

What Did The Church Do During The Time Of The Apostles?

What the Bible says about Assembly

Jesus replied, "Simon, son of Jonah, you are blessed! No human revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven revealed it to you. 18 You are Peter, and I can guarantee that on this rock I will build my church [Greek *ekklesia* -assembly]. (Matthew 16:17-19) Also "So then, some were shouting one thing and some another, for the assembly [*ekklesia*] was in confusion and the majority did not know for what reason they had come together. "Acts 19:32

In practical usage, it commonly identified people called by a magistrate for a public service of some sort. This is how it is used in [Acts 19:32](#), 39, and 41:

Some therefore cried one thing and some another, for the *assembly* was confused, and most of them did not know why they had come together. . . . But if you have any other inquiry to make, it shall be determined in the lawful *assembly*. . . . And when he had said these things, he dismissed the *assembly*. (Emphasis ours.)

Each time, *ekklesia* is translated as "assembly" and names what could easily be described as a mob of excited and confused people. However, the writers of the New Testament clearly agreed this was the word that best fit the groups of Christians called of [God](#) for service to Him. How did it come to be translated as "church" when the word "assembly" fits more accurately?

This change apparently has its beginning in another, far different Greek word, *kuriakos* (Strong's #2960). *Kurios*, the Greek word for "Lord," is easily recognizable as the root of *kuriakos*, which means "belonging to the Lord." Curiously, according to Joseph T. Shipley, author of *The Origins of English Words*, pp. 183-184, the root of *kurios* and *kuriakos* literally means "to bend or curve."

In the course of time, *kuriakos* was picked up by the Scots as *kirk*. Shipley shows that *kirk* and *kuriakos* share the same root. In the Scottish language, *kirk* indicates a place or a location, as in a building belonging to the Lord. The *kirk* became the place where the assembly bent before God in reverence, as in prayer, appealing to Him; or bent looking upward in praise of God; or where God bent in extending mercy.

As more time passed, the English pronunciation of *kirk* changed to "church." Thus "church," which indicates a building, a place where God is worshipped, gradually evolved to include, not just the place, but also the people who worshipped there and the worship services too. The modern English *Reader's Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary* reflects this in its definitions for *church*: "1. A building for Christian worship. 2. Regular religious services. 3. A local congregation of Christians." We regularly use all three in our everyday speech and writing, allowing the context to indicate which is intended.

However, *in the Bible* the word "church" *never* refers to a building or to worship services held within the building. It *always* refers to the assembly, group, or congregation of called-out ones who belong to the Lord, worship Him, and fellowship with others of the same mind. (John W. Ritenbaugh, [Bible](#) Tools (From Forerunner Commentary))

In [Acts 19:32-40](#) they knew they had been called to assemble, but they did not understand the reason for their calling.

"And when the city clerk had quieted the crowd, he said: . . . 'if you have any other inquiry to make, it shall be determined in the lawful assembly [*ekklesia*]' (verses 35, 39). He reminded the people that a legal assembly could be arranged. "For we are in danger of being called in question for today's uproar, there being no reason which we may give to account for this disorderly gathering" (verse 40). To this point the assembly, the *ekklesia*, was a confused mob of people, aroused in anger against the apostle Paul. "And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly [*ekklesia*]."

These verses show very clearly that *ekklesia* by itself requires qualitative modifiers. It can refer to a gathering that is either carnal or spiritual. The context has to define its usage.

Ekklesia, then, is more flexible than the English word "church," transcending its narrow boundaries. *Ekklesia* is not bound, as will be seen, by race; language; city, state, or national boundaries; corporate laws; space; or time. [God](#) may have inspired the writers to use it solely to connote the transcendence of *His* calling out. Tracing it back to its beginning and bringing it forward to the present will show this fact clearly. (John W. Ritenbaugh, Bible Tools)

The Form, Function, and Faith of Early Christian Communities from 33–100 C.E.

The church in the Apostolic Age—spanning from 33 C.E., beginning with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, to around 100 C.E. with the death of the apostle John—presents the clearest and most authoritative picture of what Christian life and doctrine were intended to be. This era, recorded in Scripture and guided by the apostles under direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit ([John 14:26; 16:13](#), exclusive to the apostles), offers a model rooted not in institutional tradition or philosophical abstraction but in practical obedience to the teachings of Jesus Christ. Free from post-apostolic corruption, the church during this time held fast to the teachings handed down by inspired men, expressed through their actions, letters, and instructions preserved in the New Testament.

