

Community Church of Issaquah

May 25, 2025

What the Bible Teaches About the Church

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Have you ever considered how confusing the very word “church” is? If I were to ask each of you to write a short definition of that word, what would you write? Some would say “a building that houses believers,” some would say “the people who make up a congregation,” and perhaps some would say “all the people who believe in Jesus Christ.” Oddly, all of those are true.

It's normal for all of us at some point in time to consider the church as a location, a building. If we were to say, “I’m going to church,” we would be on our way to a building or a facility. When most people hear the word church they probably think of a building. Maybe it is a fancy building or a simple building where believers gather. But biblically speaking, a church is much more than a building. In fact, some would say that the church is not a building at all but is all about the people. But what is the church?

The area of theology that seeks to understand all aspects of the church is known as ecclesiology. It is derived from the Greek word *ekklesia* that is a general term referring to a gathering or assembly. There are a number of aspects to the subject of ecclesiology, but let me focus on defining the term “church,” understanding its purpose, and emphasizing church unity as an essential truth.

Buildings do not fully define the church, however. If we were to spend hours or days studying the epistles of Paul – letters he wrote to churches all over the Middle East – we could see that his words do not focus on a building, but on the believers whom he had been with to share the Gospel of Christ. It's not hard to understand how the message of Christ had traveled that far into the unknown world and had found a band of believers. It was how the message of Jesus travelled from Jerusalem to the rest of the world. Paul, the missionary, and his associates who went city to city meeting with groups of believers in homes.

One small group that Paul refers to as the “church of the Thessalonians” were somewhat unique. Here in the midst of a world that worshipped the 12 Greek gods and goddesses, we find a band of rebels who were saying that there is only one God and Jesus was God's chosen one. It's not hard to understand why these people were often ridiculed or persecuted or even killed for taking this stand against the long-established religion based on the tradition of a system of gods and goddesses who represented every aspect of their lives.

How Paul became aware of this small group of believers is not known, nor is it known exactly what the message Timothy delivered to them was. Was it because they were getting tired of well-doing, was it because they were being harassed and persecuted, or was it they weren't sure they were doing the right thing. These are somewhat a mystery. What we do know is that Paul did indeed write two specific epistles or letters to this fellowship of believers. I

personally love the way Paul begins the first of these letters with these words, “We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you.”

Those words of affirmation indicate that this was a most devoted and faithful “church.” We must keep in mind, however, that the church of Thessalonica was not a building. As was the custom at this time and even in the time of Christ, people met in homes. There were no temples or cathedrals or even small sanctuaries. That came much later for Christians. The Greeks, however, had temples to honor their deities, some of those still standing today. Over the centuries, Christians of many denominations have built incredible structures or churches, said to honor God.

The early Christian church had no buildings, at least not in the sense of what we would consider church buildings today. First century Christians were often persecuted and, as a result, often met in secret usually in homes. As the influence of Christianity spread, eventually buildings dedicated to worship were established and became what we know today as churches. In this sense, then, the church consists of people not buildings. Fellowship, worship and ministry are all conducted by people, not buildings. Church structures facilitate the role of God’s people, but they do not fulfill it.

When speaking of the church, theologians often use terms such as the visible and local church as opposed to the invisible and universal church. The visible and local church is, of course, the physical churches that we see around us and around the world, as well as the members of those churches. The invisible and universal church, however, refers to all believers everywhere and is one church, united in Christ, and it is not talking about the many physical churches. Everyone in the universal church is a true believer, but such is not necessarily the case with visible and local churches.

Why is it relevant to understand some basic differences between the visible and universal church? One key reason is that we do not confuse what we sometimes see fallible churches doing with the reality of the universal church. Not only do visible and local churches often host nonbelievers, but also the believers themselves are imperfect, resulting in challenges and tensions in every visible church. Is that something new? Uh, I'd suggest you read again the letters Paul wrote to the believers in Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Thessalonica, and Rome, just to name a few. The visible church can often present many issues and problems that deeply affect the believers.

In my travels, I've been awe struck at both the outside and the incredible inside of so many of these buildings. I often asked myself, "Why did they spend so much money doing this when they could have fed the poor or taken the homeless off the streets?" The time and money it must have taken to build Notre Dame or St. Peter's, plus put all that art work there. Not to mention all the gold that is

splashed all over the place. All of this so God would have a first class home? Is it designed to simply enhance the visible church? It's always been hard for me to swallow. I once asked a guard at one cathedral this question: "Do you think Jesus would feel at home here?" He scowled and walked away without answering.

