

The Church: In Service to Help Others



SABBATH—NOVEMBER 17

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Peter 2:9; Matthew 28:19, 20; John 17:21, 22; Acts 15:1–29.

MEMORY VERSE: “I hope I can come to you soon. But now I am writing these directions to you. Then if I have to put off my visit, you will know how you should act in God’s family. The family of God is the church of the living God. It is the pillar [main support] and foundation of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:14, 15, NlrV).

KEY (IMPORTANT) THOUGHT: “We should remember that the church may be weak and faulty. But it is the only thing on earth to which Christ gives His highest respect.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 2, page 396.

FOR MANY, CHURCH IS NOT THE SAME AS IT USED TO BE. Some people are even talking about “a churchless Christianity.” This is an idea that goes against Bible truth, which tells us to meet together often to worship God. Others complain about “organized religion.” (What is better, “disorganized religion”?) The Bible teaches clearly that church is important. It is not an option (choice). It is a very important part in the plan of salvation. No wonder, then, that the great controversy is going on. Satan works so hard against the church. This is because the church offers a very important way for sinners to be introduced to God’s plan of salvation. Paul writes that the church is “the house of God.” It is even “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15, NKJV). The church is not a human invention. It was created by God for the purpose of bringing sinners into a saving relationship with Him.

SUNDAY—NOVEMBER 18**NATURE (THE QUALITIES) OF THE CHURCH: PART 1 (Acts 7:38)**

Suppose we speak about the nature (what something is) of something. Then we are usually interested in how this something begins and works and why. Several images (pictures) usually are used to describe the church. But the Bible uses a special word for it, *ecclesia*. *Ecclesia* means “called out” or “called forth.” In the Greek world the word was used to describe a group of citizens who had been called out from their homes into a public place for a meeting. The New Testament uses this word in almost the same way.

In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint, the “congregation [church group]” of Israel meets together with the Lord for religious reasons. It is often called *ecclesia*.

The Jews were “called out” to be God’s special people. And the early Christians may have used the word for those Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) who, as receivers of God’s grace,¹ had been called out to be Christ’s witnesses. In the New Testament, the church (*ecclesia*) means the company (group) of faithful members the world over. The word *ecclesia* is never used when talking about a building where public worship is held. The word *synagogue* (Jewish house of worship) first meant a meeting of people gathered for a special reason. But the Christians used the word *ecclesia* instead. Both words show that the New Testament

church was a carryover from the Old Testament church, the “congregation” of Israel (Acts 7:38).

The word *ecclesia* means a group of people called together by God. How does this explain Paul’s use of the word in three ways: (1) the church in people’s homes (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19); (2) the church in certain cities (1 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:2); and (3) the church in larger geographical areas (Acts 9:31)?

Ecclesia means any group of people gathered together who share in a saving relationship with Christ. This means that smaller congregations are not just a part of the whole church. Each unit represents the whole. So, the church is one throughout the whole world. But at the same time it represents all smaller church groups too.



***Ecclesia* is any group of people gathered together who share in a saving relationship with Christ.**

1. grace—God’s gift of forgiveness and mercy He gives us to take away our sins.

Think about your local church, which is also a representative (something that stands for) of God's whole church. What kind of responsibilities does that put on you as a part of the church body and on the local church itself?

MONDAY—NOVEMBER 19

NATURE OF THE CHURCH: PART 2 (Deuteronomy 14:2)

Besides the word *ecclesia* itself, the New Testament describes the church with several word pictures that explain its nature and work. Today we will look at just two important ideas about the church: the church as the people of God and the church as the body (group) of Christ.

1. The concept (idea) of the “people” of God is used in the Bible to describe the children of Israel. Deuteronomy 14:2 actually says that the children of Israel “are a holy nation” (NIRV). Read 1 Peter 2:9, where similar words are used for Christians. How are we to understand what this means for us today?

Notice that the concept of “people” of God is used for Christians. But it is still used to describe the nation of Israel (Luke 1:68; Romans 11:1, 2). Clearly, the New Testament uses these words for the church in a way that shows how the original idea continues from the beginning to the end. (Read Galatians 3:29.)

