

Christian Basics

CHAPTER FIVE

The Church

HERE IS WHY THIS CHAPTER IS IMPORTANT

- We must understand that the church is not a building, but the people of God
- We must understand that the people of God are representatives of Jesus Christ
- We must understand the role of the Holy Spirit in the church
- We must understand the mystery of the church's eternal covenant in relationship to God

There are a lot of important organizations and institutions on earth. Some are civic, some are cultural and some are political. There are entertainment entities like network television, cable, the motion picture industry and symphony orchestras. There are sports conglomerates like the NFL, the NBA and the PGA. There are huge financial and monetary organizations. And then there are nations all over the world. Some have been around for thousands of years. Now, consider the church. Out of all the organizations and institutions on the face of the earth the church is the only one that will last forever.

We naturally put a lot of emphasis on the institutions of this world. It might be worth considering that many of our most stable and strong institutions have only been in existence for a short time. Our nation is not yet 300 years old. What is it about the church that sets it apart? As you study this section you will gain some important insights that will forever change the way you view the church.

There are many ways to think about the church. We talk of going to church. We sit in church. There is the church on 3rd Avenue. What exactly is the church? In this chapter we will look at the biblical definition of the church. We will describe the church in four ways: 1) the people of God; 2) the body of Christ; 3) the temple of the Holy Spirit; 4) the bride of Christ.

AFFILIATION ALERT

It has often been said by some people that they want nothing to do with organized religion. People commonly use this as an excuse to render themselves exempt from participation in the life of the local body of believers who meet regularly. Sadly, they lose the positive aspect of mutual accountability. A biblical orientation with regard to the church should act as a corrective to this way of thinking.

Everything else people are involved with requires organization. Imagine the insanity of going to an unorganized work place or an unorganized hospital. Why select-out the church as being exempt from the necessity of organization? The church IS organized. It is organized by God, led by the Holy Spirit with Jesus as the head. All people who belong to God should be concerned with their own involvement with God's church. This is an ALERT to prompt you to be willing to see the church in a whole new light – the light of God's Word.

Section One
THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Aren't all people God's people? Yes, everyone lives under the umbrella of God's creation. "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). But beyond this, not everyone lives under God's covenant. This covenant is both inclusive and exclusive. Those who are in covenant with God are, by definition of the covenant, God's people. All other people are categorically excluded. Let's begin by looking at examples from Israel's history.

Example from the Old Testament

We know that God called out a people for himself from of all the people of the world. He began with Abraham and built a nation that would come to be known as Israel. This is why God could say to Pharaoh, "Let *my* people go." The concept that God would have a people he could call his own is repeated often in the Old Testament. "I will be your God and you will be my people" (Leviticus 26:12). That God had a people he could call his own was a common refrain in the Old Testament.

*For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.
Deuteronomy 7:6 (NIV)*

This sense of belonging was the driving force behind the covenant that God made with his people. It is what made the people who belonged to God the "people of God." It cannot be overemphasized that out of all the people on the face of the earth, these were God's people by his own declaration.

A problem arose due to the weakness inherent in fallen human nature. The people of God were unable to live up to the demands of the covenant. They were found to be unfaithful. Judgment fell on the people of God. The covenant was annulled because it was broken beyond repair. One example of the LORD's point of view can be found the book of Hosea.

When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, "Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD." Hosea 1:2 (NIV)

Hosea had children born to him and each of their names would carry prophetic implications for the people of God. One such child was named, “Lo-Ammi” (not mine). This prophet’s child, along with the child’s name, would serve as an object lesson for the people.

Then the LORD said, “Call him Lo-Ammi, for you are not my people, and I am not your God.” Hosea 1:9 (NIV)

The marriage between God and his people was over. However, God’s faithfulness would never die. He promised a future restoration that would come later with a New Covenant.

I will say to those called “Not my people,” “You are my people”; and they will say, “You are my God.” Hosea 2:23 (NIV)

This powerful prophecy was fulfilled through the work of Jesus Christ. Paul used this very passage from Hosea in Romans 9:25-26 to show that God keeps his promises.

Example from the New Testament

The promise of becoming “the people of God” would see its ultimate fulfillment in the New Covenant. The New Covenant would be put into effect through Jesus Christ. People who place their faith in Christ would now be the ones who belong to God through Jesus Christ.

*“I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”
Matthew 16:18 (NIV)*

We can learn a few things from this proclamation of Jesus. The first thing is that Jesus himself would build the church. It is important to realize that Jesus was not speaking of a physical building. He was speaking of people. *People* are the church. People are the ones called out of the world. The word for “church” in the Bible is the word “ekklessia” – ek (out) – kaleō (to call). It was a word that was used at the time for any group of people who were in assembly. It has been transliterated in our English Bibles as “church.”

