



Ecclesiology: The Study of the Church

Lesson 1: The People of God

Introduction

What is a church? That's a tough question. And Christians today are looking for all sorts of different things in their churches. If a friend heard that you attended church and asked you, "What is a church?" how would you answer that question? Would you describe the elements of the church? Would you talk about the philosophy of the church? Would you talk about the music or even some of the programs? How would you define the church?¹

Write a short one to two sentence definition of the church. _____

The People of God

Getting Started

Alyssa is a thirty-two-year-old single woman who is a member of your church. By all appearances, Alyssa would make a great wife and mother, and she deeply desires to get married and start a family. Mr. Right hasn't come along yet, but she keeps hoping.

One day, you find out that she is seeing someone. When you ask her about it, the conversation reveals that he is not a believer. She knows the Bible speaks against this, but she's tired of waiting. Things are getting pretty serious, and they are even talking about marriage.

1. *What do you do when you find out about Alyssa's relationship?*
2. *Do you think that the church should do anything about this? Is it the business of members to stick their noses in people's private lives?*

Independence and Autonomy

In the modern West, we like to think that we don't depend on anyone else and that we can do whatever we want. We like to think of ourselves as both independent and autonomous.

Do you see how these two things go together? We like to be free from entangling commitments to others (independent) so that we are free to do what we want (autonomous, literally, "a law unto oneself").

¹ Adapted from Mark Dever, "What a Church Is ... and Isn't," in *Built upon the Rock: The Church*, ed. Mark Dever, 9Marks Healthy Church Study Guides (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 9.

Think of how American culture glorifies the rugged individualist or the self-made millionaire who grows so powerful that he gets to make his own rules.

So most people would say of Alyssa’s relationship, “What she does with her life is her business, and the church should stay out of it.” But as we’re going to see from Scripture, God’s claim on our lives demands much more.

The Main Idea

Through Jesus Christ, God is saving not only individuals but also *a people*. The church is the people of God. This means that, as Christians, we are neither independent nor autonomous. Rather, we belong to God and to the people of God. So, we are to submit to God’s will and to one another.

Digging In Deeper

In Ephesians 2:11–16, Paul speaks about how our salvation as individuals incorporates us into God’s one redeemed people. Then, in Ephesians 2:17–22, Paul continues to talk about the church.

Read Ephesians 2:17–22.

1. *What phrases does Paul use in verses 17 and 19 to describe what we were as non-Christians? What do those phrases mean?* _____

2. *In verse 19, what two phrases does Paul use to describe our new state as Christians? What does this teach us about what happens to us when we become Christians?* _____

3. *Given our new identity which Paul describes in verses 19 through 22, should we Christians view ourselves as autonomous, independent individuals? Explain.* _____

Read 2 Corinthians 6:14–18.

1. *List the different terms and images that Paul (quoting Leviticus 26:12 and Isaiah 52:11) uses to describe the church in relation to God:* _____

2. *In verse 16 God says of Christians, “I will be their God, and they shall be My people.” Christians are possessed by God. What obligations do the people of God have because of this special relationship to God? (Hint: Notice the “therefore” in v. 17.)* _____

3. *Whose character are the people of God to represent? What does this say about our desire to be autonomous? ?* _____

4. *Have you ever thought about how becoming a Christian means becoming part of a new people, the people of God? In light of the two passages we've discussed, how should this truth change?*
 - a) Your relationship to other Christians? _____
 - b) Your relationship to non-Christians? _____
5. *If we better grasped this idea of being "a people," how would that affect our interactions in the local church? ?* _____

Once we grasp the fact that, as a church, we are the people of God, both an encouragement and a challenge follow. The encouragement comes from knowing that we're God's treasured possession, the people He has specially loved and called to Himself (Ex. 19:5; Rom. 1:6; 1 Pet. 2:9). This is not because of any goodness in us, but because of His sheer grace (Deut. 7:7-8; 2 Tim. 1:9). Further, it means that God is committed to being our God. He will be with us in the present and will one day bring us to live in perfect, face-to-face fellowship with Himself (Matt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5; Rev. 21:3-4; 22:4).

On the other hand, the challenge of being the people of God comes from the fact that God calls us to submit, to obey, and to reflect His character to the world.

6. *What are some specific ways that being part of the people of God encourages you? Challenges you?* _____

7. *Think back to Alyssa from the beginning of the story. In view of the Bible's teaching that we as Christians are the people of God,²*
 - a) How would you personally counsel Alyssa about her relationship?
 - b) What should the church do about Alyssa's relationship?

² Adapted from Bobby Jamieson, *Built upon the Rock: The Church*, ed. Mark Dever, 9Marks Healthy Church Study Guides (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 16-18.