

The Church

- I. This study sets forth what Scripture declares about “the church” and considers such things as:
 - A. What is the church?
 - B. What is its origin?
 - C. What is its purpose?
 - D. Is it a unique entity or merely another organization or association?
 - E. How is it constructed?
 - F. How is it governed?
 - G. What are its responsibilities?
 - H. What is its form of service or worship, its ordinances?
 - I. What is its duration?

- II. Definitions from Oxford English Dictionary.
 - A. church: While it results from what is stated above that *kirika, cirice*, was originally applied to the building, it is clear that with the conversion of the Teutonic nations, it was assumed as the naturalized equivalent of Latin *ecclesia*, and used for that word in all its senses.
 1. The (or a) Christian community, and its ecclesiastical organization.
 - a. The community or whole body of Christ's faithful people collectively; all who are spiritually united to Christ as 'Head of the Church'. More fully described as the ***Church Universal*** or ***Catholic***.
 - b. A congregation of Christians locally organized into a society for religious worship and spiritual purposes, under the direction of one set of spiritual office-bearers.
 2. All the above points are from O.E.D.
 - B. Scripture equates *church* with *congregation*. **HEB 2:12 c/w PSA 22:22.**
 1. congregation: The action of congregating or collecting in one body or mass.
 2. congregate: To collect or gather together into a mass or crowd. To assemble.
 3. assemble: To bring together into one place or company; to gather, collect, convene.
 4. together: Into one gathering, company, mass or body.
 5. Mind that these definitions do not support the notion of “virtual church” where assembling together is not needed. Nor do they support the notion of individual assemblies being divisions of one organization called “the church.”

- III. There are two things in Scripture which are called “the church.”
 - A. Sometimes, “church” refers to the entire, redeemed family of God from all times, be they on earth or in heaven. This church consists only and all of those for whom Christ died according to God’s gracious election, foreknowledge, predestination, calling/quickenings and glorification by Jesus Christ. It is holy, spotless and blameless by the work of Christ. **1PE 1:2-4 c/w ROM 8:28-30 c/w 1PE 5:10 c/w HEB 12:22-24.**
 - B. general: 1. Including, participated in by, involving, or affecting, all, or nearly all, the parts of a specified whole, or the persons or things to which there is an implied reference; completely or approximately universal within implied limits; opposed to PARTIAL or PARTICULAR. 2. Concerned with, or established for, the whole of a certain territory or organization; opposed to LOCAL, SECTIONAL, etc. (caps mine)
 - C. It has been a common assumption that membership in this “general assembly and church of the firstborn” depends upon the work of and/or inclusion in the institution of an organized local church or church system on earth: the church on earth is the only way of

- entrance to the church in heaven. This is eternal salvation by church, not by Christ.
- D. This “general assembly and church of the firstborn” does not and cannot congregate or assemble in this earth. Its place of assembly is in heaven where the spirits/souls of departed saints presently convene (**HEB 12:23; REV 6:9-11**), and the rest are there represented positionally in Christ. **EPH 1:10-11; 2:4-6**.
- E. Eventually, the separation in this church will be completely eliminated. At the glorious return of the Lord Jesus Christ, the persons of all saints will be united together completely. **1TH 4:16-17**.

