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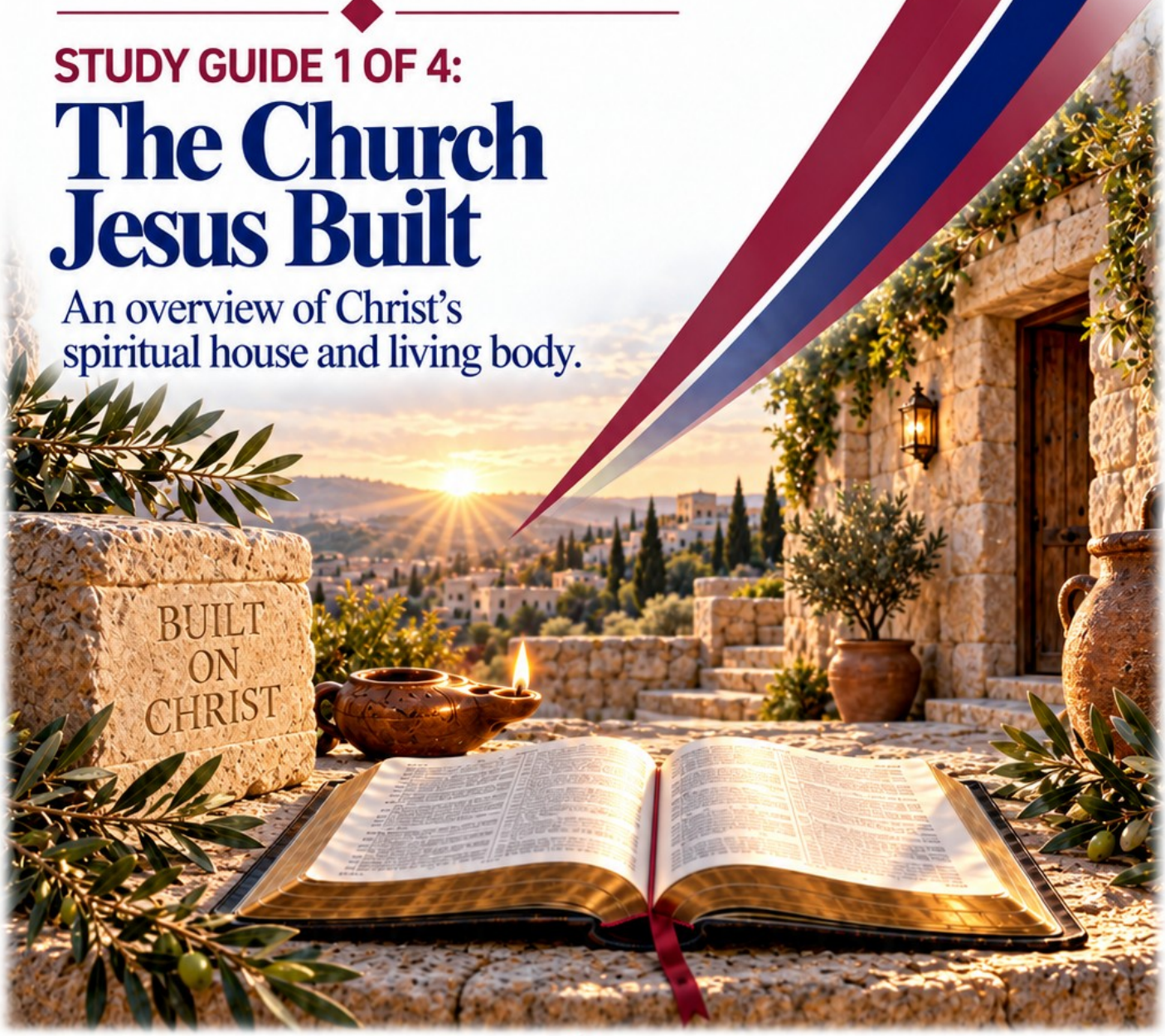
STUDY GUIDE 40

The New Testament Church

STUDY GUIDE 1 OF 4:

The Church Jesus Built

An overview of Christ's spiritual house and living body.



Equipping and empowering for effective service

2 Timothy 2:2

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE STUDENT

My Study Plan

Preparing a Study Plan before starting this Study Guide will assist you in completing it within a designated timeframe. It also helps in developing the discipline required for studying God's Word effectively.

Proverbs 16:3:

> *Commit thy works unto the LORD, and thy thoughts shall be established.*

My Study Guide Journal

Keep a record as you progress through your Study Guide, including the Personal Responses for each section, for future reference and goal setting.

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Important Points

- COGMA does not claim to be infallible or the authority.
- Infallibility and authority belong only to God and His Word.

COGMA therefore strongly advises that you prayerfully study the content of each Study Guide with the heart of a Berean (**Acts 17:10–12**).

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PREFACE

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The New Testament Church is not a human institution created by religious leaders, nor is it a building, denomination or organisation established by men. Jesus Christ Himself declared that the Church belongs to Him and that He is the One who builds it.

Jesus said in **Matthew 16:18**:

> *"And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."*

These words establish the foundation for this entire module. Jesus did not say that men would build His Church for Him. He said, *"I will build my church."* The Church therefore begins with Jesus Christ, belongs to Jesus Christ and must remain under His authority.

This first Study Guide will examine that foundation carefully. We will consider Jesus Christ as the foundation, the chief corner stone, the Head and the One whose Word governs His people. Scripture does not present the Church as an independent religious system that may create its own authority, traditions or conditions of fellowship. The Church is Christ's spiritual body, and He alone possesses the right to direct it.

Paul wrote in **Ephesians 1:22-23**:

> *"And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all."*

The Church is therefore inseparable from Jesus Christ. He is not an absent founder whose followers must continue His work through their own wisdom. Jesus Christ dwells within His born-again people by His Spirit, and His life within them is the source of their unity, holiness, love and obedience.

The Church is not produced by outward imitation of Jesus. It is the spiritual body of those who have been born again and in whom Jesus Christ dwells by His Spirit. His life within His people is what makes the Church a living spiritual body rather than a human religious organisation.

This also means that the identity of the Church cannot be determined by a name on a building, a denominational structure, a membership roll or a human statement of faith. These things may identify earthly organisations, but they cannot create the body of Christ. The true Church consists of those who have been born again and brought into Christ by the one Spirit.

Throughout this Study Guide, Scripture will remain the final authority. Jesus Christ is the chief corner stone, and every doctrine, practice and claim concerning the Church must agree with Him and with His Word. The apostles and prophets did not establish a competing foundation; their testimony points to and agrees with Jesus Christ.

The purpose of this Study Guide is therefore not simply to identify what the Church is not. Its greater purpose is to establish positively what Jesus Christ has built. He is the Builder, the foundation, the Head and the governing authority of His Church.

When that foundation is clear, the Church can be understood as Scripture presents it: a spiritual people belonging to Jesus Christ, living by His indwelling Spirit and standing upon the truth of His Word.

Personal Response

Key Truth

What does Jesus' promise to build His own Church establish about its origin and authority?

Personal Reflection

When you think of the Church, whose authority shapes your view most: Christ's or an organisation's?

Action Step

Identify one assumption about who owns the Church. Test it against Jesus' words and explain how your attitude or conduct should change.

INTRODUCTION: WHY THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH MATTERS

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The subject of the New Testament Church matters because Jesus Christ did not leave His people without a clear identity. He said that He would build His Church, and the New Testament explains what that Church is, who belongs to it and how it is governed. If we are to understand the Church correctly, we must allow Scripture to define it rather than begin with the religious organisations, traditions and names that have developed throughout history.

Paul gave Timothy an important instruction in **2 Timothy 2:15**:

> *"Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."*

The Church must therefore be understood by rightly dividing the Word of truth. Familiar customs, inherited traditions and widely accepted religious structures cannot become the standard by which Scripture is interpreted. The Word of God must remain the final authority, and every claim concerning Christ's Church must be tested by it.

