

A SCRIPTURAL CHURCH

Acts 2:41-47

Distinction must be made between a New Testament church with Christ as the Head, governed by the teachings of the New Testament, and churches whose doctrines and practices are obviously not in conformity to the Holy Scriptures. One is scripturally uninformed if he supposes that all churches are identical in nature. The word "church" is attached to many religious assemblies, but the using of a word does not thereby make the assembly a true New Testament church.

How does a person become a member of a scriptural church? According to the second chapter of Acts, the members of the early church heard the preaching of the Word of God and the gospel of Christ by a Spirit-filled preacher, they were convicted of their sins by the Holy Spirit, they repented of their sins toward God, they believed on Christ as their personal Saviour, they made a public profession of their faith in Christ and acknowledged that He had saved them, they were baptized into the membership of the church in Jerusalem, and they gave themselves in faithful service to Christ.

What are the basic requirements for membership in a New Testament church?

I. Regeneration.

A New Testament church is a spiritual organism. Those who are members must have received spiritual life from Christ, Who is both the source of all spiritual life and the Lord of the church. By nature all men are dead in trespasses and sins. They are not submissive to the will of God and cannot discern spiritual things. In their natural state they are not qualified for membership in a scriptural church. An unregenerated person does not have any more place in a church than a corpse does in a maternity ward. Death and life do not go together. If you have not been regenerated or saved, you ought not to be a member of a church. If you have been saved, you ought to be a member of a New Testament church. Only saved people are qualified for church membership. Unfortunately, some have been enrolled in a church without having been saved by Christ. Taking unregenerated people into a church dishonors God, nullifies the teaching of Christ, injures the church, and does serious harm to the individual. Some unsaved people were members of the church in New Testament times. Among them were Judas, who betrayed the Lord Jesus Christ; Alexander, the coppersmith, who prated against the apostles with malicious words; and Diotrefes, who, because of his strong desire for the preeminence, tried to dominate the church and proved to be an avowed enemy of every form of missionary activity.

Our Lord said, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God"; "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." Regeneration, or the new birth, is the impartation of the divine nature to human beings. As in the first, or physical, birth we become partakers of human nature, so in the second, or spiritual, birth we become partakers of the divine nature. We receive the nature of our parents when we are born physically, and we receive the nature of God when we are born spiritually.

The new birth is not optional. It is imperative. Christ said, "Ye must be born again." His emphasis on the word must should definitely and finally settle all debate. Nothing will serve as a substitute for the new birth. The two pre-requisites to regeneration are repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

II. Confession.

Romans 10:9-10 says: "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." As soon as one has repented of his sins toward God, and believed on the

Lord Jesus Christ, and has been saved, he should make a public confession with his lips, and then by baptism, and thereafter by an obedient Christian life.

It is the duty of all whom Christ saves to confess Him. Both gratitude and faithfulness to Christ demand it. Confession is a means of spiritual development, increasing one's faith in Christ, love for Him, and devotion to Him. It is truly a privilege to confess Him with our lips, in baptism, and by consistent Christian living in the church.

III. Baptism.

1. Who should be baptized?

Who is to be baptized, a believer or an unbeliever, a child of God or a follower of Satan? According to the Scriptures, only those who have believed on Christ unto the salvation of their souls are the proper subjects for baptism.

Christ always made disciples before He baptized them (His disciples baptized for Him). "The Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John, (Though Jesus himself baptized not, but his disciples)" (John 4:1-2).

Christ authorized and commanded the administration of the ordinance of baptism in what we call the Great Commission wherein He said: "Go ye therefore, and teach 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: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:19-20). With reference to disciples His order was to make them, to baptize them, and to teach them. "Them" is a personal pronoun which is used in the place of disciples. The specification of "them" eliminates all others. Those who say that "them" refers to disciples and their children need to be reminded that a pronoun can never include more than is embraced in the noun for which it stands; so, the word "them" denotes the disciples.

Our Lord commanded the baptism of all believers in Him. Inasmuch as there is a maxim of law to the effect that "the expression of one thing is the exclusion of another," the command of Christ to baptize believers would necessarily forbid the baptism of unbelievers. In order for a baptism to be valid and scriptural the candidate must be a child of God. There is no authority, reason, or justification for administering baptism to anyone who has not passed from death unto life. Scriptural baptism can be administered only to those who are old enough to hear the gospel of Christ, to be convicted of sin by the Holy Spirit, to repent of sin, to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and to make a personal and public profession of faith in the Saviour, and who have actually done these things. There is neither precept nor example in the New Testament for baptizing anybody except professing believers in Christ.

2. Why should all believers be baptized?

Scriptural baptism is a duty which is enjoined upon every child of God. It is a certainty that Christ did not give a command which is obligatory on everyone of His followers without a specific reason for it and a definite purpose in it.

What are some of the reasons why all believers should be baptized?

