



Ecclesiology: The Study of the Church

Lesson 4: The Living Church

INTRODUCTION

1. What are indicators that a church is either dead or dying? _____

In some churches, there seems to be little expectation that people will actually grow in the knowledge of Christ, in obeying him, and in sharing the gospel with others. Instead, members' lives are on spiritual autopilot. Christianity is a social label rather than an active, vibrant faith.

Sadly, churches like this are all too common. But this kind of nominal, stagnant religion should not characterize a church. The New Testament presents the opposite picture.

MAIN IDEA

The church is a living organism composed of spiritually alive, growing Christians. Therefore, the members of local churches should expect, encourage, and equip other members to grow spiritually.

DIGGING IN

In order to understand the church's nature as a living, Spirit-filled organism, we need to understand the history of God's dealings with his people.

When God called Israel out of slavery in Egypt, he gave them his law. Yet for centuries, Israel disobeyed God's law by turning their backs on him and serving false gods. Eventually, God punished them by kicking them out of the land he had given them.

Jeremiah 31:31–34.

1. List the ways that this new covenant differs from the old one. _____

2. In Luke 22:20, Jesus explains that his sacrificial death brings this new covenant which Jeremiah spoke about into effect. The church, then, is the people of the new covenant. We are united to Christ by faith, we have our sins forgiven, we know the Lord, and we have God's law written on our hearts so that we can obey it by the power of God's Spirit.

- a) Given the realities of the new covenant, what’s wrong with saying that someone can be a Christian and never grow spiritually? _____

- b) Does this mean that every day of our Christian lives will be marked by dramatic and bold growth? Explain. _____

The New Testament passages on church discipline teach us to expect that not everyone who professes the name of Christ in the church is necessarily a Christian. At the same time, we see throughout the New Testament that the church is a living, growing body:

- In 1 Peter 2:5, Peter writes that “you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”
 - In Ephesians 4:16 Paul writes that “the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”
3. In these two passages, what expectation do Peter and Paul place on every member? _____

4. Do you notice anything else about the nature of this growth? Does it occur in isolation from other Christians? _____

We’ve seen that God’s new covenant creates a church composed of genuine, growing Christians. Now, we’re going to spend the rest of this study focusing on the picture of one living, growing church.

1 Thessalonians 1:2–10.

5. How did the Thessalonians respond when Paul preached the gospel to them (vv. 6, 9)? _____

6. Can you summarize the difference between a genuine Christian who hears the message of the gospel and the nominal Christian who hears it? (A nominal Christian is a Christian in name only.) _____

7. To whose power does Paul attribute their response to the gospel (vv. 5–6)? Why does this leave no room for boasting? _____

8. Paul observes that the Thessalonians’ received the gospel “in much affliction.” How does this testify to the genuineness of their faith (v. 6)? _____

9. What does the Thessalonians’ faith in Christ prompt them to do (vv. 3, 8–10)? _____

10. Suppose, looking at your own profession of faith, it looks like a nominal Christian’s. There’s a lack of conviction, a lack of joy, and a lack of turning from idols. What should you do? _____

We’ve seen in Jeremiah 31, Ephesians 4, and 1 Thessalonians 1 that Scripture teaches that churches are to be living bodies, filled with genuine, growing Christians. In view of this, we as church members should expect other church members to grow spiritually and should encourage them in that growth.

11. How should the expectation that members are growing spiritually shape:
 - The purpose of small group meetings? _____

 - What you do on Saturday nights in preparation for Sunday? _____

 - How the church’s elders or other leaders shepherd the church? _____

 - Conversations after church? _____

 - What the church’s life looks like throughout the week? How do these lessons about corporate growth together translate into the rest of the week? _____

12. What are some ways you can encourage spiritual growth in church members who are¹:

- Struggling financially? _____

- Busy and under pressure at work? _____

- Overwhelmed at home with young children? _____

- Physically ill? _____

- Dealing with the death of a loved one, such as a spouse or child? _____

- Gifted in their knowledge of and ability to teach the Bible? _____

¹ Bobby Jamieson, *Built upon the Rock: The Church*, ed. Mark Dever, 9Marks Healthy Church Study Guides (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 27–30.