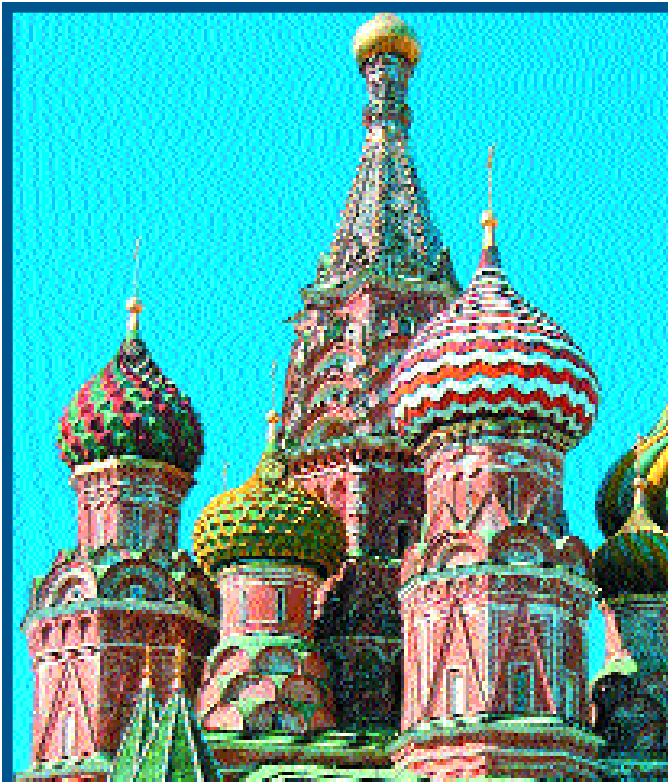


# What Is the Church?



# What Is the Church?

“... I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”—Jesus Christ (Matthew 16:18)

Jesus Christ established His Church and gave it a mission. The Scriptures indicate He intended it to be a warm and loving fellowship of His faithful disciples, a source of strength and purpose for them.

Yet most people see the Church as playing little or no role in their everyday lives. To many even the concept seems antiquated. The very word *church* carries, for some, a distasteful connotation.

For others *church* conjures up images of quaint country buildings with steeples and crosses, or maybe massive medieval cathedrals in the heart of Europe. When they think church, they think of a *place* for worship services.

An excellent example is the cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris. It represents, for many, the essence of the meaning of *church*. Begun in 1163, its construction continued through several lifetimes until 1345. Its 115-foot soaring interior, flying buttresses and great rose windows obviously were all designed for other-worldly purposes.

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* notes that the cathedral “is situated on a spot that Parisians have always reserved to the practice of religious rites” and “was built on the ruins of two earlier churches, which were themselves predated by a Gallo-Roman temple dedicated to Jupiter” (Internet edition, “Paris,” “Notre-Dame de Paris”).

This is not an unusual practice. Throughout history people have ascribed religious significance to *places* and *buildings* where they, and often their ancestors, felt closer to God or to the god or gods they worshiped. Church buildings, cathedrals, temples, altars and shrines have long been the focal point of worship.

Like the faith it represents, the cathedral of Notre-Dame it has suffered through the centuries. *Britannica* explains: “After being damaged during the French Revolution, the church was sold at auction to a



*For many people church conjures up images of quaint country buildings with steeples and crosses, or maybe massive medieval cathedrals in the heart of Europe.*

building-materials merchant. Napoleon came to power in time to annul the sale, and he ordered that the edifice be redecorated for his coronation as emperor in 1804” (“Notre-Dame de Paris”).

The ravages of time and disbelief have not been so kind to many other great European cathedrals. Shrinking church attendance throughout most of Europe has, in recent times, raised the question as to what to do with enormous church edifices that are no longer used enough to justify the high costs of their maintenance.

Is a church building that is no longer used for church services still a church? An even more important question: What does the Bible mean when it talks about the Church?

## THE CHURCH IS NOT THE BUILDING

When the New Testament talks about the Church, it speaks of an *assembly of people*. In the Bible the word *church* is a translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*, meaning “a calling out.”

(See “The Historical Background of the Word *Church*,” page 4.) It never refers to a building or meeting place, but always to *people*, the ones “called out” of the world’s society by God *calling them into* His service. The Church of the Bible is not a cold, stone building, but a group of warm and loving people specially chosen by God.

In the Scriptures *church* can refer to the group of believers in a particular location, such as a city or region, or to the entire body of believers God has called.

So a building with no worshipers cannot really be a church in the biblical sense. The New Testament Church is a group of people called out of this world’s society by God, even if they meet in a rented hall or on a grassy hillside. For example, the apostle Paul greeted the

church—the congregation of people—that met in the house of Priscilla and Aquila in Rome (Romans 16:3-5).

What are the roots, the history, of the Church? What sets apart people whom God calls His own? How does God use the Church to achieve His purposes? What does the Church do for us, and what should its members do for the Church? How can we be part of what God is doing through His Church?

When Jesus said, “. . . I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18), He was saying the Church—His chosen people—would not die out. It would be alive—a warm and caring body of believers striving to serve God, do His work and support each other. Today, with so many conflicting doctrines and practices, how can we recognize the Church Jesus built?

In this lesson let’s learn what the Bible teaches about God’s Church and what it means for us.

## A CHOSEN PEOPLE

As we’ve seen in previous lessons, God has a plan for bringing mankind to salvation in His Kingdom. Since His creation of Adam and Eve, God has worked with people in various ways but always with the same goal in mind.

Before Christ came, God called only a few people out of their societies to serve Him and further His work. Many of them are mentioned by name in Hebrews 11, a chapter in the Bible we could call the faith hall of fame.

Even as He called and worked through individual leaders and prophets to do a spiritual work, God established a physical nation to help fulfill His plan. This nation, the descendants of Abraham through his grandson Israel, was also known as God’s *congregation* (Acts 7:38) or “*church*,” as it is translated in the King James Version. Understanding how God worked through people in the Old Testament is important background for understanding why and how God established the Church in the New Testament.