The early church was neither a mystical body without form nor an institutional organization with ecclesiastical ranks. Rather, it was a fellowship of believers, called out of the world to belong to Jesus, structured around local congregations that operated with biblical simplicity. These Christians met regularly for worship, instruction, mutual edification, and to break bread, all while enduring persecution and societal hostility. Yet their spiritual health was not measured by emotional outbursts or experiential claims, but by faithfulness to the apostles' doctrine and their moral distinction from the surrounding pagan world.

From the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem to the congregations planted across the Roman Empire, the character of the church remained marked by five defining traits: *simplicity of worship, mutual accountability, shared leadership under biblical oversight, consistent evangelism, and commitment to scriptural truth*. These marks were not idealistic aspirations—they were real, concrete practices of daily life. And they were sustainable only because believers were wholly devoted to Scripture and to the pattern laid down by the apostles, who had been taught directly by Jesus.

Worship and Assembly: Reverent, Simple, and Grounded in Teaching

The regular gathering of believers was central to church life in the apostolic age. These assemblies, usually held in homes ([Romans 16:5; Philemon 2](#)), were not defined by elaborate ceremony or sensory experience, but by participation in teaching, prayer, singing, and the memorial meal known as the Lord's Supper. [Acts 2:42](#) provides a clear description: "*They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*"

This pattern was not occasional but weekly. As [Acts 20:7](#) reveals, "*On the first day of the week we were gathered together to break bread.*" The phrase "first day of the week" reflects an established rhythm of weekly worship on Sunday, in commemoration of Jesus' resurrection. These meetings were conducted with reverence and order ([1 Corinthians 14:26, 40](#)), not confusion or chaos. Singing was done with understanding, not emotionalism ([Colossians 3:16](#)). Teaching was central, with the goal of spiritual maturity and discernment ([Ephesians 4:11–16](#)).

The assembly was not spectator-oriented. Every member was expected to contribute to the edification of the body, though this was regulated by apostolic instruction. There was no clerical class, and certainly no separate priesthood. Instead, each congregation was led by a plurality of elders (presbuteroi), also called overseers (episkopoi), who were required to be men of proven character and teaching ability ([1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9](#)). These men shepherded the flock locally and were accountable to the Lord for their oversight ([Hebrews 13:17; Acts 20:28](#)), not to a denominational structure.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper: Defining Markers of Fellowship

Two ordinances were practiced in the apostolic church by command of Christ: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism was not symbolic or optional; it marked the entrance into the body of Christ. Jesus had commanded it ([Matthew 28:19](#)), and the apostles uniformly administered it upon repentance and belief. Peter's words in [Acts 2:38](#) are decisive: *"Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."*

The Greek word used—**βαπτίζω (baptizō)**—means to immerse or submerge. This was the universal practice in the first century, excluding infants, as only those who believed and repented were eligible. Baptism was both a pledge of a good conscience ([1 Peter 3:21](#)) and a public identification with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection ([Romans 6:3–4](#)). It was never postponed or disconnected from conversion.

The Lord's Supper ([1 Corinthians 11:23–26](#)), instituted by Jesus the night before his death, was also central. Referred to as "breaking bread" ([Acts 2:42](#)), it was a weekly memorial conducted with solemnity and introspection ([1 Corinthians 11:28–29](#)). There was no notion of transubstantiation or mystical change—only remembrance. The bread symbolized Jesus' body, and the cup represented the new covenant in his blood. Participation required self-examination, repentance, and unity among believers.

Teaching and Scripture: The Unifying Foundation of the Church

The early church had no councils, creeds, or catechisms. It had the living voice of the apostles and the inspired writings which were circulated and received by congregations ([Colossians 4:16](#); [1 Thessalonians 5:27](#)). The Word of God, whether spoken or written, was the supreme authority in all matters. Teaching was not a supplement to worship—it was its core.

From the beginning, the apostles prioritized sound doctrine (διδασκία, didachē). Paul instructed Timothy to *"preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction"* ([2 Timothy 4:2](#)). False teaching was a constant threat, and the apostles waged a continual battle to protect the flock from deception ([Acts 20:29–31](#); [Galatians 1:6–9](#)).

The Scripture was treated not as a source of inspiration but as the very breath of God ([2 Timothy 3:16](#), Greek: **θεόπνευστος**, theopneustos). By the end of the first century, the Gospels, Acts, Pauline epistles, and other inspired writings were in circulation, read in the churches, and treated as Scripture on par with the Old Testament ([2 Peter 3:15–16](#)). This body of teaching, once delivered ([Jude 3](#)), was complete by the time John wrote Revelation. No further revelation would be added. The apostolic church relied on Scripture, not speculation, for its theology.

