

How can I identify the church of the Bible?

The New Testament church can also be recognized by what it does. After people became Christians on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:36-38), Luke says they “*continued stedfastly in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers*” (Acts 2:42). This passage shows that part of God’s example involves meeting on a regular basis and doing the things listed in this verse. Most religious groups are committed to “prayer” and “fellowship,” but most are not “stedfast” with the other two characteristics in Acts 2:42 (the “apostles’ teaching” and “the breaking of bread”).

Jesus’ church can be partly identified by its strict adherence to the *apostles’ doctrine* (the information we now have in the Bible). Instead of following the rules and dictates of men (Mt. 15:9), the members of Christ’s church use the Bible as their only guide. New Testament Christians know that God has given the “*perfect law of liberty*” (Jas. 1:25) and this information gives them “*all things that pertain to life and godliness*” (2 Pet. 1:3). Stated another way, the completed New Testament “*furnishes us unto every good work*” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Thus, New Testament Christians (those who are part of Christ’s church) solely rely on this “*form of teaching*” (Rom. 6:17) for the “*pattern*” (2 Tim. 1:13) they need to serve and worship God “*in truth*” (Jn. 4:24). Counterfeit churches rely upon creeds, information from their “church headquarters,” church manuals, etc.

Acts 2:42 also refers to “the breaking of bread” (i.e. the Lord’s Supper. The Greek text literally says “the breaking of the bread”). This statement tells us the first century Christians partook of the Lord’s Supper on a “stedfast” basis. Other passages reinforce the fact that the members of Jesus’ church took the Lord’s Supper on a regular basis. For instance, Paul spoke of the Corinthian assemblies in 1 Cor. 16:2. The Corinthians were meeting on every Sunday (this point is expressed very well in the NASB) and the Corinthians were bringing the items for the Lord’s Supper to their weekly assemblies (1 Cor. 11:20). Although the items for the Lord’s Supper were being misused, the Corinthians knew they were to bring the elements for the Lord’s Supper every Sunday. This was the practice for Corinth as well as all the other congregations that practiced New Testament Christianity (1 Cor. 4:17).

In Acts 20 we read of a time when Paul was with some fellow Christians and this group actually waited for the “first day of the week” (Acts 20:6), Sunday, so the Lord’s Supper could be observed (Acts 20:7). Even though Paul was in a hurry (Acts 20:16), he waited seven days so he could meet with fellow Christians on the “first day of the week” (Acts 20:6) and partake of the Lord’s Supper (the Communion). This information corresponds perfectly with Acts 2:42, a text that says the first Christians “continued stedfastly in the breaking of bread.” The members of Jesus’ church partake of the Lord’s Supper every Sunday. In the churches built by men, people may partake of the Lord’s Supper once a year, twice a year, once a quarter, or once a month.

If worshippers have the Lord’s Supper less frequently than once a week, they “take away” part of what God intended for worship and thus alter God’s divine pattern (compare Rev. 22:19). If people offer the Lord’s Supper more than once a week, they “add to” God’s divine pattern and are also guilty of sin (compare Rev. 22:18). If people do not have Sunday, the “first day of the week,” as their special day to honor God in worship (1 Cor. 16:2), they also fail to follow part of the New Testament pattern and are thus not part of the New Testament church.

In addition to identifying the New Testament church through its pattern for conversion, the way that people become members of this church, the strict adherence to the Scriptures, and

having the Lord's Supper every week, the New Testament church can be identified by its teachings on giving. Many religious groups appeal to non-Christians for funds or they engage in things like bake sales and car washes. The first century Christians, who were members of the New Testament church, "took nothing from the Gentiles" (the unsaved, 3 Jn. 7). Today members of the New Testament church still meet all their financial obligations through free will contributions from members; New Testament Christians do not want nor expect non-members to contribute anything to the Lord's work.

Christ's church may also be identified by the amount of money that people give. Many religious groups tell their members to "tithe" (give 10% of their income). If a religious group teaches tithing, this is a sure sign that it is a counterfeit church. Tithing is part of the Old Testament law that was given to the Hebrew nation. The Old Testament law contained various rules about giving, keeping the Sabbath day, animal sacrifices, special priests, etc., and this law was in force for about 1,500 years. After Jesus came into the world He said His death would bring about a new covenant (Lk. 22:20) and this happened. Jesus took away the entire Old Testament system by dying on the cross (Rom. 10:4 and compare Heb. 8:5-13). If people try to bind any part of the Old Testament law on people, and telling people to "tithe" is one example of this, the Bible says people are "fallen from grace" and are "severed from Christ" (Gal. 5:4, ASV).

Instead of tithing, members of the New Testament church make a personal decision on how much to give. In fact, the church that belongs to Christ is governed by two basic rules when it comes to giving: (1) Give "cheerfully" and (2) give as we have been "prospered" (1 Cor. 16:2; 2 Cor. 9:7). Since the New Testament says *give as we have been prospered*, any church that tells people to "tithe" (give 10%) is a counterfeit church. Those who ask or tell people to *tithe* are teaching a "different gospel" (Gal. 1:6-9). This error is so serious that Paul said those who try to bind some part of the Old Testament law on people are like a woman who is married to two men at the same time (Rom. 7:1-4).

New Testament Christians know and teach that Jesus "nailed the old law to the cross" (Col. 2:14) and the removal of the Old Testament law includes the elimination of the Ten Commandments. Things like murder, theft and adultery are still wrong (Rom. 13:9), but these acts are wrong because they are forbidden by the New Testament. People can "learn" from the Old Testament (Rom. 15:4), but the New Testament is the law all are under now. Counterfeit groups often fail to distinguish between the Old Testament and the New (they teach that the Ten Commandments are still binding, people need to tithe, there is still a need to keep the Sabbath day, etc.), but these things are not taught by New Testament Christians. Members of the New Testament church know the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Because the members of the New Testament church correctly distinguish the Old Testament from the New Testament, they comply with God's will in the area of music. Under the Old Testament system of worship, people used instrumental music (Ps. 150; 2 Chron. 29:25). Under the New Testament system of worship, people are specifically told to "sing" (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16) and this is what New Testament Christians do. If the New Testament said "make music," we would be authorized to make music any way we choose. Since God has specifically said those who live under the New Testament are to make music by *singing* (compare Heb. 13:15), this is what His people do and this is another identifying mark of Christ's church. If we sing AND PLAY in worship, we add to God's instructions. Adding instrumental music to worship is an example of "will-worship" (Col. 2:23) and going "beyond what is written" (1 Cor. 4:6).

Church choirs are another example of "going beyond what it is written." The Bible says

Christians are to “sing to one another” (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), but some use church choirs “because they like them.” Worship is not about what we like; it is about following God’s pattern (compare Jn. 4:24 where Jesus said we “must worship in truth”). If we do not do things in the way God has described, we go beyond what is written (1 Cor. 4:6), we “no longer abide in the doctrine of Christ,” and we “have not God” (2 Jn. 9).

The subjects of salvation and worship are very helpful in separating the New Testament church from counterfeit groups, but these are not the only ways to recognize Jesus’ true church. We may also determine which church truly follows God’s pattern by studying what the Bible says about church organization. Every organization has some type of structure, including a headquarters or main office, and this is also true for the New Testament church. Jesus is the head of His church and He resides in heaven (Acts 1:11). Jesus’ heavenly enthronement (Acts 2:30) tells us the “headquarters” for the New Testament church is in heaven. Stated another way, Jesus’ church has no earthly headquarters; counterfeit churches, however, often do have an earthly headquarters. Jesus’ church is also autonomous (self-governing).