



Church

Enjoying God's masterpiece

by Anne Woodcock

Church: Enjoying God's masterpiece
The Good Book Guide to the church
© The Good Book Company, 2021
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Published by:
The Good Book Company

thegoodbook.com | thegoodbook.co.uk
thegoodbook.com.au | thegoodbook.co.nz | thegoodbook.co.in

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ISBN: 9781784984199

Printed in Turkey



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Introduction: Good Book Guides

Every Bible-study group is different—yours may take place in a church building, in a home or in a cafe, on a train, over a leisurely mid-morning coffee or squashed into a 30-minute lunch break. Your group may include new Christians, mature Christians, non-Christians, moms and tots, students, businessmen or teens. That's why we've designed these *Good Book Guides* to be flexible for use in many different situations.

Our aim in each session is to uncover the meaning of a passage, and see how it fits into the “big picture” of the Bible. But that can never be the end. We also need to appropriately apply what we have discovered to our lives. Let's take a look at what is included:

- ☞ **Talkabout:** Most groups need to “break the ice” at the beginning of a session, and here's the question that will do that. It's designed to get people talking around a subject that will be covered in the course of the Bible study.
- ↓ **Investigate:** The Bible text for each session is broken up into manageable chunks, with questions that aim to help you understand what the passage is about. The **Leader's Guide** contains **guidance for questions**, and sometimes ☑ additional “follow-up” questions.
- 🗒️ **Explore more (optional):** These questions will help you connect what you have learned to other parts of the Bible, so you can begin to fit it all together like a jig-saw; or occasionally look at a part of the passage that's not dealt with in detail in the main study.
- ➡️ **Apply:** As you go through a Bible study, you'll keep coming across **apply** sections. These are questions to get the group discussing what the Bible teaching means in practice for you and your church. 🗒️ **Getting personal** is an opportunity for you to think, plan and pray about the changes that you personally may need to make as a result of what you have learned.
- ↑ **Pray:** We want to encourage prayer that is rooted in God's word—in line with his concerns, purposes and promises. So each session ends with an opportunity to review the truths and challenges highlighted by the Bible study, and turn them into prayers of request and thanksgiving.

The **Leader's Guide** and introduction provide historical background information, explanations of the Bible texts for each session, ideas for **optional extra** activities, and guidance on how best to help people uncover the truths of God's word.

Why study the church?

If you have never before investigated what the Bible tells us about the church of Jesus Christ, you are, I hope, in for a wonderful surprise. Few things present a more astonishing contrast than the way most people view church today and what the Bible tells us about the church. Even some who have followed Christ for years might be missing out on the whole breathtaking truth about the gathered people of God that we find in the pages of Scripture.

There are various reasons why this might be. Throughout church history, there have always been groups professing to follow Christ but who then stray from the central truths of Scripture. With Bible teaching illuminating our minds on this subject, we start to see that some organisations identifying as churches are anything but.

Then, of course, every church is peopled by sinners—those saved by Jesus, yes, but all still struggling with weakness and temptation, and who sometimes fail badly. So churches can at times be painful places, even for faithful and mature Christians. At other times church can just feel like a slog: a lot of hard work with very little reward. We might therefore be tempted to let our difficult experiences of church blind us to the promise of Jesus Christ: “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matthew 16:18).

If disappointment or difficulty with church affect you, or if you’re simply unsure of what the Bible says about church, here’s an opportunity to unearth these unimaginably wonderful truths about the people with whom you gather week by week. As you investigate seven key characteristics of the church of Christ set out in the New Testament, you’ll learn what God is doing in and through you together.

My prayer is that you will come to see your particular Christian fellowship—though weak, prone to error and unimpressive in worldly terms—as nothing less than part of the ultimate masterpiece of our loving heavenly Father. With that renewed understanding, you can grow in your enjoyment of what God, through his Son’s sacrifice of atonement and the power of the Spirit, is crafting in his church.