What does all this mean as we try to define what the church is today? The bottom line is this: the term "church" refers to the community of believers in Jesus Christ, not just a building. It is a gathering of people who have accepted Christ and follow his teachings. How does the Bible describe the church? Here are three very critical factors that define the church:

1. The Body of Christ:

- Paul uses the metaphor of the body to illustrate the church, emphasizing its interconnectedness and the unique yet essential role of each member.
- Just as different body parts work together, so too should believers use their gifts and abilities to build up the church.
- This image also highlights the church's unity, despite its diverse makeup.

2. Unity and Love:

- Paul consistently urges believers to live in unity and love within the church, even amidst disagreements. In our world today, unity within the invisible church and often the visible church is extremely difficult. Dominique DuBois Gilliad put it this way: "When the church tolerates injustice to maintain unity, it has already chosen a side, and it is not Christ's."

- Paul emphasizes the importance of forgiveness, humility, and mutual support in resolving conflicts.
- Love for one another is a key characteristic of the church, reflecting Christ's love for the church.

3. The Church's Mission:

- Paul sees the church as an instrument of God's redemptive work, calling believers to share the gospel and make disciples.
- The church is not just a gathering place but also a place of growth and transformation, where believers mature in their faith and live out their calling.
- Paul emphasizes the church's responsibility to demonstrate its faith through its actions and witness in the world.

The Bible also emphasizes the importance of local congregations, where believers gather for worship, fellowship and ministry. These local congregations are crucial for sharing life, growing in faith, and serving the mission God gave us.

What Does the Church Do?

The church is a body of believers with a specific nature and purpose. These biblical roles or ministries of the church are foundational to it. What are these roles? There are many, but the most important to any church are worship, spiritual growth and evangelism.

Worship is God-centered and Christ-centered. It is not about entertaining Christians with flashy displays or presentations but about expressing our love by worshiping our Redeemer. We are to praise and glorify God in worship. As such, every Christian needs to be part of

regular fellowship and worship. We do not come simply to be spectators, but to be participants. There is no sidelines in a church, only an active playing field.

Spiritual growth is also a major role of the church. It involves teaching believers, but also nurturing, building up or helping believers to mature in Christ. To this end, churches are tasked with a variety of ministries such as Bible study, continuing education to grow deeper in our knowledge of the will and calling of God, praying for one another, acts of genuine hospitality and so much more.

Evangelism is also a key role of the church. This means reaching out to a lost world with the Good News about Jesus. Since people often have questions or doubts about Christ and Christianity, knowing the truth and being able to defend it (apologetics) is also part of the role of the church. But beyond evangelism in the sense of reaching out with the gospel, the church must also express compassion and mercy tangibly by helping others. In following Christ's example to love others, the church must also seek to make a real difference in the world while not neglecting to share the message of Christ.

If a church fails to fulfill any of these key roles – worship, spiritual growth, or evangelism – then the church is not functioning as God intends. Granted, there are times when churches face challenges and struggles to one degree or another, but a healthy church seeks to overcome such challenges in a way that honors God and His intentions for His church.

When I began dialogue with CCI about the possibility of being an interim minister, the one thing that impressed me the most is how you all have continued your work as a

church...not a building, but a people. Our Music Ministry team has done so for so many others. Your connection to Haiti and the work you have done there. Your continued support of the mission and ministries of the ABC. Your commitment to a continued Adult Forum of Bible Study. Your diligent work to do all the necessary work required for weekly worship services. These and so much more are what God wants a church to be. And whether it's inside a building or not, it is God's holy work in the world, and you all should be enormously proud of what you have done and are doing here at CCI.

CCI is a living example of being the church God wants. You are following the example of the faithful, like the church in Thessalonica. Let us all be committed to continuing what has been started and to finding new ways of reaching out into our world with, as Paul says, "every act prompted by your faith." My strong belief is that the Lord has much more work for all of us to do so that the name of Christ will be glorified and we can make a difference in our world. There has never been a time when the world needs us more than now.

Let me close with these words:

You will never truly feel connected to a church until you begin to serve in it. Attending helps you grow spiritually, but service allows you to fulfill your God-given purpose.

Be the church.