



THE PASTOR'S PEN

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Doctrines of the Christian Church: What is the Church?

When we use the word “Church” in our conversations, what are we talking about? Are we talking about the entire Body of Christ as it exists worldwide? Are we referring to a local congregation or a building that stands on piece of property? Are we using the word to describe two or more people gathered together in the name of Jesus Christ? Perhaps we use the term to refer to the Kingdom of God on Earth or to some other collection of saintly persons huddled together at some spot in our community. The truth is that we use the term “Church” in a dozen different ways; some correctly, some incorrectly. It is no wonder then that people are sometimes confused by the term and have a difficult time trying to understanding what it is we are talking about when we refer to “the Church” or “a church” in our daily speech.

Biblically speaking, the word *Church* (with a capital “C”) refers to the Body of Christ which is made up of all Christians past, present and future. It is a very inclusive term. The Greek word that is translated as “Church” in the New Testament is *Ecclesia*. This particular word is a technical term that literally means, “the called out ones.” It was often used in Greek society to refer to the regular assembly of free citizens in a city state, that were called out by the town crier or herald, for the special purpose of conducting the business of the city state and looking out for the welfare of its citizens. It was a truly democratic body where every citizen had an equal voice and all of the citizens were called to work together for the common good.

Taking this civil concept one step further and making it into a spiritual application, the Church then, is a body of people who have been called out for a special purpose. They are the citizens of the Kingdom of God, who have been called out of sin and into righteousness. They have been called out for the purpose of conducting the business of the Kingdom of God right here on Earth.

Now the very nature of this business was given to us by Jesus Christ as He departed from this world and it is recorded in Matthew 28:18-20 which says:

- ¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

As Christians, we are the ones who have been called and who have responded to that call to follow Christ as His disciples. We are the Church and as the Church, we are the ones who have been called out of the world and made into a new city state, a new Kingdom for the purpose of calling others and teaching them how to become a part of this new Kingdom just as we have. We call out to the people of this world to try to free them from the bondage of sin and to offer them the gift of God’s salvation. We

are trying to bring them from darkness to light. We are trying to free them from their old life of misery and give them a new life of hope. However, our work and our calling are not without consequences.

Because we have made this change in our allegiance from the world to the Church, it means that we are now citizens of the Kingdom of God and no longer citizens of this world. We are reminded of this fact in the scriptures and in some of the old hymns such as “This World is Not My Home,” “I am a Pilgrim,” and “The Way of the Cross Leads Home.” Because of that, the people of this world do not always respond favorable to us or to our message of light and salvation.

Jesus tried to prepare His disciples to understand this fact in His teachings. He warned us about these matters in passages like John 15:19 where He said: “If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.” The Apostle Paul continued to prepare the Church for this reality when he reminded all Christians that they are not to be worldly in their outlooks, but transformed by the renewing of their mind to see things in life the way Christ sees them (Romans 12:2). Even the Apostle Peter echoes this same line of teaching, that we no longer a part of this world, with his instructions: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” 1 Peter 2:9.

Over and over again in scripture we see the repeated references to Christians being people who have been called out. They have been called out of sin and into righteousness, out of darkness and into light, out of a fallen creation and into the Kingdom of God, out of the world and into the Church. By now it seems rather plain that when the Bible talks about the Church it is talking about God’s people. It is not talking about a building or a physical location, but about Christians who come together to conduct the work of the Kingdom and to care for one another. They may meet in a special building or a sanctuary, but they do not meet in a church because they are the Church.

When Alexander Campbell was trying to define what the Church was and who made up the Church over two-hundred years ago he summed it up this way:

The Church of Christ, upon earth is essentially, intentionally and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to Him in all things according to the Scriptures, and that manifest the same by their tempers and conduct, and of none else; as none else can be truly and properly called Christians.

So while we here at First Christian may be a local congregation (a group of people assembled for religious worship) that meets here in Pensacola, we are not the whole Church. Our building, as nice as it is, is just that, a building. It may consist of a sanctuary, a fellowship hall and classrooms, but it is only brick, mortar and wood. It is not made of living stones as the Church is made. That is why we need to understand that we are a part of the Body of Christ. We are members of the Kingdom of God on Earth. We are a part of the Church and as such we are called to be workers in God’s Kingdom. For if we do not respond as ones called out, then what are we?

As a fellow worker with you in the assembly of the saints,

James