

a new family

what does it mean to belong to the church?



*for new Christians
joining a local church*

Trevor Lloyd

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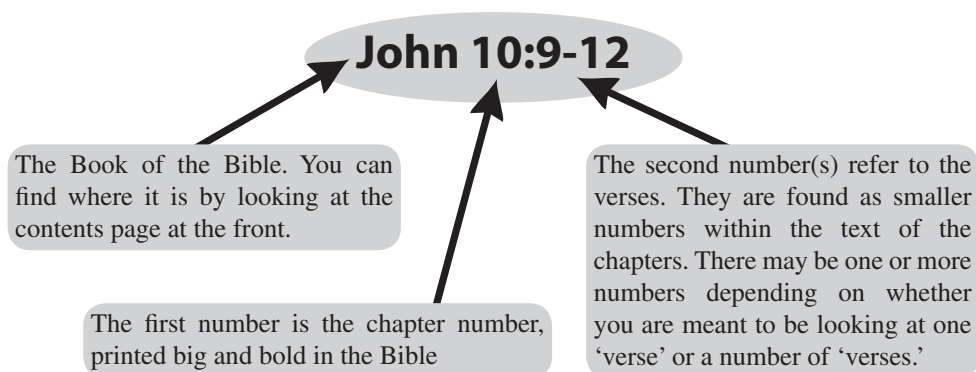
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Using the Bible

You will see as you read this book that we often refer to passages from the Bible. If you are not used to using the Bible, then it can seem a little daunting. But it is not as difficult as it first seems so don't be put off.

The Bible is not one book but a collection of books, split into two main divisions: the Old Testament and the New Testament.

When you need to look up a verse or passage from the Bible, there will be a 'reference' like the one below:



It may seem awkward to begin with but you will soon get used to it.

You will also find that there are many different translations or 'versions' of the Bible. The main ones referred to in this book are:

New Living Translation (NLT)

New International Version (NIV)

Different versions all teach the same truth; they are just put in different words.

In order to help you to read the Bible and enjoy it, I recommend that you use one of the modern translations like those mentioned above, and don't just start at the beginning and try to read through. Start with a gospel like Mark, or a short letter like Colossians. Ask your helper for notes to help you to get started.

Introduction

This booklet is the companion volume to *A New Start*. It is written to help you find out more about what it means to be part of the church, your new spiritual family. You will have already discovered that the Christian life is not meant to be lived alone. You are part of a family. The Bible describes the church as being like a temple made up of living stones. The following studies are about what that actually means in practice, how we are meant to relate together, how we can each play our part and what our attitude should be to those who lead the church. It also looks at why the church is so important to God and how he intends to use it to change his world. Read on then, and discover how you are meant to be a part of the most important group of people in the world – God’s church!

1

Body Building

A church is not a building or a meeting. A church is a community of people sharing life together. It is a family. When you became a Christian, you became part of the *universal Church*, which is the whole family of Christians across the world – and, in fact, all Christians who have ever lived and will ever live! But if being part of the Church is to have any real meaning, and if you are going to grow up spiritually, you need to be part of a *local church* family. This series of studies will teach you what it means to be a committed member of a local church.

Two of the main illustrations that the Bible uses for the church are:

- **A Building**

Jesus is building his church (Matthew 16:18) and we are all living stones (1 Peter 2:5) in this spiritual temple where God lives by his *Spirit* (Ephesians 2:21-2). This is an illustration. Remember, church must never be thought of as an actual physical building – church is people.

- **A Body**

We are all members of one body, with different functions, but all equally important (Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27), and Christ is the head of the body (Colossians 1:17-18).

