

What is the Church of Christ?

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Lesson 1 Class Goals and Purpose

Introduction to the Study

Why have we scheduled this study? And why would we ask the question – what is the Church of Christ? These are two important questions worth addressing before we embark on a 13-lesson study focused on the church.

As to the first question, this class will address concerns of the elders here at Embry Hills. We have often observed - in comments and language - a lack of understanding regarding the church; how it should function, and the role it should have in an individual believer's life. This misunderstanding takes on many forms and is found, not just among new converts, but also in those who have been Christians most of their lives. It is sincerely hoped that this concentrated study will provide deeper insight into the picture of the church that God has provided in the Scriptures. It is the church as presented in God's word that we are endeavoring to study; that word (Old and New Testament) being the exclusive means by which God reveals his will to men and women. You may not share that belief. We will look at that question in Lesson 4 and urge you to consider it carefully.

The question – What is the Church of Christ? – is both a question of identity and a question of unity. If you walk outside the building where the Embry Hills church worships, you will see these words attached to the wall – Church of Christ. Why that name? What does that say about who we are? At the very least, it should convey the idea that the people who work together within the walls of that building belong to Christ. A statement that our identity is that of belonging to Christ. But that's not the way all of us use the descriptor - Church of Christ. Does it mean more? What should it mean?

This question also speaks to our unity. A church is simply an assembly of people, a group of people united behind something. But what holds us together? We will teach that we should be united behind Christ, but how? How does that work? It's an important question, and one that will cause us to examine how Christ leads a church in the 21st Century.

Class Goals

Once we begin our study, we may agree as an entire class to set some additional goals, but we will start with these in mind:

By the end of our study, each of us will:

1. Submit our lives more fully to the kingship of Christ
2. Have a more accurate view of what Christ's church is and what it is not
3. Be more determined to please God in all that we do personally and in our part as a member of the body of Christ

4. Be a more active and faithful member of the church in our efforts to stir up one another to love and good works, telling others of Christ and honoring God in worship

Overview of the Study

Our overall approach in our study will be as follows. In the first seven lessons we will examine the nature of the church. How is the word used in the New Testament? What exactly is a church? BY whom is it owned and ruled? How is it organized? What is expected of the individual members and what are the roles of the leaders?

The second half of our study will focus on the purpose of a local church – what is its mission; what is it to accomplish? We will organize our look at the church’s purpose around the direction of that purpose – an inward purpose designed by God to strengthen and help members become like his Son. An outward purpose of declaring God’s glory, each of us being lights to the world; and of course, an upward purpose of praising and worshipping God who has saved us and added us to the church of his Son.

Each lesson is designed to teach something important about the church, but you can see how interrelated they are. Please give yourself fully to a careful consideration and study of each one.

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Preparation Questions

1. The English word “church” is used to translate the Greek word εκκλησια ekklesia. We associate the word church with religion, and exclusively use it in that context. But the Greek word simply meant a group of people or an assembly and was used in different contexts. Read the following passages:
 - a. Read Acts 5:11. Ekklesia is translated church here. Does it refer to people? How do you know?
 - b. Read Acts 19:23-41. The word ekklesia is used in vs. 32, 39 and 41. How is it translated? To whom does it refer? Is there anything religious about the use here?
 - c. Read Hebrews 12:22-29. Ekklesia is used in vs. 23. How is it translated?

2. Given ekklesia (translated church) means a group of people, an assembly – it is not a very meaningful word unless ownership or a common link is described that ties the group together. Thus, statements like *I will build my church* (i.e. my group of people) said by Jesus in Matthew 16:18, or Paul's description in I Corinthians 1:2 of the recipients of the I Corinthians letter *the church of God that is in Corinth* (a group of God's people) are so helpful. They identify the ownership of the group. Paul also describes in that passage what they should have in common - *to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.*

3. The word church is also used in both a universal and a local sense. You can already see that in I Corinthians 1:2. There was a group of Christ's people at Corinth, but there is also a reference to a larger group of people - *all those who in every place*. When Jesus said he would build his church, that was not a reference to a group of people in a specific place, but a statement of those who would belong to him anywhere and for all time. But believers would work together as a church (as an assembly or group) in specific locations like Corinth. Note the passages below.
 - a. Universal church
 - i. Read Acts 2:47 – when someone is saved, what does God do?
 - ii. Read Hebrews 12:22-29. In the heart of the passage is a reference to all the saved (*the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven and righteous made perfect* - vs. 23). It speaks of the kingdom established now through the new covenant. As noted above, in vs. 23 the word ekklesia is used, usually translated assembly. This is a reference to the universal church – all saved individuals, living or dead, who are part of the kingdom established by Christ.
 - iii. Read Ephesians 1:20-23. Is this describing Christ's rule over the church at Ephesus or a larger group of people? Read Ephesians 5:25-27. Same question – is this just talking about members of the church at Ephesus or a larger group?
 - b. Local church
 - i. Read Galatians 1:2. Was there more than one group of believers in Galatia?
 - ii. I Corinthians 1:2. How are these believers described in terms of geography and ownership?
 - iii. Read Romans 16:16. Is more than one church referenced? If so, what would be true of each of these groups of people? Bonus question – look for other references to churches in this chapter.
 - iv. Contrast the way the letters to the Corinthians and Thessalonians are addressed (using the word church) to Ephesians 1:1, Philippians 1:1 and Colossians 1:2 (where the word is not used). Do you think these are other ways of describing a local church?

