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THE CHURCH

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THE CHURCH

Providing an amplified definition of the church requires background concerning its beginning and development. As the beginning and development are unfolded the definition of the church should emerge.

The beginning of the church is found in the New Testament and is considered to be a divine revelation. Before Pentecost with the coming of the promised Holy Spirit both Jews and Gentiles had no real concept of what constituted worship with one another as the saved and as a part of the same body of believers. When the Holy Spirit came He brought together both Jew and Gentile into one body in Christ.

The Bible recognizes three distinct parts of the family of God. The Jews, the Gentiles, and the Church of God are the three groups represented in the Bible as church.

The Jews.

It is not to be forgotten that God has a divine purpose for the Jews and that He has promised them as a nation great things. Much of the future of Israel depends on God's eternal plan for them and can be fulfilled as God dictates.

The Gentiles.

The Gentiles are the many non-Jews that are predicted by the Old Testament to have a special blessing in the kingdom to come and in this present age.

The Church.

The Church of God is of course not a club to join or an organization in which to maintain membership. It is every redeemed person who has been saved in this present age of grace. It consists of Jews, Gentiles, and all who have placed their faith and trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. This company of believers are those which are truly saved and look forward to Christ coming to claim His Church of which they are a part.

With this background as a foundation an amplified definition of the church would be: Groups of believers both Jew and Gentile who have been called out of the world and joined together as one group in Christ by the baptism of the Spirit of God to the glory of the Father based on their acknowledgment that Jesus Christ paid the price for their sins.

THE FOUNDING OF THE CHURCH

The church is a term which is used to encompass or explain two types of churches. These two types of churches are the universal church and the local church. Any study of the founding of the church needs to differentiate between the two types of churches.

Universal Church

The universal church consists of everyone in the age of grace who have truly been born again. They have been filled with the Spirit of God and have been baptized into the body of Christ. This universal church is not a building but a body of believers with Christ as its head. It is the Ekklesia or called out people.

The local church

The local church is used to define the local body of believers at one place. As the apostles established churches throughout the areas of the known world they were establishing local churches.

The Founding

Different points of view exist concerning the founding of the church. Looking at several aspects and building on the Biblical account of the church several things can be noted.

Different times of founding

There are differing opinions concerning the time of the founding of the church. There are those who believe that the church is a continuation of Israel of the Old Testament. Others believe that when Christ started preaching that the beginning or founding took place. Some believe that Peter is the rock upon which the church is founded. Others believe the rock of Peter's confession is Christ. Some believe that the church in Acts is not the church today. Others indicate that the church was founded when Paul in Acts 13.46 declared a turning to the Gentiles.

Actual founding

The universal and local church was according to the Bible founded on the day of Pentecost. This is found in Acts 2 and is expressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12.13 when he said "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit". Paul is of course referring to the universal church and local church when he mentions "the body". Numerous scriptures concerning the event of Pentecost are found in all four Gospels, in Acts, in 1 Corinthians, and Ephesians. The local church specifically was waiting according to the Bible 120 strong and were the first to be baptized with the Spirit.

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH ORGANIZATION

The Organization.

The church in Jerusalem from its start appears to have been established around some type of organization. According to Acts 2.41-46 the church "received his word were baptized...added (to the church)...continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and

fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." The scriptures indicate that after Pentecost that the apostles were the leaders of the church. As needs arose to add additional personnel to assist with the needs of the poor, others were added. Meetings according to Acts 2 took place in the upper room, in some homes and some even at the temple.

Allowance for Further Development.

The early church forms of organization as presented above gave rise to at least three types of further development. They developed episcopalian forms of government which today are represented by the Roman Catholic Church, the Episcopalian Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church. The representative form of government is the found today in the Reformed and Presbyterian churches. The congregational form of government is represented by churches of Congregational, Disciples, and Baptist.

Extensive church governments which exist in almost all churches today may be an outgrowth of the established local body of believers of the early church. Much can be said about the early church organization in the way of development. It would appear that the local church government developed into a congregational form of government as the need for apostle's authority waned. Local government still seems to be the method of church organization in some denominations, such as Southern Baptist, however a large organization of "support" offices and personnel seem to be creating a large "non local" superstructure of church government above the local level.

These superstructures in the Southern Baptist Church hierarchy of government are called "Associations", "State Conventions", and the "Southern Baptist Convention".

Scriptural Offices.

The scriptural offices of the early church according to Thiessen are the offices of pastor, elder, overseer; deacons; and deaconesses.¹

Pastor, Elder and Overseer.

The terms pastor, elder, overseer seem to mean the same thing according to the scriptures. The references made to these offices are found in the scriptures as they address those present at the churches. The names used to refer to the officers known to be present do not necessarily conform to one of the three terms pastor, elder, or overseer. The following names are used to mean leaders of the church, such as pastor, elder, or overseer. They are called, elders, overseers, bishops, shepherd, pastors, and apostles interchangeably.

¹Henry C. Thiessen, Lectures in Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 320.

Deacons.

