

What Is The Church?

Over the years many people all around the world have asked the question, "What is the church?" It is the aim of this post to answer that question from the most relevant and authoritative of places, the Bible.

What is the church? That is what we must determine before we delve into the composition and manifestation of the church. The most basic meaning of the Greek word *ekklesia* which is translated "church" in the New Testament is "called out." This was a common term for a congregation or an assembly. It speaks of those who are called out for a specific purpose and was specifically used in this manner when Luke spoke of the Ephesian assembly (which was a tumultuous mob) in Acts 19:32&39 where it is translated "assembly." With this in mind we can conclude that the church is a group of people called out by God for His own purpose. In fact, Peter presents this fact to us very plainly saying, *"Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light."* (1 Peter 2:9)

The Old Testament Church

Though very little is said about the nation of Israel being part of God's church, the Bible does plainly present this fact to us. Stephen, speaking of Moses, said, *"This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us."* (Acts 7:38) Now, there are those who would wish to deny that this is indeed a reference to Israel as being a part of God's church. They would like to tell us that this is simply an assembly of people, and that is all that *ekklesia* is meant to convey to us in this context. The fact remains, however, that the word *ekklesia* occurs more than 100 times in the New Testament, and only in Acts 19:32&39 is it translated "assembly." In every other instance it is translated "church" or "churches." The only time it is used to speak of an assembly other than the Lord's church is in Acts 19:32&39. The typical usage of *ekklesia* in the New Testament is in reference to a called out group of people. That is precisely what the nation of Israel was. *"When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt."* (Hosea 11:1) Thus, we can be assured that, though it did not function in the same manner as a New Testament church, there was indeed a church in the Old Testament.

The New Testament Church

What about New Testament days? How do we see the church in the New Testament? First of all, the local church is certainly seen in the New Testament. The church is there with her leaders, discipline, and ordinances. At the same time the church is also seen as a larger body that is composed of all who know Jesus. It is this manifestation of the church that we want to consider.

When Jesus first mentions the church, He made a special promise to the church that actually demonstrates to us that the church is more than a local body alone. Jesus said: *"upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."* (Mt 16:18) KJV Why say that this applies to more than the local church? Because many local churches have died. This promise must pertain to some form of church other than the local church. Local church only proponents may say that this applies to the church in general. To do so, however, is to concede that there is some form of church beyond the local church. There is a church that shall never die, according to the promise of Jesus. What church is it?

The apostle Paul was one who understood the church to be general in nature and manifesting itself in local assemblies. It was he who told us *"by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to*

drink into one Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 12:13) Entrance into the body of Christ comes by the baptism with the Holy Spirit (See Galatians 3:26-29). The question then arises, into what body is one baptized? Historically, Baptists have required water baptism for local church membership. I think that is the right thing to do. If this is so, into what one body is the believer baptized into when baptized with the Holy Spirit?

Paul's language again shows us the general nature of the church when he said *“God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.” (1 Corinthians 12:28)* Having just told the Corinthian church that their local assembly was the body of Christ, he proceeds to tell them about the gifts that are given to the church. The first gift mentioned was apostles. Were the apostles given to the Corinthian church, or the church general which is composed of Holy Spirit baptized believers?

There's hardly another passage in which the church general can be seen more clearly than the following: *“He is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father. Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:14-22)* Paul states that the Jew and the Gentile have been made one. By the cross the Jews and Gentiles are reconciled into one body. There is no Gentile church or Jewish church. There is only the Christian church. There is no longer Israel as the only chosen of God. Gentiles are fellow heirs with believing Israel. We are of the same household as the believing Jew. Together the believing Jew and the believing Gentile are built into God's holy temple. By being reconciled to God, we are made into one body, this text tells us. God dwells in this church by the Holy Spirit. One thing that local church only advocates miss is the fact that the body of Christ is present in this passage, but water baptism is not. Neither will it serve any purpose to insist that it is implied. What is expressly stated is that the cross is what brings people into this one body. The body here is a body composed of the redeemed.

The church as the body of the redeemed is seen again in Paul's writings to the church at Ephesus. *“Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband.” (Ephesians 5:25-33)* How does the church become the church? By the cross of Christ. This same Paul said, *“Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.” (Acts 20:28)* For whom did Jesus die? He died for the church. Who is the church? Those who have been redeemed: the ones purchased by the blood of Christ. Local church only

advocates must notice that water baptism, as important as it is, is never mentioned in these two texts. What is mentioned is redemption through the cross of Christ. The church general is composed of blood bought Christians.

Finally, the having seen the church as the bride of Christ, we must ask the question of the composition of the bride of Christ. Who is in the bride?

The Bride of Christ Composed of All Saints, Both Old Testament And New Testament Saints

First of all, we must go to the Revelation to see the bride of Christ. *"I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints."* (Revelation 19:6-8) Many of those who advocate the local church only position state that the white robes come from the righteous deeds of the saints. In other words, the ones who are in the bride of Christ are the saints who live up to a certain standard of righteousness and holiness. This standard has never been fully defined, to my knowledge. It is supposed to begin with water baptism into the local church, however.

