

THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

The word "church" is never used in the New Testament to designate a building. It was several centuries after the apostolic age before this unfortunate use of the word began. In the New Testament "church" always refers to people, redeemed people, baptized believers, voluntarily associated for the worship and service of God.

I. It Is A Divine Institution.

1. It is Divine in that a Divine Architect planned it.
The idea of the church did not originate in the mind of man, but in the heart of God. He gave the pattern by which it was to be fashioned.

God's plan is never out of date. God's plan for his church has not changed. The original plan is still available.
2. It is Divine in that a Divine Builder constructed it.
Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build my church." Christ is the builder of the church. Concerning the first church in Jerusalem it was said: "And the Lord added to them day by day those that were saved." There is no place in the church for men and women whom the Lord has not added.
3. It is Divine in that a Divine Purchaser bought it.
Paul speaks of "the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). "As Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it....." The church belongs to God because he purchased it at a great price. Men have been entrusted with the administration of the affairs of the church, but it does not belong to them.
4. It is Divine in that the Divine Lord has commissioned it.
"As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you." "Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you."

II. It Is A Spiritual Organism.

The church is more than an organization; it is an organism. An organism is something which has life. A machine is an organization, but it is not an organism. It has no life. The church at Sardis had ceased to be an organism and had become a mere organization.

The church is spiritual in that it is composed of those who have had a spiritual experience. No one is a fit subject for membership in the church until he has been born again.

III. It Is A Democratic Organization.

A democratic form of government is that in which supreme authority rests in the people.

There are four forms of church government. First, the autocratic. This form is represented by the Roman Catholic Church. The pope stands at the head of a world-wide organization. Under him is a graded ministry. The local congregation has little voice in the affairs of the church. They are told what they are to believe and what they are to do.

Second, the episcopal. The Episcopal and Methodist churches are the major representatives of this system. Highest authority is vested in the bishops.

Third, the presbyterian. This form of church government is represented by the Presbyterian Church. The presbyterian form of church government is government by elders. Two classes of elders are recognized--teaching elders and ruling elders. The church session, composed of pastor and ruling elders, has charge of the affairs of the local congregation. Above the session stands the Presbytery, composed of the churches in a given district. Higher in authority than the Presbytery is the Synod, and highest authority of all is vested in the General Assembly.

Fourth, the congregational. Each church is an independent, self-governing body. Each congregation manages its own affairs without interference from any other body.

Outstanding Characteristics of New Testament Churches

1. Voluntary membership.

No one becomes a member of a New Testament church by birth. Neither is one coerced into church membership nor compelled to remain a member against his wishes.

2. Equality of privileges.

In a true democracy each member has equal rights and privileges. By reason of ability and training some may become leaders but not lords.

3. Self-government.

One church does not interfere in the affairs of another. No church has the right to dictate to another. However, it is good to work together in a common cause. By so doing the best results are obtained.

IV. The Origin Of It.

1. Founded at the right time -- during the personal ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. Founded in the right place -- Palestine.

3. Founded by the right Person -- Christ.

4. Founded out of the right material -- saved people, who had been baptized in obedience to the command of Christ, and who were willing to proclaim His gospel and to carry on His work in the world.

A New Testament church is a congregation of regenerated, scripturally baptized believers, associated together for fellowship, the ministry of the Word, worship, and the carrying of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

V. The Ordinances Of It.

1. Baptism.

Baptism is the immersion in water of a believer in Christ upon a profession of faith in Him as Saviour and Lord, upon the authority of a New Testament church, and in obedience to the command of our Lord. Baptism was submitted to by the Lord Jesus Christ, commanded by Him, practiced by the Apostles, and intended for all believers. Christ's baptism was intended to be for all time the example and pattern of those who should become members of His churches. His baptism had four characteristics:

(1) He was baptized as God's child.

"This is My beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased.

(2) He was baptized by God's man.

"There was a man sent from God."

(3) He was baptized in God's way.

"And Jesus, when He was baptized, went up straightway out of the water."

(4) He was baptized for God's purpose.

"Thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness." If a child of God loves his Saviour as he should, he will not hesitate or refuse to obey Him.

When Jesus Christ was baptized, it was God's child being baptized, God's man doing the baptizing, God's method by which it was done, and God's purpose for which it was done.

Certain things are necessary to scriptural baptism:

- (1) A proper subject -- a believer in Christ or a child of God.
- (2) A proper authority -- a New Testament Church.
Baptism is not worth any more than the authority behind it.
- (3) A proper administrator -- one authorized by a New Testament church.
Baptism is not scriptural unless it is administered by one who is properly authorized to baptize.
- (4) A proper motive -- obedience to Christ and never with any idea that it has any saving efficacy.
- (5) A proper form -- burial in water and rising from the watery grave.
- (6) A proper formula -- "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."

When so-called Baptists receive alien immersion, what do they do?

- (1) They do that for which there is no scriptural example.
- (2) They throw aside the time-honored stand of Baptists down through the centuries.
- (3) They place themselves in the position of being just another sect, thus denying their divine origin.
- (4) They disregard the real meaning of baptism, for they thereby accept the immersion of those who baptize to help save.

2. The Lord's Supper.

This ordinance is to be observed by and in New Testament churches at stated intervals as determined by each church, inasmuch as the Scriptures do not specify how often it is to be observed. Christ instituted the Lord's Supper. He also commanded its observance. He said, "This do in remembrance of Me." Concerning the Lord's Supper three things should be said:

- (1) It is a practice.
"For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup." The regular practice of observing the ordinance will enrich the life of believers, cause them to love their Lord more, and bring them to a more loyal and faithful devotion to Christ and His church.
- (2) It is a proclamation.
"Ye do shew forth the Lord's death." His death is what is held up to view in this Supper. The bread speaks of His broken body and the cup speaks of His shed blood. The Lord's Supper portrays two things:
 - a. The dreadfulness of sin.
Man's sin nailed the Son of God to Calvary's cross.
 - b. The sufficiency of Christ's blood to put away sin.
Nothing else can release anybody from the penalty, the power or the presence of sin.

The Lord's Supper is a proclamation to us and by us.

- (3) It is a prophecy.
"Till He come." This ordinance predicts that Christ will return.

Our Lord certainly expects us to observe this ordinance in the spirit of deep humility, grateful love, faithful obedience and joyous hope.

Among the prerequisites to the proper observance of the Lord's Supper are regeneration, scriptural baptism, church membership, doctrinal correctness and an orderly walk.

Both of these ordinances are symbolic. There is no saving efficacy whatever in either or both of them.