

Table of Contents

- I. The “term” Church
- II. The universal Church
- III. The local Church
 - A. The definition of a local Church
 - B. The officers of the local Church
 - 1. Elders
 - 2. Deacons
 - C. Membership in a local Church
 - D. The purpose of the local Church
 - E. The ordinances of the local Church
 - 1. Baptism
 - 2. The Lord’s supper
 - F. The discipline of the local Church

Biblical Study of the Church

The earliest New Testament reference to the Church is found in Matthew 16:18. In this verse Jesus promised, “I will build my Church.” The rest of the New Testament records how this took place under the leadership of the apostles and those appointed by them.

I. The term “Church”

The word Church (ecclesia) appears 114 times in the NT. The word means “to call out of”. It refers to a “called out assembly.” The variety of usages include the following: twice in the gospels (Mt. 16:18; 18:17), non-doctrinal uses: a political assembly of citizens (Acts 19:32,29,41), Jews assembled in the wilderness (Acts 7:38 cf. also in the Old Testament Deut. 9:10, I Kings 8:65; house churches (Rom. 16:5; I Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15. It is used of all believers in a specific city (Acts 8:1; 13:1; Rev. 2,3), and of all believers in a specific region (Acts 9:31 singular use; I Cor. 16:19 plural use; Rom. 16:16). The Church can be viewed in two primary ways.

II. The universal Church

When the word universal is applied to the Church it refers to all people who have believed in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord from the day of Pentecost to the rapture of the Church (see: Acts 2; Eph. 1:22-23; 5:23-27, 32; 1:18; I Thessalonians 4:11-18). Several facts would point to the day of Pentecost for the beginning of the universal church:

- The fact that Jesus uses the word “church” only twice, the first reference being in the future tense (Mt. 16:18; 18:17).
- The fact that Luke does not use the word “church” at all in his gospel and then uses it twenty-four times in Acts.
- The teaching regarding the church as a mystery (see: Eph. 3:5,9). The mystery is in the unique relationship of Jew and Gentile in one body.
- The spiritual formation of the body by the baptism in the Spirit (I Cor. 12:12-13).

III. The local Church

The second way to understand the Church is as local communities of believers. The universal Church is invisible and the local church is visible. In the book of Acts we find that as the apostles won people to Christ in various regions, they gathered them in local Churches and appointed leaders over those Churches. (Acts 14:21-23). In his book *The Body*, Chuck Colson wrote that, “...everyone regenerated by God is by definition a part of the universal church. It’s not a matter of choice or membership. And following the pattern made normative in the book of Acts, each believer is to make his or her confession, be baptized, and become part of a local congregation with all of the accountability that implies. So membership in a church particular is no more optional than membership in the church universal.

The earliest gatherings of Christians included devotion to the following : ...the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer (see Acts 2:42). There were very early indications of simple organization in the first church at Jerusalem. The believers knew the number of their members (Acts 2:41; 4:4), they united in public worship and prayer meetings (Acts 2:42, 47), and practiced the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper (Acts 2:41-42, 46).

A. The definition of a local Church

A short definition of a local Church can be found in Philippians 1:1, “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons”.

This verse reveals the three-fold organization of a local church: saints, overseers, and deacons. The saints are in Christ (the universal church) and at Philippi (the local church). The overseers are the elders which would include the pastor (Acts 20:17,28; I Timothy 5:17). The deacons are also functioning leaders under the elders.

The local church is an organized group of believers who gather together on a regular basis in a local area under proper leadership in keeping with the pattern established by the apostles.

B. The officers of the local church

1. Elders: (Presbuteros)

Elders (in reference to the Church) appear without explanation for the first time in Acts 11:30. The concept of elders had already existed in the Old Testament (Exodus 18:12-27; Numbers 11:1017) and in first century Judaism (Matthew 15:2; 16:21). About thirty years after Acts 11:30, Paul outlines qualifications for elders for Timothy and Titus to use (I Timothy 3; Titus 1). This was probably due to the fact that they were ministering to Gentile churches which did not have a back ground for elders.

