

Christian Discipleship Guide



“And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, ‘All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen.’” (Matthew 28:18-20)

9. The Local Church

God established three major institutions on this earth: the Family, Civil Government and the Local Church. It is the local church that has been commissioned by God to carry out His purposes in reaching the lost and perfecting the saved. Therefore, God's plan for a Christian will always be fulfilled best when the believer is connected with the local church. The local Church should play a central role in the Christian's everyday life and should enable the Christian to develop special relationships with other Christians.

We need to understand that the Local Church *is not* a building. We worship God in spirit and truth (*John 4:24*). Our bodies are the temple of God (*1 Corinthians 6:19*).

The Local Church *is not* a denominational group of congregations.

A Local Church *is* a body of men and women who have been saved and called by God to serve in specific areas or ministries. "The Church" is the body of Christ, the saved multitudes from every nation. Paul, writing to saved people, stated clearly that, "Ye are the body of Christ," when he compared the Church body to the human body (*1 Corinthians 12:14-27*). He said that each member has a different function, no member can function alone, each member's contribution is important, and a properly functioning body operates as a single unit.

The first local church in the Bible was organized in Jerusalem (*Acts 2:41-47*). The believers there organized their church for the purposes of teaching the Word of God, having fellowship with other believers, participating in prayer, observing the two ordinances of the Church (Baptism and the Lord's Supper), being a living testimony of God's grace and power, providing mutual assistance and ministry, reaching out into the community, and glorifying and praising God. And, the single most important priority of the local church is to edify (build up, teach, strengthen) the saints (*Ephesians 4:11-16*).

So how do we function properly in the Church Body? During our Christian life, we should be maturing in three stages. First, like a child, we observe and learn. Our first priority should be to submit to the teachings of the Word of God and learn to be the man or woman God wants us to be (*2 Timothy 2:15*). Second, like a youth, over time, we will grow spiritually to the point where we can begin to serve and take on some of the church's basic functions through the already established ministries of our local church (*James 1:22-25*). Thirdly, like an adult, as our growth continues, we should reach the point where we can begin to minister to others in the same way we have been ministered to (*2 Timothy 2:2*). These three stages can be roughly compared to the stages of growth physically: child, youth, and adult. And, we need to be patient! This process takes time. We just need to be sure to remain faithful to God's Word and His established institution – the local church.

In today's society, there are many churches and denominations that claim to be true followers of Jesus and who claim to adhere to the Bible, but we need to have wisdom in finding a particular local church through which God wants us to serve Him. We have all heard of cults and "so called" Christian churches that actually prey upon unsuspecting people, cults such as the ones led by David Koresh (the Branch Davidians & Waco Massacre), Jim Jones (Peoples Temple & Jonestown Massacre), Tony Alamo (Arkansas cult leader), and others. So how does one discern which churches are really true to Jesus and the Bible?

One can determine if a church is true to Jesus and the Bible by carefully taking the following steps:

- Pray about it! Ask the Lord for wisdom to show you with which particular local church to associate (*James 1:5*).
- Ask the particular church to provide you with their “Articles of Faith” (for example, see “Appendix B. Articles of Faith”). If the church is not able or willing to provide you with a written statement of their beliefs, it is a good indication that they are not standing firm on the Bible or that they have something to hide about their true beliefs. Many churches are too willing to tell people what they want to hear, not what they need to hear. They want to make people feel good so they can grow their congregations, but they don’t tell people to repent of their sins or turn away from their sinful lifestyles. Some churches even go so far as to tell their congregations that there is no Hell and that everyone is going to Heaven, which is clearly contrary to what the Bible teaches.
- Observe the qualities of a particular church and compare them with the biblical requirements of a proper church, including the following:
 - Do they believe and teach the Bible as the Word of God and the infallible guide for life (*Titus 1:9*)?
 - Is the membership encouraged to read and study the Bible as much as the leadership does (*Acts 17:10-12*)?
 - Is there evidence of soul winning (*Matthew 7:20; Acts 2:47*)?
 - Do they minister to the needs of people and help other members of the body (*Acts 6:1*)?
 - Do they send out and support missionaries (*Acts 13:1-3*)?

