What is the Church?

Christian History · https://thebiblicalroots.org/answers/what-is-the-church/

The Church is the people of God gathered around Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, the Church is not primarily a building, denomination, or religious institution, but the community of those who belong to Christ through faith (1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 2:19–22). The Church consists of all true believers united to Jesus by the Holy Spirit and joined together as His body on earth.

The Bible speaks about the Church in both a universal and local sense. Universally, the Church includes all believers in Christ across all nations and generations (Eph. 5:25–27). Locally, churches are visible gatherings of Christians who worship together, teach Scripture, practice baptism and the Lord's Supper, pray, serve, and encourage one another (Acts 2:42–47).

The Greek word translated "church" is *ekklesia*, which literally means "assembly" or "called-out gathering." In the ancient world, the word could refer to a public assembly or gathering of citizens. The New Testament adopts the term to describe God's redeemed people gathered under the lordship of Christ.

One of the most important biblical images for the Church is the "body of Christ":

> "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." (1 Cor. 12:27)

This image emphasizes both unity and diversity. Christians are united to one another because they are united to Christ, yet believers have different gifts, callings, personalities, and roles within the body.

The New Testament also describes the Church as:

- the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:25–27)
- the household or family of God (1 Tim. 3:15)
- a holy temple indwelt by the Spirit (Eph. 2:19–22)
- a royal priesthood and holy nation (1 Pet. 2:9)

Each image reveals something important about the Church's identity and mission.

The Church began formally at Pentecost in Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the followers of Jesus. From that point forward, the Gospel spread outward from Jerusalem into Judea, Samaria, and eventually the nations (Acts 1:8). This fulfilled God's long-promised plan to gather a people for Himself from every tribe and tongue through the Messiah (Isa. 49:6; Rev. 7:9).

Importantly, the Church is not "Plan B" after Israel supposedly failed. Rather, the New Testament presents the Church as the fulfillment and expansion of God's redemptive promises through Christ. Gentile believers are brought into the people of God through faith in Israel's Messiah (Eph. 2:11–22; Rom. 11:17–24). At the same time, the New Testament never teaches that God has abandoned ethnic Israel. Faithful Christians hold differing views regarding the future role of Israel in God's redemptive plan, but all orthodox Christians affirm that salvation comes only through Jesus Christ.

The Church's mission is centered on proclaiming the Gospel, making disciples, and bearing witness to Christ in the world (Matt. 28:18–20). The Church is called to worship God, teach sound doctrine, care for one another, serve the poor, defend truth, and embody Christ's love before the world.

This means church is not merely something Christians attend; it is something Christians belong to.

The New Testament consistently assumes believers will live in committed fellowship with other Christians. While personal faith in Christ is essential, Christianity was never intended to be an isolated individualistic religion. Hebrews warns believers:

> "Do not neglect to meet together…" (Heb. 10:25)

Christians need the Church for teaching, encouragement, correction, accountability, worship, prayer, and sacramental life.

At the same time, Scripture is realistic about the imperfections of the visible church. Churches can become unhealthy, compromised, divided, or doctrinally confused. The New Testament itself contains repeated warnings and corrections directed toward churches (1 Cor. 1:10–17; Rev. 2–3). This should not surprise Christians. The Church is holy because Christ is holy, yet it is made up of redeemed sinners still undergoing sanctification.

Historically, Christians have differed on questions of church structure, sacraments, leadership, and denominational organization. Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians all understand the Church somewhat differently in those areas. But mainstream Christianity agrees that the true

Church is fundamentally centered on Jesus Christ, the Gospel, the apostolic teaching of Scripture, and the worship of God.

One final point is important: the Church does not exist for itself. The Church exists to glorify God and proclaim Christ to the world.

Key Scriptures to Study

- Matthew 16:13–18 — Jesus promises to build His Church.
- Acts 2:1–47 — The birth and life of the early Church.
- 1 Corinthians 12:12–27 — The Church as the body of Christ.
- Ephesians 2:11–22 — Jews and Gentiles united in one people through Christ.
- Ephesians 5:25–27 — Christ loves the Church as His bride.

Objections & Misconceptions

Common Objection: “Is the Church just a building?”

No. The Church is fundamentally the people of God, not a physical structure. Christians may gather in buildings, homes, schools, or outdoors, but the Church itself is the community of believers united to Christ.

Common Objection: “Can I be a Christian without going to church?”

A person is saved through faith in Christ, not through church attendance. However, the New Testament consistently assumes believers will participate in the life of the Church. Persistent isolation from Christian fellowship is spiritually unhealthy and contrary to the pattern established in Scripture.

Common Objection: “There are so many denominations—doesn’t that prove Christianity is false?”

Differences among Christians are real and often unfortunate. But most denominations still affirm the historic core doctrines of Christianity: the Trinity, the deity of Christ, salvation through Christ, His death and resurrection, and the authority of Scripture. Disagreement among followers does not invalidate the truth of Christ Himself.

Why This Matters

Understanding the Church correctly protects Christians from reducing Christianity to a private spiritual experience disconnected from God’s people. Jesus did not merely save isolated individuals; He is gathering a redeemed people for Himself.

The Church is also where believers are nurtured, taught, corrected, encouraged, and strengthened in faith. God ordinarily works through His people, His Word, and the ordinary life of the gathered church to mature Christians.

Most importantly, the Church exists because of Jesus Christ. He purchased the Church with His own blood (Acts 20:28), sustains it as its head (Col. 1:18), and promises that even the gates of hell will not prevail against it (Matt. 16:18).

Recommended Resources

- Life Together — by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Classic reflection on Christian community and fellowship.
- What Is a Healthy Church? — by Mark Dever. Accessible introduction to the purpose and function of the Church.
- The Church — by Edmund P. Clowney. Strong biblical theology of the Church.
- Paul and the Faithfulness of God — by N. T. Wright. Extensive treatment of the people of God and the Church in Paul’s theology.