

# LESSON ONE

## THE CHURCH AS A MYSTERY: The Design in the Heart of God

*"...to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God ..." (Eph 3:9).*

### DAY 1: READ & SUMMARIZE

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The following verses encapsulate the lesson to follow. Read them carefully, meditating on their message. Express the key concept of each passage as it applies to the Church as the "design in the heart of God."

**A) Ephesians 3:4-6 –**

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**B) Matthew 16:18 –**

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**C) Ephesians 5:26, 27 –**

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## DAY 2: LEARN & RESPOND

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### THE MYSTERY OF THE CHURCH

What is a mystery? When used in the Bible, a “mystery” is a truth that people could not discover for themselves, which was kept secret by God until the appropriate moment in history, when He revealed it to mankind. There are 14 mystery doctrines recorded in the New Testament. One of these is the mystery of the Church.

What is the mystery of the Church? The Word of God distinguishes the human race into three separate groups: *“the Jews, ... the Gentiles, ...the Church of God”* (1 Cor 10:32). The “Gentiles” refers to all the nations of the earth—except the nation that came from Abraham, called out of Ur of the Chaldees circa 2000 BC. His family was chosen for a special role—to be the vehicle of God’s blessing to the whole world: *“And I will bless those who bless you, and curse him that curses you: and in you shall all families of the earth be*

*blessed”* (Gen 12:3). Through this nation, in spite of their failures, came the greatest gifts God ever gave the human race—the written Word of God and the Messiah.

To protect the Messianic line through Abraham and David to Christ, God erected a “middle wall.” If the Jewish nation became absorbed into the other nations, how would God provide the *“son of David, the son of Abraham”* (Mt 1:1) as Savior? So God walled off the Jews by giving them different food laws and customs which kept them from freely intermingling with other nations. But once the Savior came, God took down that middle wall. *“For He is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of partition between us [Jews and Gentiles]”* (Eph 2:14).

Of course Gentiles could be saved in the Old Testament period—Rahab, Ruth, and Uriah are examples. But the mystery of the

Church is this: *"...the mystery of Christ which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ by the gospel"* (Eph 3:4-6). Believing Jews and Gentiles now not only come in on the same basis, but share all the blessings equally, with the believing Jews now having no advantage over Gentiles.

### **THE LORD UNFOLDS THE SECRET**

What is the Church? People have many ideas about the meaning of the word "church." But we are only interested in this study with the way the Bible uses the term. A fitting description of one New Testament church is given in this way: *"Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both*

*theirs and ours"* (1 Cor 1:2). Notice that such churches are to be composed of those vitally linked to Christ, separate from the world system – "saints" – and linked to all who call on the name of the Lord Jesus. Composed of Jew and Gentile, all members of the true Church have one thing in common. We have discovered the astounding truth that *"the Son of God... loved me, and gave Himself for me"* (Gal 2:20). We have repented and believed the gospel (Mk 1:15), receiving Christ by faith (Jn 1:12). The Lord Jesus first introduced the subject in these words, *"...I will build My Church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it"* (Mt 16:18):

**"I" - THE ARCHITECT.** Man-made structures are doomed to failure; this building alone will survive the collapse of the universe. Only the Creator of the universe (Jn 1:3), described by Paul as *"the Head of the church: and...the Savior of the body"*

(Eph 5:23) has the capabilities to design, construct, and see to completion his *"glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing"* (Eph 5:27). And only He could afford it, redeemed with His own precious blood!

**"WILL" - The Purpose.** On very few occasions when He was on earth did the Lord Jesus express His own will. But He did express His mighty and certain will here in Matthew 16:18, *"I will build My Church"* and again in those words to His Father concerning us: *"Father, I will that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am; that they may behold My glory"* (Jn 17:24). *"The gates of hell,"* a malicious and relentless attack by the archfiend himself, *"shall not prevail against it."* In fact, we read concerning God's perfect Servant, *"He shall not fail nor be discouraged"* (Isa 42:4).

**"BUILD" - The Construction.** At this point the Church was still fu-

ture; it would begin *"when the day of Pentecost was fully come"* in Acts 2. We know that the Church is a New Testament work only because it was to be *"built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone"* (Eph 2:20). His death at Calvary would make the *"peace"* necessary to bring Jew and Gentile together. Now stone by living stone, the structure rises.

**"MY" - The Owner.** We must acknowledge no other head but the Lord Himself. We can obey no other and hope to be blessed. We have no more right to come up with a new way of conducting the activities of the church than we do a new way to be saved. Both blueprints are in the Scriptures. Paul would link them in these words: *"Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ [that's the doctrine of the gospel]; and to make all men see*

*what is the fellowship of the mystery [that's the doctrine of the Church], which from the beginning of the world has been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ" (Eph 3:8-9).*

### **"CHURCH" - The Masterpiece.**

The Church is not an earthly organization, certainly not a material building, but a living organism composed of all true believers as members of His body. Through it, God manifests His grace (Eph 2:7), wisdom (Eph 3:10), and glory (Rom 9:23). Some day we will see her *"prepared as a bride adorned for her husband"* (Rev 21:2). O how beautiful grace will have made her then— *"without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing"*!

