

PLAIN TRUTH[®]

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]

What Is and Who Is the Church?

By Greg Albrecht

The visible church is all the people who get together from time to time in God's name. Anybody can find out who they are by going to look.

The invisible church is all the people God uses for his hands and feet in the world. Nobody can find out who they are except God.

Think of them as two circles. The optimist says they are concentric. The cynic says they don't even touch. The realist says they occasionally overlap.
—Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*

What is the church? Many would say it's obvious WHAT the church is. When one sees a sign in front of a building that identifies it as a church, or when one sees distinctive architecture, with, in many cases,

stained glass windows, or even more commonly, a steeple and a cross on the top, then that's a church.

Is the church accurately recognized as a self-identified and/or distinctive building?

Is it possible to post a sign identifying a building as a department store when in fact the building is a barn for horses and cattle? Is it possible to assume that a building whose architecture might lead us to assume it is a bank is actually a doctor's office?

Who is the church? Many would say it's obvious WHO the church is. They say a building is WHAT the church is and the people who attend and frequent that building is WHO it is.

Can we conclude (as many do) that Christians are Christians only if (and perhaps when) they are in a church

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building? Does it conversely follow that all those people inside the church building are Christians, just because they are physically present?

Can someone be a Christ-follower if they never attend an appropriate, recognized or approved building on a regular basis? Can someone be or remain a part of the church—the body of Christ—without attending a building?

It's been said that one can sit and stand in the barn for weeks on end, but standing in the barn will not turn one into a horse or a cow. You can go and sit with the chickens and learn to cackle like a

chicken but being around chickens will not transform you into a chicken.

The Body of Christ

In 1 Corinthians chapter 12, Paul speaks of the church as the body of Christ, and he embellishes and extends this metaphor through an examination of the human body.

He makes two key points:

1) The body (both physical and spiritual), though one, is made up of many parts:

...there are many parts, but one body (1 Corinthians 12:20).

Within Christendom some churches believe they are the true church. They don't believe they are "a" church and thus part of "the" church. They say they are

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THE church—the “only true church”—and feel justified attacking, belittling and even trying to destroy *other* parts of the body of Christ.

In the context of such arrogant institutions, I use the term “*other*” generously, because if an entity that claims to be part of the body of Christ is actually attacking other churches, then can we believe them to be part of the body?

A healthy part of the body of Christ does not attack its own body. The hand does not try to cut off toes from the foot, the foot does not kick the shin or the knee of the other leg, hoping to damage it. That would be spiritual mutilation of the body of Christ.

When a group of people who call themselves a church relentlessly attacks and demeans and belittles “*other*” churches, then one has to wonder if they really are part of the body of Christ.

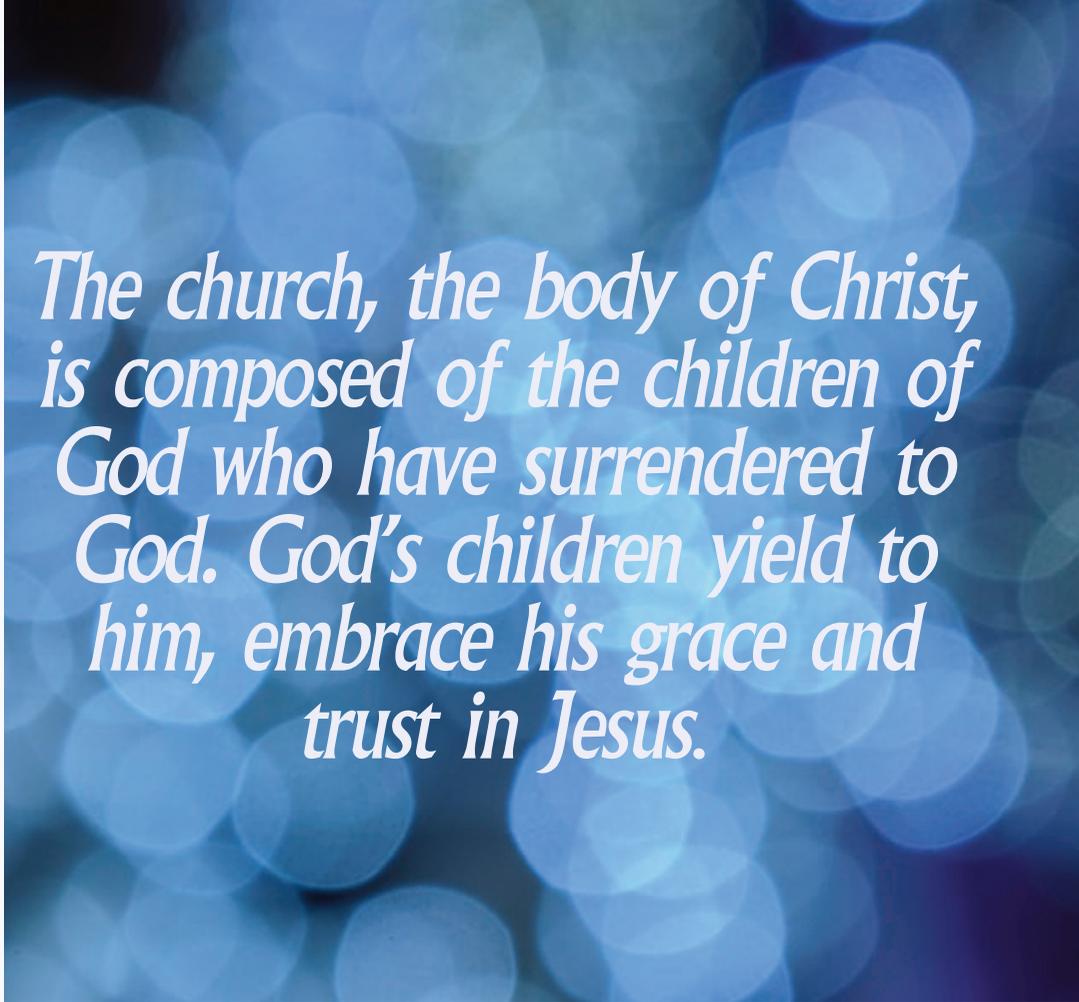
2) God has arranged the parts of the human body and of the spiritual body of Christ:

