

The Church: In Service to Humanity



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Pet. 2:9; Matt. 28:19, 20; John 17:21, 22; Acts 15:1–29.*

Memory Text: “These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (*1 Timothy 3:14, 15, NKJV*).

Key Thought: “We should remember that the church, enfeebled and defective though it be, is the only object on earth on which Christ bestows His supreme regard.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 2, p. 396.

For many, church isn't what it used to be (whatever that was). Some people even talk about “a churchless Christianity,” a concept that is self-contradictory. Others rail against “organized religion” (what is better, “disorganized religion”?). The Bible teaches, clearly, about the importance of the church. It's not an option; it's a crucial component in the plan of salvation. No wonder, then, that as the great controversy unfolds, Satan works so hard against it, especially because the church is one important means by which sinners are brought into contact with God's offer of salvation. The church, wrote Paul, was “the house of God,” even “the pillar and ground of the truth” (*1 Tim. 3:15, NKJV*). The church is not a human invention; it was created by God for the purposes of bringing erring sinners into a saving relationship with Him.

*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 24.

Nature of the Church: Part 1

When we speak about the nature of something, we are usually interested in its origins, function, and purpose. Besides providing several images to depict the church, the Bible uses a particular word in reference to it, *ecclesia*, which means “called out” or “called forth.” In secular Greek life the word was used primarily to describe a group of citizens who had been called out from their homes into a public place for an assembly or gathering. The New Testament uses the word in this general sense.

In the Greek translation of the Old Testament (called the Septuagint), the “congregation” of Israel, especially when gathered before the Lord for religious purposes, is referred to as *ecclesia*.

The Jews were “called out” to be God’s special people, but the early Christians may have used the word to identify those Jews and Gentiles who, as recipients of God’s grace, had been called out to be Christ’s witnesses. In the New Testament, the church describes the company of the faithful the world over. It’s important to note that the word *ecclesia* is never used with reference to a building in which public worship is conducted. Equally significant is that whereas the word *synagogue* originally denoted an assembly of people gathered for a specific purpose, the Christians preferred to use the word *ecclesia*. Nevertheless, both words indicate that the New Testament church was in historical continuity with the Old Testament church, the “congregation” of Israel (*Acts 7:38*).

The word *ecclesia* indicates, in general terms, a group of people called out through God’s initiative. How does this explain Paul’s use of the word at three different levels: (i) the church in individual homes (*Rom. 16:5, 1 Cor. 16:19*); (ii) the church in specific cities (*1 Cor. 1:2, Gal. 1:2*); and (iii) the church in larger geographical areas (*Acts 9:31*)?

Ecclesia is the depiction of any group of people gathered together who share in a saving relationship with Christ. This means that individual congregations are not just a part of the whole church; each unit represents the whole. Furthermore, the church is one throughout the whole world, but at the same time it is present in each assembly.

Think about your local church, which functions as a representative of God’s whole church. What kind of responsibilities does that place on you as part of the church body and on the local church itself?

Nature of the Church: Part 2

Besides the word *ecclesia* itself, the New Testament describes the church with several images that further explain its nature and function. Today we will look at just two crucial concepts regarding the church: the church as the people of God and the church as the body of Christ.

1. The “people of God” as a concept is applied in the Bible to the children of Israel (*Deut. 14:2*). Read 1 Peter 2:9, where the concept is clearly applied to Christians. How are we to understand what this means for us today?

Notice that even as the concept is applied to Christians, it is still used to describe the nation of Israel (*Luke 1:68; Rom. 11:1, 2*). Evidently the New Testament applies the concept to the church in a way that suggests continuity and consummation. (*See Gal. 3:29.*)

2. “Body of Christ”—Romans 12:5, 1 Corinthians 12:27, and Ephesians 1:22, 23 depict the church as the body of Christ. How do these texts help us to understand better its nature and function?

Numerous ideas can be found within these texts, perhaps the most obvious one being the unity (see Wednesday’s lesson) that should be seen in the church. This is an idea expressed elsewhere in the New Testament, especially in 1 Corinthians 12, where Paul writes: “For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling?” (*1 Cor. 12:12–17*).

Some people suffer from what are known as auto-immune diseases: their own immune system, which is supposed to protect the body, attacks it instead. Think about the implications of this analogy for the church as “the body of Christ.”

The Mission of the Church

The church as “the body of Christ” means that the church is to do what Christ would do if He were still on the earth “bodily.” It is for this reason that the church as an “assembly” has been called out. The church does not simply have a mission; the church is mission.

Read Matthew 28:19, 20. How does this text address the issue of the church’s mission?

