

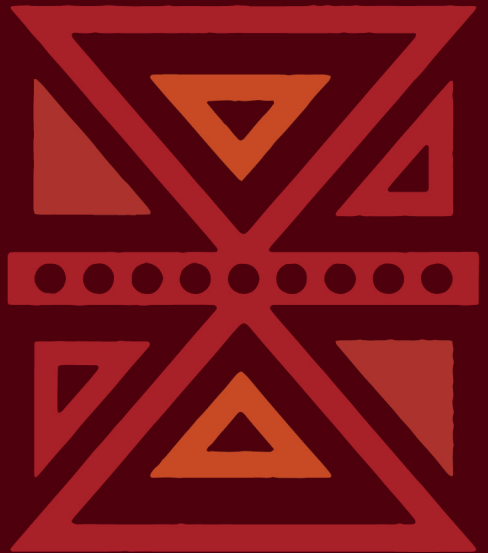
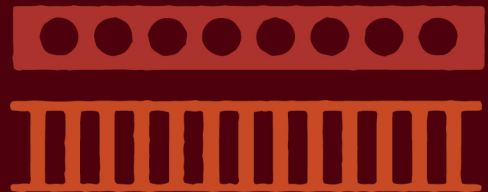
Conrad Mbewe

Foreword by Glenn Lyons



God's Design for the Church

A Guide for
African Pastors
and Ministry
Leaders



“This book is Conrad Mbewe’s equivalent of Paul’s pastoral letters. It is the wisdom of the Scriptures steeped in decades of personal experience. It is delivered in fresh African illustrations and applications that help even this North American pastor understand God’s Word better. Having known Mbewe for a quarter of a century, having been in his church and he in mine, I could not think of a better person to write such a volume. This book well reflects the teaching of the Bible in ways that both encourage and challenge today’s readers. Mbewe’s writing is clear and simple, elegant and gospel-celebrating. This book is delightful. Enjoy and be edified. The last chapter is gold.”

Mark Dever, Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC

“It’s the subtitle of this book that explains its vision: Conrad Mbewe is not only laying out a biblical and practical exposition of the church but is doing so for ‘African pastors and ministry leaders.’ Mbewe, longtime pastor of Kabwata Baptist Church in Lusaka, Zambia, points out that he writes as ‘a son of the African soil,’ and therefore he has earned the right to challenge his fellow Africans in frank ways that missionaries could never deploy without being dismissed as foreigners. In twenty short but probing chapters, Mbewe writes with such clarity and prophetic faithfulness that the book deserves wide study not only in Africa but around the world.

D. A. Carson, Emeritus Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; Cofounder, The Gospel Coalition

“I love Conrad Mbewe, and I love this book! This is a faithful, readable, and practical exploration of the doctrine of the church. As a Presbyterian, I might quibble with a Baptist point here or there, but that doesn’t take away from my overall enthusiasm. Mbewe has written an excellent book that is attuned to the cultural dynamics of Africa but beneficial for Christians everywhere. I hope this wise and accessible work finds a wide audience.”

Kevin DeYoung, Senior Pastor, Christ Covenant Church, Matthews, North Carolina; Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte

“With biblical insight and down-to-earth illustrations, Conrad Mbewe’s *God’s Design for the Church* takes us on an insider’s exploration of the nature, character, and challenges of the rapidly expanding church in Africa. His comprehensive but easy-to-read analysis confirms much of what is visible and does not shy away from often hidden ‘hot potatoes,’ such as money matters, issues of discipline, and other trends that define, enhance, or undermine the life and witness of the church. His perspective has implications for the future of the body of Christ, not only in Africa but also in other parts of the world.”

Femi B. Adeleye, Director, Langham Preaching Africa, Ghana

“This is a timely book! It addresses with clarity the confused identity and practices of the church in Africa. As a grace carrier, and as a bold, honest, and effective communicator, Conrad Mbewe has vindicated the concerns of the leaders of the church on our continent by addressing the elephant in the room. He has called by name what appeared to be a no-go area and described it as unacceptable. But he has also demonstrated that there is still a remnant who have not ‘bowed their knees to Baal.’ Above all, Mbewe has offered practical, Bible-based solutions to the current weaknesses and problems of the church. A thoroughly readable and thought-provoking book, it has left me with renewed hope for the church in Africa. I enthusiastically recommend it to all church leaders on our continent and especially to our leadership training institutions.”

Paul E. Mususu, President, Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia

“The church is the bride of Christ. It is God’s plan ‘A’ in his work of redemption. As such, it is paramount that we know and understand God’s design for the church. In this volume, Conrad Mbewe has done yeoman’s work in that regard. In an age when pragmatism and innovation are held in higher esteem than doctrine and theology, this book is a breath of fresh air. With the accuracy of a theologian and the tender heart of a shepherd, Mbewe weaves a tapestry that combines timeless truths and contemporary insights into a helpful resource for Christians of every stripe. In this time of biblical and ecclesiological illiteracy, the usefulness of this book cannot be overestimated.”

