

# We Believe: Doctrines of Our Faith

## The Doctrine of the Church

### I. Some Mentally Stimulating Questions:

What makes a church a church?

Is it important for local churches to gather together in person? Why, or why not?

What are we supposed to do when the church gathers?

Is church membership important? Why, or why not?

What are church members' responsibilities when the church gathers?

### II. What is the Church?

At its core, the *church* is the assembling of believers together.

The Greek word that we translate into "church" is *ekklesia*, a common word for an assembly or gathering of people.

The vital characteristic of the church is not a location or a built structure. It is a people gathered together.

We can think of the church on a few different levels:

Local churches consisting of a specific group of people gathering for praise, teaching, and service.

The church consisting of all believers from all time who will be present when Christ sets up His full kingdom in the New Heavens and New Earth.

In other words, when we encounter the word “church” in the New Testament, we have to investigate the context to understand what the authors are talking about.

### **III. The Church as All Believers across All Time**

In several places, the term “church” is used in a way that cannot simply mean a local gathering of believers in a particular city.

Matthew 16:13–20 – When Peter declares that Jesus is the Christ, Jesus makes a wordplay on his name, saying that the “rock” of Peter’s (“Rock”) confession will be the foundation for Jesus’ church.

1 Corinthians 12 – Paul describes the church as Christ’s body. He says we all, regardless of ethnicity or socio-economic station, have been baptized into this singular body. Further, he describes roles within the church that not every local congregation has (e.g., apostles).

Ephesians 5:25 – In describing the relationship between husbands and wives, Paul explains that husbands should love their wives as Christ loved the church (singular) and died for her. Clearly, Christ did not only die for a single local congregation.

What we must consider is whether our responsibility as Christians is only to be an individual member in this larger meaning of church (through belief in Christ) or whether the New Testament teaches us to belong to the church in a different way.

### **IV. The Church as a Local Gathering**

Far more often than in the global sense, the New Testament refers to the church in a local sense. It is a gathering of believers from a particular geographic area (e.g., a city), usually in a house of one of the members.

Acts 12:12 – A gathering of believers met at the house of John Mark’s mother.

Acts 13:1 – The church in Antioch sets aside Paul and Barnabas for missionary work.

Most of Paul's letters, John 2 & 3, and the addresses in Revelation 1–3 are all for churches located in particular cities or regions (Galatia, for example, probably refers to a whole region rather than simply the city).

All Christians in a particular city may not have met in a single house church, but they were linked together as a single church.

See, for example, how a letter like Colossians was supposed to be read to the whole church and not just one particular house church (Colossians 4:16).

## **V. The Purpose of Gathering**

The New Testament gives a few main reasons for the physical gathering together of local church communities.

Teaching the Scriptures and exhorting each other toward sanctification (e.g., Ephesians 4:11–16; 2 Timothy 4:1–5).

Singing for praise, for thanksgiving, and for mutual edification (e.g., Ephesians 5:15–20).

Exercising spiritual gifts for individual and communal spiritual growth (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12–14; particularly 12:7 and 14:1–5).

Collecting resources for generosity (e.g., Acts 2:42–47; 1 Corinthians 16:1–4).

Practicing the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper (e.g., 1 Corinthians 11:27–34; *more on these next week*).

Exercising discipline on wayward members (e.g., Matthew 18:15–18; 1 Corinthians 5:1–13).

If you have ever wondered why our Sunday mornings are structured the way they are, we are trying to achieve all of these purposes every week.

As an aside, the early church started to meet on the first day of the week rather than on the Sabbath day in order to commemorate Jesus'

resurrection day (see, for example Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2; and Revelation 1:10).

## **VI. Governance of the Church**

From the very beginning, the church was both a democratic and a hierarchical institution.

The Apostles were the original leaders of the church. Disputes about doctrine and discussions about operations were brought to them for resolution (e.g., Acts 4:36–5:2; 6:1–2; 15:6).

As the congregation grew and spread, two offices were developed in response to the needs of the churches: deacons (literally: *servants*) and elders.

Acts 6 give the origin of deacons as seven men are selected to make sure the widows' portions are distributed evenly.

By the time Paul wrote 1 Timothy, the office was well-established for all churches (1 Timothy 3:8–13).

Similarly, elders were expected to be chosen for every church in order to govern its operations and safeguard its doctrine (e.g., Acts 15:6; 1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9).

In both cases, the choice of those who would serve in these offices as well as the final word on safeguarding the church was up to the whole local body (e.g., Acts 6:3).

Note that, even though Paul tells Titus to “appoints elders” in every city, he does not necessarily mean that Titus do this unilaterally. Instead, it points toward the public reputation the men should have, meaning the church ought to be consulted on the choice.

## **VII. The Importance of Church Membership**

Our current cultural situation does not generally place a high value on church membership.

Many people see no personal benefit to joining a church as an official member because they can do all of the same things at many churches without becoming a member.

Churches are partly to blame because many of them do not operate like the New Testament model. Mutual accountability, serious serving, and discipline do not fit within the scope of operations for many churches.

The New Testament knows nothing about a flourishing Christian life without devoted membership in a local church.

The corporate aspect of Christian growth is as prominent as the personal aspect in the New Testament (e.g., the whole New Testament).

Our technological developments allow people to watch sermons from famous pastors, see the most popular worship bands, and generally get the components of traditional church gatherings without actually gathering.

Assuming that one can merely attend, listen, and not engage the community of Christians in the local church while still getting everything necessary for discipleship is like assuming that watching a cooking show is the same as eating the meal the chef prepares.