

# Lesson One: What the Church Is, and How We Join It

## A. The Nature of the Church

### 1. Who or what is the universal church?

- a) A prosperity-gospel church in South Africa?
- b) All people who are not a Moslem, Hindu, Buddhist, or atheist?
- c) All people born in a Christian family or Christian country?
- d) All people baptized or christened by a church?
- e) All people who self-identify as Christians?
- f) The body of Christ composed of all believers?

### Scriptures about the universal church

And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. (Eph. 1:22-23)

And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. (Col. 1:17-18)

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, (Heb. 12:22-23)

For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Saviour of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish... For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones." For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. (Eph. 5:23-32)

*What do these Scriptures teach us about the attributes of the universal church?*

- The universal church exists across time, and includes people who have already died
- The universal church includes only true believers
- The universal church is spread across the world
- The universal church is the body of Christ

*What is the universal church?*

**The body of Christ composed of all believers.**

### 2. Who or what is the local church?

- a) A community organization for moral improvement?
- b) Wherever two or more Christians gather together?
- c) A local, visible form of the universal Church?
- d) An organization of people interested in the Bible?
- e) A gathering of people for spiritual upliftment?

### Scriptures about the local church

So when they had appointed **elders in every church**, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:23)

I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a **servant of the church in Cenchrea**, (Rom. 16:1)

To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, (1 Cor. 1:2)

For first of all, **when you come together as a church**, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. (1 Cor. 11:18)

and all the brethren who are with me, To the churches of Galatia: (Gal. 1:2)

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, To the **saints who are in Ephesus**, and faithful in Christ Jesus: (Eph. 1:1)

Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: (Phil. 1:1)

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, **To the church of the Thessalonians** in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: (1 Thess. 1:1)

"The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the **angels of the seven churches**, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches. (Rev. 1:20)

What do these Scriptures teach us about the attributes of the local church?

- Local churches meet in specific geographical locations
- Local churches assemble for worship and the Lord's Supper
- Local churches have pastors and deacons
- Local churches are to be composed of saints: "set-apart ones" "holy ones" = true Christians.

*What is the local church?*

**A local, visible form of the universal Church.** A local church is a visible, local gathering of outwardly professing believers, who regularly gather for the ministry of the Word and the ordinances, and organize the church under New Testament lines.

Universal	Local
Only one Transcends space, includes Heaven Has one Shepherd Is spread out, awaits the Final Gathering Has no central earthly authority Is composed of believers only	Many Geographically localised Has undershepherds and deacons Assembles to worship Disciples and disciplines Attempts a visible representation of this

Of all the contrasts, notice what both the universal church and the local church are supposed to share: **they are composed of believers only.**

The church universal is the worldwide church made up of every true believer. Only God knows who all the members are of His invisible, universal church.

The local, visible church attempts to duplicate, as closely as possible, this truth. The local church is to be a visible, local assembly of God's universal church, meaning it should be made up of believers alone. This is known as **saved/ regenerate/ pure church membership.**

Four reasons why a local church is the visibly professing Christians who assemble there:

### **1. The ministry of the local church is given to believers.**

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, (Eph. 4:11-12)

The Great Commission to make disciples is given to believers. The commands to worship, give, and use your spiritual gifts to build up the body are given to believers alone. Teaching God's Word, administering the finances, evangelising – this is to be done by publicly professing believers. While attenders can certainly contribute (and do), the spiritual work of the Word should be done by believers.

### **2. Local church leadership and submission to that leadership is for believers.**

Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct. (Heb. 13:7)

Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. (Heb. 13:17)

Who is being called to submit? Believers. Certainly visitors, casual attenders, or even semi-regular attenders are not submitting to anyone's authority. Who should pastors expect to respond in a disciplined, Christlike way? Those who have outwardly professed to be believers.

### **3. Local church discipleship and discipline is for professing believers.**

Church discipline is a form of correction that works by ultimately excluding someone from church fellowship and its privileges (Matthew 18:15-17). How can one exclude a person who has never been included in the first place? If someone never publicly claimed to be a Christian, how could a church discipline him for not acting like one?

Furthermore, who is responsible for exercising church discipline? Can first-time visitors discipline someone, or ought it to be believing members who are already committed to the life and health of the body?

Paul expected the members of the church at Corinth to undertake church discipline of a sinning member (1 Cor 5:4-5). This obviously meant they knew who was included in their ranks, and who was not.

### **4. The local church administers baptism and the Lord's Supper, and they are for believers only.**

Baptism is not a public pool party; it is a burial service of Adamic natures, administered by the church. The Lord's Supper is not a soup kitchen; it is a family meal for genuine believers. To protect people from harming themselves, the Bible requires that only believers partake.

Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. (1 Cor. 11:27-29)

**Summary:** the universal church is Christ's body composed of true believers, living and dead. The local church is the local, earthly, and visible form of this universal body, that does its best to make sure its membership role corresponds to the Lamb's Book of Life.

