

ESV Study Bible – Biblical Doctrine: An Overview

The Church

The church is the community of God's redeemed people—all who have truly trusted Christ alone for their salvation. It is created by the Holy Spirit to exalt Jesus Christ as Lord of all. Christ is the Head, Savior, Lord, and King of the church. The relationship between its members results from their common identity as brothers and sisters adopted into God's family. The identity of this family is grounded in Christ's person and work and therefore transcends any earthly distinctions of race, class, culture, gender, or nationality. True Christian fellowship is divinely brought about by God, for the purpose of displaying and advancing God's kingdom on earth. As Christians love one another and submit to the lordship of Christ, they show glimpses of heavenly realities that are to come.

There is ultimately only one church, the global community of believers on earth plus those already in glory. In this world, however, the one church takes the form of countless local churches, each of which must be viewed as a microcosm, outcropping, and sample of the larger whole. Jesus Christ's headship of the church that is his body is a relationship that applies both to the universal church and to each local church. Denominational identities are secondary to these primary and fundamental realities.

The Visible Church and the Invisible Church

Theologians sometimes distinguish between the "visible church" (the church as Christians on earth see it) and the "invisible church" (the church as God in heaven sees it). This distinction emphasizes two truths. First, only God, who reads hearts, knows the ultimate makeup of the "invisible church"—those whom he has called ("The Lord knows those who are his," 2 Tim. 2:19). Second, there are some within the "visible church" who are not genuine believers, though they may look as if they are (cf. Matt. 7:15–16; Acts 20:29–30; 1 John 2:19).

Images of the Church

The Bible explains the profound mystery of the church (Eph. 5:32) using varied images and illustrations. Among the most important are the church as the building, body, bride, and family of Christ.

The Building of Christ

Jesus Christ is building his church, and even the gates of hell will not defeat it (Matt. 16:18). He is the foundational cornerstone providing unyielding stability (Matt. 21:42 par.; Acts 4:11; Eph. 2:20; 1 Pet. 2:6–7), and he promises that he will complete the building he is making (Eph. 2:21–22). Therefore, even when the church appears weak, corrupt, and lost, there is always reason for deep confidence in its continued growth and enduring strength. God's people are "living stones" (1 Pet. 2:5) who have received their life from the Cornerstone, who is the giver of life. The building image is grounded in the temple imagery of the OT, as the place where God's presence and glory were most often seen. The church is now the place on earth where God primarily dwells and makes himself

known. This temple is not made with human hands but exists in the corporate life of those who have been transformed through faith in Christ. The presence and work of God in worship, the ministry of the Word, service to others, discipline, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and gospel proclamation are now the primary source of the presence and glory of God in the world: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple" (1 Cor. 3:16–17; cf. 2 Cor. 6:16; 1 Pet. 2:4–10). The church will last even beyond the time of Christ's return, and any predictions that warn of the demise of the church of Jesus Christ are greatly mistaken.

The Body of Christ

Christ is the head of the church, which is his body (Eph. 1:22–23; 4:15; 5:23). He has authority over his people and determines their direction and destiny. Each member of Christ's body serves an important and distinct role, and none have life, power, or ability of any kind apart from Christ (1 Corinthians 12).

The Bride of Christ

Christ saves and sanctifies his people through his sacrifice on the cross, which serves as the model of the relationship between a husband and wife (Eph. 5:25). Christ's self-sacrificial love for his bride continues as he feeds and cares for her; she who will one day be presented to him in spotless perfection (Eph. 5:29; Heb. 12:23). As the bride of Christ, the church should strive for undiluted devotion to Christ, who is her jealous husband (2 Cor. 11:2–4). God's people should be motivated by and longing for the great wedding banquet as they await the return of their Bridegroom (Rev. 19:7–9; 21:1–4).

The Family of God

God's adoption of lost and unworthy children of wrath into his family is a key aspect of his redeeming work (1 John 3:1–2). This adoption through new birth leads to astounding privileges that come with being fellow heirs with Christ. Those in God's family become full beneficiaries of all his promises to his children! As adopted children of God, believers are bound by a family relationship as brothers and sisters that is greater and more enduring than biological family ties (Mark 3:31–35; cf. Matt. 19:29 par.). Earnest brotherly love should characterize relationships within the church (Rom. 12:10; 1 Tim. 5:1–2; Heb. 13:1; 1 Pet. 1:22). Such love is one of the primary ways Christians know they have truly been saved by God: "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers" (1 John 3:14). All earthly obstacles to brotherly affection (e.g., differences in culture, race, income, personality, and nationality) are done away with when God adopts his people into his family (Gal. 3:28).

To love Christ means to love his church and seek to build it by word and deed. The sin and apathy often seen in the church may at times require strong criticism and be a cause for grief. But Christ shed his own blood to create the church (Acts 20:28), and the church is God's primary conduit of his grace and glory to the world. There should be no doubt that by the grace of God his community of unworthy redeemed sinners will be triumphant and beautiful one day. Meaningful local church involvement is not an optional spiritual discipline; it is the essential context within which believers are intended to find Christ and grow in him.