

THINK BIBLICALLY

Lesson 8: Doctrine of the Church

The Church

In our New Testament, the Greek work usually translated “church” is **ekklēsia**. The word can refer to a regularly summoned legislative body (i.e., a governing assembly), a casual gathering of people, or a group of people with shared beliefs (e.g., a congregation). In a Christian context it refers to an assembly of baptized believers in Jesus Christ committed to one another in love and called out of this world into a worshiping, caring, and witnessing fellowship. (Understanding Christian Theology, ed. Charles Swindoll, Roy Zuck). We need to understand that prior to the cross Jesus announced he would build his church (Matt. 16:18) and in the book of Acts we read the early history of Jesus building his church. It is Jesus’ church and his building project, yet many professing Christians today do not place a high value on being an active participant in a local church. Some will say they are part of the “Church” even though they do not attend a local church on Sunday mornings. The study of “church” is called ecclesiology. To be sure, we need to have a Biblical understanding of these issues.

1. **“I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18):** Jesus announced he would build his church, and he did so and is still doing so. The idea of church is Jesus’ idea, his personal project during the age in which we live, and not merely a human religious institution. Jesus died for the church and the church is his bride (Eph. 5:24-32). What are some implications of that?
2. **Local and Universal (Invisible) Church:** The word “church” is used over 100 times in the NT and usually refers to a specific or local church (e.g., church in Corinth) but in some instances means something other than a specific local church.
 - specific local churches (e.g., Acts 8:1, 9:31, 13:1, 14:23; Rom. 16:1-16; 1 Cor. 1:2, 4:17; Gal. 1:2; Col. 4:15; 1 Thess. 1:1; Rev. 1:4)
 - not a specific local church (e.g., Matt. 16:18; Acts 8:3; Eph. 1:22, 3:21; Col. 1:18; Heb. 12:23)
3. **Method and Purpose:** A key passage for us is Acts 2:41-47 because it gives us a glimpse of the first local church (in Jerusalem) under apostolic leadership.
 - What can we learn from Acts 2:41-47 about the purpose and function of a local church?
 - What can we learn from the whole book of Acts about how Jesus is building his church?
 - What can we learn from Eph. 4:10-16 about the method and goal of a local church?
4. **Is Church Attendance Optional:** Read Heb. 10:19-25. What was the reason many of the Jewish Christians in the book of Hebrews stopped attending church?
5. **Who is in Charge of the Operation?:** Jesus. And under him, elders (Greek **presbuteros**) were appointed over local churches, **not deacon boards or denominational structures**. Their qualifications are in 1 Tim. 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. They are sometimes called “overseers” (Greek **episkopos**) emphasizing a responsibility to make sure things are done correctly. The word “pastor” is used once in the NT (Eph. 4:11) but the verb shepherd (Greek **poimanō**) is used to describe what an elder does. Key passages include Acts 20:28-31, 1 Pet. 5:1-4, 1 Tim. 5:17, Heb. 13:17. The word “deacon” (Greek **diakonos**) means assistant and this office carries no leadership or teaching role. (See Acts 6:1-6; 1 Tim. 3:8-13)
6. **Areas of liberty:** Where the NT indicates how things are to be done (e.g., role of elders), that is how we need to do it. In areas where it is silent we have liberty.