

First Century Christianity in Plain Language

The expression “New Testament Christianity” simply means doing things as the New Testament describes. God has a “pattern of sound words” for the Christian faith and we are to “hold” to this pattern (2 Tim. 1:13). God’s pattern is part of the “narrow gate” that leads to life (Mt. 7:13-14) and this pattern, if people will use it, eliminates religious confusion and religious division (compare 1 Cor. 14:33). When people are ignorant of God’s pattern or they reject some part of it, there will be hundreds or thousands of different religious groups that all profess to be “Christian.” The true followers of Christ know that God has a specific way of doing things and it is essential to “hold to the pattern” (compare 1 Cor. 4:17).

One of the most elementary parts of God’s pattern is found in conversion (the way someone becomes a Christian). As demonstrated by the following chart, God’s pattern for conversion requires *faith* (belief), *repentance* (a turning from sin), *confession*, and *baptism* (immersion in water) for the forgiveness of sins.

Bible verse	God’s command	God’s command	The blessing
Mk. 16:16:	Believe	<i>and</i> be baptized	Saved
Acts 2:38:	Repent	<i>and</i> be baptized	Remission of sins
Acts 22:16:	Arise	<i>and</i> be baptized	Wash away sins

The information in Mk. 16:16 has been compared to a train; just as boxcars are joined together with a coupling pin, so the word “*and*” joins together the commands of “belief” and “baptism” (Jesus said a person must *believe* and be *baptized* before he can be “saved”). Since those in Acts 2 had heard and believed the facts of the gospel (Acts 2:37), they were told to “repent and be baptized” so they could receive the “forgiveness of sins” (Acts 2:38). The information in Acts 2 also offers an excellent illustration of *repentance*, a word that meant “to change for the better.” People who had formerly hated Jesus (Acts 2:36) *repented* (they began to love and follow Jesus). After people believe and repent, they are to be *baptized*, an act that “washes away sins” (Acts 22:16).

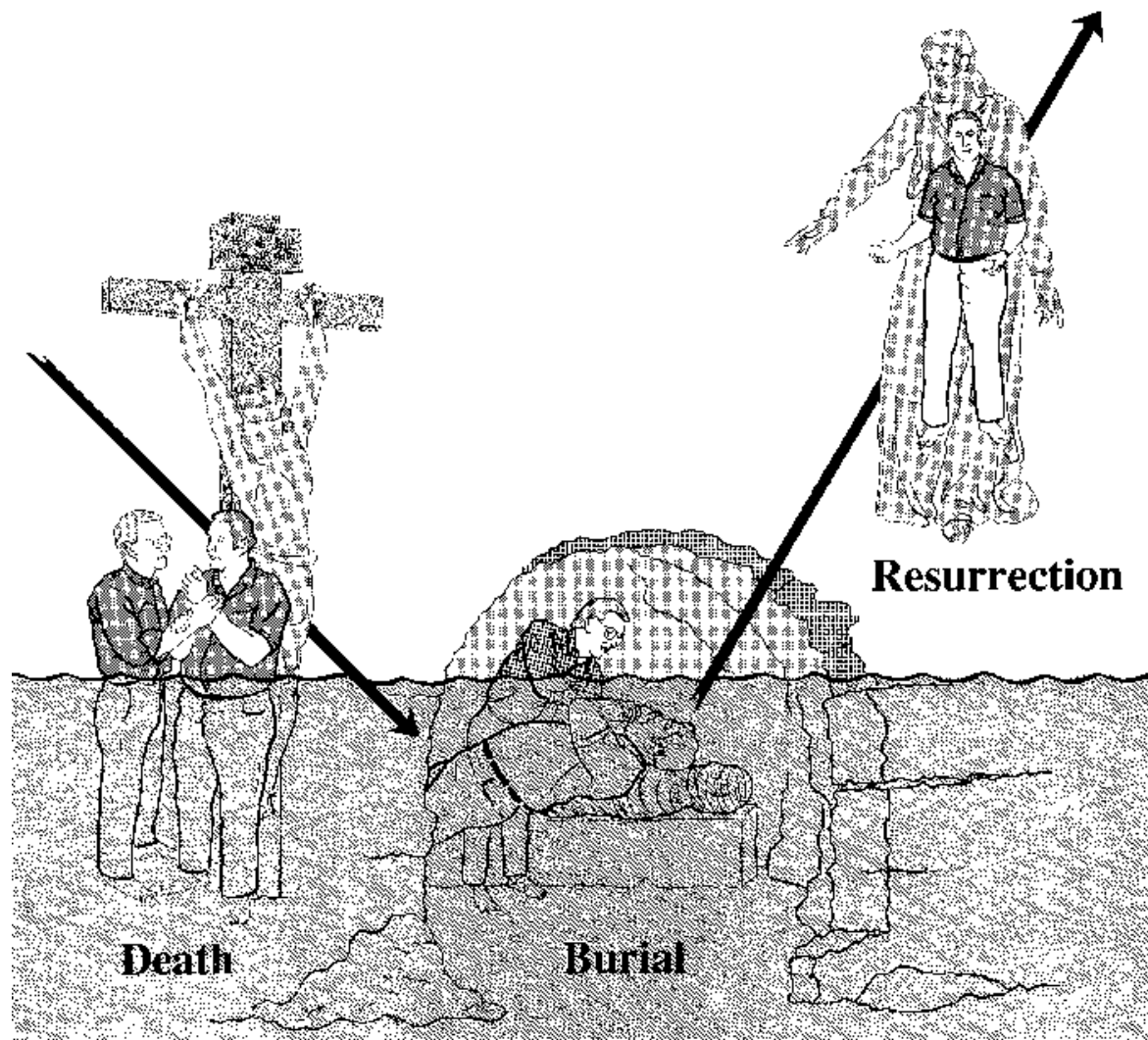
In addition to the passages in the preceding chart, the Bible also explains the purpose of baptism in Gal. 3:27 (Paul said baptism puts people “into Christ”). If a person is old enough to be accountable for his actions, he is either “in Christ” or “out of Christ.” If a person is old enough to be responsible for his actions and he is “out of Christ,” he has no spiritual blessings, one of which is salvation (2 Tim. 2:10). Those who are “in Christ” have all spiritual blessings (Eph. 1:3), one of which is salvation. According to Gal. 3:27, a person does not enter “into Christ” until he has been properly baptized.

