

churchbasics



1 Welcome to the Church!

The new family around you is a family like none other you have ever been part of. It is a family that stretches around the world, spans the generations, bridges cultures and nations, goes back through time – and is going to last for ever! That family is **the Church**. If you are reading this booklet, it is probably because you have recently become part of that family. And on behalf of that family, we want to say, **Welcome!**

But a big family is not what most people think of when they hear the word **Church**, is it?

*In fact, what was the first thing you used to think of when somebody said the word **Church** to you?*



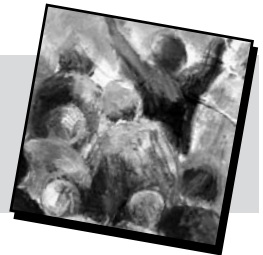
For most people their answer would be something like –

- **A religious building** – dark and forbidding, cold and draughty, with a big spire and graveyard.
- **A denomination** – perhaps the Methodists, or Baptists, or Church of England, that your family may have had some links with in the past. You may even have called it “my church”, but without frequenting it very often.
- **A bunch of hypocrites** telling other people how to run their lives when they can’t even run their own, and meddling in things that aren’t their business.

All of these couldn’t be further from the truth about what the Church *really* is! And our aim in this booklet is to help you see this.

We want to do that by looking at two main thoughts: first, what the Church **is**, and second, what the Church **does**.

2 What the Church *is*



What the Church most definitely **isn't** is a building. In fact, for almost three centuries, churches had no buildings at all. They met wherever they could – in people’s homes, in hired rooms – even in the catacombs (burial chambers) in Rome!



Why do you think buildings did not seem so important to them? What was it that really mattered to them?

So, if **church** isn't a building, what is it? Well, it is such a wonderful thing that the Bible actually uses a lot of different pictures to try to help us understand. Let's look at some of the main ones.

1. A family

God is a **family man**! From the very beginning he has wanted to build a big family who could know him and enjoy him as their perfect father. Even when the first human beings disobeyed him and turned away from his plan for their lives (Genesis 3 v1-24), God did not abandon the human race, but set into operation a **rescue plan** to build his family once again.

The first person God chose to start building this family was a man called Abram who lived around 4,000 years ago.

Read:
Genesis 12 v1-5; 15 v1-6

What two main things did God promise to Abram in these two passages?

*What was the **key** that opened the door for Abram to become part of that family himself? (See 15 v6)*



Think: *Do I know for certain that I have taken hold of that same **key** for myself?*

Ever since the time of Abram (whose name God later changed to **Abraham**, meaning **father of many** – Genesis 17 v5), God has been at work, extending his big family as more and more people have turned to believe in him.

*Look at the following passages from the New Testament and note down the phrases from each that see **us** as part of this big family of God.*

Matthew 6 v9

Galatians 6 v10

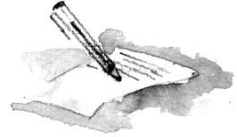
Ephesians 3 v14-15

Hebrews 2 v10-11

God is a perfect father, and he is working to bring about a perfect family. Through your faith in Jesus, you too have now become a part of it! That family is the Church.

Perhaps this is a good point for us to pause and to actually look at what the word **church** means.

Church translates the Greek word (the New Testament was first written in Greek) **ekklesia** – which literally means **called-out ones**. It was used in everyday language for any political or religious group which came together for a common purpose. But it was taken over by the early Christians because, to them, it really described who and what they were. For them, the Church



was no mere **club** of like-minded people; rather, it was a family of **called-out ones** –

- **called out** of the life that we used to live
- **called for** a relationship with God
- **called to** a future hope and inheritance
- **called together** to be God's own people, his family.

While our faith must be a **personal** experience, it cannot be a **private** experience. If you have **come to faith in Jesus**, then you have **come to birth in his family**. You have been **called out** of the life you used to live to become part of a family of other **called-out ones**. **It is absolutely impossible to be a true Christian, yet not to be part of the Christian family.** (See Acts 2 v41-42, and note how coming to faith in Jesus – expressed in baptism – was immediately followed by becoming actively involved in the life of the Church.)

