

Ellen G. White Estate

MY JOURNEY TO LIFE

THE CHURCH

What is the Church and its Purpose?

STEP 23 OF 28



My Journey to Life, Step 23

Foreword

My Journey to Life will give you the keys for finding peace of mind, harmony of body, and success in relationships. Every step will transform your outlook as you unpack each lesson. We pray they will help you to fall in love with the greatest Teacher this world has ever known. So together, let's walk the pathway step-by-step to a new life in Jesus.

Preface

What is a church? Is it a building where God meets with His people or is it something deeper than that? In today's lesson, we'll discover the true meaning of "the church."

Step Twenty-three—The Church

What is the Church and its Purpose? "The church is the community of believers who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In continuity with the people of God in Old Testament times, we are called out from the world; and we join for worship, for fellowship, for instruction in the Word, for the celebration of the Lord's Supper, for service to humanity, and for the worldwide proclamation of the gospel. The church derives its authority from Christ, who is the incarnate Word revealed in the Scriptures. The church is God's family; adopted by Him as children, its members live on the basis of the new covenant. The church is the body of Christ, a community of faith of which Christ Himself is the Head. The church is the bride for whom Christ died that He might sanctify and cleanse her. At His return in triumph, He will present her to Himself a glorious church, the faithful of all the ages, the purchase of His blood, not having spot or wrinkle, but holy and without blemish."—*Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, p. 165

Bible Discovery: Genesis 12:1-3; Exodus 19:3-7; Matthew 16:13-20; 18:18; 28:19, 20; Acts 2:38-42; 7:38; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Ephesians 1:22, 23; 2:19-22; 3:8-11; 5:23-27; Colossians 1:17, 18; 1 Peter 2:9

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 12.1

1. What is the meaning of the word "church"? In the Bible, the word "church" is a translation of the Greek *ekklesia*, which means "a calling out." Rather than referring to a building or sanctuary, the expression stood for "gathering," "assembly," or "congregation." Consider the various uses of the word *ekklesia* in the New Testament:

- Believers assembled for worship in a specific place (1 Corinthians 11:18)
- Believers living in a certain locality (1 Corinthians 16:1)
- Believers assembled in the home of an individual (1 Corinthians 16:19)

- A group of congregations in each geographic area (Acts 9:31)
- The whole body of believers throughout the world (Matthew 16:18)
- The whole faithful creation in heaven and on earth (Ephesians 1:20-22)

These biblical definitions of “church” are especially encouraging for those who cannot assemble for worship in a building or sanctuary because of a pandemic, persecution, distance, or other extenuating circumstances. In these instances where worship in a dedicated church building is impossible, God nonetheless considers the believers’ worship gathering—whether in a cave, the woods, or a private home—a place where He can dwell among them.

Bible Discovery: 1 Corinthians 10:32; 12:28; 14:19, 28, Galatians 1:2; Ephesians 4:11, 16; Colossians 4:15; Philippians 2:9-11

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 11.2

2. What is the Rock upon which the church is founded? Christ Jesus is the Rock upon which the church is founded. The church is not a human institution; it is not led by a human being or founded by a human being. The imagery of Christ as a Rock runs through Scripture (Deuteronomy 32:3, 4; Psalm 62:7; Isaiah 28:16; 1 Peter 2:4) Thus the church was built, not on frail human wisdom and ingenuity, but on the Rock of Ages.

When Jesus declared to Peter, “On this rock I will build my church, and gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18), He spoke of Himself, the Living Rock. The apostles understood Jesus to be the enduring foundation of the household of God and its cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20-22), not a faulty, finite human being. The church belongs to God because He called it into existence, lives in its midst, and rules over it with love, justice, and mercy.

Bible Discovery: 1 Corinthians 3:11; 10:4; Ezekiel 47:1-12; John 7:37, 38; 1 Peter 2:4-8

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 418.1; *The Desire of Ages*, p. 413

3. What does the Bible say about the origin, nature, and characteristics of the church? The Bible portrays the church as an inclusive divine institution, calling it “the church of God” (Acts 20:28). The nation God brought out of Egypt was called “the church [or “congregation,” RSV] in the wilderness (Acts 7:38, KJV). Its members were “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6), God’s “holy people” (Deuteronomy 28:9)—His church.