These two illustrations for the church are brought together in an important passage:



**Turn to and read Ephesians 4:11-16
and then read the notes below:**

We can note some important things from this passage that are taught elsewhere in the Bible:

Built Together

1. Members of the church are *joined* together. This is a very strong word in the original language of the Bible meaning glued or bonded together (see Acts 5:12-13). Membership then involves a very strong commitment to one another.
2. The body is held together by '*every supporting ligament*'. Every part of the body is important and none is more important than another (1 Corinthians 12:20-25). In the church, you get people from all kinds of backgrounds, but we are all one in Christ (Galatians 3:26-28). You will develop closer relationships with some people more than

others, but we are all called to love each other (1 John 3:11) and do good to the whole family of believers (Galatians 6:10). This will involve spending time with one another, worshipping together and sharing our lives together (Acts 2:41-47).

3. The body grows '*as each part does its work*'. God has blessed you with special gifts and talents to use in the building up of his church. To be fully connected to the body, you will need to be willing to serve in the church and to play your part (1 Peter 4:10). Imagine a football team where some of the players on the field decided they couldn't be bothered playing anymore and just strolled off the pitch! Or think of an orchestra where those playing the string instruments went for a stroll during the performance of the symphony! Building the church is a team effort and each must play their part if the job is to get done.
4. Growing up together also involves '*speaking the truth in love*'. In any family, there will be times of tension and conflict. As stones are being built together, sometimes sparks fly and we knock rough edges off each other. Part of growing up spiritually will involve learning how to resolve conflict. We don't simmer in silence or have slanging matches but we learn to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). We can and should also speak to encourage, spur one another on and build each other up (Ephesians 4:29/Hebrews 10:24). Although there will be occasional conflict, you will also find yourself forming wonderful 'life-joints' – real, strong, lasting friendships.
5. The *Head* of the body is Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23). The head determines what the rest of the parts of the body do. If we are all rightly related to the head, it is much easier to relate rightly to each other. Do what Jesus teaches you in his **Word** and by his **Spirit** and you will find yourself fitting into his body.

Breaking Bread

From the days of the early church, Christians throughout history have taken bread and wine as a reminder of Christ's sacrifice for them on the cross (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). It is also an expression of their unity as one body. Christ's natural body was broken so that his spiritual body might be one (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). The taking of the bread and wine is not meant to be sombre but it is serious. This is why we should examine ourselves when we take it, especially to see if there is anything between us and our brothers and sisters that needs to be put right (1 Corinthians 11:27-31). It isn't just to be taken when the whole church gathers together but can be shared together in our homes as an expression of our oneness in Christ (Acts 2:46-7).

Think About It!

1. *What do you think being 'joined together' is going to mean in practical terms?*
2. *Why do you think it is important that each person in the church plays their part?*
3. *What does it mean to be rightly related to the head? How can this affect the way you get on with other members of the body?*



Taking Steps

1. *Discuss with existing members what it means practically to be a committed member of a church.*
2. *On completing this booklet, you may be asked to make a public declaration of your commitment to the church. Make a decision to do this seriously and prayerfully.*
3. *Look for examples in society where people are just living for themselves, doing their own thing, and think about what damage it does. Then consider what happens when people try to love, serve and encourage each other. This is how God intends his church to be – an alternative society.*
4. *Recognise that no church is perfect and that the one you are considering becoming part of is still 'under construction.'*



Glossary

Universal Church – all the people who are true Christians throughout the world and throughout all time.

Local church – a community of Christians in the same geographical area who meet and share life together in committed relationships and under the oversight of the same eldership.

Word – this is short for the Word of God, a term that Christians often use to refer to the Bible because it communicates to us what God's mind and will is.

Spirit – this is short for the Holy Spirit, who is God living within us and among us.



Key Verse:

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him, the whole body, joined together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Ephesians 4:15-16)

2

Better To Give

Jesus taught that ‘it is more blessed to give than to receive’ (Acts 20:35). When we come into the Kingdom of God, we learn a whole new way of thinking and living. In the world, people are more concerned about getting. In the Kingdom, we learn the value of giving. This includes the giving and sharing of our money and material things, but it also covers more than that. It is the giving of our time, effort, talents, encouragement etc. – the giving of ourselves. Our ultimate example is Jesus, who literally gave himself for us in his death on the cross (Galatians 2:20).