Thought Questions

1. Why are you a member of the church to which you belong? How did you come to be a member of that church?
2. Can you give a scriptural reason or basis for each of the activities of the church to which you belong? Do you think that matters or not? Explain.

What is the Church of Christ?

Lesson 2 What is a Church?

Class Goals

By the end of our study, each of us will:

1. Submit our lives more fully to the kingship of Christ
2. Have a more accurate view of what Christ's church is and what it is not
3. Be more determined to please God in all that we do personally and in our part as a member of the body of Christ
4. Be a more active and faithful member of the church in our efforts to stir up one another to love and good works, telling others of Christ and honoring God in worship

Objectives of Today's Class

1. Examine and contrast the description of church in the Bible to the concept of church held by many today.
2. Recognize the distinction between membership in the universal church of all believers and being the member of a local church.

Introduction and Review

Let's review for a moment. The Greek word translated in English as church is *ekklesia*. *Ekklesia* means a group or assembly of people and is used in the New Testament to not only to designate a group of Christians (e.g. Acts 5:11) but also assemblies of other people (Acts 19:32, 39). But the key thing to note is that is always used for people.

In Lesson 1, we noted that sometimes *ekklesia* is used to refer to the group of all Christians – all the saved – everywhere and all time. For example, Jesus spoke of building his church (Matthew 16:18) or the picture in Hebrews 12:23 of the assembly of all the saved, dead or alive. This is the universal church, the saved whom God knows as his people (II Timothy 2:19)

But more often, *ekklesia* (translated church) refers to groups of Christians in a specific location. For example, "*the church of God that is in Corinth*" (I Corinthians 1:2). In studying "What is the Church of Christ?" most of our attention will be on the nature and purpose of these assemblies/groups of people who work together in a given location.

In this lesson we will look at the many concepts held for what is a church and contrast those views to the way the New Testament writers spoke of church. In these early lessons, what we are not covering is why the local church is so important. Later we will look at the purpose of a local church in lessons 8 to 13.

Preparation Questions

1. Read Acts 2:41-47. Who was God adding to the number in Jerusalem (vs. 47)?

2. Read Ephesians 1:1 and 1:22-23 (the whole chapter if you have time). Based on this chapter, who is in the church over which Christ is the head (vs. 22)?
3. Read the passages listed below and answer the questions about being part of a local church:
 - a. Based on Acts 9:18 and 22:15-16 (which describes the same event as Acts 9:18), was Paul saved and added by God to the church? In Acts 9:26, what did Paul attempt to do? If he had been unsuccessful, would he have no longer been a member of God's church?
 - b. What kind of man was a member of the church in Corinth (I Corinthians 5:1-2)?
 - c. What was Diotrephes doing to faithful brothers according to III John 10?
 - d. What was true of some of the members at Pergamum (Revelation 2:14-15)? What was true of only a few in the church in Sardis (Revelation 3:4)?

Different Views of Church

There are many competing – and not necessarily incompatible - ideas about what a church is. In other words, one may believe more than one of the following is a correct idea about church.

- For some church simply means a building where people come together
- For many the church is an institution. It is an entity that stands apart from its members, much as a business corporation is a separate legal entity. The institution of the church is ruled by a hierarchy of leaders (clergy), separate from the members (laity).
- Church may be viewed as a group of churches, i.e. all denominations – Catholic, Presbyterian, Lutheran, etc. – make up God's church.
- We speak today of different churches, meaning different denominations. A denomination would be a group of churches that are tied together in some manner. The idea, for example, would be that the Lutheran Church is comprised of all official Lutheran churches.
- Similarly, some would say the Church of Christ is simply the composite of all the local churches of Christ.
- For many, the church is a controlling entity through which a person comes to know Christ and have access to God. Here a church would have a special or exclusive role in teaching knowledge of God, allowing access to him or providing the essential sacraments needed to please God and be saved.

If we bear in mind that ekklesia always means people, it bears considerable light on the difference between the ideas above and the New Testament picture of the church. Church would not refer to the place where Christians meet, nor could it be a separate entity from its members, much less an institution through which someone has access to God. And while it may seem practical to think of the universal church or a specific denomination as being comprised of many churches, that is not the same idea as church simply being a group of people.

