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What Is The “Church?”

Let's get something out of the way right up front. You will never find the perfect church! Why? Because churches are made up of people just like you and me: people who make mistakes, hurt each other's feelings, judge each other and all those other things we humans do to each other from time to time.

Before I talk about choosing a church to attend, let's look at how God defines the real church in the Bible. The Greek word translated church as "**ekklesia**." It comes from the verb meaning "to call." Its most direct translation is "those who are called" or "the called out ones." In the biblical context (114 of 118 uses), "ekklesia" refers to those who have responded to the call of God in their lives by accepting Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior.

For a proper understanding of the true meaning of the church we must observe that the church itself did not have its beginning until after the exaltation of Christ and the descent of the Holy Spirit. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, "*I will build my church.*" It was not as yet in existence. In Ephesians 1:20-23 we have the divine order: (1) Exaltation of Christ to the right-hand of God the Father that all things might be beneath Him; (2) the giving of Him to be "*head over all things to the church, which is His body.*"

"Ekklesia" always refers to people, not places. Sometimes we forget that "The Church" never referred to buildings in the first 300 years of the New Testament era. Trouble began when Constantine became Emperor of Rome in the early fourth century A.D. After making Christianity the official state religion of the Roman Empire, he did for so-called Christians what civil rulers have

always done for pagan religions: provide money to build temples of worship to their gods. For 300 years there had been no so-called churches for the "called out ones" to meet in (they met in homes), but church buildings exploded in number from the fourth century onward. The Roman Catholic Church built church buildings throughout Europe, many of which became Protestant churches after the Protestant Reformation in 1517 and the tradition has continued ever since.

Even in the secular context it refers to those who have been called to a meeting, not to the meeting place itself. It is only through sloppy usage over time that "church" has come to be seen primarily as a building rather than the people who were called out, but this is wrong. "The Church;" God's church, is made up of every believer who has been born again, and only those who have been BORN AGAIN of the indwelling spirit. Christ's church is not a building and it is not a denomination.

The true church of our God is a worldwide living organism, not a man-made church building. Everyone who is genuinely saved and believes in Jesus the Son of our Eternal Father is an individual member that makes up this true and general church or Body of Christ.

There is only one way to be part of God's church and that is through the rebirth of the Holy Spirit. You can't join it. You can only be part of it by faith in Christ. Once our security is in Him – the rest doesn't matter.

As born again members of God's church; why should we meet together? The writer to Hebrews tells us. *"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as we see the Day approaching (Hebrews 10:24-25)."*

These verses apply to far more than attendance on Sunday morning. God made us for a relationship; first with Him, and then with each other. When we begin to understand His never ending love for us; His love begins to spill over into other human relationships. We begin to serve one another in love.

By definition, every believer is a minister. Each of us is called to serve the Body of Christ as the Holy Spirit enables. Each of us can proclaim the good news of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. We don't need special permission or education or anything else.

I am going to be very direct with you and ask you a personal question: Are you a member of the true church which is the Body of Christ? Now, I am not asking you if you belong to a church or to a denomination. You can belong to every church in the land and still die and be separated from God for all eternity. You can be christened, baptized, confirmed, take communion, say prayers, go to church and still be lost when you die and go to a place reserved for Satan and his demons.

Here is the question that will help you to determine whether or not you are truly born again by the Spirit of God. If you should die right now, do you know for certain that you would go to be with the Lord? Oh, you may say, "Oscar, can anybody know? I am not sure where I am going when I die." My friend, God wants you to be saved and God wants you to be sure of the fact that you are going to heaven.

Then you have other people who will say, "But Oscar, I am not such a great sinner. Why do I have to be saved?" You have to be saved because you are as great a sinner as has ever walked this earth. The greatest sin any person can commit before God is to reject His Son, Christ Jesus, and what He accomplished for you on the cross. As a non-believer, you have said "No" to Jesus Christ, since you have never personally received Him as your own Savior.

I plead with you today to lay aside your pride and to confess to the Lord the sin of your heart (rejection of Jesus) and receive Christ by faith.

All who are truly saved become members of His body which is "The Church." The Lord is still building His church each and every day as men and women are being regenerated by the power of the Spirit, and become vitally united to Christ and to one another by the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

The purpose of the church is to witness to the realities of the Gospel. The church's task is not to save the world but God's purpose in this the Church Age is the "calling out" of His church. God is building His church one individual at a time. When the last soul is saved to complete the body of Christ, then the church will be "caught up" or taken away to be with her risen Lord. *"Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord (1 Thess. 4:17)."*

The "catching up" (Rapture) of believers described here involves both those who have died and those who are living when the Lord comes. Notice, His coming here is in the air, not the earth, and will occur just prior to the beginning of God's wrath on earth for a period of seven years known as the Great Tribulation. God promises that Christ's body of believers will be "caught up" and taken out of this earth to be with Him in heaven and we will be delivered from God's great wrath (judgment) on earth. Revelation 3:10 tells us, *"Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth."* The Great Tribulation is described in Matthew 24: 21-22; Jesus says, *"For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the*

beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved: but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened."

In conclusion, the present age in which we live today is called the Age of Grace or the Age of the Holy Spirit or the Church Age. This age began with the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2) and will close with the rapture of the church.

We hear much today about the church and the purpose of the church in this age. But most leaders do not understand God's program for this age.

The problem today is that so few understand what the church is. "The Church" is not a denomination or an organization, but rather it is the Body of Christ; all who are redeemed by the precious blood of Christ. It is possible to belong to the local church and not be a member of the true Church at all. The true Church is made up of those who are CALLED OUT from the world of sin and judgment to become members of His body, by faith in His work on Calvary's cross.

Paul speaks of the dispensation of the grace of God in Ephesians 3:2. The gospel, which is based upon the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, is the good news for sinful man.

Our concern in this age is for the unsaved. Even in our own nation there are millions upon millions who are religious but are lost. Many think they are good enough to be saved but God declares all are sinners, separated from God. Until our Lord returns the message continues to go out and you have the choice today, even now, just where you are, to reject or receive the Lord Jesus Christ as your own personal Savior. Have you been born again of the Spirit of God? Our Lord waits today to save to the uttermost all those who come to Him by faith.