### Has God worked with people in different ways?

*“God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets,*

## A Reminder

**T**o gain the most from this lesson, be sure to look up all the scriptural references listed and not directly quoted in the text. They are cited to expand your understanding of this crucial subject. You can enhance your understanding even more by looking up, in your own Bible, the scriptural references cited in each lesson and seeing how each reference is used in its original context. If you have questions not answered in this lesson, you may forward them to us through a personal letter, fax or E-mail. Members of our staff will be happy to assist you by answering your questions.

*has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds” (Hebrews 1:1-2).*

God spoke to Adam and Eve directly, as He later communicated with Moses. However, He often conveyed His message in other ways—through dreams and visions, through prophets and priests, and through His inspired written Word, the Holy Scriptures. But the message always fit into the same overall mission.

### Why did God call Abraham?

*“Now the LORD had said to Abram: ‘Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’” (Genesis 12:1-3).*

God had a plan for Abraham. In His mission to extend His love to all humanity, God chose a man who was faithful and obedient to serve as a physical and spiritual role model. Abraham set an example of obedience in leaving his home country at God’s command, not even knowing the final destination (Hebrews 11:8). He believed God would fulfill His promises, in spite of the seeming impossibilities involved. He was even willing to give up his own son (Genesis 22), prefiguring the sacrifice of Christ. Why was Abraham willing to do this? In faith he knew that God could raise Isaac from the dead (Hebrews 11:17-19).

### Why is Abraham so important?

*“For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness’ . . . that he might be the father of all those who believe . . . [and] that righteousness might be imputed to them also” (Romans 4:3, 11, emphasis added throughout).*

*“And I will make your descendants multiply as the stars of heaven; . . . and in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws” (Genesis 26:4-5).*

*“Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as of many, but as of one, ‘And to your Seed,’ who is Christ” (Galatians 3:16).*

Not only did Abraham become the father of many nations, including those that descended from Israel, but his example of faithfulness to God led God to call him *the father of the spiritually faithful*. Over the years God extended the promises He made to Abraham not only to his physical descendants (Genesis 13:16; 15:5; 17:3-6) but to the whole world through the promised Seed, Jesus Christ.

The faithful—all those called and chosen for a

relationship with God in the past, present and future—are Abraham’s spiritual descendants. But God also worked through Abraham’s physical descendants.

### What was the nation of Israel called to do?

*“Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the LORD our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him? And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?” (Deuteronomy 4:5-8).*

One of the responsibilities God gave to the physical nation of Israel was to represent Him, to show by example that God’s way works. The nations around should have seen the beauty of God’s laws at work in the lives of the Israelites.

### Did the Israelites fulfill the mission God called them to do?

*“But I had concern for My holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations wherever they went” (Ezekiel 36:21).*

*“Nevertheless they were disobedient and rebelled against You, cast Your law behind their backs and*

*killed Your prophets, who testified against them to turn them to Yourself; and they worked great provocations” (Nehemiah 9:26).*

*“Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke . . .” (Jeremiah 31:31-32).*

Israel not only failed to set a good example for its neighboring nations, but the Israelites also broke their agreement with God and even caused God’s name to be blasphemed (Romans 2:24).

### Why did Israel fail?

*“ . . . They did not obey or incline their ear, but everyone followed the dictates of his evil heart . . .” (Jeremiah 11:8).*

*“You stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you” (Acts 7:51).*

*“But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (Jeremiah 31:33).*

The Israelites didn’t have the heart needed to fully accomplish God’s will (Deuteronomy 5:29). They resisted the Holy Spirit, as does all of mankind without the special calling of God. But God has a plan to make

## The Historical Background of the Word Church

**T**he *Holman Bible Dictionary*, in its article “Church,” explains the background of the word *church* (emphasis added throughout):

“Church is the English translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*. The use of the Greek term prior to the emergence of the Christian church is important as two streams of meaning flow from the history of its usage into the New Testament understanding of church.

“First, the Greek term which basically means ‘called out’ was commonly used to indicate an *assembly of citizens* of a Greek city and is so used in Acts 19:32, 39. The citizens who were quite conscious of their privileged status over against slaves and noncitizens were called to the assembly by a herald and dealt . . . with matters of common concern. When the early Christians understood themselves as constituting a church, no doubt exists that they perceived themselves as *called out* by God in Jesus Christ for a *special purpose* and that their status was a privileged one in Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:19).

“Second, the Greek term was used more than one hundred times in the Greek translation of the Old Testament in common use in the time of Jesus. The Hebrew term (*qahal*) meant simply ‘assembly’ and could be used in a variety of ways, referring for example to an

assembling of prophets (1 Sam. 19:20), soldiers (Num. 22:4), or the people of God (Deut. 9:10). The use of the term in the Old Testament in referring to the people of God is important for understanding the term ‘church’ in the New Testament.

“The first Christians were [mostly] Jews who used the Greek translation of the Old Testament. For them to use a self-designation that was common in the Old Testament for the people of God reveals their understanding of the continuity that links the Old and New Testaments. The early Christians understood themselves as the people of the God who had revealed Himself in the Old Testament (Heb. 1:1-2), as the true children of Israel (Rom. 2:28-29) with Abraham as their father (Rom. 4:1-25), and as the people of the New Covenant prophesied in the Old Testament (Heb. 8:1-13).

“As a consequence of this broad background of meaning in the Greek and Old Testament worlds, the term ‘church’ is used in the New Testament of a local congregation of *called-out Christians*, such as the ‘church of God which is at Corinth’ (1 Cor. 1:2), and also of the entire people of God, such as in the affirmation that Christ is ‘the head over all things to the church, which is his body’ (Eph. 1:22-23).”

a *new heart* available to us all and to write His laws in our minds.

### **What role did Israel's failure play in setting the stage for the New Testament Church?**

*“What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded. Just as it is written: ‘God has given them a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see and ears that they should not hear, to this very day.’ And David says: ‘Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a recompense to them. Let their eyes be darkened, so that they do not see, and bow down their back always.’ I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles. Now if their fall is riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness!”*  
(Romans 11:7-12).

