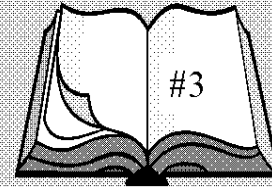


BIBLETALK

A Correspondence Study

The Church of Christ



The church is an important part of God's plan. It is vital for us to understand the place that the church occupies in the word of God. *"To Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen"* (Ephesians 3:21).

The word "church" is used in the New Testament in two significant ways. It can refer to either the church universal or a church in the local sense.

The Church Universal

In Matthew 16:18, the Lord promised to build His church. *"And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock (Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God) I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."* Notice that Christ said He was going to establish His church and that even His death on the cross would not prevent Him from doing so.

Simply stated, the church is the sum total of all saved people. The church Jesus started is not a building (although a group may choose to meet in a building) and it is not a denomination (not even one denomination existed in the first century). The church is the people who have been redeemed from sin and who are in a right relationship with the Lord.

By the phrase, "the church of Christ," then, we mean the one that He said He would establish. It is "of Christ" because it belongs to Him. He purchased the church with His shed blood. The apostle Paul, in talking to the elders from the church in Ephesus, said, *"Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood"* (Acts 20:28). Jesus owns the church; it is "of Christ" because He bought it with the highest price ever paid for anything.

But, with so many different kinds of religious groups in the world today, how can we identify the church Jesus was talking about? Do you remember from Lesson One that the Bible (and especially the New Testament) is our standard for all religious activity? Therefore, the only way we can KNOW what God wants the church to be is to read and study His book, the Bible.

The church of Christ began in A.D. 33 in the city of Jerusalem. *Acts 2* is a pivotal chapter in the entire Bible. Before that, all references to the church are in the future tense; after Acts 2, the church is mentioned as being in existence. Acts 2 records the birth of the church. When Peter preached the first gospel sermon (verses 14-36), the listeners were convicted of their sin. They asked, "What must we do?" (verse 37).

“Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’” (Acts 2:38). According to verse 41, many responded in obedience. “Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.” When the apostles continued to preach the gospel in that area, the people listened carefully, were convicted and obeyed the Lord. We are told that the early Christians were together, “praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (verse 47).

Notice that this last verse (Acts 2:47) says that the Lord added those who were being saved to the church. Newly saved people were being added to the number of already saved people. This was happening daily. These saved people, when added together, were the church.

Any church that was started later than A.D. 33 started too late to be the Lord’s church. Any church that started in any other place

than Jerusalem started in the wrong place. (See the chart at the bottom of the page.)

Jesus is the Head of His church. *“And He (God) put all things under His (Christ’s) feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all (Ephesians 1:22-23; see Colossians 1:18). Jesus is not merely the Head of His church in heaven; He is also the Head of the church on earth (Matthew 28:18).*

And Christ only established one church. He did not say, “I will build My churches and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against them.” He said, *“My church” and “shall not prevail against it.”* The church is His body. *“There is one body...” (Ephesians 4:4).* There is one head and one body. Not one body with two heads; not two or more bodies with one head. One Head and one body. Christ and His church.

The church for which Christ died is not a denomination. It is not the best of all denominations. It is not a denomination in

A Survey of Religious History

Church of Christ	Jesus Christ	Jerusalem	A.D. 33
Roman Catholic	Boniface III (first pope)	Rome	A.D. 606
Lutheran	Martin Luther	Germany	A.D. 1520
Episcopalian	Henry VIII	England	A.D. 1534
Presbyterian	John Calvin	Switzerland	A.D. 1536
Baptist	John Smythe	Holland	A.D. 1607
Methodist	John Wesley	England	A.D. 1739
Adventist	William Miller	America	A.D. 1830
Christian Scientist	Mary Baker Eddy	America	A.D. 1866
Jehovah’s Witness	Charles T. Russell	America	A.D. 1872

Can you see that the one true church that started in the right place at the right time by the right person was the Church of Christ?

any sense of the word. There is no national headquarters. There is no human creed. There are no divisive, sectarian names.

