

CHURCH?

What is the Church?

What should I know?

Is it important?



Church?

What do you see or think about when you hear this word? The Anglican or Church of England organisation? A building, or a Cathedral? All these come under the heading, "church". Strictly it means a congregation – people who meet together. In centuries past there was a phrase – 'churching of women'. This was a ritual in which a mother received a blessing after recovering from childbirth. It imitates what the people of Israel did.

Luke 2:22-24 Now when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every male who opens the womb shall be called holy to the LORD"), 24 and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, "A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

My point is that church is used as a verb – an action. Rather than think of going to a church - you church! Understanding this is helpful in understanding the Bible meaning of the word.

Church = EKKLESIA [Greek]

The idea in the word is of a group coming together. Usually, this would describe a gathering for a purpose: maybe a political group, or people in a football stadium, or people meeting together to worship God.

Deuteronomy 16:16 "Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, at the Feast of Weeks, and at the Feast of Tabernacles; and they shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed."

God's people had local gatherings to learn about God and to keep the Sabbath. They also met as a nation three times a year in Jerusalem. The Hebrew word is KNESSET – assembly. You might have heard the word on the news – referring to the Israeli Parliament. In the four Gospels we have the Greek word SYNAGOGUE. All this shows us that the important thing is not the building but the purpose. God calls us to gather to have fellowship, to learn, to pray and to worship him.

Acts 2:42 And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.

The first Christians met together and began to learn the new Way of serving God through honouring the Messiah, Jesus the Son of God. This included many communal things: caring for widows and orphans, giving and sharing, meeting in suitable houses. Several thousand people met around the city. They also came together in the Temple Courts. This pattern continued after those first Christians were dispersed and settled around the countries of the Mediterranean – including Rome.

Church in the Home

Romans 16:3-5 Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, 4 who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. 5 Likewise greet the church that is in their house.

The pattern for the 1st Century Church was gatherings in suitable homes. There was occasional larger gatherings when all the Christians in an area gathered together for a special purpose.

We need to see that there were **churches** not just one universal Church. This is important for us to understand. Becoming a true believer in the Lord Jesus makes us members of the Body of Christ, the Church that comprises every believer from the beginning to the end. However, Scripture expects that every believer would demonstrate this by belonging in the local church. A local church is a visible demonstration of the invisible Body of Christ. People will be able to see Jesus Christ through the witness of a local gathering of Christians.

1 Corinthians 11:18-19 For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. 19 For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you.

This Scripture emphasises that a local congregation is a church. This group is described as a body of Christ with its members all involved in serving the Lord.

Ephesians 1:22-23 And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, 23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

This Scripture points out that all Christians everywhere, from first to last, constitute the Body of Christ.

Denominations

It did not take long for local churches to take on names. At first it was 'Peter's Church' or Paul's Church' or even 'Christ's Church'!

1 Corinthians 1:11-13 For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. 12 Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." 13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

Clearly, Paul taught that this was very wrong. Yet, today, around the world all kinds of churches have all kinds of names (denomination means name). These have come from splits and factions and political purposes.

As far as Scripture goes, we are permitted only to describe ourselves by where we live. So, the 'church which is at Corinth'. All the other kinds of names emphasise division and distinction. We have in our modern world, many religious groups that name the name of Jesus. We are all mixed up in this and there is no simple way out without making things worse. One way is to make less of the differences and more of the similarities.

Every now and then there have been 'revivals' where church has become more like the New Testament times. It has too soon melted into the same denominational, divisive ways.

WHAT is a 'Real' Church?

The simplest answer is a local gathering where Jesus Christ is clearly the Head – in charge. This will mean the emphasis is on him not on traditions or styles that are no more than human ideas and additions. What will that look like in real time?

The first things to understand is the GRACE of God. The problem of human weakness does not have to interfere or spoil what God wants for his people.

Ephesians 3:8-12 To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, 9 and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; 10 to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, 11 according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him.

In this Scripture, Paul writes about God's Grace that permits us to serve him apart from the rules of Moses [sacrifices, rituals, ceremonies] and have a simpler and more direct access to the Father through the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul mentions God's manifold wisdom. This word 'manifold' means 'many-coloured' – like a tapestry, a painting, a beautiful carpet or woven fabric. It can also refer to the Rainbow.

The problem local churches and denominations have is that they seem unable to demonstrate this manifold wisdom. The palette is limited and sometimes shows only one colour of God's Wisdom. This does not apply to doctrines but to the expression of faith within those truths of Christ. It applies to music, song, ways of worship and prayer.

I have attended a gathering where reverence for God is very obvious but love for one another seems missing. So one cancels out the other. You get grey instead of pure colours. It is what happens if you mix opposite colours like yellow and violet – you get grey. So, a local church needs to be as colourful as possible!

Are there limits?

The answer to this depends on whether we are looking at an open meeting or gatherings for Christians and people truly seeking Christ. An open meeting requires the gentler colours of Christ. This

does not mean that truth is ignored or even doctored to suit everyone or anyone. The problem is that we do not have many Biblical doctrines about what we should do when we meet together.

Here are some:

Remembering Jesus through the sharing of Bread and Wine (at first this was at a meal)

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; 24 and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." 25 In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.

