

Study Guide #9: The Body of Christ

Introduction

Christians have historically belonged to a church. But what is the church, and what is its purpose? Who are its major leaders? Is belonging to a church really that important? How should the church finances operate? These are the main questions we address in this Study Guide.

Question #1: What does the word “church” mean? And what does that say about its importance?

Answer: The Greek word for “church” essentially means “a calling out.” It’s used in the New Testament to describe an organized group of Christians, indicating that Christians have been *called out* of the world and *into* an organized Christian organization called the Church. In other words, believers weren’t called out of the world into a kind of “no man’s land” to stand on their own. The fact that they were organized into a collective group means that the Church must have a good purpose for its existence. According to Matthew 16:18, Jesus called it “**His church**” (NKJV). Since it’s His Church, Jesus is also called the “**Head**” of the Church (Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18).

Question #2: What is the overarching purpose for the church?

Answer: The primary purpose of the church is to proclaim the gospel of salvation in Jesus to the whole world and make disciples (followers) of Him. This is the church’s principal mission statement, according to Matthew 28:19-20, Acts 1:8, et. al. The church was formed to do this in a way that individuals alone could not do. This implies that the church should have a global outreach rather than merely a local interest. It should finance missionaries and evangelists, direct mass communications of the gospel, publish literature to reach people, establish medical work and institutions, assist in natural disaster relief efforts, and operate an educational system where permitted by law. In other words, the church needs to be a well-organized institutional body vibrating with energy primarily directed toward its mission statement.



World Map

Question #3: Should churches be involved in political issues?

Answer: The church is not primarily a social and charitable organization, nor a political organization, but a *spiritual* body. The mission statement of the church implicitly means that the organized church and its public leaders should avoid engaging in politics except where political entities might interfere with religious freedom or violate basic human rights. The church has no good business endorsing political candidates or

political parties, or of lobbying on behalf of political issues outside the arena of religious freedom and basic human rights. Politics, by definition, is divisive by nature, and if immersed in it, the church would be divided and cut off its influence from large groups of people. Individual members outside of the public leadership of the church are free to engage in politics if they choose. Hopefully, however, they will avoid political efforts *inside* the church in order to avoid divisiveness. Common sense also suggests that if the church doesn't want interference from government, then the church shouldn't interfere in the government.

Question #4: Will you elaborate on the purpose and nature of the Church?

Answer: One way to do that is to briefly examine the 7 metaphors the New Testament uses to describe the Church:

- **The Body of Christ**—Romans 12:4-5; I Corinthians 12:27-28; Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:12-16; 5:30; Colossians 1:18, 24; and 2:19. Just as every part of a body is important, so is every church member. Church offices should not be ranked according to some hierarchical chart. This also implies the need for cooperation and coordination; no member is a law unto himself. When 1 part of a body hurts, it affects the entire body. Thus, the Church should care for the spiritual health of all members.
- **A Temple or House of God**—I Corinthians 3:9, 16-17; II Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:19-22; I Timothy 3:15. This reminds us that the Holy Spirit resides in the Church (I Corinthians 3:16-17; Ephesians 2:2), just as the tabernacle in Moses' day was built for God to dwell in (Exodus 25:8). Therefore, the members ought to jealously guard its reputation, being careful not to allow errors of faith and practice to come into it.
- **A Family**—Galatians 6:10; Ephesians 2:19; I Peter 2:4-5; 4:16-17. This reminds us that Christians are all brothers and sisters, so there's no room in the Church for racial, ethnic, gender, or class prejudices or discrimination. The Church ought to be the one truly classless society on earth. Just as family members need each other, this reminds us that no Christian is an island to himself. We all need the Church.
- **A Kingdom or Nation**—I Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:6, 9. Like a family, this reminds us that we are all citizens of the same "**nation.**" As such, members should treat each other with equal respect, with no discrimination or favoritism on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, or class.
- **The Bride of Christ**—II Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:22-33. As married to Jesus, the Church needs to maintain the holy relationship with Him just as a wife and husband should remain faithful to each other. Jesus must be the center of our thoughts and affections in order to be faithful to our "marriage" covenant with Him. It also reminds us that while teaching correct doctrines is important, even they shouldn't be allowed to replace our love relationship with Jesus.
- **A Field**—I Corinthians 3:9. The Church as a field suggests that Jesus cultivates it in order for it to produce more fruit. This process of cultivation includes tilling,



Bride of Christ

planting, fertilizing, and watering. Sometimes this process may offend us, but the ultimate result will be rewarding for all.