This is especially important because the name of Christ may be used by people who do not faithfully represent His teaching. Paul warned in **2 Corinthians 11:13-15**:

> *"For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works."*

Paul's warning shows that religious appearance alone cannot establish truth. Something may speak in the language of Christianity, use the name of Christ and appear outwardly righteous, yet still lead people away from the truth of His Word. The believer must therefore learn to recognise the Church by what Jesus Christ and the apostles actually taught.

John gave a similar warning in **1 John 2:18**:

> *"Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time."*

John was already living in the last time, the Gospel Day, and he warned that many antichrists were already present. The danger was therefore not confined to open opposition to

Christianity. Religious teaching could also oppose Christ by replacing His authority with another foundation, another rule or another way.

The divisions among those who profess Christianity also make this study necessary. Paul rebuked the Corinthians when believers began identifying themselves around different men.

Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 3:3-4**:

> *"For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal?"*

Paul connected division with carnality and with attention being drawn towards men. The answer is not to create another competing religious identity, but to return to Jesus Christ as the foundation and Head of His Church.

For this reason, the purpose of studying the New Testament Church is not to decide which earthly denomination has the strongest claim to be the true Church. Scripture presents a more fundamental question: What did Jesus Christ build? The answer must come from the Bible itself.

The New Testament describes the Church as the body of Christ, with Jesus Christ as its Head. It speaks of one body and one Spirit, of believers being born again, and of Christ dwelling within His people. These truths direct our attention away from buildings, denominational structures and human membership systems and towards the spiritual reality created by Jesus Christ.

This does not mean that every person associated with a religious organisation is unsaved. Born-again believers may be found in many places and may differ in their present understanding. The question is not where a person attends a meeting or what denominational name appears on a sign. The decisive question is whether that person has been born again and belongs to Jesus Christ.

Throughout this Study Guide, we will therefore return continually to Christ and His Word. We will examine the foundation upon which the Church is built, the authority by which it is governed, the Head to whom it belongs and the spiritual nature of the body He has created.

The Church Jesus built must be recognised according to Scripture, not according to human tradition.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why must the Bible define the Church instead of inherited religious names or structures?

Personal Reflection

Has a familiar church name or tradition shaped your understanding more than the Bible? Explain.

Action Step

Compare that belief with the Bible and describe what you will now accept or change in your understanding of Christ's people.

I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH

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The clearest place to begin our study of the New Testament Church is with the words of Jesus Christ Himself. Before we ask what the Church looks like, how it is governed or who belongs to it, we must first establish who builds it and to whom it belongs.

Matthew recorded in **Matthew 16:15-18**:

> *"He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."*

Peter had confessed the identity of Jesus: *"Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."* Jesus then spoke of the Church that He would build. His statement is personal and deliberate: *"I will build my church."*

Those words immediately establish ownership. Jesus did not speak of a church belonging to Peter, another apostle or a later religious organisation. He called it *"my church."* Whatever else Scripture teaches concerning the Church must therefore remain under this controlling truth: the Church belongs to Jesus Christ.

Jesus Is the Builder

Jesus also said, *"I will build."* The Church does not originate in the wisdom, authority or organisational ability of men. Human beings may construct buildings, form associations, establish denominations and create systems of membership, but none of those actions can create the spiritual body that Jesus calls His Church.

Paul expressed the same dependence upon God in **1 Corinthians 3:6-7**:

> *"I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase."*

Paul and Apollos both had a part in Gospel ministry, but neither could produce spiritual life. God gave the increase. In the same way, ministers may preach the Gospel and believers may serve faithfully, but Jesus Christ remains the Builder of His Church.

This protects the Church from becoming centred upon human personalities. No preacher, pastor, movement or organisation can take the place that belongs to Christ. Those who serve in the Church serve under Him; they do not become its source.

"My Church"

The word *"my"* is equally important. Jesus claims the Church as His own because it belongs to Him by divine right and through His saving work. Paul later reminded the elders at Ephesus of the cost associated with the Church.

Paul said in **Acts 20:28**:

> *"Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood."*

The Church is described as *"the church of God,"* and Paul says that He *"purchased"* it *"with his own blood."* The eternal Spirit does not possess physical blood; the blood belonged to the genuine humanity of Jesus Christ. Yet Scripture brings God and the blood of Christ together because the one God accomplished redemption through the man Christ Jesus.

The Church therefore belongs to Christ not only because He builds it, but because He gave Himself for it. Its identity cannot properly be separated from the One who purchased it.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why does Jesus call the Church 'my church'?

Personal Reflection

Have you ever spoken of the Church as belonging to a leader or institution? Why?

Action Step

Examine how you speak about the Church. Identify one change that will show that it belongs to Jesus Christ.

The Church Was to Be Revealed

Jesus spoke in the future tense: *"I will build my church."* During His earthly ministry, He prepared His disciples for the New Covenant reality that would be revealed when He came to dwell within His people by His Spirit. The Church was already within the purpose of God, but its Gospel Day manifestation awaited the fulfilment of Christ's saving work and the coming of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost in A.D. 31.

By the close of Acts chapter 2, the Church is spoken of as an existing spiritual body to which the Lord was adding those who were being saved.

Luke wrote in **Acts 2:46-47**:

> *"And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."*

Notice who added to the Church: *"the Lord."* Human beings did not decide who became members of Christ's spiritual body. The Lord added those who were being saved. This truth will become especially important when we later examine entrance into the Church and the meaning of new-birth membership.

The Church Cannot Be Destroyed

Jesus also declared that *"the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."* His Church would face opposition, false teaching, persecution and human attempts to replace His authority, but none of these could destroy what He Himself had built.

The continued existence of the Church therefore does not depend upon an unbroken human institution, headquarters, succession of earthly leaders or denominational structure. Its security rests in Jesus Christ. The same Lord who builds His Church is able to preserve His people.

This gives us the first great foundation for the whole module. The New Testament Church is not something humanity invented in the name of Christ. It is the Church Jesus Himself builds, purchases, owns and preserves.

Before we can understand its structure, membership, symbols or name, we must begin here: Jesus said, *"I will build my church."*

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why can Christ's Church endure when human organisations do not?

Personal Reflection

When you worry about the Church's future, where do you place your confidence?

Action Step

Consider a fear you have about the Church. Explain how Jesus' promise changes the way you will respond to that fear.

JESUS CHRIST IS THE FOUNDATION

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A building can only stand securely when it rests upon a sound foundation. Jesus used this familiar picture to reveal an essential truth about His Church. The Church does not rest upon a religious organisation, a human leader, a tradition or a denominational system. It rests upon Jesus Christ.

When Jesus asked His disciples who they believed He was, Peter answered with a clear confession.

Matthew recorded in **Matthew 16:15-18**:

> *"He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."*

The subject of this conversation was the identity of Jesus Christ. Peter had confessed, *"Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God,"* and Jesus said that this truth had been revealed to him by the Father. Jesus then declared, *"upon this rock I will build my church."*

The Rock Is Jesus Christ

The Church was not to rest upon Peter as its spiritual foundation. The truth being revealed was centred upon Jesus Christ Himself. He is the Christ, and He is the rock upon which His Church is built.

Paul later stated this directly in **1 Corinthians 3:9-11**:

> *"For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building. According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ."*

Paul leaves no uncertainty concerning the foundation. He says *"For other foundation can no man lay"* and then identifies that foundation as Jesus Christ. Apostles and ministers may labour in the work of God, but none of them can become another foundation.

This also explains why the Church can never be built upon a human personality. Paul was a faithful apostle, but he refused to allow believers to centre their identity upon him. The Church belongs to Christ, rests upon Christ and receives its spiritual life from Christ.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why must Jesus Christ, rather than a human leader, be the Church's foundation?

Personal Reflection

Have you depended more on a gifted leader than on Jesus Christ for spiritual security?

Action Step

Identify where your confidence has rested. Explain how you will place Christ, rather than a person, at the centre of your trust.