(1) To follow the example of Christ.

There is no reason why anyone, whom He has saved, should ever hesitate to do what His Saviour did. It is truly wonderful for us to have the exalted privilege of doing what our Lord did.

- (2) To obey the command of Christ.

Christ commanded the baptism of all believers.

- (3) To confess their faith in Christ.

In the act of baptism the believer announces to all witnesses thereof that he has truly repented of his sins, that he has died to sin, that his previous life of sin has been buried, that he has received from Christ a new and victorious life, and that henceforth he fully intends and expects to live a life of Christian fruitfulness to the glory of God.

- (3) To dramatize the gospel of Christ.

Christ's baptism portrayed, in figure, what He was going to do, in fact, at the close of His earthly ministry, namely, die, be buried, and arise from the dead. All believers should be baptized for the same purpose for which Christ was baptized, namely, to portray His death, His burial, and His resurrection. When a believer is baptized scripturally, the great and central facts of the gospel -- the death, the burial, and the resurrection of Christ -- are presented in vivid imagery. Anything which does not portray the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, regardless of what it may be called, is not scriptural baptism.

3. Who should baptize?

During His earthly ministry Christ administered baptism, not in person, but through the instrumentality of His disciples. Officiating as His authorized agents throughout His earthly ministry, the disciples administered baptism under His personal supervision, so their act was regarded as Christ's act.

Authority for the administration of believer's baptism is found in the words of Christ in the Great Commission. To whom was Christ speaking in this commission? He was speaking to His disciples who were members of the church which He had established, to which He had already promised perpetuity, and to which at Pentecost "there were added about three thousand souls." (Acts 2:41). That Christ was speaking to the disciples in their organic or corporate capacity, and not as individuals, is evident from the fact that He promised them His presence until the end of the age. Of course, Christ knew that not a single individual to whom He spoke would live that long. Due to the brevity of the lives of the disciples, who composed the assembly to which He delivered the commission to make disciples, baptize them, and teach them, it was an utter impossibility for Him to be with them as individuals to the end of the age. Christ authorized His church to administer baptism. From that day until the present, New Testament churches have been the divinely appointed custodians, administrators, and preservers of the significant and meaningful ordinance of baptism, and our Lord has always held them responsible for its administration in conformity to His example and teaching. The Holy Spirit had Paul to admonish the church at Corinth to "keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you" (I Corinthians 11:2).

Just as Christ baptized believers through His agents or disciples, so a New Testament church administers baptism by its duly authorized agent, the pastor. Christ never authorized any individual to administer baptism to whomsoever he deemed to be qualified, but He entrusted the ordinance to His churches for their administration. For one to baptize another without the authorization of one of the Lord's churches is a presumptuous and unscriptural assumption of authority that does not belong to any man. Scriptural baptism can be administered only upon the authorization of a church which has been organized according to the pattern found in the New Testament, and which holds

steadfastly to the teachings and practices of the churches in the New Testament.

Illustrations of how baptism is not to be administered: Lebanon, Newport, and Murray.

Since baptism is a church ordinance it must be administered upon the authority of a church. Naturally, this involves the matter of voting on those who apply for membership in a church.

In Acts 9:26 Paul applied for membership in the church which Christ had established in Jerusalem, but the members refused to receive him because they were not convinced that he had been saved and transformed. They were not convinced that he was a genuine Christian, so they refused to admit him into the membership of the church. After Barnabas recommended him and convinced them that Saul had experienced a real change of heart and was actually a true believer they voted to receive him.

From the New Testament we learn that it was the privilege of the apostolic churches to receive members into their fellowship. In Romans 14:1 we have this admonition to the membership of the church at Rome: "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye." The membership of that church was commanded to do the receiving because the epistle was addressed, not to the preacher, but "to all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints."

In the recommendation that the slave Onesimus be accepted as a brother, Paul addresses the letter to "the church in thy house" (Philemon 2). This indicates that Paul desired that Onesimus be accepted into the fellowship of the church at Colossae because he had been saved by God's grace. Would this not suggest that this church exercised the right to accept or to reject one who sought membership therein?

In every church somebody decides who shall be admitted into the fellowship. For such authority there are three possibilities. The pastor of the church may pass on the qualifications of the one applying for membership. Where it is claimed that members are received without anyone approving them, the pastor decides their fitness. If some obvious and well known case of unfitness should arise the pastor would not receive the applicant. The second possibility is to have a governing board or committee approve for membership, which is done in some cases. The third and only remaining possibility is for the membership of the church to decide on this matter. The New Testament churches were self-governing, and as such they determined the constituency of their membership. Moreover, the voting to receive a person who presents himself for church membership by the congregation rather than by a board of committee, or by an individual, is the best way of welcoming a person. It gives the entire church a splendid opportunity to say, "We are glad that you came." This duty of receiving members into a church continues to rest on the membership.