Biblical View - Membership in the Universal Church

When the New Testament speaks of church in a universal sense, it denotes all saved people of all time in every place. God is the one who added the saved to the number of his people in Acts 2:47. Only the Lord truly knows who are his (II Timothy 2:19) and the universal church is composed of saved people who are ruled by Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23). Membership in God's church comes with one's salvation.

Of course, the universal church does not function as we often think of churches functioning. It is merely the collection of all saints. Local churches are visible in their activities. The question then is how one becomes a member of a congregation, a local church.

Biblical View - Membership in a Local Church

So, every saved person is a member of God's church, but how does one become a member of a local church? In Acts 9, after his conversion, Paul was with the disciples (saved men and women) in Damascus. When he comes to Jerusalem, he attempts to join the disciples there (vs. 26), but the members were afraid of him. The leaders of the church, at that time the Apostles, make the decision as to Paul's membership.

Several important things to note. Paul recognized in both Damascus and Jerusalem, the value of being with other believers. In our study, we will have much to say about this in lessons 8-10. You see leaders making decisions about those who would be part of a church – and the possibility that they would make a poor decision (excluding someone who should be welcomed). Diotrephes, as a leader in a local church was guilty of purposefully excluding believers (III John 9-10). Of course, the opposite is possible. Those who are not saved, not recognized by God as ones belonging to him, could be active members of a local church. That's the situation in I Corinthians 5.

Belonging to a church is not a sign that you are saved. Sometimes we are sure of our relationship with God, because we belong to a church that is practicing good things, Biblical things. This is a false reason for confidence. It should also be clear that the New Testament never speaks of someone being born into the church or being baptized into a church as an infant. Nor would it be accurate to speak of being raised in a church (though what is often meant is growing up among members of that church).

Thought Questions

1. Do you think there are some individuals who turn to Christ in faith and repentance, are baptized for the washing away of their sins, but who don't know why they should participate with other Christians in a local church?
2. Who should decide whether someone can join a local church? On what basis should they make that decision?

What is the Church of Christ?

Lesson 3 What's in a Name?

Class Goals

By the end of our study, each of us will:

1. Submit our lives more fully to the kingship of Christ
2. Have a more accurate view of what Christ's church is and what it is not
3. Be more determined to please God in all that we do personally and in our part as a member of the body of Christ
4. Be a more active and faithful member of the church in our efforts to stir up one another to love and good works, telling others of Christ and honoring God in worship

Objective of Today's Class

1. Examine different names or titles given to local groups of Christians in the New Testament
2. Recognize some benefits and dangers using the name – Church of Christ
3. Examine different labels that used to describe churches today

Introduction and Review

On the outside of the building where the Embry Hills church gathers for worship and building up one another are the words – Church of Christ. Why that name? Could – perhaps should – other names be used along with that name or replacing that name? If we use the name Church of Christ, what are the advantages or disadvantages and are we pleasing God with this choice? These are a few questions we will examine in this lesson.

The name is a way of identifying the church. Remember, the Greek word translated church simply means a body of people, an assembly of people. It was often used in a non-religious manner, though for us, church always connotes a religious group. To give meaning to an ekklesia, a group of people, there must be something that ties them together. For the church (the ekklesia of the New Testament) what ties us all together is ownership. We belong to God and to his son, Jesus Christ. In the questions below, you will see passages that have numerous references to the church and its ownership.

Preparation Questions

1. For each of the following passages note what the local church (or churches) were called:
 - a. Acts 11:22
 - b. Acts 13:1
 - c. Acts 20:28 (cf. vs. 17)
 - d. Romans 16:16
 - e. I Corinthians 1:2
 - f. I Corinthians 16:1, Galatians 1:2
 - g. II Corinthians 1:1
 - h. I Thessalonians 1:1 and II Thessalonians 1:1
 - i. I Timothy 3:15
 - j. Revelation 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14

What do many of these designations have in common?

2. In the passages below, what are groups of Christians called without using the word church?
 - a. Acts 11:26
 - b. Ephesians 1:1
 - c. Philippians 4:21-22
 - d. Colossians 1:2
 - e. Colossians 4:15
 - f. I Peter 5:2

How do these designations indicate a relationship with God or Christ?

A Good Name

The group of Christians at Embry Hills generally call ourselves the Embry Hills Church of Christ. There are some helpful aspects to this name. It's a Biblical term, but also one that defines ownership and gives an expression of what holds the group of us together. We are not just a non-descript group of people; we are ones who belong to Christ. Church of Christ is meant to be an expression of our intent to follow and please Christ in all that we do. It is also a name that indicates our location – though it should be said, in our case, it means more about where we worship than where we are individually from, as we live throughout the Atlanta area. Among us you will hear other descriptions like those in the passages above: the Embry Hills church, the family at Embry Hills, the Christians here, or just Embry Hills.

