

What Is the Church?

Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is having a personal, individual relationship with Him, but it also involves a relationship with other believers. According to the New Testament, every follower of Jesus Christ should be a functional part of a local church.

That brings us to the question, “What is the church?” In the New Testament, the word church is never used to designate a building or a denomination. The Greek word translated church (EKKLĒSIA, ek-klay-see'-ah) literally means “called-out ones or assembly.”

Today there are so many buildings and organizations in Christianity that the true church is lost in the maze of things. Therefore, we will look at the true concept of the church as found in the New Testament by considering its description, directors, declarations, duties, and destiny.

I. The Description of the Church

The Greek word translated church is used more than 100 times in the New Testament, and more than 90 of those times it refers to the local church. However, before we consider the church as a local assembly we need to first look at the church in general. The “church” in the generic sense includes the entire fellowship of believers without regard to locality or time. In this sense the Church will not become a reality until after the return of the Lord and the establishment of His eternal kingdom.

Many analogies are used in the New Testament to describe the Church. How do the following references describe the Church and its relationship to Christ?

1 Corinthians 3:9–11 & Ephesians 2:20–22 _____

Romans 12:4–5 & 1 Corinthians 12:12–14 _____

Ephesians 5:25–32 _____

1 Peter 5:2–4 _____

From these references we can see in a generic sense there is one body of Christ. Since this one body will not become a reality until Christ sets up His eternal kingdom, it is obvious why most of the New Testament references are to the local church and why the references to the Church in general may also be applied to the local church.

There is much debate about what constitutes a local church. The New Testament does not give us a formal, precise definition of a local church, but it does describe the features that must exist in a truly New Testament local assembly. By assimilating the basic features of local churches

described, we might formulate the following definition of a local church: “A local church is an assembly of professing believers in Jesus Christ who have been baptized and who meet to worship and do God’s will.” Of course all aspects of the church could never be included in a brief definition or description, but now that we have the basic idea, let’s look at ...

II. The Directors of the Local Church

In reality, there is only one leader of the church—Jesus Christ (Eph. 5:23–24). However, people are called out of the church to serve in particular offices within the local church. According to Ephesians 4:11, what leaders are called to lead and direct within the church?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

The word apostle comes from a Greek word (APOSTOLOS, uh-pos'-tol-os) that means “one sent forth.” It carries the idea of one sent forth with a message. In its restricted usage, it refers to the office of apostle, which ended with the twelve apostles. In a broader sense, it denotes those who today go forth to new areas with the gospel message. We call them “missionaries.”

Prophet simply means “one who speaks for another.” In the New Testament it refers to those who proclaim the gospel of Christ—who speak God’s message. The English word prophet is a transliteration of a Greek word (PROPHĒTĒS, pro-fay'tees) that literally means “to forth-tell.”

The gift of prophecy in New Testament times and also for today is defined in 1 Corinthians 14:3. According to this verse, what three elements are involved in the speaking ministry of a prophet?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Both in New Testament times and today a prophet makes the Word of God simple and relevant to a particular situation or group. Today we call a prophet a “preacher.”

Evangelist is a transliteration of a Greek word (EVANGELISTĒS) that means “a messenger of good.” It denotes a preacher of the Gospel who is primarily sharing the Good News of Christ with those who have not received Him as Savior. In our day, evangelists go from church to church preaching revivals or crusades, endeavoring to win people to Christ. Today’s most famous evangelist is Billy Graham.

The English word pastor occurs but once in the New Testament, but the same Greek word translated pastor occurs several times in the Greek New Testament and is also translated shepherd. A pastor in the New Testament was the leader of the local church, and his primary responsibility was to feed the people with the Word of God (1 Pet. 5:2).

(A pastor is also called a bishop and an elder in the New Testament. These titles refer to the same office or position, with emphasis in each case being placed on a certain area by use of a different title.)

What instructions are given to each member of the body of Christ concerning the support of those who are called to preach and teach (1 Corinthians 9:11 & 14)?

Teachers in the New Testament were church leaders who taught God’s Word. Today we use lay people to teach the Word of God to specific groups, such as in Sunday school, Vacation Bible School, etc., while the pastor teaches the whole flock.

What responsibilities do these church leaders have to the church, according to Ephesians 4:12?

Having examined the description and the directors, we now come to ...

III. The Declarations of the Local Church

There are two declarations the church must continually make through symbolic acts called ordinances.

The words ordinance and sacrament are listed as synonyms in the dictionary and some Bible indexes, but they do not have the same meaning. A sacrament usually has the idea of conveying grace to the participant. On the other hand, an ordinance is purely symbolic and can be defined as “an outward rite commanded by Christ to be observed by His church.” Such a definition reduces the possible number of ordinances to only these two—baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Baptism comes from a Greek word (BAPTIZŌ) that means “to dip, submerge, or immerse.” According to Romans 6:3–6, what two things does baptism symbolize?

1. _____
2. _____

The second ordinance to be observed by the local church is the Lord’s Supper. What do the elements of the Lord’s Supper symbolize, according to 1 Corinthians 11:23–26?

The bread (11:24) - _____

The cup (11:25) - _____

Both together (11:26) - _____

We have studied the church’s description, directors, and declarations, so now let’s see what are ...

IV. The Duties of the Local Church

The primary duty of the local church is to provide a place where believers can grow, fellowship, encourage one another, and worship.

From the following references, list some of the functions of the local church:

Acts 1:8 - _____

Acts 2:41-42 - _____

Colossians 3:16 - _____

Hebrews 10:25 - _____

We read in Ephesians 5:25, Christ ... loved the church, and gave himself for it. Every disciple of Jesus Christ needs to come to terms with the implication of that verse. If Jesus loved the church that much, so should we as His followers. And, if we do love the church, we will be actively involved in the duties listed above.

Finally, to really understand what the church is all about, we need to be aware of ...

V. The Destiny of the Church

The local church will always be incomplete on this earth, without the full company and communion of all members of Christ's body from all of history. What did Jesus say about the Church, the called-out in heaven, in Matthew 8:11?

The Church's ultimate destiny is seen in Revelation 21:1-5. What is it?

MEMORY VERSE: Hebrews 10:25

Hebrews 10:25 (GNB) Let us not give up the habit of meeting together, as some are doing. Instead, let us encourage one another all the more since you see that the Day of the Lord is coming nearer.