

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT

THE CHURCH

Special Topic

By Shane Scott



In Matthew 16:18 Jesus promised, "I will build My church." What was Jesus promising to build in this verse? Did He have reference to a building? A denomination? An institution? While these concepts are often designated as the "church" in common parlance, the fact is that none of these definitions accurately picture what Christ meant.

The Church Is People

The Greek word that is usually translated "church" in our English Bibles comes from a Greek word that originally had no inherent religious meaning. Instead, the Greek term EKKLESIA originally referred to a group of people. A good illustration of this meaning is found in Acts 19. While Paul was preaching in Ephesus, a mob formed in opposition to his message. In Acts 19:32 Luke says that the "assembly was in confusion." "Assembly" here is EKKLESIA. Later, in verse 39, the town leader insists that proper charges be brought before the "lawful assembly." Again, "assembly" is EKKLESIA. So the root meaning of the word "church" has to do with a group of people.

Consequently, when Christ promised to "build [His] church," He was pledging to bring together a group of people. Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it (Ephesians 5:25). He did not die for bricks and two-by-fours, or for a cluster of congregations, or for an ecclesiastical machine. He died for people, and those who submit to Him in obedience are brought together into His group of people, the church.

The One Body

Another metaphor that is often used to describe Christ's people is "the body." This term is synonymous with the term "church," as is evident from comparing Ephesians 4:4 and 1:22-23. In 4:4 Paul states, "there is one body." In 1:22-23 he refers to "the church, which is His body." Putting these concepts together, we can conclude that there is one church.

The emphasis of NT teaching on the "one body" is that there is no distinction among Christ's group of people regarding race, gender, nationality, or social standing. Even the centuries old distinction between Jew and Gentile is removed in the one body. "For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups [Jew and Gentile] into one...and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross" (Ephesians 2:14, 16).

In this sense, the one body is equivalent to all those who have trusted in Christ, unlimited by time or geography. We are saved, added to this body, when our faith culminates in baptism. "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:13).

The one body, then, refers to all those who have truly been born again (John 3:3-5). It describes Christ's people from a universal perspective, all the saved of all time. One more point should be stressed. As portrayed in the Bible, the "one church" is never seen as a collection of churches. It is neither a collection of local churches nor a collection of denominations. It is simply the collection of all individual Christians. "Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27). When we think of the "one church," we must make sure our concept is the biblical one. Are you a part of the one body Jesus promised to build?

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## WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT THE LOCAL CHURCH

Special Topic

By Jon Quinn

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When a person becomes a Christian, it is a very personal response to the gospel. God looks upon the heart of the individual as he or she obeys the gospel, adding only the honest, trusting soul to His church. This action is accomplished without the approval of any human being, or board, or council, or congregation. It is in the mind of God that we are determined to be saved from our sins.

It is completely up to Him.

But being a Christian involves various changes in our relationships with others; our family, friends, neighbors, other Christians and even our enemies.

With reference to our relationship with other brethren, there is a locally organized community of believers in which God had ordained that His people function together. Practically all of the English versions of the New Testament translate the Greek word for this community (ekklesia) into our English word "church." The local church is not something man dreamed up. It is an arrangement planned by God and must adhere to His instructions to faithfully fulfill His purpose for it.

WHAT IS A LOCAL CHURCH?

"...to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven..." (HEBREWS 12:22). That would be quite an assembly! It is made up of all the saved, past present and future, from every nation! But this group is not appointed to come physically together in this world. Though we are spiritually assembled with one another in our common relationship, it would be impossible to gather together in one big group. I am sure such a sight would be impressive, but we live all around the world, and perhaps some of us are yet to be born, others of us have already left this world and await the resurrection.

As far as this life is concerned, there is a gathering that has been ordained by God for His people to partake in. While most of what we do as His people from day to day is purely individual in nature (prayer, helping neighbors, being godly husbands and wives and parents and children, teaching, etc.) there are definite responsibilities that can be met only as a part of this body which God has ordained. This body, or group, or collectivity of Christians is the local church.

