

A Survey of Church History
In
The Bible

Throughout the course of history God has worked in the world in a variety of ways through individuals, nations, and peoples. The focus of His present work is the church. That which was begun in the Scriptures, as men and women were called to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ, continues today in fulfillment of Christ's promise to build His Church. Not only is Christ building His Church, but it is the primary instrument through which He ministers in the world. As Christ was sent by the Father, so the church bears the ambassadorial role for its Lord as sent ones with a message of reconciliation to the world (John 20:21).¹

Before we get in to the study of Church History, I believe it is important that we have a biblical understanding of what the church is. The only way in which we can locate the church throughout history is by knowing its true marks. Throughout the course of history and even to the present there are many groups and sects, and cults that claim to be followers of Christ, and that they are genuine churches, but in all reality, they are illegitimate.

Therefore, the question is; who, and what is the church? In the book of Matthew 16:18, when the Lord says to Peter and the rest of the disciples, "*and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it*" what did he mean exactly? What is a church? How does Christ build it? When did he start building it? when will this building project be complete? How do we identify the construction sites of this project? These are all questions that must be answered before studying its history.

¹ Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1972) 7.

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- I. What does the word *Church* mean?
- a. The English word *church*, and the Scottish word *kirk*, and the German word *kirche* are derived from the Greek word *kuriako;n* (kuriakon), which is derived from the Greek word *kurioV* (kurios), meaning “belonging to the Lord.”²
 - i. Throughout history this term has been used to refer to different aspects of the church. (1) sometimes to the place of meeting, (2) a local organization of believers, (3) the universal body of believers, (4) a particular denomination, for example the Southern Baptist *Church*. (5) an organization of believers related to a particular area or nation, for example the *Church* of England.
 - b. The Greek term for the English word *Church* is *Ekkhhsia* (Ekklesia). The word is a compound word. It is made up of the prefix *ek* (ek), “out”, and the verb *kalew* (kaleo), “to call or summon”. They combine together to mean “to call out”.³
 - i. The term in secular Greek referred to an assembly of citizens who were summoned by a crier. It also had a very broad meaning, in that it referred to any assembly of people, regardless of its constituents (Acts 19:32, 41).
 - ii. In essence, this gives us a basic framework for understanding the biblical concept of the *church*. It is therefore, primarily a people who are being *called out of* and *separated from* unto God from the world’s system of unbelief, wicked practices and Satanic power and coming destruction; to be His people and to fulfill His purposes here on earth.⁴

² Ibid, 11. This word is used twice in the NT: in 1 Cor 11:20 it refers to the *Lord’s Supper*; in Rev 1:10 it refers to the *Lord’s Day*.

³ Ibid, 11.

⁴ It is critical to note that the New Testament Church is not the same as OT Israel. While there is continuity between Israel and the NT Church in general function and purpose, there is distinction in essence and form.

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II. The movement of the Church in the Bible

a. A mystery in the Old Testament

- It is important to note that the Church and Israel are separate entities. Many believe that the church existed in the OT on into the NT. However, it important that in studying this topic, we acknowledge both the *continuity* and *discontinuity* between Israel and the Church.
 - In the OT Yahweh calls out Israel to be His holy possession out of all the people in the earth (Ex 19:4-6; Deut 7:6-9)
 - Yet, while Yahweh left all the other nations, i.e. Gentiles in darkness and idolatry, He always had an eternal plan to save them as well (Gen 12:1-3; Isa 49:5-6; Gal 3:6-9).
 - This is also foreseen in books like Jonah, and Ruth, and other instances where Yahweh interacts with Gentiles directly in a salvific manner.

b. Christ Promises to build His Church

- During Christ's earthly ministry our Lord chose twelve apostles to be his followers (John 15:16; Matt 4:18-22; 9:9; 10:2-4). These apostles were not chosen on their own initiative nor were they chosen because of their prowess or high status. This was a motley group of fishermen and tax collectors and sinners from Galilee whom the Lord would save and transform from glory to glory and use as the foundation of His earthly work after His ascension. For three years these twelve apostles heard and saw and beheld the glory of Christ. They saw His passion on the cross, His death and His resurrected body and ascension (John 1:14; Acts 1:1-11; 1 John 1:1-2).

