

## What Is The Church?

### **In Search of the Church: The Head, the People, the Purpose**

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The geographical area that we live in has generically been referred to as Fort Mill for some time, but we technically live in what is called Indian Land. Those of us who live in this area or who were forced to travel through it have witnessed an explosion in housing, businesses, and shopping here in our little slice of northern South Carolina.

I continue to be amazed at the amount of northerners that have flocked to this area. Indian Land is not a business metropolis or some type of business center by any means, but somehow someone let the proverbial cat out of the bag, most likely citing great proximity to Charlotte, North Carolina, lower taxes, and nice neighborhoods. And everyone is selling out of the north and buying in the south.

This migration is often noted not only by new license plates on vehicles driving around the area, but also new posts that hit the Indian Land Facebook page. This phenomenon is not unique to our little area in the panhandle, as we are called, but happens to a lot of cities that are experiencing an influx of growth in their general population. Instead of picking up the white pages or yellow pages, since no one hardly knows what those are these days, folks turn to social media to find what they are looking for.

Now this might sound familiar to you. "I'm new to the area looking for recommendations for" X, Y, or Z. Most people are looking for recommendations for plumbers, electricians, dentists, people to clean their homes, dermatologists, landscapers, roofing companies, or a good transmission shop. In general, someone reputable that will not cost an arm and a leg.

Now once the post is made, folks wait for the comment section to fill up with recommendations from previous customers to companies alike, and then make the decision as to what they will choose or who they will go with. Now

this has made both ratings and recommendations quite important for those deciding on who gets the work and subsequent pay.

There is one question that has hit the pages of social media over the last couple of months that has captured my attention. This is my odd little pastime. I get lost in the comment section. Now it generally starts out with "new to the area" or "I'm moving to the area" looking for a church. Now, because most of you probably have not seen these, I have collected a few for your listening enjoyment. These are from the Indian Land Facebook page.

"Looking for a church that has Saturday night services."

Here is another one: "Looking for recommendations for a church that has a great kids/teen program."

Another one: "Looking for a decent church. Would love to have a preacher like Dr. Charles Stanley," whoever he is.

"I'm looking for a church in the area that offers a great single adult program, an awesome pastor, and friendly, welcoming atmosphere. Any suggestions?"

Now I could not stop there because now my interest was piqued, so I took this search a little broader and expanded my request to all of Facebook.

Quoting once again:

"I am looking for a church home," and that is all in caps. A CHURCH HOME. "I need a church that," and this is in numerical order here, "1. Does not sell things in the church, but random fundraisers outside service time does not apply. 2. Does not celebrate Halloween. [interesting] 3. Does not talk about or bring in Santa for Christmas. [We are getting warmer.] 4. Does not teach the once saved, always saved lie. [Not too bad.] 5. Does baptisms in the one name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost [which this person says is Jesus. I am assuming maybe they mean does not believe in the Trinity, but we will see.] 6. Does not conform to this world but calls its congregation to be transformed by the renewing of their minds. And 7. Calls us to crucify ourselves daily and follow Jesus and does not try to justify living in sin." [I should have said, you know, CGG.org. Check us out.]

Now over to Arizona, and this person also has a list, but it is in bullet form.

"Looking for a new nondenominational church. We have been having a hard time finding a home. We would like a church that has a pastor in the pulpit preaching a message, that allows us to sing along to the worship, not just a concert with bass so disturbingly loud that it causes heart palpitations, that has a Wednesday church service that adheres to biblical principles but not legalistic. [That one is interesting.] It doesn't cave to cultural pressures of female pastors, that believes God is the same God today as He was in the past, that has a variety of serving opportunities. If you know of this church, please let me know."

And I think this is the last one from the Fort Bragg area:

"Looking for a non-denominational church that's spirit-filled but Bible believing, community focused with opportunities for us to serve. We both served on the worship team singing and playing the drums. Youth involvement is important. My son played the keys during youth services and wants to continue doing so. My daughter dances and wants to continue. [Interesting.] Looking for a church that's diverse. Looking for great worship, and it's a plus if there is a choir."