Voddie Baucham Jr., Dean of the School of Divinity, African Christian University

“Some books I enjoy recommending. A few I’m honored to recommend, as with this one. Conrad Mbewe has labored in faith and love for decades, studying the Scriptures and then leading his flock to follow them. This book shows the accumulated wisdom of all that study and work. It’s wise, pastorally conscientious, rigorously biblical, and excellent. And I plead with pastors to read his book slowly, carefully, prayerfully, with your Bible open, and looking for ways to apply Mbewe’s instruction in your own congregation.”

Jonathan Leeman, Elder, Cheverly Baptist Church, Bladensburg, Maryland;
Editorial Director, 9Marks

“Conrad Mbewe’s ministry at Kabwata Baptist Church has been the example of faithfulness and fruitfulness that I have pursued in my own ministry for more than a decade now. His was the first preaching that I heard that was shrouded in African style, illustrations, and application, while at the same time communicating faithfully and powerfully the glorious truths of our great God. Kabwata Baptist Church and other congregations that belong to their family of churches were the first to expose me to the idea of a healthy church. The compelling witness of members of Kabwata, who loved selflessly and pursued God in the Word fervently, helped me see the beauty of God’s plan for his church. In a time when the truths of God’s Word are labeled as Western, and error is defended as African, Mbewe has sketched for us a biblical portrait of the church that comes accompanied with a historical witness of fruitfulness in the African context. Read this book with your Bible open. Let him convince you from the Word. Where you see a need to correct course, in prayer, patience, and humility, join in pursuing God’s design for the church.”

Kenneth Mbugua, Lead Pastor, Emmanuel Baptist Church, Nairobi, Kenya;
Managing Director, Ekklesia Afrika

“With keen biblical insight, deep faithfulness to the Scriptures, and refreshing African illustrations, Conrad Mbewe sets his sights on the needs and concerns of the African church and hits the bull’s-eye. He makes it clear that Africa needs gospel-centered, Bible-drenched churches made up of true believers, covenanted together in gospel love, who unflinchingly know, live, and proclaim the gospel of Christ. Christians around the world should offer urgent prayers that African pulpits would be filled with African men who understand and apply the truths in this book—especially as the locus of gospel vibrancy moves more and more to the Global South. Any non-African who reads this book will gain insight about Africa and Africans, but don’t miss that Mbewe’s clarion call is not for an African church, but rather for a biblical church. This book is not just for Africans—it is for all cultures and contexts. It’s for anyone who desires to anchor themselves in the Bible’s design for church.”

J. Mack Stiles, Pastor, Erbil International Baptist Church, Erbil, Iraq

“What is an ideal church and how can you tell? Conrad Mbewe seeks to address God’s design for the church. He writes in a vivid, concise, and penetrating way, exalting the supremacy of Jesus Christ in the church. Mbewe is a living testimony of the biblical principles contained in this down-to-earth book. While it is still today and the opportunity is ours, we need Christian leadership that is spiritually and intellectually incisive. It is this leadership that is evident in this book. Mbewe is a voice that must be listened to, and this is a book that must be reckoned with. May the Lord use it to keep his church—particularly the church in Africa—strong and true to the faith.”

Joe Mundamawo, Bishop’s Chaplain, Reformed Evangelical Anglican
Church in Zimbabwe; Former Board Chairman, Harare Theological College

God's Design for the Church

*A Guide for African Pastors
and Ministry Leaders*

Conrad Mbewe

Foreword by Glenn Lyons

With Study Guides by The Ekklesia Afrika Ltd.

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

God's Design for the Church: A Guide for African Pastors and Ministry Leaders

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To my fellow elders
In gratitude for our joint labors to see God's design for
the church realized at Kabwata Baptist Church

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Foreword

Matrilineal succession, ancestor veneration, and *ubuntu* may not be the expected topics of discussion in most traditional church doctrine resources, but you will find all these African considerations, and even more, in this biblical instruction on God's design for the church. The chapters that follow are all driven by the need for God's people to better understand the Scriptures in order to rightly "behave in the household of God" (1 Tim. 3:14–15).

As you journey through these pages, you will also discover a pastor's heart for the body of Christ, particularly the family of believers in Africa. Here we learn from a teacher who delights to celebrate the church's strengths but also lovingly to call out her weaknesses. He will not avoid bringing God's Word to bear on the controversial issues, but without quibbling over disputable matters. Each subject is addressed and communicated in such a way that it is within the grasp of the mature as well as the new believer. Without fail, the necessary corrective is repeatedly applied: "What does the Bible say?"

