

LESSON 6

Your New Spiritual Home, the Church

Jason's first experience with church was in a small group. The people from the church were friendly and loving toward him, even though he did not behave as "good" as they did. But he had decided to try out the church since his new friends went there. After visiting the church several times, Jason gave his life to Christ.

Before, Jason's life had been about working and drinking alcohol on the weekends. Now, he attended church gatherings, helped put a roof on someone's house, became active in youth ministry, and discovered a growing desire to be in church. His involvement in the church helped him to grow in his new relationship with Christ. Within a year, Jason felt that God was calling him to full-time ministry, so he entered into a mentoring relationship with his pastor.

As illustrated through Jason's life, one of the most important things for all new Christians is to get involved in a local church. The church is more than just a building where meetings take place each week. It is the center of your new spiritual life, and a place where you can find people with similar focus on the things of God. Therefore, becoming involved in a church can help you in several different ways. First, it gives you the opportunity to worship God with people who have also been born again. Second, you will find people to turn to when you need help. Third, you will discover great encouragement and new knowledge about God.

Being a part of a church, however, is not just about getting something. It is also your chance to give back. You can contribute to the work of the church by offering your talents, service, and ideas. Church is more than just a place that you attend; it is a place where you can belong.

There is no substitute for being faithful to a local church. While you can certainly learn about God through television and radio ministries, it is almost impossible to become intimately involved with such distant ministry. Studying and reading the Bible on your own is important, but it is also important that you be surrounded by other people of God who can offer you encouragement, advice, and help. That is the value of belonging to a local church.

LESSON OUTLINE

What Is the Church?

Your Role in the Church

The Role of Church Leaders

Biblical Illustrations of the Church

LESSON OBJECTIVES

When you complete this lesson, you should be able to:

- 1: *Define what the church is.*
- 2: *Evaluate your role in the mission of the church.*
- 3: *Point out the responsibilities of leaders in the church.*
- 4: *Describe ways the church is illustrated in Scripture.*

What Is the Church?

Objective 1:

Define what the church is.

The term *church* is used in a number of different ways. Sometimes it is used to refer to a building, as in, "I am going to the church today." Other times it is used to describe a local body of believers, as in, "The church service was very good today." And it is used to refer to

all churches everywhere, as in, “The church’s job is to evangelize the world.”

The word *church* comes from the ancient Greek word *ekklesia*, which simply means “an assembly.” As God’s people, we have been called out from the world and set apart for God. We are His *ekklesia* or assembly of people on the earth. Thus, the church really is not a building or a place at all. The original meaning of the word did not refer to a building where believers met, but to the believers themselves. The church is not a building; it is a people.

Think about it like this: if the church building burns down, does the church still exist? Of course! Because the location is not what is important. The fact that there are people of God, who have been called out from the world by the voice of the Father, and who have responded by meeting together for a common purpose, is what makes them the church.

From the moment you accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior, when you renounced the sinful things of the world, you became part of the church of God on the earth. You are now a called out one. Church is really where you belong!

Why attend church

Beth attended church when she felt like it. Some mornings, especially if she had worked late the night before, she just could not seem to get out of bed. She told herself that it was okay if she prayed and read the Bible. Eventually, though, she was neither praying nor reading her Bible, and her attendance at church became less frequent. When people from the church called or stopped by to check on her, she would be embarrassed that she had not attended church for so long. Eventually, she avoided them. What had started as a once-in-a-while habit of missing church became a pattern, and the pattern eventually became a lifestyle.

Many Christians view attending church as something optional and not a necessary part of their spiritual life.

It is very important for all Christians to be committed to a local church and to faithfully participate in its activities. Hebrews 10:25 exhorts, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” By meeting together we can encourage each other to stand firm in the faith, especially in these last days.

Jesus set the example by regularly attending worship services. Often in the gospels we see Jesus going into the synagogues, the Jewish houses of worship, to share the truth about God. Jesus’ parents also found Him as a boy in the temple. Luke 2:46 tells us, “After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.” Even as a twelve-year-old child, Jesus understood the importance of being in the house of God.

