VIBRANT CHURCH

BECOMING A HEALTHY CHURCH IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND LEADER GUIDE BY ART CRISCOE

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INTRODUCTION

“Now to Him who is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think—according to the power that works in you—to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

Ephesians 3:20-21

MEET MARK AND JIM

When Mark Ryder asked his coworker, Jim Tracy, to visit his church, he never expected to get a positive response. But much to Mark’s surprise, Jim enthusiastically accepted. “I’ve been thinking about visiting a church anyway,” Jim commented. “I guess I would feel more comfortable attending with you.”

The two men decided to have lunch together after the church service the next Sunday. When the entrée was served, Mark eagerly asked his friend about his experience. “You know,” Jim said as he began to cut his grilled chicken, “I liked your church. It reminded me how much I have missed in the past few years.”

Jim then shared with Mark that he became a Christian as a teenager but dropped out of church when he went to college. “I’m getting married in four months,” Jim said. “My fiancé is a committed Christian, and she wants us to start our marriage right by getting connected with a church. I will probably do that, but I still have questions about the church—any church. Do I really need to belong to a church to be a good Christian? Why can’t I practice my faith without attending church? What does the church really do anyway? What is the purpose of the church? Does the church really matter today?”

Jim looked at Mark’s wide eyes and knew that his rapid-fire questions had caught his friend off guard. But Jim’s questions about the church were good. Look at them again.

In this book we will follow Mark and Jim’s attempt to understand what a church is. In doing so, we will try to answer tough questions about the church and identify factors that make a church healthy. We have used the title Vibrant Church to capture the essence of a healthy church. We hope by the time you finish this book, you will have a better grasp of this commonly misunderstood entity called the church.
**INTRODUCTION**

Starting Points

*Vibrant Church* is a study of one of the most important doctrines of the Bible and one of the most crucial topics in Christianity today: the doctrine of ecclesiology, or the study of church. The nature of a biblical, New Testament church is a discussion that devoted followers of the Lord Jesus cannot ignore. After all, Christ said in Matthew 16:18, “I will build My church and the forces of Hades will not overpower it,” and Paul reminded us in Acts 20:28 that the body of believers is “the church of God, which He purchased with His own blood.” Obviously, the church is important to the Lord. Therefore, it must be important to us as well.

The doctrine of the church is a hot topic in our own day, especially the question of what characterizes a healthy or vibrant church. Put this question on the table, and you may get as many answers as there are participants in the debate! In this book our goal is to be rigorously biblical while at the same time being relevant and practical. We will attempt to present sound theology in a way that is easy to understand, and then we will provide some insights and suggestions for how we can be the church of the Lord Jesus Christ in a 21st-century context.

In the previous paragraph find the synonym for vibrant. Write that word in the following sentence.

A vibrant church is a _____________________________ church.

This doctrinal study will help you understand what the Bible teaches about a healthy church.

On one hand, it is interesting to note that in a real sense, the 21st century is much like the 1st century in terms of religious pluralism and spirituality. This is just one reason a faithful theology of the church must be grounded in Scripture.

On the other hand, the 21st century is utterly unique. We are a global village that is driven by international posturing, political turmoil, and technological advances. We can hardly keep up with all the changes that are taking place. However, we *must* keep up if we are to engage our world effectively with the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ. We will have to stand on certain nonnegotiable, bedrock principles if we are to be true to Christ. At the same time, we must be in touch with diverse cultures and
sensitive to our particular context if we are to share the good news of the gospel in a way that modern people can understand and embrace.

**ANSWERING JIM’S QUESTIONS**

Jim had some very good questions. We will attempt to answer his questions and others in this book.

*Turn back to page 6 and underline the five questions Jim asked. Think about how you would answer them.*

Our study will be divided into six chapters that address six questions related to the doctrine of the church. We pray that the answers we provide will promote a healthy, vibrant church life. These six chapters are as follows.

1. **Just What Is the Church Anyway?** In this opening chapter we will look at the basic nature and essence of the church. In doing so, we will examine some New Testament images that will help us understand what the church is supposed to be.

2. **Is My Church Acting like the Church?** Combining biblical theology and historical church practice, we will examine the essential marks of a New Testament church, such as a regenerate membership and observance of the ordinances.

3. **How Does a Vibrant Church Make Decisions?** This chapter will be a must-read for those who are interested in the elder-versus-nonelder debate. But we will focus primarily on organizational issues for church health that are biblically grounded.

4. **Does My Church Have to Practice Church Discipline?** This is an often-avoided topic but one the church can no longer afford to neglect. Just what does the Bible say about this issue?

5. **How Does a Vibrant Church Carry Out Its Main Purposes?** Here we will survey Scripture for essential patterns and practices. Special attention will be given to the way we preach and teach the Bible. We will also consider the concept that a church must have clear purposes. Are they biblical or just pragmatic?

