

# THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

## THE DEFINITION OF THE CHURCH

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- The English word *church*, the Scottish word *kirk*, and the German word *kirche* come from the Greek word *kuriakon* which means “a place belonging to the Lord, or the Lord’s house”
  - The word *ekklesia* in classical Greek (i.e. pre New Testament times) meant “assembly”
  - Before New Testament times, there was never any special religious significance to the word – it simply meant an assembly
  - The Greek world uses *ekklesia* for a popular assembly
  - “The NT reveals a development of the term *ekklesia* from the simple non-technical meaning of assembly to the full blown technical designation for the Christian people of God...Through use, it became so completely identified with the specific Christian assembly that the term took on that particular meaning itself and could stand for that assembly without being confused with others. The majority of the New Testament references have this technical meaning” (Robert Saucy, *The Church in God’s Program*, 15-16).
  - *ekklesia* is most often used in a technical sense of believers who constitute a special group of God’s people
  - *ekklesia* is never used in the NT for a church building
  - Before the church was born (Acts 2), the word *ekklesia* occurs only twice in the NT (Matt 16:18; 18:17)
  - After the church was born, it occurs 112 times
1. Some of those uses do not necessarily refer to a gathering of God’s people, but rather simply an assembly

**Acts 7:38** ~ This is the one who was in the congregation (i.e. the gathering of Israel) in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and who was with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you.

**Acts 19:32** ~ So then, some were shouting one thing and some another, for the assembly (secular assembly) was in confusion and the majority did not know for what reason they had come together.

**Hebrews 2:12** ~ saying, “I will proclaim Your name to My brethren, In the midst of the congregation I will sing Your praise.” (quote of Ps 22:22)

2. Most of those uses refer to a group of believers who are spiritually united with Christ
  - A. Sometimes referring to the universal church – a reference not to the assembly itself but rather those constituting it
 

**Ephesians 1:22-23** ~ And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

**Ephesians 5:23** ~ For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body.

- B. Sometimes referring to the local church – a specific local assembly of professed believers

**Acts 13:1** ~ Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

**1 Corinthians 1:2** ~ To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours:

- What about Grudem's definition of the church on pages 853-854 which includes OT and NT believers?

## **The Universal/Invisible Church**

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- Definition – All true believers in Christ from Pentecost until the Rapture
- Grudem – The church as God sees it (pg. 855)
- There is a distinction to be drawn between the church as we humans see it and as God alone can see it
- This is the historic distinction between the “visible church” (local church) and the “invisible church” (universal Church)
- Invisible means, not that we can see no sign of its presence, but that we cannot know (as God, the heart-reader, knows) which of those baptized, professing members of the church as an organized institution are inwardly regenerate and thus belong to the church as a spiritual fellowship of sinners loving their Savior

**2 Timothy 2:19** ~ Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, “The Lord knows those who are His,” and, “Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness.”

- Jesus taught that in the visible local church there would always be people who thought they were Christians and passed as Christians, some indeed becoming ministers, but who were not renewed in heart and would therefore be exposed and rejected at the Judgment

**Matthew 7:15-27**

**Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43**

**Matthew 13:47-50**

**Matthew 25:1-46**

- The “visible-invisible” distinction is drawn to take into account the fact that some in the visible church are not truly a part of the invisible church
- It is not that there are two churches but that the visible community regularly contains imitation Christians whom God knows not to be real
- All true believers are baptized into the body of Christ and are thus a part of the universal church

**1 Corinthians 12:13** ~ For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body

- Believers do not have a choice as to whether they will be in the universal church or not...it's automatic
- Entrance into the church is through the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit who places believers into union with Christ and with other believers
- The baptizing work of the Spirit occurs simultaneously with saving faith, is non-experiential, and includes all believers, regardless of class or social position
- All true believers, at the moment of conversion, are baptized into or identified with the universal church through the baptism of the Spirit
  - “were all baptized” – in aorist tense – once for all action
  - There is no command to be baptized in Spirit
  - There is no evidence that it is a repeated experience
  - This is not an extra endowment with super power above normal Christians

## The Local/Visible Church

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- Definition – A local group of professed believers, organized and meeting for the purposes outlined in the New Testament
- Grudem – the church as Christians on earth see it...the group of people who come together each week to worship as a church and profess faith in Christ (pg. 856)
- This refers to the local church when a particular assembly of believers in a given location at a given time is intended
- While most of those in a local church are probably believers, not all are
- Frequently, Paul referred to individual, local/visible churches:

**2 Corinthians 1:1** ~ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints who are throughout Achaia:

**Galatians 1:2** ~ and all the brethren who are with me, To the churches of Galatia:

**Philippians 4:15** ~ You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone;

**Colossians 4:15, 16** ~ Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea and also Nympha and the church that is in her house. When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea.