A Spiritual Building

When Paul calls the believers *"God's building,"* he is using spiritual imagery. The Church is not a physical structure of stone, timber or bricks. It is a spiritual people whose life and identity are found in Jesus Christ.

Peter used similar language in **1 Peter 2:4-5**:

> *"To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ."*

Believers are described as *"lively stones"* being built into *"a spiritual house."* The life of this house does not come from its outward structure. It comes from Jesus Christ, the living One upon whom the whole spiritual building depends.

This is important when considering the many visible organisations that use the name of Christ. Buildings, constitutions, offices, membership rolls and historical continuity may belong to earthly religious organisations, but none of these things creates the Church. The Church Jesus builds is spiritual because it is made up of people who have received spiritual life in Him.

The Foundation Was Revealed

Jesus told Peter that the truth concerning His identity had been revealed by the Father. The word *"revelation"* speaks of something being uncovered or made known. Peter had not

reached his confession simply through human reasoning; God had opened his understanding to who Jesus truly was.

The Church rests upon this revelation of Jesus Christ. It cannot be separated from the truth of who He is. Jesus is not simply one religious teacher among many, nor is He one authority alongside other authorities. He is the Christ, the One upon whom the entire Church rests.

The full Gospel Day reality of the Church became manifest after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and His return at Pentecost in A.D. 31 as the Holy Spirit. The Church was then revealed as His Spirit-filled body, with Jesus Christ dwelling within His born-again people.

Paul described this spiritual reality in **Colossians 1:26-27**:

> *"Even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints: To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory:"*

The Church therefore does not simply remember an absent Founder. Jesus Christ is the foundation, and He personally dwells within His people by His Spirit. The Christian life flows from His indwelling life, not from an outward attempt to imitate Him.

Everything Must Remain Upon the Foundation

A foundation does more than begin a building. It determines where the building stands and governs the structure that rises upon it. In the same way, Jesus Christ is not only the starting point of the Church. Everything taught and practised within His Church must remain aligned with Him.

Paul therefore warned, *"But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon."* No minister, congregation or movement has authority to replace Christ with human rules, traditions or teachings. Whatever is built must remain faithful to the foundation already laid.

This is why the Word of God must remain the standard by which every teaching is tested.

Jesus said in **John 5:39**:

> *"Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me."*

The Scriptures testify of Jesus Christ. We do not separate Christ from His Word, nor do we claim His authority while setting aside what Scripture teaches. Every doctrine concerning the Church must therefore be brought back to Jesus Christ and tested by the Word of God.

The New Testament Church has one unchanging foundation. It does not rest upon Peter, Paul, a denomination, a religious tradition or a human organisation. It rests upon Jesus Christ.

Paul's statement remains final: *"For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ."*

Personal Response

Key Truth

What happens when a teaching about the Church leaves Christ its foundation?

Personal Reflection

What church custom have you accepted without asking whether it rests upon Jesus Christ?

Action Step

Test that custom by the Bible. State what needs correcting in your own belief or practice and why.

JESUS CHRIST THE CHIEF CORNER STONE

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The New Testament does more than describe Jesus Christ as the foundation of the Church. It also identifies Him as the chief corner stone. This picture helps us understand that everything within the Church must take its direction and alignment from Him.

Isaiah prophesied concerning this stone in **Isaiah 28:16**:

> *"Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste."*

Notice the language Isaiah uses. The stone is *"tried," "precious"* and *"sure."* God was establishing a foundation upon which His people could safely depend, and the New Testament identifies Jesus Christ as the fulfilment of this prophecy.

The Chief Corner Stone

Paul used this picture when describing the household of God.

Paul wrote in **Ephesians 2:19-22**:

> *"Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit."*

The picture is of a building being fitted together in relation to its chief corner stone. Jesus Christ occupies the central position, and the entire spiritual structure takes its direction from Him.

Paul does not say that Jesus is simply one stone among many. He says, *"Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone."* The apostles and prophets have an important place in God's purpose, but their testimony must agree with Christ. He remains the One by whom everything else is measured and aligned.

This is why the teaching of the apostles cannot properly be separated from Jesus Christ. They did not establish another message or another foundation. Their calling was to bear witness to Him and proclaim the truth they had received from Him.

The Building Must Align With Christ

The purpose of a corner stone in this biblical picture is not simply to support the building. It establishes its alignment. If the remainder of the structure moves away from that reference point, the building no longer follows the line established at the beginning.

The same principle applies spiritually. A teaching may have a long history, be accepted by many people or be supported by an influential religious institution, but none of those things establishes it as truth. The question remains whether it is aligned with Jesus Christ and His Word.

Peter also applied Isaiah's prophecy directly to Jesus.

Peter wrote in **1 Peter 2:4-7**:

> *"To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded. Unto you therefore which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner,"*

Peter calls Jesus the *"living stone"* and describes believers as *"lively stones."* The Church is therefore a living spiritual house because its people have life in Jesus Christ. The stones do not determine their own position independently; they are built together in relation to Christ.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How does the chief corner stone guide the rest of a building?

Personal Reflection

Where might your beliefs about the Church be out of line with Jesus Christ?

Action Step

Compare one belief with Christ's words. Name any correction needed and how you will put that truth into practice.

The Apostles and Prophets Point to Christ

Paul says that believers are *"built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets."* This does not contradict his statement that no other foundation can be laid except Jesus Christ. The apostles and prophets belong to the foundation because their Scriptural testimony reveals and points to Christ.

Jesus Himself explained that the Scriptures testified of Him.

Jesus said in **John 5:39**:

> *"Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me."*

The Scriptures do not lead us away from Jesus Christ. Properly understood, they reveal Him. The prophets looked forward to the work of God in Christ, while the apostles testified of the fulfilment they had witnessed and received.

Jesus Christ therefore remains the controlling centre of the whole biblical revelation. We do not place the words of men beside His Word as another equal authority. Everything must agree with the truth God has revealed in Jesus Christ.

Fitly Framed Together in Christ

Paul says that in Christ *"all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord."* This is an important description of the unity of the Church. The Church is not made one by placing different religious systems beside one another and calling their differences unity. Its unity comes from every believer being joined to the same Jesus Christ.

The next verse explains the spiritual reality even more clearly: *"In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit."* God's Church is His dwelling place because His Spirit dwells within His born-again people.

Jesus Christ is not therefore a distant corner stone belonging only to the beginning of Church history. He is present within His people by His Spirit. His indwelling life is what makes the Church a living spiritual habitation rather than an organisation held together by human structure.

The believer does not produce this unity through outward imitation of Jesus. Christ Himself dwells within those who are born again, and His life within them produces the spiritual character and unity that belong to His Church.

Christ Remains the Reference Point

The Church can never reach a stage where Jesus Christ ceases to be its reference point. New circumstances may arise and cultures may change, but Christ does not need to be replaced by a different foundation or a different standard.

The writer of Hebrews declared in **Hebrews 13:8**:

> *"Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever."*

The One who was the chief corner stone in the beginning remains the chief corner stone today. The Church must continue to take its direction from Him.

Every teaching, every practice and every claim concerning the Church must therefore come into alignment with Jesus Christ and His Word. Human tradition cannot move the corner stone, religious popularity cannot move it, and the passing of time cannot move it.

Jesus Christ remains the tried stone, the precious corner stone and the sure foundation upon which His Church is built.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why must every part of the spiritual building remain aligned with Christ?

Personal Reflection

How readily do you allow Jesus' teaching to correct a view that you have long held?

Action Step

When you next hear a claim about the Church, examine your response to it and explain how Christ's Word will guide you.

THE PLUMB LINE OF TRUTH

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When a builder wants to know whether a wall is straight, appearance is not enough. A wall may look correct and still be out of alignment. A fixed standard is needed against which the building can be measured.

Scripture uses the picture of a plumb line to teach this principle.

