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CHURCH MEMBERSHIP *Part 1*

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When people are baptized to access forgiveness of sins, the Bible states that Jesus not only saves them, but adds them to the body of the saved, the church (Acts 2:38, 47; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 1:22-23). The Bible doesn't encourage people to be saved and join the church of their choice, but rather teaches that the saved are added to the church of Christ; being a part of the church is not about what men decide, but what Christ does. However, it's pretty common to hear Christians today claiming to be "members of the church at _____," or, after moving from one place to another, "placing membership at _____." As we need to do our best to speak like the Bible speaks (1 Peter 4:11), this question is important: are these kinds of expressions and the ideas behind them Biblical? And, if they are Biblical, what does that imply for our lives as Christians?

One of the keys to studying the Bible effectively is to realize that the Bible sometimes makes use of the variety of meanings a word has. It does this with the word church. The word church in Bible times typically referred to an assembly or a gathering of individuals. The Bible makes use of this meaning of the word to describe the worship assemblies of Christians on Sunday. When Paul spoke of his desire to speak words "in the church" with understanding, he was talking about the worship assembly (1 Corinthians 14:19).

However, just a few verses later, when Paul spoke of "the whole church [coming] together in one place," (v. 23), he clearly was using the word church in a different way. "Church" is what happens when people come together, but Paul's words indicate that the church existed when the people weren't gathered. Though the word church referred to an assembly in the first century, the word in the original language (Greek) was a compound word created by combining "out of" and "to call." This word picture, which describes perfectly the relationship of Christians to the world (1 Peter 2:9), was seized by New Testament authors and even Jesus Himself (Matthew 16:18). From a New Testament point of view, Christians are the church - the people who have been called out of the world by the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14).

When Paul spoke about "the whole church [coming] together in one place," he couldn't have intended with that statement to refer to all Christians, everywhere. The entire church hasn't been together in one place since prior to the events of Acts 8, several years before 1 Corinthians was written. This means that Paul was adding another layer to the picture of the word church. When Christians assemble in a given location, they form a local church. In fact, 1 Corinthians was written to "the church of God at Corinth" (1 Corinthians 1:2).

Putting it all together, we can see that the word church has three meanings: 1) church is the Sunday worship assembly; 2) church is a group of Christians meeting in a given location; 3)

church refers to those Jesus Christ has saved all around the world. Each of these three meanings of the word church is important and has a powerful impact upon our lives.

When people speak about being members of the church at a particular location, they are using the word church in the local sense - the sense that refers to all of the saved people that gather together in a given location. It is important to not only use the term church in this way, but to live with this meaning in mind. God has added all Christians to the universal church - the body of the saved throughout the world - and calls them to live as though they are "called out of" the world. God expects part of that difference to be demonstrated through the worship Christians offer on Sunday. However, a great deal of what God wants us to do as Christians relates in some way to being a member of a local congregation.

Next week, we will examine what it means to be a member of the church at a given location/congregation.