6. **What Should a Vibrant Church Look like in the 21st Century?** In the final chapter we will focus on essential characteristics of a New Testament church. Finally, as Mark and Jim draw some conclusions for the church today, we will help you apply what you have learned to your own church.
Jim’s questions motivated Mark to begin a serious study of the church for himself. And much to Mark’s surprise, Jim asked to join him in this study. We will listen to the fascinating conversations between these two men. They will ask many questions about the role of the church today. These are serious questions for serious times.

Here are four suggested goals for your study of this book.
1. You will understand the nature of the church and its distinctive characteristics, along with how it is organized and how it carries out its mission.
2. You will be able to identify the blessings and benefits of church membership.
3. You will gain a deeper appreciation and love for the church.
4. You will strengthen your commitment to the church.

Each chapter suggests a Scripture passage for you to memorize that supports the topic of study. Take time to do this. Read the passage over and over and say it aloud until you can quote it from memory. Write the Scripture on a card and carry it with you to review throughout the week. When you hide God’s Word in your heart, it can never be taken from you. Memorizing Scripture follows the practice of God’s people in the Old Testament and the early Christians in the New Testament.

Study with an open Bible. Take time to read the Scripture passages referred to. Pattern your study after the Beroeans of long ago, who “welcomed the message with eagerness and examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11).

Make prayer an integral part of your study. Jesus said, “When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). The Holy Spirit, who lives within you, will open your heart to God’s truth. Ask God to help you apply to your daily life what you learn.

We pray that God will be glorified in this study and that He will use it to strengthen, energize, and equip God’s people to be the church in the 21st century. We pray that your church can be a vibrant church, not just another institution going through the motions. The need is great, but our God is greater! Let’s be the church and storm the gates of Hades together for the honor of our Head, the Lord Jesus Christ.
JUST WHAT IS THE CHURCH ANYWAY?

Learning Goal
After studying this chapter, you will understand the meaning, essence, and nature of the church.

Memory Verse
“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of the One who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9).
What began as a series of questions over lunch became a serious quest for Mark and Jim. They were determined to find out whether people attend church from habit and tradition or from genuine commitment. They agreed to begin studying to answer the basic question “Just what is the church anyway?”

“I have to admit that I’m a skeptic,” Jim shared with Mark. “I’ve been out of church for so many years that I really wonder whether I’m missing anything.”

Mark listened to his unchurched friend and responded carefully: “Jim, I think your doubts about the local church are based on your observations of weak or unbiblical churches. In our first study let’s see what the Bible says about the church. Then we can compare our information to what we see in churches today.”

“OK. Maybe it would help me to know what church means to you,” Jim responded.

“You can probably remember from when we were kids in church that the common definition for church was a group of baptized believers,” Mark began. “That was one way of saying that the church is not the building but the people who meet there. But even that definition is more complex than it appears on the surface. It seems to suggest that all believers are baptized—something we’ll talk about later. And it seems to imply that all baptized believers are active in a local church. That hasn’t applied to you in recent years, and it doesn’t apply to a lot of people these days—another topic we’ll deal with later. But it does show us that simple definitions from our past don’t explain everything today. Let’s see what we can learn about what God intended the church to be.”

And so the first week of the search for the vibrant church began.
Some people think of church only as a building—the place they pass on their way to work. Some people think of it as an activity—what their neighbors do on Sunday. Others think of church as a denomination: “My grandmother is a member of the Methodist Church.” Some people think of it as a religion that is theirs by birth. Just as they were born in Northern Ireland and are therefore Irish, they are Catholic by birth as well.

Multiple usages of the term church abound, and yet there is a lack of clarity at a more basic level—a lack of understanding about the essence and nature of the church. Millard Erickson helps us understand the problem we face: “[God] is no longer viewed as relating to the world only through the agency of his supernatural institution, the church, but also dynamically relating to the world through many avenues or institutions. The emphasis is on what God is doing, not on what he is like. Consequently, more attention is given to the mission of the church than to its identity.”¹ This is especially true in America.

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BASIC MEANINGS OF CHURCH

In attempting to define church, you can expect a variety of different answers.

How would you define church?

---

Some people think of church only as a building.

Briefly describe two of your earliest memories of church.

1. _______________________________________________________

   _______________________________________________________

2. _______________________________________________________

   _______________________________________________________

---

¹ Millard Erickson, Church, vol. 1, pp. 431–32.
Erickson is correct. We first need to understand what it means to be the church and then focus on what it means to do church. We believe the issue is urgent if the church is going to fulfill the mission to which God has called it. Let’s start by getting a handle on the terminology. Then we’ll look at the New Testament church and finally at what the church is and is not as we define it today.