In addition to Jesus and Paul saying that baptism is part of the salvation process, there is the information in 1 Pet. 3:20-21. Peter described how water served as a dividing line for Noah and his family (God used a flood to separate the saved from the lost, Gen. 6-7). Water lifted the ark and those in it to safety and water caused the unsaved to drown. In fact, Peter said Noah and his family were “*saved through water*” (1 Pet. 3:20). Peter also said there is a “true likeness” for people today and this “true likeness” is “*baptism*” (1 Pet. 3:21). In other words, just as water separated the saved

from the lost in the ancient world, so water (baptism) now divides the saved from the lost under the Christian era (see again the preceding chart). Peter further noted how baptism is not for the *"filth of the flesh"* (it is not a process to remove physical dirt), 1 Pet. 3:21. Baptism is for spiritual filth—sin—as explained in Acts 2:38 and Acts 22:16.

There was no special power in the flood waters that separated Noah from the unsaved and there is no special power in the water that is now used to baptize people. Our justification from sin comes through Jesus' blood (Paul made this point in Rom. 5:9 and he explained how this process works in Rom. 6:1-4).

As demonstrated by the following graphic, which is provided through the courtesy of *We Care Ministries*, sinners access the benefits of Jesus' blood by reenacting the Lord's death, burial, and resurrection. After a person believes, he is *not* saved. The believer must experience a "death." This *death* is another description for repentance (people must turn from sin. Compare Col. 3:7; Acts 2:38; Lk. 13:3; Acts 17:30). People must "die to sin" (repent) so they do not "die in sin" (perish eternally in hell).



After a person has believed and repented (died to sin), he is ready to acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God (Acts 8:37; 1 Tim. 6:12) and then be *"buried with Christ"*

through baptism" (Rom. 6:4). After a person has been properly baptized, he has "*newness of life*" (Rom. 6:4).

Many believe that "new life" (salvation, forgiveness of sins and all spiritual blessings) comes *before* baptism, but the Bible repeatedly says this is incorrect. Jesus said a person is "saved" *after* being baptized (Mk. 16:16). Peter said a person has the "forgiveness of his sins" *after* being baptized (Acts 2:38). Ananias said sins are "washed away" *by being baptized* (Acts 22:16). Paul said "baptism" *puts people into Christ* (Gal. 3:27). A person receives "new life" *after* baptism (Rom. 6:4). Jesus said a person must be "born anew" (Jn. 3:3) and this new birth *requires water* (Jn. 3:5). God has a specific pattern for salvation and this pattern requires people to have faith, repent of their sins, confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and be "buried with Christ" for the "forgiveness of their sins."

The description of baptism as a "burial" (Rom. 6:4 and Col. 2:12) tells us that Bible baptism requires *immersion* (we do not *bury* something by sprinkling or pouring dirt on it). A *burial* means someone or something is covered and this is what New Testament baptism requires (a person is submerged in and thus covered by water). When John was baptizing people, his baptism required "much water" (Jn. 3:23). In fact, this verse says John baptized in this place "because" there was *much water there*.

Baptism for the forgiveness of sins is an essential part of God's pattern for conversion, but this is just one characteristic of New Testament Christianity. God has also created a special place called the "*church*" (this word describes the saved). Jesus promised to "build His church" (Mt. 16:18) and this promise required Him to die a horrible death (Acts 20:28). Jesus did build His church and He built only *one church* (notice that in Mt. 16:18 the word "church" is singular).

In Eph. 1:22-23 Paul described the "church" as Jesus' "body" ("*to the church, which is his body*"). Stated another way, Paul affirmed that the words *church* and *body* are interchangeable ("church" and "body" describe the same thing). The significance of this fact is seen in Eph. 4:4, a place where Paul said God has only "one body." Since there is only "one body" (Eph. 4:4), and this "one body is the church" (Eph. 1:22-23), there is *one church* that has God's approval. Many other churches can be found in the world, but these churches are not part of the church built by Christ. These other churches are counterfeit groups that have been built by men (Mt. 15:8-9) and Jesus said these groups will one day be destroyed because God did not build them (Mt. 15:13).

The problem with counterfeit churches is so bad that Jesus said: "*Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy by thy name, and by thy name cast out demons, and by thy name do many mighty works? 23 And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity*" (Mt. 7:21-23).

If we wish to truly love and serve God, we must identify and work with Jesus' one true church instead of a counterfeit group. The Bible helps us identify which church is right through the Scriptures; we can identify the right church by using the "pattern" (2 Tim. 1:13) found in God's word. The pattern for Christ's church includes things like how people become Christians, how Jesus' church worships, how the Lord's church is organized, and what its members do.

As already explained in the preceding information, one of the identifying marks of

Jesus' church is found in how people are saved: People must believe (Heb. 11:6); repent of their sins (Lk. 13:3; Acts 17:30); acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God (Rom. 10:9), and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16). The Bible never speaks of things like "accepting Jesus into the heart," "saying the sinner's prayer," or "praying to receive Christ."

After a person follows God's pattern for conversion as discussed in the previous paragraph, the Bible says Jesus "adds" a person to His church (Acts 2:47, KJV). In the churches built by men (counterfeit groups), people often "join" the church or they are "voted" into it. Acts 2:47 says the membership in Jesus' church is controlled by the Lord Himself. Stated another way, people cannot "join" the New Testament church. Neither can they be voted into it. People automatically become members of it after they follow God's pattern for conversion.

The New Testament church can also be recognized by what it does. After people became Christians on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:36-38), Luke says they "*continued stedfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers*" (Acts 2:42). This passage shows that part of God's example involves meeting on a regular basis and doing the things listed in this verse. Most religious groups are committed to "prayer" and "fellowship," but most are not "stedfast" with the other two characteristics in Acts 2:42 (the "apostles' teaching" and "the breaking of bread").

Jesus' church can be partly identified by its strict adherence to the *apostles' doctrine* (the information we now have in the Bible). Instead of following the rules and dictates of men (Mt. 15:9), the members of Christ's church use the Bible as their only guide. New Testament Christians know that God has given the "*perfect law of liberty*" (Jas. 1:25) and this information gives them "*all things that pertain to life and godliness*" (2 Pet. 1:3). Stated another way, the completed New Testament "*furnishes us unto every good work*" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Thus, New Testament Christians (those who are part of Christ's church) solely rely on this "*form of teaching*" (Rom. 6:17) for the "*pattern*" (2 Tim. 1:13) they need to serve and worship God "*in truth*" (Jn. 4:24). Counterfeit churches rely upon creeds, information from their "church headquarters," church manuals, etc.