Paul explains that Israel, not having the Holy Spirit, was unsuccessful in becoming a righteous nation before God, but that God has not deserted the Israelites. They are temporarily blinded, and during this time God is calling people from other nations. But, says Paul, the time is coming when the people of Israel will *all* be saved (Romans 11:25-27). As a result of Christ's sacrifice, God's Spirit now is available to individuals of any nation or race who genuinely repent.

God's ultimate purpose is salvation for all people, both Israelite and gentile (non-Israelite). Yet now only “the elect” are being transformed into the righteous servants of God, and both Israelites and gentiles can become part of His spiritually transformed people, His elect. This step, of course, historically required the next step in God's plan, the founding of the Church.

## **THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH BEGINS**

With the coming of the promised Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, the stage was set for a new phase in God's plan of salvation. This phase involves God working through a group of people—the Church—who are spiritually transformed by the Holy Spirit. God chooses them not only to receive salvation for themselves, but to carry out His work for the ultimate benefit of all humanity.

### **On what foundation has God built the New Testament Church?**

*“Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit”* (Ephesians 2:19-22).

By calling and training His disciples—His students—

for 3½ years, Jesus prepared them to be His apostles (messengers) and a major part of the foundation of the Church. The writings of the apostles continue to teach and support the Church, as do the writings of the prophets in the Old Testament who are also part of the Church's foundation. Both are important (see 2 Peter 3:1-2).

### **How and when did the New Testament Church begin?**

*“When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they [Jesus' disciples] were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance”*  
(Acts 2:1-4).

Miraculous signs marked the beginning of the New Testament Church and God's giving of the Holy Spirit. God wanted to draw attention to this event, to call a sizable initial base from which the Church would expand into all the world.

### **Why was it necessary for God to give His Spirit to people?**

*“So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His”* (Romans 8:8-9).

Without God's Spirit we are not Christ's. Yet the Church is described as belonging to Christ—it is His Body and Bride—a spiritually transformed people. The Spirit makes that change possible, as was discussed in Lesson 9.

### **What happened during and after that momentous Pentecost?**

*“Now when [the people in the crowd] heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’ Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit . . .’ Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them . . . And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved”*  
(Acts 2:37-38, 41, 47).

God called many to repentance, and the disciples baptized many. The Church grew rapidly in the beginning, with excitement and fervor evident in the Church's early history. The book of Acts reports on later times of persecution and scattering, as well as the growth of individual congregations throughout

the Roman Empire as the apostles spread the gospel.

**In spite of its rapid initial growth, does the Bible refer to the Church as a small, often-persecuted flock?**

*“If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:18-19).*

*“Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the*



***False teachers introduced a host of differing doctrines and practices into the Church. The Bible shows that Satan, the being ultimately behind this counterfeit Christianity, has deceived the whole world.***

*gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it. Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:13-16).*

*“Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32).*

Jesus predicted His flock would remain small and beleaguered down through history. False prophets would even arise within the Church, dividing it and diluting its message.

**Did Jesus and the apostles predict that false teachers and false teachings would creep into the Church, eventually producing a distorted, counterfeit Christianity?**

*“And Jesus answered and said to them: ‘Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, “I am the Christ,” and will deceive many”’ (Matthew 24:4-5).*

*“Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in*

*Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’” (Matthew 7:22-23).*

*“But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed” (2 Peter 2:1-2).*

The later writings of the apostles as well as secular history show that these prophecies indeed came to pass. False teachers introduced a host of differing doctrines and practices into the Church. The Bible shows that Satan, the being ultimately behind this counterfeit Christianity, has deceived the whole world (Revelation 12:9) and that his ministers usually appear as ministers of righteousness (2 Corinthians 11:13-15). Acts 8 gives an example of a false teacher faking conversion and seeking the powers the apostles had, but for his own gain (verses 9-23). As Christ said in Matthew 7, lawlessness—an opposition to God’s law—has gained a following among professing Christians.

**What did the apostle John say a false minister did to true followers of Christ?**

*“I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church” (3 John 9-10).*

Satan’s inroads into the Church were so rampant at this stage, near the end of the first century, that true Christians were actually being excommunicated from some congregations.

**In spite of such persecution and heresy, did Christ say His Church would continue until His return?**

*“And I also say to you . . . I will build My church, and the gates of Hades [the grave] shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).*

*“And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20, New International Version).*

Although Satan has repeatedly attacked and tried to destroy it, the Church has not died out. Though the details have often been hard to find in history, God’s Church has survived the worst persecutions of the Roman Empire and the Dark Ages as well as the attacks of more recent times. Somewhere on earth members of the small flock have always continued to serve God to the best of their understanding and ability. Today the Church continues as a small but active and faithful body, striving to spread God’s good news in a faithless world. (For more details about what the Church has had to endure to survive, be sure to request

your free copy of the booklet *The Church Jesus Built.*)

### **After they face all the trials of this age, what does the Bible say will happen to faithful Church members when Christ returns?**

*“Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is” (1 John 3:1-2).*

*“To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Revelation 3:21-22).*

In Revelation 2 and 3 the apostle John records Christ’s messages to seven Church congregations in Asia Minor. Those messages and promises are applicable to the Church down through the ages. (To better understand these messages and what the book of Revelation prophesies about the Church, be sure to request your free copy of the booklet *The Book of Revelation Unveiled.*)

After overcoming the trials and deceptions Satan throws at the Church, members will have their physical bodies changed to Spirit (1 Corinthians 15:50-53). They will be prepared to help Christ care for the world. An awesome future awaits us!

## **WHY THE CHURCH?**

For many people a church is mostly a social club or a place to be seen as an upstanding member of the community. But God had a bigger purpose in mind for His called-out people. We can have a role in the greatest work being done on earth today!

### **What job has Christ called the Church to do now?**

*“And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14).*

*“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).*

Jesus commissioned His Church to do His work. God calls Church members to support the work of preaching the good news—the gospel—of Christ’s coming Kingdom to the whole world. In this way members of the Church are coworkers with Christ in this crucially important work. The gospel of the Kingdom of God, as explained in Lesson 6, is being proclaimed using modern means like the Internet, radio, television and the printing press, as well as the spoken word.

### **What else can God use to draw people to the gospel message?**

*“You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16).*

The example of Church members plays a big part in the work God calls the Church to do. Their positive example is a fruit of the Holy Spirit working in the lives of God’s “called, chosen and faithful” servants (1 Thessalonians 1:6-10; Revelation 17:14).