The Jewish people were to be “servants” and lights to others, inviting people from all the nations of the world to learn of the true God and His love. Sadly, Israel became steeped in idolatry, isolationism, nationalism, pride, and self-centeredness, ultimately rejecting the very Messiah God sent for their salvation. After the cross, the church no longer focused on one ethnicity, the Jews, but God’s people were any who were baptized into Christ, regardless of race, class, or gender. All became “one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

The New Testament refers to the church both as believers in a specific location (1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:1) and to a wider geographic areas such as “the churches of Galatia” (Galatians 1:2). Each locality, however, is part of the whole church. It is in this universal sense that “church” is used in Ephesians 1:22, 3:10 or Colossians 1:18. We could describe the church as a fellowship of believers whom God has called out of the world to declare His incredible gospel to “every nation, tribe, tongue, and people” (Revelation 14:6).

Bible Discovery: Genesis 12:1-3; Leviticus 26:12; Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 3:26-29

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 15.2; *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 163.1; *Selected Messages*, bk. 2, p. 397.4

4. What is the mission of the church? The cross signified the end of Israel’s mission, while Christ’s resurrection instated the Christian church and its mission—the proclamation of the gospel of salvation through the blood of Christ. In the place of Israel, God established a new nation—a church—that would carry forward His mission for the world.

This mission includes proclaiming a message of preparation for Christ’s return—directed both to the church itself (1 Corinthians 1:7, 8) and to the rest of humanity (Revelation 14:6-12; 18:4). Thus, the edification of believers is part of the mission of the church (Ephesians 4:11-15), helping them stand against heresies and enabling them to teach “the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26) through the Word.

According to the Gospels, those whom Jesus called were trained and sent out on a mission to “make disciples of all the nations” (Matthew 28:19). As Christ was sent into the world by the Father (John 20:21), so is every member of the church called to share the gospel of Jesus Christ to the ends of the world, cutting through all racial and social barriers (Deuteronomy 28:9).

In addition to the proclamation of doctrines, or teachings, of Jesus, the church was to also follow Jesus’ example in alleviating physical suffering, especially among those who have least. In the judgment parable of Matthew 25:31-46, the sheep and the goats are divided according to their concern and action on behalf of the needy and suffering. Repeatedly, the apostles emphasized the importance of practical Christianity (James 1:27; 2:1-7; 1 John 3:15-17).

Bible Discovery: Deuteronomy 28:9; Matthew 21:41, 43; 24:14; 28:19, 20; Mark 3:14; Acts 1:8; 2 Peter 3:14

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 9.1; *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 58.1; *Selected Messages*, bk. 3, p. 16.3; *Testimonies to the Church*, vol. 2, p. 25.1

5. How does the Old Testament church differ from the New Testament church? The New Testament church differs significantly from its Old Testament counterpart. The New Testament church is made up of both Jews who have accepted Jesus as Messiah and Gentiles who also believe in Jesus Christ.

Paul illustrates the new organic relationship of these diverse peoples by the imagery of two

trees—a good and a wild olive tree, representing Israel and Gentiles. The Jews who do not accept Christ are no longer the children of God (Romans 9:6-8) and are represented by branches broken off from the good tree, while those Jews who did receive Christ remain attached. Paul goes on to portray the Gentiles who accept Christ as branches from the wild olive tree grafted into the good tree (Romans 11:19-25). Thus, the apostolic church became an independent organization with no national boundaries, the church of Christ universal.

All the covenant blessings God made to ancient Israel were predicated on Israel’s wholehearted obedience and cooperation with God’s will. When God’s own people “received Him not” (John 1:11), spiritual Israel—those who have received Christ as Savior—became the recipients of the covenantal promises. Individual Jews could still be part of spiritual Israel, but they would do so as believers in Christ as Messiah (Romans 9:6; 11:1, 2).

Bible Discovery: Exodus 19:5; Deuteronomy 4:5-8; Matthew 21:43; Romans 9:25; 11:16-18; Galatians 3:26-29

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 376.2, 379.1

6. What are some of the metaphors the Bible uses to help us understand the concept of “church”? The metaphoric descriptions of the New Testament church help us understand God’s ideal for His community of faith. These metaphors include:

- **The church as a body.** This metaphor stresses the unity of the church and the importance of each part of the body to the whole (Ephesians 5:30), as well as identifying Christ as “head of the body (Colossians 1:18).
- **The church as a temple.** The church is “God’s building,” “the temple of God” in which the Holy Spirit dwells. Jesus Christ is its foundation and the “chief cornerstone,” (1 Corinthians 3:9-16; Ephesians 2:20).
- **The church as “Jerusalem above.”** The Scriptures call the city of Jerusalem Zion, where God dwells with His people (Psalm 9:11). The New Testament sees the church as the “Jerusalem above”—the spiritual counterpart of the earthly Jerusalem (Galatians 4:26).
- **The church as the pillar and foundation of truth.** The church of the living God is the depository and citadel of truth, protecting dynamic truth from the attacks of its enemies (1 Timothy 3:15 NIV).

