

What is the Church?

Initial statements

EPHESIANS 5:25a – Husbands love your wives just as *Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*

The church consists of all those who have responded to Christ's sacrifice throughout history.

MATTHEW 16:18b – *I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.*

The church both belongs to and is built by Christ.

ACTS 2:47b – *And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

The act of being saved results in being added (by the Lord) to the church.

What is the *ekklēsia*?

What do the following scriptures all have in common?

ACTS 7:38a - He was in the assembly in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai

HEBREWS 2:12 – He says, “I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises.”

EPHESIANS 5:23a – For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church

All three underlined words are the same word, *ekklēsia*. It literally means “assembly”.

Questions for us to reflect on

If the word used for church literally means assembly:

- Can you belong to a church but not attend?
- What about people who physically can't come? (e.g. when Paul was in prison in Rome, was he part of the church in Rome?)
- People may not make every meeting. Is there a time limit when non-assembly results in not being part of a church? What other criteria might we use to determine being part of a church?
- Does attending something virtually count as assembling?

Invisible, yet visible

2 TIMOTHY 2:19a – *Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: “The Lord knows those who are his,”*

We cannot see people's hearts or strictly know the state of their salvation. This is reserved for God. As such, if the church consists of those who have responded to Christ's sacrifice throughout history, we cannot truly see the church.

The church as God sees it is invisible.

However, consider the following:

1 CORINTHIANS 1:2a – *To the church of God in Corinth*, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ

1 THESSALONIANS 1:1a – Paul, Silas and Timothy, *to the church of the Thessalonians* in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

PHILEMON 2 – to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow-soldier and to *the church that meets in your home*

There is clearly a visible church that is recognisable. Paul wrote to churches (people who assemble!), in places as a coherent group.

The church as Christians see it is visible.

With both an invisible church (as God sees it) and a visible church (as Christians see it) we should consider the following:

2 TIMOTHY 2:16-18 – Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and destroy the faith of some.

The visible church can contain ungodly people who have wandered away from the truth. Therefore the visible church does not exactly correlate to the invisible!

ACTS 20:29-30 – I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. *Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.*

Sometimes the focus is on the world outside and making sure we are safe from it, but we must be wary of the danger inside the visible church! Historically, when churches split, it's not caused by external forces.

MATTHEW 7:15-16 – “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognise them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?”

With discernment, you can sometimes spot the ungodly hiding among the visible church.

More questions for us to reflect on

- What dangers arise if we conflate the visible and invisible church?
- Deeply reflect on the wolves and sheep metaphor in two of the passages above. What lessons does this metaphor teach? (If it helps, think about the story of Little Red Riding Hood!)
- Should anything be done to try and more closely align the invisible church with the visible? How would you go about doing this?

Local and Universal

The church exists on many levels.

ROMANS 16:5a – Greet also the *church that meets at their house.*

1 CORINTHIANS 16:19b – Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the *church that meets at their house*.

An assembly in a house can be a church.

2 CORINTHIANS 1:1b – *To the church of God in Corinth*, together with all the saints throughout Achaia

1 THESSALONIANS 1:1b – To the *church of the Thessalonians*

An assembly in a city can be a church.

ACTS 9:31a – Then the *church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria* enjoyed a time of peace.

A large region can be considered a church (note the singular “church”).

EPHESIANS 5:25a – Husbands, love your wives, just as *Christ loved the church*

Again, note the singular “church” that Christ died for. The church exists at a universal level.

Final questions for us to reflect on

- Is the church one or many?
- Is there a correlation between local and universal versus visible and invisible?
- When you speak of “the church”, what do you mean?
- Have all these scriptures we’ve looked at made you think of “the church” differently? If so, how?