



Growing a Healthy Church

**An Introduction to the
Dynamics of Life in the Local Church**



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Introduction

“I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.”

Jesus proclaimed these words in Matthew 16:18 almost two thousand years ago. They are as important today as they were at the time they were spoken. Jesus is still building his church and that is probably one of the reasons you are taking this course.

When Jesus says, “I will build My church,” he is speaking of growth. The church of Jesus Christ is always growing and maturing. Such growth is accomplished as each member matures and fulfills his or her role. You want to learn how to participate successfully in Jesus’ plan to grow your church to maturity. That is the goal of this course.

God has provided leaders to oversee the growth of his worldwide church. You are one of these leaders, a coworker with Christ in building his church. The care of God’s flock is your privilege and responsibility. For this reason, you must not only provide direction, but you must also develop an environment in which God’s people can adequately grow and multiply. Therefore, as coworkers with the Master Builder, you must take your work seriously. You must be constantly asking God to give you the wisdom and ability to fulfill your God-given task.

Course Outline

This course presents tools and techniques that leaders can use to establish, grow, and nurture their churches properly. Fundamentally, it structures a three-step process: (1) evaluation of church leadership and the church body, (2) identification of weaknesses or missing elements in church leadership and the church body, and (3) Bible-based actions that will shore up the weakness and supply the missing elements—all for the building up of the church.

Thus, the second goal of this course is to guide you through this three-step process so that you can implement it in your church.

Evaluation is an endless process and is particularly important in relation to church leadership. In this course you will first evaluate the person and character of the leader. God has given elders and deacons to the church to lead and care for it; their lives must reflect God's requirements for leadership as presented in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. Are you and they good stewards of the gifts God has given? Are you and they equipped to minister effectively? As a church leader you must possess the qualities needed to fulfill the task God has set before you.

Second, you will evaluate your church. Does your church reflect its God-given purpose? Are you worshipping according to biblical principles? Are you helping all the members mature in their relationship to God? Does every member have an opportunity to serve God? Does your church reach out to your neighborhood, city, and country with the gospel of Jesus Christ?

You must not stop there. To go no further would be like realizing you are a sinner who needs a Savior but never entering into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Therefore, after evaluating yourself and your church, you must determine a course of action. How do you do that? What principles do you use to arrive at a biblical solution that meets the needs of your local church? You will achieve this by writing out a philosophy of ministry statement based on biblical principles. A ministry statement is the foundation for meeting the needs in your church and those of a lost world.

Contributions to Developing Character

A proper understanding of worship, instruction in the Bible, and Christian doctrine is key to growth in godly character. Each lesson in this course includes questions to encourage you to examine your life, to make godly choices, and to reflect on how your life shows forth the work of the Spirit.

Contributions to Achieving Ministry Skills

This course explores many ministry skills. Four, however, are of great importance in looking at the dynamics of leading a church. The course introduces the beginning steps for the following ministry skills and provides opportunities for developing them.

Administering. The essence of this skill is the ability to plan, organize, and manage resources effectively. As a church leader, you must continually develop this skill. Most of the lessons include assignments and other questions that will assist you in strengthening this ministry skill.

Discipling. The essence of discipleship is guiding believers in becoming more and more conformed to the image of Christ. The church of Jesus Christ is the gathered people of God who show the world what God's family looks like. This course looks at worship, building up believers in Christ, evangelism, fellowship, and leadership—all of which are key to growing as disciples of Christ.

Leading. The essence of this ministry skill is demonstrating how to motivate and guide people to reach shared biblical or ministry goals.

Pastoring. The essence of this ministry skill is to shepherd spiritually. Shepherding refers to caring for the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of people. Each lesson deals with ways to increase your ability to care for and minister to people.

Course Tasks

After completing this course, you are encouraged to accomplish these Course Tasks both to test and to demonstrate that you have grasped the main course objectives:

1. Using the principles and instructions in Lesson 7, create a small group and meet regularly for at least twelve weeks to study and discuss law, grace, and legalism in the church. If possible, have a church leader or an experienced Christian join the group to evaluate you.
2. Present your philosophy of ministry statement (Lesson 12, Assignment 7) to your church board in a special meeting. Ask them to interact with you as they evaluate your statement. Then propose any changes you think should be made in the church. After the meeting, ask the board chair to give his or her assessment of your work.

Course Outline

Lesson 1 What Is the Church?

