



## CHAPTER 5 “What Is the Church?”

### Section 1

The church is near and dear to the heart of God. Most people have some understanding or personal perspective about what church is based on their religious background. So what truly makes up the church? Is the church a building? Is it a non-profit organization? Is it a business? Is it something more organic?

Thankfully, God has not left humanity without a clear understanding of what the church is and does. He not only invented the church but He also laid out the blueprints for what He wants the church to be and do. He did so within the pages of the New Testament.

### Application

1. What typically comes to mind when you have heard the word “church” growing up?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Has church, as you have known it, served a positive or negative role in your life? Explain your answer.

## Section 2

### Understanding the Nature of the Church

First and foremost, it is important to understand that the church is not a building, organization, club, fraternity, or otherwise; the church is people. The English word “church” actually comes from a Greek word *ecclesia*, which literally means “a called out assembly.” This means the church is actually just a group of people that have some really important spiritual things in common—most importantly, faith in the biblical Jesus.

In this section we are going to focus on understanding the nature of the church (or what the church actually is in the most basic sense).

#### A. Born Again Individuals

Commenting on the church, Pastor Chuck Smith wrote, “The funny thing about the church is that you cannot really join it; you have to be born into it.”

That is exactly what Jesus taught; to become part of Jesus’ church you have to become what He called “born again.” Every time a person hears and believes the biblical gospel they undergo a spiritual transformation. They do not merely choose a new religion when they trust in Jesus; they become new people from the inside out.

Answer the following questions with your Bible:

1. In John 3:3, what does Jesus say has to happen to a person before they can become part of God’s kingdom?
2. In John 3:6, who is it that accomplishes the spiritual birth people need to experience to become part of God’s kingdom?
3. According to John 3:16-17, what specifically must a person understand and believe to become born again?
4. According to 2 Corinthians 5:17, what three things are said to be true of people who believe in Christ?
5. According to Acts 2:40-41, what two things did the people do which resulted in being accepted as part of the church by the Christians in Jerusalem?

#### B. The Universal Church

At the most basic level, the church consists of all people who have been born again as a result of believing in the biblical gospel. All who have understood the reality that they are sinners and trusted in Jesus as their Savior have experienced spiritual resurrection (they have come to spiritual life). As a result, God now considers them His people.

Describing what happens to people when they believe the gospel, Paul wrote, “He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.” (Colossians 1:13-14)

Here is the thing: what Paul said is not only true of Christians in one particular denomination, subculture, or country, but it is true of Christians all over the planet. This means the church you become a part of when you believe in the biblical Jesus is really a global family. Remember, as mentioned above, the church is actually a called out assembly. All over the globe, throughout all of history, God has been calling a people out of sin and out of the kingdom of darkness. The door people pass through as they exit the kingdom of darkness and become part of the kingdom of God is the biblical Jesus.

Jesus Himself put it this way: “Then Jesus said to them again, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. 8 All who ever came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. 9 I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.’” (John 10:7-9 NKJV)

“The universal church” is the term most often used to describe all the people who have made up the church from all over the world in every culture. The church began to exist on the day of Pentecost when God first poured out the Holy Spirit on all followers of Jesus. Before that day, the presence and power of the Holy Spirit was only available to select groups of people and leaders God had called to fulfill specific important roles of service. At Pentecost, everything changed; the Holy Spirit became equal opportunity for all who trust in Jesus for salvation. You can read the exciting historical account of how the church began in Acts chapter 2.

Consider the following verses that imply the reality of the universal church:

Matthew 16:18: “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”

Acts 20:28: “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”

Revelation 5:9-10: “And they sang a new song, saying:

‘You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, 10 and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth.’ (NKJV)

### C. The Regional Church

Whereas the universal church consists of all born-again people throughout the history of the church, the regional church consists of all gospel-believing local churches existing in a specific geographic region at a specific time. Examples of the regional church in modern times would be all the gospel-believing churches that exist in the Southwest or Pacific Northwest of the United States of America. Christians in regional aspects of the church often never interact with each other, and express their faith in diverse Christian denominations and traditions. What they hold in common is not so much culture or tradition, but unity in the teachings that are essential for salvation regarding things like the gospel and the identity of Jesus Christ.

The following verses speak of different expressions of the regional church in New Testament times:

Acts 18:23: “After he had spent some time there, he departed and went over the region of Galatia and Phrygia in order, strengthening all the disciples.”