The Shepherd and His flock is also a beautiful metaphor describing the close relationship of Christ Himself to the people of God, whom He has called to follow Him (Psalm 80:1). The family of God found in church fellowship may become closer even than that of a natural family, as together the members carry out the will of their Shepherd (Mark 3:33-35).

Bible Discovery: Luke 12:32; 2 Corinthians 6:14-16; Ephesians 2:16, 21, 22; Philippians 3:20; Hebrews 12:22, 23

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 12.1; *The Desire of Ages*, p. 479.2

7. What is the difference between the visible and invisible church? It was Jesus' purpose to create a visible community, a fellowship of men and women of which He is the leader. He chose His disciples to gather a remnant group to Himself that He could train for service. The visible church keeps God's Ten Commandments through faith in Him, they preach to the poor and heal the brokenhearted, as well as prepare others for Jesus' coming (Luke 4:18, 19). Members of the visible church must remember that Christ is their leader, and that even though the organized church is the body of Christ, it is composed of imperfect, erring men and women who may sometimes disappoint them.

The invisible church, also called the church universal, is composed of all God's people throughout the world, and identified only by God Himself. It includes the believers within the visible church, and many who, though they do not belong to a church organization, have followed all the light Christ has given them (John 1:9). These precious worshippers of Christ Jesus will be called out of "Babylon," or doctrinal confusion, to be a part of God's visible church before His coming (Revelation 18:1-4). Because of the spiritual gifts given to the visible church (Ephesians 4:4-16), these "called out" worshippers can then fully experience God's truth, love and fellowship.

Bible Discovery: Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43; 28:18-20; Luke 6:12, 13; John 10:16; Romans 2:14; 1 Thessalonians 5:23

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 47.1

8. What are the prerequisites to church membership? Jesus summarized who can belong to the church in these words: "He who believes [in Me] has eternal life" (John 6:47). To believe in Jesus includes repentance for sins of which His Spirit convicts (Acts 2:37, 38) and turning away from those sins (2 Chronicles 7:14). As a symbol of Christ washing away their sins and raising them to new life, the believer who has experienced the new birth will be baptized (Acts 2:36-41). Every member is then called to proclaim the gospel of Christ and His return to claim His own (Matthew 28:20).

Members of the body of Christ commit to relate to one another based on equality, remembering that "he who is the greatest among you shall be your servant" (Matthew 23:8, 11). In the church of Christ there must be no vestige of racism, discrimination, or hierarchy because all are "one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28), called to a "royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9). Each person in the community of faith must sacrifice as did their Master, take up their cross and develop entirely new values. To the non-believer, all this sounds intimidating and difficult. But to the person who has received the joy found in forgiveness and freedom from guilt, love for Jesus makes every burden light (Matthew 11:28-30).

Bible Discovery: Isaiah 1:16; Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34-36; 16:16; Luke 14:27; Acts 16:30, 31

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, *The Southern Work*, p. 12.2

9. How important is church membership? Church membership is important to us because it is important to Jesus! In fact, Scriptures represent the church as a bride and the Lord as the bridegroom (Hosea 2:19; 2 Corinthians 11:2). Christ’s love for the church is so deep that He “gave Himself for it” (Ephesians 5:25). God intends to sanctify and cleanse the church by His Word (Ephesians 5:26). He wants to prepare the church to be His bride—“a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but...holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:27).

Just as a new-born baby thrives in the care of a loving family, so the newly baptized believer thrives in the care, fellowship, and instruction of a loving church family. The book of Acts reminds us that the believers who responded to the call to repent and be baptized were “added to the church,” (Acts 2:41, 47 NKJV), not left to flounder alone.

As children of the heavenly Father (Galatians 3:26-4:7), they now belonged to the “household of God” (Ephesians 2:19). The beauty of church membership is not merely socialization with fellow believers, but genuine connection with God the Father, His Son, and the Holy Spirit (1 John 1:3). The church belongs to Christ because He redeemed it and “purchased [it] with His own blood” (Acts 20:28).