We will look at the various ways in which we can give as part of the family of God, but we’ll start with what is often the most challenging area – money!

Money Matters

Our attitude towards money is a key to the Christian life. Remember, you have been born into a new Kingdom that is very different from the world and its way of thinking. The following gives you some idea of how the principles of the Kingdom are very different to those of the world:

- All your money, as with everything, belongs to God (Psalm 24:1).
- You mustn’t make an *idol* of material things. You can’t serve God and money (Matthew 6:24).
- A wrong attitude to money and material things is destructive (1 Timothy 6:6-10).
- We are called to be faithful and wise stewards of our money, as with everything (Matthew 25:14-30).
- You reap what you sow. Give and it will be given to you (Luke 6:38; 2 Corinthians 9:6).
- When we are faithful, we can trust God to provide for all our needs (Philippians 4:18-19).
- God wants us to be cheerful givers (2 Corinthians 9:7).
- God doesn’t want us to be slaves to debt and he can set us free (Romans 13:8).

Living by these Kingdom principles is a firm foundation for a healthy attitude and approach to money and material things.

Tithes

Tithing means giving the first tenth of our income to God. The Bible calls it bringing him the first fruits (Proverbs 3:9-10). Yes, even before the taxman! It is a sign to God that we really do believe all that we have belongs to him and that we trust him to provide for all our needs. We do this by giving the tithe to the local church to which we belong, and this is how the leadership and other ministries of the church are supported. This is the same way that

the Old Testament priests and Levites were supported (Numbers 18:21; 1 Timothy 5:17-18). But it must be remembered that it is not like paying your subs to a club. We tithe to God, not men. You will find that we often emphasise tithing and the right handling of money as being vitally important for your spiritual life.

Some people's initial thoughts about tithing are that they could never afford it! Well, although the Bible usually discourages us from testing God, this is one area where we are told we can. As we are faithful to bring our tithe, he will richly provide for us. Many Christians can tell you about their personal experience of this truth.



“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.”
(Malachi 3:10)

Offerings

The giving of our *offerings*, whenever we come together to worship God or when a special request is made for a particular need, is on top of our tithe. The tithe is determined by our income, whereas the offering is determined by our own free decision (2 Corinthians 8:3-4). This is why the Bible sometimes calls them freewill offerings. But remember, you reap what you sow.



Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.
(2 Corinthians 9:6)

Whenever we gather together, we should come ready to give some of our money as an expression of our worship.

Bringing Your Gifts

As we have said, giving is more than just about the giving of our money. We noted in our last lesson that the church grows as each of us plays our part. We give by serving one another in many different ways (Galatians 5:13).

God prepares an area of service for each of us (Ephesians 2:10; 1 Peter 4:10) but we need to be prepared to serve in any way. Whatever we do, we should do it with all our heart (Colossians 3:23-24). As we are faithful in small things, God calls us into bigger things (Matthew 25:23). Most importantly, as we serve and play our part in the family, we build up ourselves and the church (Acts 20:35; 1 Corinthians 14:12; Ephesians 4:16).

When You Come Together



When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.
(1 Corinthians 14:26)

The Bible teaches that every time we come together to pray and worship, it should not just be one or two people from the front who contribute. God can use any of us. We could tell people about something special that God has done for us or shown us from the Bible. And, as we are baptised in the Holy Spirit and learn to follow his leading, we can use the ***gifts of the Holy Spirit*** – bringing a prophecy, a vision, a message in tongues or an interpretation, a word of encouragement etc. (1 Corinthians 12:7).

At the very least, give by putting all your heart and soul into worship and prayer. Always come to any gathering of the church more ready to give than to receive. Then you will receive so much more!

Think About It!

