



FRIENDS FOREVER

Course 1, *Basic Christianity*, Lesson 9

The Problem: In our previous eight lessons, we have journeyed through the history of the universe—from its original state of purity, peace, and harmony to the eventual destruction of sin and suffering, and the eternal restoration of God's righteous rule. Lesson 1 addressed the universal problem of sin that affects all humanity and highlighted Jesus Christ as the only true solution. Lesson 2 explored the state of the universe before Lucifer fell and became Satan, as well as the perfection of our world before he led our first parents into disobedience against God. Lesson 3 examined how God lovingly guided His people throughout the centuries leading up to the coming of Christ. Despite His abundant blessings and faithful leadership, ancient Israel ultimately failed in its mission, as the majority of the people chose to rebel against the Lord.

Lesson 4 depicted the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We discovered that His death makes it possible for our sins to be forgiven, for our lives to be brought into harmony with the will of God, and for believers to be given eternal life. Jesus is the answer to our world's lost condition. Lesson 5 outlined the major steps involved in becoming a true follower of Christ. Because God loves us infinitely, as revealed in the sacrifice of Jesus, we are inspired to turn away from sin and, by His grace, live the life of faith and obedience. Lesson 6 explained how after we have enjoyed the new birth experience, we can live victorious lives for Christ. By allowing Jesus, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, to reign in our hearts we can have uninterrupted fellowship with God and deliverance from the dominion of sin.

Lesson 7 unveiled God's plan for the future of our world and for each of us personally. Just as Daniel accurately foretold the rise and fall of nations in the centuries after his time, he also predicted the second coming of Christ. At that time, the wicked will face eternal destruction, true believers will receive the gift of immortality, and the everlasting Kingdom of God will be established. Lesson 8 highlighted the various events that signal the nearness of Jesus' return. Many of these prophetic signs have already come to pass, while others are unfolding before our eyes, affirming that the conclusion of world history is fast approaching.

In this lesson, we explore the question: Why is it important to belong to a church? What role does the church play in our spiritual lives? How should we respond to the presence of hypocrisy within the church? And can the church truly help us grow stronger in our faith as we prepare for the second coming of Jesus?

Individuals of any persuasion or lifestyle tend to thrive when surrounded by others who share their beliefs and way of life. This is evident in the way ethnic communities in the United States often cluster together, finding comfort and support in the shared culture and proximity of like-minded people. Humanity, by nature, is inherently social and is not fully complete in isolation. Yet, the question persists: Why is a Christian church as an organized body necessary? What benefits does such an organization provide for its members and for society at large? More fundamentally, what is the will of God in this matter? Does He desire a structured church with defined membership? Was there a form of organized church in Old Testament times? Did Christ establish a church, and what insights did His apostles offer on this subject?

Objectives:

- I We examine the religious institutions God established before the time of Jesus, their purpose, and their role in spiritual life.
- II. We analyze the establishment of the Christian Church—its foundational events, teachings, and early growth.

- III. We trace the origins of the first Christian communities founded by the apostles, exploring their structure and influence..
- IV. We identify the distinguishing marks of the true church, considering scriptural and historical perspectives.
- V. We reflect on the personal decision of church membership and its significance in one's faith journey.

I. THE CHURCH OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

God chose Abraham and his descendants as the chosen nation to disseminate the truth of salvation to surrounding nations. Abraham's household was a true Church of Yahweh. Wherever he traveled Abraham led his family in worship and service. The Lord gave him the land, the gift of righteousness, the promise of the Messiah and of eternal life. See Genesis 12:1-3; 15:6; 17:1-27; compare Galatians 3:8, Hebrews 11:9-10. These same promises were renewed to his descendants (Genesis 17:7, 9, 10). Hence, they were the chosen people of God, His Church before the cross.

