

Lesson Four
THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

"Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matt.16:18)

You are now a member of this church which Christ built. You were added to it at the time of your new birth in baptism. (see Acts 2:47) Now, as a child of God, it is your desire to know more about your "family-tree." How did the family of God come into existence? When and where did it happen? What is its past and what is its future?

This lesson is designed for the purpose of helping you understand this great heritage of which you are now a part - The New Testament Church.

THE "EKKLESIA" OF GOD

The word church was first used by Jesus when he announced to his apostle, "Upon this rock I will build my church" (Matt.16:18)

The word came from the Greek term, "ekklesia" which means, the called out.

Hence, it means for you and me that we are now members of a body of people who have been "called out" of sin and into salvation by the gospel. As Paul put it, "Whereunto he CALLED YOU by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." (2 Thess.2:14) Another time he said, "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord." (2 Cor. 6:17) And so, the church of Christ are the "Called out" those who have been separated from their past sins and who are now the servants of Jesus Christ. And God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, ye become the servant of righteousness.

The first "call" was given on the first day of the week in the city of Jerusalem, in the year 33 A.D. The one who gave the call was the apostle Peter. Jesus had promised him, "And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven," and so on that day Peter preached the first gospel sermon - he opened the door for the first time into the kingdom of Christ, and about three thousand were "called out" of their sins. And thus, on that day, the church of Christ came into existence.

The church grew rapidly. Soon the membership was over 5000. And every day more and more were added to the church, multitudes both of men and women.

At first the Jewish authorities had paid little attention of the church. But their indifference soon into alarm as "the word of God increased? and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem exceedingly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith." (Acts 6:7) This was too much for the Sanhedrin. They could not ignore what was happening any longer, for daily in the temple, and every house, the disciples ceased not to teach and preach Jesus as the Christ. It had to be stopped. And at that time there arose a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.... and they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word. (see Acts 8:1-4) thus, the one thing that the authorities had set out to stop - preaching the word - was increased immediately a thousand-fold. Like a

wind blowing seed to a distant field, the disciples of Christ were scattered over the world planting the seed of the gospel. Judea, Samaria, Azotus, Caesarea; from Caesarea to Phoenicia, to Cyprus, to Antioch; from Antioch through all Asia and on into Europe - the sowers went forth scattering the precious seed along the way.

The Master's command in A.D. 33 to "go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" was in effect. And then in A.D. 62 the apostle Paul could say that the gospel had been "preached to every creature under heaven." (see Col. 1:23) In just twenty-nine years the early church had carried out the great commission of our Lord.

THE DEPARTURE FROM THE ONE TRUE CHURCH (Around 606 A.D.)

During the New Testament period of the church the disciples "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine." (Act 2:42) But the apostles knew, and had voiced a warning, that a departure from the divine pattern for the church would come. Paul had said to the elders at the church at Ephesus:

"I know that after my departing grievous wolves shall enter in among you, not sparing the flock, and from among your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them." (Acts 20:28-30)

And to Timothy he wrote:

"But the Spirit saith expressly, that in latter times some shall fall away from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of demons, through hypocrisy of men that speak lies, branded in their own conscience as with a hot iron; forbidding to marry and commanding to abstain from meats." (1 Tim 4:1-3)

"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but having itching ears, will heap to themselves teachers after their own lust, and will turn away their ears from the truth, and turn aside unto fables." (2 Tim. 4:2-4)

And it happened just as Paul had predicted. Men in the church began to teach for doctrine the commandments of men. And these man-made creeds and human inventions began the gradual development of what became the Catholic Church.

THE REFORMATION (Around 1517)

Many years after the Roman Church was in existence, men such as William Tyndale, Uirich Zwingli, John Calvin, and Martin Luther, became dissatisfied with the Catholic teaching. But rather than trying to restore the original New Testament church, they merely desired to reform the Roman Church. The result of their efforts was more man-made doctrines which gave birth to denominational Protestantism, out of which came several Protestant churches bearing the names of the reformers themselves.