- IV. There is another institution in Scripture referred to as “the church,” namely a local assembly of converted followers of Christ meeting in His name under the rule of His appointed overseer(s) who minister His word unto them.
- A. The importance of the local church is sometimes overlooked or even trivialized as a stop-gap measure, as implied in Dispensational teaching.
1. “Hebrews is a series of contrasts between the good things of Judaism and the better things of Christ. Christ is 'better' than angels, than Moses, than Joshua, than Aaron; and the New Covenant than the Mosaic Covenant. Church truth does not appear, the ground of gathering only being stated (13:13).”
(The Scofield Reference Bible, p. 1291)
 2. This position is refuted by the fact that Paul includes instruction concerning their submission to their pastors and teachers who rule over them (**HEB 13:7, 17**), which authority is a local church office. **1CO 12:27-28; EPH 4:11-12**.
 3. Likewise warning is given for these people to *not forsake the assembling of themselves together*, which by definition, is a church. **HEB 10:25**.
- B. The proper name for the local assembly is “the church.” Each biblically built congregation is in and of itself *the church of God*, as was the local church at Ephesus. **ACT 20:28; 1TI 3:15**.
1. When these congregations are spoken of plurally or collectively, they are always referred to as “the churches.” **ROM 16:1-5; REV 1:4**.
 2. Scripture knows nothing of a hierarchical system whereby individual congregations are part of a super-church, being ruled by someone other than their God-appointed pastor/elder directly under Christ who *labors among them*. **1TH 5:12; 1TI 5:17**.
- C. Local churches are not just institutions of men; they are both *in* Christ and are *of* Christ. **1TH 1:1; ROM 16:16**.
1. It is HIS “built” church (not Moses’ or Peter’s). **MAT 16:18**.
 2. He is its chief cornerstone Whose revelation directed His N.T. apostles and prophets. **EPH 2:19-22; 3:5**.
 3. It is for the glory of God by Him forever. **EPH 3:21**.
- D. The local church by itself is called the “whole church.” **ROM 16:23 c/w 1CO 1:14; 14:4-5, 23**.
- E. The local church consists of baptized believers in a given locality. **1CO 1:1-2, 6, 13**.
- F. The local church is where the ordinance of the Lord's Supper is observed as a kingdom banquet. **1CO 11:33 c/w LUK 22:29-30**.
1. This ordinance is peculiar to local assemblies and the members thereof. It is the *disciples* that come together for the breaking of bread. **MAT 26:18; ACT 20:4-7**.
 2. disciple: One who follows or attends upon another for the purpose of learning from him; a pupil or scholar.
 - a. One of the personal followers of Jesus Christ during his life; esp. one of the Twelve.
 - b. Also applied in the N.T. to the early Christians generally; hence, in religious use, *absol.* a professed follower of Christ, a Christian

- or believer.
3. Can one truly be a follower of Jesus Christ if he does not follow Christ's orders or example? **LUK 6:46; 1JO 2:4.**
 4. What are the attributes of a disciple of Jesus Christ? How can you identify a true disciple?
 - a. He is willing to submit to the same discipline as his Master (**LUK 6:40**). If it was not beneath the sinless Lord Jesus Christ to be baptized or wash the saints' feet, would a true disciple not be willing to thus follow His Lord?
 - b. He must bear the rejection and contempt of friends and family. He must subjugate his own ideas and concerns, accept the cost of discipleship and follow. **LUK 14:26-27, 33.**
 - c. He must *continue in Christ's word* (**JOH 8:31**). Can a person truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ if he exempts himself from requirements of His word or has allegiance to some other's word?
 - d. A disciple identifies and is numbered with those of like faith and obedience **ACT 1:15.**
 - (1) Mind that this company was meeting to conduct an article of local church business: the election of an apostle, a local church office. **1CO 12:28.**
 - (2) Also, this group is later identified as a church. **ACT 2:46-47.**
 - e. Disciples are understood to be baptized believers assembled as a church, over which elders are to have the oversight. Disciples and church members are synonymous terms for true followers of Jesus Christ bearing His name. **ACT 11:26; 14:20-24, 27-28.**
 - f. Disciples are not to forsake this responsibility of identifying in common assembly with like believers as members of the body, the local church (**1CO 12:27; HEB 10:25**). If a person avoids or abandons this word of Divine instruction, how then can it be said that he is *continuing in His word*?
 5. A disciple must be willing to submit to the judgment of the church when it acts within the framework of its delegated authority. **MAT 18:15-18.**
 - a. **MAT 18:15-18** is Christ's directive for dealing with *perceived* faults *between brethren*. It is not a formula for dealing with crimes against the law of God which demand separation from the offender even if he concedes or admits his error. ct/w **1CO 5:9-13.**
 - b. This responsibility of godly judgment between brethren in the church is the subject of Paul's reproof in **1CO 6:1-8.**
 - c. A brother who considers himself to have been faulted has the option of pursuing remedy by following **MAT 18:15-18** or, at any time, dropping the matter, per **1CO 6:7; PRO 19:11.**
 - d. The church does not have authority to manufacture law against brethren but only to operate within given law as set forth by Christ and the apostles. **JAM 4:11; 1JO 4:6.**
 - e. A proper understanding of **MAT 18:15-18** allows for conflict between brethren to occur and be settled by overlooking a matter (forbearance, forgiveness, longsuffering), by pursuing remedy personally, by pressing for adjudication by others, and even for admission of error: all without requiring the church to separate fellowship from a brother.
 - (1) The separation by which one is to be deemed as a *heathen and*

publican is reserved for either brother who refuses the judgment of the church in personal conflict resolution. Such a one is guilty of *variance* or *rebellion*, which are works of the flesh. **GAL 5:20.**

