



Heartbeat of a Healthy Church

Lesson 1: Having the Right Definition

Defining the local church can be a difficult task for many. According to the average New Englander, Granite Stater, and even the dictionary, the word "church" is defined as "a building for public worship." This definition is so popular that many people will not even step into a church unless it is an attractive building. As is our custom at NESBC, we seek to gain a Biblical definition. Is a church a building or a particular people? Let us see how the word is used in the New Testament.

- 🕒 Can a building pray (Acts 12:5)?
- 🕒 Can a building be pleased (Acts 15:22)?
- 🕒 Can a building receive and welcome people (Acts 15:4)?
- 🕒 Can buildings send greetings (Romans 16:16)?
- 🕒 Can a building be persecuted (1 Corinthians 15:9)?
- 🕒 Can a building be in a house (1 Corinthians 16:19)?
- 🕒 Can a building know anything about God (Revelation 2:23)?

After examining these seven verses, the point becomes very clear that the modern definition of "church" is not the same as the New Testament's definition. And yet, there is some sense in which the church is a building. The Lord Jesus said that he will **build** his church (Matt. 16:18). In 1 Peter 2:5 we discover that the church is indeed a building, a spiritual house, composed of and built with living stones.

Therefore, the church is not a literal or physical building, but it is *a spiritual building made up of those who have been made alive in Christ* (Ephesians. 2:5). Viewing the church in this Biblical manner emphasizes 1 Corinthians 3:9. "For we are laborers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building." It is very clear that the New Testament definition of the word "church" refers to the people and not the building. In fact, it always means, "a called out assembly, a company of people gathered together for a certain purpose."

The word "church" is the translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*, which is really made up of two Greek words: 1) *ek*, which means "out, out of" and 2) *klesis*, which means "a calling" (from the verb *kaleo* which means "to call"). If we put these two meanings together we have "a calling out." Therefore, the term "church" (*ekklesia*) means "an assembly of called-out ones, a called-out assembly."

As believers in Christ, we are God's called-out ones. What has God called us out of? What has God called us in to?

- 🕒 1 Peter 2:9 - But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light:

This called-out assembly gathers together for a certain purpose. The church is not a social club or entertainment source. According to Romans 8:28-30, the church has a purpose. What is it's purpose?

This leads us to a very interesting application. Why does New England Shores Baptist Church exist? What is our purpose for meeting together? In the broadest sense, it has been stated in the

Westminster Catechism of Faith that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. We are not denying this to be true, however, perhaps it could be sharpened and explained further.

- Since those who love God in this Dispensation of Grace are his called out assembly (the church), according to Romans 8:28-30, the church exists for God's purpose of conforming redeemed sinners into the image of Jesus Christ.
- Ephesians 4:11-16 clarifies this purpose further. Since apostles and prophets are no longer active within the local church today, evangelists (most likely missionary church planters) and pastors are given to the church for:
 1. The equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry.
 2. The building up of the body of Christ.
 3. The unity of faith.
 4. The knowledge of the Son of God to be conformed into his image.
 5. The maturation of the saints.
 6. The speaking of truth for spiritual growth.
 7. The cohesive functioning of membership

Finally, inside the New Testament, there is also a distinction between the local church and the universal church.

- At times, the Bible uses the word "church" to refer to the group of people consisting of every follower of Christ who is saved. Jesus' church includes all believers everywhere (Matthew 16:18; Acts 9:31; Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18). When Paul persecuted the church from Jerusalem (Acts 1:8) to Damascus (Acts 9:1-20), he persecuted every believer he could find. When Paul gave instruction to the church, he often referred to the body of believers as a whole (1 Corinthians 5:12; 10:32; 12:28; 14:12). The **universal church** includes every believer in the world, no matter what denomination, and excludes every non-believer, even if they go to a Bible-teaching church.
- A local church is normally defined as a local assembly of all who profess faith and allegiance to Christ. Most often, the Greek word *ekklesia* is used in reference to the local assembly (1 Thessalonians 1:1; 1 Corinthians 4:17; 2 Corinthians 11:8). There is not just one specific local church in any one area, necessarily. There are many local churches in larger cities. In the letters to the churches, the comments are addressed to specific churches in identified towns (Revelation 2-3). Whenever a church is mentioned in affiliation with someone's home, it refers to a local congregation (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 1:2). When a church is identified with a city or a region, the word refers to local bodies of believers in that region (Acts 8:1; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:2).

Conclusion: With all that we have seen today, it is clear that we must have the right definition of a church in order for it to have a healthy heartbeat. When a Christian understands the purpose of God's church, a large responsibility is realized. We will look more at this responsibility in the next lesson.