Acts 2:42 also refers to "the breaking of bread" (i.e. the Lord's Supper. The Greek text literally says "the breaking of the bread"). This statement tells us the first century Christians partook of the Lord's Supper on a "stedfast" basis. Other passages reinforce the fact that the members of Jesus' church took the Lord's Supper on a regular basis. For instance, Paul spoke of the Corinthian assemblies in 1 Cor. 16:2. The Corinthians were meeting on every Sunday (this point is expressed very well in the NASB) and the Corinthians were bringing the items for the Lord's Supper to their weekly assemblies (1 Cor. 11:20). Although the items for the Lord's Supper were being misused, the Corinthians knew they were to bring the elements for the Lord's Supper every Sunday. This was the practice for Corinth as well as all the other congregations that practiced New Testament Christianity (1 Cor. 4:17).

In Acts 20 we read of a time when Paul was with some fellow Christians and this group actually waited for the "first day of the week" (Acts 20:6), Sunday, so the Lord's Supper could be observed (Acts 20:7). Even though Paul was in a hurry (Acts 20:16), he waited seven days so he could meet with fellow Christians on the "first day of the week" (Acts 20:6) and partake of the Lord's Supper (the Communion). This information corresponds perfectly with Acts 2:42, a text that says the first Christians "continued

steadfastly in the breaking of bread.” The members of Jesus’ church partake of the Lord’s Supper every Sunday. In the churches built by men, people may partake of the Lord’s Supper once a year, twice a year, once a quarter, or once a month.

If worshippers have the Lord’s Supper less frequently than once a week, they “take away” part of what God intended for worship and thus alter God’s divine pattern (compare Rev. 22:19). If people offer the Lord’s Supper more than once a week, they “add to” God’s divine pattern and are also guilty of sin (compare Rev. 22:18). If people do not have Sunday, the “first day of the week,” as their special day to honor God in worship (1 Cor. 16:2), they also fail to follow part of the New Testament pattern and are thus not part of the New Testament church.

In addition to identifying the New Testament church through its pattern for conversion, the way that people become members of this church, the strict adherence to the Scriptures, and having the Lord’s Supper every week, the New Testament church can be identified by its teachings on giving. Many religious groups appeal to non-Christians for funds or they engage in things like bake sales and car washes. The first century Christians, who were members of the New Testament church, “took nothing from the Gentiles” (the unsaved, 3 Jn. 7). Today members of the New Testament church still meet all their financial obligations through free will contributions from members; New Testament Christians do not want nor expect non-members to contribute anything to the Lord’s work.

Christ’s church may also be identified by the amount of money that people give. Many religious groups tell their members to “tithe” (give 10% of their income). If a religious group teaches tithing, this is a sure sign that it is a counterfeit church. Tithing is part of the Old Testament law that was given to the Hebrew nation. The Old Testament law contained various rules about giving, keeping the Sabbath day, animal sacrifices, special priests, etc., and this law was in force for about 1,500 years. After Jesus came into the world He said His death would bring about a new covenant (Lk. 22:20) and this happened. Jesus took away the entire Old Testament system by dying on the cross (Rom. 10:4 and compare Heb. 8:5-13). If people try to bind any part of the Old Testament law on people, and telling people to “tithe” is one example of this, the Bible says people are “fallen from grace” and are “severed from Christ” (Gal. 5:4, ASV).

Instead of tithing, members of the New Testament church make a personal decision on how much to give. In fact, the church that belongs to Christ is governed by two basic rules when it comes to giving: (1) Give “cheerfully” and (2) give as we have been “prospered” (1 Cor. 16:2; 2 Cor. 9:7). Since the New Testament says *give as we have been prospered*, any church that tells people to “*tithe*” (give 10%) is a counterfeit church. Those who ask or tell people to *tithe* are teaching a “different gospel” (Gal. 1:6-9). This error is so serious that Paul said those who try to bind some part of the Old Testament law on people are like a woman who is married to two men at the same time (Rom. 7:1-4).

New Testament Christians know and teach that Jesus “nailed the old law to the cross” (Col. 2:14) and the removal of the Old Testament law includes the elimination of the Ten Commandments. Things like murder, theft and adultery are still wrong (Rom. 13:9), but these acts are wrong because they are forbidden by the New Testament. People can “learn” from the Old Testament (Rom. 15:4), but the New Testament is the law all are under now. Counterfeit groups often fail to distinguish between the Old

Testament and the New (they teach that the Ten Commandments are still binding, people need to tithe, there is still a need to keep the Sabbath day, etc.), but these things are not taught by New Testament Christians. Members of the New Testament church know the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Because the members of the New Testament church correctly distinguish the Old Testament from the New Testament, they comply with God's will in the area of music. Under the Old Testament system of worship, people used instrumental music (Ps. 150; 2 Chron. 29:25). Under the New Testament system of worship, people are specifically told to "sing" (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16) and this is what New Testament Christians do. If the New Testament said "make music," we would be authorized to make music any way we choose. Since God has specifically said those who live under the New Testament are to make music by *singing* (compare Heb. 13:15), this is what His people do and this is another identifying mark of Christ's church. If we sing AND PLAY in worship, we add to God's instructions. Adding instrumental music to worship is an example of "will-worship" (Col. 2:23) and going "beyond what is written" (1 Cor. 4:6).

Church choirs are another example of "going beyond what it is written." The Bible says Christians are to "sing to one another" (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), but some use church choirs "because they like them." Worship is not about what we like; it is about following God's pattern (compare Jn. 4:24 where Jesus said we "must worship in truth"). If we do not do things in the way God has described, we go beyond what is written (1 Cor. 4:6), we "no longer abide in the doctrine of Christ," and we "have not God" (2 Jn. 9).