Also, by making the changes in our lives necessary to set a godly example, we prepare ourselves for the work God has for us in the future. The Christian life is a training ground for future service in the Kingdom of God.

### **What roles are Church members preparing to fulfill in God’s Kingdom?**

*“You have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth” (Revelation 5:10, New Revised Standard Version).*

*“Then the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey Him” (Daniel 7:27).*

*“And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years” (Revelation 20:4).*

Even though Paul refers to members of the Church as the weak of the world—in contrast to those who are the powerful of the world (1 Corinthians 1:27)—membership in the Church is, in a real sense, God’s training program to prepare His people for great roles of service in this age and the age to come. Those who are presently considered



***Those who are presently considered the weak will become kings and priests with Christ through the transforming power of God’s Spirit working in them.***

*the weak*, in the eyes of those who are the wise and powerful in this world, will become kings and priests with Christ through the transforming power of God's Spirit working in them.

### **How do our actions in this life provide a training ground for future rulership?**

*"He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much. Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own?" (Luke 16:10-12).*

*"Then came the first, saying, 'Master, your mina has earned ten minas.' And he said to him, 'Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities'" (Luke 19:16-17).*

Each little decision we make can be a building block for a solid foundation of faithfulness on which God can build great things. Our faithful attention to details of God's instruction does not go unnoticed by Jesus, our Savior and High Priest.

### **Does the growth-and-training process for these high offices involve testing and trials?**

*"I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings" (Jeremiah 17:10).*

*"Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy" (1 Peter 4:12-13).*

*"My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing" (James 1:2-4).*

So they may be able, in the future, to serve those who have experienced the full range of human suffering, God's chosen people experience trials in today's evil world. But through God's help they can rise above the fray by striving to mirror the attitudes and character Christ demonstrated in the midst of His trials.

### **How will leaders in God's Kingdom rule?**

## **What Did the Early Church Believe and Practice?**

**T**he book of Acts is an eyewitness account of the early Church from Christ's death until about A.D. 60. Chapter 2 records the beginning of the Church, when God sent His Spirit to 120 followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

Many Bible readers are familiar with the miraculous events of that day—of the house in which the disciples met filling with the sound of a mighty wind and what appeared to be tongues of fire alighting on those gathered there. Another miracle occurred as those people, now filled with God's Spirit, began to speak in the languages of people from many lands so that all could understand their words.

Often overlooked in this account is the specific day on which these events occurred, the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1), one of the festivals God commanded for His people many centuries before (Leviticus 23). In revealing these festivals, God said that "these are My feasts . . . These are the feasts of the LORD, holy convocations . . ." (verses 2, 4). God proclaimed these festivals to be "a statute forever throughout your generations" (verses 14, 21, 31, 41).

The Gospels show Jesus keeping the same festivals (Matthew 26:17-19; John 7:10-14, 37-38). Both the book of Acts and Paul's letters show the apostles keeping the festivals during the decades after Christ's crucifixion (Acts 2:1-4; 18:21; 20:6, 16; 27:9).

Most churches teach that the festivals were "nailed to the cross," that they were somehow annulled by Christ's death. Yet the unmistakable record of the Bible is that the early Church continued to observe them, but with greater grasp of their spiritual significance.

Speaking of one of these God-given feasts, the apostle Paul urged the Church congregation in Corinth—a mixed group of gentile and Jewish believers—to "keep the feast,

not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Corinthians 5:8). Paul was obviously referring to keeping the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:6; Deuteronomy 16:16).

Paul explained the significance of the Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7; Leviticus 23:5) and gave instructions on how to properly observe this ceremony (1 Corinthians 11:23-28).

The many references in the Gospels, Acts and Paul's epistles prompt an obvious question: Since Jesus, the apostles and the early Church kept these days, why don't churches teach and observe them today? After all, Paul directly tied the feasts to Jesus, His purpose and His sacrifice for mankind (1 Corinthians 5:7).

The Gospels and Acts are equally clear that Christ, the disciples and the early Church kept the weekly Sabbath—from Friday evening to Saturday evening, the seventh day of the week—as their day of rest and worship (Mark 6:2; Luke 4:16, 31-32; 13:10; Acts 13:14-44; 18:4). Jesus even called Himself "Lord of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28).

It was Jesus' custom to go to the synagogue every Sabbath to worship (Luke 4:16). Contrary to the teaching of those who say that Paul abandoned the Sabbath, it was his custom, too, to go to the synagogue every Sabbath (Acts 17:1-3), using the opportunity to teach others about Jesus as Savior and Messiah.

The weekly Sabbath is another of God's festivals, like those mentioned earlier. It is, in fact, the first of His feasts listed (Leviticus 23:1-4). It is also included in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15).

As with God's other feasts, the Sabbath is ignored by the



*“But Jesus called [the disciples] to Himself and said to them, ‘You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many’” (Mark 10:42-45).*

The leaders of this world naturally seek their own benefit, often to the detriment of those they rule. Christ set the example of leadership that benefits those served, what we might call “servant leadership.” We can learn from His example and instructions the way to honor and provide for those who are in our care when we become priests and rulers in the Kingdom of God (Revelation 20:6).

### What is a primary function of a priest?

*“For the lips of a priest should keep knowledge, and people should seek the law from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts” (Malachi 2:7).*

One of the responsibilities of priests is to teach the

right application of God’s law, which affects every aspect of life. As future priests Church members must themselves learn now how to apply God’s laws and prepare to educate others. A teacher who doesn’t practice what he teaches doesn’t have much credibility with his students. But, in God’s plan, teachers will have complete credibility. The students will know that the teachers have thoroughly prepared and mastered the material—God’s truth.