- 1. Imagine a world where everyone was more concerned with what they could give to people, rather than what they could get from them. What would it be like?***
- 2. Think about all the different ways in which you could give to people. Start doing it.***
- 3. What talents and gifts do you have and how could you use them to serve in the church?***
- 4. Why is it important to give your whole heart to it when we gather to praise and worship God?***



Notes

Taking Steps

1. **Look up the scriptures about money and giving noted at the beginning of this chapter, especially 2 Corinthians 8 & 9, and consider where you might need to change in your attitude towards money.**
2. **If you realise what the Bible teaches about tithing but are having some difficulty in doing it, approach one of the leaders in the church who you trust to help you get started.**
3. **If you are fairly sure that you want to become a member of this church, talk to people in the church about the various areas of service. Decide where you want to serve and approach the elders about this.**
4. **From now on, every time you come to a gathering of the church be more determined to give than to receive.**



Glossary

Idol – this means anything that is more important than God in our lives and so comes between us and God.

Tithing – giving one tenth of your gross income to God.

Offerings – money that we give to God and to his work in addition to the tithe.

Gifts of the Spirit – various ways that the Holy Spirit enables us to build one another up when we are meeting together for worship or at any time the Holy Spirit moves us – e.g. prophecy, words of knowledge, healing.



Key Verse:

'it is more blessed to give than to receive' (Acts 20:35)

Notes

3

Take Me To Your Leader

We have said that the church is a community of people. Every community has its leaders. It is important if you are going to be a member of a community that you have faith in its leaders. You need to be clear what their responsibilities are towards you, and yours to them. In this study, we are going to look at the pattern and principles of leadership in the church that are laid down for us in the Bible.

Local Leaders

You may already be aware of those in the local congregation who are the leaders. They are often called *elders* and their job is to shepherd or *pastor* (Acts 20:28) the church (which is why some people will call them pastors). It is their responsibility to '*shepherd the flock of God*' (1 Peter 5:2).

This involves:

- **Feeding** – with the food of God's Word through teaching, in large gatherings, small groups or one to one (John 21:17).
- **Tending** – helping the weak and injured through godly counselling (1 Thessalonians 5:14).
- **Protecting** – from enemies or from going astray, by warning (Acts 20:28-31).
- **Leading** – moving the flock forwards, through example, envisioning and encouraging (John 10:4).
- **Ruling** – keeping people on the right path with their staff of authority, by correcting and disciplining (Matt.2:6; Titus 2:15).

Sometimes people ask whether leaders will tell them what to do. The answer is yes, sometimes, if necessary. But it would only be for their good to help them grow in God. A good shepherd or pastor does not try to boss people around, but sets them an example to follow (1 Peter 5:1-3).

A shepherd may have to be firm with you if it is for your own protection, or if what you are doing is not in keeping with Christian principles and would reflect badly on Christ and the church. In those circumstances, it is their responsibility to do so. In a few extreme cases, a person may be disciplined by requiring them to leave the church (1 Corinthians 5:1-2). But as we listen to and follow our leaders, we will stay in a good place and grow up spiritually.

There will usually be a number of elders in a local church who, together, will oversee the whole church. There will also be a leading elder who will take the main responsibility for setting the direction and pace in moving the church forward.

The Wider Picture

The Bible makes it clear that, as well as the local elders, God has given us leaders who are not limited to the local church but have a wider leadership role within the body of Christ.



It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists and some to be pastors and teachers.
(Ephesians 4:11)



We need to draw particular attention to the leadership gifts of apostles and prophets, who are said to be foundational to the church (Ephesians 2:20).

First of all, ***apostles***:

- have gifted insight into God's plans and purpose;
- are men of initiative who are constantly breaking new ground and reminding us that God's purpose is bigger than just our local congregation;
- have an authority and wisdom to see the overall design of the church God wants so they can help identify areas of weakness and strength for us;
- can appoint the local church leaders who are then accountable to them.

Apostles work alongside ***prophets*** who:

- highlight or focus on particular areas that God is addressing at any one time within the overview of the apostle;
- keep calling us back to the original purpose and vision so we don't get side-tracked.

