

## 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 12:14-15.**
- (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.**