

“The Church” and People of God

S.R. Eph. 5:25 – 27

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Introduction

- A. The word “church” is a collective noun, applied in the universal and ultimate sense to those who are the true *“people of God.”*
- B. Because these people have answered the call of the gospel, and have been baptized into Christ (Ac. 2:41,47; Gal. 3:27), to come into Christ is to come into His church – the universal body of the saved.
- C. Can one equally say that to be in this church is to be in Christ?

I. THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

- A. If careful definitions and faithfulness are maintained, “in Christ” and “in the church” do refer to the same “in” relationship. However, even then it is not correct to say that Christ and the church are interchangeable.
 - 1. Christ is the Savior, while the church we speak of here is the product or result of His saving process.
 - 2. Only those “added” by the Lord (Ac. 2:47) are members of this church, and the Lord makes no mistakes (2 Tim. 2:19).
- B. Some call this the “invisible” church, although its members with their influence are “visibly” engaged in serving their Lord. Many *figures of speech* are used to define their functions.
 - 1. In the figure of “kingdom,” Christ is the King, and those ruled are citizens - Eph. 2:19.
 - 2. When likened to a “body,” Christ is the Head to whom members (foot, hand, etc.) submit in singleness of spirit - 1 Cor. 12:1-31; Col. 1:18.
 - 3. In terms of a “building,” Christ is the Foundation, and individuals are living stones - Mt. 16:18; 1 Pt. 2:5.
 - 4. As a “family,” Christ is the firstborn Son, and “born again” ones are brethren or children - Rom. 8:29.
- C. In all such figures Christ is predominant – the key factor, every scriptural metaphor connects us to Christ.
 - 1. Christ is the true Vine, and “if *anyone* does not abide in Me, *he* is cast out as a branch” (Jn. 15:6).
 - 2. *The universal church has as its units individual Christians, not local churches or denominations.*

D. We are reminded of fleshly Israel, called “chosen,” a “holy nation,” and “[God’s] own possession”; but of whom God said only a very small remnant would be saved - Isa. 1:9; 10:20-23.

1. Paul discusses the saving of that remnant, “according to the election of grace” (Rom. 11).
 - a. Expanding on this theme, he pictures the Jewish “tree” with the physical phase of the Abrahamic promise at its root, i.e., “I will make of you a great nation” (Gen. 12:2,3).
 - b. But Paul says some of the natural branches (Jews) were “broken off” (Rom. 11:17).
 - c. This was “because of unbelief” (v.20).
2. *One’s “election by grace” depends upon individual faithfulness to Christ.*

E. These will be the church in its ultimate sense — the bride presented to Christ.

1. A proper understanding of the *people of God* can leave us with a feeling of helplessness if we expect to achieve that status on our merit.
2. But the true church (or bride) of Christ is “holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:27), not through perfection on man’s part, but because Christ “gave Himself for her” (v.25).
3. Faithfulness involves humility: recognition of sins, genuine repentance, and obedience that brings one to God, seeking forgiveness through the sacrifice Christ made on man’s behalf - Rom. 6:1-6; Gal. 3:26,27.
4. The faithful “have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 Jn. 2:1).
5. He is their hope and confidence.
6. Those who remain faithful, maintaining a humble, penitent, and prayerful dependence upon Him, are told that “nothing shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39).

II. THE LOCAL CHURCH

A. A plurality of saints (who have access to one another) by mutual agreement and in keeping with New Testament examples, form *local churches* in their various communities.

1. Paul addressed a letter to “the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons” (Phil. 1:1), later calling them a “church” (Phil. 4:15).
2. We can read of “the church of God . . . at Corinth” (1 Cor. 1:2), and “the church of the Thessalonians” (1 Thess. 1:1).
3. Ideally the local church is a “team” of universal church saints.
 - a. It should have as members only those who are Christians (Ac. 9:26-28), and reject those who persist in sin (Mt. 18:17).

- b. But this membership is not as certain as that of the universal church.
 - 4. *Fallible people* make these decisions, and determine those added or rejected.
 - a. Their knowledge of God's word and of the hearts of the people is subject to error.
 - b. They may retain some whom God would "put away" (1 Cor. 5:1,2), or "cast out" some whom God would receive (3 Jn. 10).
 - 5. *We must not conclude that all whom men recognize as "church members" are truly in Christ and are, therefore, **people of God**.*
- B. We must remember, however, that God knew the fallible nature of His creatures when He left the forming of local churches to man.
 - 1. That imperfect brethren may function acceptably as a local church is shown in commendations extended by inspiration - Phil. 1:3-11; 1 Thess. 1:8.
 - 2. Paul could say to the brethren in Corinth, "I . . . could not speak to you as to spiritual people, but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ" (1 Cor. 3:1), and yet still call them "the church of God . . . at Corinth" (1 Cor. 1:2).
 - 3. This does not excuse error, but it does show that becoming a member of a local church is not the final step to glory.
 - 4. We should see the local church as a journey, not a destination.
 - 5. It consists of imperfect people, yes; but God intends for them to "grow up" in Christ (Eph. 4:14,15) in keeping with His instructions.
 - 6. This humble "press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14) may well be the spirit behind a "sound" church.
- C. The letters to Corinth are filled with warnings and admonitions to correct various errors found there. In fact, much of God's will concerning local churches comes to us via correction of churches in the first century.
 - 1. We are also shown that a local church may leave its first love (Rev. 2:4,5), and lose its place before God — "unless you repent."
 - 2. The Laodiceans were only "lukewarm," and were told, "I will vomit you out of my mouth . . . Therefore be zealous and repent" (Rev. 3:16,19).
 - 3. Further study of the seven churches of Asia (Rev. 2 & 3) should convince us that being "accepted" by the local church is far from satisfying divine demands for the *ultimate "people of God."*

4. *However, these letters also show that each person is judged individually, and their hope and confidence is based on Jesus Christ, not on the local church.*
- D. God looked for His ultimate “people” among the Jews on the basis of faithfulness; and there is much evidence that today only the “faithful few” among spiritual Israel (Gal. 3:29) will be acceptable to Him.
1. Meantime, the local church becomes our proving ground — for mutual edification and encouragement in the worship and service of God, and the spreading of His saving message.
 2. Its members have been saved from past sins, as Israel was saved from Egypt; but there is yet the “journey through the wilderness” before entering into Canaan, or into heaven.
- E. This means the local church is a spiritual relationship: for planting and developing divine moral and spiritual values in its members, and for spreading the gospel to others.
1. Its purpose is perverted when “this life” goals take the place of “eternal life” goals.
 2. It is not a social club nor a civic center, but has a positive effect upon society by developing the character of the individual.
 3. *We need not expect the spiritual ideals of a true church to appeal to worldly minded people, in or outside its membership.*

III. INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

- A. *In the final analysis, God is looking for faithful individuals.*
- B. Each one comes to Him individually, obeying the call of the gospel and pledging allegiance to Jesus Christ.
- C. His word instructs us to work and worship together (Hb. 10:25), but each must accept responsibility for response to the word that will judge him individually in the last day (Jn. 12:48)

