

Church Membership

Week 1

Introduction:

Proverbs 18:13 (ESV) — **13** If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame.

John 7:51 (ESV) — **51** “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?”

Schedule:

Week 1: What is the church and is it important?

Week 2: What is Church Membership and is it important?

Week 3: What are the Church and its membership like?

Week 4: What are the responsibilities and privileges of membership?

Week 5: What do we do if a member does not represent Christ?

Week 6: What will practicing meaningful membership look like?

Week 1: What is the Church and is it important?

1. What is the church?

What the church is not:

Webster’s New World Dictionary (1981): **Church**

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|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| 1. A building for public worship | “It’s about time to decorate the church” |
| 2. Public worship; religious service | “I enjoyed church today” |
| 3. A particular sect or denomination of Christians | “My church is the Baptist church” |
| 4. Church government, or its power, as opposed to civil government | “I believe in separation of Church and State” |
| 5. A group of worshippers. | |

Of the 5 meanings given in Webster’s Dictionary for the word *Church* (ἐκκλησία), only the last meaning can be found in the Bible. The Greek word **ἐκκλησία** is used over a hundred times in the New Testament, and it always refers to “a group of worshippers,” which is the last definition mentioned. ¹

¹ Life in the Father’s House – Wayne Mack pg 11

What is the church?

The “church” in Scripture is not a building, a denomination, or an activity – it is a group of people.

A biblical church is a group of people who join together in a specific way and for a specific purpose. Those people, technically speaking, do not worship “at a church” or participate “in church” – they are the church! And if you are a member of the body of Christ, you do not “go to church” or “sit in church” – you are a part of the church who comes together for worship with the rest of the body. (Wayne Mack)²

Ephesians 4:11–16 (ESV) — **11** And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, **12** to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, **13** until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, **14** so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. **15** Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, **16** from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Acts 2:42–47 (ESV) — **42** And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. **43** And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. **44** And all who believed were together and had all things in common. **45** And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. **46** And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, **47** praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

A local church is a group of Christians who regularly gather in Christ’s name to officially affirm and oversee one another’s membership in Jesus Christ and his kingdom through gospel preaching and gospel ordinances.³

Once upon a time there was a kingdom called Israel. As in all kingdoms, Israel had a king and a land and a set of laws. But unlike most kingdoms, the citizens of Israel had an especially important job to do: *Israel was to represent God on earth.*

Sadly, Israel failed abysmally at its job. This made the nations think that God was nothing special, after all. In fact, he must be a lot like them.

Then one day along came a man named Jesus, who said at least four kingdom-toppling things.

- 1) God was firing Israel. They were losing their job of representing him (Matt. 3:9–12; 8:11–12).
- 2) Jesus was the one who would now represent the heavenly Father (Matt. 3:17; 11:27; John 14:9). He was, in fact, God and the perfect image of God (Col. 1:15).
- 3) God was establishing a kingdom, not as a place like Israel, but as his rule over a particular set of people. And this kingdom was for people who were repentant, poor in spirit, and humble like children (Matt. 4:17; 5:3; 18:3).

² Ibid pg 12

³ Leeman, J. (2012). *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (p. 52). Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

- 4) The citizens of his kingdom, whom he would purchase through his death on the cross, would join him in representing God on earth (Matt. 5:48; Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; 2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:9–10).

Yet a kingdom like this with no land and no geographic boundaries had a serious political dilemma: anyone could claim to be a citizen in this kingdom. And Jesus predicted that all sorts of imposters would (Matt. 7:21–23; also Matt. 24:5; 25:44–45).

These imposters would bring the king’s name into disrepute. Remember, this kingdom was supposed to be for those who are repentant, poor in spirit, and humble like children. It was to be a new kind of society. But if literally *anyone*—all by himself or herself—could just start claiming to be a citizen, there was going to be a mess. Forget about any “new society.”