THE RESTORATION (19th Century)

In the dawn of the nineteenth century, as the circulation of the scriptures increased, more and more people began to read and study the Bible. And as they read and studied, they began to see that there was a difference between the doctrine the apostles had taught and the creed of man. They saw that God's Word condemned religious division (see 1 Cor. 1:10 & Eph. 4:4) and that Christ has prayed for religious unity (see John 17:11, 20-26) From this seed, sown in good and honest hearts, there began a plea that has reached around the world and is continuing even today.

"Let us speak where the Bible speaks, and be silent where the Bible is silent. Let us call Bible things by Bible names and do Bible things the Bible way."

In brief it was a plea to RESTORE New Testament Christianity. Soon the plea became a movement. Through the pleading and teaching of such men as James O'Kelly (1794), Dr. Abner Jones (1800), Barton W. Stone (1801), Thomas and Alexander Campbell (1809 & 1812), and many other pioneer preachers, the people began, not to reform some man-made church, but to restore the church of the New Testament the church which Jesus had built and established that day Jerusalem in A.D. 33)

The plea was simple, but a sure one. Go back to the blueprint God had given - New Testament. The same seed of the New Testament would produce the same harvest of the New Testament - Christians, and Christians only. For, just as wheat seed will produce a wheat harvest no matter in what century it is sown, just so the word of God (which Christ called the seed of the kingdom) will produce the same harvest whether it is sown in 33 A.D. or two thousand years later. The church is in the seed that produces it - the Word of God.

THE CHURCH AS FOUND IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

As we have seen, the church of Christ did not just happen. It came into existence at a particular time and place in history. Neither was the design, or structure, of the church merely left to chance. But, 'as Moses was admonished of God when he was about to make the tabernacle: for, See, saith he, that thou make all things according to the pattern shewed to thee in the mount." God has also given a pattern for us to follow today in the design of the church.

Let's look then, into the one book of inspired history that identifies the church as God intended it to be.

ONE CHURCH

First, we find that God intended that there be only One universal church. Paul says, "There is one body," and "the body is the church." (Eph. 4:4 & Col. 1:18) This one church is made up of all the 'called out who meet with and make up the local congregations around the world. Each congregation is joined through Christ and is a self-governing unit. All the units for congregations make up the one universal church.

THE NAME

Most often the New Testament refers to God's institution simply as 'the church.'" However, on occasions it is called the:

1. "CHURCH OF GOD" (1 Cor. 1:2)

2. "CHURCH OF THE LORD" (Acts 20:28)
3. "CHURCH OF THE FIRSTBORN" (Heb.12:23)
4. "CHURCH OF CHRIST" (Rom. 16:16)

In each case, the name used is to denote ownership - showing to whom the church belongs. The church is also spoken of in descriptive terms such as:

1. "THE KINGDOM" (Matt. 16:19) which describes the kind of government in the church.
2. "THE HOUSE OF GOD" (1 Tim. 3:15) describing the family nature of the church.
3. "THE BODY OF CHRIST" (Eph. 4:12) indicating the union and fellowship in the church.
4. "THE TEMPLE OF GOD" (2 Cor. 6:16) which denotes the area of Worship in the church.
5. "THE VINEYARD" (John 15:1-8 & 1 Cor. 3:9) which describes the work and service of the church.

THE ORGANIZATION

The organization which God gave for the church is very simple one.

1. Christ is the head of the church. He possesses all the authority and he controls and rules by his word, the gospel. (Col. 1:8; Eph. 1:22,23; Matt. 17:5; John 12:48).
2. Each congregation is to have a plurality of elders to over-see and provide the teaching of the truth to the local congregation. God intends that these men meet specific qualifications before being chosen to serve in this work. (Qualifications for elders are found in (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9)
3. Each congregation also has a group of men serving as deacons. They are to assist the elders in the work of the congregation. Here again, a man must meet certain qualifications to serve as a deacons. (see 1 Tim 3:8-13)
4. Finally, there are the members of the congregation who have heard, believed, and obeyed the gospel, and have been added by the Lord to the church to become servants of righteousness. Members are called, "disciples" (Acts 20:7) and "Christians" (Acts 11:26)

5. The church also has evangelists, who's duty is to preach and teach the gospel. Preachers serve under the eldership of the congregation where they have been hired to preach. The preacher is not the "pastor" of the congregation the pastors are the elders unless the preacher also happens to be an elder where he preaches. The term "Reverend" also is not used to refer to the preacher. It is used in the Bible only when referring to God never to men in any position.

