

SESSION 3

WHAT IS CHURCH?

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People have many different understandings of church. To some it is a building, to others a denomination or a tradition, but what does the Bible say church is?

The word church in the Bible actually means 'called out ones'. It refers to the people, not buildings, denominations or traditions. Simply put, church is the body of believers. The Bible refers to such people as 'a chosen generation', 'a special people' and 'His precious'.

You are coming to Christ, who is the living cornerstone of God's temple. He was rejected by people, but he was chosen by God for great honor.

And you are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple. What's more, you are his holy priests. Through the mediation of Jesus Christ, you offer spiritual sacrifices that please God. As the Scriptures say, 'I am placing a cornerstone in Jerusalem, chosen for great honor, and anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced.'

Yes, you who trust him recognize the honor God has given him. But for those who reject him, 'The stone that the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone.' And, 'He is the stone that makes people stumble, the rock that makes them fall.' They stumble because they do not obey God's word, and so they meet the fate that was planned for them.

But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show

others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.

'Once you had no identity as a people; now you are God's people. Once you received no mercy; now you have received God's mercy.'
(1 Peter 2:4-10, NLT)

The Local Church

Every believer should belong to a local church. The Bible refers to church 114 times: 96 of those to the local church. It is in the local church that accountability, protection and integrity are built. Also, this is where we can grow and be nurtured into the people of God. Our gifts and ministries are for use in the church to help build the house of God (Ephesians 3:10; 4:11-16; 1 Corinthians 12:18-28).

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' (Acts 1:8, NLT)

Acts 1:8 gives a sense of our church priorities: it is our home church first (Jerusalem). However, it is clear that we should be connected with other churches of like spirit and mind (Judea and Samaria). Pastors and elders from the local church can join up with other pastors and leaders across the world, walking together and supporting each other in the mission of the church. The big picture is that God is working in churches across the world! (Acts 11:27-30; 1 Corinthians 12:2; Revelation 5:9-10, 14:6-7).

The Undefeatable Church

The Bible shows us that the church will never fail. She will be a strong, victorious place where all peoples – whatever their background and culture – find a place in God's Kingdom. Destinies will be unfolded, lives will be restored and the church will stand strong in the full measure of Jesus Christ, its head (Ephesians 4:11-13; Romans 16:20; Matthew 16:18-19).

From the outside, some churches may seem to be powerless and slowly dying. However, Scripture and church history show that although religious institutions may be on the decline, the true church (or the 'bride of Christ') is being restored.

Peter has told you about the time God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for himself. And this conversion of Gentiles is exactly what the prophets predicted. As it is written:

*'Afterward I will return and restore the fallen house of David. I will rebuild its ruins and restore it, so that the rest of humanity might seek the Lord, including the Gentiles—all those I have called to be mine. The Lord has spoken.
(Acts 15:14-17, NLT)*

If you are a believer, then you should belong to a local church.

God's purpose in all this was to use the church to display his wisdom in its rich variety to all the unseen rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 3:10, NLT)

So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family. Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself. We are carefully joined together in him, becoming a holy temple for the Lord. Through him you Gentiles are also being made part of this dwelling where God lives by his Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22, NLT)

Characteristics of the Local Church

Every local church should be built according to the biblical pattern. The church belongs to Jesus and He said He would build His church and the gates of hell could not stand against it. We should endeavour to build the church to the same pattern that was set out in Acts 2:

All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer.

A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47, NLT)

In this Scripture we can see that key characteristics of the local church are:

- Following the teaching of the church leaders (the apostles' teaching)
- Fellowship between the church members, cultivating relationships no matter tribe or tongue
- Sharing the Lord's Supper together (communion)
- Prayer
- A real sense of awe for God, often known as the fear of the Lord
- Miraculous works of the Holy Spirit (signs and wonders)
- Generosity, sharing and meeting the needs of people in the church

- Worshipping together in church services (the temple)
- Meeting in people's homes, both socially and in small groups
- A shared sense of joy in the Lord
- The church growing in number (those being saved)
- Having a positive impact in the local community

When you read through Acts 2, there is a real sense of unity in the church in Jerusalem. Today's church should exhibit that same unity regardless, of colour, social standing or background.