The Word:

1. What does the Bible call the children of Israel in the time of Moses?

This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us. Acts 7:38

During the time of Moses, the Bible frequently refers to the children of Israel as "the people of Israel" or "the Israelites." They are also described as "God's chosen people," reflecting their covenant relationship with God. For example, in Exodus 6:7 God says, *"I will take you as My people, and I will be your God."* Additionally, terms like "the congregation" and "the assembly" are used to describe them collectively in their worship and journey through the wilderness.

2. Who were the "people of God" before the cross?

choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward. Hebrews 11:25-26

3. What kind of kingdom did God intend Israel to be?

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel. Exodus 19:5-6

Explanation: Defining the Church as a spiritual communion of all genuine believers in the Lord, the community of the faithful in Old Testament time can accurately be referred to as a Church. This community was offered the message and experience of righteousness by faith, the law of God as an expression of His will, and the promise of eternal life through the work of the coming Messiah.

Relevance: The Lord has always had His true Church throughout every age. In the time before Christ, the Old Testament Scriptures served as the divine messages for His people. These messages continue to hold relevance today, as much of what God imparted to Israel speaks directly to our spiritual needs. As Scripture declares, 'All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness' (2 Timothy 3:16, 17). The detailed record of the Old Testament Church's experiences was preserved so that we might learn from the triumphs and failures of God's people in history. See 1 Corinthians 10:1-12.

II. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Jesus Christ was the founder of the Christian Church. At first, the Church consisted of His relatively small group of followers. Later it grew rapidly as the Gospel was preached throughout the Mediterranean world. The manner in which Jesus founded the Church is clearly narrated in the New Testament.

The Word:

4. Upon whom did Jesus build His Church?

He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." Matthew 16:15-19; See also 1 Peter 2:3-8; 1 Corinthians 3:11; Ephesians 2:19-22.

5. Who is the head of the Christian church?

And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church. Ephesians 1:22; See also Ephesians 4:15; 5:23; Colossians 1:18, 2:19

6. With what authority did Jesus invest His church?

And He put all things under His feet and gave Him to be head over all things to the church. Ephesians 1:22

7. Who is the real owner of the keys of the Kingdom?

I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death. Revelation 1:18, 3:7; compare Isaiah 22:22

Explanation: The Founder and the Foundation of the Christian Church is Jesus Christ. *"For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ"* 1 Corinthians 3:11. The apostles and prophets are included in the foundation only because their faith was centered on Christ. Paul wrote *"Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ"* 1 Corinthians 11:1.

In Matthew 16:18 two different words are used for "rock." The first is the name "Peter." Jesus said, "You are Peter." A *Petros* (Greek masculine word) was a stone which could be moved. In Homer, it referred to stones used by warriors. Sometimes it was a boulder used to form a landmark. By contrast, the "rock" on which Christ said He would build His Church is the word *Petra* (a Greek feminine word). It was the word used to refer to large, immovable masses of rock such as cliffs, ledges, or ridges. By comparison with Christ, Peter was a small movable character, as was proved by his sin of denying his Lord. The powers of hell very definitely did prevail against Peter. Peter was the *petros*. Jesus Himself "who committed no sin" (1 Peter 2:22) was the *petra*, the great immovable foundation stone upon which He established the Christian Church.

Note: The argument that Jesus was speaking in Aramaic and therefore could not have made the distinction between two Greek words, is misleading. Jesus must have made such a distinction if not by using different words, at least by intonation of voice. The New Testament was written in Greek. The Holy Spirit inspired the distinction between *petros* and *petra*. He would not have done this if Jesus had not made such a distinction. No manuscripts of the New Testament have been discovered in Aramaic. The existing evidence strongly supports that the original texts were written in Greek, which was the common language of communication in the Eastern Mediterranean during that time.