The citizens of the previous administration were marked off by the fact that they lived in a particular land. And even when they left the land, they had a number of distinctives such as circumcision, the Sabbath, and various dietary restrictions. But how would a landless, borderless kingdom like Jesus’s mark off its citizens? Who would exercise border patrol when there are no borders?⁴

When did the church start and who started it? (Matt. 16 and 18)

Jesus Himself started it...

Matthew 16:18–19 (ESV) — **18** And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build **my church**, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. **19** I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Ephesians 5:25–26 (ESV) — **25** Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved **the church** and gave himself up for her, **26** that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,

Matthew 18:15–20 (ESV) — **15** “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. **16** But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. **17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.** **18** Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

- In Matt. 18 Jesus is clearly talking about the local church.

What about the universal (invisible) Church? (universal vs. local)

The universal Church is...

A: The invisible church includes everyone who has ever been genuinely born again from every age of church history. This church will not meet in a visible way until Christ returns. The visible church consists of believers who are alive and meeting together right now.

⁴ Leeman, J. (2012). *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (p. 55). Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

The universal church is not all that matters.

Interesting Fact: “Out of the 110 times that the word church (ἐκκλησία) is translated “church,” only 17 are clear references to the universal church, while 90 undoubtedly denote the local church. Even in those few times when the New Testament writers are referring to the universal church, the idea of the local church cannot be eliminated from the word because the two are so inextricably linked, the one being the visible manifestation of the other.” (LFH pg. 40)

The problem with the universal church is that it is limited:

- Membership is unknown.
- It does not meet together.
- It does not perform tasks or church functions. (send missionaries, outwardly loving each other...)
- It does not administrate the ordinances. (perform baptism or Lord’s supper)

Conclusion: The universal church is distinct from the local church.

2. Is the local church important? **Yes!**

6 Reasons

1) It was the practice of 1st century believers to join local churches.

Acts 1:15 (ESV) — 15 In those days Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said,

Acts 2:37–47 (ESV) — 37 Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” **38** And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. **39** For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” **40** And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” **41** So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about **three thousand souls**.

42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. **43** And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. **44** And all who believed were together and had all things in common. **45** And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. **46** And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their

food with glad and generous hearts, **47** praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Acts 4:4 (ESV) — **4** But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.

Acts 4:32 (ESV) — **32** Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.

2) The apostles started and ministered in and to local churches.

Acts 1-11 the church of Jerusalem starts and grows

Acts 11:19-30 Church at Antioch starts and grows. Paul and Barnabas minister for an extended amount of time there.

Acts 13:1-3 Paul and Barnabas commissioned as the first missionaries by the church of Antioch.

Acts 15 – Dispute breaks out at the church in Antioch about if circumcision was necessary for gentiles. An agreement could not be reached. Antioch decided to send Paul and Barnabas to the Jerusalem church to get their opinion on the matter.

- **Interesting fact:** two different local churches are presented in this section and both have their own governing bodies. Also, the Jerusalem church does not command the Antioch church to obey its conclusion but gives it the consensus of the apostles and elders of the church.

1 Corinthians 1:1–2 (ESV) — **1** Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, **2 To the church of God that is in Corinth**, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

2 Corinthians 1:1–2 (ESV) — **1** Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, **To the church of God that is at Corinth**, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia: **2** Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Philippians 1:1–2 (ESV) — **1** Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, **To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:** **2** Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Galatians 1:1–2 (ESV) — **1** Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— **2** and all the brothers who are with me, **To the churches of Galatia:**

1 Thessalonians 1:1 (ESV) — **1** Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, **To the church of the Thessalonians** in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

3) Church history affirms the importance of the local church.

- Augustine (354 – 430AD)– “He cannot have God for his father who does not have the church for his mother.”
- Martin Luther (1483 – 1546) – “Apart from the church, salvation is impossible.”
- John Calvin (1509 – 1564) –
“Because it is now our intention to discuss the visible church, let us learn even from the simple title “mother” how useful I, indeed necessary, it is that we should know her. For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels (Matt. 22:30). Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives. Furthermore, away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation... God’s fatherly favor and the especial witness of spiritual life are limited to his flock, so that it is always disastrous to leave the church.

The Lord esteems the communion of his church so highly that he counts as a traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of Word and sacraments.”