Other examples of Jesus attending worship services are found in Matthew 12:9, 13:54, Mark 1:21, and 3:1. There are a number of accounts of Jesus going to worship in the Jerusalem temple, too. Worship gatherings were a regular part of Jesus’ spiritual life. He did this to set an example for us.

Even after Jesus rose from the dead and returned to heaven, the first Christians continued to make a regular practice of coming together to worship God. Acts 2:46 records: “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts.” The example of the first Christians is yet another reason that we should faithfully attend church.

So for these reasons—because the Bible commands us, Jesus set the example, and the apostles understood the importance of church attendance—it is crucial for us to come together to worship God. Personal times of worship are important, but they can never substitute for worshipping with people of like faith.

What happens at church?

Throughout my travels, I have attended many churches with different styles of worship. Churches in

Nicaragua are in some ways dissimilar from churches in the United States, and still more different from churches in Europe or in Africa. But globally, all churches have certain things in common. The book of Acts, which describes how the church was formed after Jesus' return to heaven, gives some basic forms of worship that should be included in all churches.

Acts 2:42 tells us that the disciples, "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." This verse lists four elements—teaching, fellowship, communion, and prayer—that should be included in churches. The apostles' teaching was from the Word of God. Today, churches will have sermons where the pastor or another church member stands, explains portions of the Bible, and encourages the believers to apply the verses to their daily lives.

Fellowship is the practice of getting together with other members from the church. Some churches plan times for their members to have fun over lunch or other activities. This also happens informally as members of the church get to know one another by meeting in homes. Even more, fellowship is a deep caring for other Christians that develops as we share the love of God.

Some Christians avoid the social aspect of church, thinking that it is not spiritual. But the Bible does not separate our spiritual well-being from our social needs. We need to spend time with other Christians, and sometimes that means sitting with them for dinner or playing a game. That is part of God's purpose for the church.

"Breaking of bread" refers to the Lord's Supper or Communion. But it also refers to the general worship of God. Worship is the act of connecting our spirits with God's Holy Spirit. We often do that through singing worship songs or by partaking of the Lord's Supper. Giving offerings to God is another form of worship practiced in most churches.

Prayer, or talking with God, is not just done privately. The early church had prayer meetings, where they would

meet in homes or in a central location and talk to God as a group. Prayer is an important part of our church services, too. When we come together, we do not just talk to each other. We also talk to God.

While each church may practice these four elements differently, the important thing is that church members have a chance to hear teaching from God's Word, spend time getting to know each other, offer worship to the Lord, and take time to speak with Him. When you attend church, expect that these things will take place.

Your Role in the Church

Objective 2:

Evaluate your role in the mission of the church.

Meeting together as a church is about more than simply blessing the members of the church. God never intended the church to be a place only for Christians. The mission of the church is to reach out to a lost world and tell them about God's love. Matthew 28:18–20, sometimes called the Great Commission, is the primary mandate for evangelism and discipleship.

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:18–20).

Jesus commands His followers to do four things. First, we are to go. We cannot sit in the church and wait for the return of Christ. We are to be involved in the world, to go out and find people who need to know about Jesus Christ and introduce them to Him. My local church, for instance, regularly goes to a community a few miles down the road. We hand out groceries, play music, provide games for the children, and share with them stories about what God has

done for us. This is just another way to share the good news about Jesus Christ with one's community.

Second, we are called to make disciples. A disciple is a follower of Jesus. Every Christian should be trying to make other people into disciples, too. Being a disciple is about more than praying a prayer to ask Jesus to be a part of a person's life. It is a long-term commitment to help others on their spiritual journey. We should all have people who are helping us grow closer to Christ, and we should all be helping other people grow closer to Christ. Remember Jason, whom we introduced at the beginning of this chapter? He is an example of a disciple. His commitment to Christ and the ministry helped other youths in their spiritual journey. Just as he was growing in Christ, he was helping them to grow as well.