The Greek of Matthew 16:19 clarifies the meaning of the text. When Jesus said, "Whatsoever you bind on earth...." etc., He was simply saying that, insofar as the Church is built upon Him, and consecrated to Him, the decisions it makes will be a reflection of decisions already made in heaven. The Greek reads literally, "And whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." (In both cases the future perfect tense is used). Earth does not bind heaven; heaven binds earth. The Holy Spirit reveals heaven's decisions to the Church, guiding believers to understand and implement God's will. See John 14:26; 16:7-15.

The "keys of the kingdom of heaven" belong to Christ. He gives them to us so that, filled with His Spirit and truth, we can present His saving love to others. Thus, they are encouraged to believe, and heaven and eternal life are opened for

them. See John 1:12, 17:3; Luke 11:52. Jesus said, “The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life. Peter later wrote that we are born again “*by the word of God, which lives and abides forever*” 1 Peter 1:23. When we, by faith, share Christ’s Word with others, allowing it to convict their hearts and draw them to Him (Hebrews 4:12), we embody what Jesus referred to as “the keys of the kingdom of heaven.”

Relevance: Jesus established the Church upon Himself, granting it the authority to make decisions and proclaim His Word. His ultimate purpose is to extend the gift of salvation to all humanity. If Christ created the “body”—the community of believers—as a divinely ordained Church organization with a specific mission, is it reasonable to question the necessity of the Church?

III. WHAT KIND OF CHURCH WAS THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH?

The organizational structure of the apostolic church, as described in the New Testament, was relatively simple yet effective. It included the following key elements: The apostles, chosen by Jesus, were the primary leaders of the early church. They were responsible for teaching, guiding, and establishing churches. Peter, James, and John were among the prominent apostles. Elders were appointed in local congregations to provide spiritual oversight and leadership. They were tasked with shepherding the flock and ensuring the church remained faithful to its teachings. Deacons were appointed to assist with practical matters, such as distributing resources and caring for the needs of the congregation. This allowed the apostles and elders to focus on spiritual leadership.

The Word:

8. How important to the early Christians was the apostolic council in Jerusalem?

Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection. And they proposed two: Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias. And they prayed and said, “You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two You have chosen to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place.” And they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles. Acts 1:21-26; See also Acts 15:1-2.

9. What kind of leaders did Paul instruct Timothy and Titus to appoint in every city?

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you— if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, ⁹ holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict. Titus 1:5-9; compare 1 Timothy 3:1-7; 5:17; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Acts 14:23.

10. What was the responsibility of deacons?

Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word. Acts 6:1-6; compare 1 Timothy 3:8-12.

Explanation: In the New Testament, the Greek term for “elder” is used interchangeably with “bishop,” signifying the same role within the church. The elders or bishops were the pastors of the local churches. They were not rulers or commanders. Jesus had already warned against rulership. He taught, “*You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant.*”²⁷ *And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave* Matthew 20:25-27. The ministry of the Apostolic Church was composed of three distinct roles: apostles, elders (also referred to as bishops), and deacons.”

Relevance: Guided by Jesus and inspired by the Holy Spirit, a distinct Church organization emerged in apostolic times. Should we have any doubt that the Lord desires us to maintain a similar Church structure today?

IV. HOW CAN WE IDENTIFY THE TRUE CHURCH?

The Apostle Paul spoke of “*the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth*” 1 Timothy 3:15. Therefore, the true Christian Church will hold to the truth! But what is the truth? Jesus said: “*Everyone who is of the truth, hears my voice*” John 18:37. In fact, He made it clear that He is “*the way, the truth, and the life*” John 14:6. The true Church will be one that believes the truth about Jesus and puts His teachings into practice.

The Word:

11. What will the true Church believe about the Deity of Christ?

But Jesus answered them, “My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.” Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God. John 5:17-18; See also John 8:58; compare Colossians 2:9.

12. What will the true church believe about the death and resurrection of Christ?

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should ¹⁰not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. John 3:14-17, See also 1 Corinthians 15:1-4.

13. What will the true Church teach regarding the pathway to salvation?

Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” John 3:3, 5-8, 36; See also Hebrews 12:23.