### What is the basis for godly rulership?

*“. . . It shall be, when he [Israel’s king] sits on the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book, from the one before the priests, the Levites. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted above his brethren, that he may not turn aside from the commandment to the right hand or to the left . . .” (Deuteronomy 17:18-20).*

God commanded the kings of Israel to personally write out a copy of His law and regularly study and

overwhelming majority of churches. Rather than keeping the Sabbath as God commanded, most churches meet on the first day of the week—Sunday—a day nowhere commanded in the Bible as a day of worship. Why? If we are to observe any day as a weekly day of rest and worship,

Christ. This is directly contrary to Jesus’ own words (Matthew 4:4; 5:17-19) and the teaching and practice of the apostles (Acts 24:14; 25:8; Romans 7:12, 22; 1 Corinthians 7:19; 2 Timothy 3:15-17).

Following Christ’s example, the apostles powerfully preached about His return to establish the Kingdom of God (Luke 4:43; 8:1; 21:27, 31; Acts 1:3; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 28:23, 31). But Paul warned that, even in his day, some already preached “a different gospel” (2 Corinthians 11:4; Galatians 1:6).

We see much confusion in churches about what the gospel is. Most view it as a message about Christ’s birth, life and death without understanding *why* He came and why He had to die. Few proclaim the message of God’s Kingdom that Jesus Himself taught (Mark 1:14-15).

Similarly, Jesus and the apostles never taught that the righteous ascend to heaven at death (John 3:13; Acts 2:29, 34), and they understood that man does not possess an immortal soul (Ezekiel 18:4, 20; Matthew 10:28) that would spend eternity in either heaven or hell.

Nowhere do we find popular religious holidays such as Christmas approved in the Bible. The only time Easter is mentioned in the Bible (Acts 12:4, King James Version) it is a blatant mistranslation of the Greek word for Passover. Lent and its practices are nowhere found.

The early Church also followed God’s instructions regarding which meats were suitable to be eaten (Acts 10:9-14). These clean and unclean meats are listed in Leviticus 11 (you can learn more on this subject by requesting our free booklet *What Does the Bible Teach About Clean and Unclean Meats?*).

These are some of the major differences between the Christianity of the time of Christ and the apostles and that commonly practiced today. Shouldn’t you look into your Bible to see if your beliefs and practices square with what Jesus and His apostles practiced and taught?



shouldn’t it be the same day Jesus and the apostles kept?

We find other differences in teaching and practice. Many churches teach that obedience to God’s law is unnecessary, that Christ kept it for us or it was “nailed to the cross” with

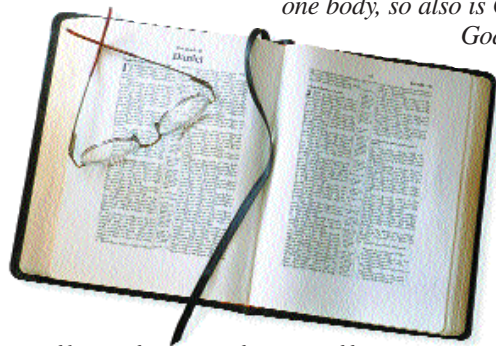
apply it during their reigns. By doing so, said God, they would be humble and virtuous rulers. God's righteous law will be the foundation and standard for all who reign as kings and priests in the Kingdom of God.

## THE BODY OF CHRIST

The Bible uses several analogies to teach us about God's Church—how it is organized, how it works and how we should relate to the Church and each other. One of these compares the Church with something close at hand—our amazing human body.

### What does the Bible reveal about the way the Church is organized?

*"For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ . . . But now*



***God's righteous law will be the foundation and standard for all who reign as kings and priests in the Kingdom of God.***

*God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now indeed there are many members, yet one body . . . Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues" (1 Corinthians 12:12, 18-20, 27-28).*

To do the work God has given it to do, the Church is organized to function as a unit. In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul compared it to a human body made of many different parts with different functions, each being necessary for the smooth functioning of the whole. Paul even calls the Church Christ's Body (Colossians 1:24). Members of the Body should all "speak the same thing" (1 Corinthians 1:10) and do things decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40).

### Who is the head of the Church?

*"And He [Christ] is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence" (Colossians 1:18).*

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

Paul explained Christ's leadership role in the Church,

not only as the head of a body, but as a husband who "loved the church and gave Himself for her" (Ephesians 5:25). Christ nourishes and cherishes the Church; He made the ultimate sacrifice for it. The Church, in thankfulness and appreciation of His sacrifice, serves Him.

### What are some of the serving responsibilities that were established in the Church?

*"And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-13).*

These serving responsibilities were given for the benefit of the whole Church, to help equip, edify and unify the Body. A person ordained to such responsibilities is generally called a "minister," a word that means *servant*. In the Scriptures they are also referred to as *elders*.

### How are the elders to handle their responsibilities?

*"The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder . . . : Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:1-3).*

Following Christ's example of service would prevent the misuses of power that occur naturally in human governments (Matthew 20:24-28; Luke 22:24-26). Leaders in God's service are commanded to work for the benefit of those they serve in an atmosphere of mutual love and respect.

### What part do all members play in the effective working of the Body of Christ?

*"But, speaking the truth in love, [we] may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love" (Ephesians 4:15-16).*

*"But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it" (1 Corinthians 12:24-26).*

God calls and places each member individually in the Body where he or she can best grow and serve for the benefit of the entire Body.

### What other analogies show how God supports and

## nurtures members through the Church?

“. . . *The Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all*” (Galatians 4:26).

*“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vine-dresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit . . . Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples”* (John 15:1-8).

God, through His Church, cares for each of His children. Paul referred to the Church as “the mother of us all.” As a mother feeds, clothes, teaches and comforts her children, the Church is to give the spiritual care that each member needs (see “God’s Church Is Like a Loving Mother”).

Jesus also compared this relationship with a grapevine. Each member attached to the vine draws nourishment and support from the vine and so can

produce good fruit. But if that close-knit relationship is severed the branch will wither. Whether the comparison is to a body or a vine, the message is the same: Members of the Church must be connected to Jesus Christ and one another to grow and thrive. The Church is one of the greatest blessings God has given His children!

## Are members to be active participants in the work and functioning of the Church?

*“For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member but many. If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body,’ is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body,’ is it therefore not of the body? . . . And the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’; nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’”* (1 Corinthians 12:13-16, 21).

