

## Church Fellowship, A Brief Overview

1. The word “**church.**” The word church may have come from two Greek words, *Kurios* (Lord) and *Oikia* (family), meaning *The Lord’s family*. It is widely used today to refer to: -
  - a. The visible church (all Christian Denominations);
  - b. A Church Denomination (Catholic, Anglican etc.);
  - c. A church building;
  - d. A church service; and
  - e. A local congregation;
  - f. The Invisible Church.

It is in the last two meanings that it is used in the Bible:- A local congregation (1 Cor 1:2); and the Invisible Church (Matt 16:18).

2. **THE INVISIBLE CHURCH** is the name given to the whole number of true believers as they are scattered throughout the world. Characteristics: -
  - a. It is holy, being composed only of true Christians (Eph 5:25-27);
  - b. Only God knows who they are, since membership is only by faith in the heart (2 Tim. 2:19; Luke 17:20,21);
  - c. It is only one body, not many and divided (Eph 4:3,4; Gal. 3:28; John 10:16);
  - d. It is found wherever God’s Word is proclaimed (Is. 55:10,11; cf. 1 Kings 19:8-18);
  - e. It can never be destroyed but will last until the last day (Matt. 16:18);
  - f. Its Head is Christ and its foundation is the Word of God (Col. 1:18; Eph. 2:20).
3. We also today refer to **THE VISIBLE CHURCH**. This is the name we give to all those who gather around the Word of God and profess the Christian Faith. The Visible Church is composed of two types of people: -
  - a. True Christians (who are also members of the Invisible Church); and
  - b. Hypocrites or sham Christians (Those who also claim to be Christians but really are unbelievers. They hide their unbelief by an outwardly good life).

See: -The parable of the dragnet (Matt. 13:47-48)  
-No wedding garment (Matt. 22:11-12)  
-Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11)  
-The tares amongst the wheat (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43).

These Christians and unbelievers are scattered right throughout all visible denominations and individual congregations. No congregation or denomination can claim, “We are the only saving church,” i.e. that only Christians belong to their church, and membership in their church is the only way to get to heaven. Such would be basing their hope of salvation on the good work of joining a visible church.

4. The **teachings of the Christian Faith** are of different types (1 Cor 3:10-15). There are: -
  - a. The Central Teaching of the Bible – that we are saved alone by faith without the works of man (Eph 2:8-9). Without this teaching no one can be saved. The devil wants to destroy this teaching, because all those who believe such false doctrine will be lost.
  - b. The Fundamental Teachings of the Bible – teachings on which the central teaching is based e.g. Jesus is true God; The Trinity; the Bible is without error; Sin and its consequences. If these teachings are denied, the central teaching of the Bible is overthrown and a person falls from the Christian faith (2 Tim 2:16-18).
  - c. Non-fundamental Teachings – those teachings which have no direct bearing on the central teaching of salvation e.g. the Angels, Marriage, Creation and Church Fellowship. Many pastors and churches falsely hold that you either need not teach them at all, or that you can teach about them what you like.
5. Since everything contained in the Bible is God’s Word, we are to hold fast not just to the fundamental teachings, but to all the teachings of God’s Word (Matt 28:20; Acts 20:27; Is 8:20; John 8:31-32). The Bible nowhere says that there are certain things God says that we are to

believe, and other things that we may ignore. Rather it teaches that we can know and hold fast to the whole truth of God's Word (Ps 119:105).

[Other passages: John 8:31-32; John 16:13; 1 John 2:21; 2 John 1:1,4; 3 John 4; John 4:24; John 14:16,17; 1 Cor 13:6; 2 Pet 1:12; 3 John 1:8; Prov 23:23. E.g. Paul 2 Cor 13:8; Gal 2:5; 1 Tim 2:7].

