

The Church

“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.”

***—Matthew 16:18,
Revised Standard
Version***

There are many self-identified Christian churches, bearing a great variety of names, and holding to different types of belief with respect to the teachings of Jesus and his apostles. When we consider these differences of viewpoint it is not out of

order, we think, to inquire as to what the Bible tells us the church really is, and what the divine purpose is concerning it. Is there any way of knowing which is the true church, or do all the denominational groups together make up the true church?

The word church does not appear in the Old Testament, and its first use in the New Testament was by Jesus when he told Peter, as noted in our opening verse, that the “powers of death” would not prevail against it. In this verse the word “church” is a translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means “a calling out,” or a selection. Jesus said to his disciples, “I have chosen you out of the world.” (John 15:19) Essentially, the church is a company of people who, in accepting the invitation of Christ, have become separated from the world.

The church is not a building, although the word church is often used to denote the place where a congregation meets. If the expression “meeting house” were more universally used to describe the gathering place of a congregation, it might help to lessen some of the misunderstanding which prevails concerning the true significance of the word church itself.

In Jesus’ ministry he used the word church only three times. Once was in his remark to Peter; and twice on another occasion when instructing his disciples in the proper procedure for dealing with misunderstandings which might arise among them. (Matt. 18:17) The next time the word appears is in Acts 2:47, following the account of the three thousand who accepted Christ as a result of Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost. It is a simple statement, saying merely that “the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”

In this simple statement of fact there is room for reflection. On the Day of Pentecost alone, three thousand became identified with the “church,” and thereafter there were “daily” additional converts, yet there is no record of any formal initiation services aside from water baptism. All of these converts were Jewish people. When, under the persuasive ministry of the apostle, they recognized that Jesus, whom their leaders had crucified, was indeed the Messiah of promise, they believed on him and were baptized.

It was as simple as that! Later, as the number of disciples increased, and they assembled in mutual edification, these groups of people were called churches. In Acts 11:22 we read of “the church which was in Jerusalem.” In Romans 16:5, Paul extends

greetings to “the church that is in their house”—that is, the house of Priscilla and Aquila.

From these texts we get the thought that in those early days of Christianity, each group of believers, regardless of its size and location, was considered a church. Indeed, it was a church, because each such assembly of believers was made up of those who, by the Gospel, had been called to separate themselves from the world and to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

These individual groups bore no denominational names. They were identified by their location, being spoken of as the church at Jerusalem, the church at Philippi, the church at Rome, or, as in some instances, the church that held its meetings in the home of one or another of the believers.

In Revelation, chapters 2 and 3, seven churches are mentioned and identified by the cities in which they were located, and special messages were sent to them. There is reason to believe that these seven churches are, in a symbolic way, representative of all believers during various time periods, beginning at Pentecost and continuing to the present. This is another, broader use of the word church, as descriptive of all in every place whom the Lord looks upon as being called out from the world to serve him and his cause.

Jesus had in mind a broad, more general meaning of the word when he said to Peter that the “powers of death” would not prevail against the church. It is this application also that Paul makes when, in Ephesians 1:22,23, he speaks of Christ as being the “Head over all things to the church, which is his body.” It is in this sense that Paul again writes

about the “church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.”—I Tim. 3:15

In I Corinthians 12:12,13, Paul elaborates on the thought of the church being the “body” of Christ. He says, “As the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.”

How to Join

How does one become a prospective member of the church—that is, the church that was established by Jesus and the apostles? Acts 2:47, cited earlier, reads that “the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.” This indicates that becoming a member of the Lord’s church depends upon him. This, we believe, would be conceded by all Christian people. Just how, though, does the Lord add members to his church, and what qualifications must one meet in order to be recognized by the Lord as belonging to his church?

Briefly, the Scriptures indicate the steps of approach to the church as being, first, a repentant recognition of the fact that we are members of a sin-cursed and dying race, and could, therefore, have no standing before God in our own righteousness. (Isa. 64:6; Mark 2:17; Acts 26:20) Next is the acceptance of Jesus Christ as our personal Redeemer and Savior, realizing that only through the value of his shed blood can we be acceptable to God.—Acts 13:38,39; 16:31; Rom. 3:21-23; 5:1

Then, upon the basis of our confidence in the merit of the shed blood of the Redeemer, we are invited to present ourselves in unreserved devotion to do the will of God. We could speak of this as making a "consecration" of ourselves to God. Let us emphasize that this consecration is made to God, not to man, nor to any earthly organization.