Lesson 2 Grace and Freedom

Lesson 3 Worship

- Lesson 4 Edification
- Lesson 5 Spiritual Growth
- Lesson 6 Ministers and Ministry Gifts
- Lesson 7 Small Groups
- Lesson 8 Evangelism
- Lesson 9 Leaders Defined
- Lesson 10 Leaders Developed
- Lesson 11 Organization and Administration
- Lesson 12 Your Philosophy of Church Ministry

Contributions to the Total Curriculum

Growing a Healthy Church is designed to assist church leaders in overseeing God's church, caring for his flock, providing direction, and developing an environment where God's children can grow and multiply. It builds upon foundational courses such as *Walking with Christ* and *Galatians*. Church leaders need to have a solid foundation in their faith in order to lead a church effectively.

Participant Instructions

In order to benefit most from your study of this material, you should plan to work through the lessons in order. Because the concepts are explored from one lesson to the next, you are encouraged to work through the course systematically rather than beginning in the middle of the course.

Before you begin Lesson 1, we suggest you acquire a notebook. This will become your *Life and Ministry Notebook* (LMN) for recording a variety of insights. You will use this notebook to write your responses to assignments and other questions in the lessons. It is also a place where you can record your personal reflections as well as any questions or problems you encounter in the course.

You should allow yourself two to three hours of study time to complete each lesson. This will include doing the required reading and completing the assignments and personal reflections.

Course Design




The course objectives above are the most important concepts you will learn in these lessons. Study these objectives carefully and refer to them periodically as you work through the course.

Since most people taking this course are extremely busy, each lesson is designed with clearly defined steps for easy reference.

Also, if you study the Course Objectives and Lesson Objectives, you will know which topics to spend the most time on.

Lesson Design

Several standard components are built into each lesson to assist your study and develop your skills. They are explained below so that you may use them to full advantage.

1. **Lesson Objectives** are provided to help you identify the most important parts of each lesson. They will guide you in the effective use of your study time and your leader will use them for class discussion.
2. **Lesson Outlines** provide an overview of the sections of each lesson. In this way you can anticipate the various topics to be covered.
3. **Repetition and review** are woven into the course to help you learn new concepts.
4. **Assignments** offer you the opportunity to interact with the material. Whenever you see this icon, stop and record what is required in your LMN. 
5. **Personal Reflections** stimulate you to think more deeply about material covered and about life and ministry. Paul says we are “transformed by the renewing of our mind” (Rom 12:2). Whenever you see this icon, please respond to the personal reflections by recording your thoughts in your notebook. This is a valuable way to see how God changing the way you think. 
6. **Adorations** arise from the lesson content related to the person and work of God. They encourage you to respond to what God is saying to you, to thank him, and to praise him. Whenever you see this icon, pause in your study to respond to God. 
7. **Appendices** (at the end of the workbook) offer useful reference materials that may be of benefit to you. These are placed at the end of the workbook.

Materials Needed

To work through this course, you will need a **Bible**, this **workbook**, and your **LMN** for all written work. Unless otherwise noted, all the Scripture references and quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

Lesson 1:

What Is the Church?

Thomas recently became a Christian through the witness of his uncle. He had watched his uncle's life for several years and was impressed by the changes he saw, as his mean, hard-drinking uncle became a much nicer person. Together they studied the Bible. Through that study, Thomas recognized his need for a Savior, and he realized that Jesus had come to be that Savior. Now his uncle was telling Thomas he should start coming to his church. Thomas did not feel that going to church was necessary. And there were some people in that church he did not particularly like. He thought spending time alone with God would be just as good as going to church – although he wanted to continue the Bible studies with his uncle. What did going to a building on Sundays have to do with his relationship with God? What was the church for anyway?

The first requirement for accomplishing any task is to understand the nature of the task. As a leader of the church, you need a clear understanding of what the church is and how it is to function. This lesson will help you develop from the Scriptures your own understanding of the nature and purpose of the church. This understanding is perhaps the most critical element in becoming the leader God desires you to be. Your understanding will help ensure that your ministry is an accurate reflection of what the Bible teaches.

Lesson Objectives

When you have completed this lesson, you will be able to

1. write a definition of the church
2. evaluate the biblical metaphors for the church to determine its purpose

Lesson Outline

The Meaning and Purpose of the Church

Looking at the Meaning of Church

Examining the Metaphors for the Church to Determine Its Purpose

Evaluating Other Concepts Related to the Church

Determining a Definition of the Church

Conclusion

The Meaning and Purpose of the Church

As you begin this study, you need to develop an understanding of the church that will provide the foundation for the remaining lessons.

1.1

- A. What thoughts come to your mind when you hear the word *church*?
- B. How would you explain *church* to an unbeliever?