When God gives us His Spirit, we become members of Christ’s Body, His Church. He expects us, since we are members of His spiritual Body, to serve Him, to participate in its example to the world and its work of spreading the gospel. He also expects us to know, love and serve *one another*. He tells us, “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

## God’s Church Is Like a Loving Mother

**T**he Scriptures describe the characteristics that set apart God’s Church as unlike any other. Part of its uniqueness comes from the unconditional love of God present in its members: “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

God’s love is like a mother’s love for her children, but God’s love goes much deeper. God’s true Church conducts herself as a caring mother toward her children.

Old Testament Israel was thought of as a mother and her citizens as her children. The Bible uses the term *mother* to illustrate the love of God for His sons and daughters (2 Corinthians 6:18). “As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you . . .” (Isaiah 66:13). Describing the way he and other elders had served the Church, Paul wrote, “But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children” (1 Thessalonians 2:7).

Paul symbolically characterized the Church of God as a mother (Galatians 4:26). In Revelation 19:7 the Church is seen as the betrothed bride of Christ. Clearly God, through His merciful, loving instructions, has provided His children with a nurturing environment through the Church.

The Church of God has the caring characteristics of a loving mother. A mother has an innate desire to nurture and protect. However, those nurturing and protective abilities are limited by the fact that she is human, made of flesh. Members of the Church of God know and understand, however, that God is the source of the Church’s spiritual

love. The apostle John equates God with love: “For God is love” (1 John 4:8). He defines what God’s love is: “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3).

The Ten Commandments, recorded in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, summarize how we are to love God and our fellowman. Jesus distilled them into two great commandments: “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matthew 22:37-39). These two great commandments embody the love of God. They are exercised in an outgoing and protective way. Members of the Church of God strive to practice this godly love.

The Church’s members follow the example set by their Savior, Jesus Christ (Matthew 5:38-48). They are concerned with two great priorities: placing God first in their lives and loving their neighbor as they do their own lives (Matthew 22:36-40). Though not perfect, members of the Church of God live by and reflect the love of the Eternal God. They teach the love of God—His outgoing concern for others—embodied within the gospel of Christ.

We eagerly await the time when all human beings will experience the love of God in this way. Until that day, the day God’s Kingdom comes to earth, we encourage and welcome you to share with us the love of God as expressed by and in His Church.

We can do this only if we are active participants in His work and service. The Scriptures admonish: "And let us consider *one another* in order to stir up love and good works, *not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together*, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:24-25). Christ expects the members of His Body to be actively working together, cooperating to accomplish the mission He gave His Church.

## THE BRIDE OF CHRIST

The Bible shows that God's Church is to be the Bride of Christ. Let's see what that means both now and in the future.

### How does Paul describe the love Christ has for the Church?

*"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her" (Ephesians 5:25).*

Jesus loves the Church as a man anticipating marriage

to the woman of his dreams. He was willing to give His life to save hers.

### What will the Bride wear to the wedding when Christ returns to rule the earth?

*"And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, 'Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.' And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints" (Revelation 19:6-8).*

The Church will have made herself spiritually ready for this wedding. She is represented as wearing a beautiful wedding dress, which, in fact, represents her righteous acts. What is righteousness in God's eyes? Psalm 119:172 defines it for us: "My tongue shall speak of Your word, *for all Your commandments are righteousness.*" Righteous acts include obedience to God's commandments and continually striving to follow Jesus' perfect example.

## God's Church Welcomes You

**A**fter Jesus' resurrection He instructed and encouraged His disciples over the course of 40 days (Acts 1:3). He told them to remain in Jerusalem so they could receive God's miraculous power. On Pentecost the disciples were assembled in Jerusalem when God gave them His Spirit, validated by signs and wonders (Acts 2:1-4). The apostle Peter then spoke to the people who were gathered from many nations to keep that feast (verses 5-14). On that day 3,000 people believed Peter's inspired words, repented of their past way of life and were baptized (verse 41).

When the apostle Paul visited gentiles in cities like Rome, Ephesus and Corinth, many kinds of people were added to God's Church. Age, race or sex made no difference. They all became "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:19). This is an important point: God makes people from all races and ages and from both sexes as *one body* of believers. We fellowship as the family of God.

But how does this godly fellowship begin?

Our fellowship begins with God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3). It is God who calls us, and it is Christ who works with us and will resurrect us (John 6:44). Christ's disciples come into fellowship with each other after they have responded to God's fellowship from above. The disciples of Christ begin their fellowship with God through God's calling (verse 44). Then, led by God's Spirit and His human servants, they begin to meet and fellowship with one another (1 Corinthians 2:9-10; Hebrews 10:24-25).

Wonderful Christian fellowship with one another will grow in direct proportion to our respect and reverence for God. "Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, and the LORD listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who

fear the LORD and who meditate on [esteem] His name. 'They shall be Mine,' says the LORD of hosts, 'on the day that I make them My jewels [literally "special treasure"]. And I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him'" (Malachi 3:16-17).

Christ's disciples look to God first, then to others who also first looked to God. God calls us to His fellowship: "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:9). He invites us to participate in that fellowship through becoming members of His Church. Eventually all people will enjoy the same uplifting and encouraging fellowship when Christ returns to earth.

God's fellowship is reserved for those who strive to obey God and have faith in Him and His promises. God and members of His Church want you to share in His loving fellowship.

We who are a part of God's Church are much like you. We desire and pray for God's Kingdom to come to earth (Matthew 6:10). But, while we wait for that to take place, we are about our Father's business (Luke 2:49; Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20). We are united in a great mission, seeking to please Him by serving Him and mankind.

The United Church of God prays eagerly for new people to become part of the divine fellowship that exists between God and His Church. Those who respond to God's invitation will enjoy His uniting fellowship through God's Spirit. "Therefore if there is any consolation [encouragement] in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind" (Philippians 2:1-2).

The United Church of God extends a warm welcome to all those who honor God and His living principles of life.

## How does Christ prepare the Church for that majestic wedding?

*“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:25-27).*

The “spots” Paul refers to here are sins that tarnish the beautiful clean dress of Christ’s bride-to-be. Sin—the violating of God’s laws—must be washed away by Christ’s sacrifice and kept away by a Christian’s use of the power of the Holy Spirit to change and grow spiritually. God’s Church teaches, and endeavors to live by, God’s laws. It actively prepares to become the unblemished Bride of Christ.