In 2 Timothy 2:2, the apostle Paul tells his co-laborer Timothy, "The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others." Discipleship is about being trained so that we can train others.

Besides making disciples, we are also called to baptize. Water baptism is a practice of the local church. It is a public statement that a person has made a decision to give his or her life entirely to Christ. Every Christian should be baptized in water as soon as possible after committing his or her life to the Lord.

Finally, we are called to teach people to obey the commands of Christ. We do this not only through our words, but also by our example. We must be models of what it means to obey Christ. Hence, the mission of the church is to reach the lost, disciple, and baptize them. This is your mission, too, as a member of the church. God can use your abilities to help the church fulfill its mission on earth.

The Role of Church Leaders

Objective 3:

Point out the responsibilities of leaders in the church.

Since the mission of the church is to reach the lost, all Christians ought to be ministers in the sense of personal evangelism and discipleship. However, in the church there are leaders who take responsibility for organizing the work and helping motivate people to accomplish the mission. The most visible leader in the church is the pastor.

Pastors

The title *pastor* comes from the Greek word meaning “shepherd.” Like shepherds, pastors are to take care of the flock of God. First Peter 5:2 tells pastors, “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve.” In other biblical passages, pastors are referred to as elders (1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1). Pastors or elders have many duties: 1) leading and overseeing the church; 2) caring for the spiritual needs of the church; 3) praying for the sick and needy; 3) counseling; 4) being an example; and 5) preaching and teaching. The goal is to share God’s Word clearly so that people can apply it to their lives.

Our responsibility to pastors or elders is also stipulated in Scripture. Hebrews 13:17 tells us, “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.” The Bible also instructs us to pray for the leaders of the church, and to support them in every way that we can.

Deacons

Besides pastors, deacons are the other main leadership role within the church. Acts 6:3 records the first use of deacons in the church. Deacons usually

oversee various operational aspects of the church in order to give the pastor time to focus on spiritual leadership. The Bible is clear that deacons must be individuals of the highest integrity and must have a clear grasp of biblical truth. Their lives must be worthy of respect (1 Timothy 3:8–13).

Biblical Illustrations of the Church

Objective 4:

Describe ways the church is illustrated in Scripture.

The Church as a Human Body

The Bible describes the church in several different ways. One common description of the church is that it functions like the human body. The Bible refers to the church as the “body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:27). Other Scriptures refer to Christ as the head of the body, the church (see Ephesians 1:23, 4:15 and Colossians 1:18).

Literally speaking, the head guides and controls the body. The human body does nothing without the head’s approval and involvement. Even the heart beat and breathing are controlled by parts of the head. In a similar way, as head of the church, Christ guides and controls the church. The church should not do anything without Christ’s permission and leading.

There are a number of other ways that the church resembles the human body. First Corinthians 12:12 says, “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.” As members of the body of Christ, we all have different functions and abilities. But we need one another to function efficiently.

Failure to work together will jeopardize our God-given mission. Therefore, Paul admonishes, “There should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it” (1 Corinthians 12:25–26). Each member of the body

of Christ must do his or her part to maintain the strength of this relationship and accomplish God's mission.

The Church as Bride

The Bible also describes the church as the bride of Christ, a pure bride (2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:26–27; Revelation 19:7). Paul earlier noted, “The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything” (Ephesians 5:23–24). Scripture indicates that the marital relationship between a man and a woman is intended to reflect Christ's relationship with the church. Hence, the husband is to be the head of the household, just as Christ is the head of the church.

This does not mean that husbands should lord their position over their wives. Instead, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25). Christ sacrificed everything for His church. That same sacrificial love should be displayed in marriage relationships. If husbands love their wives the way that Christ loves the church, then it would be easy for wives to submit to that love.

The Church as a Family

Another illustration of the church is as a family. The church should be an environment where people belong, where they relate and work together in love and peace. Paul exhorts, “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought” (1 Corinthians 1:10). It can be difficult to live without divisions in the church, but as we submit to the Spirit of God, He makes it possible.