People tend to define the church from their own experience or from only a few Bible passages. This causes them to view the church from a limited understanding or perhaps incorrectly. The best place to develop a definition is from Scripture. What does Scripture say?

Looking at the Meaning of Church

The Greek word translated *church* in the New Testament has the common meaning of assembly. Each context determines the kind of assembly that it is (e.g., Acts 7:28; 19:32, 41). Its most common reference in the New Testament is to the local church, which is a manifestation of the universal church.

The universal church includes all people from all times and places who believe in Jesus Christ as Savior. Believers in specific locations form local assemblies. Examples are seen in such expressions as “the church at Jerusalem” (Acts 11:22), “the church that was at Antioch” (Acts 13:1), and “the church of God which is at Corinth” (1 Cor 1:2).

This image provides the foundational meaning. Yet the purpose and type of assembling are still unspecified. You need to search the Scriptures for a fuller picture.

It is worth noting that *church* as a singular noun is used to denote either a single assembly in a particular locality or all local churches generally without reference to any specific locality (see Acts 12:1). In the plural it can refer to the sum of individual churches in a named region (see 1 Thess 2:14), an indefinite region (see 1 Cor 7:17), or neither of the two (see 2 Cor 11:8).

The term goes beyond the meaning of “a Christian assembly;” in Acts 8:1 Luke describes how a great persecution arose against the church at Jerusalem. The members of the church are all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. Here people in a scattered state are referred to as individual members of the church. Acts 8:3 describes how Saul seeks to destroy the church, entering every house and hauling men and women to prison. In Acts 9:31 Luke talks about the church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria.

Acts 8:1,3 make the members of the church the equivalent of the church itself. The people, whether assembled or scattered, make up the church. In Acts 9:31, 1 Corinthians 15:9, Galatians 1:13, and Philippians 3:6 the idea of an actual assembled group of believers is not specified. Here church refers to a corporate and spiritual unity in Christ.

Therefore, while many passages refer to the church as a local association, other passages (especially Eph 1:22; 3:10, 21; 5:23, 24, 25, 27, 29, 32) talk about all believers without reference to a particular location.

Consequently, church has a local sense as well as a universal, broader, more inclusive, spiritual sense. A complete definition should point to people—people who are associated spiritually with all Christians—and also to a particular group in a specific geographical location.

In both the universal and local church, the people are central. In the *universal* aspect the individual is emphasized in his or her spiritual association within the greater body of Christ. In the *local* sense, that greater spiritual association has visible geographical or corporate expression in the many assemblies.

A comparison of Matthew 16:18 and Revelation 2:1, as well as Colossians 1:18 and Acts 20:28, illustrates the distinction between the universal church and the local church.

Without an appreciation for this dual manifestation of the church, one can draw incorrect implications, such as extending human leadership to the church universal or not extending human leadership to the church locally. These are two extremes with little biblical basis. They confuse the two aspects of the church.

1.2



- A. Why is it incorrect to call a building a church in the biblical sense?
- B. How can defining the church as a gathering be misleading? How can it be helpful?

Often the response of people to this dual manifestation of the church creates problems. Three common responses follow:

1. because they are frustrated by the hypocrisy and sin in local churches, some people focus instead on their membership in the universal body of Christ and avoid any involvement in a local assembly
2. other people are not concerned about the impurity caused by hypocrisy and sin in the local church in which they are members
3. still others have stressed the need for more organizational unity of Christ's churches, believing that it is unbiblical for local churches to be divided by their differences

1.3

It might be too early in this course to have satisfying biblical answers to the above three reactions, but think through how each of these three responses interprets the dual aspect of the church. Write down your observations.

When you study the New Testament metaphors for the church, such as *temple*, *body*, *bride*, and *flock*, you will find that the biblical authors refer to both the universal and the local aspects. Thus, although there are two aspects of the church in the minds of the human authors of Scripture, there is no dichotomy. “Rather, the particular local [church] represents the universal [church], and, through participation in the redemption of Christ, mystically comprehends the whole of which it is the local manifestation.”¹

This relationship between these two aspects of the church is seen repeatedly throughout the New Testament. Indeed, “the biblical emphasis makes the local church responsible for being a true, visible, local representation of the universal, invisible church.”²

Examining the Metaphors for the Church to Determine Its Purpose

At this point you have a definition which sees the church as people integrated spiritually through their relationship with Jesus Christ. However, this definition will expand through the study of biblical metaphors to include God’s intention for his church.