## RECOGNIZING THE CHURCH

Jesus said His Church would not die (Matthew 16:18). But today, with so many churches professing Christianity while teaching widely divergent doctrines, how can we recognize the Church? What are the hallmarks of God’s Church? What does it teach? What does it do?

Just as at the beginning of the Church, God calls people out of the world (John 6:44; Revelation 18:4) and into His Church to do a job. Just as Peter called on his audience to repent and be baptized, those God is calling today realize the seriousness of their sins and commit themselves to God and a life of change.

### How do those who accept God’s call into His Church respond to that call?

*“Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’” (Acts 2:38).*

*“For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:13).*

Water baptism, as discussed in Lesson 8, is a sign of the repentant Christian’s belief in Christ’s sacrifice to cover sins. It represents the death of the old person and the beginning of a new life committed to doing what God says to do. The resulting changes are made gradually through the power of God’s Spirit, which God gives to the Christian at baptism.

### How can we identify and avoid false teachers?

*“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every*

*tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them. Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’” (Matthew 7:15-23).*

Christ warned us to beware of those who masquerade as true teachers, who outwardly might say and do the right things but whose real actions and achievements are not godly. Ultimately their teachings and doctrines amount to practicing “lawlessness”—rejecting obedience to God’s laws. Christ says He will reject those who reject and disobey His laws.

### What fruit will be growing in the lives of true Christians?

*“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law” (Galatians 5:22-23).*

God’s Spirit makes it possible for the new Christian to begin to produce the unselfish characteristics of God Himself. As with fruit on a vine, godly character traits do not suddenly appear at baptism, but must be nurtured and grow over time. A major purpose of the Church is to assist us in developing this spiritual fruit.

### What is a hallmark of true Christians?

*“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35).*

The Church of God will be growing in the same unselfish, godly love that Christ showed. This outgoing concern is far above the natural brotherly love or even a mother’s love, which is often said to be the highest form of human love. God’s love is totally unselfish and outgoing, as described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 and exhibited by Christ when He gave His life for us.

### Will members of the Church be perfect?

*“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8-9).*

*“For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?” (1 Corinthians 3:3).*

God’s Church is made up of human beings who still have weaknesses. Each has a long way to go in reaching for the perfection offered in Christ. Paul’s words of

correction in his letters to the Corinthians show some in God's Church can still have major human weaknesses to overcome. We can be thankful, though, that God looks on the heart (1 Samuel 16:7). True Christians continue to repent and change as they recognize their shortcomings. They continue to forgive and support their brethren as they struggle for spiritual maturity in Christ (Galatians 6:1-2).

They cannot, however, continue to willfully and deliberately practice sinning as a way of life. "In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother" (1 John 3:10).

#### How does the Bible define the love of God?

*"For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3).*

*"Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?' Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets'" (Matthew 22:35-40).*

God's law defines God's love. Here Jesus summed up the meaning of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) in the two great commandments. The first four of the Ten

Commandments show us how God expects us to show our love toward Him. The last six show how He expects us to show love for our fellow human beings. These fundamental spiritual principles are expanded throughout the Bible. For example, Jesus magnified the meanings of the commandments prohibiting murder and adultery in His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21-32), showing that thoughts of hate and lust violate their intent.

#### Will the Church always keep the Commandments of God?

*"... The dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 12:17).*

The woman of Revelation 12 represents God's people just before Christ returns. At that time the dragon (Satan; verse 9) persecutes the Church, which continues to faithfully keep the Commandments of God.

#### Will the Church today believe and practice the same things Christ and the early New Testament Church did?

*"Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked" (1 John 2:3-6).*

## How Is the Work of the Church Supported?

Jesus Christ assigned His Church the work of proclaiming the gospel to the world and of making disciples and caring for those God calls (Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20). This is a massive undertaking. Yet, at any one time, God calls only a "little flock" of people into the Church to accomplish this immense task (Luke 12:32).

Jesus instructed His disciples, "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). God's whole way of life is a way of *giving and serving*. So it comes as no surprise that Jesus told His disciples to share the gospel without charge. Today God's truth continues to go out free of charge to those who request it. Let's look at the biblical example for financing the work of preaching and publishing the good news.

The Bible introduces God's financial support system through the example of the patriarch Abraham. But, before we examine Abraham's example, we need to consider the significance of God's role as the Creator of heaven and earth. He created everything, including all the physical resources He allows us to use during our lifetimes. He tells us that everything still belongs to Him (Psalm 24:1; Haggai 2:8). Therefore He reserves the right to tell us how to use what He has created.

God revealed His way of life to Abraham. He says of him, "Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws" (Genesis 26:5).

Abraham also knew that all physical blessings are a gift from God. As "the father of all those who believe" (Romans 4:11), Abraham set us the example of tithing—giving one tenth of the blessings He received from God to God's priest (Genesis 14:17-20; Hebrews 7:1-4)—as part of his partnership with God.

Abraham passed this practice on to his descendants. His grandson Jacob vowed, "If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God... and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You" (Genesis 28:20-22, emphasis added throughout).

When some of Abraham's descendants became the nation of ancient Israel, after their deliverance from Egyptian bondage God gave His tithe to the tribe of Levi as payment for the Levites' services to Him. "Behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance in return for the work which they perform, the work of the tabernacle of meeting... For the tithes of the children of Israel, which they offer up as a heave offering to the LORD, I have given to the Levites as an inheritance; therefore I have said to them, 'Among the children of Israel they shall have no inheritance'" (Numbers 18:21, 24).

This support provided the means for Israel to worship

*“Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).*

The Church continues to obey God’s commandments and walk as Jesus walked. It contends earnestly to follow the faith laid down throughout the Bible and practiced by the Church in the apostolic era.