THE DOCTRINE

All that one needs to do to be saved is found in the New Testament. As Paul stated. "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it is the power of God unto salvation." (Rom. 1:16) And, all that one needs to live a Christian life is found in the New Testament. For "Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction

which is in righteousness: that the man of God may be complete, finished completely unto every good work." (2 Tim 3:16,17) RVS)

And so, the church of the New Testament had no other source of doctrine except the gospel of Christ as given in the 27 books of the New Testament by the inspired men, who were guided by the Holy Spirit into all truth. (See John 16:13)

TERMS OF ENTRANCE

The steps that brought you into the body of Christ are the same steps that were taken by the first Christians two Thousand years ago in Jerusalem.

First, you believed with all your heart that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And because of your faith in Jesus you confessed him before men. Having confessed him as your Lord, you obeyed his commands to repent of your sins and to be baptized for the remission of those sins. Upon this full obedience God added you to his church, wherein you are now a saved child of God. (The following are the scriptures for the above steps: John 8:24; Rom. 10:9,10; Matt. 10:32; Rom. 10:9,10; Lk. 13:3; Acts 2:38; Mk. 16:15; Acts 2:38; Rom. 6:3,4; Acts 2:47; Rom. 8:1)

Thus, briefly, you have the New Testament church as God intended it to be - in body name, organization, doctrine, and terms of entrance. Now, in the concluding minutes of this recording, let's look at the:

VALUE OF THE CHURCH

"The kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a merchantman seeking goodly pearls: and having found one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had, and bought it." (Matt. 13:45,46)

This is a parable told by Jesus to emphasize the great value of the church. There are many things which make the church valuable to us as children of God. For example, "Christ loved the church and gave himself for it." (Eph. 5:25) He purchased it with his own blood. (Acts 20:28) Whatever cost God's Son his life is beyond price to his disciples.

Another feature which makes the church important is the three-fold mission it has here on earth.

1. First, Evangelism: The church is to support and preach the truth of the gospel. It is the "pillar and ground of the truth." And through it is revealed "the manifold wisdom of God." (See 1 Tim 3:15 & Eph. 3:10)

2. Second, Benevolence: The church is to be "rich in good works." As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men." (See Gal. 6:10 & James 1:26,27)

3. Third, Edification: Edification means the building up and promotion of growth into Christ-like virtues through fellowship, Bible study, and worship. (Eph. 4:12,16)

Finally, the church is beyond price because it is made up of the saved. (Acts 2:47) This fact, combined with those already listed, makes the church of Christ the most valuable and the most important institution on this earth.

THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH

"For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not precede them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: so shall we ever be with the Lord." (1 Thess. 4:15,17)

"Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father." (1 Cor. 15:24)

Isn't it wonderful to know that you are now part of this great heritage of God - the church of Christ! And not only to know its past, but knowing its great future, doesn't it cause you to want to share the "good news" with as many as you possible can!

"Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion, and power, both now and ever. Amen." (Jude 24,25)

"BE THOU FAITHFUL
ACTION PAGE
FOR
THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

I. SCRIPTURE READING FOR THIS WEEK:

MATTHEW 16:18 "Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it"

2 THESSALONIANS 2:14 "Whereunto he called you by the gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."

COLOSSIANS 1:18 "and he is the head of the body, the church."

ACTS 2:47 [RSV] "And the Lord added to them day by day those that were being saved."
[KJV] "And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."

If you are not familiar with the rest of the passages used in this lesson, it is suggested that you read them at least once, for it is important in order to fully understand the truth presented so that you can share it with everyone you know or come in contact with.

II. List below three names of persons that you want to share the story of the New Testament church with; then, after making definite plans --- DO IT!

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

III.If you desire to study more fully the history of the church, the departure, the reformation, and the restoration, it is suggested that you obtain a copy of "CHURCH HISTORY" by John Cox.

BE THOU FAITHFUL