The subjects of salvation and worship are very helpful in separating the New Testament church from counterfeit groups, but these are not the only ways to recognize Jesus' true church. We may also determine which church truly follows God's pattern by studying what the Bible says about church organization. Every organization has some type of structure, including a headquarters or main office, and this is also true for the New Testament church. Jesus is the head of His church and He resides in heaven (Acts 1:11). Jesus' heavenly enthronement (Acts 2:30) tells us the "headquarters" for the New Testament church is in heaven. Stated another way, Jesus' church has no earthly headquarters; counterfeit churches, however, often do have an earthly headquarters. Jesus' church is also autonomous (self-governing).

As illustrated by Acts 14:23 and Phil. 1:1, each congregation of the Lord's church is to have local leaders known as "elders" (these men are also referred to as bishops, presbyters, pastors, overseers, shepherds. Each of these words describes a different aspect of an elder's work). Paul described the qualifications for these men in 1 Tim. 3:1-5 and he said elders "take care of" (they are the rulers for and in) a local congregation (1 Tim. 3:5). Titus referred to "elders" in Tit. 1:5 and then described them as "bishops" in Tit. 1:7.

We read of elders in Judaea (Acts 11:29-30), southern Galatia (Acts 14:23), Jerusalem (Acts 15:6), Ephesus (Acts 20:17), and Asia Minor (1 Pet. 5:1). There are implied references to them in 1 Thess. 5:12 and Heb. 13:17. In Tit. 1:5 we learn that elders were needed throughout the island of Crete ("every city").

Although God's pattern for church leadership does not extend beyond the local congregation, a high percentage of religious groups have a leadership structure that goes outside the local church (religious groups have a "church headquarters" in a well known city or another country, or there is some type of regional, national or world-wide

board). Although these arrangements are common, they are contrary to God's pattern. Church organization is just one more way to separate Christ's church from the imitations built by men.

Jesus is the head of the church, elders are the local leaders, and Jesus' church has special servants known as "deacons" (Phil. 1:1). The church of Christ also has men who serve as preachers. Paul and Timothy were two first century ministers and these men are referred to as "servants" in Phil. 1:1. Unlike the churches built by men where preachers are the leaders and often the most important people in the congregation, the Bible says the preachers in Christ's church are *servants*. The remaining members in Jesus' church of the New Testament are simply called "saints."

The New Testament pattern for church organization described in the preceding paragraphs stands in stark contrast to the "clergy-laity" system found in many denominations. In fact, in many man-made churches there must be an "official person" to baptize people or help with worship. God's pattern for Christianity says all the saved are "priests" (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). Instead of dividing people into "clergy and laity," Jesus said "all are brethren" (Mt. 23:8). Paul illustrated this point by noting how several of the Corinthians helped in and with worship (1 Cor. 14:26). The Corinthians knew their worship did not need to be carried out by a special priest or some type of "holy person" because all Christians are "priests" (Rev. 1:6; 5:10) and all Christians are considered to be "holy" (1 Pet. 1:15).

The only restriction when it comes to having a leading role in worship is a person's gender. Stated another way, women are not allowed to take a leading role in the assembly if men are present (1 Cor. 14:34-35 and compare 1 Tim. 2:8-13). In the church of Christ, any Christian male can help with worship, teach or preach. Churches that have women preachers are most definitely counterfeit churches because they violate what Paul said in 1 Cor. 14:34-35 and 1 Tim. 2:8-13. God has given a "pattern" for the New Testament church (2 Tim. 1:13) and all need to use this pattern to identify and work with the "church of Christ" in their community.

Have we found and are we a part of the one church built by Christ? If the "church of Christ" (Rom. 16:16) does not exist in our community, we can start one and practice New Testament Christianity (i.e. do things just as the New Testament describes). We can begin a congregation in our home (1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Phile. 2) or use a rented space to start "worshipping in spirit and truth" (Jn. 4:24). We certainly do not want to be part of the counterfeit groups that "*leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men*" (Mk. 7:8). Remember, "*All the churches of Christ salute you*" (Rom. 16:16).