**THE ENGLISH TERM CHURCH**

The word *church*, along with the Scottish word *kirk* and the German *kirche*, is derived from the Greek *kuriakon*, which means *belonging to the Lord*. *Kuriakon* occurs only twice in the New Testament, neither time with reference to the church as commonly used today. In 1 Corinthians 11:20 the word refers to the Lord’s Supper and in Revelation 1:10 to the Lord’s Day. Its application to the church stems from its use by early Christians for the place where they met together, denoting it as a place belonging to God. The term was applied to the assembly itself. The church was not a building but a meeting or gathering of God’s people in an open, visible assembly.

Every time I see or hear the word *church*, I think of the descriptive phrase *belonging to the Lord*. This wonderful phrase reminds us that God loves us and provides for us. We are His, and He is ours.

*Spend a few minutes thinking not just about your church as belonging to the Lord but also about your life as belonging to the Lord. Answer the following questions.*

- Does my life truly belong to the Lord?  
  - Yes  
  - No
- Do other people know that I belong to the Lord?  
  - Yes  
  - No
- Does belonging to the Lord make a difference in my life?  
  - Yes  
  - No
- Does my marriage belong to the Lord?  
  - Yes  
  - No
- Does my family belong to the Lord?  
  - Yes  
  - No
- Does my health belong to the Lord?  
  - Yes  
  - No
Do my possessions belong to the Lord?
   ○ Yes   ○ No

Does my money belong to the Lord?
   ○ Yes   ○ No

Does my work, my career, belong to the Lord?
   ○ Yes   ○ No

Does my time belong to the Lord?
   ○ Yes   ○ No

Do my hobbies belong to the Lord?
   ○ Yes   ○ No

Select one area of your life from the questions above. Describe one thing you can do to devote that area more fully to the Lord.

_________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________

BIBLICAL TERMS FOR CHURCH

The church is clearly a New Testament concept, but a look at the ways God related to His people in the Old Testament can give depth to our understanding of the New Testament church.

God’s eternal plan has always been to display His glory through a particular group of people. In Exodus 19 God chose Israel to be His people, to carry His name: “In the third month, on the same day of the month that the Israelites had left the land of Egypt, they entered the Wilderness of Sinai. … Moses went up the mountain to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain: ‘This is what you must say to the house of Jacob, and explain to the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Me. Now if you will listen to Me and carefully keep My covenant, you will be My own possession out of all the peoples, although all the earth is Mine, and you will be My kingdom of priests and My holy nation’ ” (vv. 1,3-6).
Just what is the church anyway?

Identify three terms God in the previous passage that God used to describe the Israelites.

1. _________________________________________________________

2. _________________________________________________________

3. _________________________________________________________

The Old Testament identifies the people of God with specific terms. The Hebrew word qahal is defined as an assembly, a congregation, or a convocation (see Gen. 35:11, 49:6; Num. 22:4; Ezra 10:12; Ps. 89:6; Prov. 5:14; Jer. 31:8; Mic. 2:5). A second word, edâh, means a congregation, a company assembled together by appointment, or acting concertedly. John Hammett points out the distinction between the two terms: “Qahal embraces only those who have heard the call and are following it. Edâh, on the other hand, is the permanent community into which one was born.” Although these terms predate the church, they point to the existence of a people whom God called together for His purposes.

The church was born on the day of Pentecost (see Acts 2). In the New Testament the Greek word for church is ekklesia. It is derived from the verb ekkaleo, a compound of ek, meaning out, and kaleo, to call. Often the meaning is used to support the biblical doctrine of the church as a people called out by God and separated from the world. Though this is theologically true, the usage of the term in the secular Greek language does not support this meaning. Ekklesia “came to stand for any assembly, regardless of its constituents or manner of convening. This broad use is evident even in the New Testament where a confused mob which had rushed into the theater at Ephesus is twice called an ekklesia (Acts 19:32,41), and in the same context the term is used for ‘a lawful assembly’ (v. 39).” In secular Greek ekklesia referred only to the assembly or meeting and never to the people who composed that assembly. When the people were not assembled, they were not considered an ekklesia. A new ekklesia came to be each time the people assembled. So while today we think of ekklesia as referring specifically to the New Testament church, at that time the word had more than one meaning. Just as person-on-the-street interviews today asking people to define the word church would not
yield uniform answers, the same confusion may well have existed when a New Testament believer used the word *ekklesia*.

**The church was born (check the correct response)—**
- ○ with the people Israel in the Old Testament;
- ○ during the ministry of John the Baptist;
- ○ on the day of Pentecost;
- ○ during the ministry of Paul.

“There are 114 occurrences of *ekklesia* in the New Testament. Five of these have no reference to the New Testament church, leaving 109 that are so related. …The word does not occur in the Gospels except for three references in Matthew 16:18; 18:17. It is also absent from 2 Timothy, Titus, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, and Jude.”