When Paul was converted, God put him in touch with His visible church. Today, God also leads His people into His visible church, characterized by loyalty to all of God’s commandments and demonstrating the faith of Jesus, so they may participate in finishing His mission on earth (Revelation 14:12; Matthew 24:14).

Bible Discovery: Jeremiah 3:14; Acts 9:10-22; Galatians 2:9; 6:10; Ephesians 3:15; Philippians 1:3, 5, 6

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, vol. 6, p. 366.1; *Education*, p. 268.5; *Sons and Daughters of God*, p. 13.5

10. What are the functions of church organization? The church was organized for service to others and to fill the earth with the knowledge of God—His glory, love, justice, and mercy—through the proclamation of the gospel. Some of the practical ways the church accomplishes God’s plan is through gathering for worship and exhortation, providing Christian fellowship and instruction in the Scriptures, helping members identify and use their spiritual gifts, and administering divine ordinances such as baptism, foot washing and the Lord’s Supper. The apostolic church recognized Christ as head of the church (Matthew 28:18) and the source of all its authority. In the church, Christ works through selected officers such as pastors, overseers, elders, and deacons who function as under-shepherds of the congregation.

Scripture gives church leaders the task of disciplining members (Hebrews 13:17; 1 Corinthians 5:11-13), dealing redemptively with private and public offenses, including divisive persons (Romans 16:17, Matthew 18:15-17), and working toward the restoration of offenders. The church also helps members understand their responsibility to the state (Romans 13:4, 7) while recognizing that their highest allegiance is to God (Acts 5:29).

Bible Discovery: Daniel 12:3; Acts 6:6; 13:2, 3; 20:17-28; 1 Corinthians 14:33, 40; Ephesians 1:22; 4:4-16; 1 Timothy 4:14; 5:22

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 360.1; 3LtMs, *Letter 33*, 1879, par. 5; *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 58.1; *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 185.2

11. What is the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the church? Early Christians thought of their community of faith as the Temple of God. Rather than merely a physical structure, they believed God had established His *people* as a sanctuary by choosing to dwell among them (2 Corinthians 6:16). This “people edifice” was not static, but continually growing through the agency of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22).

Just as Jesus had divine assistance in His earthly ministry, so the church would have the strengthening, empowering presence of the Spirit for its witness, help in selecting leaders, guidance, and sanctification. Every aspect of the life of the church comes within the sphere of the Spirit’s influence. As the church becomes visibly united by the enabling power of the Spirit working in willing hearts, it finds oneness in Christ (Ephesians 5:2-15). Then the Good News of the gospel can be carried to the entire earth and Jesus can come.

Bible Discovery: John 14:16, 17; Acts 1:4, 5, 2:33; 3:1; Romans 15:16; 1 Corinthians 2:13; 12:4-12; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Ephesians 4:4-6; Hebrews 12:22

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 508.1; *Review and Herald*, February 25, 1890, par. 6; *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 50.1

12. What is the future of the church? The church on earth is called, like an army, to war against spiritual darkness (Ephesians 6:12). It is not yet the church triumphant; it must wage war against spiritual darkness outside of the church and against compromise and corruption within the church. Knowing that he has but a short time, Satan is angry with God’s church (Revelation 12:12, 17) and will bring against it “a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation.” But God will intervene on behalf of His faithful people, who will be “delivered, everyone who is found in the book” (Daniel 12:1).

At Jesus’ return the church triumphant will emerge. At that time, He will be able to present “to Himself a glorious church,” the faithful of all ages, the purchase of His blood, “not having spot or wrinkle, but holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:27). Let us be faithful until that great Day of triumph (Revelation 7:9, 10)!

Bible Discovery: Matthew 24:13; Ephesians 4:5, 13, 14; 6:13; 1 Timothy 4:1; Revelation 2:10; 22:5

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, bk. 1, p. 305.3

Reflection...

The church on earth is the one object upon which God bestows His supreme regard.

Next Step...

With members coming from every nation, kindred, tribe, and people, God's church is bound to have its share of differences. How can the church find unity and balance while maintaining its diversity? We'll discuss this in our next lesson.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the benefits of church participation?
2. What is the mission of the church?
3. How are you personally advancing the mission of the church?

Further Reading

Official Adventist Website: <https://adventist.org/the-church>

Contact Information

Ellen G. White Estate: mail@whiteestate.org

Request a personal Bible study: <https://www.bibleschools.com/en/personal-studies>

Visit your local Seventh-day Adventist Church: <https://www.adventistlocator.org>

Online prayer room: <https://www.wepray.mobi>