

## CHAPTER 6 THE COMMUNITY OF CHRISTIANS

### *The Church*

I remember many occasions as a child when our little church assisted members in need of food or finances. The adults gave a special offering or brought canned goods. As an adult, when my mom died, her church inundated our family with food and other kinds of support. Truly, the church is a group of people whom Christ has forgiven and unified to serve one another so God might be glorified.

The Bible often refers to the church as the body and bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:22-33). The church is a community of Christians not a building. Christians do not *go to church*--they *are* the church. Nevertheless, they need to participate in weekly worship at a local meeting place with their particular assembly, whether it be in a traditional church building or someone's home, or out in a field, etc.

Acts 2 records the beginning of the church.<sup>75</sup> The word "church" refers to those believers assembled together to worship God through Christ.

The church has at least two dimensions. First, the word *church* can refer to the universal church, which refers to all people in the world who follow Christ. In Matthew 16:18, Christ spoke of the universal church before its inception.

Second, *church* can refer to the local church. Of all the times the Bible mentions the word "church," the majority of passages refer to the local church. The local church is a group of baptized believers who meet to worship God, fellowship with one another, see themselves as a church, and often partake of the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:44-47). This group also submits to their leadership and serves each other. Furthermore, these believers seek to tell others about Christ so unbelievers can know Jesus, become a faithful part of the local church, and grow in their faith.

### *Elders and Deacons*

When believers assemble together they need biblical leadership. Various churches and denominations use different titles for their leaders.<sup>76</sup> "Elder" is the more appropriate biblical term, although many churches don't use this exact word.<sup>77</sup> Elders

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<sup>75</sup> Some scholars contend that the church began in the Old Testament, and others believe that it began when Jesus called and appointed His 12 disciples as recorded in Matthew 10:1-4; Mark 3:14-19; Luke 6:13-16.

<sup>76</sup> The New Testament often uses various words which describe different titles and facets of the same ministry: "pastor" or "shepherd," and "bishop" or "overseer," and "elder" or "presbyter" (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9; 1 Peter 5:1-9).

<sup>77</sup> Some people use "elder" synonymously with "pastor." Even though a pastor is a type of elder, every elder is not necessarily a pastor (Romans 12:8; Ephesians 4:11).

serve as the basic leaders in the local church.<sup>78</sup> They hold the responsibility of ruling, teaching and preaching.<sup>79</sup> Even though a pastor is a type of elder, not every elder is necessarily a pastor (Romans 12:8; Ephesians 4:11). Pray for your pastors and elders, because they will give an account to God for what they do in their leadership positions.<sup>80</sup> You must also submit to their leadership, for Hebrews 13:17 says, "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you."

Servants fulfill a vital role in each congregation. Deacons are the servants each church designates (Acts 6).<sup>81</sup> Every person in the church is a servant, but churches select deacons as specific servants to assist the congregation. By example, they lead the rest of the congregation into service. First Timothy 3:8-13 describes their qualifications and responsibilities.

### *Water Baptism and the Lord's Supper*

Part of the local church's distinction from other organizations is that it often publicly fulfills two main functions called "ordinances": water baptism and the Lord's Supper.<sup>82</sup> Water baptism is the first obedient step for all new believers.<sup>83</sup> The New

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<sup>78</sup> Notice that Scripture often cites a plurality of elders (Acts 14:23; 20:28; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:5; James 5:14).

<sup>79</sup> See 1 Timothy 3:4-5; 5:17; 2 Timothy 4:2; 1 Peter 5:3; and 1 Thessalonians 5:12. While major decisions in a church may call for some congregational input (Matthew 18:17; Acts 6:3-5; 15:22; and possibly 1 Corinthians 16:3), God has still given elders the decision-making power.

<sup>80</sup> See 1 Corinthians 16:16; 1 Timothy 5:1; Hebrews 13:7.

<sup>81</sup> Unfortunately, some Christians confuse deacons with elders, ascribing to deacons ruling authority in the church. But this is typically not the case in Scripture. Some have used the case of the deacon Philip in Acts 8:26-40 to say that he preached and therefore also functioned in a "pastoral" capacity. But, all this shows is that Philip also ministered to nonbelievers by sharing Christ. Evangelism is something we should all do, whether a pastor or not. But the usual scriptural example of a deacon is that he was a servant, and an example for others to follow in servanthood, not an authoritative figure making leadership-type decisions.