Illustration 1

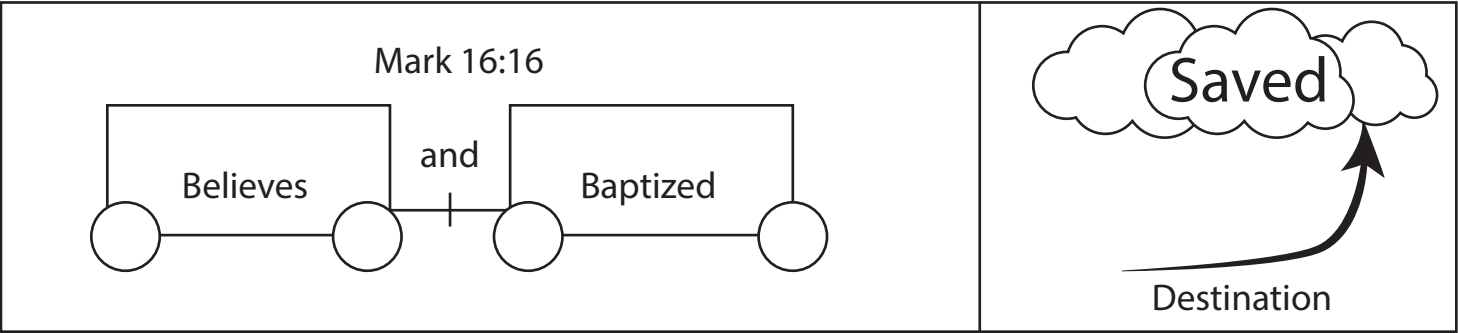


Illustration 2

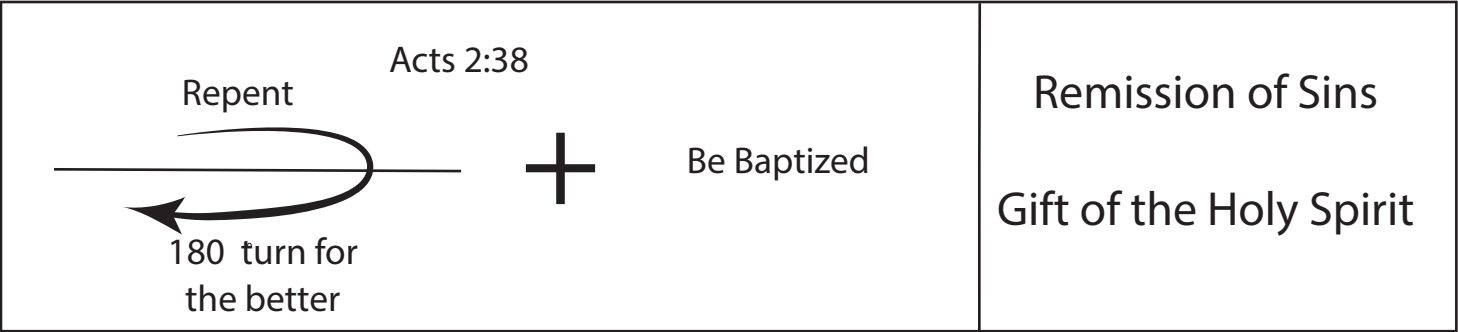


Illustration 3



Illustration 4

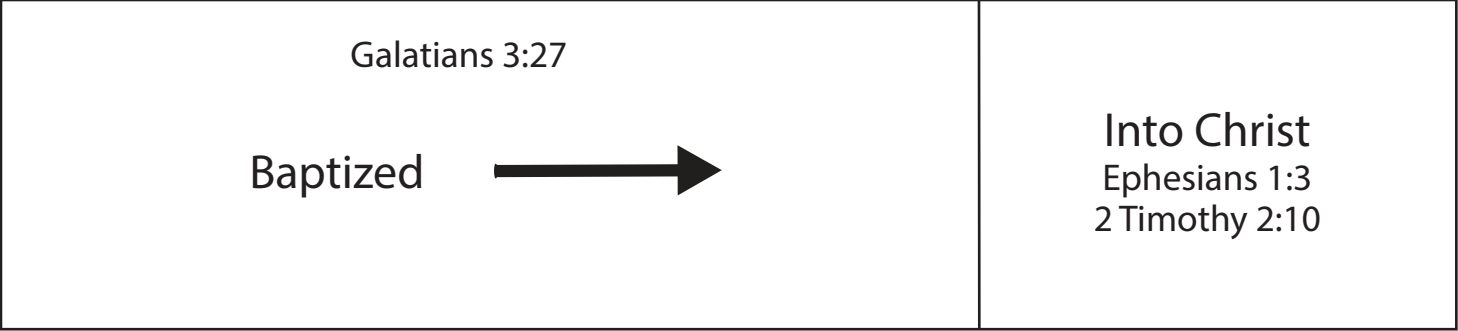


Illustration 5

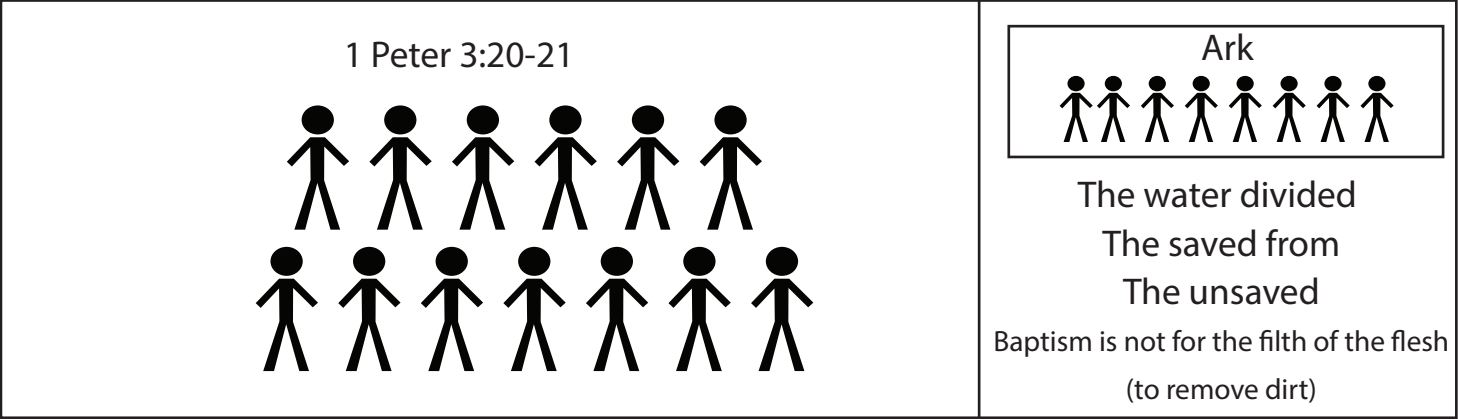


Illustration 6

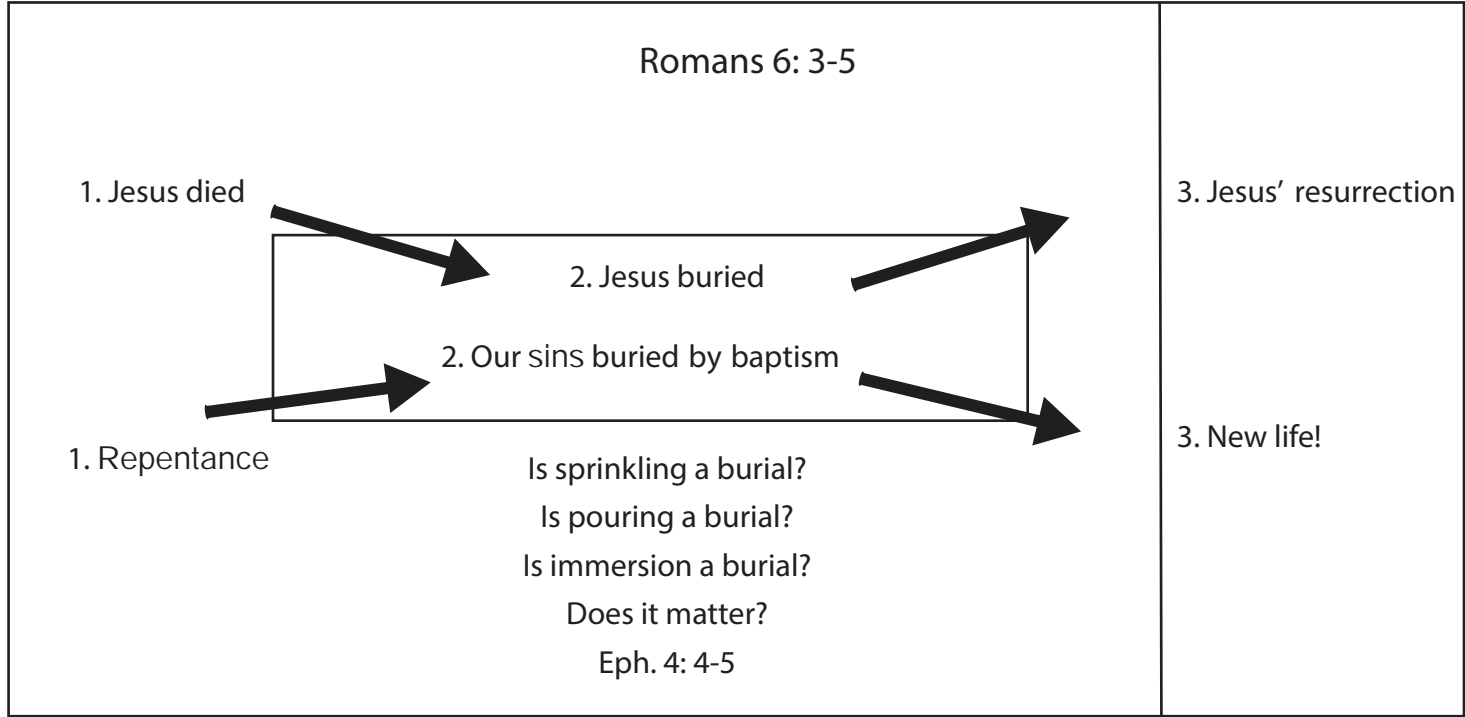


Illustration 7

The church of the Bible

Acts 2: 38, 41, 47

Matthew 16:18

Who is the builder of the church?

If Christ built it, who has the authority in it?

How many churches did Jesus build since “church” is singular in Matt. 16:18?