This is variously called – the Lord's Supper, Communion and the Breaking of Bread.

Singing and Music

Ephesians 5:17-21 Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, 19 speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, 20 giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, 21 submitting to one another in the fear of God.

This includes all kinds of musical instruments – helpful for melody. We probably miss out on speaking and singing to each other!

God's Word

1 Timothy 4:12-16 Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity. 13 Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. 14 Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership. 15 Meditate on these things; give yourself

entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all. 16 Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.

A Central part of gatherings is the attention we give to the Bible. Reading, explaining, teaching and challenging from its pages [Old and New Testament]. Making sure the doctrines of our faith are clear and adhered to.

Prayer

1 Timothy 2:1-5 Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, 2 for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. 3 For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

All kinds of prayers in a gathering as well as in personal devotions. The purpose of these prayers is peace and salvation.

The Holy Spirit

Romans 8:14 For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

Everything we do must be led by God's Spirit. We do not use our abilities or experience unless taken on by the Spirit. Our preaching, teaching, singing, praying must be led by the Spirit. In this is liberty and order.

We are told how to do all this, how much time for things, what order they should be in. We are told to do things in grace and truth and love. The Holy Spirit is able to make sure that we will be like this if we let him lead.

Leaders

1 Peter 5:1-4

1 The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: 2 Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly,

not for dishonest gain but eagerly; 3 nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; 4 and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.

A local church needs leaders (note that we are not taught to have one leader). These leaders are described as elders. These are appointed men who have experience and knowledge of the Lord and the doctrines of the faith. They are able to teach and care for the group (sometimes groups). They are described as overseers and, sometimes pastors. These names echo the character of Jesus – the Good Pastor (Shepherd).

The work is entrusted to them. They are not to be bossy, controlling or harsh. This makes the job very difficult where the group are not inclined to show respect or obedience.

1 Timothy 5:17 Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in the word and doctrine.

Hebrews 13:17 Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.

Deacons are also leaders who have specially assigned responsibilities, like looking after the money, administration or planning.

Serving and Giving

The local church is not about a few people leading and doing everything. Scripture teaches that everyone should be involved and sacrificial in giving time and possessions to the work of God.

2 Corinthians 9:6-8 But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7 So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work.

We do not teach that if you give something to God, he will give you back more of the same. Rather, the generous heart about time and money and all things will be blessed and experience the grace of God. It is a joyful thing to experience God's favour. And, Jesus taught the blessedness of giving:

Acts 20:35 I have shown you in every way, by labouring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

The Household of God

1 Timothy 3:14-16 These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; 15 but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

The word *house* is OIKOS which refers to the kind of domestic situation that had servants, children, parents and relatives all under one roof. So the idea is that there need to be house rules that everyone respects. Timothy was given guidance about spiritual behaviour in a local church. The same is true in other letters by the writers of the New Testament.

Belonging

Some church groups will expect a process of acceptance and belonging. This might include making vows or signing a paper. Belonging is a matter of continued choice and is seen by our lives. There are many problems and hurts caused through lack of commitment and faithfulness within a church community. People wander around from church to church without any commitment or sense of belonging. Some leave without resolving difficulties or conflict. Moving on or away is easy when there are so many different kinds of communities that claim Jesus is Lord to join. But do they join? Joining suggests commitment and love (like in a marriage).

1 John 2:19 They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they

went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.

Even at the end of the 1st Century people were leaving one church group for another or to establish their own version of church. John, an apostle of Jesus. Knew the truth and contending for it. When people left the recognised churches, they were labelled as not ever belonging. How could anyone walk away if they truly belong?

Of course, people do move on due to moving area, or for work, or even going abroad, perhaps as missionaries. These do not leave they still belong. However, their belonging will have a different flavour because they, probably, will have found a new fellowship where they live, where they are serving God. It all depends on the reason for leaving a community and whether people are led by the Holy Spirit.

Fellowship – Friendship

John 15:13-14 Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. 14 You are My friends if you do whatever I command you.

This should be the simplest way to understand how to behave as a member of a church. Perhaps there is a point where friendship with the Lord Jesus must be placed above human ties and bonds of friendship. False doctrine and sinful ways in a church might exist but are not acceptable nor willingly tolerated. God's plan for us is that there should be local companies of true believers who would work together to demonstrate who Jesus is – to be his Body.

1 Corinthians 12:27 Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.

The teaching in the 1st Corinthian letter emphasises the importance of unity. All kinds of arguments, divisions and splits must be avoided.

SUMMARY

There is one Church and there are many local churches. Local Churches exist in, and are subject to, time and change. The one Church is eternal. The one Church is the Body of Christ, of which he is the Head. Local churches represent this to the world.

The purpose of a local church gathering is worship and service of the Godhead. This includes prayer, teaching, praise and thanksgiving. It should also have evidence of fellowship and unity. Details of times and organisation remain a matter of the leading of the Holy Spirit.

All the letters in the New Testament, including those in the Book of Revelation, are built on the Old Testament Scriptures. The burden of the letters is that Jesus is Lord and that our lives should demonstrate this. So there is clear instruction and doctrine that we ought to honour and obey.

Ref: Get On Board – booklet available on our website

www.fenlandschurch.co.uk

