

Week 43

The Church

Key Verses

1 Timothy 3:15 I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.

+ Introduction

Before skyscrapers and sports stadiums, the skylines of American cities were marked by steeples. As recently as the 1950s, almost half of Americans worshiped under one of those steeples on Sundays.¹ Imagine rush hour traffic on a Sunday morning!

A typical church service in the fifties takes even more imagination. Air conditioning was rare. Services were long. Coats, neckties, and dresses were expected. After church, potluck lunches and “fellowships” were normal. Baptists even had church twice: Sunday morning and evening!

From first-century “love feasts” to mid-century “potlucks,” while some elements of church life are always changing, church life has a few “essentials” that do not change. Our lesson today explores those essentials and answers the question: what makes a true church?

We find our answer in Paul’s first letter to Timothy. Timothy was a new pastor in the big Roman city of Ephesus. Timothy had seen God use Paul to start churches, but now Paul had left Timothy to oversee one of these start-up churches. What would Timothy need? A big parking lot? A dress code? Potluck recipes?

Of course, Paul says nothing about those things. Instead, he writes about the way church people should act or “conduct” themselves when they gather. This conduct includes teaching the Bible, praying, orderly leadership, and caring for widows. Then, Paul says:

*“...I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in **the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.**”* (1 Timothy 3:15, emphasis added)

These God-inspired words will unlock for us the essence of what makes a true church, regardless of time, place, or situation.

✦ A Church Is a Family

Paul's words, "the household of God" tell us that a church is a family. The word "household" or *oikos* (see also Galatians 6:10) meant something like an extended family in ancient times. Think of a grand old house with several generations of family, household staff, and guests. That is an *oikos*.

Scripture calls the church a "spiritual *oikos*" (1 Peter 2:5; Ephesians 2:18-19). As a spiritual "household" or family, churches relate to each other differently than human households. Here are four major ways:

a. A family bound by blood

Most family members are related by blood, and church family members are bound by blood, too, even if they are not related. The blood that binds church family is the blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross. This is a non-negotiable feature of a church, and the Bible makes it very clear. The Apostle Peter wrote to churches scattered over thousands of square miles but said they were all "*sprinkled with [Jesus'] blood*" and redeemed with "*the blood of Christ.*" (1 Peter 1:2; 1 Peter 1:19). The Apostle Paul told the leaders of a different church to "*shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.*" (Acts 20:28). Jesus made it clear when He told His disciples that the Passover cup represented His "*blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*" (Matthew 26:28).

How does a person enter this blood family? Scripture says, "*if we walk in the Light as He [God] Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin*" (1 John 1:7). So, people do not need a blood transfusion to enter God's blood family, they need to "*walk in the Light,*" which begins with repentance and faith², or conversion (see 1 John 1:8-9). Conversion into a relationship with God through Christ is the way someone enters a church family. No one is "born into the church" or "born a Christian." On the contrary, Jesus says someone must be "*born again*" to be in God's family (John 3:7). The bottom line is that a church is a family of fellow-born-again Christians covered by the blood of Christ.

b. A family near and far

Look at any family tree, and you will see names of people still living and those long dead. You might see members who live on different continents and those who live under the same roof. God's church family is just like that.

Since God is the only One who knows the whole family tree for His church, folks sometimes talk about the "**invisible church.**" This simply means "all God's family, in all places, at all times." No one sees your great-aunt who graduated to heaven years ago, but God does! The "*cloud of witnesses*" in Hebrews 12:1 and the names "*written in the Lamb's book of life*" in Revelation 21:27 show us the idea of the "invisible church" (see also Hebrews 12:22-24). Since Christians "*absent from the body*" are "*at home with the Lord,*" we recognize that God's church family exists beyond the grave (2 Corinthians 5:8).

Scripture says much more about the “visible church,” or “God’s family in all places right now.” When people talk about “The Church,” this is usually what they mean. Jesus said He would build His church on the “rock” of His disciples’ faith (Matthew 16:18). The Apostle Paul had never met the Christians at Ephesus, but he knew that they were still part of “the Church” (Ephesians 1:22; 3:21; 4:4).

So, how can you and I know for sure who our Christian “blood relatives” are? This is where the idea of the “**local church**” family comes into play. In fact, most of the Bible’s 100-plus mentions of a “church” (*ekklesia*) involve local groups of Christians who promise to gather to worship regularly, hear the Bible, pray, serve one another, and spread the Gospel (Acts 2:42-47; 1 Corinthians 16:19, Colossians 4:15). Every Christian needs a family like this.

c. A family led by Jesus, overseen by pastors, served by deacons, and governed by one another

God invented human families with a purpose (Genesis 1:28), and His church family has a purpose too (Ephesians 3:10). But without leadership, families cannot flourish—they flounder. Thankfully, the Bible tells us exactly how local church families are to be led so they can fulfill their purpose.