The Lord prayed that all believers would be united. *"I do not pray for these alone (the apostles), but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me"* (John 17:20-21). Christ does not want His disciples to be divided and sub-divided into various religious groups, each one teaching and practicing many different things. He wants all of His people to be in His church.

The Lord's church, therefore, is undenominational in its nature.

The church of Christ in its universal sense is all saved people. There is only one body composed of all saved people, the body of Christ, the church of Christ.

The Local Church

The term "church" is also used in the New Testament to refer to a local church. This is sometimes called the "congregation" and is speaking of those Christians in a particular locality who have decided to worship and serve the Lord together.

The Bible mentions the church at Rome, the church at Corinth, the churches of Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colosse, and many others. These were local groups of disciples who banded together to do the Lord's will.

We read about the organization of a local church in Philippians 1:1. *"Paul and Timothy, servants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with*

Other Terms that Describe the Church

In the New Testament, there are many figures that are used to describe the church. Please notice these and read the accompanying passages.

- The Flock of God – 1 Peter 5:2
- The Household of faith – Galatians 6:10
- The Body of Christ – Colossians 1:18
- The Kingdom of God – Colossians 1:13
- The Bride of Christ – Ephesians 5:22-23
- Pillar and ground of the truth – 1 Tim. 3:15

the bishops and deacons." The congregation of Christ at Philippi was comprised of three groups.

First, he mentions "saints." This simply means the "set apart" ones. It is another way of referring to Christians, forgiven and set apart from sin.

Secondly, he speaks of "the bishops." These were the spiritual leaders of the church. Others terms used to refer to this same group would be elders, presbyters, pastors, shepherds, and overseers. These are the spiritually mature men who serve as watchmen for the souls of others. See their qualifications in *1 Timothy 3:1-7* and *Titus 1:6-9*. They are charged by God to care for others and help them make it to heaven (*1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; Hebrews 13:17*).

He also mentions “deacons.” This word means “servants.” They are a specially appointed group of men who meet qualifications set forth in *1 Timothy 3:8-13*. They serve the church in special ways to help meet the needs of the members.

Each church, set up according to the New Testament pattern, is to have this organization – elders, deacons, and members.

And, as taught in the Bible, each local church is separate from all others in organization. The oversight of elders is limited to “*the flock of God which is among you*” (*1 Peter 5:2*). Elders of one church do not exercise authority over the members of any other local church.

The worship of a local church is simple and unpretentious. It consists of singing praises to God (*Ephesians 5:19*), praying to the Lord (*1 Thessalonians 5:17*), studying together from His word (*Acts 20:7*), and, on the first day of every week, observing the Lord’s Supper (*1 Corinthians 11:23-34*) and giving of our means (*1 Corinthians 16:1-2*). Other verses could be listed for each of these activities; this is not an exhaustive list, merely an introduction to this subject. God is to be honored at these worship services. It is not a time for entertainment, plays, skits, or other similar acts of irreverence.

The work of a local church is equally simple. A local church is to save the lost (commonly called evangelism; *1 Thessalonians 1:8*) and to keep the saved people saved (through edification; *Ephesians 4:11-16*). The church may also be involved in caring for its own needy members.

There is no biblical evidence to indicate that the early church was involved in any political, social or recreational activities as an organized group. Of course, the members may participate in any of these activities personally (as long as they do not involve sin, in and of themselves). But the work of a local church is spiritual and involves the saving of souls.

Conclusion

The church is so important to the Lord, that Jesus died to purchase it. It is composed of all the saved people in the world. It is made up of those who are Christians, and Christians only. We need to study about the church, see what the Bible says, and be a part of the saved people of God.

Thank you for continuing to study the Bible with us.



Please return the enclosed review questions, and the final lesson will be forwarded to you.

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