



FORM OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

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Good morning and welcome. I'm glad you're here to look into the word of God together. We're exploring the church as it is described in the bible. Today is another lesson in our series about the New Testament church. So far, we have learned about its origin; how it was in the mind of God from before the foundation of the world, was foretold by the prophets, and finally built by Christ and revealed by the Holy Spirit working through the apostles.

Christ established His church on the first Pentecost after His death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven. It is the only church He ever began to build, and He has built it according to His own wisdom and not man's. If we wish to learn anything worthwhile about that church, we need to turn to the scripture for it furnishes us with all that God has revealed about it. Mankind has changed it through the centuries, but the church as it is revealed in the New Testament is what Jesus meant when He said that He would build HIS church. No other person, great or small, has authority from God to build a religious organization and call it the church. Only Christ has that prerogative, and that He did, and it is described for us in the word of God. I hope we're all interested in learning about that church and seeking to be that church and that church alone. And I humbly submit to you that if we are to resemble the New Testament church and not another, we must look to the New Testament for our authority and our example in serving the Lord as the church.

Today, I would like for us to look closely at the visible form of that church. While it is true that every baptized believer is part of that church, the church has characteristics of organization. Not just any organization but the kind of form and arrangement that Christ gave it when He built it and revealed it through His apostles. We want to view the New Testament record today and see what that church looked like as an organization. What form did it take and how was it to be organized. And is the church following that same arrangement today?

In Ephesians 1:19-23, Paul shows that the church resulted from Christ's work on earth and His consequent enthronement is heaven. He writes: ***“and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”***

Last week, we learned how the church began on the Day of Pentecost after the ascension and enthronement of Jesus Christ. But what exactly is that church? What is it defined and what visible form did it take? How did the Lord organize His church? And how should that compare to what we see today when trying to identify the church in today's confusing sea of diverse religion? We want to turn to the records of the apostles – the New Testament scriptures – for the answer. In other words, we need to Let the Bible Speak as opposed to the many voices of man and traditions that have evolved through the centuries. Let's go all the way back to the beginning and see what we can learn about the form and organization of the church as it was originally revealed in the New Testament. And this is not just an historical exercise – but surely, we desire to model the church as it existed under the auspices of the inspired apostles.

First, what do we mean when we speak of “the church”? What comes to mind when you hear the word “church”? For many, it's a physical location; a sacred spot; perhaps a cathedral or place of worship. There are several reasons for that. First, the Old Testament imagery of a temple where God's presence was manifest. Second, we are accustomed to going to a designated place to worship with other Christians. But third, the English word “church” actually refers to a physical structure where worship occurs. But that's the English word. The Greek word that is usually translated “church” is “ecclesia” which means to ‘call out’ or ‘an assembly.’ When the Jesus and the apostles said or wrote “ecclesia” they were always referring to a group or some kind of assembly of people. So, we should think of the church in those terms as well. The structure a church meets is immaterial and unimportant but the assembly itself is what is important to God and is what Christ had in view when He promised to build His church.

Now then, the term “assembly” is used in three different ways in the New Testament. First, it sometimes has reference to the worldwide assembly throughout time of all of those who are in Christ. In this case, it's not a physical assembly in a particular location but is talking more about the spiritual relationship of saved people to Christ and thus, one another and not a physical gathering or visible organization. Since “church” or “ecclesia” means ‘to call out’, when used in this universal sense it is referring to all the people who have been called out of the world into a relationship with God through Christ. Not only did Jesus describe this in Matthew 16, but the writer of Hebrews would also later refer thus to the church in Hebrews 12:22-23. He says: “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect.” Obviously, he is referring to all people whose names are written in the Book of Life upon their placing their faith in Christ, repenting of their sins, and being washed in the blood of Christ by being baptized for the remission of their sins. Luke tells us in Acts 2 that those who did those same things were added by the Lord to the church. Acts 2:41 says “Then those who gladly received his (Peter's) word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.” And verse 47 says: “praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” Referring to believers everywhere he went, Paul remorsefully recounted in 1 Corinthians 15:9 that he

“persecuted the church of God...” And there are several other references to the church in this generic sense.

So, please note that the first way the bible uses the term church simply refers to a spiritual concept – a relationship of people to Christ throughout all time and throughout the world of whom Christ is their Redeemer and over whom Christ is head. The first-century apostles of Christ are the executors of Christ’s will, and this church is built upon the foundation of the truths those apostles preached and wrote down by the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. There is no earthly organization to the church when it is referred to in this sense. Christ did not set up any earthly headquarters to govern it – for the apostles were eventually scattered over the face of the earth. He did not establish any hierarchy of power or governing authority over the universal church. Any such efforts were made by uninspired men after the days of the apostles, and they are not taught in the New Testament.