- (2) Being deemed a *heathen* or *publican* implied someone in need of repentance and conversion, and not to be eaten with (**MAR 2:16; ACT 11:3**), which in a church context has relevance to the Lord's Supper. More on this issue to follow.

G. The local church is also held accountable for the discipline of its members who are *commonly known* to have violated God's law for N.T. believers.

1CO 5:1-5; EPH 5:3-5.

1. God judges the corporate body for the sake of one or few offenders. **JOS 7:1 c/w REV 2:14-16.**
2. God promises to withdraw support and fellowship from the congregation if they do not execute judgment to purge the church. **JOS 7:12-13.**
3. God is not subordinate to the vote of a church in areas of publicly known sin which He has declared He will not tolerate in fellowship. Man is a fool to think that he by himself or in concert with others can disannul God's judgment. **JOB 40:8; EXO 23:2, 7.**
4. Even when the church does execute judgment upon a member, its decision is only a ratification of what God has already decreed. **1CO 5:3.**
5. "...The Lord shall judge His people" (**HEB 10:30-31**).
 - a. God will take appropriate action to punish transgressors, regardless of what the church decides.
 - b. He will judge His people if they will not judge themselves by repentance in timely fashion. **1CO 11:31 c/w REV 2:20-23.**
 - c. As with Joshua, if the church is not aware of an offense which needs to be addressed, God can bring it to light. **1CO 4:5; 1TI 5:24-25.**
 - d. God may cut the sinner off Himself. **ACT 5:1-5; 1CO 11:28-30.**
6. This system of examination, judgment and separation can only apply to the *local church*, not the general assembly/church comprised of all who have been purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ.
 - a. The members of that church still on earth would be expected to be accountable for the actions and beliefs of people they have never met or never (in this life) will meet, which would be an absurdity.
 - b. Secondly, how would the corporate general church on earth exercise discipline from the born-again regenerate family? How would they form a consensus to formally excommunicate someone? Could they excommunicate a saint out of heaven because some sin was exposed after his death? How would someone's name be stricken from the membership role of the general church: could living saints read of David's sin and vote to cast him out of heaven? ct/w **JOH 10:28-29.**

H. If "the church" is really multiple congregations which are considered collectively, like "the Methodist Church" or "the Presbyterian Church," again, it would be impossible for an individual congregation to be held accountable for the actions and beliefs of people they do not know and with whom they do not commune as a body at the Lord's Table. "Church" systems like that tend to fabricate false hierarchies which determine retention or excommunication of a system member rather than the matter being entirely in the hands of a local congregation.

I. Thus, the accountability of fellowship to which God holds believers is restricted to the

membership of a single congregation, which, as already seen, is the “whole church” (**ACT 15:22; ROM 16:23; 1CO 14:23**) or “all the church” (**ACT 5:11**).

1. The local church's judgment concerns those of its own membership, no more.
2. Scripture knows nothing of one local church being accountable to another or for the sin of another. The regional churches of Asia which were in good order (Smyrna and Philadelphia, **REV 2-3**) were not praised for judging the membership of the five disorderly ones, nor were they tainted by the others' disorders.

J. Intimately connected with church discipline is the keeping of the Lord's Supper or communion. Notice that in the instructions for discipline in the church is also a warning against eating a particular feast until a known offender has been purged out (**1CO 5:6-11**). This feast is of course the N.T. passover kept in commemoration of the sacrifice of Christ which delivered His people, not out of Egypt but out of hell (**v. 7**), which later in the same epistle is dealt with in greater detail. **1CO 10:16-17; 11:17-34**.