First and foremost, **Jesus Christ leads** churches. Since the Spirit of Christ dwells in every Christian³ and leads them as individuals (Romans 8:14), local churches trust Jesus to lead them corporately by His Spirit, even if His leadership is indirect. In fact, Scripture says God gave Jesus “*as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all*” (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18). Practically, churches submit to Jesus’ leadership by submitting to His Word, the Bible.⁴

Under Jesus’ leadership through the Bible, churches find that He gives qualified **pastors to oversee them**. Pastors are men gifted by God and set apart by their local church families to serve as “shepherds and teachers” (Ephesians 4:11, ESV). Modern organizational leadership is not the main task of these men; preaching the Bible and praying are (2 Timothy 3:1-2; Acts 6:4; James 5:14)). If Jesus is to lead His people by His Word, trustworthy men must continually preach and pray so that Jesus’ sheep will hear His voice (John 10:27). In addition to preaching and prayer, pastors must be men of exemplary character, leading mainly through example (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4). Because of the time and effort needed to preach and pray well, Scripture commands church families to pay their pastors (1 Corinthians 9:14; Galatians 6:6; 1 Timothy 5:17).

Jesus also leads His church by giving qualified **deacons to serve them** (Philippians 1:1; Acts 6:1-3). Deacons are people gifted by God and set apart by their local church families to meet church needs. Unlike pastors, who oversee the church mainly through teaching, deacons serve the church by meeting whatever needs arise. Churches differ on whether 1 Timothy 3:8-13 and Romans 16:1 commend the office of deacon to women. Whether or not women served as deacons in the early church, there is no doubt women served and continue to serve their church families in essential ways. Across the centuries, deacons have distributed church money to the poor, mowed yards, led building campaigns, cared for babies, taught small groups, and—yes—served potlucks! Like pastors, deacons must show exemplary character (1 Timothy 3:8-13).

If you are an organization-minded person, you are still wondering: who runs the church? Where does the “buck stop?” The best answer from the Bible is that every local church family must decide how its **members govern one another**. A clear picture of this is found when Jesus addresses seven churches in Revelation 2-3. In this passage, Jesus does not address the churches’ pastors or deacons, and He does not address a council of churches, a bishop, or a board. He addresses the entire local congregation. Local church families are accountable to one another and for one another in the sight of God. The New Testament also indicates that significant church matters can be decided by a church vote, such as receiving and disciplining members (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5:1-5); appointing leaders (Acts 6:1-6), and sending missionaries (Acts 13:1-3).

The idea of a church family governing itself is called **congregational** church government. Most Baptist churches are congregational. Baptists tend to be led from the bottom up rather than the top down. We are autonomous in structure and nature. In every congregational church, there is a way for individual members to participate in the decision-making process.

d. The symbol of family: The Lord’s Supper

When families gather, they eat. Eating together signals a bond of trust and community. Imagine walking into a house to find a group of people sitting around a table. There is turkey, cranberry sauce, potatoes, dressing, and pumpkin pie. Football is on the television. You instantly know a family has gathered for Thanksgiving. The meal points to something bigger than food. It points to family. God’s family has a meal, too: the Lord’s Supper.

The Lord’s Supper is one of three “symbols” to let people know that a church family has gathered to worship Jesus; the other two are Water Baptism and preaching the Gospel. The bread signifies Jesus’ body given for all believers (Luke 22:19). The cup signifies Jesus’ blood, which inaugurated a new covenant between God and all believers (Luke 22:20). This meal is both simple and spiritual, and it offers a picture of the cost (Christ’s death, 1 Corinthians 11:26) and the benefit (union with Jesus Christ, 1 Corinthians 10:15-17) of redemption in God’s family. It is a powerful picture of God’s love.

The Lord’s Supper is also a picture of family love. In fact, Jesus instituted it around a table in the upper room the night before He was crucified. It was in that setting He had gathered those closest to Him that were like family. Family love is built into the Lord’s Supper because a church is a family.

✦ A Church Is a Family Gathered by God

1 Timothy 3:15 says that a church is not only “*the household of God*” (i.e., family), but the “*church of the living God...*” The word for church, *ekklesia*, literally means an “assembly” or “gathering.”⁵ Church people are a family who must gather to fulfill God’s purpose for them.