Now let’s look at how we are related to other Christians. They are our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. We need to understand that only those in Jesus Christ (saved people) are our brothers and sisters, regardless of any other factors. Likewise, those who are not in Jesus Christ (unsaved people) are not our brothers and sisters regardless of any other factors (*Romans 8:29; 1 John 3:1-3; Romans 9:8; Hebrews 2:9-12*). Also, other Christians are our fellow laborers in service for Jesus Christ (*1 Corinthians 3:5-10; Psalm 119:165*).

As Christians, we have responsibilities to other Christians. We should pray for each other. Almost every one of Paul’s letters opens with a prayer for those to whom he is writing (for example, see *1 Thessalonians 1:2-3; 2 Timothy 1:3*). We are to minister to each other physically, including those in our local church family, as well as for the entire body of Christ in other areas of the world (*Galatians 6:10; Romans 12:13; Acts 11:27-30*). We are also to minister spiritually (*Galatians 6:1-2; Romans 15:1-2; Hebrews 13:3*). We are to encourage and edify one another (*1 Thessalonians 5:11*). And, we are to serve one another (*Philippians 2:3-4; Matthew 20:25-28*). Our primary attitude toward other Christians should be to love them (*1 John 3:14-16; 1 Peter*

4:8). We should also be patient with them (*Romans 15:5-7*), be sensitive to their needs (*1 John 3:17-18; James 2:15-16*), and be forgiving of each other (*Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13*).

“Fellowship” is a term commonly used by Christians, generally referring to getting together for activities or times of sharing common interests. However this is only a small part of true fellowship. It is true that to fellowship is to share things, but true biblical fellowship goes far beyond just a meal or an activity. It is the sharing of life through the person of the Lord Jesus Christ with other believers. The essential elements of true biblical fellowship are not physical matters, such as social status, friendship, common interests, etc.; they are spiritual requirements of personal character that include Humility (*Philippians 2:3-8*), Honesty (*Ephesians 4:25; 2 Corinthians 4:2*), Love (*John 13:35; Galatians 5:13-15*), and Hospitality (*Titus 1:8; Acts 2:42; Acts 2:46-47*). The areas of true fellowship include Prayer (*2 Corinthians 1:11*), Faith (*Romans 1:12*), Ministry (*2 Corinthians 8:4; Galatians 2:9*), and Suffering (*Philippians 3:10; 1 Peter 4:13; 1 Peter 5:1*).

Although doctrinal beliefs are vitally important, true biblical fellowship is not based on exact doctrinal agreement, but in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. We must learn to have fellowship with Jesus personally before our fellowship with other believers will be proper (*1 John 1:3-7*).

Unfortunately, at one point or another and because we are human and have a fallen human nature, another Christian may offend us. This might happen as we spend time with our brothers and sisters in Christ. There might be times of offense, hurt, or disagreement within the body of Christ, just as in our physical family. If and when this happens, the Bible gives a definite progression of principles to guide us in dealing with the matter:

First, we are to take the offense directly to the other party, privately, and try to settle it between ourselves (*Matthew 18:15*).

Second, if the matter is not resolved privately, we are to take it to a leader in our church to attempt to mediate the situation (*Matthew 18:16; 1 Corinthians 6:1-5*).

Third, we are **not** to go to the unsaved (that is, lawyers or public courts) to settle a problem within the body of Christ (*1 Corinthians 6:6*).

Fourth, if the matter still cannot be resolved, we are to personally accept the wrong (*1 Corinthians 6:7-9*), commit the situation to the Lord Jesus Christ who will handle it justly (*1 Peter 2:19-23*), forgive our brother or sister (*Colossians 3:13*), and pray for our brother or sister (*Matthew 5:43-48; Romans 12:14*).

Questions:

1. List some things that a church is not.

2. Define the following terms:

(1) Local church ---

(2) "The Church" ---

3. What is the most important priority of a local church?

4. When a Christian is looking for a local church in which to serve, what are some qualities for which he or she should be checking?

(1) _____

(2) _____

(3) _____

(4) _____

(5)

Additional Scripture Verses:

Matthew 18:15-17; Luke 17:1; Romans 16:17; Galatians 6:1-5; Ephesians 4:11-12; Ephesians 4:32; 1 Corinthians 12:27; 1 John 1:7.