<sup>82</sup> These are called "ordinances" because Christ *ordained*, or instructed, the local church to perform them. These ordinances symbolize and remind believers of their relationship with Christ.

<sup>83</sup> Do not confuse *water baptism* with the *baptism by the Spirit*. Concerning water baptism, see Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38, 41; 8:36, 38; 10:48; 22:16.

Testament knows nothing of an un-baptized believer. Although believers frequently participate in the Lord's Supper, they receive baptism only once.<sup>84</sup>

What purpose does water baptism serve? First, consider what baptism is *not*. Water baptism has no ability to forgive sin, as some groups have wrongly taught.<sup>85</sup> If water baptism had the power to forgive sin, it seems odd that Jesus, the Savior, never baptized anyone (John 4:1-2). Furthermore, His death was unnecessary if water baptism possesses the capacity to take away sin or to contribute to His atoning work. In addition, the Apostle Paul did not think water baptism had saving power (1 Corinthians 1:15-17). But since Christ commanded it (Matthew 28:19), water baptism isn't something to take lightly or delay.

The Bible speaks of the importance of making a public commitment to Christ. Romans 10:9-10 says, "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved." Baptism is the primary way to publicly acknowledge that you are now a follower of Christ.

Only those who follow Christ should undergo baptism. Scripture never suggests that infants or any other unbelievers be baptized. Water baptism publicly identifies Christians with Christ and the church (Acts 2:38). It portrays Christ's death and resurrection. Water baptism symbolizes the spiritual death of the person before salvation and represents the spiritual resurrection of the person after salvation.<sup>86</sup> It also pictures the

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<sup>84</sup> The Lord's Supper represents fellowship with Christ and the local church. Whereas water baptism represents initiation into a relationship with Christ and the local church. See chart later on in this same section.

<sup>85</sup> Ephesians 1:7; 1 Peter 3:21; 1 John 1:7. Some believe Mark 16:16 asserts that water baptism is necessary for one's salvation, but the latter part of this verse shows that the emphasis is on belief. Acts 2:38 and 22:16 also seem to indicate that water baptism is necessary for salvation. Suffice it to say that water baptism is an expression of faith, thus linked closely with repentance and salvation. Although they are linked together conceptually, water baptism is not a part of one's salvation in that it has power to save. I would say, however, that anyone calling himself a believer who has purposefully not been baptized has no reason to call himself a Christian. But if one has professed faith in Christ and hasn't had an opportunity to be baptized, but intends on it, will go to heaven if he dies before being baptized. For further study on Acts 2:38, see I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988 reprint), 80-81, and concerning Acts 22:16, see G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976 reprint), 102-103.

<sup>86</sup> Consult Romans 6:3-4 and Colossians 2:12. I'm not contending that these two passages refer to water baptism, but that they refer to spiritual baptism (i.e., baptism by the Spirit) which is pictured by water baptism.

believer's physical resurrection in the future. All of this symbolism seems pointless if the person being baptized doesn't know about it, like in the case of infants.

The Bible teaches immersion--submerging under water--as the only method of baptism. Since it symbolizes death and resurrection, it seems consistent with the imagery that the person(s) baptized be submerged, as being buried.<sup>87</sup>

Not only should you be baptized, but you get to (and should) participate in the Lord's Supper.<sup>88</sup> The Lord's Supper refers to the last meal, which consisted of bread and wine, Jesus ate with his 12 disciples. The bread and wine represent Christ's blood and body.<sup>89</sup> How often should a church participate in the Lord's Supper? The Bible lists no details as to how often believers should receive the Lord's Supper, but when they do receive it, they should take time to reflect on Christ's death.<sup>90</sup>

	<u>Baptism</u>	<u>Lord's Supper</u>
1. Related to:	Water (in the Jordan River)	Blood (on Mount Calvary)
2. Chiefly:	Individual	Corporate
3. As a rite is:	Non-repeatable	Repeated
4. Part of:	Initiation into the faith	Continuance in faith
5. Means of:	Entry into a church	Renewal in devotion <sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> For further evidence for this method, read Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:9-10; Luke 3:16; John 3:23; Acts 8:39.