There are other Biblical names for churches that would similarly describe our common ownership and purpose, but some of those names are already used by groups whose practices are not based on Biblical teachings. There may be a connotation to a name, that while Biblical, conveys a message we do not intend to send to the rest of the community.

An advantage of using the name, Church of Christ, is that many non-members (both Christians and non-Christians) who visit our assemblies of worship find practices and activities as that they already anticipate them to be. It should not be surprising that groups of Christians in different places who have a common view of how the rule of Christ operates (Lesson 4 of this study) would worship in a similar manner. The name Church of Christ has come to be associated with such groups of Christians. but we need to be careful. Too much emphasis could be placed on this name, as if it alone would satisfy God. To some extent, we use it as an accommodation to others to help set their expectations.

Our real emphasis should be on becoming in truth what this name means - a body of people willing to follow Christ, acknowledging his kingship in ruling us as a group and in our personal lives. Members who strive to please him and are willing to examine carefully what he desires, and then submit gladly to it whenever discovered. We should ask constantly whether this is an accurate picture of the Embry Hills Church of Christ.

Misconceptions of the Church of Christ

But while there are positive aspects to the use of the name Church of Christ, there can be negative ones as well. This can't always be controlled. Peter spoke of being insulted for the name of Christ and suffering as a Christian (I Peter 4:14,16). Even when bearing a good name, there will be those who see it as a derisive term. Sometimes we as members cause and perpetuate misconceptions, and lead to the name Church of Christ being denounced. For example:

- We might convey the message that we are the “best” church – that we are the church that understands the most truth, that follows the Bible better than all others. We need to keep in mind the Lord knows his own. The churches in Revelation 2 and 3 were chastised for doctrinal

and attitudinal errors. An attitude of pride will undo the good of sound doctrinal practices. It is not our goal to be better than other churches, but to follow Christ more sincerely day by day.

- We may become narrow-minded or Pharisaical in our language and conduct; more concerned with the “letter of the law” instead of the spirit.

We may be unfairly described in such terms despite our best efforts not to have pride or a narrow viewpoint. In lesson 5 we will discuss how the actions of every member matter in this regard. There are other misconceptions over which we have limited influence, because these are conclusions of others, drawn fairly or not, from sources that are often unreliable. For example:

- That calling ourselves a Church of Christ means that we are a continuation of the Restoration Movement. That our goal is to follow the practices and beliefs of men who were part of this movement that started in the 1820s and 1830s. These men may have had some admirable goals, but it is not in any way the goal of this church to look to them for guidance or try to perpetuate a particular practice they favored.
- That we have a unique and wrong way of “reading” the Bible. Here the charge is that the Bible is seen as a mere rule book, or that a hermeneutic (a method of interpreting and understanding the Bible) is being used which did not even exist in the First Century. We will challenge this idea more fully in lesson 4.

What’s in a Label?

A label is a short-hand way of defining something. Labels are placed on churches – by adherents or critics – to describe them beyond their chosen name. Here are some labels often placed on churches of Christ.

- Institutional vs. Non-Institutional
- Conservative vs. Liberal
- Cooperating churches
- Anti churches
- Mainstream or Mainline churches (and within these - traditional or innovative churches)

We could spend considerable time on these labels, but time will only permit a few comments. One mistaken conclusion from these labels might be that the Church has split into one or more components. The universal church cannot be split, since it is the body of all the saved known in its entirety only by God. Of course, local churches may be characterized through labels – whether accurate or not, helpful or not. Once more, we must be careful to not lose sight of the goal of simply being a church that follows Christ and pleases him. Our goal certainly is not to ensure that we “earn” some desired label or to avoid one that we disdain.

Thought Questions

1. If you have worshipped at another church of Christ, what are some of the differences between that church and Embry Hills?
2. What misleading ideas could be derived through the use of labels placed on individual churches?

What is the Church of Christ?

Lesson 4 The Rule of Christ

Class Goals

By the end of our study, each of us will:

1. Submit our lives more fully to the kingship of Christ
2. Have a more accurate view of what Christ's church is and what it is not
3. Be more determined to please God in all that we do personally and in our part as a member of the body of Christ
4. Be a more active and faithful member of the church in our efforts to stir up one another to love and good works, telling others of Christ and honoring God in worship

Objective of Today's Class

1. Examine how Jesus rules his church
2. Recognize the role Scriptures play in Christ's rule
3. Discuss how the Scriptures communicate the will of Christ

Introduction and Review

Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, he would build his church and in Ephesians 1:20-23, God is said to have *seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. ²²And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church,²³ which is his body.* If there is one thing that all religious bodies that claim to be Christian should agree on it is this – that the church is Christ's and he is its ruler. After his resurrection, Jesus told the eleven remaining apostles (Matthew 28:16) that all authority had been given to him in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18). The question is how does he rule; how does he exercise his authority. That is the focus of this class.

