

# 9. The Church of the Lord

As Creator and King, Jesus is also Head of His body, the church (Col. 1:15-18). As His body, we are to listen to the Head and respond accordingly. We have considered basic principles in understanding the way that God communicates His will. He communicates in the same way that we communicate with others: at the most basic level, He tells us what He wants, shows us what He wants, and implies what He expects us to get. Now we want to think about what God has revealed about His church. What is the church? Why is the local church important? What activities do we find in Scripture that God wants the local church to be involved in?

## **What the Church is Not**

It's often helpful not only to positively state what the church is, but also, for clarity, to state what it is not. Since there is much misinformation regarding the church, let's start with what the church is not:

First the church is not the building. We know this, but we need to be careful with the way we express ourselves.

Second, the church is not a denomination. Many have the idea that belonging to a church necessarily means belonging to some denomination. This is false. Denominationalism finds no support in Scripture, and our plea is not to leave one denomination to join another, but to abandon all denominationalism and simply be part of Christ's body.

Third, the church is not a social club. While there are many social benefits to being able to spend time with other Christians in spiritual and even social settings, the church was not designed as a social organization meant to provide for all social and physical needs, take care of entertainment, and make sure everyone is socially happy. Not even Jesus was concerned about fixing every social situation. For example, Luke 12:13-15 presents a situation where two brothers had a dispute over a family inheritance. Jesus could have easily solved the situation, but notice his reply: "Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbitrator over you?" His purpose was not to fix all the social, political, or financial problems in society. Further, in John 6:26-27, Jesus had already fed the people, but He was not willing for that to be the premise upon which they would follow Him. They needed to move beyond the signs and the food to accept the teachings of Jesus. Many ended up walking away because of what Jesus said in John 6.

Fourth, the church is not a political conduit. Jesus brought together disciples who were on very different ends of a political spectrum: Simon, a zealot and Matthew, a tax collector. The local church does not exist in order to be a political machine aimed at promoting various political agendas. There should be no attempt in a local congregational setting to overthrow a government or become lobbyists for particular political campaigns. Scripture teaches Christians to submit to governing authorities (Rom. 13) and not to speak evil of those in charge, but to pray for them so that we lead a peaceful life (cf. Jude 8-9; 1 Tim. 2:1-4).

Following the example of Jesus and the early church, we see that the primary function of a local church is spiritual in nature, focused on helping people draw near to God. The drawing power of what we offer is the cross of Jesus (John 12:32). We need to make sure we don't undermine this by making physical agendas the primary function. None of this means that Christians should avoid their personal responsibilities to help those in need, take care of the sick, or feed the hungry (cf. Jas. 1:26-27; Gal. 6:10). It does mean that we need to keep a proper perspective about priorities.

### **The Meaning of "Church" (Ekklesia)**

Put simply, the church is a group of people. In the context of God's people, it refers to those who are saved by the blood of Christ (cf. Acts 20:28). Many argue that the term ekklesia, usually translated "church," was etymologically derived from ek, "out of," and klesis, "a calling," thus referring to those who are "called out." However, "called out" is not the primary significance of the term in Scripture. We should not confuse etymology (origin of a word) with usage. The main idea of ekklesia is that of an "assembly," "group," or "Congregation." For example, the term is used of the assembly of citizens who were gathered to discuss certain affairs of a potentially riotous mob (Acts 19:32, 39, 41). It is also used of Israel in the wilderness (Acts 7:38), showing that it is not limited to Christians in the New Testament. The term is not inherently religious.

Specifically, we find the term ekklesia used, when referring to Christians, with at least the following senses:

Universally, ekklesia refers to all of God's people without specifying a time or place (Matt. 16:18; Heb. 12:23). There is no specific locality for the assembly and no organization of the universal group. It is broad and general in scope. Whether living in the first century or twenty-first century, or whether living in Europe, Africa, or America, all of God's people are part of this general assembly. It is dependent upon one's individual relationship to God. God has given no organization or collective activity to this group. Action can only be taken individually as there is no universal function other than Christians being what they are supposed to be.