1. The communion service of a local church is to be kept pure of known transgressors. Light and darkness are not to be held in common union. **2CO 6:14; MAL 2:17**.
2. To maintain fellowship with known transgressors and dine with them at the Lord's Table would be tantamount to saying that there will be no separation from sinners at the judgment seat of Christ which introduces the marriage supper of the Lamb in glory. **MAT 25:31-46**.
3. Thus, since church purity (the absence of commonly known offenders) is an absolute prerequisite to the keeping of the Lord's Supper and (as already seen), the discipline of the church a local matter, we conclude that the communion feast is restricted to the members of a local congregation.
 - a. They are accountable to each other and to God to see that no common-report transgressor partakes of the table of the Lord.
 - b. As such, the church testifies that it is a holy society which does not condone the works of the flesh in its midst. Known sinners will *not be named among them*. **EPH 5:3-7**.
 - c. The Lord's table is the focal point of church membership; it is the acid test.
4. We never in Scripture find the communion feast being observed by anyone other than the members of a local congregation.
 - a. The one exception to this is found in **ACT 20:4-13**, where Paul did partake of communion at Troas.
 - b. Observe, however, the shift in pronouns from the *first person plural* in **vs. 5-6** (we, us; i.e. - Luke, Paul and the travelling companions) to the *third person* (them, they) in **vs. 7-12**.
 - c. **vs. 7-12** describe the activities of Paul and the Troan disciples. Paul's travelling companions are not included in this group.
 - (1) Hence, a minister may serve communion in a church of which he is not a member. Paul was a member of the church at Antioch, not Troas. **ACT 13:1-3**.
 - (2) This is reasonable inasmuch as ministers are the proper administrators of the ordinance. Evangelism could not proceed otherwise.
5. Potential problems arise if an individual who is not a member of a given local church is considered eligible to partake of the communion of the Lord's table with the members of that church:
 - a. If the individual claims to be a child of God and an heir of the promises of Christ's redemption, but has not been baptized into a church in obedience to

his professed Lord, his “faith” does not have the seal of the good work of baptism, rendering his faith dead. **JAM 2:17-20.**

- (1) Baptism (not the lack of it) is *the answer of a good conscience*.
1PE 3:21.
 - (2) Consideration applies to the professed believer whose circumstances militate against his baptism but not against his eternal destiny (**LUK 23:39-43**) but the rule of “baptized church members only” at the Lord’s Table still stands. “Unsealed” faith in such a believer is not dead but *handicapped*.
- b. If the individual is, in fact, a properly baptized member of another legitimate, separate, local N.T. church, there is still a problem.
- (1) The communing congregation would have to not only consider the individual, but also the state of the other body (church) of which he is a member. To commune with *him* is to commune with *them*, since he is part of them. **1CO 12:12, 18-20.**
 - (2) It would then have to be determined that the other church is “in order,” not promoting *heresy* (a work of the flesh, **GAL 5:20**), nor communing with known sinners, nor rejecting *apostolic* tradition. **2TH 3:6, 14.**
 - (3) Has the other church purged itself of the ungodly or are they communing with those whom ought to be avoided?
 - (4) If doubts about propriety in an area of liberty defile the doer (**ROM 14:23**), how much more would doubts in participating in something contrary to command and apostolic example defile the doer?
- c. For an inter-church communion to be observed, an inquisition into the teachings and practices of the other church would be necessary, resulting in a lot of meddling in other's affairs, which ought to be avoided.
PRO 20:3; 1PE 4:15; LUK 12:13-14.
- (1) It is this kind of activity which usually results in some governor or governing body being set up over the local congregation and its elder(s) to monitor and dictate terms of fellowship, thus usurping the God-given authority and autonomy of the local church.
 - (2) The closest thing to a “mother church” hierarchy system in Scripture is the example of the Jerusalem church council in **ACT 15** which, under immediate living apostolic direction, actually put a stop to an effort of false hierarchical authority being imposed on other churches. **ACT 15:24.**
 - (3) Scripture upholds the concept of local authority in other areas like marriage, parenting, master-servant relationships, etc.
EPH 5:22-24; 1TI 3:4, 12; ROM 14:4.
- d. Consider this policy from another perspective.
- (1) The Lord’s Table is a commanded ordinance for the church.
1CO 11:2, 23-25.
 - (2) A church member who wilfully and publicly refuses to keep the ordinance would be in direct violation of the order of Jesus Christ and the church would have to separate company from him and declare him unfit for fellowship in Christ’s kingdom.
 - (3) Imagine the problems that would be created if a communing church

tried to enforce this order upon a visiting member of another church.

