

## **The Church**

The word "church" is one of the most important words in the Bible. Unfortunately it is also a word that is frequently misunderstood and misused. People sometimes refer to a building as a church ("We are building a new church on Main Street"). At times the church is thought to be a denomination ("I am Baptist. Which church do you belong to?"). Other times it is viewed as a meeting ("We will go to church at 8:00"). According to God's Word, what is the church? When did the church begin? How many churches are there? Is there one true church? These are some questions we will consider in this lesson.

### **What is the church?**

The best way to define words found in the Bible is to use the Bible itself as a dictionary. We can: 1) Examine a word in its context; 2) Compare other verses that use the word. Hebrews 2:12 contains the word "church": "Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the *church* will I sing praise unto thee." This verse in Hebrews is a quotation from Psalm 22:22: "I will declare thy name unto my brethren: in the midst of the *congregation* will I praise thee." We can see that the word "church" in Hebrews is translated as "congregation" in Psalm 22. Therefore, a church is a *congregation*. Therefore, we must erase from our minds the ideas of buildings, denominations, or meetings when we hear the word "church." We instead must think of a congregation or an assembly of people<sup>1</sup>.

### **How Many Churches Are There?**

Actually there are two questions to consider at this time. How many churches are mentioned in the Bible? How many churches are recognized by God today?

There are some who teach that there is only one church in the Bible. Another common teaching is that there was no church in the Old Testament, but that the church began only in the New Testament. Both teachings are wrong as we shall now see.

Historically, the first church mentioned in the Bible is the church spoken about in Acts 7:38: "This is he, that was in the *church* in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us." We can see that this "church in the wilderness" was a *Jewish* church existing in the days when Moses went up Mount Sinai (Exodus 19). This church lived under the *Law* in "*time past*" and sought a

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<sup>1</sup> The word "church" in the Bible is a translation of the Greek word "*ekklesia*." Examining the use of the word *ekklesia* in the Bible shows us that it refers to any kind of assembly. It does not even have to be an assembly concerned with spiritual matters. In Acts 19:32,41 it is referring to a mob of people (an assembly) in the city of Ephesus. In Acts 19:39 an *ekklesia* (assembly) is a group of citizens gathered to discuss legal matters.

kingdom on this *earth*. This church was gathered in *Old Testament* times (about fifteen hundred years before Christ and the apostles ministered in Israel). Therefore, we can see that those who say the church began in the New Testament are mistaken.

In the New Testament we also find several other verses which speak of a *Jewish* church. "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). We know that the disciples to whom Christ spoke in the book of Matthew were: 1) Jewish; 2) Living under the Law; 3) Seeking an earthly kingdom. Thus this church is similar to "the church in the wilderness." However, in Matthew 16:18 Christ says "I will build my church." Therefore, He is speaking of a church that was yet future. Though similar to "the church in the wilderness," the church in Matthew 16 is the *second* church we have discovered in the Bible. (The Bible does not give this church a name as it does "the church in the wilderness." However, we might call it *The Kingdom Church* since they were preaching the gospel of the kingdom. Also, this is the church that will be in the Millennial Kingdom on earth.) Matthew 18:17, Acts 2:47, and James 5:14 are other verses that refer to the earthly kingdom church.

Finally, Paul writes of "the church, which is his body" (Ephesians 1:22-23). This church lives under grace, not under the law. It is this church that God is building now in this dispensation of grace. Members of this church will be taken up to the heavenly places instead of being in the earthly kingdom. Paul's epistles are the only books in the Bible that mention the Church, the Body of Christ. This church is clearly different from the "church in the wilderness" or the earthly kingdom church. Therefore, those who teach that there is only one church in the Bible are incorrect.

We have seen that there is more than one church spoken of in the Bible. But how many churches does God recognize today? What about the Baptists? Methodists? Catholics? Assemblies of God? etc. Are any of these the one true church? Or does God recognize all of them as His church? In Ephesians 4:4 we read that "There is *one body*, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling." God recognizes only one church today. The one true church today is "the church, which is his body."

### **How do you become a member of the church?**

God recognizes only one church today. Therefore it is very important that we be members of this church. Manmade denominations may have many requirements for church membership. However, to become a member of "the church, which is his body" we must believe the gospel (see Lessons 5-9). The moment that we trust in Christ's death for our sins, the Holy Spirit baptizes us into the Body of Christ. This is *not* a water baptism. "For *by one Spirit* are we all baptized into *one body*, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit" (I Corinthians 12:13). [This is the baptism we studied in Lesson 13.] Only baptism "by one Spirit" makes one a member of "the church, which is his body."

### **Review Questions**

#### **True or False**

1. The word "church" is never found in the Bible.
2. Only one church is mentioned in the Bible.
3. Several verses in the New Testament speak of a Jewish church.
4. Many denominations or churches are recognized and approved by God today.

### **Multiple Choice**

5. Hebrews 2:12 contains the word "church." This is a quotation from Psalm 22 where the word used is:

- a. building
- b. denomination
- c. congregation
- d. meeting

6. Historically, the first church found in the Bible is the:

- a. church in the wilderness
- b. Roman Catholic church
- c. Church, the Body of Christ
- d. Baptist church

7. Members of the Church, the Body of Christ:

- a. live under the Law
- b. must be water baptized into membership
- c. are in a false church
- d. live under grace

### **Fill in the Blanks**

8. To become a member of "the church, which is his body" we must \_\_\_\_\_.

9. A church is a \_\_\_\_\_.

10. It is wrong to teach that there was no \_\_\_\_\_ in the Old Testament.

### **For Further Study**

1. Do the saints have to be gathered in one place to be the church? Read Acts 14:27 and I Corinthians 14:23.
2. Which church is referred to in Philippians 3:6?

3. After Christ was risen from the dead, was the church in Jerusalem hoping to go to heaven? (See Acts 1:6)
4. Does the Word of God require a local church to construct a building to meet in? (See Romans 16:5 and I Corinthians 16:19)
5. How do the following verses describe the church of this dispensation? (Romans 12:5; I Corinthians 12:12,14; Ephesians 2:16; 4:12)
6. Read I Corinthians 12:15-20, Galatians 3:28, and Ephesians 4:15-16. Are some members of the Body of Christ more important or more necessary?
7. Who is the Head of the Church, the Body of Christ? (See Ephesians 4:15 and 5:23)
8. What does Romans 12:5 teach about church membership?
9. Many people are concerned about having unity among various churches or denominations. How does church unity come about? (See I Corinthians 12:13 and Ephesians 4:4-6)
10. Are we called to *produce* unity in the church? (See Ephesians 4:2-3)



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