

Discover Bible Guides

GUIDE 25



Can I Find God's Church Today?

- **ACCORDING TO the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, there are currently 19 major world religions, which are further subdivided into 270 large groups and innumerable smaller ones. Christianity alone is made up of some 34,000 separate groupings and denominations. Many of these world religions have widely differing theological views.**
- **Jesus prayed that all of us might be one (John 17:21)—united in love, harmony, and in our worship of God. Yet religious strife seems to be everywhere in our world today—from doctrinal disputes to religious persecution, riots, and even murders and mass killings carried out in the name of religion.**
- **In 2014, a Pew Research Center study reported that the number of countries worldwide with high levels of religious hostilities had reached a six-year high in 2012.**

Can I Find God's Church Today?

- **How can religious beliefs differ so widely? Is there any hope of bridging the chasms that separate us into so many different religions?**
- **It's no wonder that people these days are reluctant to believe anyone who proclaims one truth—one faith—and calls for complete commitment. At the same time, however, people are looking for something they can hold on to with certainty—a truth to believe in completely.**
- **Some people tell us that truth is an individual matter and they urge us to follow "the God who is in your heart." However, it isn't very reassuring to just make up the truth as you go along. When you're facing difficult times, you need something more solid than that.**
- **So does God have a church today? Does He have a special message for our day that gives us a solid place to stand? Yes, fortunately, God has prepared a special message for us in these times. Jesus has a special message for our day—our generation—which gives us a place to stand. We find it described in the Bible in the prophetic books of Daniel and Revelation.**

1. The Church Established by Jesus

- **THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS of Jesus established unity of belief and close fellowship in the newly formed apostolic church. Apostolic Christians knew who they were and lived out their faith confidently. They formed a close relationship with the risen Christ. Paul pictured that close bond as a marriage relationship:**
- **“I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:2).**
- **According to Paul, the church is a pure woman, the bride of Christ—a fitting symbol of Christ’s beloved church.**
- **In the Old Testament, the same metaphor is used to describe Israel, God’s chosen people. God said to Israel, “I remember . . . the love of your betrothal” (Jeremiah 2:2), and “I am married to you” (Jeremiah 3:14). The New Testament speaks of Israel as “the church in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38, KJV).**

1. The Church Established by Jesus

- **In the book of Revelation, John also speaks symbolically of the church as a woman:**
- **“A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland [crown] of twelve stars” (Revelation 12:1).**
- **Here is the meaning of these symbols:**
- **1. THE WOMAN IS “CLOTHED WITH THE SUN.”** This suggests a church shining like the noonday sun—clothed with Christ’s glorious presence. Jesus, “the light of the world” (John 8:12), shines through the members of His church, and they in turn also become “the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14).

- **2. THE WOMAN HAS “THE MOON UNDER HER FEET.” Just as the moon reflects the light from the sun, in this verse, the moon represents the message (light) of the gospel symbolically seen (reflected) in the sacrifices and ceremonies of God’s people in the Old Testament.**
- **The moon being “under her feet” suggests that the Old Testament sacrifices were fulfilled in Christ’s life, ministry, death, and resurrection.**



- **3. THE WOMAN HAS “ON HER HEAD A GARLAND [CROWN] OF TWELVE STARS.”** Because Revelation 12 is about the church and Jesus, the stars here fittingly represent the 12 apostles—men of noble character whose testimony about Jesus shines brilliantly to this very day. In these verses, John is describing the Christian church of the New Testament that Jesus established.
- The sun, moon, and stars—used to describe the characteristics of this woman—emphasize the light-giving ministry of the Christian church and its primary role of sharing the Good News of the gospel.
- Thought question: In Revelation 12, the woman clothed with the sun represents Babylon. (True or False)



2. The Drama of Satan's Defeat

- **THE APPEARANCE of the woman sets the stage for a great drama:**
- **“Then being with child, she cried out in labour and in pain to give birth. And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great, fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. . . . And the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born. She bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up to God and His throne. Then the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, that they should feed her there one thousand two hundred and sixty days” (Revelation 12:2-6).**

2. The Drama of Satan's Defeat

- **Three key figures participate in this drama:**
- **1. THE WOMAN**, already identified as God's church in the previous section (2 Corinthians 11:2).
- **2. THE MALE CHILD** born to this woman, who is "caught up to God and His throne" and will someday "rule all nations." Jesus Christ is the only child ever born in this world who has been taken up to God's throne and will someday rule all nations (Matthew 1, 2).