The office of deacon according to its usage and translation appears to be that of a "servant" or "minister". These terms are used to denote the functions of the deacon which appeared to be spiritual but not in the same sense as one called to preach the gospel. The duties seem to be that of meeting the material and financial needs of the church.

Deaconesses.

This office of deaconesses was a part of the early church organization and can be noted in Romans 16.1 when Paul addresses Phoebe as servant or deaconess. In Paul's discussion of the early church officers Paul lists women in 1 Timothy 3.11. The work of the deaconesses though not clear may have been in areas where men would not have been the best servant. This may have been with matters relating to the needs of the local church women of a personal nature.

NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH ORDINANCES

The New Testament Church Ordinances are baptism and the Lord's Supper. These ordinances or sacraments are generally accepted by Baptist Churches, however, the Roman Catholic Church added five other sacraments. The difficulty with the ordinances as related to the Roman Catholic Church is the declaration that the sacraments confer or increase grace. Within the Southern Baptist Churches the term sacrament is not widely used but is generally referred to as an ordinance. Baptists do not believe that baptism or the Lord's Supper imparts any grace. Baptists do however consider the two ordinances as a command of Jesus Christ.

Baptism.

The unique thing about baptism is that it is one of Jesus commandments which is found in the Great Commission. Go and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt 28.19,20). Many of the Jesus followers baptized the believers. Peter preached not only repentance but baptism as well. Act 2.38.

Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper as an ordinance of the church is found in the three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, and was much a part of the early church as was baptism. Paul in his establishment of churches clearly provided instructions on this event in the life of the early church, since references in the scriptures discuss it's practice. The ordinance of the Lord's Supper is an opportunity to bring to mind Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of Me." 1 Cor. 11.24.

THE MULTI-FACETED MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The multi-faceted mission of the church should be based on the scriptures which command the called out to live their lives which would be pleasing to God. The scriptures demonstrate that the church should proclaim God's greatness; build itself in love; have no spot or wrinkle; equip the saints; go into all the world; hold forth the Word to the world; and do good to all men.

Proclaim God's Greatness.

Many scriptures show that one of the primary missions of the church to be to glorifying of God. Romans, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians and 1 Peter are definitive as to our glorifying God. These Bible references point out that the church should worship for who He is, praise Him, pray to Him, give thanks for what He has done for sinners, and live according to His commands.

Build itself in love.

The church has a giant task to complete in the building up of the saints in love. Included in this task is the mandate of Ephesians 4.12-16, which requires the equipping of the saints, building up the body, attain unity of the faith, gain knowledge and mature as a body in Christ, and have growth which builds the church in love.

Have no spot or wrinkle.

Today the church may have spots and wrinkle but they have been instructed to make themselves ready for the coming of Christ. The church today as the "bride" should continue steadfast in the teachings of the Bible and should not allow any un-godly heresies into the body, the church.

Equip the saints.

Jesus gave the church the "Great Commission" and the church should be carrying it out. Part of the commission was to make disciples and teach them to observe the doctrines of God. By teaching the church the saints will be better able to answer when called upon concerning their beliefs.

Go into all the world.

The church will never be able to convert the whole world to Christianity according to the Word of God, however, the church has been called to take the message of Christ to the whole world. This is called missions and should be one of the facets of the mission of the church. The mandate of God is to take the gospel to every nation. The church is to start in their town and go outward from there with the good news that Christ has redeemed mankind from their sins. The every widening circle of missions should be reaching the lost for Christ.

Hold forth the Word to the world.

The world is waiting for the church to be what Jesus asked it to be. The world waits for Christians who are the salt and the light of world. God continues to wait on the Christians to use the age of Grace to reach lost people for Him. Without the Christians in the world, the world would not be a people of God, and God would destroy it, as He has done in the past. Christian influence is a matter which Christians should not take lightly. Christians should be demonstrating God's love to an unrighteous generation.

Do good to all men.

Christians have a ministry not only to each other but to all people. Galatians 6.10 states, "So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith." Christians should follow Christ example of meeting the needs of mankind. Christians will meet people's needs as they give testimony to what God has done in their lives and as to what God in them will do to meet their needs. It should be sufficient to say that any doing good among Christians should glorify God. To many times Christians are not doing "good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith".

STEWARDSHIP IN THE CHURCH

Stewardship in the church is more than money and how one uses it. Stewardship is the Christians responsibility to properly use what the master provides for them and to return as would please the master that portion of His goods to His good purpose.

A steward is one who is a slave of another and is put in charge of his masters possessions. The apostle Paul believed that God has put Christians in charge of all that which God provides them. The Bible indicates that Christians are responsible for everything God gives them. They are responsible for their time, talent and all that they own. Christians must recognize that all they possess comes from God. That all they possess here on this earth is temporal and will not last. Paul said, "I am debtor" in Romans 1.14. and his debt was to God not man.

Christians according to the scriptures are to share that which they receive from God with all people. Christians have received eternal life and as a steward of the "good news" should work diligently to share it with others.

