

What is the Church?

Objectives:

1. The Nature of the Church.
2. The Marks of the Church (Distinguishing Characteristics).
3. The Purposes of the Church.
4. The Purity & Unity of the Church.
5. The Power of the Church.

The Nature of the Church

- **Reformed Definition:** *The church is the community of all true believers for all time.* (Eph. 1:22-23, 5:25; Matt. 16:18, Deut 4:10, Acts 7:38, Heb. 12:22-23)
- **Dispensational Definition:** *The church is the community of true believers distinct from Israel, which was inaugurated by Christ and birthed at Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit.*

Eph 1:22-23 - “He has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”

Matthew 16:18 - Jesus said, “I will build my church.”

- **The Church Is Invisible, Yet Visible**

- The invisible church is the church as God sees it. (2 Tim 2.19; 1 Sam 16.7)
- The visible church is the church as Christians on earth see it. (1 Cor. 1:2, Philm 1-2)
- The visible church will always include unbelievers. (Acts 20:29-30; Matt 7.15-16)

- **The Church Is Local and Universal**

In the New Testament, the word “church” may be applied to a group of believers at any level, ranging from a very small group meeting in a private home, to a group of believers in a city or surrounding area, to all true believers in the universal church.

Roman 16:5 - “Greet also the *church* in their house.” (Local - see also 1 Cor 1:2)

Acts 9:31 - “So the *church* throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up.” (Regionally speaking)

1 Cor 12:28 - “God has appointed *in the church* first apostles, second prophets, third teachers...”

Eph 5:25 - “Christ loved the *church* and gave himself up for her.” (Universal)

- **Metaphors for the Church**

- Family (1 Tim. 5:1-2)
- The bride of Christ (2 Cor 11:2)
- Branches on a vine (John 15:5)
- An olive tree (Rom. 11:17-24)
- A field of crops and a building (1 Cor 3:6-9)
- A harvest (Matt. 13:1-30)
- A new temple and a new group of priests (1 Peter 2:5)
- God's house (Heb. 3:6)
- Pillar and bulwark of the truth (1 Tim 3:15)
- The Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12-17)
- The whole human body (1 Cor 12:16-17)
- The rest of the body, distinguished from the head (Eph 4:15-16)

- **The Church and Israel**

- Dispensational view: the church and Israel are two distinct groups, at least in this age and the millennium
- Non-dispensational view: the church is the “new Israel” or the new “people of God” (Rom. 2:28-29, 4:11-12, 9:6-8; Gal. 3:29, Eph. 2:14-16)

- **The Church and the Kingdom of God**

- The church is not the kingdom. (Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31)
- The kingdom creates the church.
- The church witnesses to the kingdom. (Matt 24:14)
- The church is the instrument of the kingdom. (Matt. 10:8, Luke 10:17)
- The church is the custodian of the kingdom. (Matt. 16:19)

The Marks of a Genuine Church (Distinguishing Characteristics)

Not every organized group of people makes up a church. There are definitely true churches and false churches in existence. True churches have clear distinguishing marks. Luther and Calvin agreed that true churches are marked by:

- Pure preaching of the Word, as opposed to false doctrine.
- Right administration of the sacraments (Baptism and the Lord's Supper).
- Attempting to function as a church.

NOTE: 1) Para-church organizations are NOT the church. 2) False Churches clearly exist today.

The Purposes of the Church

- Ministry to God: Worship. (Col. 3:16)
- Ministry to Believers: Nurture. (Eph. 4:11-13)
- Ministry to the World: Evangelism and Mercy. (Matt. 28:18-20, Luke 6:35-36)
- Keeping These Purposes in Balance

The Purity and Unity of the Church

- **More Pure and Less Pure Churches**

Paul's letters to the Philippians and Thessalonians reveal that they were relatively free from major doctrinal or moral problems (see Phil. 1:3-11; 4:10-16; 1 Thess. 1:2-10; 3:6-10, etc.), as opposed to the serious problems reflected in Paul's letters to the Galatians and Corinthians (see Gal. 1:6-9; 3:1-5; 1 Cor. 3:1-4; 4:18-21; 5:1-2; 6:1-8, etc.). It should be clear that among true churches there are less pure and more pure churches.



- **Definitions of Purity and Unity**

Purity: *The purity of the church is its degree of freedom from wrong doctrine and conduct, and its degree of conformity to God's revealed will for the church.*

Unity: *The unity of the church is its degree of freedom from divisions among true Christians.*

- Signs of a More Pure Church (Eph 5:26-27)
 - Biblical doctrine (or right preaching of the Word)
 - Proper use of the sacraments (or ordinances)
 - Right use of church discipline
 - Genuine worship (Eph 5:18-20)
 - Effective prayer
 - Effective witness (Matt 28:19-20)
 - Effective fellowship
 - Biblical church government (1 Tim 3:1-13)
 - Spiritual power in ministry (Acts 1:8, Rom 1:16, 1 Cor 4:20)
 - Personal holiness of life among members (1 Thess 4:3, Heb 12:14)
 - Care for the poor (Acts 4:32-35)
 - Love for Christ (1 Peter 1:8)

- **We are to work for the purity of the visible church**

There are no perfect churches. This means that Christians have no obligation to seek the purest church they can find and stay there, and then leave it if an even purer church comes to their attention. Rather they should find a true church in which they can have effective ministry and in which they will experience Christian growth as well and then should stay there and minister, continually working for the purity of that church. God will often bless their prayers and faithful witness and the church will gradually grow in many areas of purity.