**2 Thessalonians 1:1** ~ Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

**Revelation 1:4** ~John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne,

- Most of these were probably city churches
- There was probably initially only one church in a city that gathered together at times, yet on a continual basis gathered together in homes
- Not until doctrinal controversy and false teaching did there become more than one church in a city
- The New Testament assumes that all Christians will share in the life of a local church, meeting with it for worship (Heb. 10:25), accepting its nurture and discipline (Matt. 18:15-20; Gal. 6:1), and sharing in its work of witness
- “The universal church is often termed invisible, yet the New Testament never speaks of the invisible church. Even as members of a local church are concrete people, so are members of the universal church. It is true that the New Testament uses the term *ekklesia* for the spiritual reality of the body of Christ and also for the assembly, in which the genuineness of the spiritual reality of every individual professing member cannot be known. To this extent the exact membership in any individual church and the universal church at large cannot be known and is thereby invisible. But even this invisible membership is very visible in the reality of life. As for membership in an invisible church without fellowship with any local assembly, this concept is never contemplated in the New Testament. The universal church was the universal fellowship of believers who met visible in local assemblies” (Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*, 17).

### 73. Local Church Contrasted with the Universal Church

Visible	Invisible
Membership: saved and lost	Membership: saved only
Only currently living people	Both dead and living in Christ
Many local churches	Only one universal church
Differing denominations	No single denomination
Part of the body of Christ	The entire body of Christ
Differing types of government	Christ the only head
Ministering the ordinances (or sacraments)	Ordinances fulfilled (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:23-26; Rev. 19:9)

# THE INAUGURATION OF THE CHURCH

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## Some Inadequate Suggestions

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### 1. With Adam

As New Testament saints are saved through faith in the Christ of history, so Old Testament saints were saved through faith in the Christ of prophecy...And so Isaiah, David, Abraham, Abel and a host of others were members of one body of Christ, His church. And if we assume, as undoubtedly we may, that Adam and Eve believed in the promise of God [Gen 3:15]...then it may be asserted that they constituted the first Christian church.

R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ*, 21-22

### 2. With Abraham

The church under the new dispensation is identical with that of the old. It is not a new church, but one and the same. It is the same olive tree (Rom 11:17, 24). It is founded in the same covenant, the covenant made with Abraham.

Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:549

### 3. With Christ's earthly ministry

The church, therefore, was established in the days of Jesus' sojourn in the flesh and the work of its construction was begun with the material prepared by John the Baptist, later the twelve apostles of our Lord.

R. V. Clearwaters, *The Local Church in the New Testament*, 26

### 4. With Paul

- Ultradispensationalism delays the inauguration of the church which exists today until the time of Paul
- A different church (a Jewish church) is said to have existed in the earlier portion of the book of Acts
- "Ultradispensationalism is a niche doctrine of Christian belief that believes that the Christian Church began with Paul's statement made to the Jewish leaders at Rome near the end of the [Book of Acts](#) with Acts 28:28 stating: 'Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it'" (Wikipedia – entry "Hyperdispensationalism")
- Grace Bible College in Grand Rapids holds to this; therefore, they do not teach believer's baptism

## The Church Began at Pentecost

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- See Acts 2
- How do we know Pentecost marks the beginning of the church?

### 1. It is proved by the promise of Christ in Matthew 16:18 – the church was yet future

**Matthew 16:18** ~ I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will (future) build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.

Remember the flow of thought in Matthew which indicates a new program:

- Matthew 1-10 ~ Shows the credibility of Christ as King (birth, baptism, temptation, teachings)

- Matthew 11-12 ~ Opposition to Christ by Jewish leaders
- Matthew 13 ~ Parables of the mysteries of the kingdom (i.e. the time of his rejection to the time of his acceptance)
- Matthew 14-15 ~ More opposition
- Matthew 16 ~ Christ reveals His plans to build His church (i.e. a new program)
  - Jesus was not surprised when the Jews did not accept His offer of the kingdom
  - The church has always been in the eternal purpose of God
  - God did not choose to reveal it to man until after the Jews' rejection of their Messiah
  - Thus, the church is a new work of God begun in the NT