<sup>88</sup> Refer to Matthew 26:26-30; Mark 14:22-26; Luke 22:19-20. For further details about the Lord's Supper, see 1 Corinthians 10:14-17 and chapter 11. It is not to be done haphazardly or abusively (1 Corinthians 11:28-30). Furthermore, Jesus calls this Supper the "new covenant" or promise (Matthew 26:28). According to Matthew 26:28, Jesus appears to say that His approaching death involves at least partial fulfillment of the new covenant spoken of in Jeremiah 31:31-34.

<sup>89</sup> Many churches use grape juice in the place of wine simply because of the way people abuse alcohol in modern times. Also, there are some who believe that the bread and wine actually become the blood and body of Christ when the Lord's Supper is administered (1 Corinthians 10:16). Most likely, the first disciples understood Christ to be saying that the bread and wine only represented His blood and body; it commemorated His death (1 Corinthians 11:26).

<sup>90</sup> But I would challenge all churches that only offer the Lord's Supper once a quarter to consider the joy and blessing they're missing by not providing it more frequently. Without being too judgmental, I'm tempted to say that many churches don't understand the importance, beauty, horror, fellowship, tragedy, and joy of the Lord's Supper when they partake of it only once a quarter.

<sup>91</sup> Taken from Murray J. Harris' 1994 unpublished class notes in Pauline Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (now TIU) in Deerfield, Illinois.

Besides the Lord's Supper and water baptism, the church has numerous responsibilities. The church should primarily seek to spread the fame of Jesus Christ and teach people how to follow Him (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). The church also serves as a safe haven and a point of accountability for believers. It also has many other obligations--too many to name here.

#### *Accountability to the Local Church*

Many years ago I asked a Bible-college student where she worshipped. She replied that she attended chapel at school and did not feel obligated to worship otherwise. Unfortunately, many professing Christians exhibit a poor attitude toward the church. And who can deny the horrible things done in the name of Jesus?

But we should remember that the church is the bride of Christ: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the Word, and to present her to Himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (Ephesians 5:25-27). Christ is making His bride, the church, spotless because He loves her passionately and wants the best for her. To speak ill of the church is to speak ill of Christ's bride.

Do not forsake the assembling together (the church) of yourselves (Hebrews 10:25). Some say they can worship at home better than they can with other believers. Some people further declare, "I do not have to go to church to be a Christian."

This statement might be true technically but one cannot *grow* as a Christian while willfully disobeying Scripture.<sup>92</sup> A man does not have to live in the same house with his wife to be married, but his marriage will suffer if he lives elsewhere. Similarly, believers should regularly interact with each other in the context of a church.<sup>93</sup> As a wise preacher once said, "Eternal security is a community project." Christianity isn't an adventure we take by ourselves. The late priest Henri Nouwen wrote, "We cannot bring good news on our own. We are called to proclaim the gospel together, in community."<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> If willful, persistent sin continues, Scripture says that such a person isn't taking the steps needed to rid himself of that sin or else isn't a believer (1 John 3:6, 10). In other words, the habitual sin demonstrates the lack of true faith in that person's life. Refer to section entitled "Freedom and Limits" in chapter 8.

<sup>93</sup> God understands special cases, such as sickness, which hinder people from being a part of corporate worship. And when I say *church*, I don't mean a building, but rather a group of baptized believers united for the purpose of worshipping Christ, holding each other accountable, and partaking of the Lord's Supper.

<sup>94</sup> *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad, 1996 [1989]), 40.

Be faithful to your local congregation.<sup>95</sup> Worship consistently with your local group of believers and avoid skipping it because you do not feel like going. You might never worship with other believers if this is your criterion. While few would blame you for taking an occasional break, don't make it a habit. You need to fellowship with people who love Jesus. Not only does the local church provide love and support during good times, but it gives assistance through difficult times.