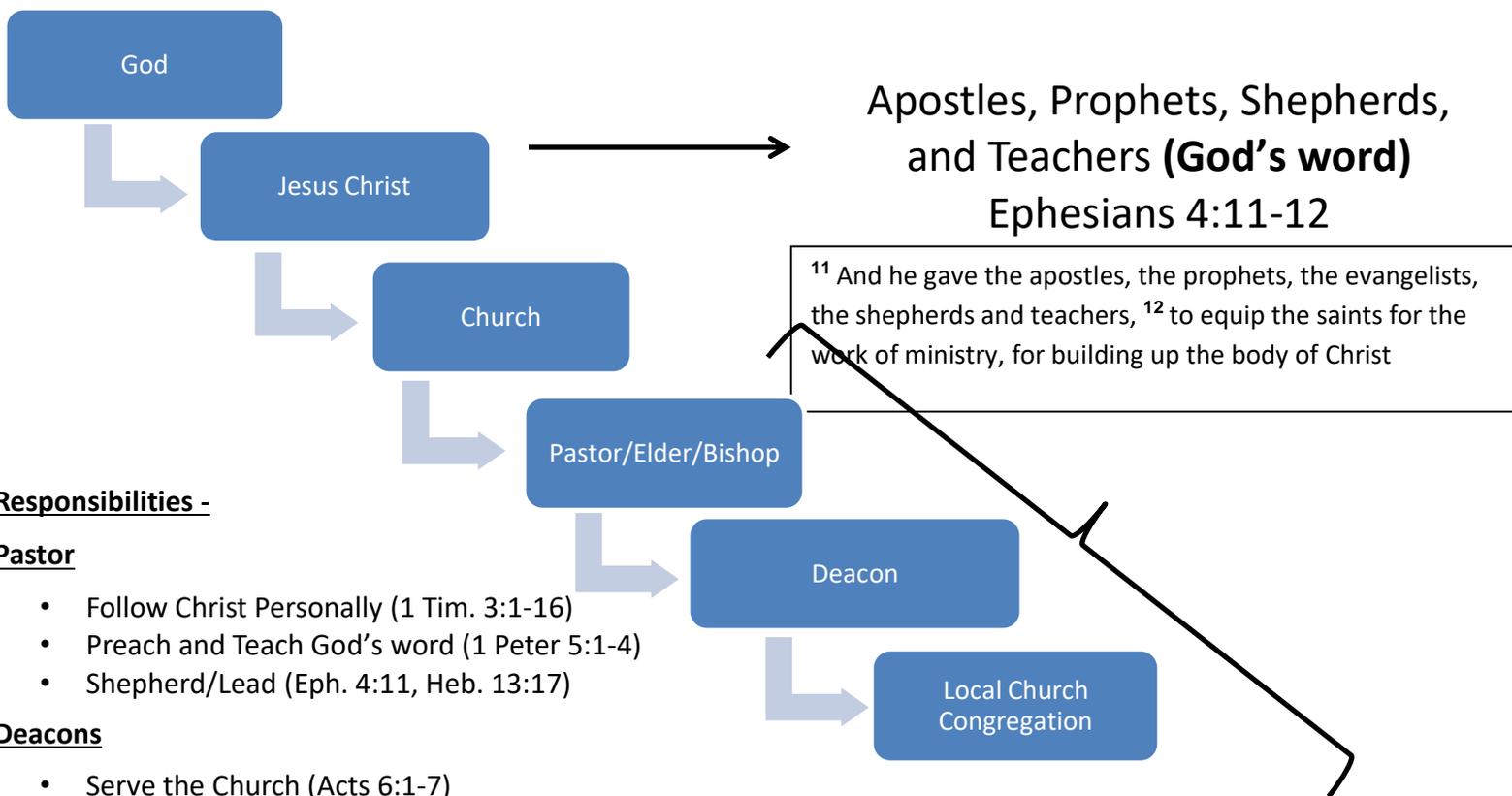
- Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)-
“The visible church is the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation”