All believers make up the church universal, and believers from the universal church meeting together in a specific geographic location become a local church. Whether speaking of the church in its universal or local manifestation, both have the same purpose. Therefore, in turning to the biblical metaphors, biblical data provide enough material to draw a comprehensive statement of purpose. Developing a concept of the purpose of the church will help us know that we are the expression of all that God intended.

Before studying each metaphor separately, consider some hermeneutical aspects of metaphorical language. Hermeneutics is the science of the laws, or principles, of biblical interpretation. Applying this type of analysis to metaphors is logical because metaphors strongly appeal to the imagination. The intended meaning of the biblical author when using a metaphor needs to be clear.

Metaphors for the church can be helpful and profound in their meaning. They also add color and life to the truth that they illustrate. As unusual as it seems, a metaphor is often clearer than non-figurative language. For example, the statement, “My husband is my Rock of Gibraltar,”³ says more than could be expressed in several declarative sentences. However, it is important to understand the limitations of metaphors, and you must always be aware of the context of the metaphor. It is possible to read too much into a figure of speech. To curb excessive imagination as you interpret the meaning of a metaphor, remember that the literal meaning of the figurative expression is the usual, or normal, meaning.

As you begin to evaluate what truths the following metaphors teach, keep their normal meanings in mind.

The Church as Body

Many passages in the New Testament use this picture for the church. (If you wish to look them up, they are Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 10:16-17; 12:12-27; Eph 1:22-23; 2:16; 4:4-12, 16; 5:23, 30; Col 1:18, 24; 2:19; 3:15.) It is a temptation to read into the texts meanings that are not there. So, we need to understand how the Bible uses this term.

When Paul compares the church to the human body (“the church, which is His body,” Eph 1:22-23), he is clearly describing the unity and interdependence of all members of the church. When he talks about there being *one body*, Paul emphasizes the spiritual unity of all believers, wherever and however they associate with each other. Further, in comparing the church not just to a *body* but to *Christ’s body* (see 1 Cor 12:27), Christ becomes the focus of attention.

Most significantly, inherent in this metaphor is the relationship of the *head* to the body: “He [Christ] is also head of the body, the church” (Col 1:18).

Lesson 1: What Is the Church?

Besides describing Christ's sovereignty over the church, Colossians 1:18 also implies that the church depends on him for life. Through his resurrection, all believers have part in the new life. To speak within the metaphor: if the head is severed, the body dies.

From passages such as Colossians 2:19 and Ephesians 4:15-16, it becomes obvious that it is the *life* connection of each member and of all members together to the head that determines the unity and growth of the church. In Christ we have life. It is Christ who nourishes his body, and through this nourishment the body grows. It is important that the emphasis in this metaphor is on the church not as an organization but as an organism. True growth comes not from new methods but from being nourished by the living *head*. This does not mean that we do not need organization or methods but that the central ingredient for a growing and healthy body (church) comes from its being rightly related to its head (Christ).

1.4

What practical implications do these aspects of the metaphor of church as a body have for the church?

1A

What practical implications are there for you personally that you are a member of the body of which Christ is the head?

All local churches need to realize that there is only one body; thus, they are not to show sectarian attitudes toward each other. Within individual local churches, growth and unity follow when each person's focus is on worshipping God and serving others. The different members of the body must work together in unity for the

body to function properly. Each must realize that every part is important for the proper operation of the whole.

The context of the specific places where the metaphor is used should determine its emphasis. Churches that emphasize external organizational unity (and in that way, strive for universal unity among Christians) understand the body metaphor to mean *organization*. On the other hand, churches that want to increase fellowship within particular local churches emphasize each person's individual and unique contribution. However, they sometimes forget to emphasize submission to Christ and dependence on him. We should remain focused on the primary biblical emphasis of all being linked as members to the *head* and then to *each other*.



Adoration

Take some time to reflect on the truth that the living God has given you his Spirit and that you are joined in a real way with him through Christ, your head. Then thank him for this great reality.

The Church as Bride

Although few Bible passages present this metaphor, the powerful picture it produces helps us understand the church's purpose. The most obvious references are 2 Corinthians 11:2 and Ephesians 5:22-32.