This is just a small excerpt of what some people are looking for when they are looking for a church to attend.

Now this is not really a new question, as most folks that you meet might ask during generic small talk type questions. What do you do for a living? Are you from this area and what church do you go to? We see this all the time.

People will ask, What church do you attend? Or where do you go to church? And the response is typically to mention the name followed by the location. So, not me, but let us say someone, "I attend Transformation Church. They are off of 521, you know, the church that has the cops that come out there every Sunday and blocks traffic, so you can't get to and from Costco." And then people kind of understand where you go to church.

So in general, most people will think of church as the place they go to to worship, and this is not a wrong view because by definition, a church is a

place where you can go to worship God. And we see that here. We are all in the church office building worshipping God. It is a building.

However, if we look a little bit deeper in our search, we find that church is defined as the Christian religious community as a whole or a body or organization of Christian believers. So looking at this word or concept more broadly, we see that it is not really a building per se, rather a body of people that believe in a particular type of religion, specifically Christianity. These definitions in a way match what the above church seekers were describing. We heard that at least one family was looking for a home. And certainly that is a reference to a building, but also to a church family.

And most are looking for the type of church, more specifically the type of congregation, the group of people that believe in what they believe in, and then similarly want to worship in the same fashion that they want to worship in.

Now, I do not know about you, but I do not believe I have really asked myself before "what is a church?" This is probably in large part because I grew up in the Worldwide Church of God and so I never actually had to look for a church, and then apply a set of criteria against that search to arrive at a specific church. But many, including my beautiful wife, as well as many of our friends here and beyond, have searched for various churches of God.

So what is the church? Let us start in the Bible and go to the first time the word church is used, and we will go from there. Please turn over to Matthew 16 for our first scripture.

**Matthew 16:18-19** "And I also say to you that you are Peter [this is Jesus speaking], and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

This is the first time the word church in this form is mentioned in the Bible. Very interesting, if you ask me, that it was uttered by Jesus Himself. The word church here is *Strong's 1577, ecclesia*, which means a popular meeting,

especially a religious congregation, an assembly, church. Now this word is mentioned 74 times in 73 verses in the New King James, and if you noticed, a building is missing from that definition.

Now switching from the Bible to more of a secular view, I found an online definition that refers to church as:

Called out assembly or congregation of believers. In the Bible, *ecclesia* or church refers to a called-out assembly or congregation of believers. It signifies a gathering of people who are spiritually called out by God, emphasizing their communal life and worship. The term is derived from the Greek word meaning to call out and is used in various contexts, including local congregations and the universal body of believers. In the New Testament, *ecclesia* describes both local communities and the broader church, illustrating the unity and diversity of believers under God's authority.

Let us build on this as we continue this study once again in Matthew 16:18. "And I 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."

In order to fully understand this, I think that one must believe in God the Father, Jesus Christ our Savior, and the inspired written Word of the Bible. If for some reason that you do not, please go out and prove those things to yourself, and there are several resources available to help you understand who God is, who His Son is, and the instructions and admonitions given to us in His inspired Word, the Bible.

Now that being said, if we really think about this verse, we understand that the word church is first uttered to the world by our Savior. Pretty significant, if you ask me. God is the originator of all things, so it is interesting to me that He introduced this word showing personal ownership of it and stating that it will not be destroyed.

To quickly address any questions regarding the rock that Jesus will build on, we have an FAQ on [biblicaljesus.org](http://biblicaljesus.org) that explains Jesus' statement.

The key to understand the scripture lies in the correct translation of the Greek words here rendered *petros* and *petra*. The Greek word translated as Peter, *petros*, meaning pebble or small stone, while the word rendered rock is *petra*, meaning big rock or huge boulder.