1 Corinthians 16:1: “Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also.”

Galatians 1:1-2: “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 brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia.”

## D. The Local Church

The local church is the concept of church most Christians think of when they hear the term “church.” The local church is an individual Christian’s church “home.” It is the church where they attend and serve on a regular basis, and where they are known by other Christians and leaders they serve and are served by.

The following verses give a good picture of the existence of specific local churches in New Testament times:

Acts 8:1: “At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem.”

Acts 9:31: “Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.”

Acts 13:1: “Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers.” (NKJV)

### Application

1. Of the different broad aspects of the church described above, which are you most familiar with?
2. How does it affect you to know that you are part of a spiritually connected group of people that has existed in heaven and on earth for 2,000 years?
3. What impacted you most as you read the descriptions about the different aspects of the church in this section? Why?

### Section 3

For the rest of the sections in this chapter, emphasis will be on the local church. The first Christians originally referred to themselves as disciples. A disciple is what you might think of as a spiritual apprentice. The first twelve disciples spent three years living life with Jesus, learning from Him, and partnering with Him in ministry. Jesus' desire is that all Christians become disciples. In fact, according to Jesus, the very mission of the church today is to not merely to make converts, but disciples: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). And thus, the church has been making disciples through preaching the gospel, baptizing new believers, and following the teachings of Jesus in the Bible for the past 2,000 years.

#### The Context of Discipleship: Life in the Local Church

Living in community with other Christians in the context of the local church is the best way to grow as a disciple of Jesus. The local church is at the epicenter of the individual Christian's life. Gathering with other Christians to learn the Bible, worship, encourage one another, and serve with our spiritual gifts is crucial for our own spiritual growth and the spreading of the gospel in the world. As a called out assembly, the church in New Testament times automatically began gathering together regularly for all the activities mentioned above and more. From its birth on the day of Pentecost throughout the past 2,000 years of church history, Christians have gathered together as the local church in honor to God, and in imitation of the apostolic church described in the New Testament.

Answer the following questions with your Bible:

1. In Acts 2:42, what four things did Christians in the first local church engage in regularly?
2. The "apostles' doctrine" consists of the Old and New Testament Scriptures in the Bible. How do you personally receive the apostles' teaching today? How does it make you feel to know that you get to receive the teaching of Paul, Peter, and the other apostles as you listen to your pastor(s) teach the Bible in the context of your local church?
3. "Fellowship" has the idea of partnership and deep friendship. The reason people long for community and friendship is because they were designed for relationship. God has given the local church to Christians as a solution to our need for meaningful relationships built on the most important things in life. In what practical ways can you engage in fellowship at your local church?
4. "The breaking of bread" is what you might think of as celebrating communion. The early church held dinners, and at the end they would remember Jesus' death on the cross for their sins. They would eat bread symbolizing the body of Jesus and drink of the cup symbolizing His blood that was shed for humanity. Celebrating communion is a practical way to keep the gospel central to the life of the local church. Every time Christians gather to celebrate communion, they remember and believe the gospel afresh, and they proclaim the gospel together. What opportunities to celebrate communion are available to you in your local church?
5. "Prayer" is simply talking to God. Even though you cannot see God face to face in this life, you can talk to Him. The early church engaged in personal and congregational prayer as a means of spiritual growth and worship. God loves the prayers of His people. He wants to use your prayers to accomplish His will in your life, others' lives, and the world. How does it make you feel to know that God wants to listen to you talk about your joys, pains, concerns, and interests every day?

## Section 4

The presence and work of the Holy Spirit is crucial to the individual and congregational life of Christians. The first local churches regularly experienced miracles and expressions of the Holy Spirit's power in their midst (Acts 2:43). The Holy Spirit desires to bless God's people and transform their lives. He desires to use them to establish the kingdom of God on the earth and help others understand and believe the gospel. He wants to empower them to become world-changers and introduce people to Jesus.

The following are the basics on how the Holy Spirit operates in the individual lives of Christians and the local church:

### The Holy Spirit's Relationship to Believers

#### The Conviction and Drawing of the Holy Spirit

Before a person believes in Jesus, the Holy Spirit is with them seeking to lead them to faith in the gospel.

John 14:17: "The Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you."