It is helpful to have some understanding of the Middle-Eastern marriage:

At the betrothal, the bridegroom, personally or by deputy, handed to the bride a piece of money or a letter, it being expressly stated in each case that the man thereby espoused the woman. From the moment of the betrothal both parties were regarded, and treated in law (as to inheritance, adultery, need of formal divorce), as if they had been actually married, except as regarded their living together.⁴

When this description is applied to the church, we see that Christ, the bridegroom, has purchased the church with his own blood (see Acts 20:28), and the church has been espoused to him as his bride. We have only to wait for the presentation of the bride to the bridegroom:

Among the wealthy the bridegroom was dressed in specially sumptuous clothes (Isa. 61, 10) and wore a matrimonial crown (Cant. 3, 11). He came with a company of his family and friends (Jdg. 14, 11; Matt. 9, 15) to meet his bride who was also beautifully dressed and decorated with jewels and was accompanied by her family and friends (Jer. 2, 32). The bride met her bridegroom with her face covered by a veil (Gen. 29, 25. Cf. also Gen. 38, 14; Jer. 2, 31). He brought her to his house, where all the proceedings took place by the light of lanterns to the accompaniment of music and songs (Jer. 24, 8; 7, 34; 16, 9; 25, 10). When both companies met, they sang to the young couple (Jer. 7, 34; 16, 9; 25, 10; Ps. 45, 16).⁵

The church should be waiting in anticipation for that day when her bridegroom, the Lord Jesus, will come and take her for himself (see John 14:3). This reminds us of the words of the Apostle Paul:

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord (1 Thess 4:16-17).

Christ is not only preparing for the future reception of his bride, but he is also preparing the bride herself. Christ purposes to present to himself “the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless” (Eph 5:27). Christ is committed to conforming the church to his image.

Yet this is not all that this metaphor tells us. After the Middle-Eastern bridegroom receives his bride, the final step is the marriage feast. So it is to be with Christ and the church:

“Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready.” It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said to me, “Write, ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb’” (Rev 19:7-9).

What love the bridegroom has for his bride! He is now preparing her and her future home. This truth should not only encourage us but also cause us to worship him who made us his bride.

It is clear that the body metaphor and the bride metaphor are closely joined together. The body metaphor emphasizes the sustaining life of Christ, and the bride metaphor emphasizes the love Christ has for the church. Both emphasize the importance of growing to maturity. Both stress three aspects of the purpose of the church: one, its relationship to the Lord; another, in its relationship to the members of the church; and third, its relationship to unbelievers outside the church. It is hard to ponder these metaphors and not find your heart turning to worship the bridegroom, your love increasing for fellow Christians, and your compassion growing to reach those who do not yet believe. This is exactly what these metaphors are intended to do.



Adoration

Take time now to worship your bridegroom who so loves you and deserves your love.

The Church as Building and Temple

The previous two metaphors for the church as the bride and the body are full of life. But the metaphor of the church as a building suggests a structure made of inanimate materials. Anyone unfamiliar with the biblical picture of a church may think of the magnificent cathedrals throughout church history that have shown

splendor and continuity. Some may think of the building they meet in on Sundays. Most people who have any acquaintance with the Bible know that the church is not a building. It is the people who gather in this building, yet it has become common to call this place the church.

The metaphor of the church as a building is developed in several ways. Look first at the foundation of the church.

1.5

Four prominent passages deal with the foundation of the church: Matthew 21:33-44; Acts 4:1-12; 1 Corinthians 3:10-11; Ephesians 2:20; 4:15-16; 1 Peter 2:4-6.

- A. Read these verses and write a summary paragraph about the concept of the foundation of the church.
- B. How does the truth that Christ is the cornerstone of the church determine the content of the preaching in New Testament churches?

The Bible emphasizes growth in this metaphor as it does with the body metaphor. The church is not a stable, immovable building but a growing building. It experiences growth inwardly like a body as it matures, but it also grows outwardly. In other words, there is both qualitative and quantitative growth. The building is being built to perfection.

The Old Testament is full of instructions and practices related to the tabernacle and the temple as the *house of the Lord*. It is the symbol for Israel of God's presence in their midst. When the temple service is central in a spiritually flourishing Israel, it is also a tremendous testimony to the nations around Israel.

In his conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus transforms worship in a central, physical location into worship without a central, geographical place of worship. She points to a place, Mount Gerizim; Jesus makes the point that no specific dwelling place can

be designated as the place where God uniquely dwells (see John 4:23-24).

Yet Paul pictures the corporate body of believers as a *temple of God* (see 1 Cor 3:16, 2 Cor 6:16) and each individual as a *temple of the Holy Spirit* (see 1 Cor 6:19), both through the indwelling presence of the Spirit. In Ephesians 2:21 Paul encourages the church in Ephesus to grow into a holy temple, a dwelling place of God in the Spirit (see also 1 Cor 3:10-15). As in the temple of old, God dwells with the body of believers, yet unlike the temple, no individual local church is the unique dwelling place of God. Thus, worship of God is not restricted to a certain place or time.