Evidence would indicate that the terms elder, overseer and pastor all the same person/leader

(I Peter 5:1-2; Titus 1:5,7; Ephesians 4:11).

Elder would refer more to the man, whereas overseer and pastor focus on the function of the leader. It is significant that the word elder is primarily used in the plural form in the NT (e.g. Acts 14:5; Titus 1:5; James 5:14). This would indicate that the ruling body in each local church was a plurality of godly men identified as elders. Although women will minister in ways related to the ministry of elders, Scripture forbids women from taking hold of this office of leadership (I Timothy 2:11-13; 3:1-2). The role and function of elder's would include the following:

- Training and appointing other leaders (II Timothy 2:2; Ti. 1:5, Acts 14:23)
- Leadership and admonishment (I Thessalonians 5:12; Heb. 13:17)
- Ministering the Word (Titus 1:9; I Timothy 5:17; Hebrews 13:7)
- Representation (Acts 20:17)
- Spiritual oversight and restoration (Galatians 6:1-2; Hebrews 13:17)
- Governing and equipping the believers (I Timothy 5:17; Ephesians 4:11-12)
- Refuting false doctrine (Ti. 1:9)
- Guarding the flock (Acts 20:17, 28-31)

The following chart categorizes the qualifications for elders from I Timothy 3 and Titus 1

Character	Conduct	Competence
1. Above reproach (I Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6)	1. Not addicted to wine (I Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7)	1. Able to teach (I Tim. 3:2) (See Titus 1:9)
2. Husbands of one wife (I Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6)	2. Not violent (I Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7)	2. Not a new convert (I Tim. 3:6)
3. Self-controlled (I Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8)	3. Gentle (I Tim. 3:3)	
4. Soberminded - "sensible" (I Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8)	4. Uncontentious (I Tim. 3:3)	
5. Respectable - "well ordered life" (I Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8)	5. Good home manager (I Tim. 3:4)	
6. Hospitable (I Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8)	6. Keeps Children under control with all dignity (I Tim. 3:4)	
7. Not a money lover (I Tim. 3:3; also see I Peter 5:2; Titus 1:7)	Having children who believe (Titus 1:6)	
8. Not self-willed - "doesn't have to have his own way" (Titus 1:7)	7. A good reputation with outsiders (I Tim. 3:7)	
9. Not quick tempered (Titus 1:7)		
10. Loving what is good (Titus 1:8)		
11. Just (Titus 1:8)		
12. Devout (Titus 1:8)		

The New Testament reveals the following basis for the selection of elders: Divine appointment by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28); appointment by other elders (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5); desire and qualification in the man being considered (I Timothy 3:1-7); a proving period of examination implied by the required qualifications.

2. Deacons (diakonos) “to serve”

The role of deacons is defined by the meaning of the word. Deacons are involved in a leadership level of service in such a way that they release the elders to focus on spiritual leadership (Acts 6:2-5a w/15:16 ff).

The function of the deacon is that of serving. Deacons are to serve well (I Tim. 3:13). Elders are to rule well (I Tim. 5:17). Scripture requires high qualifications for deacons (I Tim. 3:8-13). The separate instruction to women in I Tim. 3:11 may imply a place of deaconess (cf. Rom. 16:1).

C. Membership in a local church

“It is God’s will that every believer be a meaningfully related, faithful, serving, and accountable part of a visible body of believers under the pastoral oversight of elders (Ephesians 4:1-16; Hebrews 10:23-25; I Peter 4:10-11; 5:1-4; I Thessalonians 5:12-13; Hebrews 13:17).”

There is evidence to indicate that it was standard to become part of a local fellowship in the first century. Acts 2:47 records that, “The Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.” Regular assembling took place and was expected (I Corinthians 16:2; Hebrews 10:25). Definite numbers and lists of people were recorded (Acts 2:41; I Timothy 5:9). The role of elders in spiritual oversight implies accountable membership (Galatians 6:1; I Thessalonians 5:12; Hebrews 13:7,17). Church discipline implies identifiable membership (I Corinthians 5:7-13; II Corinthians 2:1-8). Salvation (Acts 2:47) and baptism (Acts 2:38) seem to be the basic requirements of membership. The book of Revelation chapters two and three indicate that the Lord Jesus keeps careful record of the membership and activities of local churches.

