

The Church

***“And [Christ] is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.”
—Colossians 1:18***

In part one of our consideration of the subject, “The Church,” which appeared in last month’s issue of *The Dawn* magazine, we gave attention to the Scriptural meaning of the word “church,” how it came into being following the First Advent of Jesus, and the

requirements for becoming a member. We also discussed what is meant by being “baptized into Christ,” the symbol of water baptism, and church organization as given in the Bible.

In this month’s issue, we will give further reflection to this subject. Important topics to be discussed on the ensuing pages 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 from sin and death through Christ.

Twelve Apostles

In the divine arrangement the entire church, beginning at Pentecost, was to be served by twelve

apostles appointed by God. (Rev. 21:10,14; Eph. 2:19,20) It was in keeping with this that Jesus chose twelve individuals to be associated with him during his ministry in order that they might receive personal training and instruction from him. These were Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon, and Judas.—Matt. 10:2-4

Judas, as we know, proved unfaithful, and the Scriptures indicate that Paul was chosen by the Lord to take his place. We are informed in Acts 1:23-26 of an effort by the remaining eleven apostles to make a choice of one to take Judas' place. They decided upon Matthias. However, this action was taken before they received the Holy Spirit, and there is no evidence that the Lord honored their choice. Matthias' name does not appear after this.

The word apostle [Greek: *apostolos*] means "one who is sent," a delegate or ambassador of the Gospel. From this broad standpoint every Christian is an apostle, for we are all "ambassadors for Christ." (II Cor. 5:20) In fact, the Greek word *apostolos* is used in the Bible with reference to other individuals than the twelve chosen apostles. (John 13:16; Phil. 2:25) However, this does not mean that they occupied the same high position of authority in the church as that given by divine appointment to those specially chosen by the Lord.

The twelve apostles were more than just preachers of the Gospel. They were miraculously inspired by the Holy Spirit which enabled them to speak and write the message of God's Holy Word with authority and accuracy. Their word was, and still is, a divine

message to every Christian. It is because of this authoritative position they occupy in the organization of the church that the completed church is likened to a city. This symbolic city is shown to have twelve foundation stones and in these stones are written the names of “the twelve apostles of the Lamb.”—Rev. 21:14

Other Servants

In Ephesians 4:11, the Apostle Paul informs us that the Lord provided for other servants in the church. In addition to apostles, he arranged for prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Peter speaks of the Old Testament writers as God’s “holy prophets.” (II Pet. 3:2) These wrote as they were “moved by the Holy Spirit,” so the Christian is to take their word, even as that of the apostles, as authoritative.—II Pet. 1:21

When Paul speaks of prophets as servants in the church, however, he uses the term in a much broader sense, applying it to public expounders of the Gospel. (I Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11; Acts 11:27,28; 15:32; 21:10,11) These prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers are all essential servants in the church, but not inspired as were the twelve apostles, nor are they appointed in the same miraculous way as were the apostles.

The expression in the New Testament, “ordained ... elders in every church,” according to the Greek text, more properly refers to the “stretching forth of the hand,” as in voting. See *Rotherham Emphasized Bible*, *Weymouth New Testament*, and *Young’s Literal Translation* of Acts 14:23. The clear implication is that the lesser servants of the church,

both elders and deacons, were to be elected by vote of the congregation which they were to serve.

The scriptural term “elder,” also found in the above verse, applies generally to men who serve the church along spiritual lines. A pastor, teacher, evangelist, or prophet as a public expounder, would come under the general designation of “elder.” The Greek word *presbuteros*, from which it is translated in Acts 14:23, signifies one who is mature. In the church it would describe one who is recognized as being sound in the faith and spiritually mature in experience.

The word “bishop” is also used in the New Testament and is applied to male servants elected by the church. The Greek word *episkopos*, from which it is translated means “superintendent” or “overseer.” All elders are properly, according to opportunity and ability, overseers in the church. It is their duty to watch over the flock of God and care for its needs, particularly along spiritual lines.—I Tim. 3:1,2; Tit. 1:7

The word “deacon” also appears a few times in connection with the arrangements of the Early Church. It is a translation of a Greek word, *diakonos*, which means to “run errands,” or “attend to.” The Scriptures state that deacons were “men of honest report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom,” appointed to help with the material arrangements of the church. The first of these to be appointed were in the church at Jerusalem.—Acts 6:2-4; I Tim. 3:8-13

The scriptural qualifications for those who can properly be elected by a congregation to serve as elders, or bishops, and deacons, are set forth by

Paul in I Timothy 3:1-13. Any group of consecrated believers, large or small, that has brethren who meet these qualifications, is authorized by the Scriptures to elect them to these services. When this is done, these appointments are recognized by the Lord.

