

THE CHURCH AWAKENING AN URGENT CALL FOR RENEWAL STUDY ONE

The Church: Let's Start Here

Matthew 16:13–18; Acts 2:41–47

A church must have teaching, fellowship, worship, and prayer to be a church. In mathematical terms, this is the lowest common denominator. You can have more than these four and have a church, but you cannot have less.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

A strong current can push even the most powerful ship off course. So, to avoid letting the massive vessel drift, the helmsman must keep a close eye on the compass and continually make course corrections. No falling asleep at the wheel! Undivided attention is essential to keep the ship going the right direction.

Churches, just like ships, can also drift from their true purpose when they let strong cultural currents push them off course. Distracted by worldly notions of success and power, some church leaders have taken their eyes off the compass of God's Word and lost their bearings. A passion for growth has replaced their fire for God. Slick marketing strategies have undermined their mission to declare the simple truth of the gospel and give clear biblical instruction in doctrine and life.

We've designed this series of *Searching the Scriptures* studies to help you and your church avoid drifting and to help you recalibrate and even sharpen your perspective of the church with the original vision of Christ—the North Star who guides our way.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

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PREPARE YOUR HEART

A good practice when opening God's Word is to invite the Holy Spirit to illumine your heart with His truth. You may wish to pray as Pastor Chuck Swindoll prays before he studies the Word: "I often pray, 'Lord, speak to me. Help me understand what this passage is saying. I am listening. I am sensitive to Your truth. Lead me into it.'"¹ Write your prayer here if you wish.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

In *Searching the Scriptures*, we study the Bible using a method featuring four vital steps:

1. **Observation:** *what does this biblical passage say?*
2. **Interpretation:** *what does this biblical passage mean?*
3. **Correlation:** *how does this biblical passage relate to other similar biblical passages?*
4. **Application:** *how should I respond to the truth of this biblical passage?*



Searching the Scriptures Tip

For helpful instruction from Pastor Chuck Swindoll on this method, consult the Insight for Living Ministries online instructional web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)." There, you can also follow the [link to purchase a copy](#) of Pastor Chuck's book, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs*.



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Observation: The Church's Origin and Early History

The first step is observation, which involves carefully reading the text and writing down what you see. Take your time. Each word in Scripture is an important piece of the puzzle revealing Christ's plan for His church.

Discovering the Church's Origin—Matthew 16:13–18

In Matthew 16:13–18, the term, *church*, appears in the Bible for the first time. The setting was Caesarea Philippi, a city in northern Galilee steeped in paganism and idolatry. Surrounded by temples to false gods, Jesus instituted the church in a private dialogue with His disciples.

How did Jesus begin His conversation with the disciples, according to [Matthew 16:13–14](#), and how did the disciples answer?

Jesus turned the discussion to the disciples' personal beliefs: "But who do you say I am?" (Matthew 16:15). Read aloud Peter's confession in [16:16](#). Imagine bold Peter stating these words while in the background pagan worshipers chanted praises to the false god, Pan, and bowed to Caesar as a son of god. Against this idolatrous backdrop, how does each word of Peter's confession emphasize Jesus' supreme authority?

Simon's confession was the key that unlocked Jesus' revelation of His church. Fill in the blanks in the following chart as you observe each part of Jesus' declaration: "I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it" (16:18). The first blank is filled in as an example.



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Revelation	Part of Speech	Observation
I	Subject	<i>Christ builds the church—not pastors, people, or programs.</i>
will	Tense	
build	Verb	
my	Pronoun	
church,	Object	
and <u>all</u>	Adjective	
the <u>powers</u>	Noun	
of <u>hell</u>	Noun	
will	Tense	
not	Adverb	
conquer	Verb	
it	Object	



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With these solemn words, Jesus christened the church age, which officially launched when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost. Let's open the doors of the first church in Acts and see Christ's new vision in action.

The church is a body of people called out from the world for the unique purpose of glorifying their Savior and Master, Jesus Christ. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Learning from the Church's Early History—Acts 2:41–47

As we turn from Matthew 16 to Acts 2, the setting shifts to Jerusalem soon after Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. The event the prophets foretold occurred when the Holy Spirit came upon and indwelt the disciples gathered in the upper room (*Ezekiel 36:25–27; Joel 2:28–29; Acts 2:1–13*). **The church was born!**

What four key functions did these new believers participate in, according to *Acts 2:42*?

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

Churches may reflect various *forms*, but these four *functions* are essential for a church to qualify as a true church. In the next section, we'll examine what these functions mean.