What is God’s purpose? God created the church to reveal something about Himself that could not be known in all eternity prior: “*so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places. This was in accordance*

with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Ephesians 3:10-11, emphasis added). This means that when a church gathers, God’s wisdom is on display. Consider a few ways God’s wisdom is shown through a gathered church:

a. The wisdom of who God gathers

When John F. Kennedy was president, he surrounded himself with a team of advisors who were allegedly the “best and the brightest” of their age. He called them “whiz kids.” There were Ivy Leaguers, captains of industry, academics, and policy wonks—all of them smart. Presumably, Kennedy’s “whiz kids” were the pinnacle of human wisdom. Unfortunately, all the smarts and pedigree of that group was embarrassed through their handling of the Vietnam War.⁶

Human wisdom might try to gather a group of “whiz kids” to handle a situation, but God does not gather the best and the brightest. God’s wisdom is shown precisely through the fact that *“there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble”* gathered in His church family (1 Corinthians 1:26). Instead, God gathers common, weak, and humble people and transforms their lives to show His great wisdom.

To outsiders, a local church should not look like a Washington think-tank, an L.A. cross-fit box, or a New York country club. If it does, God’s wisdom is not shining through. The reality is that God will gather all kinds of people into a local church family, and their unity around the Gospel will let outsiders know that God is at work among them. If you feel socially awkward or out of place in your church, but you love the Word of God taught there, you are probably right where God—in His wisdom—wants you to be.

b. The wisdom of when God’s family gather

God’s wisdom is also shown through the timing of His family gatherings. For centuries, God’s people gathered only on specific feast days or holidays.⁷ Jesus had a custom of gathering with other Jews each week for the Sabbath (Luke 4:16). The first Christians continued Jesus’ pattern of gathering weekly, but they did it on the first day of the week (Sunday) since that was when Jesus rose from the dead and when His disciples first encountered Him as their risen Lord (John 20:19; Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2). For God’s family, this “Lord’s Day” (Revelation 1:10) contains all the richness of a feast day, Sabbath rest, and encountering the risen Lord.

God wisely gives His church a day to rest from their normal work, gather as a family, and encounter Him. Christians who neglect gathering regularly like this are out of step with the pattern He established. Gathering with other believers is an essential way to follow Christ.⁸ Yardwork, office work, extra sleep, or eggs benedict may be valuable, but in God’s wisdom, the best way to start the week is by gathering with His family.

c. The symbol of God’s gathering: Water Baptism

As we have seen, God’s wisdom is always counter-intuitive to outsiders. He gathers unlikely people, on an unlikely day, and He shows it in an unlikely way. After someone enters God’s family through repentance and faith, God calls them to be baptized—immersed in water—as a one-time sign of their being gathered into His family. Jesus highlighted the importance of this sign by both

being baptized Himself (Matthew 3:15-16) and by commanding all His followers to be baptized (Matthew 28:19).

Since God saves people *“not as a result of works, so that no one may boast,”* (Ephesians 2:9) baptism may be understood as a *“powerful sermon in humility”*⁹ testifying that a person’s whole life is saved through, united with, depending on, and hoping in, Jesus Christ. Church families may not baptize someone every time they gather, but whenever God gathers a new person into the family, they should recognize it with baptism.

✦ A Church Is a Family Gathered by God to Stand For The Truth

So far, we have covered the essential character and the nature of the church (a God-gathered family), but what exactly do churches do? Do they just get together, eat the Lord’s Supper, and baptize new believers? Of course, there is more, and that brings us to the final phrase of 1 Timothy 3:15, which tells us that God’s church family is *“the pillar and ground of the truth.”*

Truth is the most precious thing a person can possess. Scripture reveals that the truth is what makes people free (John 8:32) and that the truth is found in Jesus (Ephesians 4:21). Since Jesus is the *“head”* over the church (Ephesians 1:22), God’s family should be ever trafficking in the truth. They do this in two ways:

First, they **promote the truth with words**. The Bible indicates that some Christians are specially gifted to *“speak”* the truth of God (1 Peter 4:11).¹⁰ This certainly means pastors and teachers, who must accurately handle the *“word of truth”* (2 Peter 2:15), but to a lesser extent, it includes every Christian. We all have a story to tell about how God brought us into His family by the *“word of truth”* (James 1:18). Moreover, all Christians are called to be *“truth-tellers,”* never dealing in lies or deception (Ephesians 4:25). So, promoting the truth about God, humanity, sin, forgiveness, Jesus, redemption, the Holy Spirit, and the age to come is the work of the church. It makes God’s family a *“pillar”* of truth.