Amos wrote in **Amos 7:7-8**:

> *"Thus he shewed me: and, behold, the Lord stood upon a wall made by a plumbline, with a plumbline in his hand. And the LORD said unto me, Amos, what seest thou? And I said, A plumbline. Then said the Lord, Behold, I will set a plumbline in the midst of my people Israel: I will not again pass by them any more:"*

A plumb line does not change to accommodate the wall. The wall is measured against the plumb line. In the same way, God's truth does not change to accommodate human opinion, religious tradition or popular belief. Everything must be brought into alignment with the truth God has revealed.

Jesus Christ Is the Truth

The revelation of God's truth is centred in Jesus Christ. He did not present Himself as one possible way among many or as one teacher whose words could be placed beside competing religious authorities.

Jesus said in **John 14:6**:

> *"Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."*

Jesus did not simply say that He taught the truth. He said, *"I am the truth."* The Church must therefore be measured against Jesus Christ. Anything that moves away from Him moves away from the truth upon which His Church stands.

The Scriptures provide the written testimony by which we know and test that truth. Jesus Himself directed people to the Scriptures because they testified of Him. The Word of God therefore functions as the plumb line by which doctrine, practice and every claim concerning the Church must be examined.

The standard is not what a church has always believed, what a respected teacher has said, what a denomination has written into its creed or what the majority of Christians presently accept. The standard is the truth revealed in Jesus Christ and established in the Word of God.

The Standard Does Not Change

Human beliefs and religious customs may change from generation to generation, but Jesus Christ does not change.

The writer of Hebrews declared in **Hebrews 13:8**:

> *"Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever."*

The Church therefore does not need a new foundation for each generation. Neither does truth have to be adjusted to suit changing culture. Jesus Christ remains the same, and His Word remains the standard.

This does not mean that every tradition is automatically wrong simply because it is old or that every new understanding is automatically wrong because it is new. The question is whether it agrees with Scripture. Tradition must be tested, teaching must be tested, and our own understanding must also be tested.

No person or religious body is above that examination.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why does God's truth remain the same when human opinions change?

Personal Reflection

Have popular opinions ever carried more weight with you than the truth Jesus taught?

Action Step

Identify one popular church claim you have accepted. Test it by God's Word and describe any change you need to make.

Beware of Human Tradition

Paul warned believers about being moved away from Christ by teachings that appeared persuasive but were grounded in human thinking.

Paul wrote in **Colossians 2:8-10**:

> *"Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power:"*

Paul identifies the danger as anything that is *"not after Christ."* He then directs the believer immediately back to Jesus and declares, *"ye are complete in him."*

This is particularly important when studying the Church. Human religious systems can accumulate customs, rules and traditions over many generations. Eventually these may be regarded as essential simply because they have been practised for a long time.

The plumb line asks a different question: Is it according to Christ and His Word?

If something cannot be established from the truth of Scripture, age and popularity cannot give it divine authority. The Church belongs to Jesus Christ, and He alone has the right to determine what His Church believes and practises.

Scripture Must Interpret Scripture

Using the Word of God as the plumb line does not mean taking an isolated verse and building a doctrine upon it without considering its context. Scripture must be understood in harmony with Scripture.

We must consider who is speaking, who is being addressed, the historical and covenant setting, and how the verses agree with the wider teaching of the Bible. A correct conclusion does not come from forcing one verse to support an existing belief. It comes from allowing the whole testimony of Scripture to speak.

This protects us from two dangers. The first is adding human teaching to Scripture. The second is using Scripture selectively to defend something we have already decided to believe.

The plumb line must remain straight even when it challenges us.

The Word Stands Above Every Teacher

Teachers have an important place in the Church, but no teacher replaces Jesus Christ or stands above the Word of God. A believer should never accept a doctrine simply because COGMA, a minister or another religious teacher presents it.

John wrote in **1 John 2:27**:

> *"But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him."*

The indwelling Spirit of Christ does not lead the believer away from the Word of God. The Spirit and the truth are in harmony. Every believer should therefore search the Scriptures and allow God's Word to test what is being taught.

This principle applies to COGMA as surely as it applies to every other teaching ministry. Scripture does not stand beneath our doctrine. Our doctrine must stand beneath Scripture.

The Church Jesus built does not determine truth by majority opinion, tradition or human authority. Jesus Christ is the truth, the Scriptures testify of Him, and the Word of God is the plumb line.

Everything must be measured against that unchanging standard.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why must God's Word stand above every teacher's interpretation?

Personal Reflection

How do you react when someone you respect teaches something that seems contrary to the Bible?

Action Step

Examine a teaching in its biblical context. Explain what you will believe or reconsider, while remaining humble towards its teacher.

JESUS CHRIST IS THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH

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The Church is not only built upon Jesus Christ; it is also governed by Him. Scripture describes the Church as the body of Christ and identifies Jesus Christ as its Head. This picture establishes both the authority of Christ over His Church and the complete dependence of the Church upon Him.

Paul wrote in **Ephesians 1:20-23**:

> *"Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all."*

Paul leaves no uncertainty concerning the position of Jesus Christ. He has been made *"the head over all things to the church,"* and the Church is identified as *"his body."* The relationship between Christ and His Church cannot therefore be understood correctly if the Head is separated from the body.

Christ Has the Preeminence

Paul repeats this truth in his letter to the Colossians. Paul wrote in **Colossians 1:18**:

> *"And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence."*

To have the preeminence is to occupy the first and highest place. Jesus Christ does not share the government of His Church with another supreme authority. He is the Head, and in all things He must have the preeminence.

This means that no pope, bishop, pastor, board, organisation, founder or religious movement can take the position that belongs to Jesus Christ. Ministers may serve within the Church and exercise responsibilities given by God, but they remain under the Head. Their authority can never replace His authority.

The Church does not belong to those who lead local congregations. It belongs to Jesus Christ, and every ministry within the Church must remain subject to Him.

The Body Depends Upon the Head

The picture of a head and body also reveals dependence. A body cannot live independently of its head and still remain a functioning body. In the same way, the Church cannot be separated from Jesus Christ and continue to possess the spiritual life that makes it His Church.

Jesus used another picture to communicate the same truth when He spoke of the vine and its branches. Jesus said in **John 15:4-5**:

> *"Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing."*

The branch does not produce life independently and then attempt to imitate the vine. Its life comes from remaining in the vine. In the same way, the Church does not reproduce the character of Jesus through human effort. Jesus Christ dwells within His born-again people by His Spirit, and His life within them produces the spiritual fruit that belongs to Him.

The Church is therefore a living body because Christ lives within His people. Its holiness, love, unity and spiritual fruit are not produced by external religious organisation. They flow from the indwelling life of Jesus Christ.

Personal Response

Key Truth

What does the body receive from Christ its Head?

Personal Reflection

Do you look first to Christ or to human leadership when decisions affect the Church?

Action Step

Consider one decision or concern. Explain how Christ's Word and His life within you should govern your response.

Holding the Head

Paul gave a serious warning concerning those who become disconnected from the true source of spiritual life. Paul wrote in **Colossians 2:18-19**:

> *"Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, And not holding the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God."*

The expression *"not holding the Head"* is significant. Religious activity may continue while Christ no longer occupies His rightful place. People may create elaborate systems of worship, rules and traditions, yet lose their dependence upon Jesus Christ Himself.

Paul says that nourishment comes from the Head and that the body grows *"with the increase of God."* Genuine spiritual growth therefore does not come from adding human requirements. It comes from remaining joined to Christ.

The Church must continually hold the Head.

Christ Governs His Church From Within

The government of Jesus Christ is not simply the government of an absent ruler giving instructions from a great distance. Jesus Christ returned at Pentecost in A.D. 31 as the Holy Spirit and came to dwell within His people. The Head of the Church therefore governs His body by His indwelling Spirit and through the truth of His Word.

Paul wrote in **Romans 8:9**:

> *"But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his."*

Paul uses *"the Spirit of God"* and *"the Spirit of Christ"* for the same indwelling Spirit. Those who belong to Christ have His Spirit dwelling within them. This is essential to understanding how Christ remains personally present with His Church.