Preparation Questions

1. Based on the following questions, how important were the scriptures to Jesus in terms of understanding God's will (Matthew 12:3, 5; Matthew 19:4, Matthew 22:31)?
2. What were the Apostles promised the Holy Spirit would do for them (John 14:26, 16:13)?
3. Read Hebrews 8:6-13. Note the contrast between the first covenant and the second covenant.
4. Describe the word the Apostles would take into the world (Matthew 28:19-20):

Four Essential Truths

There are many ideas about the manner in which the church should be directed, but we will only examine what the Scriptures say about that rule. There are four important concepts discussed in the New Testament that provide vital insight to how Christ rules his people.

1. Christ promised his apostles they would receive a message from God through the Spirit
The follow-up to Jesus' claim of having all authority is this message to the apostles – *¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*” Remember, disciples are the saved, the people Jesus adds to his church. The Apostles would carry the message into the world to save people and instruct them how to live.

Jesus had already told them how they would receive this message. The night before he died, Jesus promised the apostles the Father would send them the Holy Spirit who *will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you* (John 14:

Not only would the Spirit give them a clear memory of what Jesus had taught them, he goes on to say (John 16:12-13) there were other things the Spirit would reveal:

¹²“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

This revelation they received is the means by which Jesus rules his people.

2. The apostles claimed to have authority through this revealed message
The writers of the New Testament acknowledged the message they received was one emanating from God. In I Corinthians 2, Paul spoke of the hidden wisdom of God fulfilled in the crucifixion of Christ. He affirmed the need to have the Spirit of God to know God's thoughts, then says this about God's revelation to him and to other inspired men:

¹²Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God.¹³And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

In Ephesians 3:3-5, Paul speaks of ³ *how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. ⁴When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.*

Peter likewise claimed this type of divine guidance along with other inspired men:

¹⁹And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, ²⁰knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. ²¹For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. II Peter 1:19-21

Because their message came from God, they expected what they taught, and what they wrote, to be followed and obeyed by the Christians and the churches they addressed. For example:

- *I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.* I Timothy 3:15

- *Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle. II Thessalonians 2:15*
 - *And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. II Thessalonians 3:14*
 - *If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord. I Corinthians 14:37*
3. The message to those inspired men was a covenant that made the previous one obsolete
 Their message was a new covenant that replaced the old. The writer of Hebrews contrasts the two covenants in Hebrews 8:6-7 ⁶*But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises.* ⁷*For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.* He quotes Jeremiah in vs. 9-12 who foretold of this new covenant before going on to say in vs. 13 ¹³*In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.* Similarly, he argues the first covenant has been done away in Hebrews 10:9 *in order to establish the second.*

This new covenant – the new testament – took force as the will of Christ over men and women upon Christ’s death (Hebrews 9:15-17). ¹⁵*Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.* ¹⁶*For where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established.* ¹⁷*For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive.*

Therefore, the rule of Christ is now carried out through the New Testament writings and his church looks to that covenant for its direction.

4. The message is sufficient for Christ to rule at all times in all places
 A question could be raised about the consistency of the message the Apostles took to the world. Did it change from church to church, perhaps depending on the unique character or culture of each church’s location? What they claimed was the same message was taught in everywhere.
- *I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, **as I teach everywhere in every church.*** I Cor. 4:17
 - Now concerning the collection for the saints, **as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also...** I Cor. 16:1
 - But if anyone seems to be contentious, **we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.** I Cor. 11:16
 - For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, **as in all the churches of the saints.** I Cor. 14:33b

Beyond teaching the same message everywhere, the writers of the New Testament also stressed the completeness and finality of what they taught. For example, the Hebrew writer (Hebrews 1:1-2) spoke of the message of Christ as being given in the last days - *Long ago, at many times*

and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, implying there would be no other revelation thereafter. This explains the tone and surprise of Paul's statement in Galatians 1:6-9 which denied there could be any other message or teaching:

⁶ I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— ⁷ not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. ⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. ⁹ As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

How Does the Bible Reveal God's Will?

The real starting point is to have agreed on the four concepts above. If we acknowledge Christ is exercising his will over the church through the message of the New Testament, it will negate many other approaches that Christian religious bodies use to determine their practices and worship. It means we will not look to any person or council of men to establish rules or creeds as a guide to the church, but will look to the scriptures. It certainly means we will not accept a teaching that contradicts or supplants the message of the New Testament, even under the notion that the new teaching "fits" better our modern culture.

It is sometimes pointed out that the New Testament is more than a mere rulebook for the church, and that some churches of Christ apply to the New Testament a method of reading and interpreting it that did not even exist until the 16th century. It is beyond the scope of this class to examine this assertion fully. We have another class titled Understanding the Will of God which delves more fully into the question. I would ask you in this study, as we look to the New Testament for guidance to the church, to consider an overriding principle. We are, above all else, striving to please God and serve his son, Christ Jesus. If the New Testament has the thoughts of God revealed in its words, then it conveys his will. Following that will should be our paramount concern.

