

What Is a Scriptural Church?

What Is a Church?

According to the Bible, the church is the body of Christ (see Colossians 1:24). It is made up of God's children—those who have given their hearts to Him and voluntarily consider Him the Lord of their lives.

The Bible uses the word church two different ways. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, "I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." In this verse, church refers to the universal body of believers on earth. But the Bible also uses the word church to refer to a local congregation of believers. For instance Matthew 18:17 speaks of someone refusing "to hear the church," and Acts 8:1 mentions "the church which was at Jerusalem."

The True Christian is part of the universal body of believers. However, many New Testament commands assume that he also is part of a Scriptural, local congregation. The true Christian will always seek to join himself to such a group. We are told not to forsake "the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is" (Hebrews 10:25).

1. A Scriptural Congregation Consists of Obedient Christians

The New Testament states, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). When speaking of the local congregation, the New Testament almost always assumes that it will consist of people who have been born again. This means that at some point in their life, they realized that they were sinners, and voluntarily repented. They invited Jesus to take control of their lives and asked Him to deliver them from sin.

Many people think they are Christians because they have been baptized as a baby and have regularly taken part of ceremonies such as the Eucharist (or Communion) for most of their lives. This is one of the devil's great deceits. No one who has not gone through the process in the first paragraph is a Christian. The person who depends on any kind of ceremony or other action except repentance to save him is deceived.

The Scriptural congregation consists of born-again believers who have been baptized on the confession of their faith.

2. A Scriptural Church Practices Biblical Teachings

We have just said that you cannot be saved by ceremonies. However, the New Testament does teach that the born-again person will be baptized. It teaches the practice of Communion (also called the Eucharist). It also teaches feet washing and other practices often called ordinances (or sacraments, depending on how one defines the word). *However, the Scriptural congregation practices these ordinances because they are commanded by God in the New Testament, not because they believe that people can be saved by practicing them.*

3. A Scriptural Church Will Deal With Sin

Matthew 18:15-20 speaks of the authority and responsibility that the congregation has to deal with sin in its members. In I Corinthians 5:7, Paul commanded the Corinthian congregation to purge itself of known sinners. In verse 11 of the same chapter, Paul told them to part ways with sinners who were once part of the church. A Scriptural congregation will deal with sin, and will discipline members who refuse to live in obedience to the New Testament by removing their membership (this action is called excommunication in some circles).

A Scriptural congregation will not tolerate members who are living in known sin.

4. A Scriptural Church Is Separate From the State

The Scriptural congregation will obey God even when the government tells them to disobey. We are commanded to respect our rulers (Romans 13:7; 1 Peter 2:17) and pray for them (1 Timothy 2:1-3). We pay our taxes and do not question what the government will use the money for (Romans 13:6, 7). We are subject to the government whenever it is possible for us to do so without violating God's commands (Romans 13:1, 5; Titus 3:1). But our first loyalty is to God, and we must obey God rather than men when the two disagree with each other (Acts 4:19; 5:29).

In many countries Christians face heavy pressure to participate in political events and acts, or to support a political front. In some cases a person's job may depend on his political actions. However, the New Testament teaches that the church and state are separate. It shows us clearly (in passages like Romans 13) that the church and state have separate, incompatible duties. Because of this, the Christian cannot interfere with or participate in the operation of the government. This would include voting, participating in political rallies, supporting political parties, or agitating for government reform.

A Scriptural congregation will teach and practice separation from the government.

5. A Scriptural Church Will Not Resist Evil

We have already discussed the teaching of Christ in Matthew 5:38, 39 [change this]. Not resisting evil affects us in many areas of life. We will not resist evil with our speech, but will follow the example of Jesus, who did not revile those who reviled Him (1 Peter 2:23). Further, we will not use the courts to resist evil or to settle disagreements (1 Corinthians 6:1-7). This includes instigating or resisting lawsuits. We will not use physical force to resist evil (Luke 6:29), or participate in warfare of any sort (John 18:36; 2 Corinthians 10:3, 4; James 4:1).

Romans 12:14-21 is a very clear passage describing this aspect of the Christian life.

Any Scriptural congregation will not allow its members to defend themselves (or their country) or resist evil.

6. A Scriptural Church Will Be Different From the World

The New Testament instructs us to give our bodies a living sacrifice to God (Romans 12:1). The verses following this enlarge on this and explain some of what is involved in being a living sacrifice. Verse 2 tells us, "Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind."