Illustration 8

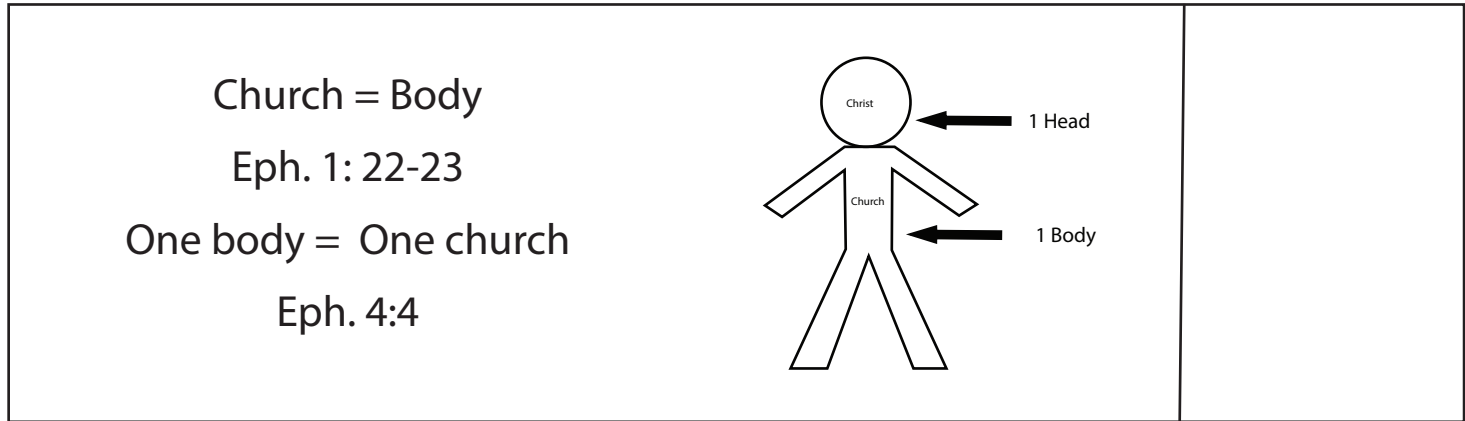


Illustration 9

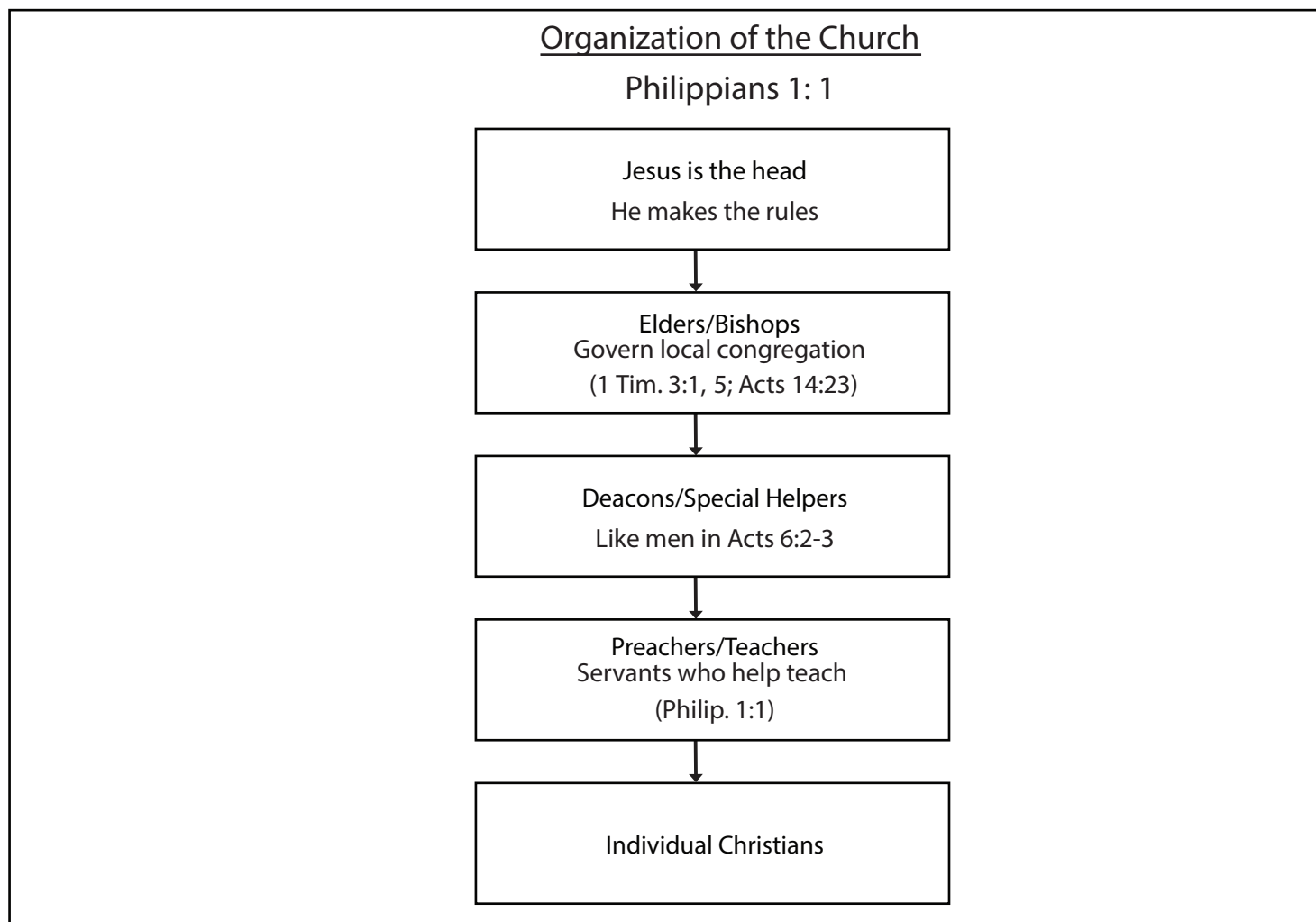


Illustration 10

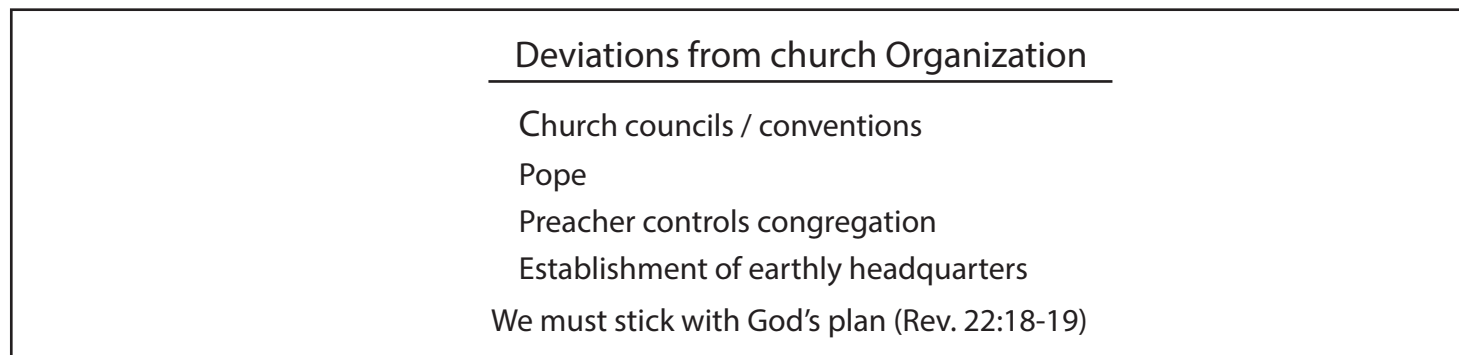


Illustration 11

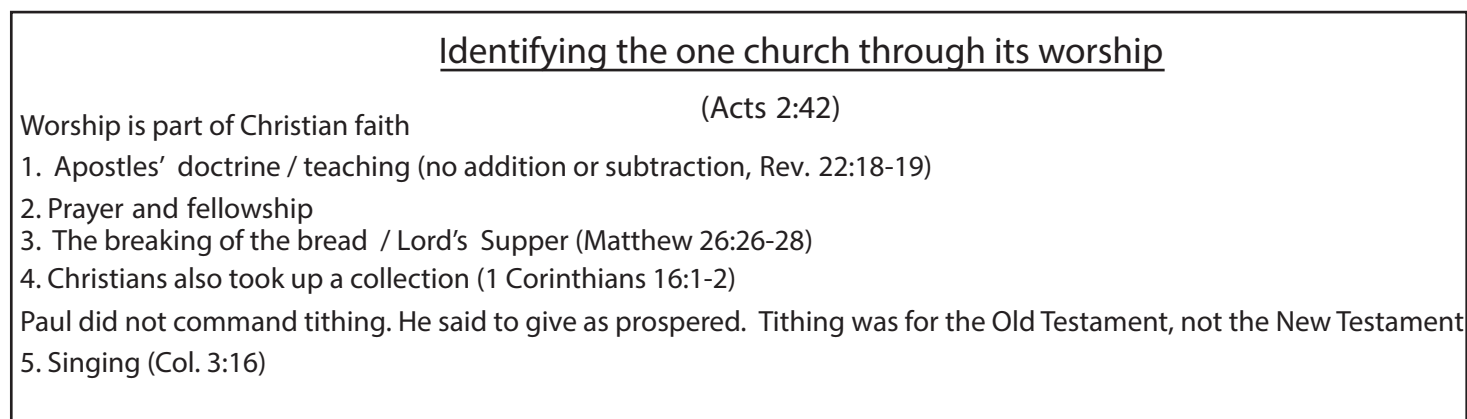