As we read the New Testament, we discover “a development of the term *ekklesia* from the simple non-technical meaning of assembly to the full technical designation for the Christian people of God.” A survey of the New Testament reveals four clear uses of the term *ekklesia* to refer to a church or churches.

As you continue reading, underline the description of church in each of the following uses.

**The local church.** Most often, the word *ekklesia* designates a specific gathering of believers in a definite locality. This is the term’s primary usage in the New Testament.

**A house church.** In some cases the word denotes what may be called a domestic *ekklesia*, the church in the house of an individual (see Philem. 2). The early church often met in homes.

**A collection of churches.** Here the term refers to the churches of a region, for example, Judea, Galilee, and Samaria (see Acts 9:31). This use is very rare.

**The universal church.** In some instances the word denotes the whole body of Christ, all believers throughout the world, those who outwardly profess Christ and organize for purposes of worship under the guidance of appointed officers. This emphasis is found in the Books of Ephesians and Colossians. In Ephesians 1:22-23 the church is referred to as Christ’s body. The character of this group is 100 percent regenerate. It includes every
believer in every place on earth as well as those who are in heaven (see Heb. 12:23). Here the church constitutes the redeemed of all the ages.

The universal church is sometimes referred to as the invisible church. However, the New Testament never speaks of an invisible church. Members of a local church are real, visible people; and so are members of the universal church. Saucy notes, “Even this invisible membership is very visible in the reality of life. As for membership in an invisible church without fellowship with any local assembly, this concept is never contemplated in the New Testament. The universal church was the universal fellowship of believers who met visibly in local assemblies.” The one universal church may be manifested in a particular place; “yet each individual assembly is the church in that place.”

Define each term in your own words.

Local church: ______________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

House church: ______________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

Collection of churches: ______________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

Universal church: ______________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________
Read each Scripture reference and match it with the correct term for church.

___ 1. 1 Corinthians 1:1-3  a. Local church  
___ 2. Ephesians 5:27  
___ 3. Colossians 4:15  b. House church  
___ 5. 1 Corinthians 16:19b  c. Collection of churches  

Answers: 1. a, 2. d, 3. b, 4. c, 5. b, 6. a, 7. a

CORRECTIVES IN DEFINING CHURCH

Robert Saucy notes that the word church “has extended to various contemporary uses: (1) a place of meeting, (2) a local organization of believers, (3) the universal body of believers, (4) a particular denomination, for example, the Lutheran Church, and (5) an organization of believers related to a particular area or nation, for example, the Church of England.” Unfortunately, not all of these uses have a biblical basis.

The church is not a building. Nowhere in the New Testament does the word ekklesia refer to a building. The ekklesia of the New Testament is never a structure composed of stones and lime or bricks and mortar. A statement such as “I pass by the church every day on my way to work” would have made no sense to the writers of the New Testament. The church is the body of believers in Jesus wherever they meet for worship, witness, and work. In the early days gatherings were small; and believers, as previously mentioned, often met in homes (see Rom. 16:5; Col. 4:15; Philem. 2).

The church is not a state church. When a nation has a state church, all citizens are by birth members of the church as long as they do not explicitly leave it. Constantine formed the first state church in A.D. 313 by making Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. During the Reformation Martin Luther rebelled against the official state church, the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, the church he established, the Lutheran Church, later became the state church of Germany. Some countries still have state religions today, such as Norway, which has Lutheranism as its state church, and England, which has the Anglican Church.
The concept of a state church is completely foreign to the New Testament. Such an institution severely compromises voluntary, responsible commitment by individuals to a local body of believers; and the result is an unregenerate membership—baptized heathens.

**The church is not a denomination.** The New Testament describes no organization on a broader level than the local church. Scripture does not explicitly command local churches of an area to form a union, nor does it furnish us with an example of such a union. However, Acts 15 records evidence of Paul’s relief collection for the church in Jerusalem (see 2 Cor. 8–9). This example supports voluntary cooperation, mutual interaction, and encouragement for more effective ministry and missions among groups of local churches.

This biblical principle undergirds our efforts as Southern Baptists. We cooperate for more effective ministry to meet human needs. Baptist churches are autonomous, or independent; they can choose to join with other churches on the associational, state, or national level for ministry and missions efforts; but each local church is free to make this choice. These voluntary organizations of churches may contribute funds to do together what one church cannot do on its own, but no regional or national organization dictates the governance or financial control of a local church. However, an organization of churches can make the decision to admit a church or to refuse to allow a church to affiliate with the organization if the church is deemed to be out of step with biblical theology or practice.