The Church should strive to be a God-centered church rather than primarily a man-centered church. Faithfulness to Christ should be evident in the doctrine of the church as well as the daily life of the church in its activities, its preaching, its counseling, and even in the casual conversations among members.

- **New Testament Teaching on the Unity of the Church**

- There is an actual spiritual unity in Christ. (Jn 10:16, 17:21, 23, 1 Cor 1:2, Eph. 4:3-6)
- Because of this actual unity, believers are commanded to live in unity with one another, to avoid those who sow disunity, and to separate. (Gal 5:20-21, Jude 19, 1 Cor 1:10, Rom. 16:17-18, 2 Tim 3:5) It should be noted that there are no direct New Testament commands to separate from Christians with whom one has doctrinal differences (unless those differences involve such serious heresy that the Christian faith itself is denied).
- We are to diligently work for the unity of the visible church.

- **Brief History of Organizational Separation in the Church**

1054 A.D.—the Eastern (Orthodox) church separated from the Western (Roman Catholic) church

1521—Martin Luther, who wanted to reform the Roman Catholic Church, was excommunicated

1525—the Anabaptists began to form churches of “believers only” in Switzerland

1570—the Anglican (Episcopalian) church was excommunicated
[“We suffer schism, we did not cause it.”]

[But in 1534 Parliament in England had passed laws placing the Church of England outside of the control of the Church of Rome]. In the centuries following the Reformation, Protestantism splintered into hundreds of smaller groups.

“Pride or self-glorification is the cause and starting point of all controversies, when each person, claiming for himself more than he is entitled to have, is eager to have others in his power.”

- **Reasons for Separating from a Church**

- Wrong Reasons: personal ambition & pride, or differences on minor doctrines or practices (doctrinal or behavioral patterns that would not affect any other doctrine and that would not

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have a significant effect on the way one lives the Christian life.)

- Right Reasons: Doctrinal reasons, reasons of conscience, practical considerations.
 - **Doctrinal**: When doctrine deviates from Scripture concerning the essential doctrines (Trinity, person of Christ, the atonement, the resurrection, salvation, etc.). We should put doctrine into a three tier classification. Only disagreement with first tier doctrines (essential) is good enough reason to leave a church. See article: www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/should-i-stay-or-should-i-go/ by Dr. Albert Mohler.
 - **Matters of Conscience**: If your conscience will not allow you to participate in some practice or doctrine that goes against what you believe and it bothers you significantly then you may have the freedom to leave. However, this should only be done after much prayer and confrontation to those in leadership concerning their disobedience to the *clear* scriptural teaching! This may include vague ideas such as ministry philosophy that are difficult to pinpoint.
 - **Practical**: If the current leadership is resistant to correction from Scripture or you have lost trust in the leadership, after much prayer you may feel led to leave only after you have biblically confronted and made your concerns known to the elders in leadership.
 - **Remember**: It is a serious thing to leave your church. Only after much prayer and mature decision making should someone consider leaving your church.

The Power of the Church

What kind of authority does the church have? How should church discipline function?

- **Definition**: The power of the church is its God-given authority to carry on spiritual warfare, proclaim the gospel, and exercise church discipline.
- **Spiritual Warfare**. (2 Cor. 10:3-4; Eph 6:10-18)
 - The church's weapons: prayer, worship, Scripture, faith, righteous and holy lives, authority over demonic forces.
 - Breaks through sin and hardened opposition, awakens faith in heart of unbelievers. (Acts 12:1-7; 20-24; Acts 13:8- 11; 16:16-18)
 - Effective power to see people saved and released from bondage to sin and Satan. (Acts 16:14; 1 Pet 1:23)
 - This power can be used in the church. (2 Cor 13:2-4, 2 Cor 13:10, Acts 5:1-11, Acts 13:8-11)
- Does the church today have the same power in spiritual warfare?

Some say No. There seems to be a distinction between the apostles & early Christians even in the book of Acts (note that immediately after the death of Ananias and Sapphira in 5:12-13 - 'many signs and wonders' were done 'by the hands of the apostles' but 'none of the rest dared join them, but

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the people held them in high honor.’) Moreover, Paul does not specifically instruct leaders at Corinth nor even Timothy and Titus to exercise such power and authority.

Some say Yes. Paul instructed the Corinthian church to exercise church discipline (1 Cor 5:1-4). Moreover, the descriptions of spiritual warfare in Eph 6:10-18 and 2 Cor 10:3-4 seem applicable to Christians in general.