This leads us to the next point to consider. The people whom Jesus called-out are his possession. “I will build MY church” (called-out-ones). Exactly how does he build his church? In the Old Testament a sign of the covenant was given to Abraham in Genesis 17. As you read, notice that God was adamant that anyone, direct descendant or not, who did not receive the sign of the covenant would, therefore, not belong to him. They would be excluded. There were to be no exceptions.

This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. From the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner – those who are not your offspring. ...My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken the covenant. Genesis 17:9-14 (NIV)

Many of the laws and rituals in the Old Testament were to be fulfilled later through Christ. Circumcision was symbolic of the cutting away of the flesh, that is, the sinful nature of humanity. In the New Testament the outward symbol would become an inward reality. Paul spoke of what it meant to truly belong to God.

A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God. Romans 2:28-29 (NIV)

Paul related the outward ritual of circumcision by the hands of men to the inward reality of a different kind of circumcision *not* done by human hands. It was to be done by the Holy Spirit. This was a reference to the new birth that Jesus explained to Nicodemus in the third chapter of the gospel of John.

Paul mentioned it again in Galatians. He wanted to move the emphasis away from some outward religious ritual. The new emphasis would be the reality of new and living relationship to God.

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. Galatians 6:15 NIV)

Let's take another look as Paul again refers to the sign of circumcision in his letter to the Colossian church.

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. Colossians 2:11-12 (NIV)

There is a spiritual circumcision that must happen. It is the "cutting away" of our sinful flesh which was symbolized in the Old Testament ritual of cutting away of the male foreskin. Under the New Covenant a person is born again by the Holy Spirit. The old, sinful nature is "cut off" and a new nature is given. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul compared it to baptism. Baptism symbolizes our death and burial. Our old life is "cut off" (symbolized by being "buried" under the water). Then we are raised to new life by the power of the Holy Spirit (symbolized by being raised out of the water). This is all through the atoning work of Jesus Christ and his resurrection from the dead.

Once people have been born again they are marked with a seal. Not with an outward seal as represented in circumcision, but with the inward seal of the Holy Spirit.

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit. Ephesians 1:13-14 (NIV)

In order to be the “people of God” it is an absolute necessity that this blessed relationship be entered by means of the Holy Spirit. It must be in the way prescribed by God: by putting our faith and trust in the One sent by God. This is the way we belong to God. “You must be born again” (John 3:3). While this is inclusive: “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Romans 8:16), it is also exclusive: “If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ he does not belong to Christ” (Romans 8:9).

A Change In Our Thinking About The Church

A change in our thinking should be regarding the true ownership and the true identity of the church. The church belongs to Jesus and we (the church) belong to him. We must continually reprogram our thinking to recognize the fact that the true church is people, not buildings or ecclesiastical organizations. And we must be aware of the fact that Jesus is Lord of the church. Jesus is *our* Lord.

Time Out

Believers have a calling. God has called us out of this world. We belong to this world no more. We must learn to unlearn the world’s ways. This is such a radical concept that it usually takes many years before believers ever realize this truth. In the meantime there might be conflicts between the way the world thinks and the way God would want us to think. This is a TIME-OUT to have you read a passage of Scripture that may help build you up in the faith as you wrestle with your new calling.

Read John 15:18-27. Read it slowly and carefully several times.

This passage is in the middle of Jesus’ encouragement to his disciples in the book of John that starts in chapter 14 and goes until the end of chapter 17. Read and meditate on what it means to be called-out of the world and called-in to a different kingdom – the kingdom of God. We are promised the help of the Holy Spirit as we move forward in our relationship with the Lord in this world. We all must know the difference between the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God. Conflict is guaranteed.

Section Two **THE BODY OF CHRIST**

The church as the “body of Christ” speaks of three things: 1) our relationship to Christ; 2) Our relationship to each other; 3) our relationship to the world.

1. Our Relationship to Christ

*And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.
Ephesians 1:22-23 (NIV)*

Jesus is the head of the church. He has sovereignty over us. It was Jesus who had the authority to cleanse the temple in Jerusalem. This was something no one else could do. Jesus has the same authority today. In the first three chapters of Revelation Jesus demonstrated his authority as he walked through the lamp stands of his church. He brought correction and exhortation. Jesus is sovereign and over the church. Jesus is called “Lord” for that very reason.

2. Our Relationship to One Another

12 The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. 13 For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body....

14 Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. 15 If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. 16 And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them just as he wanted them to be. 19 If they were all one part, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

21 The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” 22 On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable parts are treated with special modesty, 24 while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, 25 so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. 26 If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

*27 Now you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it.
1 Corinthians 12:12-27 (NIV)*

I hope you can see by this rather lengthy passage that we are connected to each other in some amazing ways. We belong to Christ and we belong to each other. We are united to one another by the Holy Spirit. We are all truly brothers and sisters in the Lord. This is not a man-made unity. It is a unity that cannot be forced or brought into being by a committee or mandated by decree. It can only come into existence by the power and work of the Holy Spirit.

