



## PART 21 – CHURCH

- What is the Church?
- What are the core activities of a church?

### The Meaning of ‘Church’

People often call the buildings where Christians meet ‘churches’, but the Bible never uses the word this way. In fact, in New Testament times there were no buildings especially for Christian meetings and they met in privately owned houses. In the Bible, ‘church’ always means people, but it is used in three senses:

- **The whole Church** – all true Christians all over the world form one Church of Jesus Christ. No one other than God knows all its members. Jesus promised to build His Church (Matthew 16:18) and the basis of the Church is Christ and His apostles (Ephesians 2:20). The Church is united by one faith, prayer to one Father God, obedience to one Lord Jesus and shared life in one Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:4-6). This is not unity with everyone who claims to be a Christian, but union with all true Christians created by God which believers must maintain the way they treat and speak about each other (Ephesians 4:3).
- **The Church in a city** – originally the whole Church was able to meet in one place in Jerusalem (Acts 2), but as the gospel spread and people in other places became Christians this was no longer possible. Christians began to meet in each city or town, with recognised leaders known as elders or overseers. They understood themselves to be part of the whole Church, or the expression of the Church in their location.
- **Congregations** – smaller groups of Christians met together in homes (later in designated buildings) as part of the Church in a city or region. They were also under the authority of recognised leaders. This was the primary experience of Church for Christians and is similar to the congregations that exist today.

The picture has been complicated over 2000 years of church history by divisions and differing ideas, leading to local churches taking different names and organising into ‘denominations’ (groups of local churches who share a common position on some belief or a common history). Despite these differences, there remains only one Church and it is important for different churches to speak well of each other and cooperate wherever possible.

### The First Church (Acts 2:42-47)

On the Day of Pentecost, around 3,000 people responded to Peter’s message and were baptised, making around 3,500 Christians in the city of Jerusalem. They devoted themselves to four vitally important things:

1. **The apostles’ teaching** – Jesus told the apostles to teach people to obey everything He commanded them (Matthew 28:19) and as Jesus’ authorised representatives, the apostles’ teaching had authority in the Church. Their teaching was recorded in the New Testament and the Bible should be regarded as the final authority for Christian belief and practice. Teaching from the Bible is, therefore, an important part of most Church gatherings. It is by hearing God’s word from the Bible and obeying it in the Holy Spirit’s power that Christians grow to become more like Jesus and serve God in the world.
2. **The fellowship** – ‘fellowship’ means sharing and they shared meals, homes and possessions with each other because they shared new life in Christ. Church is a community of people who meet together and care for one another because they love one another and understand their lives as interdependent.
3. **Breaking of bread** – the Lord’s Supper (communion) celebration was important because Jesus commanded it and because it kept the Church centred on the gospel.
4. **Prayers** – they depended on God and sought His direction as to how they should serve Him. Acts 4:24-31 shows the kind of things they prayed for: for God to work powerfully for them to speak boldly.

The result of this community grounded on the gospel and centred on Christ was that their shared life overflowed in two ways (Acts 2:47):

- a) *Towards God* – they praised God, giving thanks to Him for what He had done through Jesus Christ and was doing among them. Thankfulness flows from a life of devotion to God.
- b) *Towards others* – other people found this community intriguing and they enjoyed favour with non-believers. People heard the gospel and were added to the Church as they believed.

## Pictures of the Church in the Bible

- **A spiritual building (Ephesians 2:19-22)**

Paul pictures the Church as a building built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus as the cornerstone, with which all other stones must be aligned. The Holy Spirit lives in this Temple.

- **A body (Ephesians 1:22-23)**

As the body of Christ, the Church shares His life through the Spirit and continuing His work on earth as He (the head) directs it. Jesus is the only leader over all Christians. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul uses this idea to show that all Christians, as distinct body parts, have unique roles to play in the Church and its work.

- **A family (1 Timothy 5:1-3)**

God is the Father of all Christians and so they are brothers and sisters to one another. The love Christians have for each other comes from God and can overcome differences of culture, race, language or age.

## What Do Churches Do?

The aims of the Church are simple: to worship God and to see people come to faith in Christ and grow as His disciples. Churches have many different activities to help reach these aims, including:

- **Sunday services** – most churches have their main meetings on a Sunday, since this was the day when Jesus rose again, following the practice of the first Christians (Acts 20:7,18; 1 Corinthians 16:2). These services usually include sung praise, public prayers and teaching from the Bible. Christians may also share about their experiences and the Lord's Supper may be celebrated. Money is usually collected to help people in need, to support people spreading the gospel, to maintain buildings, and to pay workers' wages.
- **Prayer meetings** – in meetings for prayer, Christians often share about problems they are facing, needs people have, activities the church is planning, and things to thank God for. They then spend time to talk to God in prayer. Some people pray silently, but normally some will speak aloud, leading the whole group. The other Christians usually remain silent and listen, sometimes saying 'Amen', which means 'I agree'.
- **Small groups** – many churches organise smaller meetings, often in members' homes on a weekday night, in which relationships are deepened and more people can participate. They usually include a Bible study discussing the meaning of a Bible passage and applying its truth to their lives and a time of prayer.
- **Group-specific activities** – most churches organise special activities for children and teenagers where they are taught the Bible and encouraged to love and serve one another. Sunday School often takes place during the Sunday service. Some churches also have special meetings for older people, for men or women.
- **Outreach activities** – churches often arrange special activities to help people in need or to care for others, as well as activities where the good news about Jesus is spoken or shared.

## Church Leadership

Churches are organised in many different ways and use different names to describe people in leadership:

- **Elders** – many churches recognise a number of people as elders (the name emphasises their maturity in the faith) who have responsibility to oversee the activities of the church, giving direction, ensuring the Bible is taught faithfully, keeping activities in line with God's purposes and caring for members.
- **Deacons** – look after the practical, day to day running of the church business. They often have specific responsibilities (e.g., treasurer, secretary, youth leader) and work under the guidance of the elders.
- **Pastors or ministers** – many churches recognise one or more elders as pastors or ministers. They are usually supported financially to serve the church and have the main responsibility for teaching the Bible and leading the elders in their work. Pastors may meet together to make decisions for a denomination and in others a senior minister (superintendent or bishop) oversees pastors in a region.

Whatever structures are followed, leaders in the Church should be servants who do not seek power and control or their own gain, but follow Jesus' example in giving their lives for the sake of the sheep.

### **SUMMARY: The Church is a community united in Jesus by the Spirit to worship and serve God**

- Jesus is the head of the Church, which exists to do His work in the world and to make Him known.
- In the Church Christians care for one another as they worship God and share the gospel with others.