

LESSON 3 What the Church Is

Jesus said, “I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). What did He mean by the word *church*? What did His disciples understand by this word?

Perhaps you have noticed that the word *church* has been used many times in this study. It has been used in different ways. In Lesson 1, we used the term to mean “God’s people.” In Lesson 2, we used the same word for the visible organization. Both ways are correct.

We also use biblical words in everyday conversation. When we use words in this way, we might not know their biblical meaning. Meanings depend on the context, or the setting in which the word is used. It is important to know what the word *church* means in the context of the Bible.

Many people have given their lives to bring us the Bible. Not far from where I live, there is a stone sign on the spot where a man was put to death. His crime was desiring the Bible in the language of his people. God has protected His Word. Let us continue to study it!

The Plan

- A. The Church Defined
- B. The Nature of the Church
- C. Church Relationships

The Goals

1. State the biblical meaning of the word *church*.
2. Relate the role of the local church to that of the universal church.
3. Discuss the supernatural nature of the church.

A. THE CHURCH DEFINED

Goal 1. State the biblical meaning of the word *church*.

Greek was the language of the New Testament world. Paul wrote his letters to churches in the Greek language. What did the word *church* mean at that time? The word *church* meant “assembly.” In Paul’s time this word was made up of two smaller words. Together the two words meant “called out.” In Bible times, the word for church was used for an assembly of citizens called together. Citizens would meet to talk about some political or military problem. The word was also used of an army called together to fight. It could also be used to describe a law-making group. Today the word *church* sounds very religious, but initially it was never used for a religious meeting.

Application

1 Read about Paul’s visit to Ephesus in Acts 19:23–41. The word *assembly* is found in verses 32, 39, and 41. What kind of assembly was this? Write the words your Bible uses instead of *church or assembly*.

- a) Verse 32
- b) Verse 39
- c) Verse 41

2 Which of these definitions are NOT the Greek meaning of the word *assembly*?

- a) A political gathering
- b) An army called together
- c) A religious meeting
- d) An assembly of citizens

The Bible is divided into two main parts: the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, the Jews were called God's people. Many Jews, like Abraham and David, believed God and obeyed Him. Their life stories are in the Old Testament. We learn much from reading about their lives.

Even before Jesus' day many Jews lived in other lands and lost their language, not having God's Word. To help these people, a special translation of the Old Testament was made. The word *church*, or *assembly*, was used almost 100 times in this version. Sometimes it was used for secular (not religious) gatherings, and at other times it was used for religious meetings. From the time Christians started using the word *church*, the Jews stopped using it. A gathering of Christians was a church. A meeting of Jews was called a *synagogue*. Jews who believed in Jesus were often put out of the synagogue. (See John 9:22.)

Application

3 The word *church* was used by the Jews to mean

- a) a religious meeting.
- b) a secular gathering.
- c) either religious or secular meetings.

4 An example of the use of the word is also found in Acts 7:38. Stephen, a Jew who became a Christian, used this word. Who were in the "assembly" (church) in the desert? Read Acts 7:38, and write your answer.

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The word *church* can be found more than 100 times in the New Testament—in almost every book. When Christians called their meetings “the church” or “the assembly,” they did not mean a political or military meeting. They did not mean a meeting of the Jewish people, although many of the early Christians were Jewish! They meant *the people who were called out by God*. They meant the company of people saved by faith in Jesus Christ.

Application

5 What do Christians mean by the word *church*?

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B. THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

Goal 2. Relate the role of the local congregation to that of the universal church.

The word *church* means a local assembly of all those who have faith in Christ. Often in the New Testament it means a certain church. See, for example, Paul’s greeting “to the church of the Thessalonians” (1 Thessalonians 1:1). Sometimes the Bible refers to several such groups gathering in their land. “The churches in Judea” (Galatians 1:22) is an example of this.

At other times, the word *church* is used to mean the **universal** church. It is not the assembly, or meeting, but those *belonging* to the assembly. (See Acts 8:1–3.) When believers suffered and were scattered, they were still a part of the church. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus speaks of building the universal church, the body of believers in Christ, all over the world.

So the church is made up of people from not just one race, but all races. The church is not people from one nation, but from all nations. Read Galatians 3:28.

Application

6 Study each of the following passages. Decide whether it refers to a local assembly or to the universal church.

a) 1 Corinthians 4:17

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b) 2 Thessalonians 1:1

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c) Colossians 1:18

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d) Ephesians 3:8–10

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e) Ephesians 3:20–21

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f) 2 Corinthians 11:8

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7 How is the local church related to the universal church?

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C. CHURCH RELATIONSHIPS

Goal 3. Discuss the supernatural nature of the church.

The early Christians called the church a name in their language (*ekklesia*), which means the congregation or *assembly of God*. The people were called by God and were God’s assembly. Acts 9:31 notes, “Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria... was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit.” Just as he did to the church of Thessalonica, Paul wrote “To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those

everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours” (1 Corinthians 1:2).

Application

8 Each of the following verses tells us to whom the church belongs. Read each verse. Then write the description of the church found in each passage.

a) 2 Thessalonians 1:1

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b) Galatians 1:13

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c) 1 Corinthians 11:16

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The church is called forth by God and called unto Jesus Christ. To the church at Corinth Paul wrote, “God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful” (1 Corinthians 1:9). At times the church is called “of Christ.” (See Romans 16:16.) Jesus said, “I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). Paul spoke of “Christ . . . the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior” (Ephesians 5:23). Then Paul added, “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25).

Believers are spoken of as “in Christ” and are identified with Christ in His death (Romans 6:6). It is because we are in Christ that we suffer (Romans 8:17; 2 Timothy 2:12).

Application

9 Read again Romans 8:17 and 2 Timothy 2:12. What promise is made to those who suffer in Christ?

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10 Answer the following questions, each with one word.

- a)** Who calls forth the church?
- b)** Believers are in



The Holy Spirit gives the church its supernatural (spiritual) nature. Because of the Spirit, the church is unlike any human assembly. The church is seen where the Holy Spirit is known. The power, or life, of the church is not human, but spiritual.

Application

11 Study each of the following passages. Write what the Holy Spirit does for the church.

- a)** Philippians 2:1
- b)** Acts 1:8
- c)** 1 Corinthians 12:8–12
- d)** Ephesians 4:3–4



We must praise God that He has called us to be part of His *church*. The church is called forth by God, identified with Christ, and filled with the Spirit. God’s church is both local and universal. Believers everywhere love the same Christ, for “we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Corinthians 12:13).

What is the church? It is the supernatural fellowship of believers. God planned it from the beginning. It has shown itself continually since the New Testament days. The church is God’s witness in your area and country.

Check Your Answers

- 11 a)** The Spirit gives fellowship.
b) The Spirit gives power for witness.
c) The Spirit gives spiritual gifts.
d) The Spirit provides unity.
- 1 a)** The meeting
b) A legal meeting
c) The meeting
- 10 a)** God (the Father)
b) Christ
- 2 c)** A religious meeting
- 9** They will rule with Christ.
- 3 c)** either religious or secular meetings.
- 8 a)** “church . . . in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”
b) “church of God”
c) “churches of God”
- 4** The people of Israel or Israelites
- 7** Christians who make up the local church are a part of the body of Christ or the universal church.
- 5** The company of believers
- 6 a)** Local (every church)
b) Local (the people of the church in Thessalonica)
c) Universal (He is the head of the body, the church)
d) Universal (by means of the church)
e) Universal (glory in the church)
f) Local (paid by the other churches)