



Part 1: What is the Church?

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Introduction

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus first reveals to Peter that He has designs on building a church (Matt 16:18). But what exactly is this church that He's going to build? Is it a structure? Or is it something else entirely? Over the next few weeks, we will explore what Jesus means by this statement.

The Composition of the Church

The church Jesus was planning to build is not made of brick and mortar. In fact the Bible never uses the term *church* to refer to a building. The English word *church* is a translation of the Greek term *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία), meaning "assembly." So the church Jesus had in mind is composed of people! But more than that, the church is made up of Christians — born again saints who have a relationship with Jesus Christ. This includes all church-age believers world-wide, past, present, and future (1 Cor 1:2). The church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and New Testament prophets, with Jesus Christ being the chief cornerstone (Eph 2:19–20). This means that every true believer today is a member of the church.

Two Scriptural Uses of the Term "Church"

While the term *ekklesia* is sometimes used to refer to various civic assemblies, there are two primary ways it is used throughout the New Testament. The first use refers to the church at large, also known as the universal church or body of Christ. The other use refers to local church congregations in certain towns or cities.

The Universal Church

The "universal church" is a designation often given to the world-wide scope of all Christians. But it is more than that. It comprehends all born-again Christians in every nation, but it also includes those who have already died and gone to heaven. This is not the same thing as Christendom. Christendom includes every person and institution that

gives external lip service to the name of Christ, whether true or false. By this token, most of America could fall under the umbrella of “Christian,” even though a much smaller group is actually part of the universal church. For this reason, some have dubbed the universal church the “invisible” church, because its members are not readily seen.

In the bible, the term most often used to designate this group is the “body of Christ” (Rom 7:4; 12:5; 1 Cor 12:12, 27; Eph 3:6; 4:12; 5:23; Col 1:24). You can see the intermingling of the terms body and church in Colossians 1:24.

Admission into the Universal Church

How does one become a part of the universal church? It would be easy to answer this question by responding “believe in God.” That would certainly be true, but there is more to it than simply that. There is something unique that God must do to place you into the body of Christ. This process is called *spirit baptism*. This is a unique occurrence whereby the Holy Spirit places a believer into the body of Christ, and Christ causes the Holy Spirit to indwell the believer.

We may ask the question, “who is doing the baptizing?” The answer must be *both* Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Notice the progression throughout the gospels and Acts:

Luke 3:16 — Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Acts 1:5–8 — The disciples will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.

Acts 2:1–4 — The disciples are baptized with the Holy Spirit.

In this fashion, Jesus baptizes every person who believes in Him for salvation with the Holy Spirit at the moment of conversion. This means that the Holy Spirit takes up permanent residency within the believer and enables him to live out a godly and transformed life (1 Cor 6:19; Gal 5:22, 23).

Spirit baptism also involves direct action on the part of the Holy Spirit Himself. Scripture teaches us that He places the believer into the body of Christ at the moment of conversion (1 Cor 12:13). This results in union with Christ (Gal 3:27) and other believers (Eph 5:23).

Distinctions from Other Groups of Saints

While the universal church includes a great multitude of saints, it does not include saints of all ages. Take Old Testament saints, for example.

Prior to the day of Pentecost, this ministry of spirit baptism was not available to the Old Testament believer. As such, the Old Testament saint is not part of the body of Christ and does not enjoy the blessings that are particular to the church. This doesn't mean that we won't see saints like David and Abraham in heaven. But those saints will be of a different order than the church.

If the church age began on the day of Pentecost, when will it end? The universal church will continue to grow until the rapture. On that day, the church will be taken out of the earth and spared from the tribulation period which will follow shortly thereafter. The rapture is always spoken of in Scripture as an imminent event, meaning it could happen at any moment. This event will gather every remaining church saint, whether dead or alive, to meet the Lord and go to heaven (1 Cor 15:51–53; 1 Thess 4:13–17). This will complete the number of those who are placed into the body of Christ. Saints who are saved after this point will also be glorified and guaranteed an inheritance in heaven, but they will *not* be part of the body of Christ.

What makes the church so unique? The author of Hebrews refers to the body of Christ as the “church of the firstborn” or assembly of the firstborn (Heb 12:23; cf. Col 1:18). This does not mean that the church was the first group of saints to be saved. The term for firstborn is *prōtotokos* (πρωτότοκος) depicting a priority of place. In Old Testament culture the firstborn son received more inheritance — in some cases a double portion (Deut 21:17). *Prōtotokos* indicates a priority of rank or station. The church of the firstborn ones means that we will hold the highest place among the saints of all ages — both past and future. In the coming Millennial Kingdom, the church will be the Lamb's wife (i.e. the millennial queen) and will rule with Christ over the nations. The parable of the laborers (Matt 20:1–16) also bears out this idea that even though the church came later in time than Israel, it will occupy a first position in the Messianic reign.

The Mission of the Church

What is the job of the church today? Are we called to rule over the earth? No. That is for a future time. The mission of the church today was clearly laid out by Christ in the final days before His ascension. The fullest statement of this is found in Matthew 28:18–20, otherwise known as the Great Commission.

“And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’ Amen.” ~Matthew 28:18–20 NKJV

This commission involves three basic actions on the part of the church:

- 1) Make disciples (i.e. converts/believers).
- 2) Baptize them.
- 3) Teach them all things that Jesus commanded.

While this may appear rather simplistic, it is designed to be the mainstay of all Christian activity in the present age. This is the process by which Jesus will build His church (Matt 16:18). Does this mean that members of the church should not engage in any “non-spiritual” activities as rigidly defined by Scripture? No. (We’ll discuss this more in part 3). What it does mean is that all of the church’s activities as a corporate entity should be centered around furthering the mission given to us by Christ.

The Local Church

The second major use of the term *church* indicates local assemblies of believers. In modern parlance we sometimes use the word “church” to refer to the building where a particular church meets (e.g. “Hey David, I’ll meet you at *church*.”). This is not wrong so long as we recognize that the bible always uses the term with people in mind, not buildings.

Distinct from Old Testament Religion

There are many particulars of the local church we will discuss next time in part 2. But there is one primary distinction that sets apart the New Testament practices of the church from that of the Old Testament saints. The religion of the church is an *assembled* religion. The worship practices we engage in are meant to be done corporately. This does not excuse individual devotion to the Lord (e.g. bible reading, prayer, etc.). But it is decidedly different from the Old Testament. Saints in the Old Testament did have occasional large gatherings throughout the year, but most of the day-to-day worship occurred on an individual or family level. Today we have the privilege of gathering with other Christians for the purpose of mutual worship and edification. Let’s not forsake the blessings that God has in store for us (Heb 10:24, 25)!

~AWB