

A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

"And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Matthew 16:18.

Church is the English translation of the Greek word ecclesia. The word denotes the called-out ones, but the context determines from what and to what they are called. Among the Greeks, an ecclesia was an assembly of free citizens called out from their homes and businesses to give consideration to matters of public interest. As applied to believers in Christ, the church signifies those who are called out from the world to the Lord; hence, they are an assembly set apart to God.

Christ endowed this word, "ecclesia" or "church" with spiritual significance. His first use of the word was in Matthew 16:13-18: "When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi He asked His disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? And they said, Some say that Thou art John the Baptist, some Elijah; and other Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou are the Christ, The Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father Who is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

I. The Origin Of The Church.

The church was of divine origin. It was in the mind of God from the beginning. The need for the church as an institution was that the Lord Jesus Christ might leave on earth an organism and an organization to preach the gospel of His death for sin, of salvation through His vicarious suffering, and of new and eternal life in Him through the power of His resurrection.

After Christ Jesus left the carpenter's shop in Nazareth, He never built but one thing, and that was His church. He called into being His church and committed to it a positive and well-defined mission.

1. His church was instituted at the right time.

It was founded during the personal ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. According to Luke 6:12-16, after Christ had spent an entire night in prayer, He called His disciples unto Him and chose twelve, whom He named apostles. They were called out from the others. They were chosen to be with Him. "And he ordained twelve, that they should be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach." Mark 3:14. He was the Head and the Founder of the church, and they were the first members. The church is the only institution that was instituted during the personal ministry of the Lord Jesus on this earth.

2. His church was founded in the right place.

The church Christ built, and which He called "my church," was organized in Palestine—God's country. His church was founded by a Jew and all of its constituent members were Jews. The Founder and all of the constituent members of this church were baptized in the river Jordan by the first Baptist preacher.

3. His church was founded by the right person.

This person was the Lord Jesus Christ. He was the Founder, Builder, Master and Proprietor of the church. He called it "my church."

4. His church was constituted out of the right material.

His forerunner, John the Baptist, made and baptized disciples as a preparation for the organization of the church that Jesus built. John the Baptist, ever true to his God-given name, was very careful as to whom he baptized. He demanded that those whom he baptized should profess to be saved before their baptism, and then produce

fruit worthy of repentance as evidence of their salvation. Nothing is any more certain than the fact that Christ organized His church during the days of His personal ministry here on the earth out of the material prepared by John the Baptist. This material 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.

How do we know that the first church 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 names 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, shew 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.

II. 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 people, voluntarily associated for the worship and service of God.

1. It is a divine institution.

(1) A divine Architect planned it.

The idea of the church did not originate in the mind of man, but in the heart and mind of God. God's plan for a church has not changed.

(2) A divine Builder constructed it.

Christ is the Builder of the church. He said, "Upon this rock I will build my church." Concerning the first church in Jerusalem we read: "And the Lord added to them day by day those that were saved." There is no place in a New Testament church for those whom the Lord has not added.

(3) A divine Purchaser bought it.

Paul speaks of "the church of God which He hath purchased with His own blood." Acts 20:28. The church belongs to Him because He purchased it at such a great cost. Men have been entrusted with the administration of the affairs of the church, but it does not belong to them.

(4) A divine Lord has commissioned it.

"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."

2. It is a spiritual organism.

A New Testament church is more than an organization; it is an organism. An organism has life. A machine is an organization, composed of various parts, but it is not an organism. It has no life.

A New Testament church is a congregation of baptized believers in Christ, who have been called out from the world by the Holy Spirit, through the gospel, who are voluntarily united in the belief of what Christ has taught, and covenanting together to do what He has commanded in perpetuating His ordinances and propagating His gospel to the ends of the earth.

A New Testament church is a local, visible body of baptized believers. The terms "universal church" or "invisible church" are not of New Testament vintage. 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 or man put it into commission. Such an inconceivable, intangible invisible concern as the imaginary invisible church has never been known to convert anyone, to baptize anyone, to set forth the Lord's Supper, or to perform any functions of an actual church, or to do any sort of business on this earth. 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 dreamland, when on a nightmare. And the only invisible church that exists 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. In His charge to the church to maintain discipline and order Christ said, "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 18:17. Not only is it impossible, but it is also unthinkable to tell anything to an invisible something.

According to the New Testament, a church is an independent, local organization. A New Testament church is an organized assembly of those who have repented of their sins and trusted Christ for their salvation, who have been baptized upon scriptural authority after a credible profession of regeneration, who accept the Word of God as their rule of faith and practice, who meet for worship, who have a congregational church government, who use the discipline of the New Testament, who have covenanted together to disciple all the nations, who through their duly chosen servants administer the two ordinances,

whose scriptural officers are pastors and deacons who act as servants and not as rulers, and whose members strive diligently to please their Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

A New Testament church is a unique institution, divine in its origin, divine in its mission, and backed by a divine promise of security. As such it looms large and holds a central and commanding place in the divine revelation. It is the business of a church to evangelize sinners, to baptize believers, and to teach its own members.