We are all too aware of the need for the church to grow up into the fullness of her maturity in Christ. Across the African continent, our gathered congregations' primary need is to have God's Word faithfully taught, contextually applied, and consistently obeyed—and all this to be accomplished on our knees! The remedy is really that simple, and pastor Conrad Mbewe has, under God, given us helpful guidance in applying that remedy.

It is my privilege to commend this timely teaching to the church in Africa—and beyond. May it richly benefit all who read *and* apply it.

Build your church, Lord! Amen.

Glenn Lyons
Presiding Bishop
Reformed Evangelical Anglican Church–South Africa

Acknowledgments

The writing of this book has been a team effort. I wish to thank the pastors of sister churches in Lusaka, Zambia, who took time out of their very busy schedules across 2019 to meet with me and our pastoral interns each time I finished working on a chapter so that we could go through it together. They were the first proofreaders. They also ensured that my applications scratched where it was really itching. Without their sacrifice in terms of time, this book would not have been half as relevant as it has turned out to be. Without trying to be exhaustive, among the pastors and pastoral interns who met with me consistently throughout the writing of the book are German Banda, Curtis Chirwa, Saidi Chishimba, Million Kambuli, Uaundja Karamata (intern from Namibia), Kennedy Kawambale, Mwindula Mbewe, Emmanuel Mukisa (intern from Uganda), Jadder Mulonde, Thomson Musukwa, Joe Shoko (intern from Zimbabwe), Chipita Sibale, Oswald Sichula, Wege Sinyangwe, and Marvin Ssuuna (intern from Uganda). It was a truly international team!

The work that I do is almost impossible without the help of assistants. Let me thank my office assistant, Irene Maboshe, and my ministry assistant, Francis Kaunda, for the work they were doing behind the scenes that freed me so that I could concentrate on the primary work of an author. They know what I am talking about.

I would also like to thank the staff at the African Christian University for their enthusiasm for this book project. Their input when I presented an overview of the book to them toward the end of the writing period helped me to make the book more balanced. So, to the ACU Vice Chancellor, Dr. Celestine Musembi, and her staff, thank you very much.

I have dedicated this book to my fellow elders at Kabwata Baptist Church because of their spiritual courage. Whenever we have studied the Bible and seen that there are areas in our church belief or practice that we need to modify, they have not been afraid to do so. Sometimes it has taken a little long to do so, but their courage to obey has been inspirational. Without this, I would have been asking others to do what I have not been doing. So, Charles Bota, Chola Chakonta, John Chundu, John Kumwenda, Chipita Sibale, Alfred Sakwiya, George Sitali, and Emmanuel Matafwali (as one untimely born), this book is really for you!

Let me also thank Crossway, the Gospel Coalition, the Gospel Coalition Africa, 9Marks, and Ekklesia Afrika for the encouragement they gave me as I was writing the book. It was your gospel partnership that initially brought this book to birth. And I know that long after the manuscript has been submitted, you will continue to work behind the scenes to ensure that the book blesses the churches in Africa.

Lastly, and by no means the least, I am very grateful to my wife, Felistas, who sacrificed many hours of our marital bliss and fellowship so that I could try to beat the deadline for the project. I have no doubt that in heaven she will enjoy some of the reward that the Lord Jesus Christ will bestow on us for this labor of love.

Introduction

If you are wondering, as you pick up this book, why we should have yet another book on the church when many have already been written, I do not blame you. I was of the same mind when the idea for this writing project came up. Here is the story: I was approached to comment on the distribution across Africa of a very good book on the church. I had read it long before and would recommend it to anyone even today. However, the more I thought about this distribution project, the more I realized that the book would not meet the needs of the church at a practical level on the continent. I commented more or less as follows:

The book flies at 10,000 feet above sea level. It gives us the general principles that ought to guide us in the life of the church. However, what the church here desperately needs is someone to take us through the African jungle by the hand, showing us trees and animals to be wary of if we are going to stay the course.

In other words, the greatest need was for a book that deals with some of the major issues that are hindering the church in Africa from being what God designed it to be.

Let me illustrate it this way. A friend recently told me the story of a man who was tired of people using a footpath along the perimeter wall around his house and urinating on a certain section of his wall. He put up a sign that said, "This is not a toilet. Please do not urinate here." This did not stop the people from urinating there. He changed the sign to read, "Anyone found urinating here will be prosecuted." Alas, the vice continued unabated. Finally, he put up a sign that read, "Please urinate here. We need human urine for some rituals." He

said that the vice not only stopped but the footpath was completely abandoned!

