

THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

THE DEFINITION

Various ideas of what church is.

1. **A physical building:**
 - “There’s the church on the corner.”
 - Nowhere in the New Testament does the church mean a building.
 - Christians actually met in homes, some special structure made specifically for worship meetings and called, “churches” did not exist yet.
 - To say something like, “I pass the church every day on my way into work.” Would not be understood.

2. **A denomination:**
 - Sometimes you will hear people say, I am part of the “Lutheran Church” or the “Methodist Church.”

3. **A particular body of believers beyond the denomination in general:**
 - Maranatha Bible Church.
 - First Baptist Church of Zeeland
 - Central Wesleyan Church.

4. **A State or National Church:**
 - This is when one particular church is to be governed and supported by the state. Where has this been seen in history? (European countries).
NOTE: The idea of a state church finds no support in Scripture. Also, there is absolutely no call in Scripture for the Christian church to line itself up with the state government.

5. **All believers in Jesus Christ:**
 - This has no denomination, building, people group, or geographical boundaries, it refers to all believers everywhere.

What is the Biblical idea of church?

DEFINITION OF THE CHURCH

- The shape of the visible church today does have a partial continuity with Old Testament Israel (not identity, in other words, the church is not the new Israel, they are separate entities and we will discuss that later), but there is a partial continuity with the visible people of God in the Old and New Testaments.
- What I mean is that God's eternal plan has always been to display his glory not just through individuals but through a corporate body.
- If we go back to Genesis, we see God didn't just create one person but two, and not just two, but two who had the ability to reproduce more. We also see that God saved several families from the flood, not just one.
- How about Abraham? Remember in Genesis 12 God called Abram and promised his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky or the sand on the seashore.
- Or in Exodus, there we see that God dealt not only with Moses but with the entire nation of Israel. This included 12 tribes made up of hundreds of thousands of people, yet they were bearing one corporate identity.
- So, to understand the Biblical meaning of the church, we need to look to the Bible as a whole. There is a clear continuity between the Old Testament people of God and the New Testament church. (once again, the Church does not replace Israel).
- To help us narrow down the task of finding continuity within the Old and New Testaments regarding the Church, let's look at the etymology of the words used in both the Old and New Testaments regarding the subject of God's people gathering together. We can begin by taking a look at.
- The Hebrew word, "*Qahl*." This word in the OT refers to a declaration to get together or assemble. But not just the declaration, it also refers to the actual act of assembling. Now, it's not so much a specification of the members of the assembly as it is a designation of the occurrence of assembling. As we look at this term in scripture, we see that not always, but many times it has a religious significance attached to it.
Examples: [Deuteronomy 9:10](#); [10:4](#); [23:1-3](#).
- If we take "*Qahl*" and look to the Septuagint (earliest Greek translation of the OT), we see that the Greek word *ekklesia* is used 77 times in translation.

- You see, Jesus and His followers didn't describe their meetings and community by the term for synagogue which is **συναγωγή** (**soon-ag-o-gay'**) (except **James 2:2**). No, they used the word, *ekklesia*. it appears 114 times in the New Testament.
- I want to point out here that *ekklesia* wasn't only used in the NT period to describe the gatherings of Christians. No, it was used to describe all kinds of other assemblies. For instance, Luke uses it three times in the book of Acts 19?
 - Remember, in Ephesus, there was this mob that had gathered in the amphitheater, they were essentially starting to riot because of Paul? *Ekklesia* is the word used in **Acts 19:32,39,41**, to indicate this gathering.
- Now, although *ekklesia* is a common term in the NT, it is actually unevenly distributed. We only see two uses of it in the Gospels:
 1. **Matthew 16:18**
⁸ I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.
 2. **Matthew 18:17**
¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.
- I think it is interesting to point out that Luke used the word several times in **Acts** when referring to the gathering of believers, but consciously avoided using it for a group that belonged to the period of Jesus earthly activity (think about that).
- Now, the majority of references to *ekklesia* appear in Paul's letters.
 - We see it 9 times in **Ephesians** and 4 times in **Colossians**.
 - It is also mentioned in **Hebrews 12:23**, James referred to a local church and its elders in **James 5:14**, and then in **Revelation** John uses it 20 times.
 - So, we see in the NT a development of the word took place. It went from the simple non-technical meaning of just some general secular or otherwise assembly of pretty much any kind, to the full-blown technical designation for the Christian people of God.
- Now, let me just give you a fairly concise definition for the Church. This definition comes from Dr. Vlach.

Definition: The Church is the New Covenant community of God as it exists in this dispensation between the events of Acts 2 (Day of Pentecost) through the rapture of the Church.

That is a definition of the Church, but who specifically does it consist of?

Constituents: The believing remnant of Israel and believing Gentiles in this era between the events of Acts 2 and the Rapture. The emphasis of this era is on Gentiles coming to faith but a remnant of believing Israel continues to exist. **Galatians 6:16**.

This definition can be broken down into two categories:

- The Local Church / Visible
- The Universal Church / Invisible

1.) **The Local / Visible Church:**

- We see this dealt with in two different ways.
 - a) If we look at **1 & 2 Corinthians**, **Galatians**, **1 Thessalonians** or **Revelation**, we see it referring to a group of believers in a specific city. “*To the church of God at...*”
 - b) But we also see it being used of meetings that take place in individual homes. For instance, in **Romans 16:5** or **Colossians 4:15** it states, “greet the *ekklesia* that is in their house.”
- In both of these instances, it is referring to the local assembly of God’s children. The Christians are gathering together to worship the Lord locally.
- We see in the New Testament that it was assumed all Christians would share in the life of a local church, meeting with it for worship **Hebrews 10:25**, accepting it’s nurture and discipline, **Matthew 18:15-20**; **Galatians 6:1**, and sharing in it’s work of witness. So, the first category is the local visible church and the second category is:

2.) **The Universal / Invisible Church:**

- The term is used in this case to indicate the spiritual unity of all believers in Christ throughout all of history. Some scripture references include, **Matthew 16:18**, **1 Corinthians 10:32**, **Ephesians 1:22**; **5:23-32**, **Colossians 1:18,24**.
- Grudem – The church as God sees it (pg. 855).
So, in this sense it is not the assembly itself but rather those constituting it; they are the church whether assembled or not, weather alive or dead.

- Invisible doesn't mean that we can't see any sign of it's presence, but that we cannot know which of those baptized, professing members of the church as an organized institution are inwardly regenerate and thus truly belong to the church. Only God knows.
- A side note, Jesus taught that in the visible local church there would always be people who thought they were Christians and even passed as Christians, in-fact some became ministers, but they were not regenerate.

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 who 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**.
- The universal / invisible church is the universal fellowship of believers who meet visibly in local / visible assemblies.
- So, that is the definition. Within that definition I want you to notice that both the definition and the constituents deal with when the church began. So, now let's look at that.

Let's pray