When stewardship is mentioned, money immediately becomes the object of discussion. People today, Christian and non-christian place too much emphasis on money. Certainly, if money is one of the Christian's possessions he should seek God's will on how it should be used. God would rather money be used to lay up treasures in heaven rather than on earth. The Christian needs to be God's slave and

truly call Him master, so as not to follow after mammon. Christians should not be concerned after material things but should use material things to further the Kingdom of God. Money given from a willing heart clearly becomes money which can be used by God to meet people's needs. Too often money is not given from a willing heart, such as the widows mite and consequently is not blessed.

The true measure of stewardship is not one of obligation, duty, or law but is one of love of God and giving to support God's work in the world. Scriptures can be found in both the Old and New Testament which instruct concerning stewardship but none of the instruction can replace or supplement a willing heart to please God. Acts 20.35 defines a good steward when it states, "remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive."

WORSHIP IN THE CHURCH

The various aspects of worship in the church include prayer and thanksgiving. True worship is the believer praying and giving thanks to the Father, in Christ name, through the Holy Spirit.

Prayer.

Prayer as an act of worship between God and man developed in Old Testament times through individuals, the patriarchs, priests, and rulers. During Jesus time here on the earth He taught His disciples to pray. It is noted as well that Jesus prayed on many occasions, including the prayer of intercession prayed in John 17.

Prayer in worship is now complete as one is able to pray in the name of Jesus Christ as our mediator and God. Prayer in worship allows believers to intercede for others and to bring their own request to God. Prayer using the name of Jesus Christ changes prayer to a new level of existence. Prayer can be for "whatsoever" as long as one recognizes that their hearts must be in the will of the Savior.

Prayer to have meaning as worship should be a part of each individual's relationship to God. A daily time of prayer, praying as God instructs will find the throne of God. For prayer to be effective worship it must be done out of love and thankfulness for God's grace.

Thanksgiving.

This form of worship, heartfelt thanksgiving to God, is in grateful acknowledgment of what God has done for man. Thanksgiving is noted frequently in both the Old and New Testament. The apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 9.15 said, "Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift." As each individual praises God and gives thanks to God it should be two fold. It should be without ceasing and "Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

True worship accordingly must be from the heart of the Christian and is accomplished with much prayer and thanksgiving to God for His great gift to mankind of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

FIGURES OF SPEECH FOR NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

A study of the scripture reveals figures which represent Christ and His church. According to Chafer they are "the central revelation concerning God's purpose and plan for the church."²

The Shepherd and the sheep.

The figure of speech in John 10, which references the Twenty-Third Psalm, established Christ as the Shepherd and His church as the sheep. The church referenced in John 10 includes Israel with the Gentiles and is the flock which is of this present age. The sheep are those who have heard the Shepherd's voice and have followed Him.

The Vine and the branches.

Here it is noted that Christ represents the Vine and believers are the branches. This figure demonstrates that the believer apart from Christ cannot maintain fellowship with the Savior.

The Cornerstone and the stones of the building.

This figure is Christ as the Cornerstone of the church which He is presently building. He is building today's church from living stones, the believers. The believers are the stones of the building. All believers as stones must rely on a firm foundation and in this case that foundation is the Cornerstone Jesus Christ.

The High Priest and the kingdom of priests.

The Bible says that the church is a priesthood of believers. This being the case then Jesus Christ is the High Priest of His church. The kingdom of priests should be performing their duties as priest which consist of presenting themselves before God "as living sacrifices" and as priest they should worship Him in praise and in intercessory prayer.

The Head and the body.

The church is an every developing body of believers and as such must have a Head which is Christ Jesus. The figure here is that Christ is the Head of the body and the body is bound together by its relationship to the Head.

The Last Adam and the new creation.

Christ here is the figure of a new order. Christ having been resurrected starts all things new. The church is thus established in

²Lewis Sperry Chafer, Chafer Systematic Theology, 2 Vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 2:249.

Christ by the position it occupies as baptized believers. The old Adam and the old nature of creation are replaced by the Spirit of God to make the believer a new creature in Christ Jesus.

The Bridegroom and the bride.

This last figure is a representation of that which will be in the future as the fulfillment of prophecy. Here Christ is the Bridegroom being presented with a virgin bride the Church. The implications of Israel's unfaithfulness to God is contrasted here as the Bridegroom claiming a spotless bride the church at the Rapture. 2 Cor. 11.1,2.

BIBLICAL DESTINY OF THE CHURCH

The Biblical destiny of the church is twofold. The present church and its position of influence on the lost and the church as a bride with Christ as revealed in Revelation.

Influence on the lost.

Paul's writings indicate that as the end time appears that there will be fewer followers of the faith. Scriptures speak to the church as having little or no influence on the people, nor an ability to win them to Christ. Matthew in his gospel states "And because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold." Matt. 24.12. Jesus said that life would be much like in the days of Noah. In the days of Noah according to the Bible people were oblivious to the things of God and God destroyed them.

Church as a bride.

Fortunately, the believer has in Christ Jesus eternal life and will some day be united with Him as His bride. Revelation provides a picture of a sweet union with Jesus Christ as Lord and shows the fellowship with Him forever. Many incidents in Revelation describe a life in Christ Jesus in Heaven as reigning with Him, ruling with Him, Judging with Him and forever being with Him.

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