I am sure that, for many Western minds, the appeal to simple common sense (“This is not a toilet”) or the appeal to the law (“You will be prosecuted”) would have sufficed to arrest this vice. If it did not, certainly the appeal to superstition (such as witchcraft) would have also failed. Yet, to the African mind, there is something more powerful than common sense and the state—it is witchcraft. This belief is what did the trick in the story I have narrated. It is important for an author to recognize this when writing for an African audience. The world of the spirits is so real and near that it needs to be addressed in order to produce authentic Christian practice.

While I do not agree that Christianity in Africa must be different from Christianity in the East or West, I recognize the need for the application of Christian truth to vices that are peculiarly African. To my mind, these two approaches are different. The first tries to create a divide that the Bible knows nothing about and would not even want to encourage. For instance, it wants us to deliberately and intentionally worship differently from our brethren in the West, many of whom live among us in our cosmopolitan cities. This self-conscious effort is foreign to New Testament Christianity, which tries to bring all of us into one body—“. . . Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:11). The second, which this book is about, tries to apply biblical principles to what is obtaining in Africa so that we are drawn back to belief and practice that follows God’s design for the church. I am not trying to make the Bible more African; I am trying to get the church in Africa to be more biblical.

Having said all that, there is a lot that is happening in the African church that is very positive and should be encouraged. There is a lot of good that the church on other continents will do well to imitate. Here are a few of these areas.

The church in Africa is growing by leaps and bounds. This is certainly a matter to thank God for, especially when one compares this to what is happening in the church in the West. It is disheartening to any Christian who goes from Africa to, say, Europe, and finds church

buildings that have been turned into libraries, museums, restaurants, and bars. It is equally sad to see so many churches with mainly elderly people tottering to their graves and almost all the pews empty. Where are the people? Where are the young people? How can such churches survive? It is so refreshing to return to Africa and find churches meeting in every conceivable place as new churches sprout up almost every week. It is said that the number of Christians in Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century was about 9 million and that by the end of the twentieth century it was about 380 million. Church structures cannot cope with this kind of growth. So, churches are simply meeting in classrooms, in grass-thatched makeshift structures, and under trees—and yet they are still growing! It is also refreshing to see in attendance young parents with their toddlers, teenagers and young adults, all the way to octogenarians. It speaks well for the future of the church in Africa.

The church in Africa is full of zeal, though sometimes this zeal lacks knowledge (Rom. 10:2). This zeal is seen in evangelistic fervor. Anyone with eyes to see cannot miss this, and it is the explanation behind the quantum leap in growth. African society generally is very open to the Christian message, though openness to listening is not the same thing as openness to responding to the message. If they know that you are a pastor who has come to visit their home, most parents will call everyone in the home to come and listen to you. The door of opportunity is still wide open. Individuals whose knowledge of the Bible is still at kindergarten level will soon be found leading a church in a village. Some of them do not even have a full Bible. Yet they are preaching wherever they find ears that are willing to listen. You will find lay preachers in streets and on buses and trains. Personal witnessing takes place in schools, colleges, and universities. There is a desperate need for more training in order to reduce the wildfires being produced by this zeal where knowledge is lacking. The normal “Bible College” structures used in the Western world to train future leaders and pastors cannot cope with this zeal and growth. Other forms need to be brought in that would function more like the combine harvester does on huge commercial farms. All such “problems” aside, however, the church in Africa is refreshingly zealous.

The church in Africa is communal and has respect for authority. This is something that comes largely from African culture, and it is commendable. Later in the book I speak about the *ubuntu* phenomenon, which captures something of the tendency by the African people to prize human relations more than anything else. This is the fountain out of which relationships in the church tend to run deep and which also means that the elderly and those in positions of leadership are respected. Pastors living within certain distances of each other will have pastor “fraternals,” where they not only meet to listen to each other teach but also share their common lives as pastors and meet each other’s needs. They develop deep relationships in those groupings, and many of these are beyond immediate denominational circles. The “one another” imperatives of Scripture are already in practice in the culture before they are augmented with biblical teaching. People have a greater sense of belonging to churches than they normally do in the West. If there were to be a fault, perhaps it would be that people do not question the actions of their leaders as much as they ought to because of their respect for authority. Some biblical balance may be necessary.

The church in Africa is respected by the community and the state because it often provides for the basic needs of society. In my own country of Zambia, the church provides 60 percent of the health facilities of the entire nation. The church also runs the best schools in the country, in terms of both the physical structures and the holistic development of the students. Even when there has been need for disaster relief, the church has tended to be the vehicle chosen by donors to deliver help at the grassroots level. This has helped the nations of Africa that are on the brink of abject poverty to appreciate the church and to still have hope for the younger generation. The love shown by the church has won the ears of community and state leaders. Therefore, when church leaders express concern about an important matter in society, local and national leaders tend to listen. This means that the church is able to speak into the moral issues of the day and gain a hearing. This is one reason why the leaders of African nations have been able to withstand the pressure from the West to redefine human sexuality and marriage to suit those with a homosexual agenda. This

is despite the fact that some Western countries are tying their aid to an acceptance of this agenda. Although some church leaders have abused the listening ear of state leaders for their own personal gain, this relationship still augurs well for the ambience that enables the church to do its evangelistic work. What was true in the Western world some two hundred years ago is currently still true on the African continent.