More evidence for membership is found in the emphasis on the interrelationship and interdependence within a local church. This is taught in the “one another” verses in the New Testament. (see: Romans 12:10, 16; 14:19; 15:5,7,14; I Cor. 12:25; Galatians 5:13; 6:2; Ephesians 4:1-2, 32; 5:18-21; Colossians 3:9; 12-13,16; I Thessalonians 3:12; 4:18; Hebrews 3:13; 10:23-25; Ja. 4:11; 5:9, 16; I Peter 4:9.) These passages indicate the existence of deep relationships with closely knit groups. Many of the casual Sunday morning relationships in churches today would fail the “one another” test.

Faithful involvement in the community life of believers is designed by God for the protection, instruction, and encouragement of each individual believer. God has chosen to use our fellow believers to help us be more like His Son (Ephesians 4:11-16).

Specific instructions to various groups of people indicate a diversified membership in the churches:

- Women I Timothy 2:9-15
- Wives of leaders I Timothy 2:11
- Widows I Timothy 5:3-13
- Children of widows I Timothy 5:16
- Young women I Timothy 5:14 - Titus 2:4-5
- Older women Titus 2:3-5
- Young men Titus 2:6-8
- Older men Titus 2:2
- The rich I Timothy 6:17-19
- The poor Ja. 1:9-11

D. The purpose of the local church:

The church exists to exalt God in praise, worship and obedience (I Peter 2:9-10; John. 4:23-24; Romans 12:1-2; I Corinthians 6:19-20). The Church also exists to edify believers when gathered (Ephesians 4:11-16; Col. 2:6-7; Hebrews 10:24-25; I Corinthians 12:26), and to evangelize the lost when scattered (Matthew 28:18-20; Lk. 24:46-47; Acts 1:8; 8:1,4; 19:10; I Thessalonians 1:8; Revelation 22:17).

Primarily the church is to be for the Lord. He is the Head, and He must be the focus and the first priority. “Churches, and individual believers, are to be committed first to Christ, then to one another in Christ, then to the world. These three are not to be “done” chronologically, one at a time, but they are to be part of churches’ and believers’ lives all at the same time.” There is also an emphasis in God’s Word

on the importance of social concerns that the church should be involved with (Deut. 10:17-19; Mt. 25:34-40; Lk. 10:25-37; Ja. 1:27; 2:15-17; I Jn. 17-18).

Millersville Bible Church's purpose statement: "The Church exists to honor God by winning, building, equipping, and mobilizing people to advance Christ's kingdom and exalt His name."

According to Millersville Bible Church, the Church must be committed to the following:

Discipleship: "Obedience to this final command of Jesus Christ is the mission of the Church. Because of this, disciple-making lies at the heart of everything we do. Accomplishing this challenging task involved a two-fold responsibility. First, we must be careful to employ the means God has provided for building His church, and second, we must seek to understand the attitudes and world-views which prevail in the culture to which God has sent us."

The Gospel: "Faith in Jesus Christ is the only source of eternal salvation. He said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father but through me." This message confronts the pluralistic attitude of our society which declares that all religious beliefs are equally valid. I believe that only the Gospel is the "power of God unto salvation for every one who believes." We seek to both proclaim the gospel in our community and train each disciple to effectively communicate it to those with whom they have contact."

Teaching: "Jesus prayed, "Sanctify them in the truth; Thy Word is truth." God's revelation to man, His instruction for what we should believe and how we should live, is found in the 66 books of the Bible. Though our culture promotes the idea that there is no absolute truth, the Bible declares itself to be the inerrant Word of God. The disciple of Christ must not only understand the teachings of the Bible, but obey them as well. The Church strongly emphasizes the preaching, teaching, and application of God's

Word. The Scripture is our sole authority for life, and cannot be overruled by such things as religious tradition or personal experience.”