- e. Whereas a local church ought not to partake of the Lord's table with anyone not a member of its body, this should not be taken as an insult by someone not of that body. It is simply that the church has no judgmental authority outside of its own body. A visitor to a congregation may have a valid standing before God in another legitimate church elsewhere and is accountable to them.

K. The local church is the body of Christ into which one is baptized by the Spirit.

1CO 12:13, 27.

- 1. Each local church is the body and there are many churches, thus, many bodies.
- 2. This is not contradicted by **EPH 4:4** which refers to one in kind, not in number.
 - a. Paul is emphasizing that there are not diverse camps for Jew and Gentile. **EPH 4:4-6; 2:14-16 c/w 1CO 12:13.**
 - b. All baptized believers share in the common faith of a common salvation. **TIT 1:4; JUDE 1:3; GAL 3:27-29.**
- 3. Scripture does not authorize “denominations” of local churches whereby different congregations teach and practice different doctrines.
 - a. denomination: A collection of individuals classed together under the same name; now almost always *spec.* a religious sect or body having a common faith and organization, and designated by a distinctive name.
 - b. Though we can see in Scripture that a church may have errors within it and still be called by the Holy Spirit a church, this is no license to strive for diversity of beliefs based on the doctrines and whims of men contrary to the words of Christ and His apostles. Such a presumption is the basis for God fighting against or no longer recognizing a church. **REV 2:15-16.**
 - c. Denominational churches generally develop from poor Bible hermeneutics in which there is either a deficiency in trust in or a denial of a preserved Bible, and/or an errant way of interpreting it.
 - d. There is one faith that was *once delivered unto the saints*. **JUDE 1:3.**
 - (1) This argues against novel faith systems springing up.
 - (2) This argues against post-apostolic revelation.
 - e. The scriptural order is for uniformity of belief and practice and it is an honorable goal for which God’s people should *strive together* (**1CO 1:10; PHIL 1:27**) in sincere search for light more than heat to bring them closer to the ideal of **EPH 4:13-14.**
 - f. The Apostle Paul taught uniform doctrine and example in all the churches. **1CO 4:17; 7:17; 11:16; 14:33; 16:1.**
 - g. Far from promoting schisms and denominations, Paul commanded the saints to resist departures from his gospel which was the standard. **ROM 16:17; GAL 1:8-9; 1TI 1:3; 4:1; 2TI 2:16-18.**

V. The doctrine and importance of the local church (i.e., an independent congregation of baptized believers having membership in that body) is something that has been commonly maligned or trivialized. It is generally assumed that God's true program for His children in this life is fulfilled somewhere other than local churches. The notion that true fellowship with God can be enjoyed without local church membership is a common one.

- A. “Whenever a few Christians assembled together it was called A church, such as for instance the Church of Corinth, or Ephesus or the church which is in Thessalonica. It was merely a name to designate them and distinguish them from Christians who might be

meeting in other cities such as Rome or Colosse or in Galatia. In these assemblies were members of the one true body, the one Church of Christ, but THE church refers to something else... The true church, the Body of Christ transcends all local gatherings.” (*The One True Church*, M.R. DeHaan; pp. 3, 15)