So, there is a lot to be said for the health and prosperity of the church in Africa. As the reader begins to make progress in reading this book and finds some areas of grave concern being addressed, these positive characteristics of African Christianity should not be forgotten. You would have to be of a very pessimistic spirit to feel discouraged about what God is doing on the continent.

This book is written to give the biblical foundations of what the church is meant to be. Many people who make up the church in Africa—including church pastors and ministry leaders—simply inherited the church. They have adopted what they have found in the church without really knowing why they do what they do. Without being anchored in the Bible's teaching about the church, they have been at the mercy of the winds that are blowing and the waves that are beating against the church, and consequently, they sometimes take the church in directions that hurt its spiritual life. This is because they are simply flowing with the tide. This zeal that lacks knowledge sometimes results in the church finding itself in seriously unbiblical practices. There is a desperate need for a book that explains God's design for the church so that those who lead the church can do so in accordance with God's mind. This is the positive goal of this book.

Another reason why this book has been written is to address the obvious wrong practices that are in vogue in the African church today. My approach will be to lay out what the Bible teaches concerning various areas of church life and then to take that torch and shine it upon the current practices. I have tried to use questions as headings for the various chapters so that those who want to use it as a guide can go straight to the chapter that asks the question that they are asking. They will not only get the biblical answers but will also see what areas need to change in the light of what the Bible says. Where the Bible is not very clear on a matter, I have honestly said so. In such situations,

denominations that equally respect the authority of the Bible have different applications, and I have avoided being too dogmatic. However, where the Bible's teaching is well-defined, I have sought to be faithful to the Scriptures so that the readers are left in no doubt about God's design for the church. It is my prayer that the reader will have the humility to admit where the practices of a particular church are in opposition to the teaching of the Bible and will make the changes necessary to receive the approbation of God. Church leadership is a stewardship and not an ownership. The church belongs to God, and our job is to look after it on his behalf.

This book goes out with the prayer that its fragrance will spread across the landscape of Africa and will result in a therapeutic effect on the church. The church on this continent currently has the greatest potential to bless the global church if only it can be healed of the vices that are crippling its effectiveness. This transformation can take place by the power of the Holy Spirit once the word of God is known. God has designed his church to function in a particular way and has revealed that design in the Bible. May this be known and applied to the health of the church in Africa and to the glory of God alone. Amen!

STUDY GUIDE FOR THE INTRODUCTION

God's Design for the Church

Summary

Biblical Christianity is the same everywhere. It speaks into the different manners and customs that people have and speaks to them in ways they can understand, but the message of the Bible is still the same everywhere. By and large, churches in Africa are growing. They enjoy certain advantages that our brothers in the West do not have, e.g., respect in the society and the presence of a young, future generation. There is, however, a deep need to recover a biblical understanding of God's design for a church, and to forsake practices that are false to God's word.

Study Questions

1. The author identifies a number of blessings that churches in Africa still have which many in the West no longer enjoy. Can you identify them? Which of these blessings are true in your setting?

2. What do you think are the differences between a church that follows God's design for the church and a church that does not?

3. The author also says that the church is "a stewardship and not an ownership." What do you think is the difference between these two ways of viewing the church? In what ways have you seen pastors in your country practicing the one or the other?

4. Some have said that it is a waste of time to explore God's design for the local church in Africa, since Africa's greater need is to hear the gospel, not to reform its churches. Do you agree?

How do churches that follow God's design promote evangelization of the community?

5. Are there any ways you think your current church has missed the Bible's design for what a church should be? What ways are these?

Consider beginning to pray for your church in these areas as you work through this book. At the end of the book, you can come back to this list and compare it with what you have learned.

What Is the Church?

Like many individuals in Africa, I grew up going to church. From the earliest memories of my childhood, I recall being helped to dress up in my best clothes on Sunday and being shepherded into the family car before going with my parents and siblings to church. I remember the Sunday school years, with their riveting stories of Samson and Delilah, David and Goliath, Daniel in the lions' den, Moses and Pharaoh, and so on. I recall the stories about Jesus that endeared him to my heart even as a young, unconverted boy.

I also remember the eloquence of the pastor. Standing out in my childhood memories was the way in which about halfway through the sermon on Sundays, at some high point, women in the church would suddenly burst forth in a chorus and the pastor would pause to sip some water. I always waited for that refreshing midpoint in the sermon. Church was the climax of my week, and the mid-sermon singing was the great crescendo of that climax.

