

What is the church?

How one understands the word “church” makes all the difference in life. Sadly, incorrect understandings of the term are everywhere:

1. The church is a building.
2. The church is a cultural institution or a national identity.
3. The church is a social club.
4. The church is a gathering of hypocrites.
5. The church is a platform for self-expression and a means to self-fulfillment.
6. The church is an optional aspect of the Christian life.

As we will learn throughout the series, the responses listed above represent seriously flawed thinking about how God in His Word has described the church and its purpose. To begin to answer the question correctly, we must start with the key terms and descriptions provided by Scripture. **We must define the church *biblically*.**

The Biblical Term for the Church

The English word translated as “church” in the New Testament is the Greek term ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*), which basically means “assembly.” Perhaps you’ve heard the term “ecclesiology.” This word is derived from this same Greek term and means “the study of the church” (*ekklēsia*, “church” + *logos*, “study”).

The term *ekklēsia* is actually made up of two Greek words: ἐκ (*ek*, “out of”) + καλέω (*kaleō*, “to call/summon”). Therefore, it could be said that the word *ekklēsia* (“church”) refers to those who have been **summoned out of something**, specifically *out of the world*. But such a definition is a little too simple.

The Greek term ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*), translated as “church” in English, has the basic meaning of “assembly”

The term originated hundreds of years before the New Testament was written, in a secular Greek context. At that time the word *ekklēsia* was used to refer to an “assembly of citizens summoned by the crier” (Robert Saucy, *The Church in God’s Program*, 12). It was used to describe assemblies like city councils, legislatures, and special civic gatherings—anything that required a *purposeful assembly*.

The word was then employed by those who translated the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek, beginning around the year 280 BC. In a translation called the *Septuagint* (also known as the LXX), the translators used the word *ekklēsia* to translate the Hebrew term קהל (*qahal*), which had been used in the Old Testament to refer to any kind of assembly, congregation, or intentional gathering. Usually, the purpose of that gathering was religious in nature, but not always.

During the time of the writing of the New Testament, the term *ekklēsia* undergoes a transformation from a general, non-specific term, to a formal, technical one. It is used 114 times in the NT, and in all but five of these instances it is used to refer to “the church”—that is, to “the assembly of the disciples of Jesus Christ.” (Three of the five times when the term *ekklēsia* is not used to describe the church are found in Acts 19, where the term is translated simply as “assembly”, whether of a riot [vv. 32, 41] or a lawful gathering [v. 39].)

It is this NT meaning of “the church” that is most familiar to us. But here, too, it is important to make some qualifications. For one thing, the term *ekklēsia* or “church” is never used to refer to *church buildings*. Instead, when used in the Christian sense, the term always emphasizes **a spiritual assembly, congregation, or gathering of the disciples of Jesus**. Second, the term is used to refer to “the church” in one of two ways:

- (1) In many instances, the term is used to describe **a local church**—that is, an assembly of Jesus’ disciples in a particular geographical location. For example, Paul writes to “the church of the Thessalonians” (1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1), to “the church of God which is at Corinth” (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1), to “the churches of Galatia” (Gal 1:2), to “Philemon . . . and to the church in your house” (Philemon 1:1–2), etc. This use of the term refers to a specific, identifiable group of people who were known by name and face.
- (2) In other instances, the term is used to describe what is known as **the universal church**—that is, the assembly of those who have believed in Jesus throughout the church age, collectively, both on earth and already in heaven. For example, in Acts 20:28, Paul refers to “the church of God which He [Jesus Christ] purchased with His own blood.” Elsewhere, Paul refers to this universal church as “one body” when he writes, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:4–6). Speaking of this universal church, Jesus states in Matthew 16:18, “. . . I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.”

Therefore, **a correct understanding of “the church” must always take it as a reference to a certain kind of people**—specifically, to those who have been redeemed by Christ’s substitutionary death on the cross. The church in the proper sense is never a piece of property or a cultural expression or national identity. One is never “born into the church” or in it by coincidence.