So, let me repeat, the universal church is not a human, earthly organization. It has no headquarters but heaven. It has no head but Jesus Christ. It has no officers save the apostles who facilitated its establishment and revelation unto men for all time. It has no charter or creed except for the gospel the apostles preached and the doctrines they taught. It is a term describing the spiritual community of the baptized believers in Christ. Where the church takes on a visibly organized and functioning form, is when those people are bonded together into a local body. This is where what is purely spiritual and more conceptual becomes physical and more practical. Thus, most times the word church is found in the scriptures, it is referring to a local body of believers or a localized congregation of the church of Christ. Paul opens his first letter to the congregation in Corinth by saying, “To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours...” (1 Corinthians 1:2) Here, he obviously refers to a local church that meets and works together and forms the body of Christ in that place and says there are others like them in many other places.

Sometimes, congregations are referred to as being in the same region or being of the same national background. For example, Acts 9:31 says, “Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.” Luke wasn’t referring to groups of churches as regional organizations or units of churches but was merely referring to the churches scattered throughout a particular region. I might speak of the churches throughout Oklahoma. I don’t mean that the congregations in Oklahoma form some organization distinct from churches in Texas. I am simply referring to congregations located in some area. Acts 15:41 says that Paul and Silas “went through Syria and Celicia, strengthening the churches.” Same thing, you see. 1 Corinthians 16:19, “The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house.” Again, same thing.

But then we find where Paul in Romans 16:3-5 says: “Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Likewise greet the church that is in their house...” When he speaks of the ‘churches of the Gentiles’, he’s not delineating one group of churches from another organizationally or doctrinally or in any way akin to a denomination. He’s simply referring to churches in the Roman empire who were made up of converts out of other nations besides the Jews. In fact, he told the Galatian church that in Christ there is no such thing as Jew nor Gentile but that both are one in Christ. His reference to “churches of the Gentiles” merely spoke of their location and ethnic background, not their doctrinal position or their being distinguishable from other churches in faith or practice.

So, we have the church being referred to as the universal collection of all baptized believers in Christ. Then, we have local churches scattered throughout the world and concentrations of churches in a given geographical area. And then there is another way those local churches are each referred to and that is as the gathering or assembly of that local church. For example, in 1 Corinthians 14:28 when Paul instructs them on how to conduct their assemblies and someone speaks in a language the others do not speak and understand, he says: "But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God." Then, in verses 34-35, "Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church." Here, obviously, he is referring to the church when it physically comes together in an assembly.

We sometimes sloppily use phrases such as "I went to church" or "people need to go to church" and it is quickly pointed out by someone that church is not a place but a people. That WE are the church. Yes, that's true. But there is a sense in which the church refers to a particular people assembled together in a particular place and at a particular time and so, if we mean it in that sense, we could say we are "going to church" as in, we are going to the physical assembly of the saints. So, what have we learned? The word church can refer to the universal collection of all scripturally baptized believers. It does not include those not baptized into the body of Christ, by the way (Acts 2:41 and 1 Corinthians 12:13). It also can refer to a local congregation of baptized believers who together form the body of Christ in that city or that locality. It can also refer to that local body when it is physically assembled into one place. That's how the bible employs the word 'church'. What you don't find in all of that is the concept of a denomination or an array of denominations representing different factions of the church. In fact, the bible plainly condemns such in 1 Corinthians 1 and in other passages. You do not read of any organization larger than a local church and smaller than the universal church. A denomination (implied by one facet of the term) as one part of many making up the whole is not a concept described in or sanctioned by scripture. That is the product of man's thinking and divisions among men and should become an unfortunate thing of the past. Christ built ONE church. And of that church, believers in a given locality form a functioning local body and assemble together as that local body to worship and serve the Lord together.

Now then, our focus can shift to the only level where there is any visible organization and that is the local church. How were local churches in the New Testament organized? In Ephesians 4:11-13 we read; "And He (Christ) Himself gave some to be apostles (those were the men Christ personally chose and set over the entire church – those men still govern the church through their inspired writings, the New Testament scriptures), some prophets (this too refers to inspired men in the first century church who guided the church through supernaturally imparted knowledge in the absence of the completed scriptures), some evangelists (these were men who were sent out to preach the gospel, make converts and establish and spiritually develop new congregations throughout the word), and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ;"

Now, the pastors Paul refers to are not preachers in the sense that people call preachers pastors today. I know that's an almost universal practice in modern religion but that's not biblical. Pastors refers to shepherds and it is not merely a preacher or teacher. Now all pastors must certainly teach the word of God but not all teachers of the word of God are pastors. Pastors are shepherds of the local flock and that's not the job of the evangelist or the preacher as most people think of preachers. Rather, pastor refers to an elder in the local church. Notice what Luke says happened when Paul was about to depart

Miletus. In verse Acts 20:17 it says, “From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the **elders** of the church.” In verse 28, he is speaking to those elders and says: “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” The elders where what? They were overseers. They were to shepherd the flock. What flock? The flock they were among which was the congregation at Ephesus. Who were these elders, also known as overseers, also known as shepherds, also known as pastors? You see, they’re all the same people. They were men who were appointed by evangelists to oversee the local church after meeting certain qualifications. Those elders were to be appointed in every church to oversee that particular church.

Now that paradigm has been largely replaced with other forms of government and administration today, and in our next lesson, the Lord willing, we’re going to go into greater detail about the Lord’s original way of organizing the local church and how it has unfortunately changed through the centuries. So, I hope you’ll plan to join me next week. I’ll return with more, in a moment.

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