

PART 11: THE CHURCH

Members of God's adopted family are not saved to remain as isolated individuals but to live in a close association with one another as organized body sharing a common welfare, meeting on a regular basis for fellowship, worship, hearing the word preached and to minister to each other in their gifting. This organized body is known in scripture as the church.

The word church in the New Testament comes from the Greek word "ekklesia" which is a compound of the words "ek", "out of," and "klesis", "a calling." So believers are literally "called out ones;" that is to say, called out of the world and the kingdom of darkness and into the Kingdom of Light. In fact, every use of the word "church" in the New Testament refers to that group of people who have come into a relationship with God through their confession of faith and a belief in their heart that God had raised Christ from the dead (Rom 10:9-13).

Paul went so far as to call the church God's building (1 Cor 3:9) whose members are: *being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Eph 2: 22)*

Peter even addressed them as "living stones" who though: *rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God (1 Peter 2:4) were: being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, (1 Peter 2:5-6)*

Theologians have described several other distinguishing characteristics that have defined the church throughout its history. First there is the church visible and the church invisible.

The visible church is that body or members who claim to be a part of the church by identifying themselves with the Lord Jesus Christ. Unfortunately not all who claim to be true believers are what they claim. Only God, who knows the heart (1 Sam 16:7), can make the final determination about a person's true spiritual condition. Satan will always do what he can to weaken the welfare, faith and testimony of the church by compromising its membership.

Jesus warned of this hazard in His parable of the wheat and tares being sowed in the same field. Jesus is the true farmer who sows the wheat but Satan is always trying to compromise the wheat by sowing tares.

*He answered and said to them: "He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all*

*things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. (Matt 13:37-42)*

Jesus also cautioned His disciples to: *"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. (Matt 7:15)*

In common grace and faith it is usually expected that the church will accept everyone into fellowship who claims to be saved, barring evidence to the contrary. But it is the duty of the leadership of the church to examine the candidates for membership within the guidelines of their fellowship or denomination.

The church invisible is comprised of all of God's chosen children who have made a true confession of faith with their hearts and have been changed by the Spirit. Although they may be unknown to us, they are surely known to God.

*"The Lord knows those who are His," (2 Tim 2:19)*

There is also the universal church, which is the body of Christ world wide, and the local church made up of the neighboring community of Christians.

The church is also an organism, made up of individuals which functions under effective leadership such as pastors, elders and overseers.

In the book of Acts Paul and Barnabas: *appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:23)*

The "elders" of the New Testament church were the "pastors" (Eph 4:11), "bishops or overseers" (Acts 20:28), "leaders" and "rulers" (Heb 13:7; 1 Thess 5:12) of the flock. Thayer's Greek Lexicon notes that the Greek word for "overseer" is "*episkopos*" (the same word for Bishop) meaning: "a man charged with the duty of seeing that things to be done by others are done rightly, any curator, guardian, or superintendent."

The calling to be an elder, as with any position of leadership within the church, is a sacred obligation not to be taken lightly. Paul instructed his friend and protégé Timothy in the qualifications of eldership writing: *This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the*

*devil. Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. (1 Tim 3:1-7)*

It is in this respect that one of the tasks given to church leadership is the administration of discipline when necessary. This authority was assigned to the church by direct commands from both Christ (Matt 18:15-17) and Paul (1 Cor 5:5). Although discipline may seem like an unpleasant duty, it is necessary in order to keep sin from spreading, to protect the purity of the church and the honor of Christ, and to help in the restoration and reconciliation of the one who has gone astray.

Within the local body there is also the office of Deacons. The ministry of the deacon has usually been understood as a lay servant to the church and or assistant to the elders.

Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary says that the term deacon: “was used to describe the work of a servant—a person who waited on tables or ministered as a religious official. When the office of deacon was established in the New Testament church, it may have paralleled the function of the Jewish synagogue assistant—an official who took care of the administrative needs of the assembly.”

The qualifications of deacons are similar to those of elders (1 Tim 3:8-13), and it should be noted that even though some think that the office of deacon is less

important than that of an elder it is good to remember that the first martyr of the church was a deacon called Stephan who at his execution not only gave one of the most eloquent and forceful testimonies recorded in Scripture but was also granted a vision of the Lord moments before his death at the hands of the mob (Acts 6:8 – 7:60)

Whatever the views of leadership within a local body or denomination, it is the command of Scripture that there is leadership within the church and a call by Scripture for submission of the body of believers under that leadership.

*Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble." (1 Peter 5:5)*

One of the most important and vital functions of the church is the dispensation of the ordinances commonly called sacraments.

The Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary defines sacrament as: "A formal religious act in which the actions and materials used are the channels by which God's grace is communicated, either actually or symbolically."

Generally speaking, Protestant Christianity recognizes only two sacraments from Scripture: Water Baptism and Lord's Supper.

The word baptize comes from the Greek word baptizo (bap-tid'-zo) which means to: "to immerse, submerge; to make overwhelmed (i.e. fully wet); used only (in the N. T.) of ceremonial ablution, especially (technically) of the ordinance of Christian baptism" (New Exhaustive Strong's Numbers and Concordance with Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary)

Jesus commanded the continuation of this rite when told His disciples to: *Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.*" (Matt 28:19-20)

Christ instituted the Lord's Supper, also known as the Eucharist or Communion, on the night just before His arrest and crucifixion, during the traditional Passover meal with His disciples. Scripture says that: *And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you.* (Luke 22:19-20)

When we participate in this sacrament by partaking of the symbols of Christ's body and blood, we not only celebrate the work of Christ on the cross, but we also receive strength as we enter into a deeper communion with our Lord.

In conclusion we may say that the church was designed and ordained by God to represent His presence on this earth and to be that instrument through which He would manifest His authority, care and the expression of His Spirit in power and worship. As theologian Charles C. Ryrie writes: "The importance of the church can scarcely be overstated. It is that which God purchased with the blood of His son (Acts 20:28). It is that which Christ loves, nourishes, and cherishes (Eph. 5:25, 29), and which He shall present to Himself blameless in all her glory one day (v. 27). Building His church constitutes Christ's principle work in the world today (Matt. 16:18) through His giving of spiritual gifts (Eph. 4:12), Thus the exercise of those gifts by believers aligns us with what Christ is doing today."