

“The Church that Jesus Built”

Part I

We have a problem today that has resulted in a lot of confusion, much discouragement, and has fueled rising skepticism. What is called “Christianity” has been segregated into hundreds of major divisions and tens of thousands of distinct and often contrary churches and religious organizations. Besides the hypocrisy and the moral failures of some of the most recognizable faces of modern religion, I suppose more people have given up on Christianity because of the division that exists, more than any other reason. I know the word of God is under attack today by a growing secularist movement, but those people wouldn’t be having the effect that they are were it not for the division and the disarray that, frankly, has disillusioned so many people, especially those of the younger generation. Christianity in the first century wasn’t like that. It was a powerful force that took the gospel to the world, and that converted people to the simple message of Jesus Christ thousands at a time. It was so powerful in large part because it was a united force.

But even in the days of the apostles, apostasy and false doctrine were already at work and there was a great falling away from the truth. Nineteen centuries of history have brought us to where we are today, and it seems that new religious groups are springing up every day. I sometimes just shake my head when I pass by a storefront or building and I see the latest name that some group has come up with to carve out their niche in this confusing maze that we call Christianity in America. Drive down just about any street in any town or city and you’ll pass building after building after building bearing the names of all kinds of denominations. Do you suppose that that’s what Jesus Christ had in mind when He told His little band of disciples so long ago that He was going to build His church? Can we really honestly think that Jesus’ desire was to have hundreds of opposing religions claiming to uphold and honor Him?

Matthew 16:13-18 “When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of Man am? And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets. 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 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.”

What did Jesus build? Does it still exist? And if so, how can I possibly define and distinguish it from all of the religious bodies that have sprung up since then? Let’s look today at the church that Jesus built.

Jesus made a wonderful promise when He said that He would build His church. It was, after all, God’s eternal purpose to do so.

Ephesians 3:10 “To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God...”

Within the church, God would unite all believers under the lordship of Christ. It would be a spiritual community made up of those who would leave the kingdom of the world and resign their hearts and their lives to Jesus. Jesus not only said that He would build His church, but also that nothing on earth or in hell beneath would prevent Him from building it, and that there would be nothing that would bring it to naught. The church had a glorious beginning. According to **Acts 2**, the first sermon of the gospel dispensation was preached by Peter and thousands were saved upon obeying it that very day.

Acts 2:47 “...And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”

Those who were saved were added to the church, and that infant church rapidly grew in size, influence and maturity, and within the first forty years of its existence, with one voice, the church took the pure and simple gospel message to the whole world and turned it upside down for Christ.

But, it didn't take long until men began to depart from the teaching of the apostles and bring their own ideas into the church, and the result was a great falling away from the faith over the course of several hundred years. As the centuries passed, men became ensconced in the tradition and manmade doctrine and practice. The church that Jesus built became a religious minority for hundreds and hundreds of years.

Beginning in 1517, the reformation took place, and some noble men began to break away from the oppressive and false religion that had dominated the world since the great apostasy nearly 1400 years before. Make no mistake, their intentions were good. The doctrines that came out of the reformation and their overarching thesis of “salvation by grace” as opposed to the rituals and dogma of Catholicism, were a reaction to the abuses and false concepts of justification under Catholicism. Well, we are saved by grace through faith.

Ephesians 2:8 “For by grace are ye saved through faith...”

But, some false doctrines also came out of that movement, and one by one, people began to align themselves after the teachings of Martin Luther, John Wesley, John Calvin, John Smith and others...and they began to establish churches in protest to the teachings of the Catholic church. Sadly, a worthy motive resulted in a maze of hundreds of denominations that teach conflicting doctrines, embrace conflicting practices and wear every kind of name that you can imagine. Christianity, as people think of it, has denominated itself in so many different ways that it's hard to tell up from down. The result has been the delight of the devil, I can assure you, who understands that you divide and then you conquer. You know, I suppose more people have been turned off by Christianity by the division that exists within it. If you feel overwhelmed and confused by what you see in religion these days, you are not alone. But friend, I believe that it is possible to identify and be a part of the church that Jesus built. I believe that it is entirely possible to restore within our own hearts and our own lives, in our own churches and our own communities what we read about in the New Testament. That's a refreshing concept to me, to go back before the divisions that men have created and to simply be a Christian after the New Testament order.

I want to begin our study by pointing out that Jesus only promised to build His church and none other. He never said He would build a thousand denominations. He said, *“upon this rock I will build my church,”* and that alone should tell us that there’s something terribly wrong with what we see in religion today.

Ephesians 4:4 “There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling.”

Paul said that there is *“one body,”* and the body of Christ always refers to the church of Christ.

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 fullness of him that filleth all in all.”