### **THE MEANING OF THE WORD "CHURCH"**

There are several words that might help us in understanding the biblical meaning of these important words, "Church" and "churches." Since the church has "ears" (Acts 11:22), can "pray"

(Acts 12:5), and can be "persecuted" (1 Cor 15:9) among other things, it is obvious that the word refers to people and not to a building or organization.

1. First is the English word **church** itself, which derives from an anglicized form of the Greek word *kuriakos* meaning *that which belongs to the Lord (kurios)*. He is our center, our gathering place. As the prophecy reads: *"The scepter shall not depart from Judah...until Shiloh come; and unto Him shall the gathering of the people be"* (Gen 49:10).

2. The word most often used is **ekklesia**, meaning *called out*. Those saved have been *"called ...out of darkness into His marvellous light"* (1 Pet 2:9). *"God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for His name"* (Acts 15:14). We have been called out of this world system into a new society of those who love and follow the Lord Jesus.

3. A third word often used in English is **assembly**. Although preferred as a better translation of *ekklesia*, it not only carries the idea of being called out but of being called together. The believer is no longer a part of this world but he is not alone. "Together" is one of the often repeated words in the epistles of Paul to the churches.

The first scattered congregations of Greek-speaking Christians...spoke of themselves as a "[convened] assembly"; at first each single congregation was so called, and afterwards the whole body of Christians everywhere was spoken of collectively as "the [convened] assembly." That is the most literal translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*. This self-bestowed name rested on the certain conviction that God had separated from the world His "saints" in Christ, and had "called" or "convened" them to an assembly, which was "God's assembly," "God's muster," because God was the convener.

- See Adolph Deissmann's *Light from the Ancient East* (p. 112).

### **THE CHURCH AND THE CHURCHES**

In these notes, we will distinguish between the Church and the churches. The universal Church (with a capital C) is that great company, most already in heaven, regardless of creed or denomination, to which each believer is added the moment he or she trusts Christ: "*And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved*" (Acts 2:47). God "*gave [Christ] to be the head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all*" (Eph 1:22-23). We believe this embraces every believer from Pentecost to the Rapture.

However, the universal Church for practical reasons cannot meet on earth. Therefore groups of believers in every locale come together as a visible representation of it. Note the three expressions used in the New Testament:

- *“the churches of God”* (1 Cor 11:16) because God is the source, the giver, of all the churches’ blessings.
- *“the churches of Christ”* (Rom 16:16) because Christ is the Redeemer and Head, ministering to her needs.
- *“all churches of the saints”* (1 Cor 14:33). Only saints should belong, made holy through the Spirit’s work. Local churches are also referred to by their location: “at Corinth,” “at Philippi,” etc.
- *“that we should be called the sons of God”* (1 Jn 3:1) – the Father wanted a family with which to share His joy.
- *“that we should be to the praise of His glory”* (Eph 1:12) – we shall share in filling the universe with Christ’s glory.
- *“that we should bring forth fruit unto God”* (Rom 7:4) – as part of the harvest from the Corn of Wheat that died.
- *“that He might present it to Himself [to be His bride]... without spot or wrinkle”* (Eph 5:26-27) – to be Christ’s eternal companion.
- *“that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us through Christ Jesus”* (Eph 2:7). And to be His eternal worshippers...and servants...and heirs...and on and on.

### **THE GRAND PURPOSE IN GOD’S HEART**

The New Testament unfolds many reasons for God’s desire for the Church. Here are some of them:

- *“that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love”* (Eph 1:4) – for eternal companionship.
- *“that we should be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures”* (Jas 1:18) – only the beginning of a mighty harvest.

### **THE DESIGN: FORM FOLLOWS FUNCTION**

The nature of the local church is

portrayed in 5 different and effective ways—all of which we will utilize:

- as **word pictures**, using metaphorical language to paint illustrations of the assembly in its varied aspects
- by **historical narrative**, primarily in the book of Acts, stirring our hearts with drama, pathos and triumph
- by **intercepted letters**, showing the breadth of knowledge and depth of passion in the early churches
- through **pastoral teaching**, included in these epistles, which lays out the divine plan in clear precepts
- in the **very words of Christ**, delivered through John to seven churches in Asia Minor, and recorded in Revelation chapters 2 and 3

Let us briefly look at the first of these – ten word pictures that give a general impression of the character of the Church:

**i. The BRIDE or CHASTE VIRGIN** portrays the separatedness and devotedness of the Church for Christ

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**ii. The TEMPLE and BUILDING** (1 Cor 3:9-17) shows the holiness of God’s dwelling and progress in construction

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**iii. The BODY** (Eph 4:11-16; 1 Cor 12) emphasizes joint co-operation and the rich giftedness of the Church

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**iv. The FAMILY** (2 Tim 5:1-2) portrays the love and loyalty of the believers to one another, a hallmark! (Jn 13:35)

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**v. The FLOCK** stresses the vulnerability of the Church, its dependence on the Shepherd, and the need to obey

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**vi. The FIELD** (1 Cor 3:9, “husbandry,” KJV) reminds us of God’s ownership and the need for personal growth

**vii. The PILLAR and GROUND** (1 Tim 3:15): strength for service—grounded on truth; lifting it up for all to see

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**viii. The LAMPSTAND** (Rev 1:20) reminds us that our witness is crucial; and we depend on the filling of the oil

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**ix. The HOUSE** (1 Tim 3:15) where we must learn to behave! Submitting to godly order is the key to enjoyment

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**x. The VINE with its BRANCHES** (Jn 15) explains that fruitfulness and joy comes only by abiding in Christ!