6. Not to believe and obey even the most insignificant teaching of the Bible, is to refuse to obey God Himself. This is called false doctrine (Matt 7:15-16). When Satan wants to destroy the teachings of a church, he often introduces false doctrine in the Non-fundamental Teachings of the Bible. It is here that the members of that church are often poorly indoctrinated. The Bible describes the progress of that false doctrine, that like a rot, a cancer, or a gangrene, it will spread throughout the other doctrines of that church (Gal 5:9; 2 Tim 2:17-18). Ultimately Satan wants to destroy the central teaching of the Bible so that souls will be destroyed.  
[Other passages: Matt 16:6,11; Matt 24:11; 1 Cor 3:12ff; Heb 10:26,27; Heb 12:25; Luke 12:47; John 8:47; James 5:19-20].
7. A church that teaches and practises all the doctrines of God's Word purely is known as an **Orthodox or Right-teaching church**. Since God has commanded Christians to hold fast to all the teachings of His Word, it is to an orthodox church that He has commanded Christians to belong (Matt 28:20; Acts 20:27; Is 8:20; John 8:31-32).  
[Other passages: 2nd Commandment; 1 Pet 4:11; 2 Thess 2:15; Jude 3; Acts 2:42; John 10:27-28; Deut 13:4; Matt 5:19; Titus 1:9; Josh 1:7-8; Eph 2:20; Rev 22:18-19; Acts 20:27; Jer 23:28].
8. A church that teaches and practises contrary to God's Word, even in one point of doctrine, is called a **Heterodox or False-teaching church**. Since God has commanded Christians to avoid false doctrine, that also involves them avoiding such false teaching churches (Rom 16:17-18; 2 Tim 2:17-18).  
[Other passages: 2 Thess 3:6; 1 Cor 5:11; Jer 23:31,32; Gal 1:9; 1 Tim 6:3-7; Matt 7:15-16; 2 John 10,11; Amos 3:3; Titus 3:10,11; 2 Pet 3:17; Col 2:8; Heb 13:9; Deut 13:15; Is 9:15-16; Jer 14:14; Jer 23:16; Matt 15:9; 2 Tim 4:3-4; Titus 1:10-11; 2 Thess 3:14; 1 Tim 5:22].
9. If we find ourselves in a church that teaches false doctrine, we are to admonish them. If they keep on teaching falsely, God commands us to leave that church since it is a heterodox church (Titus 3:10-11; Titus 3:10-11)
10. God has commanded for there to be unity in doctrine in a Christian Church (1 Cor 1:10). So also God has commanded the Christian to have Church Fellowship (to pray, worship, attend Communion) with those Christians who are of the same faith and teaching as themselves (Rom 15:5-6; Matt 18:19-20; Acts 1:14; Acts 2:42; Acts 4:24; 1 Cor 10:17-21; Ps 66:2; 1 Cor 14:15; Ps 71:22.). Unions between churches should only take place where there is complete agreement between the church bodies in doctrine and practice. To join a church implies that we are in agreement with the teachings that church holds to.  
[Other passages: Eph 4:3-6; Ps 119:105; Deut 27:10; John 2:5; 2 Cor 13:11; Phil 1:27; 4:2; 1 Pet 3:8].
11. Church fellowship with those who do not hold to all the teachings of God's Word is called **Unionism**. To have fellowship with someone who persistently holds to false doctrine is condoning their teaching (1 Tim 5:22). Many church unions and much church fellowship takes place today where there is no true unity in matters of God's Word. This is done on the basis of the principle: We agree, to disagree, agreeably (Open Questions theory). Such do not hold fast to God's Word in all points, and are not prepared to separate from false doctrine.
12. Obeying these commands is a difficult test of the Christian's faith. Many do not care whether they belong to a heterodox church or not because:-
  - a. They may be poorly instructed in the teachings of God's Word;

b. Their main loyalty may be to the organisation of their church rather than to God and His Word;

c. They may be influenced by family relationships whom they fear to offend (Matt 10:32-38). Ultimately the Christian will put His love for God and obedience to His Word first in these matters (Heb 10:26-27; Heb 12:25; Luke 12:47; John 8:47). We do recognise that there are many otherwise sincere Christians who nevertheless are a part of false teaching churches, and do not know and do not follow the Bible's teachings on church fellowship.

13. In an orthodox church there will never be complete harmony in doctrine and life. The devil will be constantly seeking to overthrow the faith of Christians through false doctrine and sinful life (1 Cor 1:11; 11:18-19; Phil 4:2; 2 Tim 2:20; 2 Pet 2:1).

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