

THE TRUE CHURCH

A true believer and follower of Jesus is always called by God to relate closely to other such believers, whenever possible.

Forming communities of believers – where there can be a proper commitment to proclaiming the gospel, sound biblical teaching, prayer, praise, baptism, sharing Holy Communion (breaking of bread/Eucharist) and maintaining a loving fellowship in the power of the Holy Spirit – are vital aspects of the biblical understanding of what it is to be ‘church’.

The word ‘church’ is the standard translation of the Greek word ‘ecclesia’ (literally ‘called out’), used 112 times in the New Testament, but in some translations the terms ‘congregation’, ‘meeting’ or ‘assembly’ are used. The Greek word in James 2:2 is not ‘ecclesia’ but ‘*sunagoge*’ (synagogue), a term with an especially rich history for Jews of course, tending to emphasise the significance of the ‘assembly’ of the believers, who gather together for corporate worship, prayer and teaching.

The Bible uses several illustrations to explore the meaning of the church.

1. The Israelites were a chosen people and were rescued from Egypt (see Acts chapter 7); disciples of Jesus (the church) are rescued from slavery to sin.
2. A human body has different ‘members’ or parts, with many different functions. So does the church. (See 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 5:29-30.)
3. It is likened to a holy temple in which Jesus dwells. (See 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; Ephesians 2:21-22; 1 Peter 2:5.)
4. It is like a bride in a true love marriage where Jesus himself is the husband. (See Ephesians 5:28-30.)
5. It is like a virgin, betrothed to Jesus. (See Matthew 25:1-13; 2 Corinthians 11:2-3.)

The true church is the community of true believers in and followers of Jesus. This includes both those believers living today and those who have died. It is better to think of the church as a living organism rather than primarily in terms of institutions, buildings and organisations, though every particular ‘church’ (whether an individual congregation or a denomination) has some level of organisational structure and leadership. Seeking appropriate leadership is biblical and enables community life to flourish by making sure that all things are done ‘decently and in order’. In the Christian creeds the term ‘catholic’ refers to the universal nature of the church (God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ, his claims and the gospel are true everywhere, and addressed to all people), and the term ‘apostolic’ refers to the fact that the church is built upon the faithful foundation of apostolic witness and teaching. Sadly, the one true ‘universal’ and ‘apostolic’ church in the world today is divided into numerous denominations and groupings. There are historical, theological and pragmatic reasons for this, but it does appear to go strongly against the will of Jesus for true unity amongst his disciples. (See John 17:6–26.)

The fact is that when true Christian believers meet each other there can be a real awareness of unity in the Spirit, which transcends denominations, because it concerns a real fellowship, with a living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Many testify to this experience, and it is not about legal, denominational structures. In God’s ongoing purposes there is a clear link between unity and effective mission. The unity in the Spirit which is experienced by believers should not be confused with uniformity in external structures of organisation or styles of worship.