### **IN CONCLUSION: SOME PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS**

We are often quick in our study of the Church to think about the **mechanics**—the way the church gathers and functions, church government, ordinances, etc. These subjects are vital (since the Holy Spirit has revealed

them to us). But at the end of this first study, perhaps we could offer our hearts to the Lord so that the **dynamics** of the early churches might be the motivating influence in our lives and local gatherings as well. We often speak of the characteristics of the New Testament Church relative to the great and glowing doctrines revealed in the Word. And so we should! But perhaps for a few moments we could examine our hearts and ask the following questions:

- Do I act like a CHASTE VIRGIN for Christ by both being separated from other loves, and being whole-heartedly devoted to the Lord Jesus? Has some other affection got in the way—even a “good” thing like the service of God? Am I known for being a lover of Christ? Is my local church known in the community by its love?
- Like the BUILDING and the FIELD, am I making progress

in my Christian life? Do others notice my personal growth? Or have I, perhaps as a more mature believer, settled down in a kind of spiritual retirement? Am I regularly helping younger Christians in my local fellowship to also be well grounded and built up in the faith?

- As the PILLAR and GROUND of truth, how is the regular ministry of the Word in our fellowship? Are we not only holding up the principles of truth but also basing our lives, our families, our business, and our relationships with others on the practices found in God's blessed Book? When was the last time I was asked what made me different?

- How am I playing my part in the BODY? Am I using my gift for others' benefit? And in God's FAMILY, how is my love for my brothers and sisters? Is there something I need to

make right with one of them? When should I do it?

- And what of the LAMP-STAND? Aren't we glad that the One who trims the lamps doesn't quench smoking wicks? Shall we ask Him tonight to make our flickering lights to shine more brightly for Him in this dark world?

### QUESTIONS

#### FOR DISCUSSION...

1. Compare and contrast the emphasis Scripture places on Jesus Christ in the church and the emphasis people place on Christ in the church today. What effects might this have on the life of the church?

2. As a group, create a "mission statement" that fits the local church you attend, and then revise it so it fits the purpose of the Lord for His Church.

# THE CHURCH AS A MYSTERY

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## Review:

1. What is the definition of the word "mystery" as used in the Bible?

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2. What is the significance of Christ's statement in Matthew 16:18, "I will build My Church"? (5 Key words)

I	WILL	BUILD	MY	CHURCH

3. What are the three shades of meaning of the word "church"?

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4. Name five of the ten word pictures illustrating the assembly. Which one speaks to you just now?

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5. What is the difference between the Church and the churches?

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## DAY 3: WATCH & ANSWER

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Fill in the blanks as you watch the video. TIP: It's helpful to pre-read the questions before watching. You can check the answers in the Answer Key (Appendix 10).

1. Whatever truth we buy, it will  us something.

2. Every picture of the Church does not just *include* the Lord Jesus:

He is the .

3. The two greatest gifts ever given to the human race through Israel are the

, and the .

4. A person who is a saint is essentially one who is .

5. Both the first wedding and the last wedding are  marriages.

6. **"I"...** God wants us to understand that  will stop His program.

7. **"Will build"...** One day the whole world will see that Jesus did what He said He'd do. "He shall not  nor be " (Isa. 42:4).

8. **"My"...** He  for the Church.

9. **"Church"...** The Church is made up of  stones. When the church is called out of the world, the world turns its back on us. But the Holy Spirit gives us instead all the resources of heaven.

10. Christendom is  and .

The true Church is  and .



## DAY 4: WRITE & REMEMBER

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Revisit the verses you focussed on earlier. Write them out below and memorize one of the passages.

A) Ephesians 3:4-6 –

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B) Matthew 16:18 –

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C) Ephesians 5:26, 27 –

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## DAY 5: REFLECT & PRAY

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Respond in prayer: Having looked carefully at the Church as a mystery—as a beautiful design in the heart of God—reflect on your own life in the following ways:

**Praise:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Repent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Ask:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Yield:** \_\_\_\_\_

**PRAISE:** What specific blessing have you discovered in this lesson? Thank the Lord for it! **REPENT:** Is there something in your life that is hindering you from experiencing what you have just learned? **ASK:** What specific way would you like the Lord to help you live out these truths? **YIELD:** Is there a particular area in your life that needs to come under the Lord's rule?