

Portrait of the New Testament Church

When the word “church” is used today most people think of a building where religious activities are conducted. In the New Testament, however, the word was used much differently.

First, it was never used to refer to a physical building. Instead a “church” described an assembly of people. In ancient Greek, in which the New Testament was written, the word that described this assembly was the word *ecclesia* (ἐκκλησία), meaning “a called out body; a congregation, assembly or gathering.” We usually translate this word “church,” but on one occasion in the New Testament *ecclesia* was used in reference to a non-religious assembly or mob (Acts 19:32,41). Most often when the New Testament refers to “The Church” it is referring to a group of God’s people “called out” by the gospel, the message of Jesus Christ (2 Thessalonians 2:13-15). We can find reference to “**churches of Christ**” (Romans 16:16) or the “**church of God**” (I Corinthians 1:2) and even the “**church of the Firstborn**” (Hebrews 12:23), but these all describe those people who by their faith and obedience to Jesus belong to God in Christ.

The Saints

Who were these people that made up Christ’s church? We can find the answer within the Scripture. Many New Testament books were originally authoritative letters sent from apostles of Christ to various churches in the first century. From the open-

ing words of these letters we can learn a great deal about who these people were. For example, First Thessalonians is written by the Apostle Paul—“**To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**” (1:1). This letter is to the “called out body” (or *church*) in the city of Thessalonica. In a similar way, the book of Colossians is addressed—“**To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colosse**” (1:2). Much like the word “church” the word “saints” has a different meaning in Scripture than in modern usage. The word “saint” is translated from the Greek word *hagios* (ἅγιος) meaning someone or something which is “set apart unto God; consecrated or holy.” In the Scriptures a saint is not one who has been recognized by a religious body and then given this title. Instead all Christians are *saints* in the fact that they are *set apart* to God by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul addressed the letter of First Corinthians—“**To the church of God which is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord**” (1:2). This shows us that the “church” in the New Testament was that group of people who were “sanctified” by Christ, and thus “saints” who had been “set apart” and saved by His blood. Sometimes in the religious world it is suggested that a person can be saved without being a member of the church. We see from this that Scripture indicates to us that the “church” is those who are “saved.”

The Universal & Local Church

In Paul’s introduction to his letter to the church in Corinth he referred to the “church” in two distinct senses. Notice, he speaks of “**the church of God which is in Corinth**” (a specific location) but also to “**all who in every place call**

on the name of Jesus” (many locations). This illustrates that there are two ways in which the church may be viewed: The local Church (1 Thessalonians 1:1; 1 Corinthians 1:2) and The Universal Church; (Matthew 16:18; Hebrews 12:22,23). By recognizing this we can understand a great deal about how the New Testament church functioned.

Over the universal church the only structure that the Bible teaches is that “**Christ is the head of the church**” (Ephesians 5:23). The universal church was authorized to determine practice, teaching and conduct first by the “**apostle’s doctrine** (or teaching)” (Acts 2:42) and then by those things which they wrote through the direction of the Holy Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 14:37; 2 Thessalonians 3:14; 1 Timothy 3:15).

On the other hand, The local church was to have a very specific structure. Paul’s letter to the Philippians was addressed—“**To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons**” (1:1). This shows us that these independent local churches were made up of “saints” (that is all Christians), “bishops” (men appointed from the congregation according to specific qualifications outlined in 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) and “deacons” (also men appointed from the congregation according to qualifications recorded in 1 Timothy 3:8-13). This is the only structure the Bible authorizes for church organization.

The New Testament teaches no church organization higher than the local church leadership and yet lower than the headship of Christ.

In the religious world today much of the division that exists comes from misapplications of the universal and local sense in which the church is viewed. Many groups, for example, try to develop some structure to regulate the universal church. Others try to expand the authority of local elderships over a number of congregations. In the New Testament there is no superstructure larger than the local church yet smaller than the universal church.

The Assembly

The New Testament church was characterized by its simplicity. Rather than complex formal rituals and lofty elitist dissertations, assemblies of New Testament Christians were simple, spiritual times of encouragement, edification, learning, meditation, and praise. The Bible tells us these early saints assembled on the first day of the week **“to break bread”** (Acts 20:7). This “breaking of bread” was the simple memorial service Jesus established to remember His death. In First Corinthians 11:20 Paul called this “the Lord’s Supper” and shows that its observance was one of the reasons for their assembly.

It would be a mistake, however, to imagine that the observance of the Lord’s Supper was the only reason for New Testament assemblies. A second reason for their assemblies (sometimes on days other than on Sunday, see Acts 2:46) was to encourage one another. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews commands Christians that they should not be guilty of **“forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as we see the Day approaching”** (10:25). In order to encourage one another in these assemblies, four additional activities of worship were done:

- 1.) **Singing.** In the New Testament this was always vocal music alone (Colossians 3:16; 1 Corinthians 14:26; Acts 16:25; Ephesians 5:19).
- 2.) **Praying.** (1 Thes. 5:17; 1 Cor. 14:15).
- 3.) **Teaching.** (1 Corinthians 14:26; Acts 20:7). In the assembly of the church this teaching was to be done only by men (1 Corinthians 14:34; 1 Timothy 2:11-12).
- 4.) **Collection.** On the first day of the week a collection was taken from among the saints, **“for the saints”** (1 Corinthians 16:1,2). This voluntary collection was how the early church raised funds.

The Church Today

This simple pattern is still followed today. Any church that follows the teaching and practice of the New Testament church is what these faithful men and women of the past were—a church which belongs to Christ. Any church which fails to follow this pattern demonstrates that it is not what Jesus built in the New Testament—**“Unless the Lord builds the house, They labor in vain who build it”** (Psalm 127:1a).

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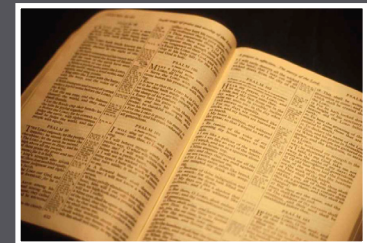
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