2. “Body of Christ”: Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:27 (NIV); and Ephesians 1:22, 23 describe the church as the body of Christ. How do these verses help us to understand better the church's nature and work?

Many ideas can be found within these verses. Perhaps the clearest idea is the unity (oneness) (see Wednesday's daily study) that should be in the church. This is an idea used elsewhere in the New Testament, especially in 1 Corinthians 12. There Paul writes, “There is one body. But it has many parts. Even though it has many parts, they make up one body. It is the same with Christ. We are all baptized by one Holy Spirit into one body. It didn't [did not] matter whether we were Jews or Greeks, slaves or free people. We were all given the same Spirit to drink. The body is not made up of just one part. It has many parts. Suppose the foot says, ‘I am not a hand. So I don't [do not] belong to the body.’ It is still part of the body. And suppose the ear says, ‘I am not an eye. So I don't [do not] belong to the body.’ It is still part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, how could it hear? If the whole body were an ear, how could it smell?” (1 Corinthians 12:12–17, NIRV).

Some people suffer from what are known as autoimmune diseases. Their own immune system is supposed to protect the body, but it attacks the body instead. Think about what this comparison means for the church as “the body of

Christ.” What would happen to the body if individual believers began to “attack” one another? What is the only “cure” for this illness?

TUESDAY—NOVEMBER 20

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH (Matthew 28:19, 20)

The church is “the body of Christ.” This means that the church is to do “bodily [as a group]” what Christ would do if He were still on the earth. It is why the church as an “assembly [group]” has been called by God. The church does not simply have a mission. Instead, the church is mission.

Read Matthew 28:19, 20. How does it explain the church’s mission?

Mission involves sending people out to speak for God. It is what God Himself did with the prophets (special messengers) of Israel (Jeremiah 7:25) and with the apostles (teachers and leaders) (Luke 9:1, 2; Luke 10:1, 9). And Jesus sent out His disciples just as the Father sent Him (John 20:21). Today’s church still has the same responsibility to remain faithful to its calling (duty).

What do Ephesians 4:11–13; Matthew 10:5–8; James 1:27; Ephesians 1:6; and 1 Peter 2:9 teach us about the church’s mission?

Clearly, evangelism² is a very important part of the mission of the church. The main purpose of the church is to build up and encourage its believers for true worship and for social support.

The church faces many challenges. But one of the most difficult is to keep a proper balance in its understanding of mission. On one hand, it would be so easy to become too interested in solving social problems and in helping with people’s needs. That work is important. But we must never forget the most important mission of the church. This is to reach the lost for Jesus and to prepare people for Jesus’ second coming. At the same time, too, we need to avoid neglecting the basic tasks of daily life. We need God’s wisdom in knowing how to keep the right balance.

How involved are you in the mission of the church? In what way could you do more than you are doing? Why is it important for your own spiritual growth to be involved in the church’s calling (work)?



The most important mission of the church is to bring the lost sheep back to Jesus.

2. evangelism—the act of spreading the good news of Jesus to the world.

WEDNESDAY—NOVEMBER 21**UNITY (ONENESS) OF THE CHURCH (John 17:21, 22)**

The church is pictured as those who have been “called out” by God, the “people of God,” the “body of Christ” and the “temple of the Holy Spirit.” It is fitted (made ready for) for service or mission. Unity is very important to the church because without it the church cannot successfully finish its mission. No wonder the issue of unity was on Christ’s mind toward the close of his earthly life (John 17:21, 22)!

In John 17:21, 22, Jesus prays for the unity of the church. In Romans 15:5, Paul encourages the believers about unity too. How are we to understand unity as it is shown in these verses? What does this unity mean?



The church is pictured as the “temple of the Holy Spirit.”

Christ prays for unity within the church. Paul encourages the believers to have it. This kind of unity means a union (oneness) of feeling, thought, action, and much more. This is not possible for humans to achieve (do) on their own. Instead, it is a gift given to believers by Christ’s “living” in believers (John 17:22, 23), who are supported by the power of God the Father (John 17:11).

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10 and 2 Corinthians 13:11. How are we to have what Paul calls for in these verses?