- **An Army**—implied in Ephesians 6:11-17, where if believers put on spiritual armor, then the Church must be like an army. Just as a soldier is ineffective apart from the rest of the army, so a Christian is likewise ineffective apart from the Church. Being a soldier requires great training and discipline and reminds us of the absolute need for cooperation and coordination of activities.

Question #5: What were the 2 primary official types of leaders in the early Church?

Answer: There were 2 principal types of leaders in each New Testament church: (a) spiritual leaders and (b) service leaders. Of course, both kinds of leaders required spiritual qualifications, and there was some overlap in the activities of these leaders. The leaders with primary spiritual oversight responsibility were referred to with 5 different names: (1) *elders*; (2) *bishops*; (3) *presbyters*; (4) *pastors*; and (5) *overseers*.



Pastor preaching

The Greek words for “elder” and “presbyter” both refer to an elder (older person), although this person may be older in experience rather than only in age. The Greek word for “bishop” means a “superintendent” or an “overseer” and is sometimes translated as “overseer.” And the Greek word for “pastor” means a “shepherd,” who is an overseer of sorts. Moreover, a comparison between I Timothy 3:1-7 and 5:17 suggest that bishops and elders are the same office, as does Titus 1:5-9. Therefore, it is apparent that these 5 names are indeed referring to the same church officials. Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5 tell us that each local church had multiple elders/bishops. Since this office concerned the spiritual needs of the church, we can infer that they occupied themselves in preaching, teaching, and otherwise leading out in public worship and other affairs of the church. [NOTE: The practice of 1 bishop for an entire city of local churches was a much later development.]

The other office in the New Testament Church was that of deacons (Philippians 1:1; I Timothy 3:8-13). Although not immediately called deacons, it appears that the 7 men chosen in the Jerusalem church to care for the needs of the widows were the first deacons in Church history (Acts 6:1-6). Since deacons were involved primarily with the physical needs of the members, we can safely infer that in later times, when Christians had their own church buildings, they supervised any needed repairs, cleaning, and grounds work to keep the building operational. It would also be natural for deacons to assist in other ways the work of the local church. [NOTE: Women deacons eventually became known as deaconesses.]

Question #6: Does the spiritual leader of a church function as a priest?

Answer: No. *First*, the New Testament never uses the word for “priest” to apply to a special group within the Church. Jesus is the only specific part of the Church who is called a *priest*, and He is our High Priest (Hebrews 4:14; 5:5, 9; 7:23-28; 8:1-2; 9:11, 24; 10:19-22). *Second*, all members of the Church are called “priests” as belonging to a kingdom of priests in the sense of representing Jesus to the world and of offering spiritual sacrifices of reasonable service to God (I Peter 2:5, 9; Romans 12:1; Revelation 1:6, 9). This

concept is called the “priesthood of all believers,” an expression originating among the Protestant Reformers in the sixteenth century.

Question #7: Do church leaders have to be married, or must they be celibate?

Answer: On the basis of I Timothy 3:2, which says that a bishop must be “**the husband of one wife**” (NKJV), some have insisted that a bishop, elder, or pastor must be married. However, the emphasis is on the fact that he must have only 1 wife. In Paul’s statement following this text, he states that deacons ought also to be married to only 1 wife and to rule their children and houses well (v. 12). Does that mean a deacon must have more than 1 child also? There seems to be no theological reason why this is the case. The fact is that most free adults in the Roman-ruled world were married, as they are today. As to celibacy, there’s no Scriptural support for mandating celibacy whatsoever.

Question #8: Do the Scriptures prohibit women from serving as official spiritual leaders in the church?

Answer: Traditionally, it has been argued that only men served in leadership roles in ancient Israel and in the New Testament Church, and that this practice is a model for the Church in all places and for all times. *First*, this is not quite historically accurate. Ancient Israel did have a few women with spiritual leadership roles. Most notably of these was Deborah, a prophetess and a judge (Judges 4:4). As a judge, she heard difficult legal cases and rendered judgments binding on all parties, which especially included men, who were more likely to bring cases to court. Also, in the period of the judges, when there was no king in Israel, judges were considered the political leaders. Note also that legal cases often concerned the application of *religious* law, making a judge a spiritual leader as well. If God had ordained that women should never be leaders in Israel, then He would not have chosen Deborah to be a judge in Israel. In this case, the exception invalidates the rule as interpreted by more traditional Christians.