The believer is not left simply with instructions about how Jesus once lived. Jesus Christ Himself dwells within the believer. His life within gives direction, produces spiritual fruit and enables His people to walk according to His will.

Human Government Must Remain Under Christ

Every local congregation requires order, faithful ministry and responsible leadership. Scripture does not teach that recognising Jesus as Head removes the need for ministers or spiritual oversight. It does teach that every person who serves must remain subject to Christ.

Peter instructed those who served as elders in **1 Peter 5:2-3**:

> *"Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock."*

The flock is *"the flock of God,"* not the possession of its ministers. Those who exercise oversight are specifically warned against becoming *"lords over God's heritage."*

Jesus said in **John 10:11**:

> *"I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep."*

Church leadership is therefore service under Christ, never a replacement for Christ. The more faithfully a minister serves, the more clearly that ministry should direct people to Jesus rather than create dependence upon the minister.

Complete in the Head

Paul also connects the authority of Christ with the believer's completeness in Him. Paul wrote in **Colossians 2:9-10**:

> *"For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power:"*

The believer is complete in Jesus Christ. Nothing needs to be added to Him in order to provide a higher spiritual life, a fuller salvation or another source of authority.

Recognising Jesus as Head is therefore far more than accepting a theological title. It determines how the Church lives, how it is governed and where it receives its spiritual life. Jesus Christ is the Head, and the Church is His body.

Every believer, every minister and every gathering of God's people must therefore remain subject to Him. In all things, Jesus Christ must have the preeminence.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why is the Church complete only in Christ its Head?

Personal Reflection

Where have you expected a church organisation to provide what Jesus Christ alone gives?

Action Step

Identify that expectation and explain how trusting the indwelling Christ changes your response to it.

JESUS CHRIST IS THE LAWGIVER

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If Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church, then the authority to govern His Church belongs to Him. The Church does not have the right to establish another supreme authority beside Christ or to create religious requirements that take the place of His Word. Jesus Christ determines how His people are to believe and live.

Isaiah expressed this authority clearly in **Isaiah 33:22**:

> *"For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; he will save us."*

Three expressions are brought together in this verse: Judge, Lawgiver and King. Each belongs to the LORD. He establishes what is right, exercises authority over His people and provides their salvation.

The Authority Belongs to Christ

When Jesus commissioned His disciples, He first established the authority under which they were to serve.

Jesus said in **Matthew 28:18**:

> *"And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth."*

The authority under which the apostles served belonged to Jesus Christ. They were not free to establish their own religious laws or another Gospel. Their teaching and ministry remained subject to Him.

This principle continues in the Church. Ministers may teach, elders may oversee and congregations may make practical arrangements for orderly fellowship, but none of these has authority to create another Gospel or impose spiritual requirements that Christ has not established. The Church remains under Jesus Christ.

There Is One Lawgiver

James reinforces the truth that ultimate spiritual authority belongs to God.

James wrote in **James 4:12**:

> *"There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another?"*

There is *"one lawgiver."* The One who possesses this authority is also the One *"who is able to save and to destroy."* Human beings therefore have no right to take the place that belongs to God.

Jesus Christ is the one true God revealed to us, and He is the Head of His Church. When His Church submits to Him, it does not need another spiritual ruler standing between Christ and His people.

This does not mean that the Church has no teaching, order or discipline. Scripture itself gives instruction concerning doctrine, conduct, ministry, correction and fellowship. The important distinction is that these things must arise from the authority of God's Word rather than from human beings establishing themselves as an independent source of spiritual law.

Personal Response

Key Truth

What authority belongs to Christ as the Church's one Lawgiver?

Personal Reflection

Have you treated a human church rule as though it carries the authority of Jesus Christ?

Action Step

Compare that rule with the Bible. Decide what place it should have in your life under Christ's authority.

When Human Rules Take the Place of Christ

Religious organisations often develop creeds, constitutions, traditions and membership requirements. Some written statements may simply summarise what a group understands Scripture to teach or provide practical arrangements for orderly administration. The danger begins when human requirements are given an authority that belongs only to Christ and His Word.

Jesus confronted this problem among the religious leaders of His own time.

Jesus said in **Mark 7:7-9**:

> *"Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition."*

The problem was not simply that traditions existed. The problem was that human tradition displaced the commandment of God. What people had established was being treated as though it carried divine authority.

The same danger remains. A religious practice may become familiar through generations of use, but age does not make it a commandment of God. A rule may be sincerely intended, but sincerity does not give it the authority of Scripture.

Everything must remain subject to Christ.

The Word of God Is Sufficient

H. M. Riggle expressed this principle in 1913 when he wrote, *"Any creed larger than the Bible is too large, just as any creed smaller than the Bible is too small."* His point was that God's revealed Word must remain sufficient and supreme.

A creed that adds requirements God has not established goes beyond Scripture. A creed that excludes truths Scripture clearly teaches falls short of Scripture. In either case, the Bible must remain the standard rather than the creed.

This principle applies equally to COGMA. Our teaching does not determine what Scripture means, and no Study Guide stands above the Word of God. If our understanding is shown to be inconsistent with Scripture, our understanding must be examined while the Word of God remains the authority.

Obedience Flows From Christ Within

Submission to Christ's authority is not an attempt to earn salvation by keeping an external system of religious rules. The born-again believer has received the Spirit of Christ, and His life within produces a willing response to His Word.

Jesus said in **John 14:15-17**:

> *"If ye love me, keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you."*

Jesus did not identify the Comforter as a separate divine Person from Himself. He continued in **John 14:18**:

> *"I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you."*

This promise was fulfilled at Pentecost in A.D. 31 when Jesus Christ came as the Holy Spirit to dwell within His people. The Spirit dwelling within the born-again believer is the Spirit of Christ.

Obedience is therefore inseparable from relationship with Jesus Christ. His people do not obey Him in order to complete their salvation. They obey because they belong to Him and His Spirit dwells within them.

The life of Christ within does not lead believers away from His Word. His Spirit leads them into harmony with the truth He has revealed.

Christ Alone Occupies the Highest Place

No minister, organisation, creed or tradition may occupy the place that belongs to Jesus Christ. Those who teach in the Church are servants of the Word, not authors of a competing authority.

The true body of Christ remains subject to its Head. It listens to His Word, receives His direction and refuses to place human commandments on the same level as divine truth.

The principle is simple and unchanging:

"The LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; he will save us."

Jesus Christ builds His Church, Jesus Christ is its Head, and Jesus Christ alone possesses the supreme authority to govern it.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why must every human rule remain under Christ's authority?

Personal Reflection

Is there a religious practice you have followed from habit rather than biblical conviction?

Action Step

Examine its basis in God's Word. Describe what should change in your understanding or practice under Christ's rule.

THE CHURCH IS THE BODY OF CHRIST

BACK TO CONTENTS

Having established that Jesus Christ is the foundation, chief corner stone, Head and Lawgiver of the Church, we can now consider what the Church actually is. Scripture gives a clear answer: the Church is the body of Christ.

Paul wrote in **Ephesians 1:22-23**:

> *"And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all."*

Paul does not describe the Church primarily as a building, organisation or institution. He identifies it as Christ's body. This is spiritual language describing the relationship between Jesus Christ and those who belong to Him.

The Church Is His Body

Paul repeats the same definition in his letter to the Colossians. Paul wrote in **Colossians 1:18**:

> *"And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence."*

The words are direct: *"the body, the church."* The Church is the body, and Jesus Christ is its Head. We therefore do not need to invent a definition of the Church from religious history or common usage because Scripture has already defined it for us.

Paul confirms this again in **Colossians 1:24**:

> *"Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church:"*

Again, Paul says that Christ's body *"is the church."* This definition is especially important because the word church is often used today for things the New Testament does not mean when speaking of the spiritual body of Christ.

The Body Is Made Up of Believers

A physical building cannot be the body of Christ. A meeting hall may be a useful place in which believers gather, but the building itself is not the Church. If the believers leave the building, the Church has not ceased to exist.