Second, church people **support the truth with actions**. Just as some Christians are gifted to speak, others are gifted to serve (1 Peter 4:11). When a church family exercises these gifts, true religion can be seen in the service of widows and orphans (James 1:27), true generosity is experienced (Matthew 6:1-4), and true goodness is stirred up among the family of God (Hebrews 10:24-25). Acting on the truth by serving people is the foundational work of the church. It makes God’s family a *“ground”* of truth.

a. The sign of the truth: the Biblical Gospel

Just as the Lord’s Supper and water baptism are signs of God’s family being gathered, the words of the Gospel are the sign that God’s family gathers around truth. In fact, the Gospel is the most important sign of God’s family. Think of it like the sign a restaurant might put out on the highway to guide hungry people in for a meal. If folks do not know where to eat, it really does not matter how good the food is!

For a church family to obey Jesus and participate in baptism and the Lord's Supper, they must be about the business of spreading the Gospel. Moreover, they must be very clear about what the Gospel message is. Any error or deception with something as crucial as the Gospel will cut people off from the "power of God for salvation" (Romans 1:16). So, if a church family wants to stay true to the Gospel, they must recognize the authority and truth of the entire Bible. If you have ever wondered why church people spend so much time reading, studying, hearing, listening to, preaching, teaching, and memorizing the Bible, this is why!

+ Conclusion

Because God gathers a family from different backgrounds, ethnicities, ages, and abilities, church family can feel more awkward than a defensive driving class (at least defensive drivers all come with the exact same problem; church people come with different problems!). But God designed several ways for His church family to cut through the awkwardness and function as one:

1. Worship brings God's people back to the basics. We gather in one place (ideally) and sing together, pray together, listen together, give together, and together celebrate the Lord's Supper, baptism, and the Gospel message. A weekly rhythm of worshipping together makes church less of an awkward family.
2. Bible Study builds on worship by giving God's family a greater exposure to the truth. Since the truth sets people free (John 8:32), Bible Study also slowly releases people from the selfish tendencies that can make church family feel awkward.

Participating in worship and studying the Bible with other Christians strengthens family ties, so why not commit to it? Church membership is a promise to other Christians that they can count on you, and you can count on them. For someone looking to grow in God's family, membership is a must.

The church as we know it was started 50 days after Jesus rose from the grave. It was at Pentecost that the church was born (Acts 2) with 3,000 members. From the beginning, it was a mega-church. Throughout Acts we can navigate how the church grew and developed leadership while ultimately applying the elements we looked at today.

We still have the responsibility that was established over 2000 years ago. We are to be the church, one body, utilizing the spiritual gifts we each have for a common goal of making Christ known to the world.

+ Sources

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¹ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/166613/four-report-attending-church-last-week.aspx>

² See the First Things First lesson from Week 20, *Salvation and Repentance*.

³ For more on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, see First Things First lesson 9, *The Holy Spirit: His Person* and lesson 21, *Salvation from the Power of Sin*.

⁴ Jesus' command to make disciples, "*teaching them to observe all that I commanded you,*" points Christians back to the Bible, which was the source of Jesus' teaching (Matthew 28:20). For more on the authority of Scripture in the church (even Scripture written *after* Jesus spoke his words in Matthew 28) see First Things First lessons 1-4.

⁵ <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/ekklesia.html>

⁶ See David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, New York: Ballantyne Books, 1992.

⁷ Leviticus 23 commands God's people to gather at set times of the year: Passover/Unleavened Bread, First Fruits, Pentecost, Trumpets, Day of Atonement, Tabernacles.

⁸ Hebrews 10:25 commands "not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some..." then 10:26 begins "... For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins..." The natural understanding of "sinning willfully" in this context is a person who is "forsaking" assembling with the local church. At the very least, professing Christians who neglect regular church attendance are compromising their assurance of God's saving grace in their lives. For this reason, Baptists have historically encouraged weekly gathering for all members and kept one another accountable by recording church attendance.

⁹ See Dr. Ed Young, "Baptism Explained," <https://youtu.be/nyMatw6Up30>

¹⁰ 1 Peter 4:11 de-clutters much of the confusion about spiritual gifts in the church by giving us two categories for giftings: "whoever speaks" and "whoever serves." Speaking gifts would include teaching, evangelizing, prayer, and exhortation, and words of wisdom/knowledge (as well as apostleship, prophesy, tongues, and interpretation of tongues in the early church situation). Serving gifts would include leadership, faith, mercy, helping, giving, and healings (see Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:8-10; and Ephesians 4:11-16)