**Check each statement that reflects the primary meaning of church in the New Testament.**

- 1. She belongs to the Methodist Church.
- 2. Our church increased its missions giving.
- 3. Lutheranism is the state church in Norway.
- 4. The church is located at Broadway and Vine.
- 5. The church voted to build a new educational building.
- 6. Our church has a strong evangelistic ministry.
- 7. The church in South Korea is strong.
BIBLICAL IMAGES OF THE CHURCH

Biblical images can teach us much about the essence and nature of the church. John Hammett believes it can be argued that “this is the primary means by which we are instructed.” We will highlight three prominent New Testament images of the church.

THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Is there continuity between the nation of Israel and the church? In 1 Peter 2:9 the church is called “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His possession.” This language recalls descriptions of Israel in Exodus 19:5–6; Deuteronomy 4:20; 7:6; Hosea 1:10; 2:23; and other places throughout the Old Testament where God calls Israel “My people.”

In Exodus 19 God first called the nation of Israel to be His chosen people: “If you will listen to Me and carefully keep My covenant, you will be My own possession out of all the peoples, although all the earth is Mine, and you will be My kingdom of priests and My holy nation” (vv. 5–6). Continuity is further suggested in the biblical promise “I will be their God, and they will be My people” (Jer. 31:33). However, only after Pentecost (see Acts 2) were God’s people called the church. The indwelling Holy Spirit (see John 14:15–17) made this people different in some sense from the Old Testament people of God. Jesus’ death and resurrection and the Spirit’s coming at Pentecost inaugurated a new day for the people of God.

Hammett summarizes insight provided by the image “people of God”:

1. It gives the church a connection to the redeemed in the Old Testament and God’s great purpose of calling a people to Himself.
2. It underscores the nature of the church as called; it is called by God to be His people. God took the initiative in calling a people to Himself.
3. The church is a people, not a collection of isolated individuals.
4. The church is God’s people, not a human institution.
   • As God’s people, the church is called to be holy and loving.
   • As God the Father’s people, the church is a family.
• As God the Son’s people, the church is composed of those who believe in Christ.
• As God the Spirit’s people, the church is those who experience His indwelling and fellowship.10

“The people of God” is a powerful image of who the church is. We are people who belong to the Lord God Himself.

List the four terms for church in 1 Peter 2:9 (margin, p. 20).

1. ____________________________________________
2. ____________________________________________
3. ____________________________________________
4. ____________________________________________

THE BODY OF CHRIST
This image appears in four of Paul’s letters—Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, and Colossians. In Romans and 1 Corinthians the body of Christ is an image for the local church. The emphasis is on the relationships that members of the body have with one another (see 1 Cor. 12:27). The local church is regarded as the body of Christ in a particular place.

Unity in the body. The body image in Romans and 1 Corinthians highlights unity, the common experience of baptism by or in the one Spirit (see 1 Cor. 12:13). It also emphasizes unity in diversity (see Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:14-20). Paul reminded the Romans that it is only “in Christ” that we are “individually members of one another” (Rom. 12:5). The supernatural power of a shared life in Christ and a common reception of the Spirit are required to overcome the divisions of Greek and Jew, slave and free, male and female. There can be diversity of race and sex and social status, diversity in function and gift; but there is one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith (see Eph. 4:4-5).

Mutuality in the body. The body metaphor also teaches mutuality of love and care for all within the body. Romans 12:5 says that in Christ we are “individually members of one another.” First Corinthians 12 shows

“We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”
1 Corinthians 12:13

“As we have many parts in one body, and all the parts do not have the same function, in the same way we who are many are one body in Christ and individually members of one another.”
Romans 12:4-5
that each part of the body needs every other part, pointing out that God desires all members of the body to “have the same concern for each other” (v. 25). Mutuality is also reflected in more than 30 “one another” passages in the New Testament, such as “love one another” and “forgive one another.”

Complementing these insights, Hammett notes that

in Ephesians and Colossians, the image of the body of Christ is used, but in a totally different context, with different emphases. … [Here] the body is related to the universal church. Five times Paul places the two together: “the church … his body” (Ephesians 1:22-23; 5:23,29-30; Col. 1:18,24). In each case, the description of the church points to and virtually requires the universal sense. However, while the universal church does seem to fit the usage of ekklesia in these two letters, the activities Paul describes (of pastors and teachers equipping God’s people, of the body growing as each part does its work; see Eph. 4:12,16; Col. 2:19) take place in local churches and thus local assemblies are not totally out of view.11

The head of the body. Hammett also points out that “in Ephesians and Colossians, a new element is added to the usage of the body image, that of the relationship of the head to the body. In these letters, a major emphasis is on the role and importance of Christ, who is identified as the head of the body five times (see Eph. 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col. 1:18; 2:19). … The teaching on Christ as the head of the body highlights the ideas of his authority over the body and his provision for the body. His provision for the body leads to its growth.”12

As the head of His church, Christ is supreme or preeminent in everything (see Col. 1:18). However, His authority is described as loving and sacrificial in the beautiful comparison of Christ and the church to a husband and a wife (see Eph. 5:22-33). Christ, as the head, exercises His authority on behalf of the church, loving her, giving Himself up for her, feeding her, and caring for her.