On a scale of 1-5 (where 1 = not really, and 5 = very much) how would you rate your response to the following?



- Am I sure that God has not left me to live this new Christian life on my own?
- Am I sure that God has put me into his big family to help and encourage me?
- Am I sure that God himself is my perfect heavenly Father?
- Am I excited about being part of this family that God has brought me into?

*We do not **go** to Church; we **are** the Church!
Church is God's family and Jesus has made me a part of it.*

2. A body

Another picture that speaks of how very much we belong to one another is the picture of the Church as a **body** – not just any old body; but rather, the Body of Christ himself! It is his life that **draws us together, holds us together**, and **expresses itself through us** to the world. We are not an **organisation**, but a living **organism**!

Read:

Ephesians 4 v1-16

Who is the 'Head' of the Body? (v15)

What words in v16 indicate how we should relate to one another and work together? What do you think this means?

What is Jesus' goal for his Body? (v11-13)

Now let's turn to one more passage that describes us as the Body of Christ:

Read:

1 Corinthians 12 v12-31

How does this passage bring out -

a) that we desperately need one another?

b) that it is OK to be different and have different gifts and abilities?

c) that unity is tremendously important?



You may be a fairly new Christian, and you may feel fairly insignificant; but the Bible says that *you* have a vital place in the Body of Christ. You are needed by the other parts of the Body; and you have need of them.

*The Body of Christ is not just a picture – it is a reality! And Jesus has called **you** to be part of it.*

3. A temple

Having said that the Church is not a building, there is *one* sort of building that the Church *is* – but one that is *not* made with bricks and mortar, as the following two passages show.



Read:

1 Corinthians 3 v16-17

What sort of building does Paul say we are? _____

What makes this building special? _____

1 Peter 2 v4-5

How does Peter describe us in these verses? _____

What do you think he means by this? _____

We can sum this up by saying:

■ **The building is 'us'!**

God needs no physical building; his building is **us!** We are the bricks he is using, and he wants us built together strongly so that people can come to this **building** and see his glory. What **cements** us together is his love.

■ **The building is holy**

This building is holy because it is **God's** building and God is holy. That means everything in it should be holy too – including us. Whenever we still hold on to things from our old way of life, it brings **dirt** into the temple and spoils it. We need to keep ourselves clean with the help of God's Spirit so that the temple can stay holy and people will recognise that God is there.

■ **The building isn't finished!**

This building isn't finished yet, and won't be until God's chosen moment at the end of human history. So, like any building site, at times you will find the odd eyesore or two! That's why we shouldn't be too quick to criticise other **bricks** that God is still working on. Learn how to be gracious and forgiving to others; you might need their forgiveness before too long!

*God does not want me to be a lonely **brick**.
I have an important place to **fit** into what God
is building – a temple where he can show his
glory.*

4. An army

This fourth picture of what the Church is also brings home to us our great need of one another.

*In the following passages, note down the **military** phrases that occur:*

2 Corinthians 10 v3-4

Philippians 2 v25

1 Timothy 6 v12



2 Timothy 2 v3-4

Philemon 1 v2

Christians are in a **battle**; but God has not left us to fight it alone! Did you notice the use of the phrase **fellow-soldier** in two of the passages above? God has put us together into his army so that we can fight **alongside** one another and **for** one another. This too is another aspect of belonging to his great big family.



Think: *In what sense do soldiers need one another?*

But this picture of soldiers in an army does not just focus on **us**; it focuses on the fact that there is a **battle** to be engaged in together.



Read:
Ephesians 6 v10-18

Who is our battle against? (v11&12)

What sort of weapons has God given us? (v13-18)

No matter how strong our battles seem, we can win them, as long as we stand together and keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. A battle can be won so much more easily by an army together than a soldier alone.

5. A bride

This final picture is one of the most lovely pictures of the Church there is. Perhaps it is because it focuses, not on one another, but on Jesus; and in particular, on the way that his Holy Spirit is getting us ready for when Jesus returns to this earth.

Like any bridegroom, Jesus wants to come for a beautiful bride, not an old hag! When he comes (whether we have already died and are in heaven, or whether we are still alive at that time on earth), he will gather us all together and take us to be with himself **for ever**. This is our wonderful hope for the future!