Now you can turn here if you like. I will just read it. When Jesus is calling the disciples, He says in verse 42,

**John 1:42** Now when Jesus looked at him, He said, "You are Simon, the son of Jonah. You shall be called Cephas" (which is translated, A Stone).

Here we see that Peter is called *petros* or a stone indicating something smaller. Since the word used here in Matthew 16 is *petra*, Jesus is stating that His church would be built on Him, Jesus Christ, the stone.

Now let us see *petra* used in another scripture just to show this. If you will please turn over to I Corinthians, we will go to chapter 10. Just one example here.

**I Corinthians 10:1-4** Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ.

Now this is one of several instances where Jesus Christ is referred to as the Rock. So bringing this all together, when Jesus says that the church will be built upon Him, the chief cornerstone, and it is an assembly and congregation of followers that He has claimed ownership, it is His, not man's, not a group of people, not an institution or denomination of men, not a tradition, not an organization, and not a physical building. It is His. He builds it, sustains it, and leads it.

Similar to Richard's sermon series last year titled "Jesus in the Feasts," we can see here that Jesus is also, and to no surprise, in the church. This is one of the reasons why when we get baptized, we are not baptized into any

denomination of men, but into the Body of Christ through or by the means of the Holy Spirit.

Now let us go back to this definition of the church being an assembly of believers. By standard dictionary definitions, we understand that this is what makes up a church or what a church is comprised of. We just read in I Corinthians 10:4 that the Israelites were a type of this as they passed through the Red Sea as a group being baptized, sharing in the same spiritual food and drink, which of course was Christ.

Let us look at Acts 7, just to get another Old Testament perspective. We will read verses 38 through 39.

**Acts 7:38-39** "This is he who was in the congregation [he is speaking of Moses] in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us, whom our fathers would not obey but rejected."

Now congregation here is translated in the Greek as *ecclesia*, assembly, or church. You probably find that in your margin. And there are many more that refer to the children of Israel as the assembly of God.

Let us see a New Testament version of this. Let us go over to Acts 2. Now just to set this up, if you do a word study on the word church, you will find that it essentially explodes in Acts, and it is really no wonder since Acts begins here in chapter 2 with the giving of the Holy Spirit and the Day of Pentecost.

**Acts 2:40-47** And with many other words, he [this is talking about Peter] testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." Then those who gladly received his word were baptized, and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and

divided them among all as any had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

So we see a New Testament example as God calls people into His church, that they come together, they assemble in doctrine and fellowship. The writer of Hebrews reiterates this in Hebrews 10:25 by telling them to "not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but to exhort one another, and so much more as you see the Day approaching."

To recap this section, we have seen that the church is an assembly of those who have been called and believe. We have also seen that Christ claims the church as His, that He built it. That He will build it, sustain it, and lead it.

Who makes up the church? Let us look at who are part of that called out assembly.

Those who have been in the church for a while probably have the memory verse in John 6 come to mind. You do not have to turn there.

**John 6:44** "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him, and I will raise him up in the last day."

In the scripture we see that there is first an action taken by God to do something, to change something in each of us. He draws us towards Jesus Christ, something that we are not able to do on our own. There is a change that occurs, and that change is caused by God.

Keep your finger here in Acts, but let us go over to I Peter 2 for our next scripture. We are going to highlight this change. I will read verses 9 through 10.

**I Peter 2:9-10** But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the

praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.

Now we see here that those being called into God's church at this time are chosen, a chosen generation. We also see the change, the catalyst, if you will, that for those who will believe are called out of darkness and into His marvelous light. In order to be part of His church, this assembly of His people, we must be called by God.

This is an invitation-only event, as we might hear in the secular world, something that, you know, one cannot simply just show up for. It is not free and you cannot even purchase it with the greatest of riches. No, this is only by invitation from God. Mr. Armstrong even stated this in chapter 6 of *Mystery of the Ages*, that we are draftees, not volunteers.

Back to Acts 2.

