

What is the church?

How important is a building?

When we think of a church our thoughts immediately turn to a building; perhaps one which is grand and lofty with beautiful architecture, or a small country church with a lych-gate – a perfect place for a wedding! Either of these will most likely be surrounded by graves or even incorporate them into the interior. This may be one of the reasons why so many people today are ‘turned off’ at the mention of church. Some aspects seem to speak of death rather than life, and much of the ritual and traditions seem largely irrelevant in contemporary society.

How does the Bible define ‘church’?

It is always important to look at the original Greek or Hebrew word when we wish to have a better understanding of what God is saying to us through His Word. The Greek word for church is ‘**ekklesia**’, which means an **assembly of citizens** in secular Greek, or the **congregation** of Israel in the wilderness (**Acts 7:38**).

In the New Testament ‘**ekklesia**’ is used to describe:

- the whole body of Christians
- a company of Christians gathering in a local setting for worship, sharing and teaching
- Christian gatherings in a district.

A key verse is found in **Matthew 16**, where Jesus says:
“...I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” (v.18)

The ‘rock’ He refers to is not Peter as an individual, since a different word is used; ‘**petra**’ is used here which means a foundation rock or boulder, whereas the meaning of Peter’s name in Greek is ‘**petros**’, a fragment of the ‘**petra**’.

The ‘rock’ referred to in this verse is generally understood to be Jesus Himself, the foundation of the church, also the spiritual Rock out of which poured a miraculous supply of water in the wilderness for the Israelites.

Read: 1 Corinthians 3:10-11 and 1 Cor. 10:1-4

Can you think of any ways that some church leaders may be building on the wrong foundation?

Who supplied the needs of the Israelites in the wilderness?

We can see from these verses that the church **is** referred to as a building, but a spiritual one which Jesus Himself is building, constructed with ‘**living stones**’ (**1 Peter 2:5**)

1 Cor. 3:16 uses the terminology of temple worship:

“Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?”

Here we see that God Himself lives in this spiritual building, the local church, through the Holy Spirit.

Read: Ephesians 2:19-22.

Man-made buildings can be filled with man-made ideas and projects, and many times the people who meet there don’t even realise that God is not amongst them! We therefore need to join ourselves to the right local church if we are to grow as He intends.

If Jesus is building His church how can we co-operate with Him? (remember that He calls us ‘living stones’)

The church in Acts

As we read of the wonderful works of God in the early church and compare these with what we see in most churches today, we may wonder – “Whatever went wrong?”

In its infancy the church of Jesus Christ was characterised by passionate preaching and prayer, fervent evangelism and numerous miracles of healing and deliverance. Angelic visitations were experienced by these early believers, particularly as they found themselves under persecution. In addition to this the first Christians shared their possessions in a way which is largely unknown today in Western Christianity.

Acts 2:41- 42 tells us of **four fundamental devotions** practised by the early believers which have continued throughout this church age:

“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread , and in prayers.”

The Apostles’ doctrine refers to the teaching of the apostles received from Jesus, now being imparted to the many new believers in Jerusalem.

- **Matt. 28:20** – Jesus here commissions His disciples to teach all things that He has commanded them, during His three years of public ministry.
- **Read: Galatians 1:15-18**
Paul withdrew after his conversion to Arabia, where God revealed to him the substance of the gospel he was to preach to the Gentiles.

Why do you think Paul went to a desert area rather than to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles ?

Fellowship was an extremely important aspect of the early believers’ lives – it went hand in hand with the teaching and means:

.....”sharing, unity, partnership, contributory help, the brotherhood.”

It is fellowship (‘koinonia’ in Greek) which cements believers to the Lord Jesus and to each other.

Are you experiencing the joys of fellowship with the Christians around you?

What do you think may hinder true fellowship with our fellow Christians?

Breaking of Bread

In the early church the breaking of bread, also known as the Lord’s supper (**1 Cor. 11:20**) would often be in conjunction with a full meal, since the first Christians met in their homes for fellowship as well as attending temple services. (**Acts 2:46, Acts 20:11**).

In today’s churches, this joyous remembrance of all that Jesus did for us on the Cross becomes a solemn ritual which, as we can see, is far removed from the practice of these first followers of Jesus. At that time it was a natural part of community life, enhanced by the blessing of a shared meal with fellow believers; we can imagine it as a time of thankfulness and enjoyment in the presence of God.

What aspect of the breaking of bread have we frequently neglected today?

Have we made the breaking of bread too much of a ritual?

Prayers

The early church knew the power of prayer! Their prayers were fervent and effective and we read of many different prayers that were offered to God by the believers throughout the Book of Acts. Here are just a few instances of situations which called for prayer amongst those early believers:

Read the following and write down the needs which they brought to God in prayer:

Acts 4:23-31; Acts 12:5-17; Acts 13:2-3; Acts 27:35; Acts 28:8