The Church as Priesthood

To read about this important metaphor, you can look at several books in the New Testament, especially Hebrews. But the most specific treatment is found in 1 Peter 2:4-10.

Peter places this figure in juxtaposition with the figure of the spiritual house or temple, and there seems to be a logical relation between the two. . . . Thus, the living stones, when they are built into the house, become also the body of priests who minister in the house.⁶

The obvious resemblance to the Old Testament function of Israel is seen in verse 9: “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession” (see Exod 19:5-6; Deut 7:6-7). Like Israel, the church is now called by God to be his witness in this world.

However, the image of the church as a priesthood includes more than just this witness to the world. In the Old Testament, Israel is not only a nation of priests, but also within the nation a separate group formed a priestly class, the Levites (see Num 1-4).

From many passages in Hebrews, we know that Jesus is pictured as our great high priest (see Heb 4:14). He is the one who has gone before us and once for all opens the direct way to the throne of grace for anyone at any time (see 4:14-16). His sacrifice is sufficient to open the way to God, even into the *holy of holies*. The church does not need to bring any more sacrifices for sin and has direct access to God.

There are other sacrifices the new priesthood is called to perform. Peter states that the church is “a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 2:5). Familiar New Testament sacrifices are our bodies (see Rom 12:1), praise (see Heb 13:15), doing good and sharing (see Heb 13:16), and material help for those in need (see Phil 4:17-18). Although we no longer bring animals to a temple as part of a detailed program of sacrifice, daily sacrifices are to be part of our daily lives in Christ.

From these many details, you can draw some general conclusions. In some churches the concept of a priesthood continues the Old Testament distinction between clergy and laity. These churches seek to justify their ceremonies as an extension of the Old Testament sacrifices. The New Testament shows us, however, something opposite to that interpretation.

All believers are priests as was emphasized anew in the Reformation era by Martin Luther. This biblical emphasis should continue as the concept of the priesthood of believers turns every aspect of the believer’s daily life into a sacred activity.

Although the emphasis in this metaphor is not so much on Christians relating to each other, their relationship with God can touch the lives of non-Christians. As nonbelievers see our material life, our prayer life, our speech—our whole being as a sacrifice pleasing to God—they may be drawn to the Lord.

The church as a priesthood seems diametrically opposed to human intermediaries between Christians and God. At the same time it focuses on the role of all the members, not just clergy, as leaders in the church. The next metaphor will explore human leadership within the church.

The Church as Flock

The metaphor of the flock is one of the most broadly applied figures of speech used of the church. In the Old Testament, Israel is called “the flock of the Lord” (Jer 13:17; Zech 10:3). Jesus referred to his small circle of disciples as the “little flock” (see Luke 12:32). Again, the term is used of the church on several occasions (see Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:3). In addition to these examples are the repeated references to the sheep that compose the flock (see John 10:16; 21:15-17) and to the shepherd of the flock (see John 10:2-16; Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 2:25; 5:4). Although this metaphor is rich with potential

for application, a few things deserve special note because it speaks of relationships within the church.

One of the most significant teachings of the flock metaphor is that the Shepherd of the flock has committed the task of shepherding to undershepherds. This is the essence of the thrice repeated charge given to Peter in John 21:15-17. . . .

Writing on a later occasion to the elders of the flock as it was scattered throughout the five provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, Peter gives the very same charge: “Feed . . . the flock of God which is among you” (1 Pet 5:2).⁷

The need of human beings for guidance, human leadership, and organization is not a revolutionary concept. Leadership is needed not only among unconverted sinners but also among converted sinners. Spirit-guided growth to spiritual maturity is taking place in every saved person. However, no one, not even the most mature leaders, can deny a tendency to drift away and a need to be fed and guided by others. Sin is something to be overcome, and the strengthening influence of others is a blessing to anyone’s spiritual life. As the shepherd nourishes and protects his sheep, so God, the Chief Shepherd, directly provides nourishment and protection himself and indirectly provides it through mature fellow Christians.

The importance of this metaphor of the church as a flock, however, is that it corrects wrong tendencies in leaders as well as in those being led. Several things can be highlighted. Look first at how this picture of undershepherds provides corrective encouragement for those in leadership.

Undershepherds who want to be the leaders God intended them to be must understand the biblical teaching on the *ownership of the flock*. The possessive pronoun “My” in John 21:16 and the phrase “of God” in 1 Peter 5:2 emphasize a truth which recurs throughout the Bible. God owns everything. Therefore, he is the one to be obeyed.