Separation from the world includes every area of life. It means that we will act differently from the world, we will talk differently, and we will dress differently. We will not become involved in the world's amusements and pleasures (such as cock fights, fiestas, fairs, television, and radio) see 1 Peter 4:1-4).

The world is especially interested in clothing and jewelry. The Bible teaches us to not to wear jewelry at all, and to wear only clothing that is modest and not showy (1 Timothy 2:9, 10; 1 Peter 3:3, 4).

A Scriptural congregation will require its members to be separate from the world in their actions and appearance.

7. A Scriptural Church Will Trust in God

Many of God's children, in many parts of the world, are poor. This has been true in all of history. But poor people are not desolate, because God is in control of their lives and circumstances. Christians will not steal or be dishonest, but will work to make an honest living where possible (Ephesians 4:28). (According to this same verse, the Christian will also share what he has with those in need.) God does not promise to meet the needs of the person who is too lazy to work, but He has promised to relieve the orphans and the widows (Psalms 146:9). This blessing would include any of His children in helpless circumstances.

It is not God's plan for His people to be beggars and parasites. When people become covetous and are always trying to get something for nothing, they are not in God's will (this can include such things as accepting welfare payments from the government and receiving insurance). Along with this, we should not expect people to give us extra money to do a job that they are paying our employer to have done. If they want to offer us a tip when we are finished because we have done our work well, it is not wrong to take it, but the Bible condemns bribery.

In a Scriptural congregation the members love and care for each other, and help meet each other's needs. This kind of interdependence is one of God's ways of supplying the needs of His children.

The Scriptural congregation will have honest members who are working to meet their needs where possible and trusting in God to meet their needs if they cannot. The members of such a congregation will share what they have with those who are in need.

8. A Scriptural Church Will Teach a Proper Role for Women

A Scriptural congregation will help to meet the needs of its sisters. Christian women can find fulfillment in Christian service in many ways. They can be schoolteachers and Sunday school teachers (for children's or sisters' classes). As mothers they have a tremendous influence on the future of the church by raising children for God. They can stand by their husbands and encourage them to live and work for God. Indeed, a godly woman is a tremendous asset to any congregation.

However, the Bible teaches that women are not to lead out in the work of the congregation, or to be involved in spiritual leadership (1 Timothy 2:11-15). As a sign of their submission to God's plan for them, He has commanded that they cover their heads and not cut their hair (1 Corinthians 11: 1-15). In many unscriptural churches today, the women preach, teach, and pray in public. They uncover their heads and cut their hair in spite of God's commands not to do so. (Sometimes this is because of ignorance, but in other cases it is because of a brazen rebellion against God's plan.)

The sisters in a Scriptural congregation will submit gladly to God's plan for their role in the church and home.

9. A Scriptural Church Will Teach a Proper Role for Men

God has made men responsible to provide spiritual leadership in the congregation and in the home. This is implied in the same Scripture passages that we just gave for the woman's role. However, though the man is given this responsibility, he does not have the right to be a dictator in the home and expect his wife to be his slave. The relationship between a husband and wife is clearly described in Ephesians 5:22-33. A husband is to love his wife so that she can submit to him without fear.

A spiritual congregation will require men to accept their responsibility in the home and congregation, but will not allow them to become despots, mistreating their wives or using them as slaves.

10. A Scriptural Church Will Require Scriptural Marriages

The Bible teaches that a man is to be the husband of one wife (1 Timothy 3:2, 12). Polygamy, though allowed in the Old Testament, is therefore sin according to the New Testament. Divorcing a husband or wife and remarrying is sin. Marrying a divorced person is also sin (Romans 7:2, 3). All of these conditions are immoral according to New Testament standards.

A Scriptural congregation will not allow polygamy, divorce, or remarriage (unless the former partner has died).

11. A Scriptural Church Will Be a Haven

In a congregation where God is in control, there will be peace. God's children will love each other and enjoy being with each other. They will visit each other and enjoy fellowshiping with each other.

In some congregations, people quickly vanish when church is over. But in a Scriptural congregation, people tend to linger and visit after church, because they enjoy being with each other. In such a congregation the members will help each other to become better Christians. They will encourage each other and pray for each other, but they will avoid criticizing each other.

A Scriptural congregation will be at peace, and its members will show genuine love and concern for each other.

—Lester Bauman