

“I'M LOOKING FOR A CHURCH”

Introduction:



1. There comes a time in many people's lives when they find themselves searching for a church. This search can be filled with hope, uncertainty, and a desire for something more meaningful. But why do people embark on this search? The reasons can be as varied as the individuals themselves; here are just three common reasons:
 - a. **A Newfound Interest In Faith:** Some people find themselves searching for a church because they have recently started reading the Bible or exploring their faith. Perhaps they have experienced a personal awakening, a life event that has led them to question the bigger picture, or a growing curiosity about the teachings of Jesus. For them, finding a church is a step toward understanding God's Word and integrating it into their lives.
 - b. **Discontentment With Current Church:** Another reason someone might be looking for a new church is dissatisfaction with the teachings and practices of their current church. They may have grown uncomfortable with doctrines that do not align with their understanding of Scripture or observed practices that seem more rooted in tradition than in biblical truth. Their search reflects a desire for a church where they can worship in spirit and truth (**John 4:24; Philippians 3:3**), and where the teachings resonate with their convictions.
 - c. **Relocation To A New Area:** Moving to a new city or neighborhood often brings with it the need to find a new church home. Whether due to a job transfer, family reasons, or other life changes, these individuals are not only looking for a place to worship but also a congregation where they can belong, build relationships, and contribute their gifts and talents.
2. The desire to find a church acknowledges and, in my experience, infers a few things:
 - a. **Acknowledgment Of The Plurality Of Churches:** The act of searching for a church acknowledges that there are numerous churches or religious organizations in existence today. Estimates suggest that there are between 30,000 and 45,000 different Christian denominations worldwide. Someone has said, "What is different cannot be the same". All these religious organisations have their own ideas about faith and practice; they cannot all be right, can they? This highlights the need for discernment in looking for a church.
 - b. **The Presence Of Criteria - Personal And Spiritual Considerations:** The fact that someone is "looking" for a church suggests that they have certain criteria in mind, whether consciously or subconsciously. These criteria may include doctrinal soundness, the style of worship, the sense of community, the opportunities for spiritual growth, or the church's commitment to preaching the gospel. The search is often driven by both personal and spiritual considerations, as individuals seek a place where they can worship God in spirit and in truth, grow in their faith, and belong to a supportive community. This search is not random; it is guided by values, needs, and desires that shape what they hope to find.
 - c. **Possible Indifference To Specific Church Affiliation:** We might infer that some people show indifference to which church or religious organization they attend. This could stem from a belief that all churches are fundamentally the same or a focus on the social and communal aspects of church life rather than doctrinal differences. This perspective may prioritize fellowship and community over theological precision, or it might suggest a more casual approach to faith.
 - d. In my experience, those who say they are looking for a church often have limited knowledge of what the Bible teaches about the Lord's church. This lack of understanding can lead them to focus on external factors like worship style or church size, rather than seeking a congregation that aligns with biblical principles. It is important to guide them toward understanding the church as the body of Christ, committed to worship, teaching, fellowship, and service, according to the Scripture.
3. When you encounter someone who says, "I'm looking for a church," how should you respond? This lesson provides a suggested approach that has proven effective in my experience. While it may not be the only way to respond, I have found that this approach often resonates well with people and helps guide them in their search.

1. Key Considerations In Your Search For A Church:

When searching for a church, it is important to consider key historical and theological facts that shape our understanding of what constitutes Christ's true Church. From Jesus' promise to build His Church to the establishment of new congregations in the first century, and the later emergence of various religious organizations and cults, these considerations guide us in identifying the Church that remains faithful to Christ's teachings.

a. Jesus' Promise To Build His Church (Matthew 16:18) And The Expansion Through New Congregations:

“And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock **I will build My church**; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).

- 1) A.D. 32: The Promise Made: Jesus made a profound promise to build His Church after Peter's confession of Him as the Messiah. This pivotal moment took place in the region of Caesarea Philippi, with His twelve disciples present. This declaration was made approximately one year before Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, highlighting its significance in His ministry.
- 2) A.D. 33: The Promise Fulfilled: The fulfillment of Jesus' promise began on the Day of Pentecost, a Jewish feast celebrated in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-47). On this day, the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles, and the first public proclamation of the gospel led to the establishment of the Church.
- 3) The Expansion Of The Church: From Pentecost onward, the apostles and early Christians preached the gospel, leading to the establishment of new congregations in various regions. It is important to note that these were not new religious organizations, but rather local assemblies of Christians unified in Christ, continuing the mission Jesus set forth (Mark 16:15-16). The Book of Acts provides several examples of new churches that were established as the apostles and early Christians spread the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. Here are some key examples:

a) The Church In Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-47):