1. Yet the Holy Ghost calls a single congregation of organized converts under the oversight of a pastor/elder/bishop THE church. **1TI 3:5, 15; 5:16.**
 2. As already seen, a local church is called THE body of Christ. **1CO 12:27.**
 3. Paul refers to the local church at Ephesus under its ordained elders as “...the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood” (**ACT 20:28**).
- B. “Church (visible), Summary: The passages under this head (1 Co.10:32; 1 Ti.3:15) refer to the visible body of professed believers called, collectively, 'the Church,' of which history takes account as such, though it exists under many names and divisions based upon differences in doctrine or in government. Within, for the most part, this historical 'Church' has existed the true Church, 'which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all,' like the believing Remnant within Israel... Church (true), Summary: The true church, composed of the whole number of regenerate persons from Pentecost to the first resurrection, united together and to Christ by the baptism with the Holy Spirit, is the body of Christ of which He is the Head.” (*The Scofield Reference Bible*, pp. 1276, 1304)
1. Would the Holy Spirit call something a church of God (**1TI 3:5**) and in God (**1TH 1:1**) if it was not the true church?
 2. As already seen, the Scriptural order opposes the concept of divisions and denominations.
- C. Faulty ideas concerning the purpose of the church have been at the root of some erroneous teaching concerning it:
1. Example: “The purpose of the local church is the synergistic strength found in a society of individuals... Therefore, a local church is a group of Christ's disciples voluntarily joined together practically for mutual strength and encouragement in gospel duties. It is not a mysterious body of spiritual union apart from or superior to this practical union.” (*Baptism and Church Membership*, J.R. Crosby; sermon outline of 4/90, p. 2)
 2. This assumption changes the local church from being a Christ-centered spiritual organism to a man-centered organization like Alcoholics Anonymous which is a group “voluntarily joined together practically for mutual strength and encouragement.” Baptized saints could even voluntarily form a club or organization by mutual agreement for mutual benefit yet that would not be a church.
 3. Mind that Scripture calls a local church “...the body of Christ...” (**1CO 12:27**) into which one is baptized by the Spirit (**1CO 12:12-13**), “...a spiritual house...” (**1PE 2:5**) and converts are “...baptized into Christ...” (**GAL 3:27**). How is this not a spiritual union?
 4. The primary purpose of the local church is for the glory and promotion of its Creator and Savior. **EPH 3:21; 1TI 3:15.**
 - a. Christ builds it and preserves it. **MAT 16:18.**
 - b. Christ is its chief cornerstone. **EPH 2:20.**
 - c. Christ purchased it. **ACT 20:28.**
 - d. Christ is proclaimed its King/Head. **EPH 1:22-23.**
 - e. Christ’s law governs it. **MAT 28:18-20.**
 - f. Christ instructs angels by it. **EPH 3:9-10 c/w 1PE 1:12.**
 5. Even the redemptive work of Christ is primarily for His glory.

EPH 1:3-6; 5:25-27.

6. All of God's creations are for Himself and His pleasure. **PRO 16:4; REV 4:11.**
 7. The accordant benefits of church membership are the result of this greater purpose; they are not the primary purpose.
- D. "All societies or organizations require the mutual assent of the body and the applicant. Marriages, nations, and businesses among other organizations require such assent: spouses, citizens, and employees all enter and participate in these relationships by voluntary submission." (*Ibid*, p. 3; premise for opposing baptismal church membership)
1. The local church is the kingdom of God in this world (**MAT 16:18-19; LUK 22:29-30 c/w 1CO 10 & 11**) but it "...is not of this world..." (**JOH 18:36**). Hence, the analogy drawn from things of this world may not necessarily apply.
 2. Whereas mutual agreement may be necessary for the maintenance and health of a relationship in a society, it may not be necessary for induction into that society:
 - a. Citizenship in a country is generally granted without the knowledge of the majority of populace. A potential candidate for citizenry is generally interviewed and examined by an acknowledged representative of that country who has authority to grant or deny citizenship in that country. This is essentially the same as when a pastor baptizes a qualified candidate on behalf of a local church comprised of citizens. **EPH 2:19.**
 - b. Employees don't enter into relationship with co-workers in a corporation based on mutual agreement with them. Rather, their status as an employee is granted by the appointed personnel officer of the corporation, who reviews the applicant. An employer who deemed a job applicant as suitable would hire him regardless of whether the rest of workpool all knew about it or consented. If another employee found this set-up to be unbearable, he could always leave. If he causes trouble because of the new qualified co-worker, he may have to be fired. Again, this bears similarity to an obstinate church which wouldn't tolerate co-existence with someone that their pastor, on behalf of the church, had judged worthy of baptism and church membership.
 3. Verses like **AMO 3:3** are obviously dealing with the maintenance of relationships, not the formation.