This background defined what church was for me. It was a place. It was a building. It was where you went in your best clothes to meet people in their best clothes and to hear wonderful Bible stories. Most often those stories ended with some moral application about how we should live in ways that pleased God. They also helped us to become more loving neighbors.

It was not until many years later that I began to understand that a church was in fact not a building. It was not even a place. It was a

gathered people who come together for the purpose of worship and fulfilling the mission given to them by Jesus Christ. In that sense, it was different from a bank or a shop. This change of understanding happened when I became a true Christian through regeneration and conversion. The more I studied the Bible, the more I began to understand that the church was not the building you went to on Sundays. It was the people engaged in the activities that took place in that building. It was the people who met there. I can go further and say that the church was not even *everyone* who met there. It was the people who had experienced conversion in Christ and had covenanted together to live as a family according to the law of Christ. These were the church. That was a new concept for me.

***Ekklesia* and the Body of Christ**

In the forty years of my Christian life I have come to realize that my wrong concept of the church was in fact the most common understanding all around me. The first picture used in the Bible for “church” is best captured in the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means, “the called-out ones.” Perhaps the closest phrase in English would be the word “assembly,” which refers to people who are called out from wherever they are and are gathered into one place. Sometimes this word was used to refer to other assemblies who were not the church. We see this in Acts 19:32, 39, 41:

Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together. . . .

[The town clerk said] ‘But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly.’ . . . And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly.

The New Testament church chose to use this Greek word for assembly to refer to its own gatherings.

In the Gospels, this Greek word is used only three times. It is used when Jesus said, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). It is used twice when Jesus said, “If he refuses to

listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matt. 18:17). In both cases, these were the words of Jesus. In the rest of the New Testament *ekklesia* is used more than 110 times. The usage of the word emphasizes that the church is not a building but people. It also emphasizes that these people are separated, through salvation, from other people. They are “called out” from other people. In this case, believers are called out to live separate lives from what the Bible calls “the world.” Finally, this word emphasizes that the people of God are called out in order to be together. They are an assembly. The sense of togetherness cannot be missed when one reads the following description of the church in its very earliest days:

And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:44–47)

A second picture that the Bible uses for the church is that of “the body of Christ.” We see this especially in the writings of the apostle Paul. To the Romans Paul says, “For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them” (Rom. 12:4–6). To the Ephesians Paul writes, “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11–12). This refers to the church’s relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus is the head of the body (Eph. 5:23; Col. 1:18). We are joined to him when the Holy Spirit regenerates us and baptizes us into his body (1 Cor. 12:12–13). Just as the human head controls what the body does, so also Jesus by his Spirit and his word determines what the church does. This concept of the body of Christ also emphasizes the variety of gifts that we have as

Christians, as we noted in both the Romans and Ephesians passages quoted earlier. We are like the eyes, ears, mouth, nose, arms, and legs of the human body. Each of us fulfills a distinct function in the body. Finally, this body concept illustrates the way in which Christians are to care for one another in the church. As Christians, we are members of the body of Christ in the same way that the human body has various parts. Each part functions for the good of the rest of the body. “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Cor. 12:26).

The Church Universal and Local

According to the Bible, the church is both universal and local. The universal church comprises all those who from the beginning of human history up to the end of history have been (or will be) purchased by the blood of Jesus and are already assembled and enrolled in heaven (Heb. 12:23). We will one day be gathered around the throne of God from every tribe, language, people, and nation (Rev. 5:9). For God, who sees the end from the beginning (Isa. 46:10), this church is ever present before his eyes. The author of the letter to the Hebrews seems to suggest this when he tells the Hebrew Christians that they have come “. . . to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven” (Heb. 12:23). The apostle Paul seems also to have alluded to this ever-present reality when he says,

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (Eph. 5:25–27)

That makes sense only if it refers to all the believers right across history. At any one time, part of that number is here on earth awaiting glorification and the other part has already arrived in heaven. In Christian literature, the former is called “the church militant” while the latter is called “the church triumphant.” Wonderful terms, I think!

The church militant, being the sum total of Christians on earth, has been growing over time. The numbers sometimes reduce in some parts

of the world due to persecution or worldliness. Sometimes it is evident that a growing hardness to the gospel sweeps over an entire geographical area. As older Christians die and very few people are converted, the number of Christians in that area reduces and the church militant gets smaller. However, generally speaking, the church militant has continued to grow around the world over the years. This has been primarily because of its evangelistic and missions work. In the most dangerous places for Christians to live, and especially where tyrannical regimes have been in power, sometimes the church militant has largely disappeared. In fact, believers have simply gone “underground” (see 1 Kings 19:18). They are still there, but for fear of their lives they no longer meet publicly. However, once the situation changes and freedom of religion is guaranteed, the church militant has popped up again and the world has been amazed to discover that it has grown substantially while in hiding.