2. The Drama of Satan's Defeat

- **3. THE DRAGON, representing the devil, or Satan (Revelation 12:9).**
- **“War broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him” (Revelation 12:7-9).**
- **The picture becomes clear once we understand the symbols. When the devil and his angels lost their place in heaven, they were “cast to the earth.” When Jesus was born here nearly 2,000 years ago, the devil tried to kill Jesus (the male Child) as soon as He was born (Matthew 2:13-15). Satan failed, and after the resurrection (“caught up to God and His throne”), Jesus returned to heaven (Acts 1:9-11).**

2. The Drama of Satan's Defeat

- **Satan then set out to annihilate the Christian church that Christ established. But Satan has failed to destroy Christ and His church.**
- **John saw glimpses of this great conflict between Christ and Satan raging on this earth. As the battle reached a climax at Christ's crucifixion, John heard a voice shout from heaven:**
- **"Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down" (Revelation 12:10; see also John 12:31).**
- **Jesus won a deciding victory over Satan at the cross. At the cross, Jesus guaranteed the certainty of the plan of salvation. God provided to all men and women—through the Holy Spirit—the power to resist Satan's temptations. The promise of heaven ("the kingdom of our God") and eternal life was made secure. And Jesus was confirmed as our High Priest and King.**

2. The Drama of Satan's Defeat

- The announcement “now salvation . . . [has] come” interests not only John but the entire universe:
- “Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time” (Revelation 12:12).
- All of heaven celebrated Jesus' victory. Christ destroyed any claim Satan may have once had to a place in heaven. Satan was defeated and lost his claim to our world forever. In step with Christ, the Christian church marched forward in triumph.
- Thought question: ; The great conflict between Christ and Satan ended at Christ's birth.. (True or False)
- The Child the woman gives birth to is Jesus Christ.. (True or false)
- The dragon who attempts to destroy the Child at His birth represents religious leaders.. (True or False)

3. The Christian Church in Conflict With Satan

- **CHRIST'S DEATH on the cross gave the Christian church the power to defeat Satan.**
- **“And they [the Christian church] overcame him [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death” (Revelation 12:11).**
- **Through the Holy Spirit, Christ is now able to give His power to us as members of His church. Just as Jesus decisively triumphed over Satan at the cross, He now continues to triumph over Satan through His church.**
- **Three characteristics mark the triumphant church during the passing centuries of the Christian era:**

3. The Christian Church in Conflict With Satan

- **1. “THEY OVERCAME HIM [SATAN] BY THE BLOOD OF THE LAMB.”** Jesus went back to heaven after His resurrection (was “caught up to God and His throne”) and began His ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, which we studied in Guide 12. It is the shed blood of Jesus that clears the record of our sins and gives us eternal life (1 John 1:7). The life-giving blood of a risen Savior also gives us power to live the Christian life day by day (1 Peter 1:18-20). (For a full explanation of the meaning of Christ’s blood, see Guide 11.)
- **2. “THEY DID NOT LOVE THEIR LIVES TO THE DEATH.”** The blood of the Lamb made Christians willing to die for Christ’s cause; they did not “love their lives to the death.” The impact of the cross enabled the Christian martyrs to retain a sense of mission in the face of adversity. God had suffered greatly, so they were willing to suffer.
- **Even children made the ultimate sacrifice.** A story is told of a Christian mother who was thrown to the lions in a Roman arena because she gave her ultimate allegiance to Christ and not to the state

- Her young daughter had to look on the cruel scene. But instead of shrinking back in horror, she felt a fervent devotion welling up inside. As the lions attacked her mother, she stood up and cried, “I too am a Christian.” Roman officials arrested her on the spot and hurled her to the hungry beasts.
- Tertullian, a church leader in the 2nd century, said of Christians: “The working of such love puts a brand upon us, for ‘See,’ say the heathen, ‘how they love one another, and are ready to lay down their lives for each other.’”



