

Acts In Action Training Series



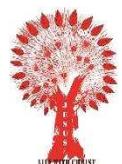
Foundational Lesson 5 What is The Church?

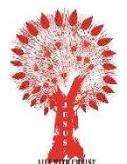




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Introduction

Matthew 16:18 (KJV)

“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.”

Having now gained an understanding of what the Bible is, who God is, what God’s commandments are, and what it means to be a Christian, we can now go further into understanding what it is that God has called us to do. So far with the topics that we have discussed we have in many ways talked about our relationship with God and how we are to understand Him and interact with Him. In this section, “What is The Church” we will begin to review how we now go out into this world and become an influence for Christ to the people who we are in relationship with.

As we begin to discuss this topic, we will first review what the church is not. Over the course of history there have been many different ways of describing the church and many different understandings of what the church is as well as what its function is. However, the only source which can truly tell us the answers to these questions is the Word of God and its teacher, the Holy Spirit. We will find out that many of the beliefs and understandings about what the church is are not based upon these sources but upon human logic and traditions.

We will then move to reviewing what the Bible says the church truly is. We will find that the Bible is quite clear in its description of the church and also provides us with significant insight into how the church is formed. Finally, we will begin to understand what the function of the church is and what we are to do. The church has many different functions and each part or member of the church has a unique and specific role. Before we begin to dive into these topics, let us first pray...

Father, we thank You for this time. We seek Your Holy Spirit to lead us and to guide us into this truth. We know that the wisdom of man cannot provide the insight that we need. We know that what we truly need is You. Lord, let us know more about what You have created us to do and how You have called us to function in this sinful world. May we truly be Your hands and Your feet so that all who we encounter may see Your love in action through our lives. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen and Amen!!





What The Church is Not

Matthew 16:18 (NIV)

“And I tell you that you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”

From the time that the Holy Spirit was imparting to the disciples and the work of the church on earth began, we have seen significant division within the Body of Christ. Throughout the centuries whenever there has been a disagreement about the interpretation of a particular doctrine or teaching within the Bible a new “denomination” has been established in order to classify those who hold to that interpretation or belief. As these denominations grew and became more organized, they began to be viewed as almost their own religious group. Instead of being a Christian, you were now a Catholic, a Protestant, a Baptist, a Calvinist, a Methodist, and the list could go on and on. However, these labels and divisions are not from the Word of God and are in fact contrary to Jesus’s desire for His church. He does not instruct us to be divided, but to be one, united in word and deed.

With that said, each individual within the Body of Christ has their own unique purpose and calling. These unique individual characteristics are designed by the Lord to work in harmony with those of the people that He places around us. The moment that humans begin to introduce conflict we are no longer working as effectively as He has intended us to be. This however does not mean that we are not observant of what others believe. We must also use discernment. When another person or group begins to espouse beliefs that are contrary to the core doctrines of the Word of God then we must be willing to stand for the truth. Let us review two examples which illustrate this difference.

Example 1: Group A believes that it is a complete sin to ever consume an alcoholic beverage, while group B believes that it is not a sin as long as the person does not become drunk or it becomes an addiction.

Example 2: Group A believes that Jesus Christ was the son the God but, He was not actually God and was truly only human. Group B believes that Jesus Christ was the Son of God and is also fully God Himself.

In example 1 we see a circumstance which should not be the cause of a group of believers to become divided. However, many groups and churches have split for even more trivial reasons and



disagreements. When this happens it truly grieves the Lord to see His children in such division. In example 2 however, we see a situation in which there is a true and fundamental disagreement about who the Lord is. We know from the Word of God that Jesus is also God Himself. With this understanding about who Jesus is, if another person or group professed that Jesus is not God then this would constitute a break in fellowship.



The Church is Not an Organization or Denomination

1 Corinthians 1:10 (NIV)

“I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.”

As we have mentioned multiple times throughout this series, the church we see today is one that has been divided. There are dozens of different fundamental denominations and if we were to begin to count the subdivisions of those fundamental denominations we would see that the number of separate groups would be well into the thousands. An overwhelming majority of these divisions are caused by small differences in beliefs and the people involved have chosen to break fellowship rather than come to a place of cooperation.

It is my own personal belief that there are few things that grieve the heart of the Lord more than to see His children in division like we see today. I understand and agree that the Body of Christ is to have order and that there will be differences in gifting and calling in both individuals and groups, however, these differences should be viewed as sources of division but sources of cooperation. We should never identify and divide ourselves by denomination in a way that projects that we are not one Body. If an unsaved person were to ask a follower of Christ what they believe, the answer should simply be that they are a Christian and believe in Jesus. The answer should not be that they are a protestant, a catholic, a calvinist, a methodist, or a presbyterian. Those names in the eyes of the Lord are void and meaningless.