## **B. How People Are Joined to the Church**

### **1. How do you join the universal church?**

- a) By praying the sinner's prayer?
- b) By being immersed by the Spirit into the body of Christ at the moment of salvation?
- c) By being born into a Christian country?
- d) By registering online?
- e) By deciding you are?

Scriptures about the joining the universal church

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. **For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body**-- whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free-- and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member but many. (1 Cor. 12:12-14)

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. **For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.** There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3:26-28)

**Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?** Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. (Rom. 6:3-7)

*How do you join the universal church?*

**By being immersed by the Spirit into the body of Christ at the moment of salvation. Membership in the universal church is simultaneous to salvation.**

## **2. How do you join the local church?**

**Question:** if people are automatically members of the universal church when they are saved, doesn't that make them automatic members of any church they attend? Surely membership in the "bigger, truer" church must mean membership in the "smaller, less perfect" local church?

**Answer.** No.

**Should we consider the following groups as members?**

- a) Everyone who attends that church.
- b) Everyone who attends the church and believes he/she is a Christian.
- c) Everyone who attends the church and *is* a Christian.
- d) Everyone who attends the church, claims to be a Christian, whom the church recognizes as a Christian.

Let's consider those in turn.

*a) Everyone who attends the church?*

- Unbelievers attend churches.
- People attend churches who don't want to be part of that church.
- Unsaved children attend churches.

Clearly, mere attendance is not sufficient for a **pure church membership**.

*b) Everyone who attends the church and believes he/she is a Christian?*

Problem: Can someone be deceived about his or her salvation?

Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?-- unless indeed you are disqualified. (2 Cor. 13:5)

Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!' (Matt. 7:21-23)

Being assured that you are a Christian is important, but it does not mean you are a part of a local church. If self-assurance was all that is required, churches would have apostates, false teachers, and false believers and nominal believers all being members - and therefore "saints".

Clearly, personal and individual assertion of being saved is not sufficient for a **pure church membership**.

*c) Everyone who attends the church and is a Christian?*

This is much closer to the truth, but we still have some problems. First, how do we know? Churches must perform spiritual service, and we do not have access to God's hidden knowledge of who is saved. Some true Christians never make their conversion or testimony of salvation known to the church, so the church cannot tell if they truly are Christians. We have to do external, visible worship, so we cannot rely on what is internal and invisible.

Second, some true Christians sadly don't want commitment, involvement or participation in the life of the church. This is wrong, but it is a reality. Should these ones be counted as part of the church, and responsible for disciplining others, choosing leaders, making decisions?

For example, when two or three true Christians are in the same place, you have several members of the universal church who happen to be in one place, but you do not necessarily have a local church.

Clearly, (even if we knew who they were), the collective body of Christians attending a church is not sufficient for a **pure church membership**.

*d) Everyone who attends the church, claims to be a believer, whom the church recognizes as a believer?*

For the purposes of membership in a local church, it is not sufficient if you think you are a believer. It is not sufficient if the pastors or deacons think you are a believer. Since the local church is to do things given to believers only, *the church itself has a*

*responsibility to determine, as best it can, if you are believer.* The local church corporately must recognise that you are a believer. That is the biblical idea of membership.

### Scriptures about the church's authority to publicly recognize believers (and reverse that judgement)

"And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My **church**, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and **whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.**" (Matt. 16:18-19)

"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. "But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that `by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' "And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the **church**. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. "**Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.**" Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. (Matt. 18:15-19)

And when He had said this, He breathed on *them*, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. "**If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the *sins* of any, they are retained.**" (Jn. 20:22-23)

Since the local church is to replicate the universal church as closely as possible, and do things given to believers only, it has a responsibility to make a distinction between believers and unbelievers. We do not have access to God's knowledge of who true believers are. Instead, God requires that churches follow some outward and external mechanisms, so that the local church is as pure as possible

*How do you join a local church?*

**You join a local church if you assemble with a local church, publicly claim to be a believer, publicly identify with that local church, and that church then recognizes you as a Christian and reciprocates your identification.**

*How does the local church do this?*

For local church membership, we need a mechanism by which:

- A person publicly gives testimony of the Gospel believed before a local church
- The person visibly identifies with Christ and His church
- The local church accepts this testimony and publicly affirms the person as a visible member of the local church.

*Is there such a mechanism in the Bible?*

Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls **were added to them.** (Acts 2:41)

Just as the Spirit's baptism is the moment of being joined and identified with Christ's universal church (1 Cor 12:13), so water baptism is the moment of being publicly, visibly identified with Christ's local church.

Here the church has the chance to observe and hear a person's profession of faith, and vouch for that by the public act of baptism. Baptism makes public what is at first personal and private. God expects believers to identify themselves with His Body.

