

WHAT IS THE LOCAL CHURCH?

Learning Objectives¹

After this lesson, learners will:

1. Understand God's design and purpose for the local church
2. Recognize the biblical basis for church membership and authority
3. Identify their role and responsibilities within the local church
4. Be able to explain why church involvement isn't optional for Christians

INTRODUCTION: THE CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGE

Jesus warned that many would claim to be His followers in the last days. How does the world know who represents Jesus? False teachings are abundant in the name of Christ. Many live lives that do not match God's holiness and character yet claim to be members of His body.

We live in a country where claiming to be a Christian is fashionable and accepted. Yet many who make that claim:

- Commit adultery
- Abandon their wives
- Get drunk
- Frequent clubs
- Cheat their employers
- Engage in corrupt business
- Have an out-of-control temper
- Use slanderous speech

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- How does the world know who is genuine and who is false?
- How do we know who is a genuine Jesus follower?
- How will the world know the truth, and how will they know who represents that truth to them?

¹ NOTE: This study is based on the book Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus. Copyright © 2012 Jonathan Leeman Published by Crossway 1300 Crescent Street Wheaton, Illinois 60187. Good News Publishers. Kindle Edition.

I. DEFINING THE CHURCH

A. Common Misconceptions

The local church is NOT:

1. A club or volunteer organization where membership is optional
2. A service provider where the customer has all authority
3. A support group merely discussing divine things

B. Biblical Definition

1. "The church is the new covenant people of God, rooted in the promises to Israel and inaugurated by the Holy Spirit, which refers both to all believers in Jesus Christ, both living and dead, and to local gatherings of believers."²
2. The NT Local Church defined:
 - "A formally organized body of believers meeting to worship together."³
 - "A called out assembly of believers, meeting together in a particular location for the purpose of worship and spiritual accountability"
 - "A local church is a group of Christians who regularly gather in Christ's name to officially affirm and oversee one another's membership in Jesus Christ and His kingdom through gospel preaching and gospel ordinances." - Lehman

C. Biblical Pictures of the Church

Scripture presents three primary images:

1. Body (**Romans 12:4; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27**)
 - Unity and interdependence of members
 - Diverse functions working together
 - Christ, as the head
 - Mutual care and support
2. Bride (**2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:24,32**)
 - Exclusive relationship with Christ
 - Covenant commitment
 - Sacred unity
 - Pure devotion
3. Building (**1 Corinthians 3:9; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:20-22**)

² <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/origin-nature-church/>

³ <http://www.brainyquote.com/words/ch/church143947.html>

- Christ as foundation
- Structured growth
- Individual stones fitted together
- God's dwelling place

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND DIVINE PLAN

A. Covenant Progression

There is only one "People of God," those who have been redeemed by faith in the Messiah. Different governments marked how God communicated and dealt with the people of God:

1. Adamic Covenant

- Direct personal communication in the perfect garden - this was the perfect kingdom over which God reigned.
- God met and talked personally with Adam

2. Abrahamic Covenant

- Sign of Circumcision for Covenant People
- Included both regenerate and unregenerate Israelites, identified with national Israel. But not all of these people were the "people of God" in a salvific sense. The chosen people of Israel were given the land that Adam had forfeited through his rebellion and sin. They found this place groaning under the curse of sin and idolatry, the full effects of the fall were on display.

3. Mosaic Covenant

- The law given to national Israel - some refer to this law as containing moral, ceremonial, and civil. Moral - These are the ethical and universal principles that reflect God's character and apply to all people, in all places, at all times. Ceremonial - These laws pertain to Israel's worship practices, sacrifices, festivals, and rituals, all of which foreshadowed Christ and His work of redemption. Civil - These are the laws that governed the day-to-day life and societal structures of ancient Israel as a theocratic nation.
- People met God at the temple through priests and sacrifices.

4. New Covenant

- Circle of only regenerated believers
- Christ died and rose again, then ascended to sit on the "throne of David" as King over his kingdom. He was given all authority!
- Public identification into the kingdom is in the church through believers' baptism

B. The Church's Mission

The mission of the church is the Great Commission ([Matthew 28:18–20](#)):

1. **Go into the world with Christ's authority** - The church operates under Christ's delegated authority. This isn't optional or suggested – it's commanded. When local churches make decisions, develop ministries, or engage their communities, they do so as Christ's authorized representatives. This authority isn't based on human wisdom or cultural relevance but on Christ's own authority over all creation.
2. **Make disciples** - Notice that Jesus didn't command us merely to make converts or fill buildings. The church's primary task is disciple-making – the comprehensive work of helping people become fully committed followers of Jesus. This involves far more than just programming or activities; it requires "sacrificially giving to God through the church" and "providing accountability and discipline."
3. **Baptize them** - Baptism isn't just an optional ritual but a crucial part of the church's mission. It serves as the public identification of believers with Christ and His church. Baptism naturally connects to church membership – it makes little sense to be baptized into Christ's body without connecting to a local expression of that body.
4. **Teach them to follow Jesus** - The church's teaching ministry isn't just about information transfer; it's about transformation. "The discipling and equipping of saints were entrusted to the local church." This involves systematic instruction in God's Word, practical application of biblical truth, and ongoing accountability for spiritual growth.
5. **All for God's glory** - The ultimate purpose for our existence is for the glory of God! Westminster Shorter Catechism: Q1: What is the chief end of man? A1: **Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.**