There is only one division that is of concern. Does a person believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, who came to earth to be sacrificed for our sins so that we could be forgiving and reunited in fellowship with our Father. That is where the divide exists. That is the question that matters. For those that profess this to be true and live their lives as such, there is no division and no contradiction. The Church of Christ is One and there is no division in it.



The Church is Not a Building or Specific Location

1 Corinthians 3:16-17 (NIV)

“Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person; for God’s temple is sacred and you together are that temple.”

A fundamental error that has made its way into the Body of Christ is a belief that “church” is a building you go to on Sundays to worship and hear a preacher. I do not believe that the issue is that we have buildings in which we gather together to fellowship and worship, but the issue arises when we begin to view that physical location as the church. There are many who put a significant emphasis on the church building. They seek to improve it and make it bigger and more extravagant. They seek to attract more and more people to the building and we may often hear a phrase like this, “If we can just get people into the church, they would accept Jesus.” The mindset places the emphasis on the physical location and the building in which the Body of Christ gathers for fellowship.

In addition to the building and physical location, there is also a tendency to place a significant amount of focus upon the things within the church building. So many spend a lot of time and money installing the latest and greatest sound systems, media systems, lighting systems, and extravagant stage backdrops and while there is nothing inherently wrong with these things, they must never be viewed as a substitute for the pursuit and presence of the Holy Spirit. Just as with the physical location or a building, the things within the church building have nothing to do with the true Church of Christ.



The Church is Not a Series of Human Traditions or Rituals

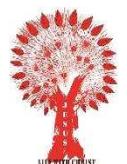
Mark 7:6-8 (NIV)

“He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”

There are so many believers and many denominations who view church as a series of rituals and traditions that, if and when observed, constitutes church. If a group of people do not perform these traditions when they gather or do not engage in these rituals in their lives, then they are not a part of the church. This practice is embraced in a wide variety of churches and denominations today.

There is no question that there are some actions, namely remembering the last supper of Christ and baptism, that the Bible still instructs us to observe. However, we must remember that these practices never constitute church or salvation. They are instead an outward sign of what has already taken place within the heart. There is no ritual or tradition that you can partake in that will bring the presence of the Lord into your heart and life. There is only one way in which we can find salvation and be united in relationship with God and that is by believing and accepting Jesus as our Lord and Savior.



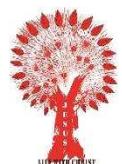


What The Church Is

Ephesians 2:19-22 (NIV)

“19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In Him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”

As with most of the topics that are covered within this lesson series, if we were to do an exhaustive study on what the Bible says the Church is, we would be unable to carry the book because it would be too heavy. For the purposes of this study, we will be reviewing three of the most significant attributes of the Church of Christ. There are many others that could have been included, however, these three, when truly understood and embraced, provide a significant foundation on which we as the church can build upon. These speak to our identity and our purpose in the Kingdom of Christ.



The Church is People

Romans 12:4-5 (NIV)

“4 For just as each of us has one body with many members and these members do not all have the same function, 5 so in Christ we, though many, form one body and each member belongs to all the others.”

When a person believes in and accepts Christ the Holy Spirit comes and dwells within them. That person is the Church. Whether that person goes, the Church is there. Wherever believers gather together for fellowship and worship, that is the Church. This place may be at a church building, or it may be in someone's home. In addition, it could be on the street corner, the workplace, a restaurant, a park, a shopping mall, or any place. Wherever a believer goes, they are taking the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Church, with them.

You should know right now, that wherever you may be reading this, if you have accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior then you are the church. The presence of the Lord is with you in this very moment. You do not need to go anywhere in order to experience Him. You do not need to refer anyone to a building or a specific location if they also desire to know Him. You can introduce the people who may be around you to the Lord right where you are.



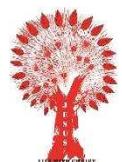
The Church Represents Christ's Presence on Earth

Ephesians 1:22-23 (NIV)

“22 And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”

What we must remember as Christians is that we represent Christ. This does not simply mean in character or that we serve as His representatives, but means that we truly are meant to be like His very presence here on earth. Wherever we go and whatever we do we not only take His presence with us there but we ourselves are acting like His actual hands and feet. When we pray for someone it is as though Jesus were praying for them. When we give someone a hug, invite someone into our homes, take food to someone who is hungry, or help someone who is in need, we are serving as Jesus Himself who is doing the work.