Belonging to the Local Church

The local church ought to comprise those who have repented of their sins, put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and undergone public baptism. (Some church denominations include the children of believers, but that issue is beyond the scope of this book.) Jesus, the head of the church, wants all those who claim to belong to him to be baptized and become part of such visible and localized bodies so that they can be taught the implications of belonging to him. We read this in the statement that we call “the Great Commission.” Jesus said,

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt. 28:18–20)

As shown in this passage, baptism signifies the public confession by which a person becomes a member of the local church and comes under the instruction of church leaders.

All Christians should belong to a local church. This is not optional. It is in the local church that they will be instructed, as we have

already observed. It is also in the local church that they will primarily experience the richness of Christian fellowship with other believers. Everything we have learned about *ekklesia* and the body of Christ will be experienced at a very practical level in the context of the local church. Christians will learn to live with other believers in the local church even though they may have serious personal disagreements and disputes from time to time. It is in the local church that they will learn to serve one another and to serve together in extending the kingdom of God according to the gifts that God has given them. Every Christian should become an active member of a local church. I repeat, this is not optional.

Distinguishing Characteristics of a True Church

Not every institution that calls itself a church is really a true church. In the Bible, some such institutions are called “synagogues of Satan” (Rev. 2:9; 3:9). So, how can we tell if a church is really a church? When the New Testament church began in Acts 2, it was described this way: “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:41–42). There was the preaching of God’s word, the sharing of the common life, the ordinances, and prayer. From this list, I want to draw out two distinguishing characteristics of true churches and then add another one that became part of church life later. A true church can be *distinguished* by three primary characteristics:

1. **The preaching of the word of God.** That this is an essential characteristic of a true church is evident from what Jesus said in Matt. 28:20: “. . . teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” The preaching of the word of God must be central to the very definition of the church. This is why one of the very first achievements of pioneer missionaries who came to Africa was to translate the Bible into the language of the people. They knew how important the preaching of the Bible was to the health of Christians and of churches. Sadly, in too many of our churches in Africa, preaching does not occupy a central position anymore. Rather, we have many choirs that take turns

on the same day—children’s choir, men’s choir, women’s choir, the main choir, and so on. By the time all these choirs have finished singing, everyone is ready to go home. Drama has also begun to feature quite prominently in some churches. This must change. With regard to preaching, Louis Berkhof says, “This is the most important mark of the Church. . . . It does not mean that the preaching must be perfect and absolutely pure, but that it must be true to the fundamentals of the Christian religion and must have a controlling influence on faith and practice.”¹

Closely connected with the preaching of the word of God should be the proclamation of the true gospel. This is the heart of the word of God. The church should be one place where men and women are constantly reminded of the way in which God reconciles sinners to himself. The person and work of Christ should be taught in all its fullness. Where salvation is being taught as achieved through works of righteousness—whether in part or in whole—you will not have the church of Christ there, even if the place is called a church. The true gospel must be an essential component of the definition of the church.

2. The provision of the ordinances. This refers to the administration of baptism and the Lord’s Supper (see Acts 2:41–42, referred to earlier). The latter is sometimes called Communion. Whereas churches may differ on the right recipients and mode of baptism, this religious rite should be part of the activities of local churches as a means by which individuals enter into the church. While inside the church, they should participate in the Lord’s Supper, which typifies the death of the Lord Jesus for his people. Again, there will be differences in the frequency and the precise way in which this meal is celebrated, but it must be part of the church’s life.

3. The practice of discipline. The church is meant to be a place where godliness and truth are upheld. Where either of these is missing in the life of a person, they should be warned and urged to repent so that they are restored to a healthy spiritual life. However, where they stubbornly continue living a life of sin or holding on to and teaching heresy, they should be disciplined through public rebuke or excommunication (Matt. 18:15–20; 1 Cor. 5:1–13). In the book of

1. Louis Berkhof, *Summary of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1938), 153.

Revelation, Jesus warned those churches where stubborn sinners are not disciplined that he was going to do it himself (e.g., Rev. 2:16). Where that happens, often entire churches end up being closed down. We must all take this matter seriously. Discipline is part of the very definition of the church.

The only people who should remain in the church are those who show genuine faith and obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ, the great head of the church. This is seen when individuals are doing everything possible to flee from sin and pursue a righteous life. This is also seen in their love for fellow believers and for the God whom Christians worship. Where you have individuals like this filling up the membership of a local church, you can safely say that you have a true church on earth.