The Church consists of people who belong to Jesus Christ. Paul describes believers as members of one body.

Paul wrote in **Romans 12:4-5**:

> *"For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another."*

There are many members, but there is one body. Each believer has a place and purpose within that body, but no individual believer is the whole Church. Together, those who are in Christ form His spiritual body.

This also means that the Church is not created simply by people deciding to gather together. A gathering may contain many people, but attendance at a Christian meeting does not itself make someone a member of Christ's body. Membership in the spiritual Church depends upon belonging to Jesus Christ.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Who belongs to the body of Christ, and how do they enter it?

Personal Reflection

Have you ever measured whether someone belongs to Christ by a church label?

Action Step

Examine that attitude in the light of the new birth. Explain how you will recognise and treat Christ's people differently.

The Body Receives Its Life From Christ

The body cannot live independently of its Head. Jesus Christ is not only the authority over the Church; He is also the source of its spiritual life.

Paul wrote in **Romans 8:9**:

> *"But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his."*

This verse gives a clear distinction. A person belongs to Christ because the Spirit of Christ dwells within. If a person does not have the Spirit of Christ, Paul says, *"he is none of his."*

The true Church is therefore the born-again body of Christ. Its members receive the Spirit of Christ at the new birth. They do not become part of Christ's body through an earthly membership process; they belong to Him because He has given them spiritual life.

This is why the Church is a living body rather than a religious institution. Jesus Christ personally dwells within His people by His Spirit.

Christ in His People

Paul described this indwelling life as a mystery that had been hidden but was now revealed. Paul wrote in **Colossians 1:26-27**:

> *"Even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints: To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory:"*

The great New Covenant reality is *"Christ in you."* The Church does not simply gather around the memory of Jesus Christ or attempt to reproduce His life through outward imitation. Jesus Christ dwells within every born-again believer, and His life within is expressed through His people.

This helps us understand why Scripture calls the Church His body. A body expresses the life within it. In the same way, the Church expresses the life of Jesus Christ because He dwells within His people by His Spirit.

His love, holiness, truth and spiritual fruit are expressed through those in whom He lives. The unity of the Church therefore comes from the same Christ dwelling within every born-again believer.

Many Members, but One Body

The fact that the body contains many members does not mean that Christ has many separate spiritual bodies. Paul wrote that believers are *"one body in Christ."*

He stated this plainly in **Ephesians 4:4**:

> *"There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling;"*

The detailed meaning of this oneness will be examined more fully later in this module. At this point, the essential truth is clear: Christ has one spiritual body.

Local groups of believers may gather in different places, and the New Testament therefore speaks of local churches or assemblies. These local gatherings do not create separate spiritual bodies belonging to different Christs. Born-again believers everywhere belong to the same body because they belong to the same Jesus Christ.

The Body Belongs to Christ

Understanding the Church as the body of Christ changes the way we think about belonging. The Church cannot become the private possession of a minister, congregation, organisation or religious movement. The body belongs to its Head.

Paul reminded the Corinthians that believers themselves belonged to God. Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 6:19-20**:

> *"What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's."*

Those who have been born again belong to Jesus Christ. They have been bought with a price, and the Holy Ghost dwells within them. Their identity therefore rests in Christ rather than in an earthly religious label.

This spiritual reality must remain central whenever we speak about the Church. Buildings may be useful, local congregations are important, ministers have responsibilities, and orderly fellowship has its proper place. Yet none of these things defines the spiritual body itself.

The Church is the body of Christ, made up of those who have been born again and in whom the Spirit of Christ dwells. Jesus Christ is the Head, His people are the members, and His indwelling life is the life of the body.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why does Christ's body belong to Him rather than to an organisation?

Personal Reflection

How does knowing that believers belong to Christ challenge the way you have treated others?

Action Step

Consider a believer you have overlooked. Identify how Christ's care within you should govern your next response to that person.

A SPIRITUAL PEOPLE, NOT A RELIGIOUS ORGANISATION

BACK TO CONTENTS

Once the Church is understood as the body of Christ, an important distinction becomes clear. The Church Jesus built cannot be identified primarily with a building, denomination, institution or human organisation. These things may provide places and structures in which people gather, but the Church itself is the spiritual body made up of those who belong to Jesus Christ.

Paul described those who belong to Christ in **1 Corinthians 1:2**:

> *"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:"*

Paul addressed *"the church of God which is at Corinth,"* but then immediately identified the people to whom he was speaking: those who were sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be saints. The Church was not the city, the meeting place or an organisation established at Corinth. It was the people who belonged to Jesus Christ.

A Called People

The Greek word commonly translated church in the New Testament is EKKLESIA. It speaks of an assembly or congregation. In the New Testament, the emphasis is upon people gathered to God rather than upon a religious building.

Peter described the spiritual calling of God's people in **1 Peter 2:9-10**:

> *"But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light: Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy."*

Notice the movement in Peter's words. God has *"called you out of darkness into his marvellous light,"* and those who have received His mercy are now *"the people of God."*

The Church is therefore a people called to God through Jesus Christ. They have been brought out of spiritual darkness and into His life, and their identity comes from belonging to Him.

Born Again Into a Spiritual Reality

A person does not become part of Christ's spiritual body simply by attending meetings or placing a name on a membership roll. The Church consists of those who have received new life in Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote in **2 Corinthians 5:17**:

> *"Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."*

The essential expression is *"in Christ."* The new creation is not produced by joining an earthly organisation. It is the work of God in the person who is born again.

This is why there is an important difference between membership in a religious organisation and membership in the body of Christ. An organisation may accept someone according to its own requirements, but only God can give spiritual life. Human beings can place a name on a roll, but they cannot place a person into Christ.

The fuller question of how a person enters the Church will be examined later in this module. For now, the important truth is that the Church consists of people whose spiritual identity is found in Jesus Christ.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why does new birth make the Church a spiritual people?

Personal Reflection

Do you still think of belonging to the Church mainly in terms of attending or joining a group?

Action Step

Compare that view with the new birth. Explain what needs changing in the way you understand spiritual membership.

Holy Because Christ Dwells Within

Those who belong to the Church are called saints. The word HAGIOS, translated saints, carries the thought of being holy and set apart to God. This holiness is not an outward religious appearance produced by human effort. It flows from belonging to Jesus Christ and from His life dwelling within the believer.

Peter wrote in **1 Peter 1:15-16**:

> *"But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy."*

God's people are called unto holiness. The source of that holy life is not an attempt to copy Jesus from the outside. Jesus Christ dwells within the born-again believer by His Spirit, and His indwelling life produces conduct that agrees with His holiness.

Paul also wrote in **1 Thessalonians 4:7**:

> *"For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness."*

The Church is therefore a holy people because its members have been called to God and have received the life of Christ within. Holiness belongs to the spiritual nature of the Church, not to the name of an organisation.

An Organisation Cannot Define the Body

Religious organisations may contain genuine born-again believers. A person's association with a denomination does not by itself tell us whether that individual belongs to Jesus Christ. There may be sincere believers in many religious settings who truly possess the Spirit of Christ.

At the same time, the organisation itself must not be confused with the spiritual body of Christ. An institution may include people who are born again and people who are not. The Church, in its spiritual New Testament meaning, consists only of those who actually belong to Christ.

Paul gives the determining principle in **Romans 8:9**:

> *"But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his."*

The decisive question is not which organisation has accepted a person, but whether the Spirit of Christ dwells within. Paul says plainly that if someone does not have the Spirit of Christ, that person does not belong to Him.

This distinction prevents us from claiming that one earthly organisation, including one using the name Church of God, is automatically identical with the entire spiritual Church. The Church belongs to Jesus Christ, and He knows all those who are His.

The Church Can Gather Anywhere

Because the Church is a spiritual people, it is not confined to a particular building or physical location. Believers may gather in a house, a hall or another suitable place. The location can serve the congregation, but it does not create the Church.