The Bible is very explicit as to what this consecration will mean in our lives. Jesus said, "If any man will come after me [be my disciple], let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me." (Luke 9:23) To deny self does not mean merely giving up of some petty pleasure or satisfaction for a short period of time, or even for all time. It is, rather, just as the expression implies, a complete denial of self. It is the same word that Jesus used when he foretold that Peter would three times completely deny knowing him. (Matt. 26:33,34) Thus to deny self is to completely disallow ourselves the right to recognize our own will, and accept instead the will of God as expressed through Christ and the Scriptures.

What is the divine will for those who, responding to Jesus' invitation, utterly deny self? It is expressed in his further invitation to take up their cross daily and follow him. Jesus used the symbolism of cross-bearing to denote going into death. When Jesus gave this invitation, he was himself laying down his life in sacrifice. His sacrifice was completed at Calvary when he cried, "It is finished."—John 19:30

Those who accept Christ's invitation to take up their cross and follow him, likewise lay down their lives in sacrificial service. They are not all literally crucified, although in the beginning of the Christian age some were. Many suffered martyrdom in other

ways. In the case of every follower of the Master, however, the willingness to serve and to suffer regardless of the consequences must and will be present.

This matter of following in the footsteps of Jesus is described by Paul as being “planted together in the likeness of his death.” (Rom. 6:5) Before we came to Christ, we were “dead in trespasses and sin.” (Eph. 2:1) However, through obedient faith in the merit of his shed blood we are released from Adamic condemnation. Yet we die; not as sinners, however, but as joint-sacrificers with Jesus. Paul expressed the thought when he wrote, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.”—Rom. 12:1

Baptized into Christ

In Romans 6:3,4, Paul wrote, “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” The baptism here referred to is not in water, but into Christ, and into his death.

The word baptism in the New Testament is translated from a Greek word meaning “to bury” or “submerge.” Our baptism into Christ is the burial of our will into his will. It is a death baptism because it is God’s will that we die with him.

In Revelation 20:4 this thought is symbolized by the use of the word “beheaded.” Here we read of those who are “beheaded for the witness of Jesus,

and for the Word of God.” This does not refer to a literal beheading, but to the renouncing of our will, as represented by the head, and accepting Christ as our Head.—Eph. 5:23; Col. 1:18

Paul elaborates further on this point, saying, “By one Spirit are we all baptized into one body.” (I Cor. 12:13) It is by the influence of the Holy Spirit, through the Word of Truth, that we are drawn to the Lord and led by his love to present ourselves in full consecration to him. Since this consecration means the renouncing of our own wills and accepting the will of God in Christ, Jesus thus becomes our Head, and we become members of the church, which is his body, if we are faithful to our standing before God, even unto death.—Rev. 2:10

Thus, we see how it is that God, by the power of his Spirit, adds prospective members to the church of Christ. Our part in it as individuals is merely to yield to the influence of his Spirit, and to take the steps which the divine Word indicates; that is, the steps of repentance, acceptance of Christ, and the presenting of ourselves in full consecration to do God’s will.

Can we know, after taking these steps, whether or not God has accepted us, and actually recognizes us as probationary members of the church, the body of Christ? We believe so. Paul said, in a text already quoted, that having been “buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” (Rom. 6:4) Are we joyfully walking in “newness of life”?

Paul also wrote, “If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold,

all things are become new.” (II Cor. 5:17) Have the old things belonging to the “times past” of our lives passed away, in the sense that they no longer hold any real attraction for us? (Eph. 2:3) Do we find our greatest joys in the new things of the Lord—our new vocation of divine service—our new hopes, new aims, new ambitions?

Having taken this step of full consecration to the Lord, our former friends and relatives may fail to understand us. In some cases, they may even persecute us. In any event, they will not find in us the same degree of companionship, for they will not be in harmony with our new way of life. We will not love them any less, nor cease to do all we can for them, but we will learn that the ways of the world and the ways of the consecrated people of God are often far apart. Are we having this experience?

Paul again wrote, “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.” Then he adds, “God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God.”—I Cor. 2:9,10

Is the Lord leading us day by day into a deeper appreciation of the marvelous truths contained in his Word? Are the “deep things” of his Word pertaining to our calling in Christ Jesus more clearly understood as we seek to know and to do his will? If so, we have additional evidence that he has accepted our consecration and is leading us in the path of righteousness.

Jesus himself gives us a very definite assurance of our standing before God. First, he declares, “him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.” (John

6:37) He follows this a few verses later, saying, “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him.” (John 6:44) If we have felt the drawing power of God through Christ, what further assurance do we need than this?