As we move forward, see if the approach we take to our study is different in any material regard from how we would understand anyone's will. Generally speaking, we look to what they specifically tell us, what they show us or what we come to see through our familiarity with them that they expect us to do even if not said explicitly. We may not always agree on what a given scripture is teaching, but when we approach it with a humble desire to see and follow God's will, we will be blessed and enlightened.

Thought Questions

1. How did your parents teach you what they expected of you?
2. What are some practices or activities of churches that are not mentioned anywhere in the New Testament?

What is the Church of Christ?

Lesson 5

Members of the Church – Citizens of the Kingdom

Class Goals

By the end of our study, each of us will:

1. Submit our lives more fully to the kingship of Christ
2. Have a more accurate view of what Christ's church is and what it is not
3. Be more determined to please God in all that we do personally and in our part as a member of the body of Christ
4. Be a more active and faithful member of the church in our efforts to stir up one another to love and good works, telling others of Christ and honoring God in worship

Objective of Today's Class

1. Examine the character expected of every member of the church
2. Look honestly at the damage our sin and neglect causes to the church and its mission

Introduction and Review

If the church is an assembly, a group of people, then the goals, the attitudes, and the conduct of its individual members will have a significant impact on how God views that congregation, and on the influence for good or harm it has in the community. This is a different concern than looking at whether the church as a body is sound in its doctrinal practices, it's a recognition that each member has an important role in whether the church effectively carries out the purpose God has for it.

This lesson then, focuses on the individual members who make up a local church. If you are such a member, ask yourself these questions:

- Why am I here? Why this church?
- What am I committed to do as a member of this church?
- How do I expect this church to affect me?

There are some wrong, or incomplete, answers that may be given to these questions. For example –

- My parents raised me in the Church of Christ
- We have always been Church of Christ
- This church is part of the right church
- I know I need to worship like this church does in order to be saved
- This church has a good influence on my children
- This is the friendliest church I have ever been a part of

This lesson alone will not expose all of the deficiencies in the answers above, but I hope the study as a whole will give you a richer, deeper understanding of what it means to be a part of a faithful and edifying congregation.

Preparation Questions

1. Read I Peter 3:8. What is every Christian expected to possess?
2. Read Ephesians 4:1-3. How are we to walk?
3. Read I Corinthians 6:6-8. What problem existed among the Corinthians? What message would that have sent to those outside the body of Christ?

The Goal for Every Member

The composition of Christ's Church is all the saved, everywhere, for all time. Ideally the local church is made up exclusively of those who are saved, but we have looked at passages (I Corinthians 5:1-2, Revelation 2:14) that indicate there is no assurance of this. The Lord knows those who are his (II Timothy 2:19), and we will not always have an accurate view of who they are. Nevertheless, the churches of the New Testament were addressed as being composed of those who were saints and faithful. That should be the desire of every member.

But the message to those Christians was always of the need to change, to mature, to put aside their sins and to become more and more like Christ. In the passage to Timothy regarding those the Lord knows as his, it says that they are ones who depart from iniquity. It's a constant theme of the New Testament, but two additional examples will suffice:

1. Paul challenged the Ephesians to no longer walk as the Gentiles do, saying in Ephesians 4:22-24 - *put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires,²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds,²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.*
2. Speaking to those who have "died to sin", Paul urged them in Romans 6:12-13 - *¹² Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. ¹³ Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.*

Lessons 8 through 13 of this study and especially lessons 8-10 will concentrate on how the church assists this personal effort to mature and grow like Christ, in particular we will look at Ephesians 4:11-16 where each of us is striving to no longer be a child, but instead to grow with the assistance of what the leaders of the church and every member are providing. This goal of individual growth is emphasized well beyond doctrinal purity, though both are essential.

There is a godly character expected of each of us as we work together in a church. Note the importance of the character mentioned in each of these passages:

- Humility – I Peter 5:5
- Non-Judgmental Spirit – Romans 14:10-12
- Forbearance and Forgiveness – Colossians 3:13
- Self-sacrifice – I Corinthians 10:24
- Generosity – I John 3:16-18
- Compassion and Patience – Colossians 3:12
- Submissive Spirit – Ephesians 5:21
- Love – I John 4:7-8

I Peter 3:8 speaks to all members and repeats the necessary character of all – *Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.* This is the spirit and attitude that will allow a church to accomplish the task God has given it.