Jesus said in **Matthew 18:20**:

> *"For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."*

The essential reality is the presence of Christ among His people. A magnificent religious building without born-again believers is not the spiritual body of Christ, while believers gathered in the simplest surroundings remain members of His Church.

The New Testament Church must therefore be recognised spiritually. It is not identified by architecture, institutional history, denominational boundaries or a human membership list. It is the people of God, born again in Jesus Christ, indwelt by His Spirit and belonging to His body.

The Church is not an organisation that gives people spiritual life. It is a living people because Jesus Christ lives within them.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why can Christ's people gather without a particular building?

Personal Reflection

Have buildings or meeting places become more important to you than the people who gather?

Action Step

Examine a habit of fellowship. Describe how you will give more attention to Christ's people than to the place of meeting.

BUILT UPON THE APOSTLES AND PROPHETS

BACK TO CONTENTS

When Paul describes the Church as God's spiritual building, he says that it is built upon *"the foundation of the apostles and prophets."* This does not introduce another foundation beside Jesus Christ. The apostles and prophets form part of the foundation because their inspired testimony points to, reveals and agrees with Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote in **Ephesians 2:19-22**:

> *"Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit."*

Jesus Christ remains the chief corner stone. The apostles and prophets do not stand independently of Him. Their place in the foundation is determined by their relationship to Christ, and the whole spiritual building is fitted together *"in whom."*

The Prophets Pointed Forward to Christ

Long before the birth of Jesus Christ, the prophets spoke of what God would accomplish through Him. Their writings contain promises, prophecies, types and spiritual pictures that find their meaning and fulfilment in Christ.

Jesus Himself directed people to recognise this. Jesus said in **John 5:39**:

> *"Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me."*

When Jesus spoke these words, the New Testament had not yet been written. He was directing His hearers to the Scriptures they already possessed and declaring that those Scriptures testified of Him.

This gives us an important principle for understanding the prophets. Their writings must not be treated as an independent message separated from Jesus Christ. The Old Testament revelation moves towards Christ, and its promises and prophetic pictures must ultimately be understood in relation to Him.

Isaiah's prophecy concerning the corner stone is one example. Isaiah wrote in **Isaiah 28:16**:

> *"Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste."*

What Isaiah announced beforehand is identified in the New Testament with Jesus Christ. The prophetic testimony therefore aligns with the chief corner stone.

The Apostles Testified of Christ

The apostles stood on the other side of Christ's earthly ministry, death and resurrection. They had witnessed His ministry and were commissioned to proclaim what God had accomplished through Him. Their teaching did not establish a religion independent of Jesus because the authority of their message came from the One who sent them.

The apostles had been with Jesus and were appointed to bear witness of Him.

Jesus said in **John 15:27**:

> *"And ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning."*

Their message therefore remained centred upon Jesus Christ and subject to His authority.

This is why apostolic teaching has such an important place in understanding the Church. The apostles did not invent the Church after Jesus had departed. They proclaimed Jesus Christ and explained the spiritual reality He had established.

Their writings help us understand what it means for Jesus to be the Head, for believers to form His body, for the Spirit of Christ to dwell within His people and for the Church to become God's spiritual habitation.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How do the apostles and prophets point to Christ rather than replace Him?

Personal Reflection

Have you relied on a preacher's authority without checking that the teaching leads to Christ?

Action Step

Select one teaching and compare it with the apostles' words. Explain how you will respond to what the Bible establishes.

One Harmonious Testimony

The prophets looked forward to Christ, and the apostles testified of the fulfilment found in Him. Their writings form one harmonious Scriptural witness because Jesus Christ stands at the centre.

This does not mean that every verse says the same thing or that differences of covenant, history and audience can be ignored. Scripture must always be read in its proper context. Yet when rightly understood, the biblical testimony does not lead us to competing foundations.

The prophets do not lead us away from Jesus Christ, and the apostles do not establish another authority beside Him. Their testimony brings us to the same foundation.

This is why Paul can say that the household of God is *"built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets"* while also declaring elsewhere that no other foundation can be laid except Jesus Christ. The statements do not compete with one another. The apostles and prophets testify to the one foundation upon which the Church rests.

The Word Must Remain Aligned With Christ

The picture of the chief corner stone helps us understand the relationship between Christ and the Scriptural testimony. In a building, the corner stone determines the line along which the structure is built. In the spiritual building, Jesus Christ remains the point of alignment.

The written Word must therefore be understood in harmony with the One of whom it testifies. We must not take isolated verses and use them to construct teachings that contradict the revelation of Jesus Christ or the wider harmony of Scripture.

Neither should we add human teachings to the foundation and then give them the same authority as God's Word. Religious traditions may become deeply established, but they do not become part of the apostolic and prophetic foundation simply because they are old.

The foundation has already been laid.

The Church Continues in the Truth

Because the Church is built upon this foundation, it must remain faithful to the truth revealed through Scripture. It is not free to reshape the Gospel according to each generation's preferences.

The apostles did not regard their message as something that could be endlessly altered. What they had received concerning Jesus Christ was to be faithfully proclaimed and preserved.

At the same time, faithfulness to apostolic teaching does not mean creating another human creed and placing it above Scripture. The writings of the apostles themselves must remain the authority. Every summary, Study Guide and statement of doctrine must remain subject to the Word of God.

This is especially important when studying the Church. Human religious systems can develop their own traditions concerning membership, government, worship and doctrine. Those traditions must not be allowed to redefine what Jesus Christ and the apostles established.

The question must always return to Scripture: Does this agree with the foundation?

The Whole Building Grows in Christ

Paul does not end his description with the foundation. He shows what God is building upon it. The saints are *"fellowcitizens"* and members of *"the household of God,"* and the whole building is *"fitly framed together"* in Jesus Christ.

The purpose is spiritual:

"In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit."

God is not building a religious institution for its own sake. He is forming a spiritual people in whom He dwells by His Spirit.

The prophets pointed towards this work, and the apostles testified of its fulfilment. Jesus Christ remains the chief corner stone who gives the entire building its meaning, direction and unity.

From Genesis through the New Testament writings, the message ultimately leads us to Jesus Christ. The Church must therefore remain where the apostles and prophets placed it: built upon the truth of God's Word, with Jesus Christ Himself as the chief corner stone.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How does the whole spiritual building grow in Christ?

Personal Reflection

Do you see your fellow believers as people to support or mainly as people attending the same meetings?

Action Step

Identify one person's need and consider how Christ's indwelling love should shape the encouragement or help you offer.

CHRIST GOVERNS AND PRESERVES HIS CHURCH

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Jesus did not promise to begin His Church and then leave its continuation in the hands of men. The One who said, *"I will build my church"* also declared that the powers opposing it would not prevail. Its continued existence rests upon Jesus Christ, not upon the survival of a particular earthly institution.

Jesus said in **Matthew 16:18**:

> *"And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."*

This is both a declaration of ownership and a promise of preservation. Christ builds the Church upon Himself, and what He builds cannot be destroyed by the forces that oppose Him.

The Church Remains Because Christ Remains

Throughout history, religious organisations have risen and fallen. Institutions have divided, movements have changed, and human leaders have come and gone. The continued existence of the Church cannot therefore depend upon an uninterrupted human organisation.

Its security rests upon the unchanging Jesus Christ. The writer of Hebrews declared in **Hebrews 13:8**:

> *"Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever."*

The foundation has not changed, the chief corner stone has not moved, and the Head of the Church remains the same. The Church Jesus built has never required another head to preserve it. Christ has not surrendered His authority to a succession of human rulers, nor has He needed a denomination or institution to guarantee the survival of His spiritual body.

Jesus Christ remains sufficient for His Church.

God Gives the Increase

Paul understood that the preservation and growth of the Church were works of God rather than achievements of human ministry. Different servants might participate in preaching and teaching, but spiritual life could come only from God.

Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 3:5-7**:

> *"Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase."*

Paul did not diminish the importance of faithful ministry. He placed ministry in its proper position: ministers plant and water, but God gives the increase.