Just as a physical body has different parts and each part has its own unique role, the Church of Christ works just like the Body of Christ. It is the physical presence of Christ on the world. Jesus serves as the head of the body and as such, is in the control of the whole body, telling each part when and how to move. As parts of the body, we should each be seeking His direction and move when and how He tells us to move.



The Church is The Bride of Christ

Ephesians 5:25-27 (NIV)

“25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing[a] her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.”

One of the most significant representations that the Lord has given to us is that of husband and wife. This relationship is designed to mimic and represent the intimacy that is to exist between us and the Lord. The Bible tells us very clearly in the New Testament that we as the church also represent the bride of Christ. This should not be viewed in terms of male or female rather, in the intimacy and love that are shared between a husband and wife. Jesus loves his church with the same passion, protection and caring that a husband should love his wife. In that way, Jesus is the husband and each person who has accepted Him and their Lord and Savior is the wife.

We can see this depth of love in the verse above. It says that He gave Himself up for her, her being us the church. That means that He gave even to the point of death so that we may live. But He did not stop there either. It continues on to say that He washes her clean so that she could be presented to Him as a perfect and holy partner. We must recognize that Jesus loves us in this way and we must understand that there should be no other response than to love Him back with all that we are as well.



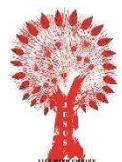
What is the Function of The Church

Ephesians 2:20-22 (NIV)

“Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In Him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”

Now that we have come to an understanding of what the church is and is not, we will begin to discuss what the role of the church is. God has not only saved us through His Son, but He has also given us a plan and a purpose. As part of the church we each have a role to play. There is no doubt that as we read through this topic that they are big callings. There is no way that we as individuals would be able to work towards any of them. However, when we work as unto the Lord and we also work together as one body, we will see the Lord do amazing things.

As we go through the remainder of this lesson reflect on what it is you feel called to do within the Body of Christ? What specific area of service has He called you to and what specific tasks has He prepared you to perform? Who are the people that He has placed around you and how can you serve them? These are all questions that can help you to hear and obey what the Lord is calling you specifically to do.



The Church is to Bring Glory to The Lord

1 Corinthians 10:31 (NIV)

“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

One of the fundamental functions of the church is to bring glory to the Lord. It is through the church the the Lord moves and works in this world. As we have discussed, we functions as the very hands and feet of the Lord. As we step out and faith and do the things that the Lord is calling us to do we will begin to see the Holy Spirit do things that go beyond what we could ask or think. When this happens our response should not and cannot be to point people towards us, but we must always give the credit, give the glory, to the One who is actually doing the work. The Lord is the One who is doing the work and therefore, He should be the One who always receives the glory and the praise.

This is one area in which so many Christians struggle in, however. The enemy uses pride as a means to break this down and when this occurs, we begin to take some of the praise for ourselves. Pride so often is something that develops slowly, in the background and often it may not even be noticed at first. Christians can be so susceptible to this as well. We hear the call of the Lord and we begin to move forward as He directs us. The effort starts to produce fruit and other people begin to notice. Soon, those people begin to come to us and tell us how the work that we are doing is good and how the work is a blessing to others. Over time, we can begin to have thoughts about the role that we played in these accomplishments and how we have done so well to trust in the Lord and stay so humble. Did you catch that? The seed of pride has started. It seems like on the surface that there is nothing wrong with what I have described. We heard the call, we did the work, we saw the increase and now we are feeling good about the result. It is so subtle that most of the time we do not even notice it. I can say this because this is describing me and the person that I once was.

In everything that we do, we should be examining ourselves to determine who we are giving the glory to. When others come to us to give us compliments and kind words, we should immediately point them back to the One who should receive the Glory. We must not allow even one inch for the enemy to gain ground in this area.



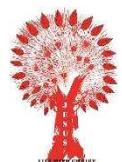
The Church Is to Demonstrate Love

John 13:34-35 (ESV)

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

There is little to no doubt that at the heart of everything that the Lord has done for us is love. Love is one of the fundamental things on which everything is built. As a result, the church is also built upon a foundation of love. No matter what it is that we have been called to do individually or corporately, if we are doing it out of a heart of love, then we have missed the mark. We may provide eloquent teaching, exciting events, financial support and other work for others, but if we do not demonstrate love then none of it will have any lasting meaning.