Damage Caused by Members

Unfortunately, the New Testament is full of situations where members of a church were not what they were supposed to be. A partial list includes:

- Sexual Immorality – I Corinthians 5:1-2
- Disputes – I Corinthians 6:5-8
- Uncooperative/burdensome members – II Thessalonians 3:6-10
- Bias/Prejudice – Galatians 2:11-14, James 2:1-4
- Divisions/parties – I Corinthians 1:11-13
- Pride/Argumentative Spirit – I Timothy 6:3-5
- Love of the World – II Timothy 4:10

Think of the damage done within a church, and the harm to its influence without, when these kinds of sins and issues characterize the members of that church. It is discouraging to those who genuinely want to follow Christ. Such behavior is seen as the hypocrisy that it is, and often pushes away those who are weak or who might come to know Christ. It causes dissension and disunity that distracts the congregation from its mission. Nevertheless, those engaged in such sins are often still comfortable with the knowledge that they belong to a church that is sound in its worship and organization or wears the “right” name. Such a spirit only reinforces some of the worst stereotypes held by the lost against Christians or the Church.

We should recognize the danger and look honestly at our own spirit and conduct. When we fail to be what Christ asks of us it affects others. Being part of a sound, active and faithful church will not save us if we are unwilling to submit our own lives to Christ.

Great Good Done by Members

On the other hand, great good that can be accomplished when every member is committed to presenting their bodies as a sacrifice to God, avoiding conformity with the world and being transformed (Romans 12:1-2). How much more is accomplished in a place of peace and unity. How much more we are capable of being the lights of the world (Matthew 5:14-16). It’s not enough to be a church that maintains doctrinal purity, we must truly be citizens of Christ’s kingdom who live out the precepts of Christ.

Thought Questions

1. What message does your attendance and participation in the activities of the church send to the other members?
2. Is your conduct in the “world” consistent with your reputation within a local congregation? If not, what damage may you cause in the future?

What is the Church of Christ?

Lesson 6

Role of Leaders – What are Elders for?

Class Goals

By the end of our study, each of us will:

1. Submit our lives more fully to the kingship of Christ
2. Have a more accurate view of what Christ's church is and what it is not
3. Be more determined to please God in all that we do personally and in our part as a member of the body of Christ
4. Be a more active and faithful member of the church in our efforts to stir up one another to love and good works, telling others of Christ and honoring God in worship

Objective of Today's Class

1. Examine the important responsibilities given to elders
2. Note the value to a local church as a whole and to each member of having faithful and capable elders who are serious about discharging their duties.

Introduction and Review

A study of elders usually begins with, and often ends, with a review of the qualifications listed for them in I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. While a worthy study, these two passages mostly explain who should serve as an elder, and don't provide much insight to the essential work God has given to elders. In this lesson, we will note some of the qualifications, but spend most of our time examining two aspects of an elder's work.

The first is that of leading a church as a whole; making decisions with the other elders that direct and affect an entire local church. Because shepherd or pastor is one of the names used for an elder (Ephesians 4:11), we will refer to this as Flock Shepherding. The second aspect of an elder's work is the effort made to encourage and build-up every soul over whom they have responsibility. We can think of this as Sheep Shepherding. Both are important, but we will stress the greater importance of looking after individual souls.

Preparation Questions

1. Read Acts 11:29, Acts 20:17, 28, Ephesians 4:11, Philippians 1:1, I Timothy 3:1 List the words you see used for the leaders of the church. Are there leaders other than elders in any of these verses? Note the translation you are using.
2. Read Acts 20:35. Who did Paul stress should especially be remembered by the elders?
3. Read Hebrews 13:17. What responsibility is given to the elders? To those they watch over?

One Office – One Role

There are three words or word groups in the New Testament that are used for the position God has designed for leadership in local churches. Each group has multiple English words depending upon the translation you are using, Here's a Bible reference to each with a reference to different translations:

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- I Timothy 4:14 – Elders or Eldership (NKJV, ESV)/Presbytery (KJV)
- Ephesians 4:11 – Shepherd (ESV)/Pastor (NKJV, NASB)
- I Timothy 3:1 – Bishop (NKJV, RSV)/Overseer (ESV, NASB)

These terms all refer to the same office. It is not until well after the First Century that bishop and elder and pastor come to mean different positions. Note in the following passages where the terms are used interchangeably:

1. In Titus 1:5, Titus is charged with appointing elders, who are referred to in Titus 1:7 as overseers.
2. In I Peter 5:1 Peter speaks to elders whom he commands to shepherd (Gr. poimante) the flock (I Peter 5:2). The Greek word for a pastor or shepherd is poimena.
3. In Acts 20:17 Paul calls for the elders of Ephesus to meet him. During that meeting, he says they have been made overseers (Acts 20:28).

Why Elders?

Elders served an important and active role in the churches of the New Testament. Look at this list and note how many different books and writers make references to elders and their work.