3. Our Relationship to the World

We must become more sensitized the fact that we, as the church, are made up of living human beings and that we belong to each other. We need to begin to fit in to God's plan for the church as we relate to the world around us.

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. Ephesians 4:11-12 (NIV)

The emphasis is on being equipped for works of service. The idea is taken from the world of fishermen. They drag their nets on shore and then they mend (prepare) them for service. The lives of believers are in view here. We are, in a sense, pulled ashore -- rescued from the world. Then it is the task of the church, with the help of God, to begin the mending (equipping) process so that we can be sent back out to impact the world for Christ.

We are not only the body of Christ in complete unity with each other, but we are the body of Christ as he makes his influence known in the world through us.

A Change In Our Thinking About The Church

An accurate view of the church will change our concept of what it is we are doing when we meet together on a typical Sunday or at any other time. We meet for a purpose. We are believers in the process of becoming equipped for works of service. A proper view of the church will cause us to jettison the spectator mentality that is so prevalent in our culture. We will NOW go to our meetings with an eye toward service. We are called to fulfill the will of the Lord for our lives. Worship and service will be united.

Section Three

THE TEMPLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

1. The church is not a natural institution.

The church is a supernatural institution. It was instituted by God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. We can read about the birth of the church as described in the second chapter of the book of Acts. It was born of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In a sense it can be said that *all* believers are "Pentecostals."

*Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?
1 Corinthians 3:16 (NIV)*

Paul felt it necessary to remind the Corinthian church that they were no longer only under the influence of the natural world. There was a higher calling on their lives. He told them that believers were temples of the Holy Spirit. Paul wrote this to bring to mind the potential that lies within each of us. It is the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through the lives of those who belong to God through Jesus Christ.

*And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.
John 14:16-17 (NIV)*

Since the church is not a natural institution we should use caution every time when we attempt to identify the church. The common way of identifying the church is to point to buildings and other man-made structures and organizations. We will be less prone to do this once we realize that the church is made up of *people* who are temples of the Holy Spirit.

We also might mistakenly think of the church as being some ecclesiastical institution endowed and sanctioned by human authority. Understanding that the church has supernatural foundations apart from the will of humanity will help to remove the usual human and political pitfalls that have occurred throughout history.

The church is an invisible entity and not subject to the usual sensual requirements normally associated with the word “church.” The church is not always going to be seen. There may be many surprises at the end of the age as to the true identity of those who have been (or have not been) possessions of Christ. The church is not a natural, human organization.

2. The church is not the church without the Holy Spirit.

No one can belong to the true church of Jesus Christ without being born of the Holy Spirit. Jesus explained this to Nicodemus as recorded in John 3. Believers must be born of the Spirit into the church. Paul referred to believers as being new creations in Christ.

*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!
2 Corinthians 5:17 (NIV)*

The true church, born of the Holy Spirit, exists without denomination. It exists without respect to geographical location, national or ethnic boundaries. There is unity that can only come from being one in Christ through the sovereign power of the Holy Spirit. There may be differences in language and culture. There may be differences in how specific congregations or denominations choose to govern themselves, but “what counts is new creation” (Galatians 6:15).

A Change In Our Thinking About the Church

The church is made up of born again believers. It forms a living entity brought into being and sustained by the Holy Spirit regardless of outside appearances or national and political affiliation.

4 As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him – 5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house... 9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God... 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. 1 Peter 2:5-10 (NIV)

Section Four
THE BRIDE OF CHRIST

1. Intimacy in relationship

There is an intimacy that speaks of the mysterious union between Christ and the church (believers). It is not a mystery in that it is unknowable, but it is a mystery in terms of complete human understanding. We remain tied to Christ in a most intimate way, yet we may at times feel quite far from him. We are related in the most intimate of terms, yet we may often feel that our lives do not reflect that intimacy. The fact that we may falter makes the fact of our relationship no less real. We may not fathom the depths of it all, but it is no less true. It remains a mystery.

There is no closer bond in human life than the bond of marriage. Paul spoke of this union and related it to union with Christ.

Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her... For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be united with his wife and the two shall become one flesh. This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. Ephesians 5:25; 31 (NIV)

There is no other relationship that better portrays the intimacy between Christ and the church than that of the marriage of husband and wife. Let's remember that it was God himself who instituted and blessed the first marriage in the Garden of Eden. It was surely meant to reflect the image of God in his capacity for love and faithfulness.

The Old Covenant was often described in terms of the same fidelity that would be expected in marriage. God sent prophets again and again to correct his unfaithful people. There was a serious breach of fidelity that had occurred by their worship of other gods. In fact, it was spiritual adultery. The LORD used highly charge emotional language in an effort to reach his people.