Jesus’ life (and death) clearly set a model in this arrangement. It is obvious that undershepherds are to lead in such a way that they are an extension of how the Chief Shepherd leads. Understanding this will help eliminate being possessive, controlling, or manipulative, as well as eliminate timid and negligent leadership

styles. The Great Shepherd basically gives himself for the sheep to the point of dying (see Acts 20:28). It is God's flock, and he proves by his death how valuable this flock is to him. God wants any leader to be constantly aware of this truth. The heart of Christian leadership is service and sacrifice.

**1B**

1. Read the following references to
 - A. Jesus' leadership
 - Luke 22:24-27
 - John 10:11
 - John 13:13-17
 - B. Paul's leadership
 - 1 Corinthians 1:10-17
 - 1 Corinthians 3:4-7
 - 1 Corinthians 3:21-23
 - 1 Corinthians 4:1
 - 1 Corinthians 9:16-17
 - 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12
2. Which of these are easy for you?
3. Which aspects are hard for you?
4. In which specific areas do you need to improve?

Turn now to the corrective encouragement that this flock metaphor contains for the sheep. Sheep need a shepherd. Left alone they will follow the lead sheep anywhere—even into danger. They do not know how to find good sources of food and water. Yet they readily submit whenever the shepherd steps in to guide. Chief characteristics of sheep are not only their need but also their willingness to be subject to their shepherd (see Isa 53:7).

Figurative sheep, however, need to be reminded that submission to the guidance of their leader is to their own benefit. This is the

emphasis when the writer of Hebrews urges us to “obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be *unprofitable for you*” (Heb 13:17, emphasis added).

In the way the flock metaphor is treated in the biblical text, it calls the sheep to be careful to submit and the shepherds to serve the needs of the sheep humbly, all under God’s mighty hand (1 Pet 5:6).

Because cultures are so different, it is hard at times to pinpoint when the flock is in danger. Some cultures value tolerance highly, and the church becomes too lenient. Other cultures easily fall into legalism and can turn against even the godliest teachers and leaders.

1.6



The Bible speaks of dangers and enemies threatening the flock. The New Testament describes some of these enemies as thieves who both steal and kill (John 10:1, 8, 10) and as savage wolves who speak perverse things to draw the flock to them (Acts 20:29-30). The warnings against things threatening the flock are presented as a challenge and encouragement to shepherds to guard the flock against these dangers.

- A. Why are the warnings important?
- B. In today’s church, what specifically identifies thieves and wolves?
- C. What do you do, or can you do, to protect your flock from these characteristics of thieves and wolves?

So far, biblical information provides several elements for a definition of the church. A central idea in that definition is that saved people associate purposefully. Looking at the contextual use of church provides us with the two aspects of the church: the local and

the universal. The various metaphors have provided a multicolored focus on the nature and purpose of the church.

1.7

Look back over the metaphors for the church, and identify the purpose(s) for using each metaphor: worship (to Christ); edification (to others), evangelism (to nonbelievers). We have identified the purposes emphasized by the body metaphor as an example.

	Worship	Edification	Evangelism
Body	X	X	
Bride			
Building/Temple			
Priesthood			
Flock			

Evaluating Other Concepts Related to the Church

Two other concepts relevant to the church include terms used in the Bible to designate Christians: disciples and brotherhood.

Disciples

In Protestant circles today, new emphasis is given to the concept of discipleship. In many ways, this is a reaction to the superficial nature of much church life. All believers need to make their individual and corporate contributions to the growth of the church locally and in the world. The metaphors discussed above emphasize

the relationship of believers with their Lord Jesus Christ: their head, their bridegroom, their cornerstone, their chief priest, and their great shepherd. That relationship is discipleship.

A dual concept of discipleship can be seen in the New Testament: (1) a call to individual believers to imitate their Lord Jesus Christ, to grow into his image and (2) a call for these disciples to make disciples.

The biblical basis for the first concept of discipleship is clear. Every believer is to become like Jesus Christ. God uses every circumstance in a Christian's life to mold him or her into the image of his Son (see Rom 8:28-29). Christlikeness is the very purpose of the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who writes the law of God in each believer's heart (see 2 Cor 3:1-18).

The second concept is found most clearly in the Great Commission (see Matt 28:19-20). Without evangelism as the first step in making disciples, the church will not grow. Paul presents the process of making disciples in 2 Timothy 2:2 as a ministry of multiplication.

The term *disciple* does not designate a Christian. Every rabbi in Jesus' day called his students disciples. In the Gospel narratives, many sayings of Jesus have been written down that paint a picture of Jesus' requirements for anyone who wants to be a real student under him.