So, there is one body or one church, over which Christ is the head or sole authority. Well, that already contradicts what many people think today. We’re told that it really doesn’t matter what church a person belongs to, or if they’re a part of *any* church, as long as they love Christ. We’re told that the religious bodies that make up denominationalism for the most part have a scriptural right to exist and that all of them in their own unique way bring glory to God. That’s what we’re told. Some even try to explain away the one body spoken about in the New Testament by saying that denominations are simply parts of that church that is the whole. In other words, that there really is only one body, but it’s made up of hundreds of denominations that all go together to make up the one church of the Lord Jesus. Some have even argued that Jesus taught that Himself when He said this:

John 15:5 “I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit...”

They argue that every denomination or religious body is a branch on the vine of Christianity. But there is a glaring problem with that analogy: the principle of the seed doesn’t allow it. You see, the immutable seed principle says that every seed produces after its kind. In other words, if you plant corn, you’ll grow corn. If you plant potatoes, you’ll grow potatoes, and so on. It’d be a rather strange sight to go out to the garden where you planted some kind of seed and see a variety of produce hanging from each branch. Imagine that you were to set out a tomato plant at the beginning of the summer and you went out later and saw a red, juicy, ripe tomato hanging there on one part of that vine. Then you lift back the leaves and there you see a squash, and under that, a cluster of grapes. And lying on the ground attached to another vine from the same plant is a watermelon. You’d probably rub your eyes and look again. You know, the law of nature doesn’t allow that, and neither does the law of God. It’s just as absurd to suggest that Christ, the true vine, would produce the opposite kinds of fruit being produced in religion today.

Think about what we have today: one church teaches that baptism is necessary for salvation, another teaches that it’s not. One church sprinkles for baptism, another immerses the candidate in water. One church wears the name of this man, while another church wears the name of a different man. One church believes that once you’re saved, you’re always saved, but the next believes that a child of God can forfeit his salvation. Folks, these aren’t just auxiliary issues. They’re very, very important matters. Are we really to believe that the same seed produced such contrary doctrines and practices? Can we

really be content to just shrug and say that one church and one belief is just as valid as another? Friend, that doesn't fit what Paul expected of the Corinthians. That church, you may recall, was splintered into several factions, and the Christians there were identifying as the disciples of influential men instead of Christ, and Paul wrote to them sharply rebuking them.

I Corinthians 1:10 "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."

That's what we should be striving for today instead of trying to justify and dismiss the division and denominationalism that has turned so many people away from the gospel.

How can we achieve that kind of unity? How can I go back and be a member of the church that Jesus built? How can I identify it and know that I am a member of it? Well, it goes back to the seed principle. If every seed brings forth after its kind, shouldn't I be able to look at the fruit that a tree bears and tell what kind of seed it grew from? When I see an apple tree, can't I immediately conclude without a doubt that someone planted an apple seed there? Jesus said the word of God is the seed of the kingdom.

Luke 8:11 "Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God."

So, doesn't it stand to reason that if you plant the word of God, only one kind of fruit will be produced? And *that* fruit will be like that from which the seed originated? If I preach only the word of God to honest men, how can they become anything but that which the word produces? If I preach only the New Testament—lay aside the Westminster Confession of Faith, the catechism, the Convention Platform and all of that—and people believe and obey it, wouldn't they become New Testament Christians? If I preach the doctrines of men, they become what those doctrines produce. The word of God, the gospel message, is only intended to produce one thing, and that one thing is a New Testament Christian, just like you read about within the scriptures. When someone becomes something religiously above or beyond or besides a New Testament Christian, then we can safely conclude that something besides the teachings of the New Testament were planted in that person's heart. So, if I desire to find the church that Jesus built and become a member of it, I must look for its characteristics within the New Testament record, and I must reject whatever does not bear the marks of the church that we read about there.

What if I was to tell you that you could look out over the vast sea of religion and find the very church that Jesus built, by using the marks of positive identification found in the word of God? Well, you can. The New Testament gives us a very clear and comprehensive picture of the church that Jesus established. Let's notice some of those marks of identification now.

I. The origin of the church

First of all, I can identify the church that Jesus built by observing *when* and *where* he built it. The origin of the church is very, very important. I can point you not only to the place and the general timeframe of the church's establishment, but to the very *day* and *hour* when it happened. You can go and "google" it or find a book of religious history and read about where your denomination was established. Perhaps it

was established in Europe in the 1600's or maybe in America in the 19th or 20th century. I challenge you to look up that information. Friend, Christ's church is older than all of them, and you don't need an encyclopedia or book of religious history or Google to trace its origin. It was established about fifty days after the Lord's crucifixion and resurrection. It was not in existence during the life and ministry of John the Baptist. That is, John did not begin or found the church. It came after him, and after the death of Christ. Jesus told His disciples that some of them would be alive when it came.