- Christians who kept biblical truth in the face of death are an inspiring example. Here's an account of the ordeal of certain believers who insisted on practicing baptism by immersion as taught in Scripture:
- *In 1160 a company of Paulicians (Baptists) entered Oxford. Henry II ordered them to be branded on the forehead with hot irons, publicly whipped them through the streets of the city, to have their garments cut short at the girdles, and be turned into the open country. The villages were not to afford them any shelter or food, and they perished a lingering death from cold and hunger” (James M. Moore, Earlier and Later Nonconformity in Oxford, p. 12).*



- **3. “THEY OVERCAME HIM [SATAN] . . . BY THE WORD OF THEIR TESTIMONY.”** The “word of their testimony” is not only their words, but the testimony—the example—of their lives, their living witness to the power of Jesus and His gospel. During the darkest hours of the Christian era, a whole army of Christians—from the early church fathers to the Protestant reformers—overcame the worst the devil could hurl at them, simply by the dynamic witness of their lives.
- Since Satan failed to destroy the Son of God when He lived on earth in the flesh, he now seeks to destroy Christ’s church. The church receives both encouragement and warning: “Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male Child. But the woman [God’s church] was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent. So the serpent spewed water out of his mouth like a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away by the flood. But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the flood which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth” (Revelation 12:13-16).

- **Just as predicted, during the Dark Ages of the Christian era (beginning around ad 500 and lasting more than a thousand years), Satan sent “a flood” of persecution to sweep away the church. This is spiritual warfare. Satan wants to destroy Christ’s influence by wiping out His church, and he uses every trick his evil genius can devise.**
- **The dragon represents Satan primarily. But remember that in his role as the dragon, Satan uses human institutions to attack God’s people. He used a Roman king, Herod, in an attempt to murder the Christ child as soon as He was born. He worked through Christ’s jealous religious rivals to stalk and harass the Savior, and finally secure His execution on the cross. But Satan’s apparent victory turned into Christ’s greatest triumph. Furious over his defeat at the cross, Satan turned his wrath against the church that Jesus established.**

- During the decades after Christ's crucifixion, thousands met their death in arenas, city squares, dungeons, and desert hideaways. But after the death of the apostles, a gradual change crept into the church. During the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th centuries, many in the church began to modify—and sometimes even reject—the truths Christ and His apostles had taught. Some apostate leaders even began to persecute Christians who insisted on the purity of New Testament beliefs.
- Some scholars have estimated that at least 50 million faithful Christians died during this time of persecution, though the number may have been much higher. In an unsuccessful attempt to drown out the church and completely destroy it, the devil sent “a flood” of persecution and false doctrine to carry away the church and attempt to eliminate it. “But the earth helped the woman . . . and swallowed up the flood” of persecution and false doctrine. How did this happen?

- **During these medieval persecutions, the true church withdrew from the apostate leadership and took refuge in “the wilderness.” Fortunately, God’s church—His faithful people—had, according to Revelation 12:6, “a place prepared by God, that they should feed her there one thousand two hundred and sixty days.”**
- **This prediction was fulfilled during the 1,260 years of persecution from ad 538 to 1798 (remember that a day stands for a year in symbolic Bible prophecy; see Ezekiel 4:6).**

- **During these dark centuries, faithful Bible-believing Christians found refuge wherever they could—for example, in the Waldensian valleys of western Italy and eastern France, and in the Celtic church of the British Isles. Men such as Patrick of Ireland, Columba of Iona, and Aidan of Lindisfarne preached the divine Word of God in secret centers of learning, where they trained young men to share the pure gospel in a time of ignorance, superstition, and intolerance. (For more details about the wilderness church and its 1,260 years of trouble and controversy, be sure to enroll in the free *Focus on Prophecy* course—which focuses on the books of Daniel and Revelation—when you complete the *Discover* series.)**
- **Thought question: The Christian church is able to overcome Satan through Christ's cleansing blood. (True or False)**

4. God's Church in Our Day

- **AS MIGHT be expected, the dragon is still angry with God's people. The great unseen war continues. In fact, Satan will make his greatest attack on the church just before Jesus comes. Note the last act in the drama at the conclusion of the prophecy:**
- **"And the dragon [the devil] was enraged with the woman [God's church], and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 12:17).**
- **This prophecy focuses on our day. Satan is enraged; he wages war on "the rest of her offspring" or "the remnant of her seed" (KJV). This refers to Christians living in the last days of earth's history—our day. The word remnant means "the remainder," the last of something. In this case, it refers to God's remaining faithful Christians in the last days. Notice that the final Christian church has certain identifying marks: they "keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ."**

4. God's Church in Our Day

- **1. THESE LAST-DAY BELIEVERS “HAVE THE TESTIMONY OF JESUS.”** Clinging faithfully to the pure doctrines of the Word of God, they testify for Jesus through dynamic Christian living. They have discovered that the great truths of the Bible awaken love and devotion to Christ. They are a caring people, and want to share with others the joys of living in Christ.
- **2. THESE LAST-DAY CHRISTIANS ARE A PEOPLE OF PROPHECY.** Receiving “the testimony of Jesus Christ” enabled John to write the book of Revelation (Revelation 1:1-3). The final group of believers, God's remnant people, receives a similar gift: direct testimonies from God through an earthly messenger. John defines “the testimony of Jesus” as “the spirit of prophecy” (Revelation 19:10). The gift of prophecy focuses their eyes on God's revelation of their mission and final destiny.