- **The Keys of the Kingdom. (Matt 16:15-19)**

- Elsewhere in NT: a key always implies authority to open a door and give entrance to a place or realm: Luke 11:52, Rev. 1:18
- Conclusion: The “keys of the kingdom” represents at least the authority to preach the gospel of Christ, and thus, to open the door of the kingdom of heaven and allow people to enter.
- But there is probably more involved here:
 - (a) “Keys” suggests more than one door - some authority within the kingdom is also suggested
 - (b) “Binding” and “loosing” parallels Matthew 18:17-18, where “binding” and “loosing” means to place under / release from church discipline
- The term “whatever” (not “whoever”) is neuter in Greek: Perhaps this indicates that Jesus is not speaking of persons, but more generally of situations and relationships that come up within the church (including persons and relationships).
- The Greek periphrastic future perfect tense (an action that would be completed before some future point) allows this kind of translation: “Whatever you shall bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.”
- Legitimate church discipline involves the awesome certainty that corresponding heavenly discipline has already begun.
- Church discipline is not unlimited. It is effective only against sin, as defined by God. Ultimate authority to forgive sin belongs only to God. (Isa. 43:25, Mark 2:7, Rom. 2:15-16, 1 John 1:9)
- Submit to church discipline - do not try to run from it!

- **The Power of the Church and the Power of the State.**

Should the church use physical force to advance the kingdom?

- God gives the state the right to bear the sword (Rom. 13:1-7).
- Jesus refused to use physical force to compel people to follow him or believe in him. (Matt. 22:21, Luke 9:54-55, John 18:36; 2 Corin 10:4)
- Genuine faith in Christ cannot be forced.
- Therefore: Therefore the church should not use the power of government (“the power of the

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sword”) to compel people to become Christians, or to support the church. (This took a long time for the church to realize.)

- Implication: No civil governments should enforce laws requiring or prohibiting kinds of church doctrine, or abridging the people’s freedom to worship as they choose, or using tax dollars to support any one church.
- However, this does not prohibit Christians from attempting to bring positive moral influence on Government. (This should be done!)
- **Church discipline**
 - The purposes of church discipline.
 - Restoration and reconciliation of the believer who is going astray: Similar to a wise parent disciplining his or her child. (Prov 13.24; Heb 12:6) Such restoration should be done with genuine love. (Gal. 6:1; James 5:20) Even “excommunication” should be done with the hope of eventual repentance. (1 Tim. 1:20; 1 Thess. 5:12; 2 Tim. 4:2; Titus 1:3; James 5:19-20)
 - To keep the sin from spreading to others. (Heb. 12:15; 1 Cor 5:2, 6-7; 1 Tim. 5:20)
 - To protect the purity of the church & honor of Christ. (Rom. 2:24; 1 Cor 5:1-2; 2 Pet. 3:14; Rev. 2:20). If a church does not exercise discipline, often the Lord Jesus will do it himself. (1 Corin 11:29; Rev. 2:5, 15)
 - For what sins should church discipline be exercised?
 - In cases where a personal sin against another person cannot be resolved privately:

Matt. 18:15-17: “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.”

- But there are many other different kinds of examples from the NT:
 - Divisiveness: Rom. 16:17, Titus 3:10
 - Incest: 1 Cor 5:1
 - Laziness and refusing to work : 2 Thess. 3:6-10
 - Disobeying what Paul writes: 2 Thess. 3:14-16
 - Blasphemy: 1 Tim. 1:20
 - Teaching heretical doctrine: 2 John 10-11
 - List in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11: sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuality, stealing, greedy, drunkards, revilers or swindlers.

Principle: All these sins that were subject to church discipline in the NT were publicly known, outwardly evident sins. Many sins continued over a period of time. In such cases, reproach was being brought on the church, Christ was being dishonored, and others would be encouraged to follow wrongful patterns.

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- How should church discipline be carried out?
 - Knowledge of the sin should be kept to the smallest group possible for proper resolution (Matt. 18:15-17). [However, some sins are already publicly known, and should be dealt with publicly]
 - Disciplinary measures should increase in strength until there is a solution: See Matt. 18:15-17 above. (Elders would ordinarily be involved before going to the church)

Jesus' presence is behind the decisions made by the church. (Matt. 18:19-20; 1 Cor 5:4)

Some verses speak of avoiding fellowship with a person claiming to be a Christian but engaging in publicly known, serious sin. This is to prevent the church from giving the impression of approving of the disobedience. (1 Cor 5:11; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15; 2 John 10-11)

- Discipline of church leaders: a special situation!

1 Tim. 5:19-21 - “Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. **20** As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. **21** In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality.”
- Other aspects of church discipline:
 - As soon as genuine repentance has occurred, the person should be quickly brought back to Fellowship of the church. (**2 Cor 2:7-8**; Gal. 6:1; Matt. 18:21-22, 35) We should have a spirit of gentleness & humility knowing our own weakness.
 - But it is unwise to set any timetable in advance for church discipline to be finished - Different situations will be different in how they work out.
 - We should quickly grant forgiveness. However, granting forgiveness is different from restoring trust. Trust is built only slowly over time, and can be shattered quickly and take a long time to rebuild.