“But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, everyone of them, just as he wanted them to be”
(1 Corinthians 12:18).

Can someone who is not pleased that others are also a part of the body of Christ be a part of his body if he/she is not willing to accept and give honor to other parts of his body?

It pleases God to have many parts in the body of Christ, just as it pleases him for each of us to have many parts in our human bodies. Paul says God has actually *arranged* many parts of the body of Christ, so if someone, individually or collectively, is saying that other parts of the body have no right to exist, or they are inferior in some way, might they be taking issue with an *arrangement* that pleases God?

One of the central, core



The church, the body of Christ, is composed of the children of God who have surrendered to God. God's children yield to him, embrace his grace and trust in Jesus.

traditional and historical beliefs of Christianity that has stood the test of time is what is generically called ***the universal church***. The universal church transcends all definitions, specifications and limitations humans might place upon it.

The universal church, by its very nature, is known and unknown to humans—it is visible but more than that, it is invisible. For as many Christ-followers we know, there are so many we do not.

What Is and Who Is the Church, the Body of Christ? Four Points to Remember

1) The church, the body of Christ, is composed of the children of God who have surrendered to God:

God's children yield to him, embrace his grace and trust in Jesus. God's children are new creations in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). God's transformed children surrender the illusion of the power and authority that religion claims

to have over people to regulate and enforce behavior.

2) The church, the body of Christ, might be found in geographical places and in specific buildings, or it may not be:

For the first three centuries after Jesus, those who wanted to join together with other Christians for fellowship, prayer and Christ-centered discussion did so, but NEVER in a building that was designated, defined or described as a church.

For some 300 years after Jesus no one went to church, in terms of going to a building that was solely dedicated to being a church, because there were no such things as church buildings.

For some 300 years, Christ-followers met together in a wide variety of places—including by the side of a river or in someone's house. In a similar way, today, we can and we do, meet together in a wide variety of places (including online!) as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The body of Christ is not exclusively in one place to the exclusion of another. Jesus transcends doctrinal and geographical walls of separation (Ephesians 2:11-16).

By God's grace we are the church, as Jesus lives in us. Buildings, ceremonies, creeds, traditions and rituals may or may not be helpful to our walk with Jesus.

We are only the church if Jesus lives in us... he enables and enlivens us to be part of his universal body of Christ-followers.

The church—the body of Jesus Christ—is who we are in Christ far more than it is where we go and what building we attend and what ceremonies we perform and those we don't.

3) If you are a member of a physically incorporated institution, you do not "belong" to that institution:

In the ultimate sense, you and I only belong to Jesus. While I belong to my wife and my family, in the ultimate sense I belong only to Jesus.

In my own case, I am not affiliated with a church or a political party because, among many reasons, I am not owned by them. I don't belong to them. I am bought and paid for by Jesus alone (1 Peter 1:18-19).

Join and be a member of a physically incorporated group that calls itself a church if you wish, but take care it is a healthy, grace-based and Christ-centered institution.

If you choose to be a "member" of a physically incorporated group that calls itself a church be assured that the only membership that counts, now and forever, is membership in the universal body of Christ.

No membership in any physically incorporated institution that calls itself a church is

necessary to award or validate your membership in the body of Christ.

4) The head of the body (his church) is Jesus Christ. No Jesus, no church:

Jesus is the head of his spiritual body, "the" church. Jesus is the rock upon which his church, his body, is built. Jesus is the true vine, and without being attached to him no branch is alive in him, but rather dead.

Without Jesus there is no church. The parking lot might be filled with hundreds of cars. The music might be incredible and uplifting. The preaching might be encouraging and entertaining.

The ceremonies might be impressive, the bells and whistles awe-inspiring and the architecture and adornments of the building breathtaking. But without Jesus there is no church.

No Jesus, no church. But where Jesus is, you'll find the church. □

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