Hammett’s summary of this metaphor is again helpful:
1. The image of the body points to the church’s unity, seen especially in the ordinances of the Lord’s Supper and believer’s baptism. [The ordinances will be discussed in a later chapter.]

2. The image of the body aptly illustrates how the church may be one, while its members are diverse. We are a unity with diversity.

3. The body image reflects how the members of the church should show mutual love and care for one another.

4. Christ, as the head of the body, is the ultimate authority for the church. His will is to be sought in all things.

5. As head, Christ also provides for the needs of the church. We are completely dependent on Him.

6. Christlikeness is the goal of the church’s growth; all members of the church contribute to the growth and unity of the church as all perform their own particular ministries (Eph. 4:11-16).  

Describe ways your church reflects the image of the body of Christ in the following areas.

Worship: 

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

Fellowship: 

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

Ministry: 

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

Christ, as the head of the body, is the ultimate authority for the church.
“We are God’s co-workers. You are God’s field, God’s building.”
1 Corinthians 3:9

“Don’t you know that you are God’s sanctuary and that the Spirit of God lives in you?”
1 Corinthians 3:16

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**THE TEMPLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

In 1 Corinthians 3:9 Paul compares the church to a field and a building. He goes on to state that the foundation of the building is Jesus Christ (v. 11). But in verse 16 he sees the church as a very special building, God’s temple. Elsewhere Paul speaks of the individual Christian’s body as the temple of the Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor. 6:19). The church is the temple of God by means of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The word used here for temple is a very special word. It is naos, which refers to the innermost sanctuary, the place of God’s dwelling. It stands in contrast to the word hieron, which refers to the greater temple precincts as well as to the sanctuary. Just as the temple was the place to worship God, the church, as the temple of the Spirit, is to be a worshiping people.

The New Testament calls those who lead the church elders, bishops, or pastors; but they are never called priests. All believers are priests, and thus the doctrine of the priesthood of believers primarily designates believers’ common responsibility to minister to one another and to the world.

Again, Hammett’s summary helps us understand the church as the temple of the Holy Spirit:

1. Because it is God’s holy temple, the church must be a worshiping community.
2. In God’s temple all believers form the priesthood; all are involved in the church’s ministry. We are all believer-priests.
3. The temple is also a place of relationship.
   - The Spirit mediates our relationship with God, communicating His presence and power and sanctifying us as we grow in Christlikeness.
   - The Spirit joins together believers as the living stones in God’s temple through His creation of fellowship.

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Read the following Scripture passages and match each one with the biblical image to which it refers.

___ 1. 1 Corinthians 3:16  a. The people of God
___ 2. 1 Peter 2:9  b. The body of Christ
___ 3. 1 Corinthians 12:27  c. The temple of the Holy Spirit

Answers: 1. c, 2. a, 3. b
Match each statement to the biblical image of church to which it primarily refers.

___ 1. All Christians are to be involved in ministry.  
   a. The people of God

___ 2. Christ is the ultimate authority for the church.  
   b. The body of Christ

___ 3. The church is connected to the redeemed in the Old Testament.  
   c. The temple of the Holy Spirit

___ 4. God took the initiative in calling a people to Himself.  

___ 5. The church must be a worshipping community.  

___ 6. Christ provides for the church’s needs.

A WORKING DEFINITION OF CHURCH

Baptists’ strong interest in ecclesiology, or the doctrine of the church, has been a distinguishing characteristic since we began writing confessions nearly four hundred years ago. Baptist churches were birthed from the free-church tradition. This means that Baptists rigorously seek to follow the New Testament in all it teaches and that Baptist churches are made up of baptized believers who operate through democratic processes under the direction and leadership of pastor(s) or elder(s). Greg Wills points out that from their inception, “Baptist churches practiced a more thorough democracy than did the American federal and state governments.”

A brief survey of Baptist confessions of faith reveals Baptists’ efforts to rigorously follow the New Testament teachings in their understanding of the church.

Compare and contrast the following four historical statements on the church.
The New Hampshire Confession, 1833

OF A GOSPEL CHURCH
We believe that a visible Church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the ordinances of Christ; governed by his laws, and exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by his Word; that its only scriptural officers are Bishops, or Pastors, and Deacons, whose qualifications, claims, and duties are defined in the Epistles to Timothy and Titus.

