

Question #17: What Is the Church?*

While in his book Wayne Grudem states that the church is the true community of believers for all time, we believe that there is a distinction between Israel, as the chosen people of God during the old covenant, and the church under this new covenant following the death of Jesus Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit. The church is the unique instrument that Christ has established to both add to the number of and strengthen the true believers in his person and work (Matt. 16:18).

I. The Invisible Yet Visible Church

A. The invisible church refers to the spiritual church made up of all true believers.

1. Only God really knows the makeup of this invisible church since only He knows those who have truly trusted in himself (2 Timothy 2:19).
2. As this church is made up of every true believer, it is in a sense the universal body of believers.

B. The visible church refers to what we as Christians see here presently as the church.

1. This visible church consists of the numerous churches that we presently see that maintain faith in Jesus Christ's death and resurrection for salvation.
2. These churches consist of both true believers and unbelievers.
 - a) This is why Paul can command members of churches to examine themselves to see whether they are in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5) and the writer of Hebrews can give such strong warnings concerning impending judgment to those in the church to whom he was writing (see Heb. 2:3ff; 6:4-6; 10:26-31).
 - b) Yet, it is not our job as believers to snuff out those we suspect as not being true believers. We should regard all those who have made a profession of faith and pattern their life after such a profession to be believers and thus members of the church.

II. Other Descriptions of the Church

A. The New Testament uses the word "church" to refer to groups of believers in a number of ways.

1. The term can refer to believers meeting in a small house (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19).

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2. It can refer to the groups of believers of an entire city (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1).
 3. It can refer to the groups of believers in an entire region (Acts 9:31).
 4. It can refer to believers throughout the entire world (Eph. 5:25; 1 Cor. 12:28).
- B. The New Testament also utilizes a number of metaphors to describe the church.
1. One prominent metaphor is that of a family.
 - a) On a number of occasions, Paul addresses the members of the churches as “brothers and sisters.”
 - b) In 1 Timothy 5:1-2, he commands Timothy to treat the various members of the church he oversees as family members.
 - c) Further, the relationship between Christ and his church is depicted in familial terms -- Christ as the groom and the church as the bride (Eph. 5:25; 2 Cor. 11:2).
 2. Another important metaphor is that of the body.
 - a) In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul states that the members of the church form one body. Each of the members represents a part of the body, and thus each has its own unique function and responsibility.
 - b) The head of the church body is Christ, who holds the body together and equips each part to do what it should (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:15-16; Col. 2:19).
 3. Further metaphors for the church include a new temple (1 Pet. 2:4-8), a holy priesthood (1 Pet. 2:5), a field of crops (1 Cor. 3:6-9) and a building/temple (1 Cor. 3:9b-17).

III. What Makes a Church a Church?

- A. Historically, two functions have been seen as markers of a true church.
1. A church needs to possess correct preaching from the Bible.
 - a) The emphasis here is on content rather than form.
 - b) If the preaching in a church contains false doctrine or conceals the Gospel message of salvation by faith alone, then that church is not truly a church.

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2. A church must also administer the two ordinances given in the New Testament -- baptism (Matt. 28:19-20; Rom. 6:3-5) and the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:17-34).
 - a) Once a group of believers begins administering these ordinances, they are functioning as a church.
 - b) The administration of these ordinances can also mark off church membership. Many churches
 - (1) use baptism to admit believers into church membership
 - (2) and encourage members to partake of the Lord's Supper only if they are in a right relationship with the other members of the church body.
- B. With the advent of different parachurch organizations (mission agencies, Christian groups, Christian colleges, seminaries, etc.), it is also helpful to recognize a church as that institution that seeks to function as a church. Many of these other groups will encourage their constituents to join a local church.
- C. Among churches, two other distinctions can be made.
 1. A church can be more or less pure.
 - a) This is determined by the degree of freedom from wrong teaching and conduct and the degree of conformity to God's leading within the church.
 - b) Church members should strive to fulfill Christ's goal of purity for his bride found in Ephesians 5:26-27.
 2. A church can also be more or less unified.
 - a) Individual churches should seek out unity as the metaphor of the church as a body signifies. Further, Paul encouraged such to the Philippian church (Phil. 2:1-4; 4:2).
 - b) True believers and followers of Jesus Christ should also be united with one another as this fulfills Christ's prayer that all his future followers may be "one" (John 17:21).
 - (1) This does not mean that all churches need to be united under one united church government.
 - (2) Rather, this suggests that believers and churches should cooperate and affiliate with other true and pure churches in appropriate ways

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from time to time.

IV. What Is the Church Supposed to Do?

The church has certain responsibilities to God, its members, and the world.

A. The church serves as a place where its members can corporately worship God.

1. Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs should be sung in thanksgiving to God (Col. 3:16).
2. Corporate worship reflects the individual worship of church members who day-to-day live for the praise of God's glory (Eph. 1:12).

B. The church nurtures and strengthens its members.

1. The ultimate goal of edification by the church is to "present everyone mature in Christ" (Col. 1:28).
2. According to Ephesians 4:12-13, God has given the church in general and as a corollary, individual churches, specially gifted leaders to accomplish these purposes.

C. The church proclaims the Gospel to the world by preaching God's word and displaying acts of kindness and mercy.

1. Jesus commissioned his followers to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18-20) and serve as his witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).
2. The New Testament contains numerous instructions for the church to be involved in ministering to those in need.
 - a) to the poor and oppressed (Gal. 2:10; James 1:27)
 - b) to the physical needs of fellow believers (Acts 11:29; 2 Cor. 8:4; 1 John 3:17)
 - c) to everyone in general (Gal. 6:10)

V. The Church's Power to Fulfill Its Mission

- A. When Jesus left this earth, He left the Holy Spirit to empower his followers to build his church (John 14:26; Acts 1:8).

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- B. The Holy Spirit empowers believers with spiritual gifts to minister within the church.
1. These gifts are listed in a number of passages in the letters to the churches (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 7:7; 12:8-10, 28; Eph. 4:11).
 2. Whether these gifts seem to pertain to natural ability or miraculous endowment, all these gifts are given by the Holy Spirit who apportions to each as he sees fit (1 Cor. 12:11).
 3. These gifts are not for individual gratification but for the “common good” (1 Cor. 12:7) and are to be used for “building up” of the church (1 Cor. 14:26).

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