Worship: “To worship God is to love Him with heart, soul, mind, and strength. This is the foremost command of God. The Bible warns the believers not to put anything "before the Lord God." We cannot, as Jesus taught, "serve two masters." He also said that a man's life does not consist in the abundance of things he possesses. In an age of materialism, possessions can easily become modern day idols competing for the devotion of our hearts. The Church encourages people to serve God with single-hearted devotion - seeking first His kingdom and righteousness. We view all aspects of life as a stewardship for which each of us will give an account to God.”

Fellowship: “The New Testament clearly teaches that it is God's design for every Christian to be an active and accountable part of a local assembly of believers, willingly serving others. This results in the mutual encouragement and support of all believers in their walk with Jesus Christ. In contrast to this, our society promotes individualism; the attitude which seeks to please self, elevates personal fulfillment, and avoids costly involvement with others. The church challenges believers to fulfill God's design by meaningfully relating to others in the church. Merely attending the worship services will not accomplish this; other opportunities for both fellowship and service must be pursued.”

Leadership: “Like every institution ordained by God, the Church of Jesus Christ has a structure of authority. The Bible reveals that God's design for leadership in the local church consists of a group of godly men called elders. The church follows this pattern, with elders overseeing and guiding the life of the assembly. Though our society today largely rejects authority, the faithful disciple of Christ desires the accountability and security which comes from willing submission to those God has placed as leaders in His church.”

E. The ordinances of the local church

An ordinance is an outward symbol which functions as a visible sign of salvation. Scripture reveals two ordinances passed on from Jesus for continual practice in all churches:

1. Baptism: Baptism is an outward demonstration of the believer's identification with Jesus Christ in His death, burial and resurrection (Romans 6:3-6; Galatians 2:20; Col.2:12; 3:1, 9; Ephesians 2:6; 4:22). At salvation, we are spiritually immersed into Jesus Christ C into His death, burial and resurrection. Paul addresses this deep spiritual reality in Romans chapter six.

Immersion is the mode that most fully preserves the meaning of baptism (baptizo - to dip or immerse). John baptized at "enon" because there was much water there (John 3:23). When baptized by John, Jesus "came up out of the water" (Mark 1:10). Upon hearing the good news, the Ethiopian eunuch said to Philip, "see, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized? (Acts 8:36). Then they both went down into the water, Philip baptized him, and they came up out of the water" (Acts 8:38-39). Baptism is commanded by the Lord (Matthew 28:19) and was practiced by the church (Acts 8:38; 10:44-48; 16:31-33; 18:8). The NT only reveals the baptism of believers (Acts 2:41; 8:30-38; 16:33,34).

2. The Lord's Supper (I Corinthians 11:20).

This also called "communion" (I Corinthians 10:16), "Eucharist" (I Corinthian 11:24), "breaking of bread" (Acts 2:42). The Roman Catholic title "Mass" (i.e. to dismiss), and Leonardo Da Vinci's "Last Supper" are not from Scripture.

Communion is a time of remembrance of Christ's sacrificial death as symbolized

through the bread and the cup (I Corinthians 11:24-25). Communion also involves active fellowship with the Lord and His people (I Corinthians 10:16-18; 11:23-26). Communion has a future focus in that it “proclaims the Lord’s death until He comes” (I Corinthians 11:26). In a symbolic way communion stands as the watershed between the OT and the NT (Luke 22:1-23) and encompasses a past, present, and future focus.

Doctrinal statement on the Church: From Millersville Bible Church

“In the present age, God’s primary work is to call out from among all humanity a people to be His very own, who through common faith in Jesus Christ are united in one spiritual body, the Church. Jesus Christ, through His death and resurrection, has been exalted as Head of the Church. It is God’s will for each believer to be an active and accountable part of a local expression of Christ’s body, which is an assembly of those who have made a public profession of faith in Christ through baptism and who fellowship, service, observance of the Lord’s supper, and discipline. God has entrusted the oversight of the local church to scripturally qualified men called ‘elders’, who serve as accountable to the Chief Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, and who by their example, instruction, exhortation, correction, and discipline shepherd the assembly of believers. Unite for the purpose of worship, prayer, ministry of the Word. Functioning under the elders are scripturally qualified deacons who serve the assembly by caring primarily for its physical and material needs. The mission of the church in the world is to make disciples by winning, building, equipping, and mobilizing people to advance Christ’s kingdom and exalt His name.”