Some Implications of All This

All these issues are dealt with in more detail later in this book. For now, I wanted us to simply answer the question, "What is the church?" I trust that the explanation above has answered that question from the Bible. A few implications come out of this brief survey.

First, attending a church regularly does not automatically make you a member of a church. There is a difference between the local church and the Sunday congregation. You must go beyond simply attending and should become a responsible member who fulfills all the responsibilities that Christ expects you to fulfill.

Second, we must not look down on churches that do not meet in exquisite church buildings, as if they are any less churches of Christ. The rate at which Christianity is growing in Africa means that we will continue to have churches meeting in school classrooms and under trees. These are as much churches of Jesus Christ as those who meet in magnificent cathedrals. What matters is not the kind of building Christians are meeting in but whether the people meeting there are real Christians and whether they are listening to the preaching of the word of God, receiving the sacraments, and ensuring purity among themselves through the exercise of church discipline.

Third, it must be evident from this that we should rejoice in the international and global nature of the church. We must not think of the church primarily in terms of our own local church or denomination.

We belong to the body of Christ that encompasses the whole planet. The church is in Africa, in America, in Europe, in Asia, and so on. It is everywhere. Your local church is only a local manifestation of this big, international body. There is sometimes such an emphasis on being an “African church” that we can easily lose sight of the fact that we are one body—one church—right across the globe. Our local church should be in partnership with other churches in fulfilling the task that Jesus has given to his worldwide church. Our local church should also be actively helping weaker churches around us to become stronger.

Fourth, since membership in the church is open to all who are converted in Christ, we must never limit our church’s membership to one tribe or one ethnic group. The language that we use in our church should simply represent the language of the people we meet in our community. That way, anyone who lives in our vicinity will feel free to belong to our church as long as they are truly believers in Christ. One of the sad realities of Africa is that you can have five churches on the same street and they all use different languages because each church “belongs” to a different tribe. Yet those who go to those churches go to the same schools and work in the same offices, where they interact or learn and work in the same language. This totally misrepresents the nature of the Christian church. If there is to be any division, let it be because of doctrinal differences. Beyond that, each local church must be open to anyone who is a Christian, and we must go out of our way to make everyone in that category feel at home.

STUDY GUIDE FOR CHAPTER 1

What Is the Church?

Summary


God's word, not our varied experiences, should teach us what a church is. A church is a gathering of those who have been called out of the sinful world through salvation and who have made a covenant with each other to care for each other and to assemble regularly to worship God. These assemblies of believers must be marked by three things: the preaching of the word, the practice of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the practice of church discipline. The church is the body of Christ, which is both universal and local. As the head, Christ has authority over the church, and as a body we need the variety that each body part contributes.

Study Questions

1. This chapter identifies three distinctive marks of a true church. What are they? Which of them is your local church strongest at? Which one do you think you are weakest at?


2. On page 24, the author describes the church as “people who had experienced conversion in Christ and had covenanted together to live as a family according to the law of Christ.” Based on this definition of a church, would you call a weekly Bible study or a home group fellowship a church? Why or why not?

3. Are there local churches in your area that have died and closed down? How would you reconcile a church closing down with Jesus's promise in Matthew 16 to build his church?
4. A pastor in rural Burundi believes that even though everyone is welcome to attend church on Sunday, the Bible teaches that only those who have been "called out" through faith and repentance can rightly become members. However, he fears to teach this because he will upset the unconverted elderly, rich, long-time attendees whose money supports the church budget. What should he do?
5. From this chapter, what would you say to believers who don't think they have to be part of a local church?



At the beginning of the twentieth century, Christians in Africa numbered approximately nine million—by the end, that number had grown to more than 380 million. As the number of Christians continues to grow, African pastors are often overwhelmed and in desperate need of guidance.

Drawing from three decades of pastoral experience in Zambia, Conrad Mbewe has written a comprehensive handbook specifically for African pastors and church leaders. Structured around twenty commonly asked questions about God’s design for the church, this helpful resource covers topics ranging from the definition of church and the role of church members to the importance of doctrine. Through this book, Mbewe aims to equip pastors and leaders with biblical principles that will “permeate the landscape of Africa and transform its churches for generations to come.”



“This book takes us on an insider’s exploration of the nature, character, and challenges of the rapidly expanding church in Africa. Mbewe’s perspective has implications for the future of the body of Christ, not only in Africa but also in other parts of the world.”


FEMI B. ADELEYE, Director, Langham Preaching Africa, Ghana

“A thoroughly readable and thought-provoking book, it has left me with renewed hope for the church in Africa. I enthusiastically recommend it to all church leaders on our continent and especially to our leadership training institutions.”

PAUL E. MUSUSU, President, Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia

“This book is delightful. Enjoy and be edified.”

MARK DEVER, Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC



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