Second, Paul’s statements in I Corinthians 14:34-35 and I Timothy 2:11-15 used by some to support the exclusion of women from pastoral positions are referring to the husband-wife relationship rather than the broader male-female relationship. This is shown by his reference to women asking their own men questions at home (I Corinthians 14:35) and by the fact that I Timothy 2:11-15 is obviously a parallel passage to I Peter 3:1-6, which is definitely speaking about husbands and wives. In other words, Paul is speaking about the headship principle in the home. The only New Testament chapter that directly compares the headship principle in the husband-wife relationship to the Church is Ephesians 5. There it’s clearly the case that Christ’s headship over the Church is the model for the husband’s headship with his wife—*not* that the husband’s headship over his wife is the model for all men’s alleged headship over all women in the Church.



Woman preaching

Third, the secular culture of the Middle East and Europe in the 1st century also taught that the husband was the head of his wife and family. One way that culture applied that principle was that wives shouldn’t take any visible leadership role in public. Therefore, Paul applied the same Christian principle of headship in the same way in the Church for the sake of the gospel. However, the same apostle declared in Galatians

3:28 that **“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”** (NKJV). As a Jewish male, Paul would have formerly prayed that he was thankful that he had not been born a Gentile, a slave, or a woman. Here he is explicitly refuting that former view. Note also that he doesn’t say *merely* that males and females are all **“in Christ,”** but that they are **“one in Christ.”** In other words, men and women are *one with each other* when they are in Christ.

Question #9: So should women be allowed to be spiritual leaders today?

Answer: *First*, whenever and wherever the culture prohibits women from taking visible leadership roles, the Church should refrain from that practice so that people won’t automatically turn a deaf ear to the gospel. *Second*, whenever and wherever the culture permits women to take visible leadership roles, the Church ought to model that in setting the example for women to take spiritual leadership roles. Therefore, we conclude that there’s no *theological* reason that women cannot be ordained as spiritual church leaders.

Question #10: Should a pastor be called Reverend or Father?

Answer: Psalm 111:9 calls the Lord’s name **“reverend”** (KJV), which means “to fear or to revere.” With a title like that for the Lord, it would be audacious and thus inappropriate for any human leader in the Church to be called “reverend.” Jesus Himself stated, **“Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven”** (Matthew 23:9, NKJV). In the context, He was clearly talking about “father” as a spiritual person, not a biological father. Biblical terms, such as pastor, elder, bishop, and so forth are appropriate titles of respect for spiritual leaders because they avoid a hierarchical or worshipful meaning.

Question #11: How should the church be financed? Should Christians tithe?

Answer: The principle of returning a tithe (which means “one-tenth”) originated in the Old Testament and even predates the nation of Israel, when Abraham paid tithes to the priest Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18-20).



Later, tithe was returned to God by giving it to the Levites, who worked in the tabernacle/temple and didn’t receive an inheritance of land like the other 11 tribes of Israel (Numbers 18:25-28). In Solomon’s temple, storage space was provided in an adjacent building to store the crops that the tithes were paid in (II Chronicles 31:10-11; Nehemiah 10:38; 13:10-14; Malachi 3:10). The tithe was returned on the basis of a person’s increase or profit (Deuteronomy 26:12). The theological basis for tithing was to recognize that it’s God who gives us the **“power to get wealth”** (Deuteronomy 8:18, NKJV) and that He is the actual owner of the world and everything in it (Psalm 50:10-12).

The New Testament implies that Christians should return a tithe also. Jesus endorsed it (Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42) and Paul implied it also: **“the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel”** (I Corinthians 9:13-14, NKJV). He said this just after reminding his readers that those who served in the temple **“eat of the things of the temple”** (v. 13, NKJV). Thus, Paul endorsed tithing for the Church. Since most of us now live in a money-based economy rather than an agricultural-based one, Christians should return one-tenth (a tithe) of their *gross* income. Some might argue that it

should be paid on the net income only. However, those taxes that are withheld are used for all kinds of things, including public roads that every citizen has access to. For those in business for themselves, ordinary business expenses may be deducted, of course, and then the tithe returned on the actual profit.

As in the Old Testament, the tithe should be reserved for fulltime gospel workers. Other expenses will require offerings from the members, apart from the tithe. After all, Malachi 3:10 teaches that those who fail to return tithe *or* give additional offerings are robbing God.