

A SCRIPTURAL CHURCH

Matthew 16:13-18

What would you say if someone should ask you to distinguish between the family of God, the kingdom of God, and a church of God? It is important that we distinguish between them.

The family of God is composed of all the saved from Abel to the last person who has believed on Christ, whether in heaven or on earth. In Ephesians 3:15 Paul mentioned "the whole family in heaven and earth." All believers are God's children and members of His family. The Old Testament saints and the babies who died in infancy are in God's family, even though they were not then and are not now in the kingdom or in any church. When a person is born again, or born from above, he is admitted into God's family. He is in the family of God forever. The relationship does not change. Whether he is on earth or in heaven, he is in God's family.

The kingdom of God includes all of the saved who are on earth at any given time since the days of John the Baptist. Luke 16:16 tells us that, "The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached." The kingdom of God is composed of only those who have been born again, or who have been "translated out of darkness into the kingdom of His dear Son." Christ said, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). He also said, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). When a person is born from above he enters the kingdom of God. The kingdom is the spiritual reign of God in the hearts and lives of believers while they are on earth. All true believers on earth, whether church members or not, are in the kingdom. This relationship is for life. When a believer dies he passes out of the kingdom of God on earth and enters the heavenly kingdom. Concerning this Paul wrote to Timothy saying, "And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me until his heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever, Amen" (II Timothy 4:18).

A church of God is a congregation of born-again Christians, who have been called out from the world by the Holy Spirit through the gospel, who have submitted to and honored Christ in New Testament baptism, who are voluntarily united in the belief of what Christ has taught, and who have covenanted together to do what He has commanded in the observance and perpetuation of His ordinances, and in the propagation of His gospel to the ends of the earth. A scriptural church is a body of like-minded, baptized believers in a given locality meeting to worship God, to administer the ordinances, and to share the saving message of the gospel of Christ with all men everywhere.

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

The word "church" is the English translation of the Greek word "ecclesia." Ecclesia is made up of two Greek words which mean "called out." This word was not coined by Christ, but it was in current use when He lived on the earth. At that time the meaning of this word had become definitely fixed and established. To both the Hebrews and the Greeks the word denoted an assembly of people. Among the Greeks, ecclesia was the assembly of the citizens of a free city-state gathered by a herald blowing a horn through the streets of a town. If we would properly understand the meaning of the word "church," as it is employed in the New Testament, we cannot overlook its usage in the everyday Greek of that time. The word always carries the obvious connotation of a localized assembly. The word never loses its root meaning of assembly or congregation.

The Greek word "ecclesia" occurs more than one hundred times in the New Testament, and it is translated "church." In the vast majority of these cases it refers to a definite local congregation, as in First Corinthians 1:2, "the church of God which is at Corinth." In every case it refers to an assembly. In the few instances where it refers to the assembly of the redeemed it is prospective. This word "ecclesia" refers either to one of the Lord's churches on earth, or to His general assembly of all of His people in glory. Concerning the general assembly of all the redeemed of all the ages, some things are obvious, indisputable, and very significant. Many of those who will be in that assembly are now in heaven, many others are here on earth, and still many others, who will be called out, are neither in heaven nor on earth, because they are yet unborn, and therefore non-existent. It follows therefore, that if one part of those who will compose that assembly is now in heaven, a second part is on earth, and the third part is not yet born, this general assembly is only in prospect. God intends to have a general assembly of all the saved in glory. Of this John wrote, "After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands" (Revelation 7:9).

The terms "universal church" and "invisible church" are not found in the New Testament. They were of post-apostolic origin. In his "History of Dogma," Harnack wrote: "No one (until after the time of Eusebius, Tertullian, Clement, etc.) thought of the desperate idea of an invisible church." If there is any other sort of church than a visible congregation, revelation and investigation have alike failed to locate its whereabouts or to define its functions. God has never given it a mission. Such an intangible concern as an invisible church has never preached or taught anybody anything, never baptized anyone, never observed the Lord's Supper, never performed any function of a church, never introduced one soul to Christ, and never done any work whatever for the Lord.

As a boy on the farm, I often rode a horse, but I always had to have a real horse to ride. I never rode an invisible horse. The only invisible horse I ever rode was at night, after eating too much supper and while in dream-land, when on a nightmare. The only invisible church is in the imagination of some dreamer. When you hear some preacher setting forth the doctrine of an invisible church, ask him if he is willing to receive his salary from that invisible church to which he claims to belong. The only church through which Christ works is a local assembly.

It is interesting to note that the natural tendency of those who teach the theory of the present existence of an universal, invisible church is to discredit and to minimize the importance of the Lord's churches and the ordinances and the work which He has committed to them. Those who advance this theory are far from unanimous in always honoring God's existing institutions by assuming their responsibilities and performing their duties in them. Of all the people whom you know that talk about an invisible and universal church, how many are regular church attendants, personal soul-winners, tithers, or faithfully prove their devotion to Christ by their loyalty to the churches of which they are members?

John the Baptist, under the commission given to him directly from heaven, began the work of preparing people for membership in scriptural churches which were to be established. He preached that repentance and faith were pre-requisites to baptism. He baptized those who repented and believed, and prepared a people for the Lord Jesus Christ. Both the Christ and the constituent members of the first church that was ever established were baptized in the Jordan River by the first Baptist preacher. The first church ever established was instituted by Christ during His personal ministry on earth. He was both its founder and its foundation. The material out of which Christ organized the first church consisted of believers in Christ who had been baptized in obedience to His command and were willing to carry forward His work in the world. Read Matthew 16:13-18.

How do we know that the church which Christ built was in existence before Pentecost?

1. It had apostles, prophets, and teachers in its membership before Pentecost.

"God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers" (I Corinthians 12:28).

2. It had an ordained ministry before Pentecost.

"And he ordained twelve, that they should be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach" (Mark 3:14).

3. It had a commission to preach before Pentecost and it did so.

"And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 10:7).

4. It had authority to baptize before Pentecost.

"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 28:19).

5. It had the Lord's Supper before Pentecost.

"And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body.

And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. But I say unto you, I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom. And when they had sung an hymn, they went out into the mount of olives" (Matthew 26:26-30).

6. It had a rule of discipline before Pentecost.

"Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican" (Matthew 18:15-17).

7. It had a church roll with one hundred and twenty members on it before Pentecost.

"And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples, and said, (the number of names together were about an hundred and twenty" (Acts 1:15).

8. It had a church treasurer before Pentecost.

"For some of them thought because Judas had the bag, that Jesus had said unto him, Buy those things that we have need of against the feast; or, that he should give something to the poor" (John 13:29).

9. It had a business meeting before Pentecost.

"And they appointed two, Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias. And they prayed, and said, Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, show whether of these two thou hast chosen, That he may take part of this ministry and apostleship, from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place. And they gave forth their lots; and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles" (Acts 1:23-26).

10. It had three thousand additions on the day of Pentecost.

"Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41).

Christ instituted the church for the purpose of preaching the gospel, making disciples of those who hear it, baptizing them, and teaching them.