Passage	Information Regarding Elders
Acts 11:29-30	Elders distributed relief in Judea (first time they are mentioned – though the Apostles serve as a precursor)
Acts 14:23	“when they had appointed elders for them in every church”
Acts 15:2-6, 22-23, 16:1-4	Elders in Jerusalem, deciding and communicating doctrinal matters
Acts 20:17	There were elders in Ephesus
Acts 20:28	They were made overseers to care for the church of God
Acts 21:18-25	They guarded the church’s unity – advice to Paul
Ephesians 4:11	They are a gift from God (shepherds)
Philippians 1:1	Overseers and deacons in Philippi
I Thess. 5:12-13	They were to be esteemed highly because of their work
Titus 1:5	Instruction to Titus - “so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you”
Titus 1, I Tim. 3	Their Qualifications
I Timothy 5:17	Elders were teaching and being supported
I Peter 5:1-5	Instructions to elders and congregations
Hebrews 13:7, 17	Instructions to obey leaders (elders)
James 5:14	Elders were praying for the sick

Elders are said to be a gift of God to the church, as are apostles, prophets, evangelists and teachers – Ephesians 4:11-12: ¹¹And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

But how are they a gift to the church? How do they serve the church?

Flock Shepherding

Serving as shepherds to the flock of God (Acts 20:28 and I Peter 5:2), elders serve by leading the entire local church or flock. Guided by the rule of Christ as revealed through his Apostles in the New Testament, there are still many decisions that elders must make on behalf of a church that are not specifically spelled out in the Scriptures. Those Scriptures are to serve as a guide in all cases, but consider the following sample of decisions or actions affecting the whole church that require the discernment and judgement of elders:

1. Make immediate and reactive responses to events as they arise (for example: congregational discipline, resolving squabbles and issues, requests for support from members and preachers, unexpected “events” in the assemblies)
2. Constantly spend time to understand (“take heed to”) the flock—in order to set strategic directions (collect facts, seek and accept suggestions or criticism, sense the “mood,” predict events, preempt difficulties, communicate a vision, set priorities)
3. Make/explain/implement plans (direct resources, set guidelines for the work of deacons and others, encourage giving, prevent/remedy divisive behavior).
4. Provide spiritual food (select and guide teachers, preachers, special events and speakers)
5. Exhort and motivate (set expectations, correct, encourage, praise)
6. Provide for an edifying and orderly worship – I Corinthians 14:26 (set the order, guidelines, select leaders, remedy problems)
7. Watch for and correct doctrinal error – Titus 1:9 (see trends, teach preemptively and preventively, address specific errors)

If just this list were handled well, imagine how much more equipped a church would be to carry out its responsibilities (Ephesians 4:12).

Sheep Shepherding

But elders are also meant to be a gift to the church because of the care they take to shepherd every individual member (Sheep Shepherding). I would argue this is the far more important (though often overlooked) aspect of an elder’s work. Even the work focused on leading the church as a whole is intended to strengthen every member (Ephesians 4:12-16. Vs. 13-14 especially, *until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children.*)

This responsibility for each soul and especially for those who are weak in their faith is highlighted in several passages. Look at Hebrews 13:17

¹⁷Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Elders must give an account to God for every soul in the church they are leading. When Paul addressed the elders of Ephesus in Acts 20, he used himself as an example of the diligence they were to employ in their work. Several statements are especially important to shepherds of sheep:

- *for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.* – Acts 20:31
- *I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house* – Acts 20:20

- *In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*" – Acts 20:35

In the qualifications for elders in I Timothy 3, we see an emphasis placed on the man's role with his family:

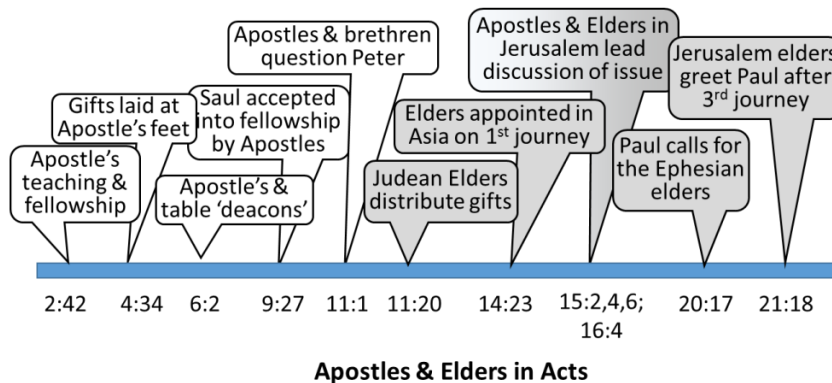
⁴He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?

Obviously, a good father is the man who has an influential and positive relationship with each of his children – not the man who just runs a household efficiently. An elder who takes this responsibility seriously will be well served to study the level of care revealed in the Bible that good shepherds are to give to their sheep, especially the weak ones, and the disasters that result when they fail in this task (Ezekiel 34:1-6, 12-16; Luke 15:1-7).

When a congregation recognizes the valuable work of elders there will be a deepened sense of urgency to develop and appoint men elders.

Thought Questions

1. Note the chart. Did the Apostles early on carry out some responsibilities that were later placed on Elders?



2. What can an entire church do to help men be prepared to serve as elders?