Spiritual Gifts: Purposeful and Temporary for the Establishment of the Church

During the apostolic age, miraculous gifts were present, including tongues (γλῶσσαι, glōssai), prophecy, healing, and the ability to discern spirits ([1 Corinthians 12:4–11](#)). However, these were not signs of spiritual maturity, nor were they permanent. Their purpose was to confirm the Word before the canon [IBKI comment Bible] was completed ([Hebrews 2:3–4](#); [Mark 16:20](#)). Paul himself taught that prophecy and tongues would cease ([1 Corinthians 13:8](#)), and by the end of the first century, there is no record of miraculous signs continuing.

These gifts were given by the Spirit for the building up of the church, not for self-promotion or emotional experience ([1 Corinthians 14:12](#)). Paul commanded order in their use, limiting tongue-speaking to two or three, with interpretation, and forbidding women from speaking in the assembly ([1 Corinthians 14:27–35](#)). The apostles laid hands on believers to transmit certain gifts ([Acts 8:18](#); [19:6](#)), which means such gifts could not be perpetuated beyond their lifetime.

Today, the Spirit operates not through direct gifts but through the completed Word ([Ephesians 6:17](#); [Hebrews 4:12](#)), guiding and sanctifying believers through their knowledge and application of Scripture.

Evangelism, Morality, and the Hope of Christ's Return

The apostolic church lived with urgent expectancy for Christ's return ([Titus 2:13](#)), but this did not lead to passivity. Instead, it fueled bold evangelism, holy conduct, and enduring perseverance. Believers were not consumers of religious services but active participants in spreading the gospel and supporting one another through persecution, poverty, and rejection.

Their lifestyle was morally distinct from the Greco-Roman world. Paul repeatedly exhorted Christians to flee sexual immorality, greed, idolatry, and false speech ([Ephesians 4–5](#); [1 Thessalonians 4:3–7](#)). Holiness was the standard, not perfection, but continual repentance and transformation. Christian women adorned themselves modestly ([1 Timothy 2:9–10](#)), and Christian men led their households in submission to Christ.

Their evangelism was not dependent on professional ministers or organized campaigns. Every Christian was a witness ([Acts 8:4](#)), and their boldness came from the knowledge of the resurrection, not from social acceptance. The early church grew not through accommodation but confrontation with error, faithfully preaching Jesus as the only way to salvation ([Acts 4:12](#)).

Facing Hostility Without Compromise: Perseverance in the Midst of Opposition

From its inception, the apostolic church existed in an environment of severe hostility. The Jewish Sanhedrin opposed the movement fiercely ([Acts 4:1–3](#); [5:17–18](#)), imprisoning and flogging the apostles. Stephen became the first martyr ([Acts 7:54–60](#)), and Saul of Tarsus led widespread persecution before his conversion ([Acts 8:1–3](#); [9:1–19](#)). Yet these attacks did not suppress the church—they clarified its identity. Believers accepted persecution as part of their calling, fulfilling Jesus' words in [John 15:20](#): *"If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you."*

This suffering was not interpreted as divine punishment or a test from God, but as a badge of identification with Christ ([1 Peter 4:12–16](#)). Jehovah does not tempt or test with evil ([James 1:13](#)), but He strengthens believers through His Word ([Romans 15:4](#)). The response of the early Christians was not rebellion or retreat, but rejoicing and endurance. When the apostles were beaten for preaching, they *"went on their way... rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for his name"* ([Acts 5:41](#)).

This unwavering faith was possible because their hope was not in political deliverance or temporal comfort, but in the return of Jesus Christ. The early Christians believed firmly in the literal return of Jesus to reign ([1 Thessalonians 1:9–10](#); [Revelation 22:20](#)). This eschatological hope sustained them through trials, anchored in the promise that Jehovah *"has fixed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness through a man whom he has appointed"* ([Acts 17:31](#)). This future event would bring vindication to the righteous and eternal judgment to the wicked.

Their perseverance became a testimony. Pagan observers marveled at their unity, their courage, and their moral purity. Yet they remained outsiders to the Roman world—refusing emperor worship, abstaining from pagan festivals, and rejecting immoral social customs. This separation was not cultural isolation but spiritual loyalty. As Paul wrote, *"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind"* ([Romans 12:2](#)). The church of the apostolic age was, in every sense, a distinct people.