These ministries will be involved in helping the local church leaders, as well as teaching and envisioning the local church. They may also remind us of the wider vision that we are part of by calling together occasional gatherings of a number of churches that relate to them and to each other.

The Purpose of Leadership

It is important that we realise that the purpose of leadership is not for the leaders to do all the work while we watch and applaud. Look at what follows on from the Ephesians verse quoted above. They are given:



to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.
(Ephesians 4:12)

By responding to these leaders, we are more fully equipped to play our part.

The Nature of Leadership

In our modern world, people often react against leaders and those who have authority because they are aware that some leaders abuse their positions of authority. Sadly, this has sometimes happened in the church as well. But the answer to an abuse is not disuse but right use. And Jesus taught us about good leadership, showing us that it involves:

- **Serving** – and not trying to push people around or hold on to a position (Mark 10:42-45).
- **Setting An Example** – then exhorting and helping people to follow (1 Peter 5:1-3).
- **Stewardship** of God’s people – they know that they must give an account to God because the people belong to God (Hebrews 13:17).

Responding to Leaders

If we fail to respond to leaders by being rebellious, awkward or by undermining their authority through gossiping, grumbling and complaining, we will miss out on one of the main ways that God wants to bless us.



Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Hebrews 13:17)

We should:

- **Honour them** (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13);
- **Submit to and obey** their authority (Hebrews 13:17) – this does not mean that you have no mind of your own. If you struggle with something they have to say then you should talk it over with them, listen to what they have to say and accept that they are the ones who make the final decisions for the church;
- **Be loyal** to them (James 5:9) – don’t murmur and complain behind their backs.

When we do these things, we learn that submitting to true spiritual authority is not a harmful, restrictive thing but a great blessing and a key to our own spiritual growth.

Think About It!

1. ***Look at the five things listed under what local leaders do. Think about what these five things look like in practice. Have you already benefited from any of them?***
2. ***Do you think that our society has a positive or negative view of leadership and authority? Why? Why is leadership a good thing?***
3. ***How do you feel the leaders might help you to play your part in the church more effectively?***
4. ***Why is it important to respond to leaders in the way stated above?***



Taking Steps

- 1. Think about what your own attitude to leadership and authority is generally and consider where you might need to make some changes.**
- 2. When it comes to joining the church, you will be asked whether you feel you can confidently allow the elders to 'shepherd' your life. Consider whether you feel you would be able to do this. You might want to talk to mature Christians in the church about their experience, and it would be a good idea to talk to the elders themselves.**
- 3. Try to get to know the elders as real people and don't put them on a pedestal in your own mind. The fact that they have a God-given authority does not mean they are perfect. We must be able to honour them even when we know that they are not perfect.**



Glossary

Elders – men who are involved in pastoring and managing the affairs of the local church.

Pastoring – also called 'shepherding', it refers to the care, oversight and directing of the people of God who are sometimes pictured in the Bible as a flock of sheep. Jesus is our Chief Shepherd but elders are like under-shepherds working for him.

Apostles – leaders who break new ground in the advance of God's Kingdom and who have gifted insight to help elders build the church.

Prophets – gifted people who help the church to hear what God is saying, encourage them and help keep them moving in the right direction.



Key Verse:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets some to be evangelists and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. (Ephesians 4:11-12)

Notes

4

God's Great Purpose

Having begun the Christian life and started to get involved with a local church, you might easily begin to think that that's it! All you need to do now is try to be a good Christian, get on with church life and then go to heaven when you die. Wrong! God is not just interested in getting us up to heaven but getting heaven down to earth. God has a purpose to transform and restore our broken world and we are part of his great plan. This is what the Bible is concerned with when it talks about the *Kingdom* of God. Let's learn some things about this Kingdom.

The Kingdom of God

The Kingdom is already here and yet it is still to come! Amazing, isn't it? Let me explain.