III. Church Authority and Membership

A. Biblical Basis for Authority

1. Christians must submit to church leadership (Hebrews 13:17). "Christians are commanded to submit to those in church leadership because they must give an account." This isn't arbitrary or oppressive – leaders will answer to God for how they shepherd His flock. This accountability goes both ways, creating a framework of responsible spiritual leadership.
Hebrews 13:17 [Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.](#)
2. Specific elders care for particular people (1 Peter 5:1-5, Acts 20:29-30). This isn't abstract or theoretical – it's personal and particular. Just as parents are responsible

for specific children, not just children in general, church leaders are responsible for specific believers.

1 Peter 5:1-5 So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. ⁵ Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

Acts 20:29-30 I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.

3. Church discipline requires membership (**1 Corinthians 5:1-12**). The church has both the right and responsibility to exercise discipline when necessary. As our source points out, "Church discipline cannot work if local church membership doesn't exist. How do you put someone 'out' if they were never 'in'?" This underscores why formal membership matters – it provides the framework for meaningful accountability.

"The local church is the authority on earth that Jesus has instituted to officially affirm and give shape to my Christian life and yours." - Leeman.

B. Understanding Church Membership

Definition: "A formal relationship between a church and a Christian characterized by the church's affirmation and oversight of a Christian's discipleship and the Christian's submission to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church." - Leeman

Key Elements:

1. Church formally affirms:
 - Individual's profession of faith
 - Baptism as credible
 - Discipleship in Christ as valid
2. Individual formally submits to:
 - Body's authority
 - Leaders' oversight
 - Mutual accountability

C. The Church as an Embassy

1. The church functions like an embassy by:
 - Representing one nation (Kingdom) to another
 - Affirming citizens of Christ's kingdom
 - Protecting citizens of Christ's kingdom
 - Proclaiming the laws of Christ's kingdom
 - Inviting all peoples to worship the King
2. Practical Implications - We are pilgrims and sojourners on our way to Heaven:
 - Identification not national, ethnic, or cultural
 - Identification as children of the King
 - Church shows what the Kingdom of God looks like
 - Citizens live differently and look different
 - Passionate commitment to spreading good news

IV. COMMON ERRORS AND BIBLICAL CORRECTION

A. Wrong Thinking About the Church

1. Christians can attend indefinitely without joining
2. Baptism can occur apart from joining
3. Lord's Supper was taken without joining
4. The Christian life can be autonomous
5. Church involvement is optional

B. Biblical Response

Key principles:

1. "Christians don't join churches; they submit to them." - Leeman, p 30
2. "Once you choose Christ, you must choose his people, too. It's a package deal." Leeman, p.31
3. "A Christian must indeed choose to join a church, but that does not make it a voluntary organization. We must choose a local church just as we are obligated to choose Christ. Having chosen Christ, a Christian has no choice but to choose a church to join." Leeman, p.66

V. APPLICATION AND RESPONSE

A. Personal Evaluation

Assess your current:

1. Church involvement
2. Submission to leadership
3. Participation in body life
4. Kingdom representation

B. Corporate Implementation

The church's responsibilities:

1. Proclaiming truth
2. Discipling and equipping saints
3. Providing accountability
4. Administering discipline
5. Building unity

Discussion Questions:

1. How do the biblical pictures of the church challenge your current view?
2. What prevents Christians from engaging in church membership?
3. How does seeing the church as an embassy change your perspective?
4. What practical changes should this teaching produce in your life?

TEACHING NOTES:

Learning objectives are covered in the notes in the following areas:

1. "Understand God's design and purpose for the local church."

This is primarily covered in the "DEFINING THE CHURCH" section, mainly through:

- The Biblical Definition subsection
- Biblical Pictures of the Church (Body, Bride, Building metaphors)
- It was further elaborated in the "The Church's Mission" section, which discusses the Great Commission.

2. "Recognize the biblical basis for church membership and authority."

This is addressed in the "Church Authority and Membership" section, specifically:

- Biblical Basis for Authority
- Understanding Church Membership
- Supported by scriptural references (Hebrews 13:17, 1 Peter 5:1-5, Acts 20:29-30)

3. "Identify their role and responsibilities within the local church."

This appears in multiple sections:

- The "Biblical Pictures of the Church" section (showing how members function in the body)
- "Understanding Church Membership" (discussing submission and accountability)
- "APPLICATION AND RESPONSE" section with personal evaluation points

4. "Be able to explain why church involvement isn't optional for Christians."

This is primarily covered in:

- "COMMON ERRORS AND BIBLICAL CORRECTION" section
- The Biblical Response subsection includes key principles, such as "Once you choose Christ, you must choose his people, too. It's a package deal."
- The section challenging wrong thinking about church being optional