Also, your local fellowship should hold you accountable to obey God's Word. Even though Jesus loves sinners, Scripture commands the local church to exercise discipline upon its rebellious members (Matthew 18:15-20). The church cannot overlook blatant sin in its members because the local church is a gathering of holy people who follow Christ. While church offers many opportunities to fellowship, it's not a social club. I'm surprised at the blatant sins of adultery, abandonment, gossip, and other sins that Christians ignore in local congregations.

Christ hates sin and loves righteousness. Therefore, believers must also hate sin and love righteousness. The local church must love its members enough to help them grow spiritually, even if it means confronting them about sin (1 Corinthians 15:30).

Jesus gives the procedure for carrying out church discipline in Matthew 18:15-20. The first step is one-on-one confrontation to encourage the offender to repent. If that doesn't work, one or two other people should approach the sinning person. Finally, if that isn't effective, the confronter should notify the church of the person's rebellion. If the offender doesn't repent, the church must consider him a nonbeliever.

The local church disciplines rebellious members for the purpose of restoring them to proper fellowship with God and the church, not for spite or shame (2 Corinthians 2:6-11; Galatians 6:1-5).<sup>96</sup> Many Christians oppose this procedure, saying it lacks kindness and can result in a lawsuit, but Scripture still teaches discipline. Practicing compassionate church discipline helps the church body and the sinning member. A church can't be healthy and ignore this scriptural teaching.

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<sup>95</sup> Faithfulness to your church is a bit subjective because what you might call faithful, might not seem faithful in other's eyes. Most church members and leaders have their own concept of faithfulness. For many churches in the southern part of the U.S., there is a high expectation for members to show up at a church building three or more times a week. Any less, and one might be perceived as unfaithful to Christ and the church. Without getting too deep into a long debate, Scripture doesn't obligate us to worship with believers any certain number of times a week.

At the least, believers in the first century met once a week (1 Corinthians 16:2), at the most the same group congregated every day (Acts 2:46). So, when I say be faithful to your church, I mean, be as faithful as you can be. Don't be a slacker, never showing up. But don't get trapped in a legalistic obligation ("If I don't attend this service, then I won't be a good Christian," or "If I attend this service, then that proves I am a good Christian").

<sup>96</sup> Some reasons for discipline, as well as how to respond to those under discipline, are given in Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 1 Timothy 1:20; Titus 3:10; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15.

What kind of local fellowship should you join? Though no perfect churches exist, some churches follow the biblical pattern more than others. Join a church that respects, preaches, and practices *all* of the Bible.

A local church should love God and help believers grow spiritually. Join a church that practices prayer, Bible study, church discipline, grace, evangelism, missions, and joy-filled worship. The church you unite with should be spreading the gospel to the community and world, and should be helping the hurting and hungry.

Get involved with God's people and participate in as many things as you can realistically manage. However, be cautious not to overload yourself.

### *Accountability to Individuals of the Church*

Even though you are responsible to the church and supremely to God for your thoughts and actions (Psalm 51:4), you are also responsible to fellow believers for certain things. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 tells of the important role others play in your life. Take some time to study that passage. Then find a strong, growing Christian of the same sex and keep each other accountable.<sup>97</sup>

Meet frequently with your accountability partner to share personal struggles and victories. Be honest and confidential with one another, encouraging each other along life's way (Proverbs 17:17). "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17).

During your accountability time, avoid condemnation, but don't fear lovingly correcting weaker areas of the other's life (Proverbs 28:23). "Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses" (Proverbs 27:5-6). But a word of caution is in order when it comes to confronting others about their sin. Approach people with humility and keep in mind what Matthew 7:3-4 says, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?"

### *The Church and Finances*

The Old Testament often spoke of a *tithe*.<sup>98</sup> God required all Israelites to regularly give a tithe (10 percent of their income) to help fund the tabernacle (Deuteronomy 14:22; 2 Chronicles 31:5-7).

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<sup>97</sup> I'm encouraging believers to only have accountability relationships with members of the same sex because of the temptation opposite-sex relationships hold. A married couple should undoubtedly make their spouse their closest relationship, but many times married people need other close friends of the same sex to confide in. Two married people should avoid, at all times, sharing their struggles, and other such intimacies, with members of the opposite sex other than their own spouse. Furthermore, those who are single should avoid close intimate interaction with a married person of the opposite sex.