Mission involves sending people out to speak for God. It is what God Himself did with the prophets of Israel (*Jer. 7:25*) and with the apostles (*Luke 9:1, 2; 10:1, 9*). Jesus also sent out His disciples just as the Father had sent Him (*John 20:21*). The church today can do no less and still remain faithful to its calling.

What do the following texts also teach us about the church’s mission? *Eph. 4:11–13, Matt. 10:5–8, James 1:27, Eph. 1:6, and 1 Pet. 2:9.*

Clearly, evangelism is central to the mission of the church. The church exists also for the edification of believers, for the promotion of true worship, and for engagement in matters of social concern.

Though the church faces many challenges, one of the most difficult is to keep a proper balance in its understanding of mission. On one hand, it would be so easy to get caught up in social reform and in working for the betterment of society and its ills. While that work is important, in and of itself, it must never be allowed to swallow up the ultimate mission of the church, which is to reach the lost for Jesus and to prepare people for His return. At the same time, too, we need to avoid the extreme of living as if every headline signaled the end of the world and thus neglect the basic tasks of daily life. We need divine wisdom in order to know how to strike the right balance.

How involved are you in the mission of the church? In what way could you do more than you are doing? Why is it important for your own spiritual growth to be involved in the church’s calling?

Unity of the Church

The church—depicted as the “called out” of God, the “people of God,” the “body of Christ,” and the “temple of the Holy Spirit”—is fitted for service or mission. Unity is essential to the church because without it the church cannot successfully accomplish its mission. It is no wonder that the issue of unity was on Christ’s mind toward the close of His earthly life (*John 17:21, 22*).

Jesus prayed for the unity of the church (*John 17:21, 22*); **Paul** exhorted the believers about it (*Rom. 15:5, 6*). **How are we to understand unity as it is expressed in these texts? What does this unity mean?**

The unity that Christ prayed for and that Paul exhorted the believers to attain clearly involved a union of feeling, thought, action, and much more. It is not a harmony that is achieved through social engineering, diplomatic management, or political subterfuge. It is a gift bestowed upon believers by the indwelling Christ (*John 17:22, 23*) and kept by the power of God the Father (*John 17:11*).

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10 and 2 Corinthians 13:11. How are we to achieve what Paul calls for in these texts?

There is no question that we are all different people and that we have different views regarding many things, views that can at times make unity difficult. Though stresses and strains are inevitable at every level of the church, we all need to keep an attitude of humility, self-denial, and a desire for a good that is greater than ourselves. So many of the divisions that arise do so because of selfishness, pride, and a desire to exalt oneself and one’s views over others. None of us has it all right; none of us understands all things perfectly. Whatever the inevitable differences that will arise, were we all to daily take up our crosses, daily die to self, daily seek not only our own good but the good of others and the good of the church as a whole, so many of the problems with which we struggle and which hinder the work would vanish.

In short, unity begins with each one of us, individually, as followers of Christ—not just in name but in a life of true self-sacrifice, a life dedicated to a cause and a good greater than ourselves.

Governance of the Church

Governance means getting things done. This is true of general social life, and it is also true of church life. Governance also involves organization, which means the organizing of things into a functioning, coherent whole with rules, regulations, and structures designed to facilitate a task at hand. Authority is also critical to governance. At the practical level of church life, who has authority to authorize things and who can be authorized to do things? Different answers to these questions have led to different forms of church governance.

Seventh-day Adventists have a representative system of church governance. Ideally, leadership acts only as representatives, receiving delegated authority and responsibilities from the membership. It is not simply enough to show that a system of church governance is based on Scripture; the exercise of authority within the system must demonstrate sensitivity to biblical values.

Look at Acts 15:1–29. What can we learn from these verses about some key principles that are involved in church organization and governance?

Whatever we can learn from these verses about church governance, one point should be clear: church organization needs to be centered around advancing the spread of the gospel. Biblically, church governance is only as good as its promotion of mission and evangelism.

We need to remember, too, that though Christ exercises His authority through His church and its appointed officials, He has never handed over His power to them. He retains the headship of the church (*Eph. 1:22*). The early church was conscious of the fact that it could not exercise any authority independently of Christ and His word. In Acts 15:28 it was important to the assembly that what it decided “seemed good to the Holy Spirit” (*NKJV*), the true representative of Christ. Holders of offices in the church today cannot act differently.

Consider Matthew 20:24–28 and 23:8. What implication is there for the exercise of authority in the church at all levels?

How willing are you to serve others? Think deeply about your own motives and what they are in regard to what you do in the church, regardless of whatever position you might hold. What are these motives, and how can they be more in harmony with the principles revealed in the Word?