The Scriptures make it clear that no group of Christians needs to look to a parent church for authority to elect servants, hold meetings, and carry on the work of the Lord. Likewise, congregations need not to be large in order to exercise their liberty along these lines. The Biblical record is that many of the churches, or groups of Christians, in apostolic times were organized in the homes of believers, and held their regular meetings in these homes. (Rom. 16:5; I Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15) The same thing is being done today. Now, as in the past, the Lord richly blesses those who find others with whom they can cooperate as a group—or, within the Scriptural meaning, a church. These can elect their own servants by the simple method of stretching forth the hand. No membership roll is needed, nor is such authorized by the Scriptures.

There is not much in the Bible to indicate the nature of the meetings held by the various groups in the Early Church. Certainly the apostles and others, on occasions, gave discourses. However, profitable meetings can be held even though there may be no one qualified to preach a sermon. Meetings for Bible study, both topical and contextual, in which all present have an opportunity to express their thoughts and to ask questions, are very helpful. An elder, if one has been elected, should serve to keep the study orderly. Prayer, praise, and testimony

meetings are also spiritually profitable to those who are seriously endeavoring to know and do God's will.

The Mission of the Church

The present mission of the church is three-fold. First, it is for the perfecting [Greek: complete furnishing] of the saints for a future work of service. (Eph. 4:12,13) Second, it is to develop in each member the fruits and graces of Christian character. (Gal. 5:22,23; II Pet. 1:5-8) Third, it is to be God's witness to the world concerning Christ's kingdom of blessing now so near.—Matt. 24:14

In part one of our consideration of this subject, we noted these words of Jesus to Peter: "Upon this rock I will build my church." (Matt. 16:18) That which is "built" in due time reaches completion. It is not God's design that the "building" of the church shall go on forever. Hence it is not a case of all who will ever obtain salvation through Christ becoming members of the church. The very meaning of the word church [Greek: *ekklesia*] is "a calling out," and is contrary to this concept of God's purpose at the present time. The church is being "called out" from the world. (I Cor. 1:26; I Pet. 2:9) It will be "few" in number, a "little flock." (Matt. 7:13,14; 22:14; Luke 12:32) It is not God's plan to convert the world in general until the coming of his promised kingdom.—Matt. 6:10

"Thou art the Christ," Peter testified, "the Son of the living God." (Matt. 16:16) This expression identified Jesus with the Messianic promises of the Old Testament and indicated that Peter properly recognized in Jesus the one whom God had sent to

fulfill those promises. In order to see clearly the full divine purpose through the church, it is essential to keep in mind the Old Testament promises concerning Christ; for the church is called out from the world to be associated with him in the fulfillment of those promises. God said to Abraham, "In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed." (Gen. 22:18) In Galatians 3:16 Paul informs us that this "seed" of promise is Christ. The Apostle gives us additional information concerning the seed of promise. In verses 27 and 29 we read, "As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ... And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

The establishment of the church is not the completion of God's purpose toward the children of men. It is only the beginning of his plan to bless mankind. In James 1:18 we are told that the church is a "kind of firstfruits" of God's creatures. This expression is also used in Revelation 14:4, and it is applied to those who are associated in heaven with Christ Jesus, the "Lamb," on the symbolic Mount Zion, the heavenly phase of the kingdom of God.—Rev. 14:1; Heb. 12:22,23

In the 15th chapter of I Corinthians, Paul pointed out very clearly that the hope of life for both the church and the world depends upon the resurrection of the dead. If there be no resurrection of the dead, he argued, "then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished." (vs. 18) However, he gave us assurance of the resurrection and the opportunity for all to gain everlasting life, saying, "As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive."—vs. 22

Then Paul shows that there is to be a definite order, or sequence, in the resurrection. “Every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ’s at his coming.” (I Cor. 15:23) The “firstfruits” referred to are the church. Following this, a more proper translation of the Greek text would be, “Afterward, they [everyone not part of the church, in their own order] who become Christ’s during his presence.” (See *Rotherham Emphasized Bible* and *Young’s Literal Translation*.) The word “coming” in this verse is translated from the Greek word *parousia*, which means “presence,” and should be so rendered. This is a reference to the thousand years of Christ’s kingdom when he and his church will reign for the purpose of destroying sin and death and giving all mankind an opportunity to accept the gift of life provided by his shed blood.

Paul’s further statement immediately following is clear: “Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.” (I Cor. 15:24-26) This is the great, ultimate, purpose of God to be accomplished through Christ and the church—the “afterward” blessing to reach all mankind when the building of the church shall have been completed.

Heavenly and Earthly

In his lesson on the resurrection Paul reveals that some are to receive heavenly bodies, and some human, or earthly bodies—the determining factor in each case being the sort of “seed” or “bare grain”

that is sown. (I Cor. 15:37,38) The “it” or “bare grain” to which Paul refers is simply the identity, the sum total of a person’s lifetime of thoughts and character.