Does the Scripture uphold this view of the robes of righteousness being righteous works? It is this writer's contention that the Scriptures do not support that position. Isaiah rejoiced in God's grace saying, *"I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels."* (Isaiah 61:10) Isaiah ascribed the garments of salvation and the robe of righteousness as being a gratuitous gift from God, not as something done by the saint¹. Jesus alludes to this in one of His parables: *"When the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment: And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen."* (Matthew 22:11-14) In Jesus' day it was common for great men to invite many people to celebrate when family members were married. We are told by some scholars that often the host would freely provide garments for his guests. It was a great show of disrespect to one's host to not wear the provided garments. Jesus is telling us that we cannot partake of the joy of His kingdom if we do not accept the garments that He gives us. What is the wedding garment, or the fine linen in which the bride shall be clothed in the day of her marriage to the Lamb? It is the robe of righteousness. It is the imputed righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 3:19-28;5:1-3). Thus it is that the bride who has prepared herself and to whom it has been given to be arrayed in fine linen clean and white is none other than all those who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb of God. The bride of Christ is composed of those who are justified by faith in Jesus.

We also see the bride of Christ portrayed in the book of the Revelation as the city New Jerusalem. *"There came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife. And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God."* (Revelation 21:9-10) One statement

¹ It is interesting to note that clothes cover, and that the meaning of atonement is covering. There is good reason to think that the robes of righteousness represent both atonement and justification through Christ Jesus our Savior.

especially about this city leads this writer to believe that all of the redeemed of all ages will be a part of the bride of Christ. That statement is as follows: *"Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city. For without are dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie."* (Revelation 22:14-15) The reader will quickly notice that the only ones who are without the city are those who are not redeemed. By this we readily see that the city is populated with the redeemed. That being so, and the city being the bride, the bride of Christ is composed of all of the redeemed of all ages. In fact, we find that Abraham and other Old Testament saints anticipated entrance into the New Jerusalem. *"These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city."* (Hebrews 11:13-16) This writer knows of no city for which they could have been looking other than the New Jerusalem, and God has prepared this city for them. This being so, we can safely conclude that the church is the redeemed of all the ages.

The Local Church

While considering these things, it is imperative that we recognize that the church generally is seen and experienced as the local church. What we mean by the local church is the church as it is established and ministers in a certain area. In many places within the New Testament, the church is referred to as being within a particular location. It is for this reason that Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia, rather than to the state church of Galatia, composed of all of the Galatian churches. The New Testament knows nothing of a national or state church, but teaches us much about the local church composed of those baptized believers in a particular area. This is readily seen in the book of Acts. *"Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."* (Acts 2:41-47) The Jerusalem church was comprised of those believers who were baptized and were joined together in teaching, worship and communion.

Many people contend that the belief in the general church constitutes a denial of belief in the local church. This simply is not true, and is an uncharitable statement to make. In fact, the denial of the local church does not logically follow the belief in the larger body of Christ composed of all of the redeemed. Paul told the Corinthians that we are all baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ: *"For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit."* (1 Corinthians 12:13) We know that this is true, because the Spirit that we all receive is the Spirit which was promised (See Ephesians 1:13-14 cf Isaiah 32:12-20; Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:14-21). Every believer is baptized in/by the Spirit into the body of Christ. In the same chapter, however, Paul explicitly tells the Corinthians that they, the local church, were the body of Christ: *"Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular."* (1 Corinthians 12:27) It is impossible to both believe the Bible and reject the truth of the local church. In fact it is no more biblical to deny the local

church than it is to deny the church general, composed of all of the redeemed. Scripture teaches us both.

We also read Jesus saying, *“And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”* (Matthew 16:18–19) Here Jesus tells us that there is a church that is unfailing in her existence. At the same time, this church has certain functions it exercises. This church has authority to bind and loose. That is, she can either declare something lawful or unlawful, right or wrong, as she has been entrusted with the truth of God and is the “pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). This points further to the exercise of discipline within the body of Christ in which the church has the authority to receive people into the membership and to loose them from their membership by means of excommunication, and to receive them again by means of forgiveness (See Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 5; 2 Thessalonians 3:5–16; Titus 3:10; 2 Corinthians 2:1–11). This is worked out within the local body of the church. While it is true that we see in this text the larger body of Christ composed of the redeemed, it also points us to this body being experienced and showing herself in the activities of each local church.

As Paul taught Timothy concerning the ministry, he wrote to him as one who was laboring in a local church. He told him the qualifications of those who would serve the local body, and told him that he was writing for a purpose: *“These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly: but if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.”* (1 Timothy 3:14–15) Paul’s counsel for Timothy was for the purpose of instructing him in how he should conduct himself in the church where he was laboring and leading. The same could be said concerning Paul’s letter to Titus.

When Jesus gave us instructions concerning relationships, he did so with the understanding that the local church had authority in these matters. *“But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”* (Matthew 18:16–20) Not only does the local church have authority in matters of relationships and discipline, but Christ Jesus dwells in the local church. This is why He said that He would be in the middle of the gathering of two or three who get together in His name. When God’s people determine to do God’s work in God’s way, Christ is present with them. Considering the fact that these things always occur in a locality, we can certainly understand that this refers to the actions of a local body.

Finally, as we consider the gifts and ministries that are given by the Spirit of God, we find that they are found being used within the local body. Paul taught the Roman church about this (Romans 12:1–8). He also went into great detail with the Corinthians concerning this: *“For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.*

And if they were all one member, where were the body? But now are they many members, yet but one body. And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: and those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked: that there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.” (1 Corinthians 12:13–27) Though there is reference to the general body of Christ, we also find that the gifts of the Spirit have their residence and benefit within the local church. Paul informed Corinth that their local body was the very body of Christ. Each local church is a complete body of Christ, established to carry out the commandments of God in her area.