1

1 Peter 1:1-2, 2:9-10; Acts 2:42-47

GOD'S PEOPLE



talkabout

1. What comes to mind when you hear the word “church”?

In the Bible, the word “church” is used in two ways that overlap.

- All believers everywhere throughout history. We join the church in this sense when we are born again by the Holy Spirit and become a follower of Jesus. This total church cannot be seen now but will be revealed in the new creation.
- A local group of believers. We join the church in this sense when, having become a follower of Jesus, we commit ourselves to the community and activities of a local Christian gathering, and put ourselves under the teaching and pastoral care of the leaders there.



investigate: all believers everywhere

Read 1 Peter 1:1-2

It's evident from this greeting that Peter was writing to multiple churches in what is now modern-day Turkey—although his words here also apply to Christian readers throughout time (there are similarities with other New Testament letter greetings, such as 1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1; and James 1:1).

2. How does Peter describe the people he is writing to?

DICTIONARY

Apostle (v 1): one of a group of men chosen by Jesus to be the first leaders of the church (all his followers in all places).

Elect (v 1): people chosen by God and saved by him from their sin.

Sanctifying (v 2): making holy.

Sprinkled with [Jesus']

blood (v 2): cleansed from sin by Jesus' death.

- What's comforting and what's challenging about his description?

3. How does Peter's description contrast with commonly-held views in our culture today of what a church is?

▶ Read 1 Peter 2:9-10

Having contrasted those who reject Jesus Christ with those who trust in him (2:1-8), Peter launches into another description of all the followers of Jesus.

4. Peter previously described the followers of Jesus as "scattered". Here, how are we united? (Think about our identity and our role.)

5. Peter previously described the followers of Jesus as "exiles"—those who are homeless and seen as outsiders. Here, what shows our privileged status?



6. What do we learn here about...

- our relationship with God?

- our mission in this world?

- the contrast between our past and our present?



explore more

optional

God has always aimed to create a people that he calls his own. David wrote this song celebrating God's proactive love for his Old Testament people, Israel.

▶ Read Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35

As you answer the questions, note the similarity of relationship between God and his people in Psalm 68, and God and the church in 1 Peter.

Verses 1-3 sets out two groups. How are God's enemies described?

What marks out his people here?

In verses 4-6, what do we learn about God? What do we learn about his people?

From verses 7-10, list the things that God has done in history for his people. What have his people done?

In verses 32-35 David lists reasons to give God praise and glory. What do God's people contribute?



→ apply

7. As scattered exiles, the church is weak and out of place in society, and often without rights. But as God's chosen people and special possession, the church is also the astoundingly privileged royalty of the universe. What practical difference should both truths make in our attitude towards Christ's church?



getting personal

"Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise ... influential ... of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world ... the weak things ... the lowly things ... and the despised things ... so that no one may boast before him." (1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

Christians look weak and lowly in the eyes of the world. Are you able to accept that joyfully—or do you instinctively feel resistant to the idea? How does it help to remember that this displays God's power and wisdom, not ours?

↓ investigate: the first local church

▶ Read Acts 2:42-47

The word "church" is not mentioned in Acts until chapter 5, but as the Greek word itself simply means "gathering", there can be no doubt that here Luke is describing the first church ("together" appears three times).

8. What essential features of a local church are listed here?

DICTIONARY

Breaking of bread (v 42): eating together (Luke 24:30-31, 35); or celebrating the Lord's Supper together (Luke 22:19-20); or both (1 Corinthians 11:20-27).

9. How would this description of a church surprise people in your culture today, do you think?

➔ **apply**

10. Read through the features of the first church again. In what ways is your church like this one?

- In what ways is it different? Why, do you think?

11. How could you help your church to be as much like the first Jerusalem church as possible?





pray

Thank God that you and your church are part of his chosen people, his royal priesthood, his holy nation and his special possession.

Ask for his help to live in obedience to Jesus while you are scattered exiles in this world.

Pray for your church to become more and more like the first church, and for yourself to be more and more like those brothers and sisters in Jerusalem.