**Acts 2:36-39** "Therefore let all of the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ. [Again, this is Peter.] Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

Now during Peter's sermon, the light switch was turned on, the veil over their eyes was removed, as it were, and they recognized what they had done. Now God did that through Peter's message. God revealed what they had done, and the awareness of a need to change occurred.

These verses basically show the process in action. God calls and reveals Himself to us and how corrupt we are and we respond by believing and doing, believing in God and His Word, repenting and being baptized that we might receive the gift of His Holy Spirit.

So we have seen the church is made up of those who have been called by God and believe in Him and then commit their lives to Him by repenting, being baptized, and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Now, as a small aside, I would remind us that God indeed has called not many wise, not many mighty or noble, but the foolish and weak of the world, as we read in I Corinthians 2. As Gary Petty has said previously, and I am paraphrasing, the church is full of sick people, and we are all trying to get better. And we should keep that in mind as we look across the assembly. We are all trying to get better.

So how do the called out assembly live their lives? To believe in something means that you agree with it. To believe in God and Christ means that one's life must be guided by the Bible, not the traditions of men or trends of the world. And since Christ is the Head and God's Word and truth is the Bible, if we have been called, separated from the world, and commissioned to be lights in the world, then our lives must be governed by His instructions.

When we have established that Christ is the Head of the church, this means that He also has established the requirements for attendance and worship. Let us go back to John 4, where Jesus is speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well. We will pick it up in verse 23.

**John 4:23-24** "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

Now if we are to be true worshippers of God, then we must worship Him in spirit through baptism and receiving His Holy Spirit, and in truth, and obviously truth is what we find right here in our Bibles.

Let us go over to John 14, over just a couple of pages. Jesus says in verse 15,

**John 14:15** "If you love Me, keep My commandments."

And then let us drop down to verse 23 as He responds to Judas here.

**John 14:23-24** Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father's who sent Me."

But for those whom God is working with through Christ, we have a responsibility to change how we live and align with God's commands and His truth, similar to any of these basic organizations or clubs out there, or groups. There are certain rules or regulations that one must adhere to if they wish to maintain their membership.

I just watched a famous clip of Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson's exchange in *A Few Good Men* so I will use the Marines as an example. If you want to be a Marine, well, you have to act like a Marine, and there are certain things morally and ethically, even procedurally, that are expected of Marines, including adherence to their code of conduct. If a Marine strays from or departs from or breaks that code, well then they can be guilty of conduct unbecoming a Marine, and they can be at risk of becoming dishonorably discharged.

Similarly, once we have been called, repented, we have been baptized, and been set apart, as we have seen here, God introduces us to how to live a good life and how to properly worship Him. If for some reason we choose not to do it the way that He is revealed to us, well then we too can be guilty of conduct unbecoming a Christian.

To go a bit deeper on this, I just want to apply this simple logic. We have seen that Christ owns His church and He leads the same. He tells us what makes up His church, the assembly of called-out people. He tells us how we are to worship God the Father and even tells us when and where. We did not go to the specific instructions on the Sabbath or the holy days, but if we do not keep the Sabbath as He outlined, or perhaps we are looking for a church with Sunday or Wednesday services, if we do not keep the appointments with God by way of the holy days, or perhaps we think that only half of the Bible is now relevant and only observe what is found in the New Testament, then can we honestly say that we are a part of God's church?

Is there any other church that we should be looking for other than the one that Jesus Christ is building Himself? If you are looking for the true church, He has given us what to look for and told us what it is. Applying similar logic here, anything that does not meet His definition of the church is not of Him.

So what is the purpose of the church? As we saw in the comments section earlier, some are seeking specific types of teaching, and those are not bad in and of themselves, teaching that is grounded in God's Word, the Bible, should provide instructions that point the assembly towards God and Christ. It is not inherently wrong. What about those looking for more of worship services or bonus points for a choir, you know, the need for a kid's youth program? What about those who want or need greater flexibility so they can come to church on Sunday or Wednesday or even someone who is looking for a specific type of speaker?