### 3. Baptism

There is also an antitype which now saves us – baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, (1 Pet. 3:21)

Baptism is:

- A ceremony picturing resurrection from deadness of sins into newness of life.
- A public testimony of salvation.
- The answer of a good conscience and so the beginning of service for Christ in the church.
- Administered by the local church
- Provides entrance into the local church
- A prerequisite to the Lord's Supper – a family meal for believers.

#### Valid New Testament Baptism: Three Requirements

**Valid Subjects:** only true believers, of sufficient age to have “the answer of a good conscience” This cannot include infants, unbelievers, or true believers already validly baptized.

**Valid Meaning:** a public confession of already-held faith, for a good conscience. It cannot be looked to for cleansing, or the completion of salvation.

**Valid Mode:** The ceremony is a resurrection ceremony, not a cleansing one. Full immersion is the only valid way of symbolizing full identification with Christ's death and grave, and resurrection. Baptism is from the Greek baptidzo, which means to dip, to submerge.

#### Invalid vs Irregular Baptism

An **invalid** baptism is one where the subjects, meaning or mode is compromised. Here the person was not baptised in the biblical sense. The person need to be “re-

baptised”, or more correctly, baptised for the first time.

An **irregular** baptism is one with valid subjects, meaning, and mode, though it is not administered as entrance into a local church (at a camp, Jerusalem tour etc.) Though this is often an unfortunate (and culpable) misunderstanding of baptism on the part of the one administering it, the persons having been baptized do not need to seek (re)-baptism. Instead, they should seek membership in a sound local church.

### **Baptising into Membership**

What seems to be the NT pattern, the ones we baptize are being baptized into membership. Though we will still formally take them in in a Lord’s Supper and church business meeting, their baptism constitutes their biblical act of identifying with Christ’s local church.

*What if a person has been validly baptized elsewhere and comes to a new church?*

**Formal Membership.** Membership is a kind of repetition of your baptism testimony for a church that did not hear it, and that church’s affirmation of your baptism & profession of faith), combined with a commitment (covenant) from both the believer and the church.

The church hears and acknowledges that (baptism) testimony and affirms it.

### Scriptures which show how churches transferred and received baptized believers from other churches

I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea, that you may **receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints**, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for in (Rom. 16:1-2)

Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, with Mark the cousin of Barnabas (about whom you received instructions: if he comes to you, **welcome him**), (Col. 4:10)

And when he [Apollos] desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren **wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him**; and when he arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace; (Acts 18:27)

Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some others, **epistles of commendation** to you or letters of commendation from you? (2 Cor. 3:1)

*Perhaps there are genuinely converted and baptised people attending, who do not want to be committed participants in the life of that church. Are they automatically members?*

No. People with a valid testimony of salvation and baptism need to publicly identify with that church’s doctrine and practice. This identification is sometimes called **covenanting**.

A group of believers who have gathered to organise themselves along New Testament lines often gather their core beliefs into a **statement of faith**, and gather

their core commitments into a **church covenant**. Together, these describe what unites those believers in terms of **belief** and **practice**. A baptised believer applying for membership is stating his or her agreement with the beliefs and practices of the local church, and his or her desire to become part of that church's family and ministry.

*But why must we formalise our commitment in a public covenant? Three answers:*

**First, formalised and public commitments are real and publicly verifiable commitments.** A couple might live together in sin, and protest that they are committed to one another with or without a marriage licence. However, until they make a public **covenant** to be true to one another, they are not considered married. Covenanting is a very serious and important concept, mostly lost on the world today. The Bible encourages us to take our vows seriously (Eccl 5:4-6, Ps 15:4). At the same time, it is a joy to come under a binding commitment, when empowered by grace (Ps 22:25-26).

**Second, baptism and membership covenanting enables mutual accountability and commitment.** We live in a time of religious independence and individualism. Everyone wants a 'private' religion without accountability. People shop for spiritual experiences like they shop for other goods, bouncing from church to church, neglecting the ordinances, using para-church organisations for personal growth and edification, but disconnected from a church community with its body life, its accountability to leadership and its mutual submission.

**Third, baptism and membership covenanting make public and explicit what is personal and unseen.** In membership you are making a promise that you can be held to. This is important for our sanctification, given our inclinations towards self-deceit, spiritual apathy, and privatised religion. Scriptures like Galatians 6:1-4, James 5:16, 19-20, only make sense in an environment of mutual accountability.

When we understand baptism and church membership as ways that believers publicly identify themselves as Christians and publicly identify themselves with a local church *so that the church can affirm and receive that identification in terms of Matthew 16 and 18*, we can see that church membership is not a mere administrative detail. It is a means to achieving proper New Testament church life, and achieving a **pure church membership**.

To enable a proper baptism or "transference" of baptism, it is necessary for every believer seeking membership to give his or her salvation testimony. This given first to the leadership in writing, and then presented to the congregation to hear.