Illustration 12

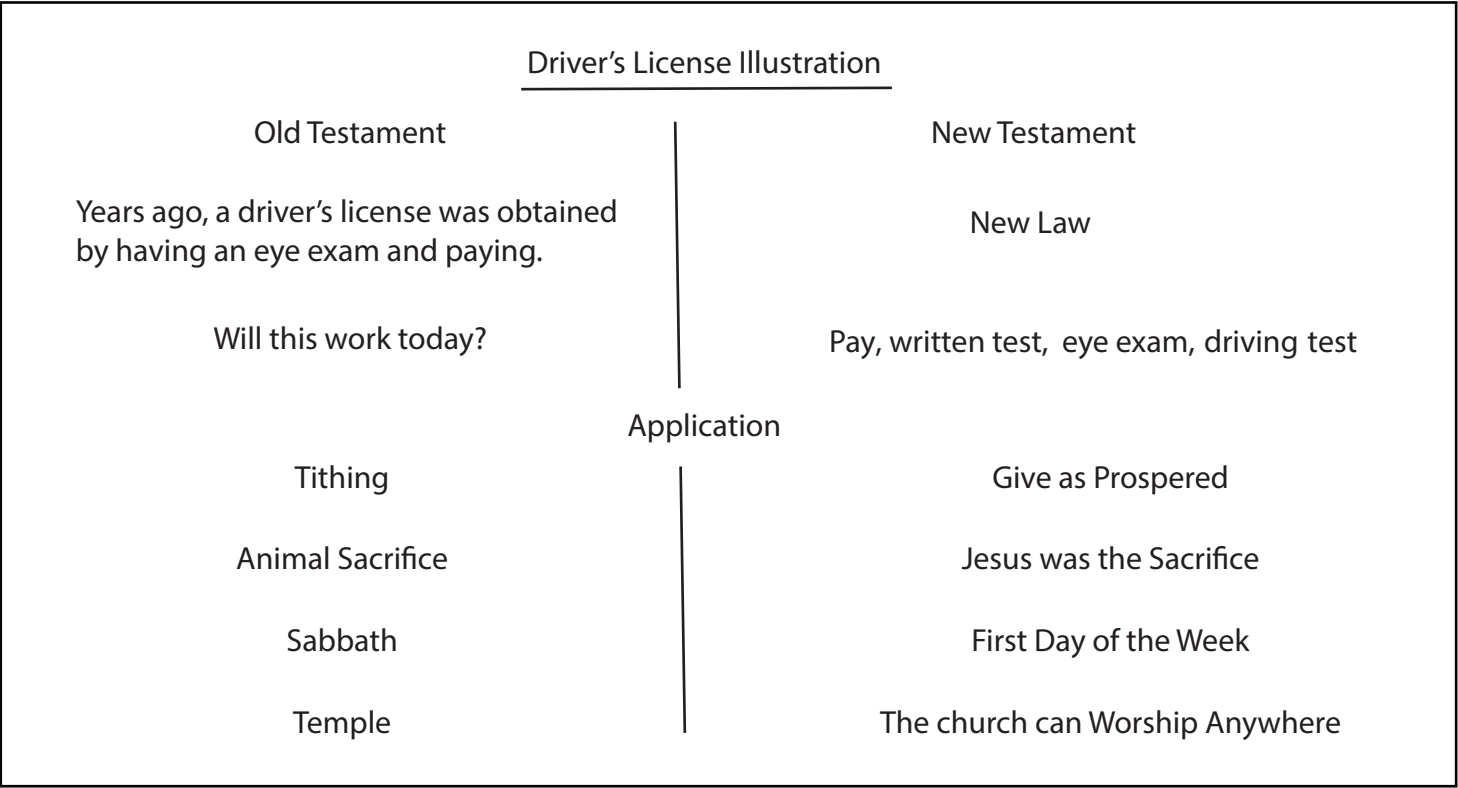


Illustration 13

The Lord's Supper	
1 Corinthians 11:20	The items for the Lord's Supper were brought
1 Corinthians 16:1-2	Christians assembled every Sunday