<sup>98</sup> Genesis 14:20; Leviticus 27:30, 32; Numbers 18:26; Deuteronomy 12:17; 2 Chronicles 31:5; Nehemiah 10:38.

The New Testament talks about money in several passages. The Apostle Paul speaks of giving funds to further the ministry of the local church in 2 Corinthians 8-9 and Philippians 4:12-19.

No New Testament rule says you have to give *10 percent* of your gross income to the local church. Giving at least 10 percent, however, seems to work well as a reminder that God owns all of your finances, not just 10 percent.<sup>99</sup>

Give to the local church, with a cheerful heart, as the Lord has given to you. And remember, you're free to give well above 10 percent (1 Corinthians 16:2). "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7).

### *The Church and Cults*

In short, a *cult* is a religious sect or group that teaches something contrary to the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. A few popular cults are the Mormons (Latter Day Saints), Jehovah's Witnesses, the Moonies, and Christian Scientists. Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism are world religions and are not considered cults, but they also teach doctrines contrary to the New Testament.

The best way to recognize a counterfeit is to be familiar with the original. If you study the Word, pray, and worship with other Christians assembled as the local church, you will recognize false teachings.

In 1 John 4:1, the Bible tells believers to "test the spirits." This means believers should scrutinize all teachings to discern whether such teachings align with the Bible. Don't accept everything you hear. In fact, don't accept what I say without measuring it against God's Word. Read the Bible for yourself to discover its teachings (Acts 17:11).

Don't buy, accept, or read material from cults or other false teachers. In 2 John 10-11, the Apostle warns believers not to even let such people into their houses. At the very least, this meant that they should not encourage or enable false teachers to spread unbiblical teaching.

One day you might be able to converse with cult members. However, you must be a strong, mature believer who thoroughly knows God's Word. Without an in-depth knowledge of God's Word, you will find Satan's forces overpowering.

### *Summary*

The church is the bride of Christ, a group of believers who worship together, fellowship with one another, give their finances to extend the family of God and to promote the fame of Christ by proclaiming the gospel. Local churches administer water baptism and the Lord's Supper. These churches function with appointed leaders and servants. Local churches help believers grow in their faith; sometimes discipline is the only way to achieve spiritual growth. The local church provides accountability for the community of believers. A person must be careful to get involved with a doctrinally sound church, not a cult.

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<sup>99</sup> See Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:41-42; Acts 24:17; 2 Corinthians 16:1-4; 1 Timothy 6:6-19.

### ***Assignments***

1. Memorize Hebrews 10:25, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching."
2. If you have not yet found a church home (i.e., the assembly of believers with whom you faithfully worship), do so as soon as possible. Worship with a local church sometime within the next seven days. Take notes on the sermon. After returning home, record what you liked and disliked about the church.
3. During the following two weeks, find a spiritually maturing Christian of the same sex and start meeting to hold each other accountable. It could actually take longer than two weeks to find someone you trust enough to share your soul with, but at least start trying to pinpoint a prospective accountability partner in the next couple of weeks.

### ***Discussion Questions***

1. What is the biblical title(s) of a designated church leader?
2. What is the biblical title of a designated church servant?
3. What two ordinances do the local church administer?
4. Which passage in Matthew discusses church discipline?
5. Is a church still a church if it doesn't meet in an official church building?

***Answers to Chapter 6 Discussion Questions***

1. What is the biblical title(s) of a designated church leader? *An elder, bishop, shepherd, pastor, overseer, or presbyter.*
2. What is the biblical title of a designated church servant? *A deacon.*
3. What two ordinances do the local church administer? *Water baptism and the Lord's Supper.*
4. Which passage in Matthew discusses church discipline? *Matthew 18:15-20.*
5. Is a church still a church if it doesn't meet in an official church building? *Yes. Some Christians think that unless believers meet in a traditional church building then that group isn't a church body. But a church is made up of believers and has nothing to do with a building.*