The Closure of the Apostolic Era and the Completed Faith

By the end of the first century, all of the foundational work of the church had been completed. The faith had been delivered once for all ([Jude 3](#)), the gospel had gone forth to the known world ([Colossians 1:23](#)), and the New Testament writings were circulating among the congregations. No successors to the apostles were appointed, because the role of

apostle required eyewitness testimony to the risen Christ ([Acts 1:21–22](#); [1 Corinthians 9:1](#)). When John, the last apostle, died near the end of the first century, the era of direct revelation ceased.

This does not mean the church was left without guidance. The completed Scripture, inspired and preserved, became the full and final authority for teaching, correction, and training in righteousness ([2 Timothy 3:16–17](#)). It was never intended to be supplemented by human councils or new revelation. Instead, each local church was expected to uphold apostolic doctrine, appoint biblically qualified elders, and continue in faith, love, and hope until Christ returns.

What followed in the second century and beyond was not necessarily a continuation of the apostolic pattern. Many churches began to drift into hierarchical structures, speculative theology, and ritualistic practices borrowed from Jewish and pagan sources. But these developments were not part of the apostolic tradition—they were departures from it. The church in its purest, most faithful form is the church of the apostolic age: local, autonomous, scripture-saturated, morally distinct, evangelistic, and hopeful.

Conclusion: A Model for All Time, Not Just for the First Century

The life of the church in the apostolic age stands not merely as a historical curiosity but as a divine blueprint. What they believed, how they worshiped, and how they organized themselves was not a product of cultural pragmatism but of divine revelation. Every aspect of their life was ordered by the Word of God. They were not perfect, but they were faithful. Their faith was not built on emotion or tradition but on the unchanging truth of Jesus Christ and the Scriptures that bore witness to Him.

Their pattern is still the model for the church today. The needs of modern believers are no different from theirs: teaching, fellowship, discipline, encouragement, and hope. Churches today must reject the temptation to innovate or modernize what God has already designed. As Paul reminded the Corinthians, “*We preach Christ crucified... the power of God and the wisdom of God*” ([1 Corinthians 1:23–24](#)). This gospel, unchanged and undiluted, remains the power of salvation for everyone who believes ([Romans 1:16](#)).

Let every church seek to restore and live out the simplicity, purity, and devotion of the apostolic church—not through nostalgia, but through obedience to the Word. Let us hold fast to the teaching once for all delivered, and like them, live as strangers and exiles in the world ([1 Peter 2:11](#)), awaiting the return of the one who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.

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IBKI Analysis of 1 Corinthians 14:26–36

What is the outcome then, brethren [Greek *adelphos* -men and women]? When you assemble, each one [Greek *hekastos* – Man or Woman] has a psalm, has a teaching [Greek *didache* – instruction] has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. 27 If anyone [Greek *tis* -a certain one, man or woman] speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and one must interpret; 28 but if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God. 29 Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment. 30 But if a revelation is made to another [Greek *allos* -someone else] who is seated, the first one must keep silent. 31 For you can all [Greek *pas*- everyone, man or woman] prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; 32 and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; 33 for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints. 34 The women [Greek *gunee* - a woman of any age. Here it is a wife as she is to ask her husband at home. Therefore, it does not apply to single women or women married to a non-Christian] are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. 35 If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church. 36 Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only? (NASU)

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The life of the church in the apostolic age stands not merely as a historical curiosity but as a divine blueprint. What they believed, how they worshiped, and how they organized themselves was not a product of cultural pragmatism but of divine revelation. Every aspect of their life was ordered by the Word of God. They were not perfect, but they were faithful. Their faith was not built on emotion or tradition but on the unchanging truth of Jesus Christ and the Scriptures that bore witness to Him.

Their pattern is still the model for the church today. The needs of modern believers are no different from theirs: teaching, fellowship, discipline, encouragement, and hope. Churches today must reject the temptation to innovate or modernize what God has already designed. As Paul reminded the Corinthians, “*We preach Christ crucified... the power of God and the wisdom of God*” ([1 Corinthians 1:23–24](#)). This gospel, unchanged and undiluted, remains the power of salvation for everyone who believes ([Romans 1:16](#)).

Let every church seek to restore and live out the simplicity, purity, and devotion of the apostolic church—not through nostalgia, but through obedience to the Word. Let us hold fast to the teaching once for all delivered, and like them, live as strangers and exiles in the world ([1 Peter 2:11](#)), awaiting the return of the one who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light. (Christian Publishing House.com)