Acts 2:42; 20:7	The Lord's Supper was weekly (every Sunday)
Revelation 22:18-19	Partaking less or more often would be wrong (1 Cor. 4:17b)

Illustration 14

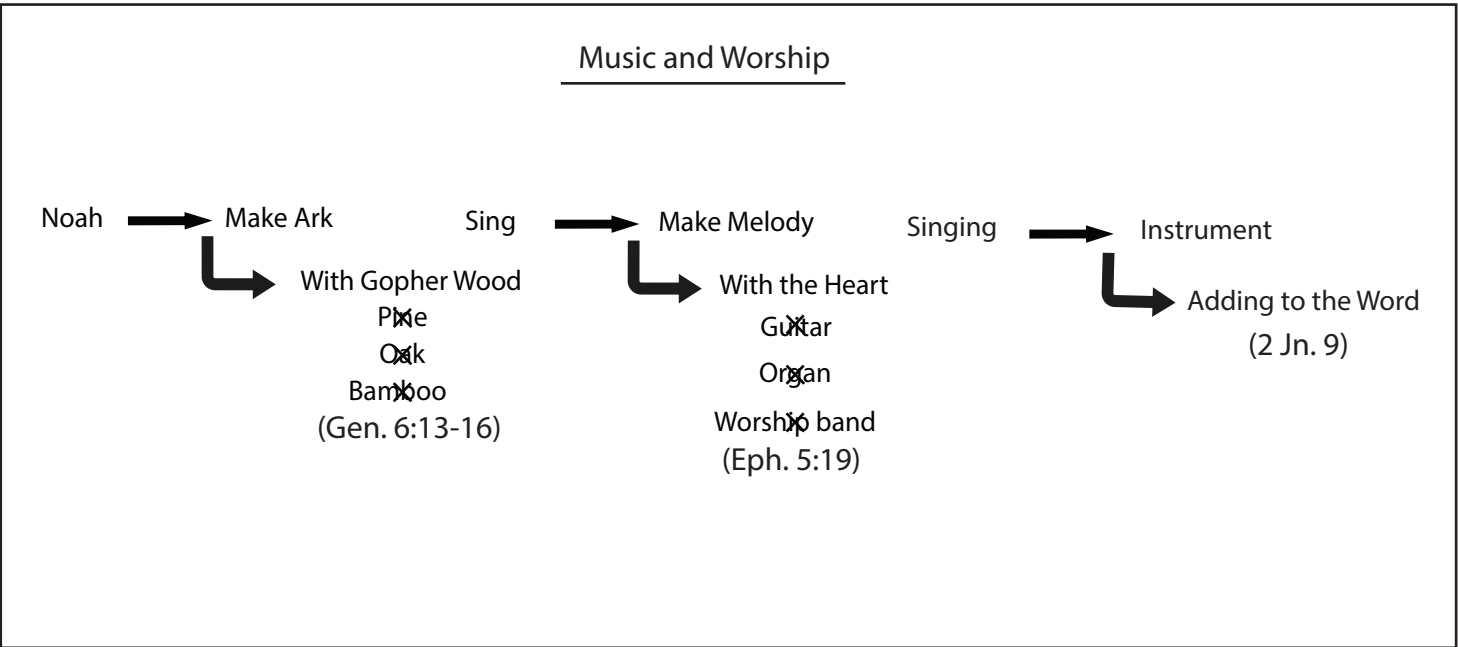


Illustration 15