- ▶ Key Event: The church in Jerusalem was the first Christian congregation, established on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles. About 3,000 people were baptized and added to the church that day (Acts 2:41, 47).
- ▶ Significance: This church became the central hub for the early Christian movement, where the apostles taught, and Christians shared everything in common.

b) The Church In Antioch (Acts 11:19-26):

- ▶ Key Event: The church in Antioch was established by Christians who fled persecution in Jerusalem. They preached the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles, leading to a diverse and vibrant church community.
- ▶ Significance: Antioch became a significant center for early Christianity, known for sending out Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journeys. It was also where believers were first called “Christians” (Acts 11:26).

c) The Church In Philippi (Acts 16:11-40):

- ▶ Key Event: The church in Philippi was established during Paul's second missionary journey. Paul and Silas preached the gospel, leading to the conversion of Lydia, a merchant, and the Philippian jailer and his household.
- ▶ Significance: The Philippian church became one of Paul's strongest supporters, as evidenced by his letter to them, the Book of Philippians.

d) The Church In Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9):

- ▶ Key Event: Paul established the church in Thessalonica during his second missionary journey. He preached in the synagogue, and many Jews and Gentiles believed.
- ▶ Significance: Despite facing severe persecution, the Thessalonian church remained faithful, and Paul later wrote two letters to them, 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

e) The Church In Corinth (Acts 18:1-11):

- ▶ Key Event: Paul established the church in Corinth during his second missionary journey. He spent 18 months there, teaching and converting many, including Jews and Gentiles.
- ▶ Significance: Corinth was a major commercial city, and the church faced numerous challenges, leading Paul to write 1 and 2 Corinthians to address issues of division, morality, and spiritual gifts.

f) The Church In Ephesus (Acts 19:1-20):

- ▶ Key Event: The church in Ephesus was established during Paul's third missionary journey. Paul spent over two years there, leading to a widespread conversion of both Jews and Greeks.
- ▶ Significance: Ephesus became a major center for Christianity in Asia Minor, and Paul later wrote the Book of Ephesians to strengthen the Christians there.

g) The Church In Rome (Acts 28:14-31):

- ▶ Key Event: Although the church in Rome was not directly founded by Paul, his arrival in Rome marked an important moment for the church there. He preached and taught while under house arrest, continuing to influence the Roman Christians.
- ▶ Significance: The Roman church was highly significant in the early Christian world, and Paul's letter to the Romans is one of the most important theological documents in the New Testament.

These examples illustrate how Christianity spread through the establishment of new congregations, each contributing significantly to the growth and development of the early Church. It is important to emphasize that these were not new religious organizations, but rather new congregations of Christ's Church, unified in their commitment to the teachings of Jesus and the mission He entrusted to His followers.

b. The Emergence Of New Religious Organisations:

- 1) Jesus established His Church in A.D. 33, and it has continued to exist throughout the centuries to the present day. It is crucial for anyone seeking a church or religious organization to understand that there is only one true Church, founded and established by Christ Himself (Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 4:4-6; Colossians 1:18). Since Jesus has already established His Church, no one has the authority to create another religious organization.
- 2) Despite man not having authority to create new religious organisations, man has done so and continues to do so. Here is a brief overview of the emergence of new religious organisations:
 - a) The Emergence Of The Catholic Religious Organisation: The Catholic Church gradually emerged over time as a distinct entity, beginning in the early centuries after Christ, as certain practices and doctrines developed that were not part of the original teachings of Jesus and the apostles. A significant moment in this development was in A.D. 606 in Rome, when Boniface III was declared the first official pope.
 - b) The Rise Of Protestant Religious Organisations: The origin of Protestant churches is rooted in the Protestant Reformation, a major movement in the 16th century that sought to reform perceived corrupt practices within the Roman Catholic Church. This resulted in the establishment of many new religious organisations:
 - ▶ Lutheranism: **Founder:** Martin Luther, **Place:** Wittenberg, Germany, **Date:** Approximately 1520s.
 - ▶ Reformed Church: **Founder:** John Calvin, **Place:** Geneva, Switzerland, **Date:** 1536.
 - ▶ Anglicanism (Church of England): **Founder:** Henry VIII, **Place:** England, **Date:** 1534.
 - ▶ Anabaptists: **Founders:** Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and others, **Place:** Zurich, Switzerland, **Date:** Early 1520s.
 - ▶ Presbyterianism: **Founder:** John Knox, **Place:** Scotland, **Date:** 1560.

- ▶ Puritans: **Founders:** Various leaders including William Bradford and John Winthrop, **Place:** England, **Date:** Early 1600s.
- ▶ Baptists: **Founder:** John Smyth (among others), **Place:** Amsterdam, Netherlands, **Date:** 1609.
- c) The Ascendance Of Cult Organisations: In the wake of the Reformation, several cults emerged, each introducing unique doctrines and practices that diverged significantly from mainstream Christianity. These new religious movements often developed distinctive beliefs and structures. Here are a few notable examples:
 - ▶ Unitarianism: **Founder:** Michael Servetus, **Place:** Switzerland and Transylvania, **Date:** Early 16th century.
 - ▶ Mormonism: **Founder:** Joseph Smith, **Place:** New York, United States, **Date:** 1830.
 - ▶ Jehovah's Witnesses: **Founder:** Charles Taze Russell, **Place:** Pennsylvania, United States, **Date:** 1931.