This love is also not limited to any specific group of people. We are to love our brothers and sisters in Christ because he has called us to love each other. When people see us working together, they should not see fighting and bickering, but instead they should see people who put the needs of the other above their own. They should be us demonstrating the same love that Christ showed to us to each other. Likewise, we are also to love those who are not a part of the Body of Christ in the same way that Christ loves us as well. Remember, when Jesus went to the cross the Bible tells us that it was when we were still sinners. He loved us even before we understood how much we needed Him and gave our lives to Him. He was not concerned with what He could get from us or what we could do for Him in return. As we interact with others, we must allow the Holy Spirit to instill this same love and devotion for others in our own hearts. There is nothing that we as the church can do that is more important than to demonstrate the love of Jesus to all people.



The Church Is to Use Their Gifts for Each Other

Hebrews 10:24-25 (ESV)

“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

We have talked multiple times about how God has created each one of us with gifts and how each person has a unique set of talents and abilities. What are those gifts for and how are we supposed to use those talents and abilities? One of the primary ways in which we are to use the gifts that God has given to us is in service to others.

No matter what the gift that we have we can choose to use it for the benefit of others, or we can choose to use it for our own self benefit. What does this look like? Consider a person who has been blessed with a beautiful singing voice. It would be very easy for this person to set out to have a successful career for themselves and work to make money and collect expensive possessions. On the other hand, this same person could, recognizing that their gift is in fact from God, choose to use their voice to worship for Lord for what He has done and in the process lead others to open up into worship of the Lord. In both of these scenarios the person is using their voice to sing but the motivation and result of each is completely different.

A question we should always be asking ourselves and answering honestly is this, who am I doing this work for? The answer we should always have is for the Lord and for other people. We should never place the focus upon ourselves or seek gain from the work that we do. Instead we should seek to give without expectation of return, just as Jesus gave His life for us.



The Church is to Make Disciples

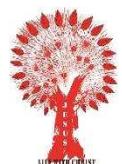
Matthew 28:19 (ESV)

“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.”

In addition to loving each other, loving the lost, and serving others, God has given us an additional task, one that will have eternal impact on others. We are to seek to make disciples of other people. To be a disciple means that a person is actively seeking to be transformed to become more like Christ. This cannot be something that is forced. In order for a person to be a disciple they must choose and desire to be one. We are to desire to instill the love and passion that we have for Jesus in the hearts and minds of other people.

The one thing that is an absolute requirement in order for us to accomplish this task is that we are disciples of Jesus ourselves. This means that we cannot simply say what needs to be done, we must be actual doers of it. We must live out the principles that Christ taught us and we must be committed to growing closer to Him.

Being a disciple and having a disciple also means sharing our lives together. We cannot ignore the need for a relationship and we must actively pursue the relationships we have with each other. A person cannot be a disciple of another person if they do not communicate or share their lives together. We must seek first to be a disciple of Jesus and then we must seek to share our lives together with other people. Through this they will see the change that the Holy Spirit is causing in our own lives and we will see the change that is taking place in theirs. This will encourage us to grow even closer to the Lord and continue our pursuit of Him.





Conclusion and Closing Prayer

As we have gone through this study we can see that we as the church have a significant amount of work to do. The world and even much of the church itself, do not have a proper understanding of what the church actually is nor what the work of the church involves. Because parts of the church do not have the proper focus it creates issues, disagreements, and ultimately disorganization. This cripples the ability of the church to do the work that God has called us to do.

In order to resolve this and move forward we must begin to turn back to the Bible as the source of what the church is and what we have been called to do. We must seek the Holy Spirit to be our head and we must each humble ourselves and do the things that He has called us to with our gifts and abilities. We must seek His glory and not our own and we must seek to stay in relationship with each other as we seek Him together. One of the most important things that we can do for the church is to pray for it. To pray that the Holy Spirit would be poured out upon the church and the people who make it up. This is what we as the church should work towards. Seeing the church of Christ be built up and bring glory to the Lord. Let us pray in closing:

Father, we thank You today that You have sent Jesus to this earth for us. We thank You that You love us so much that You choose to forgive us and rescue us from the consequences of our sins. Lord, we pray for the church today. We pray that there would be revival in the church and that each piece and part would come to a deeper and more real relationship with You. We pray that the gifts and abilities that You have given to the church would be activated and that each and every person who uses a part of the church would come alive in the Holy Spirit. Lord we see that you would be glorified through the obedience and work of Your children and that all would come to know You as their Lord and Savior. It is in Jesus' name that we pray, Amen and Amen!