The word of the LORD came to me: "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem: 'I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert...'" Jeremiah 2:1-2 (NIV)

"I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed adultery." Jeremiah 3:8 (NIV)

"Return, faithless people," declares the LORD, "for I am your husband." Jeremiah 3:14

God's covenant was one of faithfulness that demanded the same fidelity as that of a marriage. The people were unable to maintain right relationship and the covenant was broken beyond repair. The lesson learned is that human beings are unable to be in right relationship to God because of the weaknesses inherent in fallen human nature. The New Testament has a more secure ground because it is founded in the nature of another: the holy and pure nature of Jesus Christ. Faithfulness and fidelity can be found in Christ and he will guarantee the ultimate fulfillment of the New Covenant.

2. Intimacy in the future

The guarantee of intimacy in relationship with the Lord can often be overlooked, but it is one of the greatest blessings in the life of a believer. It is the constant, unbroken joy of fellowship with God – both in this life and in the next. Jesus gave gentle and tender words of encouragement for his disciples as he strengthened them for his departure.

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. John 14:1-3 (NIV)

We know the clear teaching of Scripture is that Jesus will return for his bride, the church. There is the promise of future fellowship that will result in the second coming of Christ. This will be the consummation of the age. The book of Revelation gives us the fulfillment of this promise.

Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean was given her to wear." ...

Then the angel said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!'" And he added, "These are the true words of God." Revelation 19:6-9 (NIV)

The future of the church is bright. It is beyond bright. There is nothing in this world to which it can be compared. Everything on earth will one day disappear, but the church: i.e., the people of God, will continue on forever with God.

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life. Revelation 22:17 (NIV)

You can see that the image of the church as the bride of Christ culminates the great plan of salvation that God has for his creation. The bride of Christ has the privilege of being a part in the invitation of God addressed to anyone willing to respond. The free gift was given to us and now we are involved in leading others to the same blessing we have freely received. We will explore how this is done in our next chapter on discipleship.

A Change In Our Thinking About The Church

The church is made up of organized pilgrims of incredible value. We are organized by God and called to be pilgrims while on an earthly journey toward heaven. We are of incredible value to God proven by the fact that he would send his own Son to buy our pardon. We will be with him forever. Such is the destiny of the church, the bride of Christ.

TIME OUT

Go over all four perspectives: 1) the people of God; 2) the body of Christ; 3) the temple of the Holy Spirit; 4) the bride of Christ. Think deeply and meditate on these four biblical portraits of the church. Let this four-fold description of the church change your thinking about the church.

Try to give examples (using Scripture references) from each biblical description of the church. What Scriptures point to the church as being the people of God, the body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit and the bride of Christ. Take the time to make a little chart of these four characteristics of the church. You will be glad you did. The church will never again be seen as merely some sort of building or some earthly social institution.

CONCLUSION

The church is part of God's divine plan of redemption. It is important that we learn what God's revealed will is for the church. We need to be extra cautious and not allow ourselves to slip into the world's way of thinking. The church is God's redeemed community living between the time of the resurrection of Jesus and his second coming. The true believer is to be involved in those things in which God is involved. God is highly involved in his church. The true believer is to be invested in those things in which God is invested. He has invested his best and highest in the church: Jesus Christ. Let us all take part in what God has provided.

QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK

1. Do I have to go to church to be a Christian?
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No. Remember, if you are a believer, YOU are the church. You may never set foot in a church building. However, once the true meaning of "church" is understood, we will find that believers are meant join together in regular fellowship. (People who have no desire to be obedient to God's plan may, in fact, have a false salvation). Meeting together regularly is God's plan. A believer should want to be a part of God's plan. We are admonished in the Bible to meet together as a means to carry out God's will for his church.

23 Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. 24 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:23,24

So much more can happen as we meet together than if we stay separated and alone. The potential is endless. However, those who stay away shut the door on all of what God wants to do in us and through us.

We should not think of meeting on Sundays as merely “going to church.” Remember, the purpose for being involved in a church is to be in the process of becoming equipped for works of service. People who do not get involved are displaying a form of selfishness that is not only counterproductive, but it is also in direct rebellion with God’s plan for those who belong to him. “And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (2 Corinthians 5:15). (NIV)

Other questions?

Go to **christianlifetools.org** with your questions. They will be answered ASAP.

Review

1. Give an Old Testament example of the concept: “the people of God.”
2. Give a New Testament example of the ultimate fulfillment of the concept: “the people of God.
3. How would you describe the relationship of the church to Jesus Christ based on the church being called the body of Christ?
4. How are the individual members of the church affected by being called the body of Christ?
5. Describe what is meant by the two terms: “visible” church and the “invisible” church.
6. How does one become a member of the church?
7. Cite three or four New Testament references to the church being joined with Christ at his second coming.