Indeed, our rejoicing in the spiritual things of the new way of life in which we are walking; our loss of interest in the former things of the flesh and of the world; a measure of misunderstanding, and perhaps even of persecution, from the world; our increasing appreciation of spiritual things, particularly as they pertain to our heavenly calling—all these are evidences that our consecration has been accepted by God, and that we have actually been “baptized” into Christ.

Water Baptism

The question of water baptism naturally arises, and properly so, for Jesus himself was baptized in water, and we are to follow in his steps. What is the purpose of water baptism? John the Baptist baptized for repentance. (Matt. 3:11) He could not understand why Jesus requested baptism, for he knew that Jesus was not a sinner, but rather, that he was the holy and just one.—Matt. 3:13-15; Heb. 7:26

John’s baptism applied only to members of the Jewish nation. It symbolized their return to the covenant with God under which he was dealing with the entire nation—the covenant made at Mount Sinai. John’s baptism was also to prepare the Jews to receive their Messiah, Christ Jesus, when his ministry would subsequently begin.—Mark 1:4,5; Luke 1:13-17; Acts 13:24,25

Jesus was not baptized for the repentance of sin. In asking John to baptize him he simply said, "Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness." (Matt. 3:15, *RSV*) It is Jesus' example that we follow in our water baptism. To him it was a symbol of his covenant to die sacrificially, and of his hope, if found faithful, to be raised from the dead.

How aptly water immersion pictures these two thoughts. When one is lowered into the water by the immerser he becomes helpless in his hands, and would remain buried, as in death, except as raised up out of the water. Thus, in our consecration we give ourselves up to die with Christ, inspired by the promises of God that we will be raised up in the resurrection, even as Jesus was, to be associated with him in the great future work of his kingdom.—Rom. 6:4,5; Phil. 3:10,11

Water baptism, then, is a beautiful symbol of our true baptism into Christ. It is not essential in the sense that it is a saving ordinance. However, since those who are properly eligible for water immersion have renounced their own wills, and have covenanted to do the Lord's will, they will recognize that this is part of the Lord's will for them, and they will gladly comply. Any other attitude would indicate something less than an all-consuming love for the will of God.

Church Organization

The Scriptures do not indicate that the various local groups of called out ones in those early years of Christianity had any elaborate organizational arrangements, nor does the Bible teach that this

was God's design for the church as a whole. However, the disciples at that time were not without some organization. Their meetings were not without order, and various privileges of service were assigned to different ones according to their several abilities.—Matt. 25:15; I Cor. 14:40; II Thess. 3:6,7; Titus 1:5

In the Early Church organization Jesus was universally recognized as the Head. This was in keeping with Jesus' own instructions to his disciples, when he said, "One is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren." (Matt. 23:8) Paul wrote, "Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body." (Eph. 5:23) In I Corinthians 11:3 he presents the same thought, saying that "the head of every man is Christ; ... and the head of Christ is God."

Jesus is not only the Head of his church, but he is also its foundation. "Other foundation can no man lay," wrote Paul, "than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." (I Cor. 3:11) The members of the church are also referred to as "the household of God," which is declared to be "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone."—Eph. 2:19,20

The Apostle Peter wrote, "Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded." (I Pet. 2:6) In Revelation 14:1-4, the Apostle John also affirms that Jesus is the "chief corner stone" in Sion—the church complete. This is especially noteworthy in view of the misunderstanding which has been attached to Jesus' statement, "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church."—Matt. 16:18

This assertion has been misconstrued to mean that Peter was to be the “rock” upon which the church of Christ would be built. However, this interpretation is seen to be in error when we discover that Jesus used two different Greek words in making the statement. When he said, “Thou art Peter,” the Greek word translated Peter is *petros*, meaning a “piece of rock.” However, when he said, “Upon this rock I will build my church,” he used the Greek word *petra*, meaning a “mass of rock,” a boulder, as it were.

Peter had just said to Jesus, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (Matt. 16:16) Jesus was pleased with this confession. We might paraphrase his reply to Peter in order to get its meaning a little clearer: “Peter, your name means that you are a small piece of rock—a pebble, as it were. By comparison with the meaning of your name, the great fact of my Messiahship, and that I am the Son of God, is as a great mass of rock—a great boulder—and the church will be built upon me as its foundation.”

In next month’s issue of *The Dawn* magazine, we will give further consideration to the subject, “The Church.” Important topics to be discussed will include: The role of the twelve Apostles and other servants of the church; the mission of the church; and the heavenly and earthly phases of God’s plan for the salvation of all mankind through Christ. ■