Locally, ekklesia refers to a specified group of believers who have banded together to carry out God's work in a particular community or city (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:2). A local church is an organized, independent group of God's people with leaders (e.g., Phil. 1:1). It has no organizational ties to other independent groups, and it does not answer to other groups. In a plurality, "churches" refers to more than one local group rather than different denominations (Rom. 16:16; Gal. 1:2; cf. Rev. 1:4, 20 with 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). Even when we aren't meeting at a particular moment, we are members of the group that meet in that location. We don't cease to be the local church when we depart from a physical assembly.

Locally, when the church is physically assembled together for specific action (e.g., to worship), then ekklesia applies to that gathered assembly (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:18; 14:19, 23). The church comes together in assemblies with the express purposes of carrying out God's will for the local group.

Jesus is the Head of His universal body (Col. 1:18; Eph. 1:22-23); He is also over all local groups (Rev 2-3). Individuals, not sub-groups, comprise the universal body (Rom 12:4-5) as well as local churches (Phil 1:1). Universally, there is one body that belongs to Christ (Eph. 4:4), whereas locally there are many groups in multiple locations. While there is no universal organization in which all local churches are under some earthly headquarters, there is local organization wherein a congregation acts independently to the glory of God with its own leadership (1 Pet 5:1-4; Heb. 13:17).

When did this church universally begin? The Lord promised He would build His church (Matt. 16:18). This is not to imply that God did not have a group of believers before Jesus (cf. Heb. 11-12), but that the new covenant would be in effect soon and the new company of believers would be established in a new relationship under this new and better covenant (See Heb. 8:7-13). Christ uses the figure of a building structure to refer to His people under the new covenant. This should highlight the idea that God's people are His temple (cf. 1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Cor. 3:9-17). After Christ died and rose again, and on the Day of Pentecost, the Lord was adding people to His body of believers (Acts 2:47). Locally, churches begin in different places and at different times.

Several figures are used to refer to God's people in the New Testament, such as "body" (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18), "household" (1 Tim. 3:15), and "temple" (1 Cor. 3:16). The church's relationship to the Lord is compared to a bride and her husband (Eph. 5:22-33; Rev. 21:2). These, and more, point to the type of relationship we have with God and each other in Christ. Yet God did not specify a single title for this body of believers. Descriptions are given which identify the church as belonging to God (Acts 20:28) and Christ (Rom. 16:16, where "churches of Christ" refers to several local groups); other descriptions refer to a specific locality ("church of God which is at

Corinth," 1 Cor. 1:2; Rev. 2-3), or as being composed of Christians in a given location ("church of the Thessalonians," 1 Thess. 1:1). Hebrews 12:23 refers to the "church of the first-born ones" (plural), which shows the exalted position to which God elevates believers. All such phrases are descriptive. We need to be careful that we don't just single out one exclusive title, as this itself would be going beyond the authority presented in Scripture.

## **Conclusion**

The church universally and churches locally all exist by the authority of God. There are many misconceptions about the church, so it is important to understand both what the church is and what it is not. Once we understand the various uses of "church" in Scripture, we will then be in a position to understand better why the church exists.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. Why should we be careful about not confusing the church with the building in which the church meets?
2. Why should we learn not to think of the church as a denomination, a social club, or a political conduit?
3. What is meant by "universal church"? Where do we find this concept in Scripture? Is this a physically organized group?
4. What is the main idea of ekklesia, and why is this important to understand?
5. Why is it important to recognize that a local church operates independently of other local churches or organizations?
6. Who comprises the universal body with Christ as the Head, and why is this an important understanding?
7. What is the difference between the universal church and local churches in terms of when they began?
8. Why should we be careful not to use only one designation for the church exclusively?