There is no question that we are all different people. We have different opinions about many things. Sometimes these opinions can make unity difficult. Stresses and disagreements are unavoidable at every level of the church. But we all need to be humble and work together for the greater good of the church. So many of the quarrels arise because of selfishness and self-pride. None of us has it all right. None of us understands all things perfectly. Every day we all need to take up our crosses, die to self, seek not only our own good but the good of others and the good of the church as a whole. When we do, many of the problems will go away.

So unity begins with each one of us being a follower of Christ not just in name but in a life of true self-sacrifice. This is a life dedicated to a cause and a good greater than ourselves.



Every day we need to take up our crosses, die to self, and seek the good of others.

THURSDAY—NOVEMBER 22

GOVERNANCE (MANAGEMENT; CONTROL) OF THE CHURCH (Acts 15:1–29)

Governance means getting things done. This is true in general social life. It is also true in church life. Governance also involves organization. This means organizing things into a working group with laws and rules to make things work together smoothly. Leaders are also very important for governance. Who has authority to do things in the church? Who can receive orders to do things? Different answers to these questions have led to different kinds of church governance.

Seventh-day Adventists have a very good system of church governance. Leaders act only as representatives. They receive authority and responsibilities from the membership (group of members). But it is not enough to show

that a system of church governance is based on the Bible. Church leaders and those in authority must be very sensitive to instructions from the Bible too.

Look at Acts 15:1–29. What can we learn from these verses about some principles (important rules) of governing (managing) the church?

We can learn a lot from these verses about church governance. But one point should be clear: The goal of church organization is to spread the gospel. According to the Bible, the church's mission and evangelism depend on how good its governance is.

Christ uses His authority through His church and its chosen leaders. But we need to remember that He has never handed (given) over His power to them. He remains the Head of the church (Ephesians 1:22). The early church knew that it did not have any authority without Christ and His Word. In Acts 15:28, it was important to the group of believers that what they decided “seemed good to the Holy Spirit” (NKJV) and truly representative of (an example of) Christ. Holders of offices (leaders) in the church today cannot act differently.

Consider Matthew 20:24–28 and Matthew 23:8. What do these verses suggest about the use of authority in the church at all levels?

How willing are you to serve others? Think deeply about why you serve in the church. What are these

reasons? How can these reasons better follow the principles shown in the Word (Bible)?

FRIDAY—NOVEMBER 23

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Read Raoul Dederen, “The Church,” pages 538–581, in Raoul Dederen (editor), *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology [Study of God]*; Ellen G. White, “ ‘Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods Before Me,’ ” pages 361–364, in *Testimonies [Messages] to Ministers and Gospel Workers*; and “The Church the Light of the World,” pages 455–467, in *Testimonies for the Church*, volume 5.

“Suppose a man tries to use too much power or tries to control his brethren [brothers] because he feels that he has the authority to make his will the ruling power. Then it is best and safe to remove him. In this way great harm will not be done, and it may keep him from losing his own soul. And the souls of others will not be endangered. . . . This desire to rule over God’s people will lead to negative [bad] results. . . . A man’s position [amount of power; job] does not make him one bit greater in the sight of God. It is character [who a person is] alone that is most important to God.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, page 362.

“The mission of the church of Christ is to save dying sinners. Its work is to make known the love of God to men and to win them to Christ through that love. The truth for this time must be carried into the dark corners of the earth. And this work may begin at

home.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, volume 3, page 381.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

① There is no question that the church, our church, has problems. Jesus explained it as such: “Jesus told them another parable [short story with a spiritual lesson]: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed [planted] good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away’ ” (Matthew 13:24, 25, NIV). Read the rest of the parable. How do we make use of what Jesus said to our church? How do we deal with those who cause problems? Does this mean that there is no way to remove someone from church membership? Read, for example, Titus 3:10, 11 and Romans 16:17.

② What do you say to someone who believes that the church is impure and then he or she decides to pull away from the church group to worship alone?

③ Our church supports the idea of what has been called the “priesthood of all believers.” What does this idea mean? What responsibilities does this idea carry for us?

④ Discuss in class some of the dangers to our unity (oneness) as a church. What issues (problems) have caused the church to divide into groups in the past? What can we learn from the past that can help to prevent these things from happening in the future?