4. God's Church in Our Day

- **3. THESE LAST-DAY CHRISTIANS ARE ALSO IDENTIFIED AS THOSE “WHO KEEP THE COMMANDMENTS OF GOD.”** They not only defend the integrity of the Ten Commandments, but they also obey them. “The love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit” (Romans 5:5). God's love produces joyful obedience (Romans 13:8-10).
- **The apostolic church demonstrated a loyalty to the commandments of God, and these last-day Christians take the same stand by following the example of Christ and the early church in obeying the commandments of God. This greatly provokes our enemy, the dragon. The devil wages war with “the rest of ” the woman's “offspring,” because they bear witness to a great truth: genuine love for God produces obedient disciples. As Jesus instructed us:**

4. God's Church in Our Day

- **“If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15).**
- **Have you discovered this in your own life? The lives of these last-day Christians show us that, in Christ, it's possible to love God with all our hearts and love our fellow human beings as ourselves. These qualities—love for God and love for others—sum up God's Ten Commandments (Matthew 22:35-40).**
- **The fourth of those commandments asks us to observe Saturday, the seventh day of the week, as the Sabbath. Since love for Jesus is seen in following all 10 of the commandments in their hearts, these last-day Christians are Sabbath-keepers. The devil has tried in various ways to chip the fourth of the Ten Commandments out of the tables of stone on which God wrote them, but he hasn't been able to remove it from the hearts of faithful believers.**

4. God's Church in Our Day

- **God does have a last-day movement that leads men and women back to obedience to His commandments—one that calls His people back to allegiance to Him. The Sabbath is the symbol that God is both Creator and Lord of this world and of each of our lives. And the Sabbath is at the heart of God's final appeal to His people in Revelation chapters 12-14.**
- **All the resources of heaven are arrayed behind the last-day Christians described in these chapters. They may seem weak and insignificant in the world, but their prayers call an army of heavenly angels to their side; a living Savior is their constant companion; and the Holy Spirit works to strengthen them with power in their lives (Ephesians 3:16). The promise is sure. They will overcome Satan "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony" (Revelation 12:11).**

4. God's Church in Our Day

- **Let's review in outline format the Bible picture of the true church, the remnant people of God:**
- *They keep the commandments of God, including the Bible Sabbath—the seventh day.*
- *They are a prophetic people, teaching Bible prophecy. The prophetic gift is a sign of God's guidance in God's last-day movement.*
- *They have the faith of Jesus and are not confused by human tradition. They accept the whole Bible—both the Old and New Testaments.*
- *They remain steadfast to God's Word no matter what others might think.*
- *They give a special message of warning, calling people to come out of religious confusion and accept the Bible as their rule of faith and practice.*
- *They give the message of the judgment hour, which, according to Bible prophecy, began in 1844.*

4. God's Church in Our Day

- ***They are a mission-minded church, carrying the everlasting gospel to every nation—the Good News of Jesus' saving grace and of His return to gather His people into His everlasting kingdom.***
- **Do you want to be one of these last-day Christians who “keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus”? Why not make that decision just now?**
- **Thought question: God's true church in these last days of earth's history has the gift of prophecy. (True or False)**
- **God's true church, through a love for Him, follows all the commandments of God, including observing the seventh-day Sabbath. (True or False)**

Decision & Prayer

- **MY PRAYER:** If you've never prayed before, that's okay. Here is a short prayer to get you started, if you want to read these words aloud to God or say them silently in your head to Him. You can also take this prayer and make it your own by paraphrasing or add your own words to it.
- Try to think of talking to God like you would talk to a friend, saying whatever is on your heart.
- Dear Father, how thankful I am for the clear message Scripture gives us about how we can be part of God's last-day people. I surrender my life to Jesus, and I desire to keep His commandments and faithfully follow Him. Keep me close to Jesus and meet my daily needs. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

Decision & Prayer

- **MY DECISION: Take a moment to reflect on the following statements, placing a check mark next to each statement you relate to.**
- **I want to be a part of God's true church—His remnant people—in these last days. By His grace, I want to follow Jesus in all things.**
- **Please pray for me as I consider the Bible messages I have been studying.**