Mark 9:1 "And he said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power."

Jesus Himself equated the 'kingdom of God' upon this earth with the church.

Matthew 16:18-19 "And I say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven..."

So, the Lord is saying that they would see the establishment of the church, the coming of the kingdom with power, while they yet lived. So, the church was established during the lifetime of the apostles, and He said that it would come "*with power*" from heaven.

After His resurrection, Jesus told the apostles to wait in the city of Jerusalem until the promise of God was fulfilled.

Luke 24:49 "And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high."

What would come with the power? The kingdom: the church.

Before Jesus ascended to heaven, He reaffirmed the promise to His apostles.

Acts 1:8 "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."

So, the church would be established during the lives of the apostles, in the city of Jerusalem, when the Holy Spirit fell on them enduing them with power. And the very next chapter, **Acts 2**, tells us how that happened. The apostles were gathered in the upper room in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit fell on them and clothed them with power. This was in the year of the Lord's crucifixion and resurrection, which scholars and historians believe to be around the year 33 A.D. Pentecost always fell on Sunday morning since the word 'Pente' means fifty and signifies the fiftieth day after the first sabbath following the Passover. You know, we even know what *time* of day it happened because the apostles spoke in tongues and bystanders thought they were drunk. But Peter defended their actions.

Acts 2:15 "For these are not drunken, as ye suppose, seeing it is but the third hour of the day."

As the Jews kept time, beginning at sun-up, that would've been at 9:00 a.m. There you have it. The church that Jesus built was established on a Sunday morning at 9:00, in the city of Jerusalem, in the year A.D. 33.

Now, I'd like to ask you: where and when was the church that you're a member of established? Can it trace its origin back to the beginning of Christ's church, or was it the product of the divisions of the reformation era and beyond?

II. Membership

We need not look any further than **Acts 2** to find out how the early Christians became a part of the church that Jesus built. When the church was established on Pentecost, there were people there from all over the world, and Peter stood up and preached the very first sermon of the gospel dispensation. He declared that what they were seeing was the fulfillment of their own scriptures, and that the innocent Jesus whom they had crucified just seven weeks before, was the Son of God, the promised Messiah. Well, they were convicted of their awful sin by Peter's preaching that day and they begged Peter to tell them what they had to do to be saved. They wanted to be saved. Peter's answer could not have been clearer.

Acts 2:38 "Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost."

Notice carefully, Peter told them to be saved that they must repent of their sins and be baptized for the remission or forgiveness of their sins. There were no altars there, no mourner's benches involved. There were no prayers uttered there on the part of the sinners. They were told to submit themselves to baptism for the remission of sins.

Acts 2:41 "Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them."

They gladly did what Peter preached. They were baptized into Christ. The result was that three thousand of them were added to His disciples. Added unto what?

Acts 2:47 "...And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."

Isn't that wonderful? These people were added by God to the church upon their obedience to the gospel and their salvation from sin! Did you know that some believe that they have the right to vote a person into the church? Or that they can vote to keep someone out of it? Some teach that you must request to join their denomination after they say you've been saved. And IF you're accepted, they'll later baptize you as a means of joining their church. Is that the policy and procedure where YOU go to church? Is that the doctrine of your denomination?

Friend, take a good long look at **Acts 2** and ask yourself, is that how those people became members of the church that Jesus built? They didn't join the church. God immediately added them to the church when they were baptized for the remission of their sins. I believe that that is an identifying mark of the

Lord's church. When people come to Jesus is simple faith and repentance, confess that He is the Son of God, and are baptized, the Lord adds them to the church.

I Corinthians 12:13 "For by One Spirit are we all baptized into one body..."

The Bible makes no distinction between the point of salvation and the point that one becomes identified with the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

A lot of people misunderstand what the church is today. They think the church is a building, but a building is merely where the church assembles, as the Bible instructs it to assemble. The building is rather immaterial. The church is told to come together in worship and edification, so the church isn't a building. The church is also not a human organization. Men don't have a right to go out and establish a religious organization. A group of believers in a locality can come together as a congregation of the Lord's church, but man doesn't have the right to go out and build a religious organization. That's where a lot of the confusion today comes in. People say, well, I'll go out and join this man's church or that religious organization or that one over there seems right. Well, that misses the whole point of what the church is. The church is merely the body of Christ: those who have been called out of the world by the gospel and who have been saved by obedience to the gospel and whom the Lord then adds to the church.

I'm happy to tell you today that if you desire to obey the gospel, the Lord will not only forgive your sins when you're baptized into Christ, but they'll be no voting or deciding that you will or won't be recognized as a member of Christ's church. Rather, when you are baptized for the remission of your sins, the Lord does that work. He adds you to His church. If you're part of an organization that is not teaching that, you need to understand that that is not the church that Jesus built.