## 2. It is proved by the baptism of the Holy Spirit – without Spirit baptism there can be no body of Christ

**Acts 1:5** ~ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now



**Acts 2:4** ~ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance.



**Acts 11:15** ~ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning.

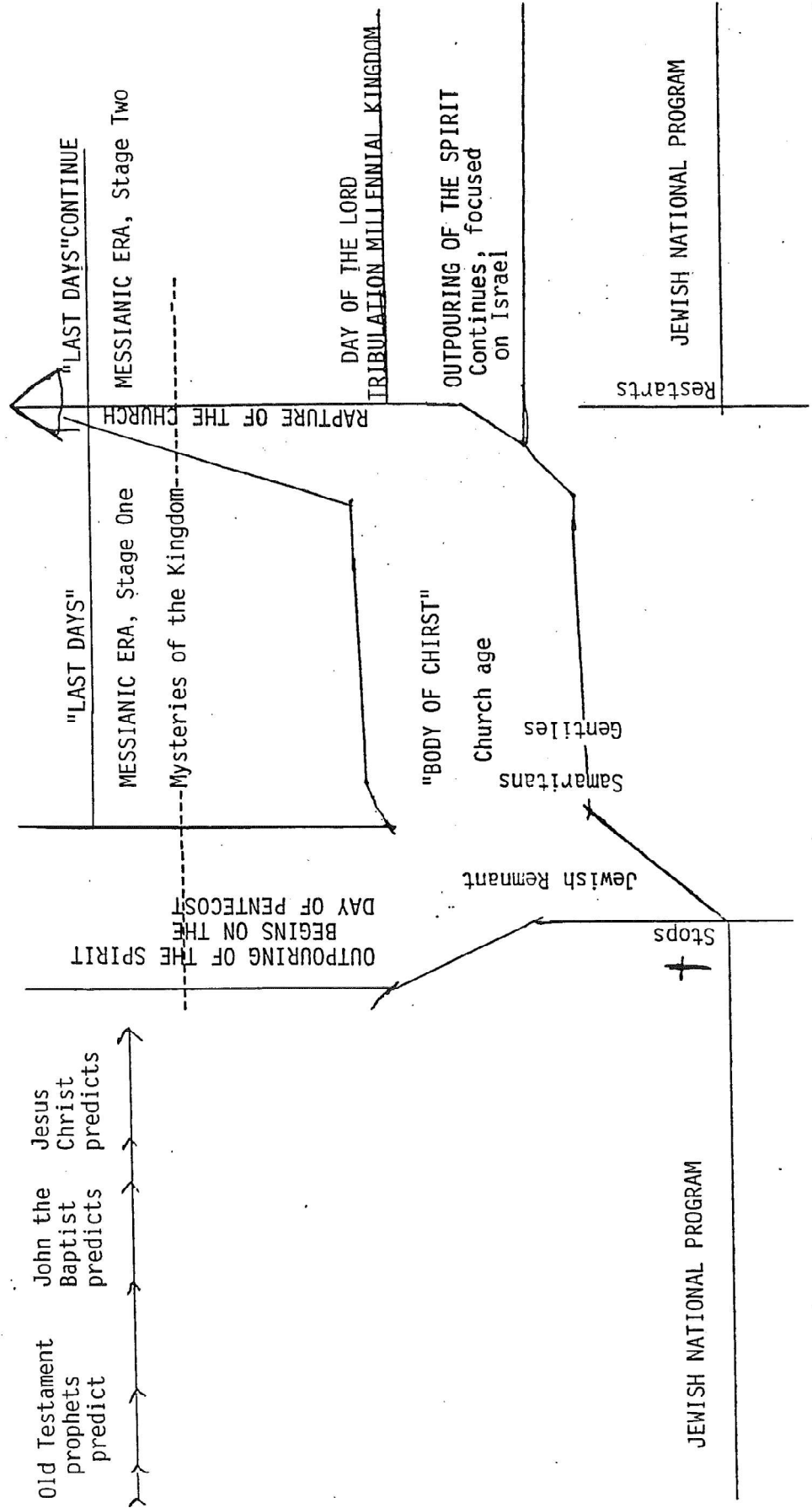
- “the beginning” can only refer to Pentecost, thus identifying it as the time of the “baptism of the Holy Spirit”



**1 Corinthians 12:13** ~ For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

- The pouring out of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost is the means by which the body of Christ was formed
- As believers are placed in the sphere of the Spirit, they are fused into the spiritual body which is identified as the church

# HOLY SPIRIT OUTPOURING: CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY



### 3. It is proved by the church as a mystery – a truth not formerly revealed, but now revealed

- The contemporary definition of a “mystery” is “something not understood or beyond understanding; a piece of fiction dealing usually with the solution of a crime”
- But the biblical definition of a “mystery” is “a fresh revelation or something now revealed that was not previously revealed and so previously unknown”
- The church is a mystery in that it was previously unknown in the Old Testament

**Colossians 1:25-27** ~ Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

**Ephesians 3:2-6** ~ if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace which was given to me for you; that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel,

- Therefore, the church as a union of Jews and Gentiles on equal footing as fellow heirs in Christ is a distinctly New Testament entity
- This union was not foreseen in OT times; it is the mystery of the church age which is a “new man:”

**Ephesians 2:14-16** ~ For He Himself is our peace, who made both *groups into* one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, *which is* the Law of commandments *contained* in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, *thus* establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.

## THE PARENTHESIS OF THE CHURCH

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- The church is a parenthesis between God’s two dealings with the nation of Israel

**Romans 11:11-29**

- The Jews were broken off and the Gentiles were grafted in
- Later, however, the Jews will be regrafted at the Second Coming of Christ
- Thus, the church is the means by which God is working in this present age, between His working in Israel

## THE COMPLETION OF THE CHURCH

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- The age of the church will be complete at the Rapture of the church

**1 Thessalonians 4:13-18** ~ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.

**1 Corinthians 15:51-52** ~ Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.