14. What will the true Church teach about Christ’s heavenly ministry since His death?

Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, ² a Minister of the ¹⁰sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man. Hebrews 8:1-2

15. What will the true Church teach about Christ's ministry of judgment?

Then I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth—to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people— ⁷ saying with a loud voice, “Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water.” Revelation 14:6-7; See also John 5:22; Acts 17:31

16. What will the true Church teach about the Bible?

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16-17; See also Isaiah 8:20; compare Luke 24:27, 44.

17. What will the true Church teach about the second coming of Jesus?

Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. ² In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. John 14:1-3

18. What will the true Church teach about the importance of the commandments of God

If you love Me, keep My commandments. John 14:15; See also John 15:10

19. What are the special characteristics of God's last-day Church?

And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ. Revelation 12:17; See also Revelation 19:10.

Explanation: The Scriptures provide clear guidance and unwavering principles of truth. Seek out a Church that sincerely believes, teaches, and practices the truths revealed in God's holy Word, and you will be drawing closer to the Church as God intends. A Church that disregards or contradicts biblical teachings should not be followed (Isaiah 8:20).

Relevance: Have you discovered the true Church? If you found it, would you be willing to become part of it?

V. WHY SHOULD I BELONG TO THE TRUE CHURCH?

We have substantially answered the question already. Jesus founded the Church. He said that no power on earth or in hell would prevail against it. So He intended it to continue until his second advent. He urged His followers to "teach all nations, baptizing them" (Matthew 28:19). He inspired the apostles to organize congregations with pastors in every city. The apostles did this and inducted new believers into church membership. The Church is one of the most important features of the Christian faith. As a Christian, it is vital to connect with fellow believers—joining them in worship and partnering with them in sharing the message of Christ.

The Word:

20. Who added members to the early Christian Church?

praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added ^[a]to the church daily those who were being saved. Acts 2:47; compare Acts 11:25-26.

21. How much does Christ love His Church?

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. Ephesians 5:25-27; compare 1 Corinthians 12:27-28

22. What specific instruction does the Lord give regarding our fellowship with the Church?

not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:25

23. What mighty call to join the Lord and His Church is proclaimed in the time leading up to Jesus' second coming?

After these things I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illuminated with his glory. And he cried mightily with a loud voice, saying, "Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and has become a dwelling place of demons, a prison for every foul spirit, and a cage for every unclean and hated bird! For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication,

the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have become rich through the abundance of her luxury."

And I heard another voice from heaven saying, "Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues. For her sins have reached to heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. Revelation 18:1-5; compare Revelation 22:17.

Explanation: Christ's true Church warmly invites you to come to Him and embrace fellowship with His people. Scripture affirms that membership in the Church is not merely a tradition but a desire of God for each believer. Loving Jesus naturally leads to loving His people and finding joy in worshiping together. Though the Church is still being refined and is not yet without "spot or wrinkle or any such thing" (Ephesians 5:27), this remains its ultimate goal. As believers fix their eyes on Jesus, "the author and finisher of their faith" (Hebrews 12:2), they grow in faith and unity. Your deepest joy and spiritual well-being are inseparably linked to this sacred fellowship. In Christ's hands, guided by His Spirit, we are transformed—reflecting His character more fully and preparing for His glorious return.

Relevance: Jesus invites you to become part of His end-time Church, a community that embodies these principles. Will you accept His call to belong and grow in faith?

Review Questions

1. True or False:

- a. God never established an organized church.
- b. There was never a church before the time of Jesus.
- c. Jesus builds the Christian Church upon Himself.
- d. The apostles organized local churches in many different places.

2. Discuss: The teachings in these nine lessons are firmly rooted in Scripture, making it both logical and meaningful to embrace them while worshiping alongside others who share the same faith. In what ways does being part of a united faith community enrich your spiritual journey? Conversely, what challenges or risks might arise from isolating yourself from those whose beliefs align with yours?