John 16:8-11: "And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: 9 of sin, because they do not believe in Me; 10 of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; 11 of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged." (NKJV)

### The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit

After a person believes in the gospel and becomes born again, the Holy Spirit actually comes to live inside them. The reason He comes to live in (or indwell) believers is to transform them. As He lives in them, He transforms their values, emotions, thinking, will, and actions, conforming them to Jesus'.

Ephesians 1:13-14: "In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, 14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory."

1 Corinthians 6:19: "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?" (NKJV)

### The Empowerment of the Holy Spirit

Every day, those who are born again through faith in the gospel have an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to empower them. In the book of Acts, the empowerment of the Holy Spirit is both referred to as being "filled with the Spirit" and being "baptized with the Holy Spirit."

Acts 1:8: "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

Acts 4:31: "And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness." (NKJV)

### The Gifts of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit imparts spiritual gifts to every single person who becomes born again through faith in the gospel. Spiritual gifts are spiritual abilities that God gives to individual Christians, which enable them to perform roles of service He has planned for them. Your spiritual gifts make you a valuable part of God's church. Without the gifts God has given to you, other Christians in your life will miss out on good things that God wants to do through you. The same is true for you; if you do not allow yourself to be in relationship with other Christians, you will miss out on the good things God wants to do through them in your life as they operate in their spiritual gifts.

Read 1 Corinthians 12. Answer the following questions with your Bible:

1. According to verse 7, which Christians have spiritual gifts?
2. According to verses 4-6, should you always expect the kinds, uses, and functions of spiritual gifts to look the same in your life as it does in the lives of other Christians?
3. In verse 11, for what purpose does the Holy Spirit give gifts to individual Christians?

#### How to Receive the Gifts and Empowerment of the Holy Spirit

Receiving the power and the gifts of the Holy Spirit is far less complicated than Christians sometimes assume. Though it may sound overly simplistic or too good to be true, all you have to do to receive the gifts and empowerment of the Spirit is to believe in them, and ask for them.

Luke 11:13: "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"

Acts 4:31: "And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness."

1 Corinthians 14:1: "Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts" (NKJV)

#### Application

1. Have you ever prayed to receive the empowerment and gifts of the Holy Spirit? Take time to do that now. If you are completing this study guide as a group, consider laying hands on one another and praying for the Holy Spirit to pour out new gifts and power in your life.
  
2. Are you uncomfortable with asking for the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit? God does not condemn you for that. He loves you. He wants you to be honest with Him about your hesitation and questions. Spend time prayerfully reading 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and Ephesians 4. Ask God to show you what He has for you, and to pour out anything that would help you live like Jesus, and help others know Him.

## Section 5 - The Love of God

While the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit are necessary and beneficial, it is possible for Christians and entire churches to have a misguided focus on them. It is important to remember that the greatest mark of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit is the love of God.

Hear what the apostle Paul wrote to a church that was booming with spiritual gifts: “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. 2 And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.” (1 Corinthians 13:1-3 NKJV)

Luke, a historian and companion of the apostle Paul, described the first local church as “having favor with all the people” (Acts 2:47). This was not because they compromised the teaching of Jesus but because they lived out genuine love for each other and their community.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 and answer the following questions:

1. If you inserted your name in place of the word “love” in these verses, would they accurately describe you?
2. If you inserted the name of your local church or denomination in place of the word “love,” would these verses accurately describe them?
3. What aspects of this definition of biblical love can you ask the Holy Spirit to transform in your life? How about the life of your church or denomination? Take some time to pray for the Holy Spirit to transform those areas now.

### Summary

The church consists of all people who have become born again through faith in the biblical gospel. It exists in three different aspects: the universal church, the regional church, and the local church.

A healthy local church gathers regularly for biblical teaching, fellowship, communion, and prayer. It practices baptism and depends on the gifts and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Individual Christians in local churches have the opportunity to serve one another through the use of spiritual gifts in the context of meaningful relationships. They have the opportunity to serve and bless their city and community through loving acts of service. As the local church engages in the above, Christians’ lives are transformed, people meet Jesus, cities are renewed, and Jesus is honored in and through the local church.

### IMPACT POINTS

Write down the insights from this chapter that most impacted you and discuss them with your small group.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

### ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

Write down any questions you have about the content of this chapter, or additional questions you thought of as you went through it. Discuss these questions in your small group.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

### GOING DEEPER

Vintage Church by Mark Driscoll and The Gifts of the Holy Spirit by Brian Brodersen