Moreover, a correct understanding of “the church” must appreciate *both* its **concrete, local reference** to an identifiable gathering of people *and* its **universal, transcendent reference** to all those throughout the church age who have been redeemed by Christ. You cannot have one without the other. You cannot claim to be a member of a *local church* and have no love or concern for true brothers and sisters in Christ in other locations nearby or around the world. To be in this universal church means to be united with all those who have believed in Jesus Christ—near and far, past and present. Furthermore, you cannot claim to be a member of *the universal church* and ignore the responsibility to assemble with other brothers and sisters in Christ in your area.

Gregg Allison summarizes these two dimensions of the term *ekklēsia* well when he writes,

“[The church] is Christ’s followers who (1) on a local level, worship, mature, and evangelize together as a particular church; (2) on a global level, constitute the universal church of all who embrace the gospel; (3) when deceased, become part of the heavenly church, enjoying rest from their earthly labors and worship the Lord face-to-face; and (4) long for Christ’s return and their participation in the wedding to the Lamb.” (*The Church: An Introduction*, 51.)

“The church is primarily a body of people who profess and give evidence that they have been saved by God’s grace alone, for His glory alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. This is what a New Testament church is; it is not a building. The early Christians didn’t have buildings for almost 300 years after the church began. The collection of people committed to Christ in a local area constitute a church.”

—Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 135

The Biblical Metaphors for the Church

A. The People of God

What makes the church **“the people of God”** is not the fact that it is made up of those who bear God’s image (see Gen 1:26–27). They certainly do. But there is something more. What makes the church “the people of God” is that **God has sovereignly chosen them out of the vast sea of humanity for Himself.**

This metaphor, “the people of God,” has **distinct roots in the Old Testament.** In the OT, “the people of God” represent an ethnic group, the descendants of Jacob (“Israel”) who were redeemed out of slavery in Egypt and called to be a special people for God’s purposes (see Exod 19:3–6). In some cases, those who constituted this “people” were truly regenerated. In other cases, those who were part of this people were so by physical descent only. In other words, they were “the people of God” in the physical sense alone, but not in the spiritual sense.

In the age of the church, “the people of God” represent **a spiritual people** without regard to ethnicity or bloodline. They are a people redeemed out of spiritual darkness and transferred into the spiritual possession of God’s beloved

Son (see Col 1:13). This does not mean that God's prior covenants with ethnic Israel—His people of the Old Testament—have been cancelled. As the apostle Paul states in Romans 11, God will one day return to work on the people of Israel to make them *spiritually* what they are by bloodline (see Rom 11:1–2, 25–29).

Fundamental to the metaphor of “the people of God” is the concept of **God's sovereign choice**. This metaphor is important because it emphasizes the fact that it is not the people who chose God, but that He chose them! This was emphasized with respect to the people of Israel (e.g., Deut 7:6–11), and it is carried over into the metaphor as it is used in the NT with respect to the church. For example, see “the people of God” in **1 Peter 2:9–10**; “a people for His own possession” in **Titus 2:14**; or “one new man” in **Ephesians 2:14–16**. It is also the basis for similar language that refers to the church as: the “chosen of God, holy and beloved” in **Colossians 3:12**, “the called of Jesus Christ” in **Romans 1:6**, “the elect” in **Romans 8:33**, or “those who are chosen” in **2 Timothy 2:10**.

What are the **implications** of this metaphor, “the people of God”?

- God has chosen those who make up His church; the church isn't a people which has chosen God.
- Those in the church aren't there because of their effort, worth, or wisdom; they are there because of God's grace.
- God has chosen the church to be *one people*, not an assortment of divided, polarized, tribalistic *peoples*.
- The church is to reflect the character and advance the mission of the One to whom she belongs.

B. The Body of Christ

The **dominant metaphor** in the New Testament for the church is “**the body of Christ**.” There is good reason for this. The *material realities* of our physical body vividly and effectively communicate many of the *spiritual truths* of God's design and purpose for the church. Everybody has a body. Everybody knows the importance of his own body. And although we only know a fraction of what takes place in our bodies, we generally know how it functions. We know the blessing of when everything in the body works well, and the pain that comes when something doesn't.

Remarkably, God has designed our bodies and the church in a similar way. Consider these texts: **Romans 12:4–5**; **1 Corinthians 12:12–13, 27**; **Ephesians 1:22–23**; **4:11–12**; **5:23**; **Colossians 1:18, 24**; **2:19**.

What are the **implications** of this metaphor, “the body of Christ”?