F. The discipline of the local Church

In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus taught the need for accountability among his followers. This is the text that has formed the basis for an understanding of church discipline. The steps Jesus taught “begin with **private confrontation**. Before this step, however, there is a need for **personal preparation** (see: Matthew 7:3-5). Discipline should move from personal preparation to private confrontation (cf. O.T. Lev. 9:17-18).

The third step is private conference. This only becomes necessary, if the one confronted has as obstinate attitude (v. 16). When a sinning member of the church refuses to heed the confrontation of a fellow believer, thus refusing to be restored to proper fellowship, the circle of confrontation needs to broaden so that it includes one or two others (cf. an O.T. principle from Deuteronomy 19:15; Numbers 35:30; and Deuteronomy 17:6). Assuming that the one who made the initial confrontation kept the matter between himself and the sinning member, who should he enlist for the third step? Jesus said, “One or two others,” but who should be called on for involvement in this confrontation? People who are spiritually prepared (Matthew 7:3-5), spiritually mature (Galatians 6:1), and entrusted with spiritual oversight (I Peter 5:1-4; Acts 20:28)

Nothing in the text requires that these people be eyewitnesses to the sin being confronted. If they had been, they should have gone to confront the member themselves. Ideally, it would be good to include people who are known and respected by the erring member (e.g. small group leaders). This is not always possible.

What is the function of the one or two witnesses? They are there “so that every fact may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses” (v.16). Their purpose is not to threaten or intimidate, but to help the erring member to understand the seriousness of the matter. Their main purpose is not to evaluate the truthfulness of the charge, but to strengthen the rebuke and the call to restoration. After private conference, if the erring member remains obstinate and unwilling to acknowledge and repent of the sin, Jesus teaches a fourth step. Each of the four steps has as its primary aim the restoration of the brother to proper fellowship.

The fourth step is public announcement (v. 17a). Jesus said, “Tell it to the church (i.e. to the “ekklesia,” the assembly). This step is a sobering reminder that sin is not merely private and personal matter for a Christian. Sin that separates and alienates believers must be dealt with and resolved. But how do we take this step of public announcement? In our church, it would be communicated to the covenant members through a special meeting of the membership. Some churches make these announcements during communion. Others will use a letter to the membership.

To avoid litigation, it is important for churches to specifically outline these steps in their constitutions. Churches have been sued for following the guidelines in Matthew 18:15-17 and have lost in court because they lacked specific reference to the steps. Churches also are wise to limit the public announcement of discipline to those who are actual members. Remember, membership as a process can protect the church, and discipline of non-members is sticky territory.

The fifth step is public confrontation. In v. 17b, Jesus implies that the church (as an assembly) has made an appeal to the erring member.

When the church is informed, it seems to imply that the pastors will be involved. And when this happens, it should be accompanied by warnings about the need for the whole assembly to avoid: gossip and slander, a proud, critical spirit (Matthew 7:3-5; Galatians 6:1), a lenient or punitive attitude, and playing spiritual detective.

People should be encouraged to pray for repentance and restoration, and to appeal to their fellow member to submit to the leadership of the Church. In such an appeal, one might say, “I don’t know all the details, nor is it my place to know them, but I do want to encourage you to make things right with the church.”

No one should give the erring member the feeling that he is in good fellowship with the Church (cf. II Thessalonians 3:12-14). Never act in cross-purpose with the church. We should not do anything that would cause disrespect for the leadership. Remember the goal: “Win your brother.” It is redemptive! But in step six public exclusion (removal from membership), the goal is also judicial. The primary aim of this step is to protect the purity of the assembly (see: I Corinthians 5:1-11). Failure to practice these steps invites God’s discipline on the entire assembly (see: I Corinthians 11:30-32; Revelation 2:5, 16, 20-23; 3:3-19).

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