This includes worshiping God on the days commanded in the Bible and observed by Jesus and the apostles. The Bible makes it clear that Jesus, Paul and the Church regularly assembled on the Sabbath, obeying the Fourth Commandment (Exodus 20:8-11; Mark 6:2; Luke 4:16, 31-32; 13:10; Acts 13:14-44; 17:1-3; 18:4). So today members of God’s Church meet together on the Sabbath to worship Him, learn more of His ways and fellowship with each other—with even greater urgency as the return of Christ approaches (Hebrews 10:24-25). Members also observe God’s other commanded festivals, just as Christ and the Church did (see “What Did the Early Church Believe and Practice?,” page 8). As we will see in a future lesson, the festivals of the Bible help remind members of the Church about God’s awesome plan each year.

The Church uses the Bible as its guide and does not seek to add nonbiblical teachings and practices.

### **What is God’s Church called in the Bible?**

*“Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you*

*overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28).*

The phrase *church of God* appears eight times in the Bible (Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 10:32; 11:22; 15:9; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:13; 1 Timothy 3:5). “Churches of God” appears another three times (1 Corinthians 11:16; 1 Thessalonians 2:14; 2 Thessalonians 1:4) and “the church of the living God” occurs once (1 Timothy 3:15).

### **What work will the Church of God be doing?**

*“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).*

*“And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14).*

God’s Church continues to do the same work that Christ commissioned His disciples to do—part of the same work that Christ Himself did (Mark 1:1-2, 14).

The Church is to spread the good news of Christ’s coming Kingdom to the whole world. The gospel of the Kingdom of God shows the hope beyond the bad news humanity is bringing on itself. Though few seem inclined to listen now, God’s loving warning impacts everyone at some point. God wants all to come to the knowledge of the truth and to be saved at the

God and be taught according to His will. The book of Hebrews describes a change in administration because the New Testament Church—the spiritual temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:19-22)—replaced the physical temple in importance. The responsibility for teaching God’s truth now falls on the New Testament Church. In the first century the followers of the gospel message gave monetary and other aid to Jesus, to His disciples and, later, to other laborers in the Church to support them in doing the work Christ had given His Church to do. Examples of such giving, and principles relating to it, are found in New Testament passages such as Luke 8:3; 10:7-8; 2 Corinthians 11:7-9; and Philippians 4:14-18.

Did Jesus uphold the biblical practice of tithing? He did indeed! Notice His comments to the scribes and Pharisees: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone” (Matthew 23:23).

The Pharisees were careful to accurately tithe even the smallest of spices, but they often neglected other “weightier” principles of the law. Jesus told them *they should have done both*. Neither tithing nor such weightier matters as “justice and mercy and faith” should be neglected.

Jesus and His apostles taught that a *giving attitude* should be a major part of the Christian way of life. “Give,

and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you” (Luke 6:38).

Neglecting to tithe is compared to robbery—robbing God (Malachi 3:8-12). We can rest assured that He has promised to supply the needs of those who sincerely seek first His Kingdom and become willing and enthusiastic partners with Him in the work of preaching the gospel (Matthew 6:31-34; 2 Corinthians 9:8).

Christ has commissioned His Church to carry on the work He started. God’s tithe funds that effort. As Christians, we are called to be coworkers with Christ.

“For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, you are God’s building” (1 Corinthians 3:9). “Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers, who have borne witness of your love before the church. If you send them forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God, you will do well, because they went forth for His name’s sake, taking nothing from the Gentiles. We therefore ought to receive such, that we may become fellow workers for the truth” (3 John 1:5-8).

What an awesome gift and responsibility, to be a fellow worker, a coworker with God in preaching the gospel around the world! (To better understand the scriptural instruction about tithing, request your free copy of *What Does the Bible Teach About Tithing?*)

appropriate time (1 Timothy 2:4). Members of the Church pray fervently that God will call more laborers now to help in this tremendous undertaking (Matthew 9:37-38).

The Church not only scatters the seed of the gospel (Mark 4:2-20), it also actively welcomes those God is now calling. It is teaching them the precious truths of the Bible and nurturing them in their spiritual growth.

## WHAT NOW?

Is God calling you to His Church, to participate in its important work? Do you have questions you would like to be answered? We warmly welcome your questions and comments. Dedicated ministers are happy to answer them for you through the mail or in person. Please contact our office in your country (or the country nearest you) listed below.

Members of God's Church are praying for you—asking God that you may receive the understanding, strength and courage you need to surrender your life to Him. These same members eagerly look forward to meeting you and working together with you in the Church of God. (See "God's Church Welcomes You," page 12.)

This lesson has covered a great deal of what the Bible teaches about God's Church. But, as always, the Bible contains greater depths of understanding than can be covered in one lesson. To better understand related subjects, be sure to request the following free booklets:

- *The Church Jesus Built.*
- *The Book of Revelation Unveiled.*
- *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion.*
- *Preaching the Gospel, Preparing a People: This Is the United Church of God.*

In our next lesson we examine specific biblical principles and practices that relate to daily living a godly life. Don't miss it!

## Points to Ponder

The following questions are intended as a study aid to spur further thought on the concepts discussed in this lesson and help you personally apply them. We suggest you take the time to write out your answers to these questions and compare them to the scriptures cited. Please feel free to write us with any comments or suggestions, including questions about the course or this lesson.

- What did the physical nation of Israel—God's "Church" in Old Testament times—lack that God promised to the New Testament Church? (Jeremiah 31:33; Deuteronomy 5:29; Acts 7:51).

- Why was the giving of the Holy Spirit necessary, not only to start the Church but to benefit every member of the Church since that time? (Romans 8:7-9).

- Has the Church continued to exist, in spite of persecution from without and division from within? (Matthew 16:18).

- How do Church members prepare for roles in God's future Kingdom? (Revelation 5:10; 20:4; Daniel 7:27; Luke 16:10-12; 19:16-17; Jeremiah 17:10; 1 Peter 4:12-13; James 1:2-4; Mark 10:42-45; Malachi 2:7).

- How is the Church organized? (1 Corinthians 12:27-28; Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:11-13, 15-16; 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, 24-26).

- In what ways is the Church like a bride? (Ephesians 5:25-27; Revelation 19:6-8).

- What fruit does the Church strive (imperfectly) to produce? (Galatians 5:22-23; John 13:34-35).

- What commission has God given the Church, and how is it to be carried out? What message will the Church preach? (Matthew 28:19-20; 24:14; 9:37-38; 5:14-16; Mark 4:2-20).

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