Further Study: Read Raoul Dederen, “The Church,” pp. 538–581, in Raoul Dederen (ed.), *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*; Ellen G. White, “‘Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods Before Me,’ ” pp. 361–364, in *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*; “The Church the Light of the World,” pp. 455–467, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5.

“If a man is sanguine of his own powers and seeks to exercise dominion over his brethren, feeling that he is invested with authority to make his will the ruling power, the best and only safe course is to remove him, lest great harm be done, and he lose his own soul, and imperil the souls of others. . . . This disposition to lord it over God’s heritage will cause a reaction unless these men change their course. . . . A man’s position does not make him one jot or tittle greater in the sight of God; it is character alone that God values.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, p. 362.

“The mission of the church of Christ is to save perishing sinners. It is to make known the love of God to men and to win them to Christ by the efficacy of that love. The truth for this time must be carried into the dark corners of the earth, and this work may begin at home.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 381.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ There is no question that the church, our church, has problems. Jesus explained it as such: “ ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away’ ” (*Matt. 13:24, 25, NIV*). Read the rest of the parable. How do we apply what Jesus said to our church about the way in which we deal with those who cause problems? Does this mean that there are no circumstances under which someone could be disfellowshipped? See, for instance, *Titus 3:10, 11* and *Rom. 16:17*.
- ❷ What do you say to someone who, believing the church is corrupt, decides to pull away from the body as a whole and go it alone?
- ❸ Our church affirms the notion of what has been called the “priesthood of all believers.” What does this idea include? What responsibilities does the idea carry for us?
- ❹ Discuss in class some of the potential threats to our unity as a church. What issues have caused division in the church in the past? What can we learn from the past that can help to prevent similar things from happening in the future?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *1 Timothy 3:14, 15*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize the purpose and function for which the church was designed, understanding that Christ is its Foundation and Head.

Feel: Cherish unity of mind and heart, as well as the diversity that brings strength to the church family.

Do: Practice servant leadership.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Called to Mission

A Who is the head of the church? How does this make a difference when considering criticism of the church body and governance?

B How has Christ modeled the mission and leadership style that He is calling the church to provide?

C What functions is the church to perform, and how does church governance support these functions?

II. Feel: Called to Unity

A Christ constantly stressed the unity between the Father and Himself. Why is unity with God and with one another so important for His church to promote and experience?

B How do the many parts of the church support and strengthen one another?

III. Do: Called to Service

A How should church members emulate Christ's example of servant leadership?

B What daily acts of servanthood may followers of Christ perform?

► **Summary:** Christ is the Head of the church and serves as the best example of mission, unity, and service through His self-sacrificing life on this earth. His life was one of perfect unity with the Father, culminating in His atoning death on the cross. What He has done offers salvation to the lost and victorious living to His disciples.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: **Becoming a member of the church implies both individual and corporate belonging. Therefore, the mission of the church to seek the lost and make disciples remains and applies equally in commission to the individual member as it does to the worldwide church.**

Just for Teachers: **This week’s lesson examines the church from the aspects of its nature, mission, unity, and governance, thereby giving us a very good framework for disciple making.**

In this first section we want to connect the overall concept of church to the actual church experience of the church member. First, we will review the unique status of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and its challenges. Then we will probe a little deeper into the actual dynamics of actively belonging to it.

Opening Discussion: The Seventh-day Adventist Church movement is an exciting place to be today. We are experiencing an influx of multiple new members in many countries. We are witnessing many last-day events taking place before our very eyes, giving us evidence that we are now coming close to the awaited time of Jesus’ second coming. The advent is upon us, and many of us are recalling scriptural prophecy as well as the Spirit of Prophecy writings.

The global nature of the Seventh-day Adventist Church creates a beautiful mosaic of diversity as well. While the denomination is well over a century old, its new members bring in fresh life and keep the sense of mission active.

Church membership is composed of individuals with free will who live out their spiritual choices and lives individually and corporately. Complicating this diversity, certain geographic locations and circumstances evince that perhaps the influence of current culture and the cares and busyness of life have resulted in lower-than-might-be-expected, regular study of the Bible.

Another challenge for the church is that of membership retention, both in rapidly growing areas and with the youth and young adult members in the more established venues.

How then do we continue to grow spiritually from the standpoint of both the individual and the corporate church?

It is time to reflect more deeply on the relationships that we share with one another within the local church structure. These relationships are key to the role of the church and its mission.

Activity Questions:

- 1 Share, in a sentence or two, how you became a follower of Christ and a church member.
- 2 Who has played a key role in your continued, active participation in church life? How has he or she influenced your spiritual growth and walk with Christ?

