



New Testament Church: What is a "Church"?

These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly: But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. (1 Timothy 3:14–15)

An old cliché reads, "If it quacks like a duck, waddles like a duck, and looks like a duck, it is probably a duck." Our passage gives us simple, straightforward details regarding the prominent characteristics of a New Testament church. It shows us the "duck," the appearance of a New Testament church. Paul identifies three major marks of a New Testament church.

1. **It is "...the house of God."** In terms of God's essential attributes, God is omnipresent. He is "everywhere present—nowhere absent." He fills His material universe, but he is not contained by it; He rather transcends it. In a unique and specific sense, Paul says that the church is God's "house." Rather than referring to a physical structure, the word here translated "house" refers to the family structure.

Notice it is not "our" house, but His. When a pastor, deacons, or the dominant family in a local church begin to think of the church as their private, personal possession that they may control, manage, and manipulate as they wish, they have lost the New Testament vision of what a true church is to be, and they are likely in danger of losing the blessing of that church. Every church that holds any legitimate claim to being a New Testament church lives with the constant, conscious knowledge that it belongs to the Lord, not to all the members or to any lesser segment of them. It is the "house," the "church" that belongs to God. We are His stewards, given the use and blessing of the church and held responsible by Him and accountable to Him for its safe keeping and godly use.

"...the family consisting of those related by blood and marriage, as well as slaves and servants, living in the same house or homestead—family, household."¹ While it

is healthy for people to respect the building where a church meets, Paul is here referring to the church, not to the building. Our old English ancestors in the faith often referred to the building where the church met as the "Meeting house." They understood the difference between the building and the church itself. Paul is not imposing a required behavior that we need to observe while in the physical building where the church meets. He is teaching us how to live in personal relationship with the individual members of our church, as well as with the gathered body of the church. Isaiah 66:1–3 tells us about this unique "house" where God dwells.

Thus saith the LORD, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: Where is the house that ye build unto me? And where is the place of my rest? For all those things hath mine hand made, And all those things have been, saith the LORD: But to this man will I look, Even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, And trembleth at my word.

God's special dwelling place, where He abides in fellowship, protection, and outpoured blessings on His obedient, faithful children is here further described. The folks in this church are humble, gracious people. They do not boast of their superiority over God or His word. They bow and tremble before both Him and His word. They hold His word, what He has "said" in Scripture, in reverential, high regard. They do not divide it into what they will accept and what they do not like and reject. They respectfully tremble at all of it and pray for grace to believe, trust, and obey it. Above all groups on earth, the people in a New Testament church should hold God's word, Scripture, high in both esteem and in obedience.

2. **It is "...the church of the living God."** It is not an irrelevant institution that honors the tombs of dead founders. We indeed focus our preaching on a tomb, but it is an empty

¹ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., 112 (New York: United Bible societies, 1996).

tomb, not an occupied one. The God whom we serve is alive. He lives! Further, Paul refers to this collective group as a “church.” The word translated “church” here refers to a group of people who are “called out.” Someone in authority over them has called them out for the conducting of official business. The word was commonly used in first century Greek culture to refer to the official herald in a city, summoning the city’s citizens to come together to conduct the city’s business. This group of people should so live as to demonstrate that God has called them out from among men to serve Him, to “do His business” for the benefit of His people. A New Testament church should be a friendly, socially interactive organization, but it should not degenerate into a common social club or a “Mutual admiration society.” **All the members of a local church should consider that every single time their church gathers together, God has summoned them to gather with the collective body for the purpose of conducting His business.** What is His business? It is worshipping Him and ministering to His children.

3. **It is “...the pillar and ground of the truth.”**

We know more about first century and earlier Greek buildings by their pillars, their supporting columns, than by any other part of the buildings, because in most ancient Greek ruins, all the buildings have disappeared, but the pillars, the massive columns, still stand. A pillar doesn’t shift and move around based on the drift of the wind or the latest fad of the day. It is tightly, permanently anchored in bedrock that holds it tightly against all forces aimed at weakening or moving it. *“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.”* (1 Corinthians 15:58) At the same time the church is to serve as the strong supporting pillar of the whole structure of knowing and serving God in the here and now, Paul also writes that it is to be the ground of the truth. “...that which provides the basis or foundation for belief or practice—‘support, foundation, basis.’ *στῦλος καὶ ἑδραίωμα τῆς ἀληθείας* ‘pillar and support of the truth’ 1 Tm 3:15.”² In both roles, the church is to serve as a foundation for and a support of

the whole structure of God’s truth. However, do not overlook that Paul not once hinted that the church has any authority to redefine truth or to reject Biblical ideas and to embrace new non-Biblical ideas. The populist idea in today’s Western Christianity that the church needs to survey what the “un-churched” like in a church, and to do whatever they can do to accommodate these desires, flies in the face of this Biblical principle. For a number of years during my business career, I worked in public education. As our student population grew or moved from one area of the school district to another, we were faced with the challenge of housing students in each neighborhood where our schools were located. We might have empty classrooms in one campus, and at the same time need more classrooms on a campus across town. To meet this ever-changing need, the district owned a number of “relocatable” classroom buildings. With a few weeks’ notice, we could move a few classrooms from Campus A to Campus B. Truth in Scripture is never compared to a floating, changing, “relocatable” and therefore variable set of ideas. What was “truth” a hundred—or a thousand, for that matter—years ago, if it was truth based on Scripture, is truth today. Further it is truth whether the “churched” or the “un-churched” think it is what they like or not. Not once in Scripture do we ever find God putting His truth up for a popular vote. God commands us to believe and to obey His truth. He never leaves it up to us to decide what is—and what is not—His truth.

What have we learned about the New Testament idea of “church.” First, when the people in a local assembly believe and serve God faithfully, He “dwells” with them in the form of special fellowship and blessings. Secondly, every faithful New Testament church knows that it answers to the Lord and must therefore faithfully obey Him in all things. And finally, a godly New Testament church understands her charge to support, stand on, and safeguard the truth of God, not alter it. They are to stand strong and faithful under the heat of trials, the enticements of ever-changing popular ideas, and they must work to uphold the whole structure of God’s truth, not selected parts of it that they like more than other parts. No preacher or church has Biblical authority to alter truth or to change the truth that God has revealed in Scripture. In our next study we shall explore Paul’s teachings regarding the core elements of God’s truth. Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?” But he quickly left the room instead of waiting for Jesus’ answer. Believers need to ask Jesus the question and attentively listen to His words.

² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., 377 (New York: United Bible societies, 1996).

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
16434 Woodruff
Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor