

Stockton Bible Chapel

Who is the church?

The Bible calls those people who have entered into a family relationship with God through Jesus Christ the church. "To all who received him," the apostle John writes, "who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (John 1:12). They have the privilege of addressing God as "Abba! Father!" (Romans 8:15). This is a permanent relationship. Should one of his children go astray, the Father disciplines him in love (Hebrews 12:6). He does not cast him out. God promises: "I will never fail you nor forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5).

Elsewhere the Bible describes the intimate relationship between Christ and his church as that of a groom to his bride (Ephesians 5:25-33; 2 Corinthians 11:2). Speaking of marriage, the Bible says: "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). When the church arrives in heaven, there will be a great wedding feast. Scripture proclaims: "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Revelation 19:9).

Scripture also uses the human body as a picture of the church. Christ is "the head of the body, the church" (Colossians 1:18). The redeemed are "the members of the body" (1 Corinthians 12:12).

The church is "God's people" (1 Peter 2:10). The Bible calls them "saints" (Philemon 5), "believers" (1 Corinthians 14:22), and "Christians" (Acts 11:26). It describes them as "saved" (Ephesians 2:8), "ransomed" (1 Peter 1:18), "forgiven" (1 John 2:12), at "peace with God" (Romans 5:1), and "holy and blameless before him" (Ephesians 1:4).

Some mistakenly think of the church as a building with cross and steeple. The church of the New Testament, however, has no walls. More than an organization, it is an organism—a living entity of interdependent members. Consequently, Christians don't "go to church," they are the church.

When did the church begin?

The church did not exist in Old Testament times. Nor did God reveal its design and purpose to Moses or the other prophets of the old covenant. We learn of the church from Jesus, "the mediator of a new covenant" (Hebrews 9:15) and his apostles, the "ministers of a new covenant" (2 Corinthians 3:6). Scripture calls the church "the mystery of Christ" (Ephesians 3:4). He unveiled it. He is at the center of it and is the source of its life. Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians: "When you read this you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit" (Ephesians 3:4,5).

In the months before his crucifixion, Jesus said, "I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). This is the first occurrence of the word church in the New Testament. Here Jesus speaks of it as something yet future. When did it begin? Before ascending into heaven, Christ promised his disciples, "Before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:5). We know from Paul's teaching that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is when a person becomes part of the church, the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13). Therefore, Jesus is telling his disciples in Acts 1:5 that the Spirit is about to inaugurate the church. This occurred ten days later on the Jewish feast of Pentecost. The disciples were gathered together, when ". . . suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:2-4). The church was born.

What is the relationship between the church and Israel?

God's people of the old covenant are the nation of Israel, the Jews. God's people of the new covenant are the church. We must not confuse the two.

Israel has its beginnings in the call of Abraham. To be a Jew, one must be a descendant of Jacob, also named Israel. Membership is by physical birth. The Jews formerly entered into the old covenant with God at Mount Sinai. Leviticus 26 summarizes this contract. God would bless them if they obeyed him. He would curse them if they forsook him. There was a conditional relationship based upon performance. Their promised blessings had an earthly focus—long life and prosperity in the land of Israel. Jerusalem was to be the center of their worship. Their priests were to be of the tribe of Levi. Their high priest was to be Aaron, Moses' brother, or one of his descendants.

The church differs from Israel in every respect. It began at Pentecost. Membership is by spiritual birth through faith in Christ Jesus (John 1:12). It is open to all people, both Jews and Gentiles (Galatians 3:28). In Christ they become "one new man in place of the two" (Ephesians 2:15). There is an unconditional relationship based on grace. The blessings of the church have a heavenly focus—eternal life and an inheritance with Christ. Its worship also has a heavenly focus. Their high priest is Christ himself, "who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven" (Hebrews 8:1).

It won't do to take God's religious order for the Jews, christen it, and apply it to the church. The church is something new, something far more wonderful. Christ expressed this when he taught: "No one puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but new wine is for fresh skins" (Mark 2:22).

Does God have a specific design for the church?

The Holy Spirit has preserved Christ's revelation of the church in the New Testament. He shows us the church in Acts. He tells us its foundational truths in the epistles. This is similar to how God revealed the order of Israel's worship. First God showed Moses the tabernacle that he was to build in a vision, saying, "See that you make everything according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain" (Hebrews 8:5). Then God told Moses how to build it, describing it in every detail (Exodus, chapters 25-40).

The model God shows us for the church in the New Testament is marked by simplicity. The disciples preached the gospel. Some believed and were baptized (Acts 2:41). The apostles gathered these new believers into groups. These early Christians devoted themselves to the study of the apostles' teaching, sharing their lives with one another, remembering the Lord with bread and wine, and praying (Acts 2:42). Scripture refers to each group of Christians by the city or town in which it was located: "the church in Jerusalem" (Acts 8:1), "the church at Antioch" (Acts 13:1), "the church of God which is at Corinth" (1 Corinthians 1:2). We sometimes call these local churches to distinguish them from the church as a whole, the universal church.

The epistles tell us that the universal church is one: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Ephesians 4:4,5). Paul writes: "We, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Romans 12:5). This means that regardless of a person's church affiliation, all born-again believers, having been baptized by the Holy Spirit, are one in Christ.

Who is in charge of the church?

Ruling the worldwide church is Christ himself. "He is the head of the body, the church" (Colossians 1:18), the "chief Shepherd" (1 Peter 5:4), and "high priest" (Hebrews 8:1). In all things he is to be "pre-eminent" (Colossians 1:18).

Christ has ordained elders, also known as bishops, to serve under him over each local church (Acts 14:23). The Greek word translated elders is presbuteroi. It means older men, indicating the spiritual maturity required for the position. The qualifications for the position are found in Titus 1:5-9 and 1 Timothy 3:1-7. Bishops is the translation of episkopoi, literally meaning overseers. This word has their function in view. They supervise the people and ministries of the church. Scripture says: "Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account. Let them do this joyfully, and not sadly, for that would be of no advantage to you" (Hebrews 13:17). We can see the nature of their calling in Paul's exhortation to the elders of the church of Ephesus: "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God which he obtained with the blood of his own Son" (Acts 20:28). Note that it is the Holy Spirit who makes an overseer, not the apostles or the church.

Assisting the elders are deacons. They are servants of the church, not a subordinate tier of leaders. Paul lists the qualification of a deacon in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. Deacons serve in various ministries, such as distributing food to the needy (Acts 6:1-6).

In the New Testament, there is no further governmental structure to the local or universal church. We might picture the structure of Christ's design for the worldwide church as follows.

Serving Christ together with the elders and deacons are the other members of the church. The Holy Spirit, Scripture tells us, has given each Christian a spiritual gift for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:1-7). This is a supernatural ability for service. It involves ministries such as teaching, pastoring, evangelizing, exhorting, giving, leading, helping, and showing mercy (Romans 12:4-8; Ephesians 4:11). As each person does his or her part, they build up one another in the faith. The church matures and becomes more like Christ (Ephesians 4:11-16).