The basis for our unity is love for each other. First John 3:11 says, “We should love one another.” That means we have to learn to get along with other members of the church. We must pray for, care for, and be willing to sacrifice for each other. We cannot give up on others

or be negative towards them. John 13:35 insists that the world will know we are disciples of Jesus by our love for each other. We must love each other as Christ loves us.

This love includes forgiving each other. Ephesians 4:32 reads, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." Since God has forgiven us, our responsibility is to forgive others of everything. This means that we have to move beyond being offended and must demonstrate grace toward each other. We should not keep track of how often people have wronged us, but should lay down our rights for the sake of keeping peace in the family of God.

Finally, the family of God ought to be generous. "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Galatians 6:10). We must look for ways to help other people, to share with them, and to bless them. We must think of others before thinking of ourselves. This is the heart of what it means to be God's family, the church.

Conclusion

Belonging to a church is about much more than weekly attendance to hear a sermon. Being part of the church requires working with other believers to accomplish God's mission on earth. If you do not belong to a local church, begin this week by finding a place where you can faithfully attend and contribute your gifting. If you already belong to a church, consider whether you are offering yourself and your abilities to the church as God intends. Ask God to show you where you should be involved. As you do this, you will find yourself growing deeper in your relationship with Jesus Christ.

SUGGESTED SCRIPTURE VERSES TO MEMORIZE

Matthew 28:19–20

Acts 2:42

1 Corinthians 12:12

Galatians 6:10

Ephesians 4:32

1 Timothy 2:1

Hebrews 10:25

Hebrews 13:17

1 John 3:11

SELF-TEST

After studying the lesson, please read each study question carefully and circle the correct response. There is only one correct response for each question.

1. *The word church comes from an ancient Greek word that means*
 - a) *an assembly.*
 - b) *house of God.*
 - c) *group of believers.*

2. *Which of these is the correct attitude about church attendance?*
 - a) *Attending church is unnecessary since all believers will go to heaven.*
 - b) *Believers should want to attend church to grow closer to God.*
 - c) *Church attendance is required in order to get into heaven.*

3. *What was Jesus' attitude toward attending worship gatherings?*
 - a) *Jesus rarely attended worship gatherings because He knew they were unnecessary.*
 - b) *Jesus regularly attended worship gatherings, setting the example for us.*
 - c) *Jesus said that we could not get to heaven without attending church.*

4. *Which book of the Bible describes the habits and worship practices of the first church?*
 - a) *Acts*
 - b) *Matthew*
 - c) *Revelation*

5. *Which of these is not one of the things the Bible mentions as happening in all church worship services?*
 - a) *Eating full meals*
 - b) *Preaching*
 - c) *Prayer*

6. *What is the primary mission of the church?*
 - a) *To reach the lost, baptize and disciple them*
 - b) *To please members by creating a comfortable family atmosphere*
 - c) *To meet together regularly to encourage each other to stay faithful to Christ*

7. *The Greek word for "shepherd" is used for which church leader?*
 - a) *Deacon*
 - b) *Elder*
 - c) *Pastor*

8. *Who is the head of the church?*
 - a) *Elders*
 - b) *Jesus*
 - c) *The pastor*

9. *In Scripture, the church is **not** depicted as a*
 - a) *bride.*
 - b) *husband.*
 - c) *body.*

10. *How will the world know that we are disciples of Jesus?*
 - a) *Because we attend church*
 - b) *Through our good deeds*
 - c) *By our love for each other*

ANSWERS TO SELF-TEST

Note: If you answered a study question incorrectly, you can find the objective it was drawn from by looking at the reference in parentheses.

1. *a* (6.1)
2. *b* (6.1)
3. *b* (6.1)
4. *a* (6.1)
5. *a* (6.1)
6. *a* (6.2)
7. *c* (6.3)
8. *b* (6.4)
9. *b* (6.4)
10. *c* (6.4)

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