Read:

2 Corinthians 11 v2

Revelation 21 v1-4

In what ways do you think we can be preparing ourselves to be the beautiful bride of Jesus?



6. Review time!

So, let's review what we have said the Church **is**. It is definitely **not** a building of bricks and mortar, but rather -

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____



Share: *Which of these pictures of the Church surprised you? Why? Which one do you find yourself warming to the most, and why?*



3 What the Church *does*

Having seen what the Church **is**, now let's turn to look at what the Church **does**. Just as the Bible's answer to the first question may have been so different to what you used to think, so might the answer to this question too – especially if you thought all the Church did was hold Jumble Sales and raise money!

Let's begin by reading a key passage (one that occurs often in this Basics series) that tells us what life was like in the very first church of all.

Read:

Acts 2 v37-47

We can sum up the main tasks of the Church under three key aspects: towards God, towards one another and towards the world.

1. Towards God

What things in the passage you have just read were activities that were directed towards God?

These are things that we still look to do together as a church today. When you come to our meetings, whether one of the main meetings on Sundays or one of the smaller meetings in homes during the week, you will often find us doing some, or all, of the following things:



a. Singing

The Bible encourages us often to express our praises and thanksgiving to God in **singing**. Singing is great! It really helps us to express our innermost feelings and thoughts to God.

Read:

Psalm 149 v1-5

Ephesians 5 v18-20

If you have not been used to singing very much, don't worry! You will soon feel at home with it, and will quickly get to know the words of the songs we sing (often displayed on an overhead projector, rather than in a book).



b. Praying

You will often hear people praying out loud in our meetings, expressing their thanks or bringing requests to God. It is not just the leaders at the front who do this; remember, we are a Body. So all of us can take part – although no one will force you to do so!

Read:

Ephesians 6 v18

Philippians 4 v4-7

c. Using spiritual gifts

The Bible tells us that God gives us special gifts of the Holy Spirit to help us speak to him (especially when we just can't find the words) and to hear from him, and you will often experience these being used in our meetings. These gifts of the Holy Spirit include -

- **speaking in tongues** – speaking out a Spirit-inspired prayer in a God-given language (human or 'spiritual') that you have not learned



- **interpreting tongues** – interpreting, or **giving the sense of**, what someone else has just spoken out in tongues so that we can all get the benefit of it
- **prophecy** – sharing a message directly from God, whether in words or by describing and applying some **picture** that is impressed on your mind
- **singing in tongues** – singing aloud together in tongues and allowing the Holy Spirit to blend a beautiful harmony of praises to God
- **words of knowledge** – bringing some God-given insight into some situation or sickness that God wants to deal with

**Read:**

1 Corinthians 12 v7-11

1 Corinthians 14 v26-31

d. Learning

At most of our main meetings someone will preach a **sermon** – teaching from the Bible to help us know more about God and how to live out our faith in everyday life. You will also sometimes study the Bible together in smaller group settings, and this will help you learn how to get more out of it for yourself.

**Read:**

Luke 4 v42-44

2 Timothy 4 v1-2

2 Timothy 3 v16-17

e. Sharing bread and wine

At some of our meetings we will share bread and wine together as a special way of focusing on Jesus' death on the Cross for us. The way we do

it may vary from meeting to meeting. Different Christians use different names to describe this – Breaking Bread, the Lord’s Supper, Holy Communion, the Eucharist.

This is a special and meaningful event that Jesus himself commanded us to do.

Read:

1 Corinthians 11 v23-29

When we break bread and share wine together in this way it is an opportunity to -



- **look back**, remembering what Jesus did for us on the cross (v24) and giving thanks for it. The bread helps us to remember his broken body and the wine his shed blood.
- **look in** to our own lives and to see if there is sin to be confessed or things that need to change (v28). The bread and wine remind us that we cannot go on living life the old way.
- **look round** and remember that I am part of Christ’s Body and that I cannot be a Christian on my own. The bread comes from one loaf, symbolising the one Body that we are part of. God wants us to “recognise the Body of the Lord” (v29). (See also 1 Cor 10 v17)
- **look forward** to the certainty of his coming again. In the Lord’s Supper we “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” (v26) The bread and wine are God’s **pledge**, God’s **appetiser**, that one day we will eat with Jesus at the great Wedding Banquet at the End of Time. (See Revelation 19 v6-9)