You were born again into the Kingdom (John 3:5) and transferred into it (Colossians 1:13) when you accepted Jesus Christ to be the Lord, or King, over your life. His Kingdom continues to grow in this world as more and more people turn to God and bring their life under his rule. Eventually, King Jesus will return, the powers of this world will be superseded by his Kingdom (Revelation 11:15) and those of us who are its citizens will go and enjoy it to the full in the new heavens and the new earth (2 Peter 1:11). So the Kingdom has come, is growing and will one day come to complete fullness.

The idea of the Kingdom growing and affecting our whole world is shown in a number of parables that Jesus told:

- **A tiny seed** that becomes a great tree (Matthew 13:31-32);
- **Yeast** that works through the whole dough (Matthew 13:33);
- **Good seed** that grows amongst the weeds until the end of the age (Matthew 13:24-30, 37-40).

Even though, as 'sons of the Kingdom', we may sometimes feel small and there will always be evil in society, we are nevertheless destined to help change our world.



Read Matthew 5:13-16

Say what you think it means and do it.

A City on a Hill

The church is often compared to a city - the city of God (Hebrews 12:22). The church is meant to be a 'city on a hill' that the world can look up to, to learn what God is like and how he wants us to live. Sadly, it often fails to do that. But one day it will, and we can help by playing our part in building up the church.

However, the church is not to be concerned only with building itself up but with reaching out to the world. We are to be the 'salt of the earth', getting into every area of life and 'seasoning' it with God's goodness and wisdom. We are also to let the light of our good deeds shine before people (Matthew 5:13-16).

There are three main ways in which you can reach out to others in this way:

- **Words** – tell them about God, what he has done for you and what he can do for them;
- **Works** – through good deeds and acts of kindness;
- **Wonders** – with demonstrations of the power of the Holy Spirit, like healing and other supernatural acts. Believe that God can use you in this.

All of these can happen in our daily life - at work, in the neighbourhood, in the supermarket etc. They can be expressed by us corporately as a church through doing good work in the community but with the addition of prayer, power and presenting the gospel to people. So be prepared to get involved in the various church-based activities for reaching out.

Filling the Earth

As we saw in an earlier chapter, it has always been God's purpose to fill the earth with a people like himself (Genesis 1:27-28). This is what it means for the earth to be filled with his glory (Habakkuk 2:14). This is why the Kingdom is always increasing and taking over the earth (Isaiah 9:7).

We must always try to make sure that we are not short-sighted or limited in our vision. We need to remember that we are part of a Kingdom that is on the increase and that is filling the whole earth. Two things will help in this:

- We reproduce ourselves and our churches – we expect to be used to bring other people to Christ and we expect the church to grow and to reproduce so that other congregations spring up in the regions around us (2 Corinthians 10:15-16).
- We keep a world vision of what God is doing by sharing, through prayer and giving, with our partners in the gospel across the world who are working in other nations.

Think About It!

- 1. In what practical ways do you think the Kingdom of God can grow so that it is like a seed growing in the ground or yeast spreading throughout the dough?**
- 2. In what kind of ways do you think we can be salt and light to the world?**
- 3. In what practical ways do you believe God could use you to reach out to the people around you?**
- 4. How do we stop ourselves from becoming limited in our vision and small in our thinking?**



Taking Steps

- 1. Whenever you read the Bible, look out for and note references to the Kingdom of God.**
- 2. Ask God to show you practical ways in which you can be salt and light in your world – among family, neighbours, work colleagues etc.**
- 3. Try, at least once a week, to sow good seed into someone's life. It could be an act of kindness, a word about God and the gospel or a prayer that God would do something very definite for them.**
- 4. Find out what different ways the church is reaching out into the community and choose one of them to get involved with.**
- 5. Find out what God is doing through some of the projects in other nations that we are supporting. Pray regularly for them and look for opportunities to give towards them financially.**



Glossary

Kingdom - not a geographical place or political power but God's rule over people's hearts and lives and, through such people, to the whole world.



Key Verse:

For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.
(Habakkuk 2:14)

Notes

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Notes

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We strongly recommend that you read the companion booklet
a new start

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