The Baptist Faith and Message, 1925

THE GOSPEL CHURCH
A church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the ordinances of Christ, governed by his laws, and exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by his word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Its Scriptural officers are bishops, or elders, and deacons. (Matt. 16:18; Matt. 18:15-18; Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; Acts 2:41-42; Acts 5:13-14; 2 Cor. 9:13; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 4:14; Acts 14:23; Acts 6:3,5-6; Heb. 13:17; 1 Cor. 9:6,14)

The Baptist Faith and Message, 1963

THE CHURCH
A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is a local body of baptized believers who are associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel, observing the two ordinances of Christ, committed to His teachings, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth.

This church is an autonomous body, operating through democratic processes under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In such a congregation, members are equally responsible. Its Scriptural officers are pastors and deacons.

The Baptist Faith and Message, 2000

THE CHURCH

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.


Let’s compare some of the ways these confessions viewed the church.

The New Hampshire Confession (1833). This document speaks of the church as “a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the Gospel. … Officers are Bishops or
Pastors, and Deacons, whose qualifications, claims, and duties are defined in the Epistles to Timothy and Titus.”

*The Baptist Faith and Message* (1925). It is clear that the 1925 statement on the church is rooted in the *New Hampshire Confession*, with only minor changes. With respect to the offices of the church, scriptural officers are now “bishops, or elders, and deacons” (emphasis added). The *New Hampshire Confession* spoke of “Bishops or Pastors, and Deacons” (emphasis added). It is clear that the meaning of *elders* and *pastors* is the same.

*The Baptist Faith and Message* (1963). This revision of the 1925 statement significantly expanded the statement on the church. Added to the 1925 statement are emphases on—

- the local church and its autonomy;
- the fact that the congregation operates through democratic processes under the lordship of Jesus Christ;
- the equal responsibility of each member;
- the reality of the church as consisting of all the redeemed of all the ages.

Terms for the officers of the church are also changed in the 1963 statement. Now the officers are simply noted as being pastors and deacons. There is no reference to bishops or elders, in spite of their continuous presence in previous Baptist writings and confessions. However, we should probably not make too much out of this. It is likely that the 1963 confession simply represents the popular usage of the day; churches were now referring to their leaders as pastors. It is possible that the term *bishop* was now more easily misunderstood or even viewed negatively in the context of a growing Roman Catholic population in America. The reason the term *elder* was used less often is not altogether clear.

*The Baptist Faith and Message* (2000). This confession is something of a theological landmark in the context of the theological controversy that shaped the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s and 1990s. The statement on the church is again similar to the 1925 and 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* statements, but there are some important differences as well. The word *autonomous* has been moved toward the front of the article; and interestingly, the statement “operates under the lordship of Jesus Christ through democratic processes” reverses the order of the 1963 statement. This revision is more biblical in its order and also draws
attention to the fact that we make our decisions and exercise our responsibility in relation to the lordship of Christ.

Mark Dever is correct when he writes, “A church is not just straightforward democracy, for in the churches there is a common recognition of our fallen state, of our tendency to err, and, on the other hand, of the inerrancy of God’s Word. So the members of a church congregation are democratic, perhaps, only in the sense that they work together as a congregation to try to understand God’s word. ... As leaders and congregation, we strive for the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace; we work together for what we believe would be best for the church.”

The 2000 statement on the church, like the 1963 statement, affirms the scriptural offices as pastors and deacons. Finally, the statement affirms all believers’ gifts for service in the body of Christ but limits the office of pastor to men who are scripturally qualified.

In this brief survey one thing seems clear: Baptists have struggled—not always with success, to be sure—to remain faithful to the teachings of the New Testament in all matters of faith and practice. This dogged devotion to Scripture is also seen in their understanding of church government and polity.

For the purpose of this study, we will utilize article 6 of *The Baptist Faith and Message* (2000) as a working definition of *church*. This excellent statement is short and concise, biblical and practical. It sets reasonable parameters for like-minded brothers and sisters committed to the lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture, but it does not dictate issues of methodology and practice that the Bible does not address. This statement provides Baptist churches a foundation for a diversity of methods that are grounded in biblical and theological unity.

Certainly Baptists, like others, have sometimes been captive to the currents of the culture that surrounds them. In recent years, however, Southern Baptists have swum against the currents of modernity and many other denominations. Their positions on issues like biblical inerrancy, abortion, homosexuality, the exclusivity of the gospel, and women as pastors are just a few examples. In the context of their polity, Southern Baptist churches have been fiercely congregational. They have consistently recognized only two offices in the local church—pastors (elders) and deacons. This is what the New Testament teaches. This is what Baptists seek to practice.
PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

“I didn’t realize there so many ideas about what a church is,” Mark admitted to Jim. “I can see how we can get in trouble in our churches today. We had a big fight in our church three years ago over a building program. I think some of us thought the building was the church, as if we were more concerned about bricks and wood than people.”