In your search for a church, understanding the biblical foundation of Christ's Church and recognizing the historical developments that have led to the formation of other religious organizations and cults is crucial. These insights help ensure that your search is focused on finding Christ's true Church, as established by Him, rather than a man-made institution.

2. Looking For Christ's Church:

In our search for a church, it is essential to recognize the historical and scriptural foundations of Christ's Church. By understanding the timeline of events - from Jesus' promise to establish His Church, through the spread of the gospel, to the later emergence of various religious organizations and cults - we can better identify the true Church that Christ established.

- a. We have seen that (i) Jesus promised to establish His church in A.D. 32 (**Matthew 16:18**), (ii) This promise began to be fulfilled in A.D. 33 (**Acts 2:1-47**), (iii) As the gospel spread, new congregations (not new religious organizations) were established, (iv) The first major deviation, leading to the formation of the Catholic Church, occurred around A.D. 606, (v) The Reformation in the 1520s gave rise to many new religious organizations such as Lutheran, Baptist, and Methodist denominations, (vi) Additionally, various cults emerged during this period, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Science, and Mormons.

Do you desire to be a member of religious organisation establish by man or do you seek to be a member of the church that Jesus established?

- b. While we might initially say, "I'm looking for **a** church," given the facts presented, we should now say, "I am looking for **the** church—Christ's church."

Where is Christ's church?

How do I become a member of Christ's church?

These are questions we will answer in the next lesson.

Although we might begin by saying, "I'm looking for **a** church," the information presented should lead us to refine that search to "I am looking for **the** church - Christ's church." In our next lesson, we will explore where Christ's Church can be found and how one can become a member.

Summary:

1. **Jesus' Promise And The Establishment Of His Church:** Jesus promised to build His Church after Peter's confession in A.D. 32 (**Matthew 16:18**), a promise fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost in A.D. 33 (**Acts 2:1-47**). From that moment, the apostles spread the gospel, leading to the establishment of new congregations, not new religious organizations, unified in Christ.

2. **The Emergence Of New Religious Organizations:** Over the centuries, deviations from the original teachings of Christ led to the formation of new religious organizations, beginning with the Catholic Church around A.D. 606. The Reformation in the 16th century further gave rise to numerous Protestant denominations, such as Lutheranism, Anglicanism, and Baptist traditions.
3. **The Ascendance Of Cult Movements:** In the wake of the Reformation, several cult movements emerged, including Unitarianism, Mormonism, and Jehovah's Witnesses. These groups introduced distinctive doctrines and practices that significantly diverged from mainstream Christianity, further complicating the religious landscape.
4. **The Quest For Christ's True Church:** In light of these historical developments, the search for a church should be focused on finding Christ's original Church. Understanding the historical context and the scriptural teachings is key to identifying and joining the Church that Jesus Himself established.

Applications:

1. **Discernment In Choosing A Church:** Use the information from this lesson to guide your search for a church. Understand that not all religious organizations are aligned with the teachings of Jesus Christ. Apply discernment by evaluating whether a church adheres to the scriptural foundation and the original teachings of Christ, rather than simply accepting any church based on tradition or convenience.
2. **Commitment To Biblical Teaching:** This lesson emphasizes the importance of staying true to the teachings of the Bible and the Church that Jesus established. As you engage with different congregations, prioritize those that emphasize sound doctrine, the authority of Scripture, and a commitment to the mission of Christ as outlined in the New Testament.
3. **Awareness Of Church History:** Develop an awareness of the historical development of Christian denominations and cults. Understanding this history will help you navigate the complex religious landscape today and prevent you from being led astray by organizations that deviate from the true teachings of Christ. This knowledge can also be a tool for engaging in meaningful conversations with others about the importance of staying faithful to the Church that Jesus founded.

Questions:

1. What did Jesus promise in Matthew 16:18?
2. When did the fulfillment of Jesus' promise to establish His Church begin?
3. What is the significance of the church in Jerusalem?
4. How did the Catholic Church begin to emerge?
5. What was the Protestant Reformation, and when did it occur?
6. Who founded Lutheranism, and where did it originate?
7. What is the difference between the new congregations established in the Book of Acts and the new religious organizations that emerged later?
8. What is one significant cult that emerged after the Reformation, and who founded it?
9. Why is it important to understand church history when searching for a church?
10. What should someone seeking a church ultimately be looking for, according to this lesson?