Nevertheless, the term disciple cannot be called a metaphor for the church, nor can it be treated as one. It is a technical term that is defined by whom one is following. In our context, disciples are students of Jesus Christ.

Many groups in Protestant churches today value this term because it calls for personal imitation of Jesus Christ by individual believers. Anyone who denies or ignores a need for this imitation of Christ in our churches denies or ignores the emphasis in Jesus' ministry. Practically speaking, such a person creates the need for an emphasis on discipleship.

However, note that most of what is stated in the New Testament letters is being said to churches, not to individuals. Also note that Jesus is a rabbi in a culture with tremendous emphasis on corporate life, and all of his calls to discipleship build on that.

Brotherhood

The term *brotherhood* was popular in many religious orders of the past, and it is also used in many of the newer churches of today. Although it is not a metaphor, brotherhood is a valid description of the church.

The word *brother* was already used in many earlier periods to describe relationships outside of the family. “Family designations are used to indicate the superior or inferior status of the person addressed, thus ‘father’ to a greater, ‘brother’ to an equal and ‘son’ to an inferior without any connotation of blood relationship.”⁸

The Lord Jesus gives a very pointed meaning to the term when he says, “For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother” (Matt 12:50). Both the equality and the spiritual bond are expressed in the rest of the New Testament when the term brother is used as a straightforward reference for fellow Christians. “The responsibility for mutual love, compassion, and respect within the Christian community are stipulated in 1 John consistently in terms of ‘brother’ to ‘brother.’”⁹

Ephesians 2:17-19 shows the significance of the church being a spiritual family:

AND HE CAME AND PREACHED PEACE TO YOU WHO WERE FAR AWAY [Gentiles], AND PEACE TO THOSE WHO WERE NEAR [Jews]; for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household.

In Jesus’ day unity and fellowship between Jews and Gentiles was a new and radical concept. The fact that the church brings together in a spiritual family opposite groups which sometimes have a strong natural dislike for each other cannot be overemphasized. This fact forms the background to the many things said in the Letters about God, who in his grace forgives sinners and calls them to accept each other on the same ground of grace. Whenever and wherever the brotherhood of Christians finds real expression, that brotherhood becomes a tremendous testimony to the world.



1C

Think about fellow Christians that you have a hard time relating to, those whom it would be hard for you to call *brother* or *sister*. What does God need to do in your heart so that you can think of them and deal with them as fellow sinners saved by grace?



Adoration

Take some time to worship the God who loves each of us and in Christ has broken down all the barriers between people, so that among those who are Christ's, there need be no divisions of race, clan, nationality, or status.

Determining a Definition of the Church

The metaphors you have studied—body, bride, building and temple, priesthood, and flock—have shown different aspects of the nature of the church. These aspects also point out the different purposes of the church. Various purposes are associated with the three relationships of the believer—between oneself and God, other believers, and unbelievers. The association between the purposes of the church and relationships of the believer is summarized by these three terms: worship, edification, and evangelism.

Using the above summary, we would define the essence and purpose of the church in the following way:

Definition of the Church

The church is the living community of people in Christ Jesus, organized to fulfill corporately a threefold purpose: worship, edification, and evangelism.

1.8

- A. Explain how you think this suggested definition adequately summarizes what the Bible teaches about the church.
- B. If you disagree with the definition, what changes would you offer?
- C. Explain why you think your definition is more biblical.

Conclusion

In this lesson we have examined the Scriptures to establish a definition of the church. It is hard to formulate a definition in a few words that will completely give the essence of a multi-faceted, living organism such as the church. Yet we believe we have stated the key elements of the church in our definition. We will use this definition as the foundation for the rest of this course.

Notes

¹ Earl D. Radmacher, *What the Church Is All About: A Biblical and Historical Study* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1978); original title, *The Nature of the Church* (Portland, OR: Western Baptist Press, 1972), 327.

² Ibid., 188.

³ Similar to a metaphor is a simile. It makes a comparison but uses the word like or as: “My husband is like a Rock of Gibraltar to me.” Most see the metaphor as the stronger figure of speech because it is a more direct comparison.

⁴ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 3rd ed., 2 vols. (1886; reprint ed. [2 vols. in 1], Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 1:354.

⁵ E. Neufeld, *Ancient Hebrew Marriage Laws, With special references to General Semitic Laws and Customs* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1944), 149. (Commas in the Scripture references are in the original text and separate chapter and verse.)

⁶ Radmacher, 280.

⁷ Ibid., 301.

⁸ William White, Jr., “Brother,” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), 1:658.

⁹ Ibid.