We have to have teaching. We have to have fellowship, worship, and prayer. We cannot have less than these four functions and be a church. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: Teaching, Fellowship, Worship, and Prayer

In the interpretation phase, we ask questions such as these: What did Luke, the author of Acts, want his readers to understand about the early believers? What principles did Luke intend future believers to draw from their example? We fill the role of an interpreter as we answer these questions.



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Searching the Scriptures Study Tool: Bible Study Resources

The biblical context provides the best insight into the meaning of a passage. For additional understanding, feel free to consult *The Swindoll Study Bible* and reliable commentaries and Bible dictionaries such as: *Swindoll's Living Insights* New Testament Commentary series, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* consisting of both *Old Testament* and *New Testament* volumes, and *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*.

Drawing from the context of Acts 1–2 and using your Bible study resources, what is the meaning of the phrase: “All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42)? Note the significance of the source of the teaching: the apostles. Who were they and why was their teaching trustworthy?

In addition, the early believers were devoted “to fellowship” (2:42). What does that word mean within the context? Read [2:44–45](#) to find examples of *fellowship* in action. What attitudes characterized the early believers?



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Next, the early believers were devoted to “sharing in meals” (2:42), a phrase which implied the Lord’s Supper. Baptized at conversion, according to 2:41, the believers regularly celebrated the Lord’s Supper in obedience to the Lord’s commands (*Matthew 28:19; Luke 22:17–19*). What is the significance of these two essential ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper?

Commenting on baptism and the Lord’s Supper, Pastor Chuck Swindoll concludes, “An acceptable, all-inclusive term would be *worship*. For a church to be the kind of church Jesus promised to build, there must be worship.”² In addition, there must be “prayer” (2:42). *Prayer* is equally all-inclusive, and it can include an array of spiritual expressions. What types of prayer do you think Luke meant?

The apostles kept their priorities simple: teaching, fellowship, worship, and prayer. What was the result? “Each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved” (2:47).

In the early church, there were no politics or power grabs, no maneuverings, no financial squabbles, and no turf protection. This pristine setting provided room for the Spirit of God to work and guide. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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Correlation: Christ the Head of the Church

In correlation, we look for supportive Bible passages to enhance our understanding. Paul explained the reason Jesus Christ takes the place of prominence in the church. Summarize Paul's declaration of Christ's supremacy in *Colossians 1:15–18*.

What implications can you draw from this passage about the central purpose of the church?

In a nutshell, the apostles kept the church on course by focusing on *four simple priorities* and *one ultimate purpose*: to exalt the name of Jesus Christ.

The church is not a building. It is a body without political roots, cultural boundaries, or linguistic restrictions. Christ's body has no denominational ties, and it is not a business with a cross stuck to it. It is a spiritual entity in which Christ remains the head.

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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Application: Three Principles to Apply

Do our churches follow the biblical example of teaching, fellowship, worship, and prayer? Is Christ the head of our churches? Does He have preeminence? To help you answer these questions, consider these guiding principles.

Clear, biblical thinking must override secular planning and a corporate mentality. The church is a spiritual entity with Christ as its head, not a secular business with a board of directors in command. We turn to the Bible for direction, not a corporate policy manual.

In what ways does your church's teaching, preaching, singing, counseling, serving, and educating have its roots in the Bible? How do your church's programs reflect a spiritual mind-set?

Accurate decisions must originate from God's Word, not human opinions. When decisions are communicated in your church, are there biblical reasons given and biblical guidelines followed? If so, write down an instance that you recall.



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Wise and essential changes must occur to counteract signs of erosion. Flexibility is the key. When God's Word points to a better way, change course! Based on the passages in this study, are there any changes you might need to make as a church member? Are there changes you might humbly and respectfully recommend to a church leader?

We can summarize these principles in three commands that apply to us as much as our churches: *think spiritually*, *stay biblical*, and *be flexible*. With these principles flying like banners on the masts of our churches and our lives, we'll be certain to sail the course God intended.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, keep us authentic in our relationships and biblical in our thinking. Guard us from distractions and hobbyhorses that shift our focus. Keep our eyes on Your Word and our hearts on Christ. Faith includes risk, so give us the courage to make changes if needed, and keep our churches Christ-centered, biblical, and Spirit-empowered. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2016), 128.
2. Charles R. Swindoll, *The Church Awakening: An Urgent Call for Renewal* (New York: Faith Words, 2010), 16.

