

12: What Is The Church?

The Church is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, in the sense that he rules it. Indeed Christ rules all things for the good of the Church.

“And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church.”

Ephesians 1:22

Because Jesus rules the Church those who belong to it must be subject to His Word in everything.

The Church is also described as the house and family of God, the temple of God, the bride of Christ and the body of Christ. These and the many other terms used to describe the church help us to understand what it is.

“...the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.”

1 Timothy 3:15

“For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people.””

2 Corinthians 6:16

“He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”

Ephesians 1:22 – 23

Question: What other terms can you think of that are used to describe the church? What do they teach us about it? What is meant by the phrase, “the fullness of Him who fills all in all?”

The Bible teaches us that there is only one church;

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.”

Ephesians 4:4 – 6

It tells us that the church is holy:

“But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light.”

1 Peter 2:9

And it tells us that it is a catholic church:

“After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes.”

Revelation 7:9

The Church's Task

God has given the Church a task to perform and has equipped her to do it. He has given the Church responsibility to proclaim His Word, administer the sacraments and exercise discipline. These three things are said to be the marks of a true church.

"All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 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, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Matthew 28:18 – 20

The Church's Head

The Head of the church is Jesus Christ. He is not only head of the invisible Church, but also of the visible church on earth. He has appointed elders to govern the visible church.

Although you will not find the terms in the Bible, some people find it helps them understand the church if they talk about the visible church and the invisible church.

The Invisible Church

The church, which is made up of everyone who has been saved from the time of Adam and all those who will be saved before Christ's return, can be called invisible in the sense that no one has ever seen all of it and no one knows for sure who belongs to it and who does not. We may see evidence that a person is "in Christ" and belongs to the church but we can get it wrong and we certainly cannot look into either the past or the future to see who belongs to Him. God alone knows all those who are His.

The Visible Church

The visible church is the church we can see. It is made up of those who profess to be saved and within it we can see the invisible church in action.

Church Membership

In the Old Testament membership of the visible church was restricted in the main to Israel, but since the coming of Christ it is made up of people from all nations and backgrounds.

Membership of the visible Church is for everyone who professes to have saving faith. There is always the possibility that a profession may not be genuine, but there should at least be nothing in a church member's outward life that raises serious doubts about the reality of his faith: his profession must be credible. When someone applies for membership of a local church that is all that can be required. We cannot add conditions of our own. If, after joining a church, someone denies the profession he has made by his words or actions he ought to be disciplined and, if necessary, removed from membership of the church.

It is possible to be a believer, and not belong to a local congregation where none exists but normally those who are converted will identify with a local church. Not to do so would be to disobey Scripture and ignore something God has appointed for Christian growth.

Question: The Bible does not appear to distinguish between becoming a Christian and making a formal application to be a member of a particular local church. Where do you think the idea comes from? Is it necessary?

Key Words

Catholic Including or concerned with all people. The catholic church is the one true church embracing people from every nation and background.

Memory Verses

- ☺ Ephesians 1:22 – 23
- ☺ 1 Timothy 3:15
- ☺ Ephesians 4:4 – 6