

Systematic Theology #5: The Church

INTRODUCTION

1. The word church has more than one meaning in Scripture.

- It can refer to the entire community of genuine believers in all places and at all times. This is often called the universal church.

Ephesians 1:22–23 (ESV) And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

- It can refer to all believers in a particular geographical area. This may be a region or a city (such as Galatia or Corinth).
- It can refer to a specific community of believers who regularly gather together. This is often called the local church.

1 Corinthians 16:19 (ESV) Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord.

2. Historically, Christians have made a distinction between the “visible” and “invisible” Church.

The Visible Church	The Invisible Church
Membership: saved and lost	Membership: saved only
Only the currently living	Both dead and living in Christ
Many local churches	Only one universal church
Differing denominations	One body

A person may be genuinely saved and not be a part of a local church. Nevertheless, the Bible is clear that it is God’s will for every Christian to be a part of a local church; e.g., Hebrews 10:24-25.

A person may be a part of a local church, but not be genuinely saved. Jesus warned not everyone who calls him Lord will be saved (Matthew 7:21-23).

SOME BIBLICAL METAPHORS FOR THE CHURCH

1. The Church is compared to a bride.

Ephesians 5:32 (ESV) This mystery (of the two becoming one flesh) is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

2. The Church is compared to a family.

Galatians 6:10 (ESV) [L]et us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household (or, family) of faith.

3. The Church is compared to a temple.

Ephesians 2:21–22 (ESV) [I]n him the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

4. The Church is compared to a human body.

1 Corinthians 12:27 (ESV) Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

SOME BIBLICAL PURPOSES OF THE CHURCH

1. The church exists to worship and glorify God.

Ephesians 3:21 (ESV) [T]o (God) be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

2. The church is called to join believers together into spiritual family.

Romans 12:10 (ESV) Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.

3. The church is called to equip and empower believers for ministry.

Ephesians 4:11–12 (ESV) And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...

4. The church is commissioned to bring God's Good News to the world and make disciples.

Matthew 28:18-19 (ESV) *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...”*

5. The church is called to uphold the truth and serve as a prophetic voice to the world.

Acts 2:36 (ESV) *“Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”*

THE BIBLICAL SACRAMENTS OF THE CHURCH

1. A biblical sacrament is a divinely ordained symbolic act that is also a divinely ordained means for ministering spiritual blessings. Sacraments function both as a declaration of faith and as a means of grace.
2. Jesus instituted two rites for his followers: water baptism, which is a rite of initiation, and communion, which is a rite of remembrance.
 - Both of these rites have Old Testament counterparts that were practiced by Israel. Circumcision was a rite of initiation for Israel, while the annual Passover feast was a rite of remembrance.
3. Water baptism is commanded by Jesus (Mt 28:19) and by his apostles (Ac 2:38-41; 10:47-48).

Water baptism is not a pre-requisite for justification, but is part of God’s overall process of salvation.

- Numerous spiritual benefits are associated with baptism.
 - We identify with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus (Ro 6:1-16) and “put on Christ” (Gal 3:28).
 - We experience forgiveness and the washing away of sins (Ac 2:38; 22:16).
 - We experience a circumcision of the heart (Col 2:11-12).
- Anyone being baptized should be characterized by the following:
 - They have repented and believed the Gospel (Ac 2:38; 8:12).

This precludes infant baptism. None are recorded in the New Testament.

- They are calling on the name of Jesus (Ac 22:16) and are making a pledge of a good conscience toward God (1 Pe 3:21).

People in Acts were baptized as soon as possible after they first repented and believed the Gospel.

No Christian needs to be baptized a second time, even if they backslide and then return to the Lord. No one was baptized a second time in the New Testament if they were a genuine repentant believer at the time they were first baptized.

- Water baptism should be done by immersion, if possible.
 - The Greek word translated “baptism” fundamentally means to immerse.
 - Descriptions of baptisms in Scripture speak of people coming up out of the water (Mk 1:10; Ac 8:36-39).
 - Identification with Christ’s burial suggests immersion even as Christ was surrounded by earth in the tomb (Ro 6:3-4).

The early church practiced baptism by immersion, but allowed for “sprinkling” if there was a scarcity of water (Didache, VII).

4. Communion was instituted by Jesus and practiced by the early church (Mt 26:26-29; Mk 14:22-25; Lk 22:19-20; 1 Co 11:23-26ff).

- Communion is also known as the Lord’s Supper or Table (1 Co 11:20; 10:21) and as the Eucharist (which means to give thanks).
- In communion we proclaim the Lord’s sacrificial death.

1 Corinthians 11:26 (ESV) *For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.*

- The bread represents his body broken for our punishment; the wine, his blood spilled for our condemnation (1 Co 11:23-25).

By implication, communion is a symbol of hope because of Jesus's ensuing resurrection, ascension, and promise to return one day in glory.

- Communion is a participation in the blood and body of Christ.

1 Corinthians 10:16 (ESV) *The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?*

The Greek word translated “participation” means an association involving close mutual relations and involvement. By faith we are genuinely encountering Christ's presence in communion.

- Communion is meant to underscore the unity of the Body of Christ (1 Co 10:17; 11:17-22).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is it important to be an active part of a local church?
2. How are you personally engaged in fulfilling the biblical purposes of the church?
3. Why is important for believers to be baptized? Why is it also important for believers to receive communion?

HOMEWORK

1. Many affirm the necessary distinctions of a true local church are:
 - The worship of God, including the practice of the sacraments
 - The preaching of the Word of God, especially the Gospel
 - The discipline of unrepentant people for major sin or major doctrinal error

Write out why you think each of these is important.