Let us head back to the Scriptures so we can once again understand why God and Christ are building this church. They defined it so it is fitting to understand Their purpose for it. And if we are looking for the true church, understanding its purpose should inform the attributes that we look for in that church.

Now let us start all the way back in Genesis 1. You can probably guess where we are going here. We will pick it up in verse 26. I think we have been here recently.

**Genesis 1:26-28** Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

This chapter reveals God's creation and then specifically speaks to what They had in mind for mankind, that man created in God's image would be

fruitful and multiply. We understand in this one scripture that God is showing us that He is creating a family that is like Them. (I think that was in today's Berean or yesterday's Berean.)

Now let us head over to Matthew 28. I consider these scriptures similar in terms of what God tells man to do or the commission that He gives to man. We will pick it up in verse 18. And if you have headings in your Bible, you will notice this one says The Great Commission.

**Matthew 28:18-20** And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

Jesus commissioned His disciples to go out amongst all the nations, even the whole world, and do what? Baptize them and teach them to observe the things that He had commanded them. So just as God created man and, in a way, commissioned him to be fruitful and multiply, to expand the human race, to grow in number and expand across the face of the earth, here God is saying, go out amongst those same people and to as many that God will call at this time, baptize, teach, and instruct. God is showing how He will teach and educate His people according to His way. He provides everything needed along the way.

Now Mr. Armstrong, once again in the *Mystery of the Ages*, chapter 6, notes that we are draftees, not volunteers, as I said previously. He also states that a church is "God's teacher's college to prepare rulers and teachers for the Kingdom of God when God does offer redemption and eternal life to the world as a whole." This statement, at least in part, references I Peter 2:9, which we read previously. I will just read it again.

**I Peter 2:9-10** But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.

The church, then, is the group of people being called by God right now to be set apart from the world, to repent, be baptized, and live a life according to His instructions that we find in the Bible. Now those of us in the church are being called out of the darkness and into the light, to put to death the things of the old man and to put on the new. There is this aspect of being taught, learning, and changing.

Now let us read this in Ephesians 4, verse 20. And as we read, think of the words used in the scripture as it relates to what we have heard about earlier.

**Ephesians 4:20-24** But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.

Now Paul described the futility of the Gentiles' way in previous verses and tells the Ephesians that this is not what they have been taught. They have been taught the truth that is in Jesus. Knowing the truth should produce a change that puts off the former conduct of sin, corruption, and the old way of life, and puts on the new person that God creates in us with His Holy Spirit after baptism.

The church is a training ground. Think of someone who wants to grow up and be an engineer; perhaps a pilot, a doctor, a mechanic, you name it. If a person wants to become a professional in a specific career, what do they do? They go to school and they learn how to be an engineer, a pilot, or a doctor, whatever it is.

A better example, potentially a better example, might be someone who wants to learn a trade, perhaps be a blacksmith. What do they do? They become an apprentice and they learn from their teacher. Now Christ's church provides the place, the instruction, and the people necessary to help us grow into His image and likeness to learn to be like Him, and that is hopefully what we want to do.

Now we have seen that the church—the true church—is one that is founded and being built upon Jesus Christ, who is its Head and chief cornerstone. The church is a congregation, an assembly of people that are called by God to know and understand who God is and what Christ has and is accomplishing for them. It is His chosen people who believe and follow His written Word, working to overcome their once carnal nature and put on the new person post baptism.

The church is the called-out assembly of God's people, led by Christ's example, who follow the teachings from God's Word and strive to overcome sin and this world as He prepares us for the positions and roles that are waiting for us when Christ returns. The church is not something that we can create a list of things that we are looking for in a religious organization. We cannot dictate to others and we certainly cannot dictate to God as to how we want to worship and learn. We are the student, not the teacher.

Rather, if we truly seek the church, we seek the assembly of called-out ones by God, led by Christ, who adhere to and are taught by His Word, and with His Holy Spirit they strive to overcome the world and become more like the Head of the church, the chief cornerstone, our Savior Jesus Christ.