The Church therefore does not depend upon the greatness of its human leaders. A minister may serve faithfully for many years and then pass from the scene, but Jesus Christ remains. One generation of believers may finish its earthly course, but Christ continues to give spiritual life to those who are born again.

The Church survives because its life comes from Him.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Who gives the Church its growth, and what part do people have?

Personal Reflection

Have you felt responsible to produce spiritual results that only God can give?

Action Step

Examine that pressure. Describe how you will serve faithfully while trusting Jesus Christ to give spiritual life and growth.

Christ Governs Through His Spirit

Christ does not govern His Church as an absent Founder whose followers are left to preserve an organisation after His departure. Jesus Christ returned at Pentecost in A.D. 31 as the Holy Spirit and personally dwells within those who are born again.

Paul wrote in **Romans 8:9**:

> *"But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his."*

The Spirit of God is the Spirit of Christ, and those who belong to Jesus have His Spirit dwelling within them. This is fundamental to the preservation of the Church because its life is not

handed down through an earthly chain of offices or maintained through institutional continuity. Jesus Christ continues to dwell within His people by His Spirit.

The Church is living because Christ is living within His people.

Christ Keeps His People Centred Upon Him

The greatest danger to the Church is not the disappearance of an earthly institution. The spiritual danger is being moved away from Jesus Christ.

Paul warned about this in **Colossians 2:8-10**:

> *"Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power:"*

Paul identifies the danger as teaching that is *"not after Christ."* The answer is not another human system. The answer is to remain in Christ because the believer is already *"complete in him."*

Human traditions can gradually become more important than the Word of God, and religious structures can begin as useful arrangements and later be treated as though they possess divine authority. When this happens, attention moves away from the Head. Christ preserves His Church by continuing to be its life, truth and authority, so His people must remain centred upon Him.

The Lord Adds to His Church

The book of Acts shows that the growth of the Church was not controlled by a human membership system. The Lord Himself added those who were being saved.

Luke wrote in **Acts 2:46-47**:

> *"And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."*

The Lord was adding to the Church. This agrees perfectly with the words of Jesus: *"I will build my church."* Christ builds by giving new life and adding to His spiritual body those who are saved.

The Church therefore continues wherever men and women are genuinely born again and receive the Spirit of Christ. This truth also prevents any earthly group from claiming exclusive control over Christ's Church. Human organisations may keep membership records, but the Lord knows those who belong to Him and adds the saved to His body.

Division Does Not Create Many Bodies

The existence of many religious organisations can give the impression that Christ has many different churches. Human division, however, does not divide the spiritual body of Christ into many bodies.

Paul wrote in **Ephesians 4:4-6**:

> *"There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all."*

There is one body because there is one Head and one Spirit. Human organisations may divide, but those divisions do not create additional bodies of Christ.

Born-again believers may be found in different religious settings and may presently possess different levels of understanding. Their salvation does not depend upon belonging to one earthly organisation. They belong to Christ because they have been born again and possess His Spirit.

This is why the preservation of the Church must never be confused with the preservation of a denomination.

Christ Is Able to Maintain His Church

Jesus Christ is the Builder, foundation, chief corner stone, Head and Lawgiver of His Church. He gives it spiritual life, governs it by His Spirit and adds to it those who are saved.

The Church has therefore never depended upon human ability to keep it alive. Men can preserve records, buildings and organisations, but only Jesus Christ can preserve the spiritual life of His body.

His promise still stands: *"I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."*

The Church Jesus built still exists because Jesus Christ still lives. Wherever people are born again, possess the Spirit of Christ and remain joined to Him, His spiritual body is present.

Christ built His Church, Christ governs His Church, and Christ is able to preserve His Church.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why can Christ preserve the Church He has built?

Personal Reflection

When difficulties arise in the Church, do you respond with fear or with trust in Christ?

Action Step

Identify one concern and a promise of Jesus that speaks to it. Explain how you will respond with faith rather than fear.

CONCLUSION: THE CHURCH BELONGS TO JESUS CHRIST

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Everything we have studied brings us back to one central truth: the Church belongs to Jesus Christ. He said, *"I will build my church."* He is its foundation, its chief corner stone, its Head and its Lawgiver. The Church cannot therefore be separated from Him or placed under another supreme authority.

Paul reminded the elders at Ephesus of the price by which the Church was purchased.

Paul wrote in **Acts 20:28**:

> *"Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood."*

The Church is described as *"the church of God,"* purchased with His own blood. The eternal Spirit was revealed through the genuine human life of Jesus Christ, and through His death He purchased a people for Himself. The Church therefore belongs to Him by both divine authority and redemption.

Because the Church belongs to Jesus Christ, no human being or organisation can claim ownership of it. Ministers are servants, not owners. Congregations may gather in particular places, but the people of God do not become the possession of those who oversee them. Every born-again believer belongs first and completely to Jesus Christ.

The Church also receives its life from Him. It is not kept alive by an institution, a historical succession or a denominational structure. Jesus Christ dwells within His people by His Spirit, and His indwelling life makes them His living body.

This gives us the foundation for everything that follows in this module. To understand the New Testament Church, we must begin with Jesus Christ and allow His Word to define the Church rather than beginning with the religious structures that have developed around Christianity.

The question is therefore not simply, *"Which church should I join?"* A deeper question must first be answered: What is the Church that Jesus Himself built?

Scripture has begun to answer that question. The Church is built upon Jesus Christ and aligned with Him as the chief corner stone. It is governed by Him as its Head, remains subject to His Word, and consists of people whose spiritual life is found in Him.

The Church is His.

Jesus Christ built it, Jesus Christ purchased it, Jesus Christ governs it, and Jesus Christ gives it life.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How do Christ's roles as Builder, foundation, Head and Lawgiver establish that the Church belongs to Him?

Personal Reflection

Which of Christ's roles as Builder, foundation, Head or Lawgiver most challenges your present thinking?

Action Step

Identify one belief or practice needing review. Explain the correction God's Word calls for and how you will respond under Christ's authority.

SUBMISSION TO COGMA FOR APPRAISAL

Instructions

Complete this section after you have finished the Study Guide. It must be completed online.

The link is located at the bottom of the online Study Guide — https://cogma.com.au/study-guides/

Your answers should reflect your understanding, your personal response, and how you intend to live by the truth you have studied. Answer honestly and be specific.

1. Main Truth

How do Jesus' roles as Builder, foundation, Head and Lawgiver show that the Church belongs to Him? Explain why this matters for any person or organisation that claims to govern it.

2. Understanding

How should the apostles' and prophets' testimony be understood in relation to Christ? Use a verse to explain how you would test a church teaching against His Word.

3. Personal Reflection

Have you used a building, denomination or human leader as the main measure of Christ's Church? Explain what has changed or been strengthened in your understanding of His spiritual body.

4. Response to Truth

What should you do if a trusted church custom disagrees with Christ's Word? Explain how His place as Head and Lawgiver should guide your own response.

5. Action Step

Choose one belief or practice about the Church that challenges you personally. Compare it with a verse about Christ's authority and explain what needs to change in your understanding or conduct.

6. Early Response

Have you begun to examine that belief or practice and respond to what the Bible teaches? Explain any correction you have made, or what has hindered you from responding.

7. Ongoing Practice

How will you continue to place Christ's Word above a preacher, tradition or organisation? Describe a regular way you will check a teaching and respond to it.

8. Doctrinal Clarity

Explain how Christ can be the foundation, chief corner stone and Head of His Church. Why can an earthly institution neither create His spiritual body nor take His governing place? Use a verse in your answer.

9. Living the Truth

Think of a believer who gathers in a different place or organisation. How should the truth that Christ's body consists of born-again people affect the way you recognise and serve that person? Give a realistic example.

10. Final Response

Bring together Christ's authority, His indwelling life and His care for the Church. What has become clearer or been corrected in your understanding? Explain how you are now prepared to treat His people and test church claims.