Because of these four things, breaking bread together is more than just a symbolic act; it can be a special time of God's meeting with us.

f. Praying for people

Jesus spent much of his ministry praying for people and their needs (whether physical, practical or emotional). He trained his disciples to do the same. The newly-founded Church was quick to continue this practice, not just in their own meetings for one another, but out in the world wherever they went. At many of our meetings too you will see us **laying hands** on people as we pray for God to bless or heal them.



Read:

Acts 5 v12-16

James 5 v13-16

2. Towards one another

Look again at our key passage in Acts 2 v37-47. As you go through the four points below, note the words or phrases from the passage that sum up each point.

a. Fellowship



The word for **fellowship** in the Greek language originally meant **partnership** (as in a business partnership, for example). God is in favour of us doing anything that builds our **partnership** together and makes it strong! This may include sharing our hearts with one another as we pray or worship; but it may also include having fun together and doing things together.

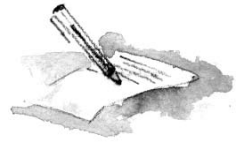
b. Sharing our lives and resources

Our society has become selfish and self-centred. Most people think only of themselves. But that is not how it is to be in the Church. Did you notice in Acts 2 that they were even prepared to sell possessions they did not need in order to alleviate the poverty of some of their Christian brothers and sisters? For us, a readiness to loan our lawn mower or electric drill might be the place to start!



c. Meeting together

Not all our meetings have to be for **religious** purposes. The Temple Courts that the first Christians met in were simply one of the biggest public gathering places there was in Jerusalem in those days. They met to worship – but they also met to **be friends!** Church should always be a place for friendship and **getting together.**



d. Opening our homes

Christians are told to be hospitable people, opening their homes to one another. The saying “**an Englishman’s home is his castle**” won’t do for us! We do not need to have a luxury home or be able to offer chocolate biscuits or five course meals to be hospitable. Learn how to **be Church** in your home.





Think: Can I see that these expressions of **being Church** are just as important to God as coming to a meeting on Sunday? That these are all expressions of being **family**?

3. Towards the world

Someone once said, **the Church is the only organisation in the world that exists for the benefit of its non-members**. Sadly, that has not always been the case down the years. But this church family sees this aspect of **being Church** as tremendously important. We don't want to keep what we have discovered to ourselves; we want to share it with everyone we can, just like those first Christians did.



In the following verses from the story of the beginnings and growth of the Church, note down the different ways that were used to show God's love to others.

Acts 3 v1-10 (See also 4 v9-10)

Acts 3 v11-16

Acts 4 v13

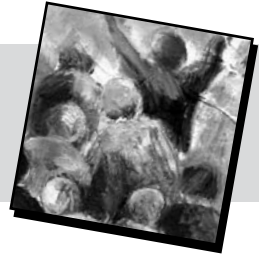
Acts 4 v32-33

Acts 8 v26-35

Acts 17 v16-23

In other words, there are lots of different ways of sharing our faith with those around us. God will show you which is the most natural and effective way for you, if you ask him. It does not matter whether people become Christians immediately or not. What matters is that we leave them just a little bit more favourable towards God for the next Christian who comes along. (We will look further at how to share our faith with others in a later book in this series.)

4 Welcome to the Church!



We began this booklet by saying **welcome!** We end it by saying **welcome to the Church!** – that is, to the Church which seeks to be built **as God** means it to be, rather than as society has mistakenly understood it to be.

We cannot claim that this particular church you have come to is perfect – far from it! That is because it is made up of people who are still on the journey and still in the process. We all need to wear badges saying, **please be patient with me – God hasn't finished with me yet!**

What we **can** honestly claim, however, is that we are genuinely trying with all our hearts to be the sort of church that you have been studying about in this booklet, the sort of church that Jesus wants it to be.

If that desire is in your heart too, then we warmly welcome you to join the journey with us!