►STEP 2—Explore**Bible Commentary****Equipping the Church** (*Read Ephesians 4:1–16 with your class.*)

Historical context tells us that the book of Ephesians is what we call a “prison epistle”; it is thought to have been written by Paul while he was incarcerated. Ephesians shows that Paul gave much serious thought to this new entity, the church, coming into being. We find that in this epistle he refers to the church as the body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit, and the bride of Christ. Our Scripture passage, in chapter 4, speaks to the unity and purpose of the church.

Notice the gifts given to the church as described in verse 11: “Some of us have been given special ability as apostles; to others he has given the gift of being able to preach well; some have special ability in winning people to Christ, helping them to trust him as their Savior; still others have a gift for caring for God’s people as a shepherd does his” (*TLB*).

It is very significant to consider why Jesus Christ gives these gifts to individual members who make up the church. Paul sets forth three reasons: first, (*read vs. 12, 13*), “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (*NRSV*).

Second, Paul addresses the very real process of spiritual growth. Note verses 14–16: “We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (*NRSV*).

Lastly, Paul places focus on how the church membership should function together. Observe verse 16: “From whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working

properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love" (*NRSV*).

This passage sets forth Paul's framework for both the individual member and the corporate church structure. It entails both the process of individual spiritual growth and corporate mission.

Let us review, then, the three purposes for the gifts that Jesus gives to the church. The first purpose, "to equip," means to prepare people for service. The second purpose, to nurture spiritual growth and knowledge, means to prevent being spiritually misled. Finally, the third purpose is for the edification of the church.

These three purposes entail one threefold goal, found in verse 13: unity of faith, knowledge of the Son of God, and maturity in Christ.

Paul's concluding metaphor of the body so brilliantly encompasses his vision for the church: unity, maturity, and harmony. As the body is joined together with ligaments, so is the church well built with each part working rightly, promoting growth nurtured by love.

Consider This: What metaphors does Paul use to describe the church? What spiritual qualities do those images suggest about the church and the intimate relationship that Christ wishes to have with us?

■ *For what purpose are the spiritual gifts given to the church? What metaphor or word-picture does Paul use to explain how the church should work together as a whole? How does this illustration encompass Paul's vision for the church?*

► **STEP 3**—Apply

Just for Teachers: This section is designed to connect the goals of the church framework as described in the previous section with practical application in the spiritual-life experience of the church member. As an overview to the following reflection on discipleship, read Matthew 28:19, 20 with the class.

Reflections on Biblical Discipleship: There is no doubt that many of us are asking, how do we relate with one another and with the overall church structure in order to have the individual and corporate church experience that the apostle Paul defines and describes in Ephesians? This question is at the heart of discipleship and disciple making.

Turning to Matthew 28:19, we review the beginning words, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations" (*NIV*). How are disciples made? The Gospels portray both the model and method of discipleship by showing how Jesus disciplined the 12 men He had chosen to continue His ministry when He returned to the Father.

The discipleship model and method that Jesus utilized was not a curriculum

or a program; rather, it was a life-to-life investment of time and relationship within a lived experience in the process of discipleship.

Experience was also key to how Jesus instructed His disciples and empowered them for future ministry. As He shared His everyday life of teaching, preaching, and healing, these settings became like a classroom session with His disciples. As Jesus shared relationship and ministry experience with His disciples, they were at once becoming like their Master while being confronted with the cost and commitment necessary to follow Jesus.

Discipleship at its core is fundamentally a relational process. Leroy Eims observes, “Disciples cannot be mass produced. We cannot drop people into a ‘program’ and see disciples emerge at the end of the production line. It takes time to make disciples. It takes individual personal attention.”—*The Lost Art of Disciple Making* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1978), pp. 45, 46.

Jesus’ method of discipleship reveals that it is a smaller group that provides the setting where there might be honest and open interchange. This context makes it possible to have individual response and observation that elicits correction, inspiration, and a desire to become like the Role Model.

It is by proximity, or life-to-life contact, that change begins to take place in the life experience and spiritual understanding of a disciple. This process of spiritual growth is called transformation.

Inductive Questions:

- 1 Based on the passage from Matthew, how did Jesus encourage, equip, and challenge His disciples?
- 2 What can we take from His methods of discipleship in our own disciple-making endeavors?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Please provide paper and a writing utensil, if available, to each student for this exercise. Alternately, to do this activity without supplies, have each of the students select someone to pray for and then have them break away into smaller prayer bands of two or three to pray for this person, as well as for the individuals chosen by the others in their prayer group.

Activity: Ask your class members to write down the name of one individual in their local church for whom they would like to pray and to follow this by investing their time and life with them. They might want to take this one step further by inviting this person into a discipleship friendship.