- The church has one “head”—one Lord—to whom she submits.
- Christ—the “head” of the church—is the exclusive source of the church's vitality, direction, and harmony.
- As there are many diverse components in the body, so there are many diverse members in the church.
- But these diverse components are all necessary, mutually dependent, and equally reliant on Christ, just like the diverse organs and systems that make up our physical bodies—they are all interwoven and necessary.
- Division among the members of the church is similar to an autoimmune disease in the physical body.

C. The Bride of Christ

Perhaps **the most beautiful metaphor** for the church is “**the bride of Christ**.” The desire for marriage and all the powerful emotions connected with it have been a part of human consciousness since the very beginning of time (see Gen 2:18–25). Thus, the bride-groom metaphor serves as an excellent picture to communicate the realities of **Christ's choice** and His *cherishing* of the church, and the resultant *exclusive nature* of their relationship.

Consider these texts: **2 Corinthians 11:2–3**; **Ephesians 5:22–30**; **Acts 20:28** (the *dowry* Christ paid); **1 Thessalonians 3:13** (the *presentation* Christ will make of His bride); and **Revelation 19:7–8** (the culminating *wedding ceremony*).

What are the **implications** of this metaphor, “the bride of Christ”?

- The metaphor reminds us of the cost Christ paid to seek and obtain His “bride,” the church.
- It pictures for us of the intimate nature of the relationship between Christ and His church—a relationship of Christ's nourishment and cherishing, and the church's submission.

- It emphasizes the importance of exclusivity and purity; the church is betrothed to Christ and must appear spotless before Him at the culmination of the age.

D. The Temple of the Holy Spirit

Since the Greco-Roman era was the golden age of architecture and building, the NT commonly uses *building analogies* to describe the church (see **Matt 16:18**). But there are even deeper roots. In the Old Testament, **the temple was the place where God dwelt**. Thus, describing the church as “the temple of the Holy Spirit” or “God’s building” makes perfect sense. In this present age, the church is the place where God manifests His special presence. True—the Holy Spirit indwells all believers individually (e.g. Rom 8:26–27). But the manifestation of His Spirit is concentrated in the assembly of God’s people. Consider these texts: **1 Corinthians 3:10–11, 16–17; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:19–22; 1 Peter 2:4–6**.

What are the **implications** of this metaphor, “the temple of the Holy Spirit”?

- As the “temple of the Holy Spirit,” the church is the spiritual *dwelling place* of God Almighty—the place in which He particularly manifests His glory and goodness. To withdraw from the church is to forfeit these blessings.
- The construction of this “temple” is not an accomplishment of the building blocks themselves. It is Christ who builds the church, and the individual members of the church are the construction materials.
- Since temples were built with the enduring materials of granite and marble, the church as “the temple” represents strength and endurance; what Christ builds hell cannot destroy.

Implications for Today

1. Join the church.
2. Love the church.
3. Labor for the church.
4. Pray for the church.

“I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints.” —*the Apostles’ Creed*

“We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.”
—*the Nicene Creed (AD 325)*

For Discussion

1. What is the basic idea of the word *ekklēsia* or “church”?
2. What are some common misunderstandings of the term “church” that you have heard?
3. We must understand the church of Jesus Christ in two dimensions—in its *local expression* and in its *universal expression*. What errors can Christians fall into when either one of these dimensions is ignored?
4. What is the basis for *entry* into Christ’s church? What are some false ways people have tried to “enter” the church?
5. Are you currently a member of a local church? If not, why not? Are you willing to give careful thought to your answer to this question over the months to come, as we continue this series?
6. List several questions about the church that are most concerning or curious for you. God willing, we will provide helpful answers in the upcoming lessons.

For Further Study

1. **Memorize:** Matthew 16:18 and 1 Corinthians 12:12–13.
2. **Read (intermediate):** *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth*, by Richard Mayhue and John MacArthur, pages 740–751.
3. **Read (advanced):** *The Church in God’s Program*, by Robert Saucy, pages 11–56.
4. **Sing:** “The Church’s One Foundation” (#354 in *Hymns of Grace*).

Audio, video, and handouts for this session are available at www.gracechurch.org/motw.

Next meeting: September 16, 7pm – “Ekklesia: The Centrality of Scripture”