Commentator R. B. Kuiper (1966) explains:

“...Does it follow that he who is outside the visible church is necessarily outside Christ?”
Certainly not. It is possible that a true believer because of some unusual circumstance may fail to unit with the church. Conceivably one may, for instance, believe in Christ and die before receiving baptism. But such instances are exceptional. The Scriptural rule is that, while membership in the church is not a prerequisite of salvation, it is a necessary consequence of salvation. Outside the visible church “there is no ordinary possibility of salvation”
- Charles Spurgeon (1834 –1892) –
“I know there are some who say, “Well, I have gien myself to the Lord, but I do not intended to give myself to any church.” Now, why not? “Because I can be a Christian without it.”

Are you quite clear about that? You can be as good a Christian by disobedience to your Lord's commands as by being obedient? There is a brick. What is it made for? To help build a house. It is of no use for that brick to tell you that it is just as good a brick while it is kicking about on the ground as it would be in the house. It is a good-for-nothing brick. So you rolling-stone Christians, I do not believe that you are answering your purpose. You are living contrary to the life which Christ would have you live, and you are much to blame for the injury you do."

4) The local church was given structure (Congregational, Pastor led, deacon serving)



Responsibilities -

Pastor

- Follow Christ Personally (1 Tim. 3:1-16)
- Preach and Teach God's word (1 Peter 5:1-4)
- Shepherd/Lead (Eph. 4:11, Heb. 13:17)

Deacons

- Serve the Church (Acts 6:1-7)
- Be an example of Christ for others to follow (1 Tim. 3:8-13)
- Follow the Biblical leadership of the Pastor. (Heb. 13:17, 1 Thess. 5:12-14, 1 Tim. 5:17-18)

Congregation

- Follow and submit to the Biblical leadership of the church (Heb. 13:17, 1 Thess. 5:12-14)
- Search Scripture and follow the truth. (Acts 17:10-11)
- Love One Another, Be a witness of Christ, Serve the church.

5) The local church was given authority.

Matthew 16:19 (ESV) — **19** I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Matthew 18:17–18 (ESV) — **17** If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. **18** Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

1 Corinthians 5:1-2 (ESV) — It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife. **2** And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

1 Corinthians 5:4–5 (ESV) — **4** When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, **5** you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

1 Corinthians 5:12–13 (ESV) — **12** For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? **13** God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

6) The local church was given responsibilities and privileges.

- To be covered later

Conclusion:

- The local church is overwhelmingly present throughout all of the New Testament as a group of people in a specific location that come together to worship and serve God by following scripture.
- The local church is so important that it is essential for Christian growth and obedience to God’s commands both personally and in the church.
- The local church must be an essential part of life for anyone who calls himself a follower of Christ.

Wayne Mack, pg. 21

Is it possible to have a vibrant spiritual life and successfully nurture our relationship with God apart from a local church? Is it just “conventional wisdom” that tells us we must be a part of it? Is it possible to

move closer to God and farther away from the church? Are there “lots of alternatives” to the church when it comes to our spiritual growth? And are those who forsake all church involvement truly blameless for that choice?

The answer to all those questions, according to scripture, is a resounding no! Far from being only one of many options for the Christian, the church is the primary means through which God accomplishes His plan in the world. It is His ordained instrument for calling the lost to Himself and the context in which He sanctifies those who are born into His family. Therefore God expects (and even demands) a commitment to the church from everyone who claims to know Him.

1 Timothy 3:14–15 (ESV) — 14 I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, **15** if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, **which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.**

Books used for this study:

Mark Dever – Nine Marks of a Healthy Church

Mark Dever – What is a Healthy Church

Thomas Rainer – I am a Church Member

Rick Thomas – *Preaching Center or Discipleship Community* (article)

Dave Jenkins – *5 Reasons We should Gather in Local Churches* (article)

Wayne Mack & Dave Swavely - *Life in the Father's House*

Wayne Mack – *To Be or Not To Be a Church Member*

Jonathan Leeman – *Church Membership*

Jonathan Leeman – *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*