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- These apostles were given special divine revelation and understanding concerning the Father and the Son (Matt 11:16:17; John 17:8).
- While on earth the Lord made a grand and mega promise to His disciples in Matt 16:18, “I will build My *church*, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” There are two critical observations to made concerning this verse:
 - The Construction of the Church “*I will build my Church*”. The Greek word for build is the word *oikodomew* (oikodomeo). It is used throughout the NT to refer to building structures being erected.⁵ It connotes construction and building enterprises.
 - The Chief architect is Christ “*I will build*”. Christ is the one fashioning His church into the form which he desires. Therefore, when the Church is being spoken of as a construction project, it is passive⁶ (1 Peter 2:5; Eph 2:20).
 - Its membership/numerical growth (Acts 2:47)
 - Its leadership (Acts 1:15-26; 20:28; Eph 4:7-13; Pet 5:1-2)
 - The Chief owner is Christ “*my Church*”. Christ not only builds it, but he owns it.
 - Christ is its head (Eph 4:15-16; 5:23)
 - Christ is its Chief Shepherd (1 Pet 5:1-4)
 - Christ is its bridegroom (Eph 5:22-24-27)

⁵ It is also used figuratively in the spiritual realm to the process of edifying, encouraging and strengthening a fellow believer, e.g. 1 Thess 5:11. It is also used in the NT when referring to the building up oneself, e.g. Jude 20 (slightly different word, but same word group).

⁶ However, in Eph 4 it is used twice in verses 13 and 16 to speak of the internal growth and formation that takes place in the lives of believers as gifted men, appointed by God feed and equip the flock for the work of ministry and growth in discernment.

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- Christ is its sole purchaser (Acts 20:28)
- The Tenacity of the Church “*The gates of Hades will not prevail against it*”. The Lord makes it clear that this new entity that he is building will be unassailable. This is His sovereign work, His building project and therefore, it won't be thwarted. It will be strong and resilient not because of its constituents, but because the God of its constituents is a mighty fortress!
- The fact that our Lord makes this final statement concerning the tenacity of the Church, this suggests that she will be attacked. Her tenacity will be tested.
 - The word *Hades*, refers to the world of the dead. It could be referring to the *hell* itself. Thus, some versions translate it that way. But essentially this is referring to the power and fury of death, that enemy who entered the world through sin. thus, all the powers of darkness.
 - In the book of Rev 20:13-14; death and Hades are personified as coming under the judgment of God for their deeds. Satan also will be judged fully and finally by God for His deeds.
 - But Christ promises that nothing, not even all the powers and fury and rage of Satan and death and hell will snuff out the Church!

c. Christ ratifies the New Covenant

- i. His death* (Isa 53:4-6; Matt 26:26-30; 2 Cor 5:16-21; 1 John 2:2; Heb 10:11-14)
- ii. His resurrection* (Rom 1:1-4; 4:22-5:2)

d. Christ commissions the apostles

- i. (Matt 28:16-20; Luke 24:44-53; Acts 1:1-11)*

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e. Christ begins building the Church

➤ The book of Acts is critical in our study of Church History because this is where Church History begins. The book of Acts belongs with the Gospel of Luke. It is the second volume of Dr. Luke's compilation of the life and work of Christ. In it he records the founding and beginnings of the Christian Church. *In Acts, Luke conducts the reader on a whirlwind tour of three decades of church history. We visit Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, Syria, Cyprus, many cities in Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, and, finally, Rome.*⁷

i. *The Inauguration of the Church on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-47)*

ii. *The spreading of the Gospel (Jerusalem → Judea → Samaria → uttermost parts of the world)*

1. Establishing of Local New Testament churches

2. The Church as a New man is revealed

a. Acts 10-11; Eph 2:11-3:21 (Rom 1:5)

3. Canonization (apostolic writings)

4. Doctrinal succession

iii. *Death of the apostles*

⁷ D.A. Carson & Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: 2005), 285.