Those who are fully consecrated to do God’s will, and are buried with Christ in sacrificial death, will be given a “celestial,” or a heavenly body upon their resurrection. (vs. 40) This depends upon their walking in “newness of life” throughout the remaining years of their present earthly life. (Rom. 6:4) During their earthly pilgrimage they learn to set their “affection on things above;” their hopes are heavenly; through faith they are symbolically dwelling together with Christ “in heavenly places.” (Col. 3:2; Eph. 1:3) Thus, while yet in the flesh, they “sow” spiritual characters. In the resurrection, these receive a heavenly reward.

The majority of people, however, are not interested in spiritual things. This does not mean that they are necessarily wicked. Most of them are not. They love the good things of the earth because they were created human, earthly beings, and God does not condemn them for not aspiring to heavenly things. It is in the very nature of things that these, in death, “sow” an earthly character, and as a result will be raised from the dead as human beings, with “earthly bodies.”—I Cor. 15:40, *YLT*

Speaking of the resurrection of the church, described later in Revelation 20:6 as the “first resurrection,” Paul explained, “It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.”—I Cor. 15:42-44

To this Paul adds, “There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.” (vs. 44) In other words, he would have us understand that in describing the change of nature to be experienced by those who participate in the “first resurrection,” he is not implying that these are the only ones to be raised from the dead, for all mankind is to be recovered from death, only they are to receive natural, earthly, human bodies.

Paul continues his lesson, saying, “The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second man is the Lord from heaven. As is the earthy [those who die with human hopes and desires], such are they also that are earthy [in the resurrection]: and as is the heavenly [those who now set their affection on heavenly things], such are they also that are heavenly [in the resurrection].”—vss. 47,48

Paul concluded this lesson on the resurrection, saying, “This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?”—I Cor. 15:53-55

Thus, in a few words, Paul presents both the hope of the church and the hope of the world. The resurrection hope of the church is “glory and honour and immortality.” (Rom. 2:7) No human being possesses immortality by nature. It is a reward that will be given to those who faithfully follow in the footsteps of Christ unto death. In Revelation 2:10 we read, “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.”

The call and preparation of these for the fruition of this glorious hope in the first resurrection have been the work of God through the Holy Spirit during the present age since Pentecost. Paul explains, however, that when this is accomplished, and the last member of the church, or "body," of Christ has entered into glory, then will be the time for the fulfillment of those glorious promises of the Old Testament concerning the destruction of death: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"—I Cor. 15:55; Isa. 25:8; Hos. 13:14

Paul, in quoting from Isaiah and Hosea, assures us of the divine purpose to destroy man's great enemy, Death, and the grave. The word "grave," as used in Hosea 13:14, is a translation of the Hebrew word *sheol*, and is the equivalent of the Greek word *hades* in the New Testament. These words are translated as both "grave" and "hell" in various places, yet the meaning denoted by them, particularly the word "grave," simply refers to the condition of death, or oblivion, not a literal place of torment. (Eccles. 9:10; Ps. 115:17; Acts 2:31) Thus, we understand the divine purpose toward the human race to which Jesus referred when he said that the "gates of hell"—the grave, death—would not prevail against the church.—Matt. 16:18

What a wonderful assurance! Throughout the reign of sin and death, hell—the grave or tomb—has continued to claim its victims, but in Revelation 1:18 Jesus tells us that he has the "keys" of hell. He purchased these keys, the right to unlock hell's gates, by his own death as man's Redeemer. When his church is completely built, she will be

associated with him in bestowing the promised blessings of life upon all mankind.

The fact that meanwhile so many millions continue to go into death, into the Bible hell, will not deprive them of these blessings. The gates of hell did not prevail against Christ; they will not prevail against his church; they will not prevail against the rest of the world; and they will not prevail against Adam and all who have died since Adam. By divine power, these gates will be swung wide open, and all Death's prisoners will be released!—Isa. 42:7; 49:9; 61:1; Luke 4:18

This, then, is to be the future work of the church. What a glorious work it will be! What an incentive it should be now to prove faithful to the Lord. There is no greater peace or joy that anyone can experience than that which results from being at one with the Heavenly Father, and in living a life of full devotion to him. Indeed, there are trials, but as Paul reminds us, these are in reality “light afflictions” lasting “but for a moment,” when compared with the “eternal weight of glory” that the Lord has promised.—II Cor. 4:17,18

It is a blessed privilege to be counted among the “called out” ones, the church, at the present time. Surely God is blessing his people, especially in revealing to them the beauties of his plan of salvation. How thankful we are that through Christ and his church the whole world will have an opportunity to rejoice in the blessings the Lord has designed for them—blessings of restitution, as Peter described them, “which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.”—Acts 3:21