Jim responded, “This was a lot of information about what a church is. Let me see if I can go to the definition of the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message to get it clear.” Jim got a piece of paper and began to list the characteristics of a church:

• The church is an autonomous and local congregation.
• The church consists of baptized believers.
• The church is associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel.
• The church observes two ordinances.
• The church is governed by Christ’s laws.
• In the church, believers exercise the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by God’s Word.
• The church seeks to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth.
• The church operates under the lordship of Christ through democratic processes.
• Each church member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord.
• The scriptural officers of the church are pastors and deacons.
• The office of pastor is limited to men, as qualified by Scripture.

“This list helps define church,” Jim said to Mark, but I’m really curious as to whether we would recognize a church today as a true New Testament church by visiting it for a few weeks. I really wonder whether we could tell that a particular church is acting like a church.”

“I think you just sent us on another study,” Mark laughed. “Now we have to spend some time looking for the marks of a true church.”

We will join Jim and Mark’s search in chapter 2.
Refer to the definition of *church* you wrote on page 12. In light of what you have learned from this chapter, rewrite your definition here.

Review your memory verse for this chapter.

Close your study by thanking God for choosing you to be a member of His church—the local church to which you belong and the redeemed of all the ages.
JUST WHAT IS THE CHURCH ANYWAY?

BEFORE THE SESSION
1. Study chapter 1 and complete the learning activities.
2. Write the following Scripture references on separate index cards: Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 1 Corinthians 6:19; 1 Corinthians 12:27; 1 Peter 2:9.
3. Have available large sheets of paper and felt-tip pens.

DURING THE SESSION
1. Greet everyone, make needed introductions, and help everyone feel at ease. Make sure everyone has a copy of the book.
2. Distribute large sheets of paper and felt-tip pens and ask members to work in pairs to make a drawing of the church. Do not elaborate on what you mean by the word church. Allow a few minutes for the activity. Then mount the drawings at the front of the room. Do not comment on the drawings or ask members to interpret them until later in the session.
3. Share that the topic for this study is vibrant church. Ask: What does the word vibrant mean? Write responses on a dry-erase board. State that the word as used in this study means healthy. Referring to page 8, overview the six chapters of the study. Share the four suggested goals for the study from page 9.
4. Ask volunteers to share their earliest memories of church.
5. Ask members to work in the same pairs again to write a definition of church. As the definitions are shared, it will be obvious that multiple usages of the term abound.
7. Call attention to members’ drawings of the church that are displayed on the wall. Using the section “Correctives in Defining Church,” beginning on page 18, point out contemporary uses of the word. Ask members to evaluate whether each drawing reflects a correct or an incorrect idea of what the church is.
8. Refer to the activity on page 19. As you read each statement, ask members to decide whether it refers to the primary meaning of *church* in the New Testament (a local body of believers).

9. Point out that the New Testament writers used a number of images for church. Write on a dry-erase board the headings *People of God*, *Body of Christ*, and *Temple of the Holy Spirit* and point out that these are three prominent images. Divide members into five groups and distribute the index cards with Scripture references. Ask the groups to read the Scriptures and to identify which New Testament image of the church is described.

10. Point to the heading *People of God* on the board. Use the material on page 20 to explain how the image *people of God* connects the church to the Israelites in the Old Testament. Ask: *What are some practical implications of the term people of God for the church?* Point to the heading *Body of Christ* on the board. Ask: *How does this image highlight unity? How does this image emphasize unity in diversity? What does the image imply about love and care in the church? Who is the head of the church? What are some implications for the church since Christ is the head of the body?* Point to the heading *Temple of the Holy Spirit* on the board. Ask: *What does this image imply about the church’s worship? What are some practical implications for a believer’s daily living? What kind of sacrifice should a Christian make to God (see Rom. 12:1)?*

11. Call attention to the *Baptist Faith and Message* (2000) statement on page 27. Ask members to name all the points or statements they can find about the basic nature and essence of the church as you write them on a dry-erase board. Refer to the summary list on page 30 and ask members to identify any ideas that are not on the board. Allow time for discussion of and questions about the statements.

12. Ask volunteers to share how they would change the definitions of *church* they wrote at the beginning of the session.

13. Call attention to this week’s memory verse, 1 Peter 2:9. Lead the group in reading the verse aloud several times. Encourage members to commit to memorize the verse.

14. State that our English word *church* comes from the Greek word *kuriakon*. Write the two words on a dry-erase board. Explain that the meaning of the Greek word is *belonging to the Lord*. Ask members to bow their heads and close their eyes for prayer. Say: *Think not only about our church as belonging to the Lord but also about your life as belonging to the Lord. Meditate on the following questions.* Read the questions in the activity on pages 13–14. Close with a prayer of thanksgiving that God has chosen us to be members of His church, both the local church and the redeemed of all ages. Ask God to help each member and your church to more completely surrender to and serve the head of the church, Jesus Christ.

15. Ask members to read chapter 2 and to complete the activities before the next session.