

## **What Is Church?**

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**Integration Question:** *What is the local church? Is it a people, a building, a program, an institution, or an organization?*

### Theological Statement

A church is not a building. It is the people of God coming together as a committed community, devoted to living in the Way of Jesus. In Acts 2, Luke records a profound scene from some of the first committed followers of Jesus. After Peter finished sharing the gospel with the people, they were “cut to the heart” and asked, “what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). Peter led them to repentance and baptism, and over three thousand people committed their lives to Jesus that day. Luke then records what these Jesus followers committed themselves to doing together, archiving, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people” (Acts 2:42–47). These verses are pivotal to seeing how and what the earliest followers of Jesus constituted as church.

A first and major component of church begins with the sharing of the gospel, people repenting and putting faith in Jesus, and these people being baptized (Acts 2:37). Scripture then shows us they devoted themselves to “the apostles teachings” (Acts 2:42). The first churches had leadership teaching and leading them, and the people submitted themselves to that leadership. We see this also happen in some other earliest churches around the globe. Expressly, Paul wrote to Titus, a new pastor to the people of Crete, telling Titus to appoint elders, leadership, in order for the local churches to have leadership (Tit. 1:5). Acts 2 continues that they early Christians

committed themselves to “fellowship”, the act of living in communal and continued relationship together, and to the “breaking of bread.” Breaking of bread is stated twice, first in verse 42 and second in verse 46. The former is specifically referring to the Lord’s Supper, while the latter is the act of eating together and sharing meals. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul corrects the communities in Corinth, admonishing how they take the Lord’s Supper, which he parallels with the breaking of bread. (1 Cor. 11:17-34). Paul makes it clear that every time they meet together, they partake in the Lord’s Supper and along with sharing a meal. We see communion, in addition to baptism that we already identified, as prominent sacraments administered in the early churches.

Acts also shares how the early churches devoted themselves to prayer, not just individually, but corporately. This is in alignment with what we see done in other first century churches. For example, Paul wrote to the churches in Thessalonica and Colossi to commit themselves to prayer as a church (1 Thes. 5:17; Col. 3:16). The early church was filled with Holy Spirit. They saw, expected, and experienced Holy Spirit move and work amongst them (Acts. 2:43). For this very reason, Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, instructing them to set be intentional about hearing from and being used for each other by the Spirit, writing, “When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up” (1 Cor. 14:26). Followers of Jesus living in commitment to one another should also be committed to giving of resources, time, and emotions, just like we see the first church do (Acts. 2:46). They were so unified and lived with such radical generosity that there was not any need in their community (Acts. 2:44-45). Lastly, a church must remain committed to the teaching of Scripture, as well as the praise and worship of God (Acts 2:46-47). Just like it began, Luke ends this section of Acts 2 recoding that “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts. 2:47).

The literary design of sandwiching the description of the New Testament church is meant to give the reader encouragement and an expectation that when followers of Jesus come together and live devoted to this way of following Jesus, God's Kingdom will grow and expand.

### Ministry Application

It is easy for church to become something you do, rather than someone you become. It is easy to center church around attending a building for an hour on Sunday, rather than a people devoting their entire lives to the way of Jesus with other Christians. Our ecclesiology must be better transformed by Scripture. Because when it is, we see God's kingdom widen its reign in this world. There are two audiences that must heed the examples given in Scripture of church: the leaders who are committed to shepherding a community of Jesus followers, and the Christian who are devoted to following the way of Jesus in a community. To the leaders, it is vital to create a culture that does not reduce church to an hour experience on Sunday. Unfortunately, most church models make Sunday gathering the most important aspect of their fellowship life. Churches usually spend about 80% of their resources, money, and time centered around a building where the community spends the least amount of time. Instead, these leaders must be committed to overseeing a community that becomes the hands and feet of Jesus to one another and their neighbors every moment of their lives. I believe the New Testament church model, centered on the meetings in the homes, is how the Church most effectively advances the kingdom of God. If this were to happen globally, billions of dollars would be relocated from building expenses to providing for the needs of the community. As well as a bigger emphasis on weekly, even daily, discipleship (which sounds like actually living out the Great Commission). This way of living would ensure followers of Jesus in the more decentralized model of church were continuing to be equipped for daily kingdom work.

For the layperson devoted to fellowship, it is important to commit, and hold accountable, a community that lived out what we see in Acts 2. Christians should choose a church community not based on how loud or soft the music is, bright or dim the lights are, or even how good the preacher is. Rather, Christians should commit to a community that places a strong emphasis on being the hands and feet of Jesus to one another, as well as the people in the city, the other 165 hours of the week. The big corporate gathering one aspect of church. Christians should ensure this aspect prioritizes praising Jesus, teaching His Word, communal prayer, exhortations (through hymns, prophecy, revelations, tongues) to one another, partaking in the Lord's supper, giving (of time and resources), and sharing meals together. Another aspect, the rest of a Christians week, is even more important. Christians should ensure they are choosing a community that equips them to live in an abiding relationship with Jesus and to share the good news of Jesus that leads people to repentance, faith, and baptism. If one can enter into a community and have zero active participation, then there should also be a deeper investigation as to why that is permissible. The lay person should want to seek a community where people become the church, not do church.