

INTRODUCTION

The word “church” comes from the Greek word, *ekklēsia*, which literally means “the called out ones.” It carries the meaning of “assembly,” “community,” or “congregation.” At no time in the Scriptures does it refer to a physical structure. So the church is composed of the redeemed community of believers who have been called out from the world, by God and for God, and who are under the dominion and authority of Jesus Christ.

It’s interesting to note that during the first three centuries of church history, Christians weren’t permitted to erect their own buildings, so they met primarily in homes and available public places. The first church buildings weren’t built until after the edict of Milan in 313 when Christians were granted freedom of worship and with it the permission to build their own houses of worship. It was Warren Wiersbe who mentioned that some Christian historians consider this move a real milestone in Christian history; others see it as a millstone.

How do the following Scriptures describe the Church?

- Acts 2:46; Rom. 16:5; Col. 4:15; Phm. 2

These scriptures are clear that the early church met in “house” churches, not church houses. In Romans 16, Paul gives a greeting to Priscilla and Aquila and writes: “Likewise greet the church that is in their house” (Rom. 16:5a). When he gives a greeting to Philemon he also includes “and to the church in your house” (Phm. 2).

- Matthew 16:13-18

Jesus said He would build His church, and the gates of Hell would not prevail against it.

- Acts 7:48; 17:24

In Stephen’s sermon recorded for us in Acts 7, he makes a reference to Solomon’s temple and states:

“However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet [Isaiah] says:

‘Heaven is My throne,
And earth is My footstool.
What house will you build for Me? says the LORD,
Or what is the place of My rest?
Has My hand not made all these things?’”

When Paul addressed the philosophers at Athens, he said:

“God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands.” (Acts 17:24)

- Ephesians 2:19-22

It is clear that the church is a spiritual family and a spiritual building.

- 1 Corinthians 3:16-17

Paul emphasizes, that as believers, *we* are “the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in [us]”.

- 1 Peter 2:1-5

Peter declares that as believers, *we* are “living stones,” “a spiritual house,” and “a holy priesthood.”

- Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:19

In both passages, Paul refers to the church as a “household.”

So as we look carefully at the Scriptures, they clearly teach that the church is not a physical structure but is comprised of the redeemed community of believers. They have been called out from the world, by God and for God, and are under the dominion and authority of Jesus Christ.

Consider the following contrasts between a physical building and the church.

A Building

1. Physical (wood, bricks, mortar)
2. Built by man
3. Purchased by man
4. Belongs to man
5. Temporary
6. Destructible
7. Dead stones
8. Stationary
9. A dwelling place for man
10. Decays
11. Established by living man
12. Sustained by dying men
13. Exists for man
14. Exalts man

The Church

1. Spiritual (born again believers)
2. Built by Christ
3. Purchased by Christ
4. Belongs to Christ
5. Eternal
6. Indestructible
7. Living stones
8. Portable
9. A dwelling place for God
10. Ever-growing
11. Established by the dying Christ
12. Sustained by the living Christ
13. Exists for Christ
14. Exalts Christ

Points to Ponder

- The church building is not God's house; we are.
- We must not turn any building into a shrine.
- The work of the church is not confined to a particular place, time, or day of the week.
- What goes on in our lives outside the building is far more important than what goes on inside.
- What we are, or wherever we are, is more important than what the building is doing.

So what will this look like in practice?

1. There will be a strong emphasis on penetrating our community with the message of Christ. That was the charge brought against the apostles: "you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine" (Acts 5:28). We must not simply be content with being at church. In a regular week, if we attend every service, we're here, for what, four hours a week? There are 164 more hours left in the week!
2. There must be a strong emphasis on evangelism and discipleship: reaching the unsaved in our community and then teaching them.
3. We must help believers discover and develop their spiritual gifts to effectively function in the body of Christ.
4. Focus will be on the spiritual aspect of the church: the maturity of believers and their growth.
5. We will see ourselves not as an institution but a living organism: the body of Christ, alive in Him.
6. Families will be building their homes on Christian principles. That's one reason why we must emphasize the use of the D6 Sunday School curriculum (see Deut. 6:4-9). The church was never meant to be a substitute for what should be taught at home.
7. We will see families reunite and built on God's Word.
8. We will be certain to teach and encourage our young people to truly seek God's will for their lives. This includes making sure they have a genuine walk with Christ and have a proper Christian worldview.
9. There will be genuine fellowship as we minister to the needs of one another.
10. There must be a willingness to change, and to innovate, and to think outside the box. Our faith needs stretching, and faith demands risk. Someone once said, "Insanity is when you keep doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results."
11. There will be a spirit of sacrifice; a life lived beyond mediocrity. What are you believing and trusting God for in your life that only He can do?
12. There will be a strong emphasis on the preaching and teaching of God's word and every ministry saturated with prayer. (See Ephesians 3:20-21).

CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude with an excerpt of Martyn Lloyd-Jones's sermon, titled *What is the Church?*

My dear friends, here is the great need of the hour. It is not merely that we should perpetuate a denomination or an organization or an institution. No, no! It is for Christians to become the living church of Christ, filled with his life and power, charged with the energy of the Spirit divine, and standing as a phenomenon in this modern, evil world. The world needs a church that points to the way of salvation and enables men and women to see that what has happened to us can likewise happen to them.

O may God have mercy upon us and awaken us out of our formalism and our lethargy and give us no rest or peace until we come to know him and rejoice in him and are filled with his Spirit.

O Lord our God, have mercy upon us, we humbly pray. We find ourselves so far removed from this picture of your people in the early church. O God, have mercy upon us. Come, we humbly pray, in the power of your blessed Spirit and awaken us. Convince us of our sin, and lead us to Jesus and his blood. Humble us, O Lord, and break us and bend us. Take from us our complacency, our self-satisfaction, and make of us a people who know their God, a people of whom he will not be ashamed to be called their God. O Lord, revive thy work. Make bare your own mighty arm, and do a new work in the midst of this evil and perverse generation in which we find ourselves. And unto you, and unto you alone, shall we give the praise, the honor, and the glory forever and ever. Amen. (Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Setting Our Affections Upon Glory*, Crossway, 2013, 65-66).