While the universal assembly, or church, is without human organization, the local church is the organization authorized by the Lord for collective efforts which He has authorized for His people to undertake. Individuals join themselves to a local body voluntarily. The New Testament

shows that each of these local groups had its own common work, treasury and leadership (I CORINTHIANS 1:2; ROMANS 16:16).

THERE IS A PATTERN

"...and thus I direct in all the churches" (I CORINTHIANS 7:17). The various local churches which sprang up across the Roman Empire in the first century were bound by the Law of Christ, as given through the teachings of the inspired apostles. This was true from the very beginning of the church (ACTS 2:42). As long as they remained true to the apostolic doctrine, they taught the same thing and held in common the same creed; the word of Christ.

Man has always sought to improve upon what God has given him. The Israelites had been given a specific pattern for worship under the Old Law. They were told to be very careful not to go beyond the pattern. The book of Hebrews makes the point that we have a better covenant in Jesus than they had; that we have better promises and a superior high priest; Jesus. So, it follows that if anything, we should be more careful to keep within the pattern which God has given to His church; "...See,' He says, 'That you make all things according to the pattern which was shown to you on the mountain.' But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted upon better promises." (HEBREWS 8:1-6).

Local churches across the world may be quite different from one another in some respects; their customs, manner of dress; language; traditions and so forth. But concerning matters included within the pattern; matters which the Lord specifically spoke about, there should be no variation. There is a pattern (ROMANS 6:17; II TIMOTHY 2:2). It does matter to the Lord whether a local church remains faithful to His pattern; it ought to also make a difference to us.

THE WORSHIP OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

"...and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one

another; and all the more, as we see the day drawing near." (HEBREWS 10:24,25). The purpose of worship is at least two-fold. Jehovah is glorified by the acts of the faithful worshiper. The other purpose of worship is for the benefit of the worshiper. Both of these purposes are mentioned in the instructions the New Testament gives concerning worshipping God in song; "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts unto God." (COLOSSIANS 3:16).

When the local churches of the New Testament worshiped, they would sing praises to encourage one another and to jointly express their gratitude unto God. They would also pray together voicing unto God their joint concerns. They would involve themselves together in a study of the word, with a teacher or preacher expounding on the doctrine of Christ. Also, on the first day of the week, or Sunday, they would take up a collection by which the members of the local church could pool their resources into a common treasury for the purpose of carrying out works which God appointed the local church to do. Also, on this day, Christians would remember the Lord's death for them by observing the Lord's supper as He had directed (ACTS 2:42; ACTS 20:7; I CORINTHIANS 16:1,2).

THE WORK OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

"...I write so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and the support of the truth." (I TIMOTHY 3:15). The purpose of the church is to bring God glory by declaring His wisdom to the universe (EPHESIANS 3:10,11). This is in accordance with God's eternal purpose! God's plan for the church has been around for a long time; in fact, His plan predates the creation of the earth; it is eternal.

God has made the church responsible for holding forth the truth of the gospel to the world. The church at Thessalonica was commended for the diligent way in which they undertook this mission; "...so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your

faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything." (I THESSALONIANS 1:7,8).

Some in the local church at Corinth were having a difficult time cooperating with one another. They were still too carnal; envious and jealous of one another. Paul told them that their relationship to Jesus and to one another, and the heavy responsibility of the work God had given them to do, made it important for them to put away such worldly attitudes. He described the local church as a body which needs the efforts of every one of its members: "...Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it." (I CORINTHIANS 12:14-27).

The local church today needs each of its members to join in the godly efforts of the congregation. "The body is not one member, but many." If each member does not do His part, then the most important work we could possibly be involved with suffers. The church is the body of Christ; and He is the head of the body. We must listen to the head. Because of the human part, no local church is perfect. But because of Christ, let each member push on toward perfection, always growing, and never quitting.

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