



Lesson 1: Welcome to What? Understanding What a Church Is

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Every year Barna Research group does a “State of the Church.” In the 2016 edition the report states “Americans are attending church less, and more people are experiencing and practicing their faith outside of its four walls. Millennials in particular are coming of age at a time of great skepticism and cynicism toward institutions—particularly the church.”¹ The number one reason Millennials don’t attend church, according to another study, was “I find God elsewhere.”² We live in a time when there is a declining interest in church, a time where many think they can have a relationship with God but not be involved in a church. But is this accurate? And what does God’s Word have to say about faith and church?

In this first lesson we will seek to answer two questions. First, “What is a church?” By this we mean that we will attempt to give a biblical understanding of what we mean when we say the word “church.” The second question is “How does God feel about church?” and will examine passages that show us what church means to God.

¹ <https://www.barna.com/research/state-church-2016/>

² <https://www.barna.com/research/what-millennials-want-when-they-visit-church/>

What Is a Church?

The Common Understanding of a Church

Typically, when people say the word “church” they mean one of three things:

1. **A building** – “What a beautiful church!”
2. **A meeting** – “How was church today?”
3. **A group** – “I joined a new church.”

The Greek Understanding of a Church³

Since the New Testament was written in Greek, we need to first ask what the Greek word (*ekklesia*) meant before Christ first used it in Matthew 16, since that will give us an idea of what the word meant to his disciples.

The Greeks used the word originally to refer to a meeting of people who had been called out for a specific purpose by a city crier. Eventually, though, it came to mean a meeting of people who regularly assembled without being gathered by a city crier. For example, in Athens citizens would gather to vote on matters of business. Eventually, it came to be used for any gathering of people, for any reason. This is seen in that it the same word is used in the NT for both an unlawful mob (Acts 19:32), yet also for the lawful assemblies (Acts 19:39) in the same passage.

To summarize, the Greeks usually used the word for groups of people who came together for a specific purpose, usually to conduct business.

³ Robert Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1972), 12-13.

The Old Testament Understanding of a Church

Shortly before Christ was born, the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek, a project called the Septuagint (abbreviated LXX). This was the Bible that many Jews used and that the apostles quoted from, and helps us a great deal in seeing where concepts overlap from the Old and New Testament. Two Hebrew words are of interest.

1. ***Qahal*** – “refers to a summons of assembly and the act of assembling. It is not so much a specification of the members of the assembly as a designation of the occurrence of meeting.”⁴ In other words, this word focuses on the assembling (act) and not the assembly (people). Word most frequently translated with *ekklesia*.
2. ***‘Edah*** – refers to the people themselves, the congregation. Often used specifically of Israel. This might be what we would typically think of as a “church,” but surprisingly the word *ekklesia* is never used. Rather, the Septuagint translators used the Greek word *synagogue*.

What does this mean? First, the idea of a special group of God’s people is a concept familiar to the Old Testament. But when selecting a word to describe what he intended to do in the future, Christ chose a word that carefully avoided any overlap between the Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New Testament. This strongly goes against the idea that Israel and the church are the same thing, a discussion we will return to later.

⁴ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology 2nd edition*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 1042.

The New Testament Understanding of a Church

When Christ said, “I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18) how much of this did his disciples understand? It’s hard to know for sure, but the study above tells us that from a secular standpoint, the word was often used to refer to groups meeting to conduct business, and from a religious standpoint, it was often used to refer to groups of people who had been summoned for a specific reason. As we go through the rest of our Bibles, we get a clearer picture of what a church is.

The local church

The first time we come across this word after Christ is Acts 5:11, where we are told that fear came upon the whole church after the incident with Ananias and Sapphira. This clearly refers to the people in the church and continues to do so through the rest of the book (Acts 8:1, 3; 9:31; 11:22, 26 etc.). There were no buildings at this time, and the way the word is used makes it clear that these are the people, even when they aren’t meeting (Acts 12:1, 14:27).

The word “church” is used with some flexibility, but always refers to a group or groups of people.

- Sometimes a church is described as the church of a region (Acts 9:31)
- Sometimes a church is described as the churches of a region (1 Thessalonians 2:14)
- Sometimes a church is described as the church of a city (1 Corinthians 1:2)
- Sometimes a church is described as the church in a house (1 Corinthians 16:19)

A church, then, is a group of people who assemble together for a specific purpose (more on that later!). The word refers to the people themselves, but also strongly implies the fact that they are meeting regularly.

The universal church

While a local church is the normal meaning of a word, there are some instances where the word “church” seems to include every believer (Ephesians 1:22, 3:10, 21; 5:23-25, 27, 29, 32). Every believer is a member of the universal church, but every member of the universal church should join and participate in a local church. This is because the things the universal church must do can only be done in the context of a local church.

How Do You Feel About Church?

Common Negative Attitudes about Church

Surprisingly, negative attitudes about the church exist both with the hyper-conservative and the contemporary crowd. Although not exhaustive, here are several factors that play into people from either side leaving:

- 1. Indifference** – Many people look at the church like they look at a gym membership. It’s really nice to have, but it’s a luxury. Sure, it can help you with your walk with God, but you can do all the stuff that you would do there at home if you just had the motivation. God has declared the church absolutely necessary for Christian growth, however. It is not optional! (Ephesians 4:11-16)
- 2. Suspicion** – As was noted in the introduction, many people are suspicious of all institutions, including the church. Stories

of abuse of leadership, distrust of authority in general, and a strong desire for independence can lead to Christians wanting to avoid church to play it safe. While there certainly can be problems with churches and church leadership, to avoid joining a church cuts one off from an immensely important aspect of their growth (Ephesians 4:11-12).

3. **Bitterness** – Some people have been hurt deeply by a church and don't want to go back to another church. Some have been burned more than once This happens for a number of different reasons, and ought to break our hearts every time. But as difficult as it might be, God commands participation in the local church, and God's commands must be obeyed even when hard (Hebrews 10:25).
4. **Defiance** – None of us enjoy being told what to do, but for some people the negative reaction is stronger. Some don't join a church or don't go to church because they don't want other people in their lives. Yet one of the reasons that God wants us in church is so that we can have spiritual leaders to watch over us (Hebrews 13:7).

God's Perspective on the Church

The question we must ask, then, is what does God think about the church? Fortunately, Scripture does not leave us to guess.

1. Christ gave himself for the church (Ephesians 5:25).
2. God is displaying his wisdom to the angels and demons through the church (Ephesians 3:10).
3. Christ is nourishing and cherishing his church (Ephesians 5:29).
4. God is building up the church to proclaim his excellencies (1 Peter 2:4-9).

God loves and delights in his church, warts and all. When trying to find a picture for his love for the church, he went to the highest form of human love available, marriage. God looked at a messed up church like Corinth, and yet still called it a church and even found something to commend them for (1 Corinthians 1:4-7). God saw some major problems with churches in Asia, but still called them churches, and offered all of them eternal rewards for faithful living (Revelation 2-3). Problems in the church ought not cause us to quit on a church.

God has chosen in this age to accomplish his work through the church. This should both excite and humble us, and it ought to create within us a desire to be a part of the church, because that is where God is working! While often broken and scarred by sin, God is nevertheless so excited about the church he uses it as a demonstration before supernatural beings to showcase his wisdom. Who are we to despise what God so highly cherishes?