

WHAT IS THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH?

We have become so accustomed to thinking of the church in terms of denominationalism that it is nearly impossible to disassociate them in our minds. It shall be my purpose in these discussions to set forth the fundamental difference between that Divine Institution described in the New Testament and all other institutions. When we read about the church in the New Testament no one thinks that a denomination of any kind is there intended. No one thinks that Paul or any of the other apostles belonged to a denomination. Of all the conversions set forth in the book of Acts there is no hint that any individual ever joined any human institution. Yet all Christians in New Testament times belonged to the church. They belonged to that Divine Institution which Jesus died to establish. This is the institution I want to present in these lessons.

Since the church is unlike any other institution in the world it has been presented to us by a great many pictures in order that we may better appreciate it. It depends on the angle from which we view it as to which of these terms is used. Let us notice some of these pictures just now.

IT IS GOD'S BUILDING. The apostle Peter says, "ye are also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house" (1 Pet 2:5). With this agree the words of Paul, who said, "Ye are God's husbandry, God's building" (1 Cor. 3:9). Again Paul said, "So then ye are no more strangers and sojourners, but are fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God, being built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ himself being the chief corner stone; in whom each several building, fitly framed together, groweth into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom ye also are build-ed together for a habitation of God in the spirit" (Eph 2:19-21).

While the institution which Jesus came into the world to establish is sometimes called a "building" let us not suppose it is a material structure. We often refer to the building where we meet for worship as "the church." This is only an "accommodative" use of the term. When we speak of the "place" of meeting as the church we mean, of course, the place where the church meets to engage in social worship. The church is not made up of shingles and nails, brick and mortar. The church of the New Testament is a "spiritual" institution. The apostle Peter calls it a "Spiritual house."

IT IS THE CHURCH. Some six to nine months before his death Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). This was done the first Pentecost after this statement was made. Henceforth the church is spoken of as a reality —something already in existence.

The term "church" is from the Greek word "ecclesia" and primarily signifies "a called out congregation." Etymologically the word means no more than this. Hence, it may be applied to any sort of a body. The ancient Greeks applied it to a political body. Stephen applied it to the Israelites in the time of Moses, calling them "the church in the wilderness." While the term "church" signifies no more than "a called out congregation," the church of Christ, means much more. It is an institution composed of immersed believers who have been called out of the world, and who associate themselves together to worship God "in spirit and in truth." It is a spiritual house over which Christ reigns as head and in which the Holy Spirit dwells.

IT IS THE KINGDOM. Whether we speak of it as the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Christ, or the Kingdom of Heaven, we have in mind the same institution. Jesus said, "all things that are mine are thine, and all thine are mine." (John 17:10). Hence, the Kingdom of Christ is the Kingdom of God, and the Kingdom of God is the Kingdom of Christ. It is often called "the Kingdom of heaven," because it is "Heaven-born"—that is, it is from heaven.

The church and kingdom signify one and the same institution. Jesus said, "And I also say unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:18-19). The "church" and "kingdom" are here spoken of in the same breath. It is evident that Jesus was speaking of the same institution when he did so. Moreover when Peter used the "keys of the kingdom" on the first Pentecost after the resurrection of Christ, to make known the terms of entrance into it, he announced the terms of entrance into the church at the same time. In Luke 22:17-30 we have a very definite statement regarding the immediate establishment of the kingdom. It was the night before Jesus' death. As he ate the last passover supper, and instituted his own, "he received a cup, and when he had given thanks, he said, Take this, and divide it among yourselves: for I say unto you, I shall not drink from henceforth of the fruit of the vine, until the kingdom of God shall come. . . . But ye are they that have continued with me in my temptations; and I appoint unto you a kingdom, even as my Father appointed unto me, that ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom." From this we learn that Jesus instituted his supper to be observed in his kingdom which was soon to be set up. A short time later we find the apostles observing the Lord's supper, ~~which~~ in the church (Acts 2:42; 20:7) 1 Cor. 11:20-34). It is evident therefore that the church and the kingdom are one in the same institution. If not, then the Lord's supper, which was appointed to be observed in the kingdom, was never put there but in the church, where it was never intended.

IT IS THE FAMILY OF GOD. Writing to the evangelist Timothy, the apostle Paul said, "These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly; but if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how men ought to behave themselves in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:14-15). The term house here signifies "household," or family, and is so indicated in the margin. In the Old Testament we read that "Isaiah the prophet" said unto Hezekiah, "thus saith Jehovah, Set thy house in order; for thou shalt die, and not live" (2 Kings 20:1; Isa 38:1). His "house" certainly signified his family. Frequently we read in The Old Testament of the "house of David," where his family is meant. In the New Testament we read that Cornelius "Feared God with all his house" (Acts 10:2); the Philippean jailor was told to believe on the Lord Jesus with all "thy house." (Acts 16:31-33).

In conversion man is pictured as being born again. The figure most commonly used to express our relationship to God after conversion is that of a man of a son, or child. Thus by a re-birth man becomes a child of God, and by the same process he becomes a member of God's household, or family. We may join the institutions of men but we enter the family of God only by the new birth.

IT IS THE BODY OF CHRIST. Speaking of the exaltation of Christ after his resurrection, Paul says that God "put all things in subjection under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, "which is his body", the fullness of him that filleth all in all" (Ephesians 1:22-23). The same apostle says of him once more, "and he is the head of the body, the church" (Colossians 1:18)

These and numerous other passages make it quite clear that when the New Testament speaks of the body of Christ reference is not made to his physical body but to his spiritual body, which is his church.

It will be in order to observe just here that, (1) all christians are in Christ; (2) All who are in Christ are in his body; 9(3) All who are in the body of Christ are in his church; (4) Therefore all Christians are in Christ's church.

When we look at the church from all the angles presented by the New Testament we get a beautiful picture of it. If each and every Christian is looked upon as a necessary particle in a great structure then it is a building. If we have in mind a group of Christians who have been called out of the world and who associate themselves together to worship God then it is a church. If we think of Christ as our king and all his disciples as his subjects then it is a kingdom. If we have in mind the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man then it is a family. If we view it as an organization over which Christ reigns as head and in which all Christians are members then it is a body. All these different pictures are used to set forth the same Divine Institution. Jesus came into the world to establish one and one only institution through which to save the world. In order that we might get a better conception of it all these different figures have been used to represent it. The church is a marvelous institution when we view it in the proper light.

L Pet 2:5

"Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priest hood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God ay Jesus Christ."

1 Cor 3:9

"For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building."

Eph 2:19-21

"Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord:"

John 17:10

"All things that are thine are mine, and mine are thine."

Luke 22:17-30

"And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, Take this, and divide it among yourselves: For I say unto you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine, until the kingdom of God shall come. And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me. Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you. But behold, the hand of him that betrayeth me is with me on the table. And truly the Son of man goeth, as it was determined; but woe unto that man by whom he is betrayed.' And they began to enquire among themselves which of them it was that should do this thing. And there was also a strife among them, which of them should be accounted the greatest, and he said unto them, The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. But ye shall not be so; but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve. For whether is greater, he that sitteth at meat, or he that serveth? is not he that sitteth at meat? but I am among you as he that serveth. Ye are they which have continued with me in my temptations. And I appoint unto you a kingdom, as my Father hath appointed unto me; that ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

Acts 2:42 20:7

1 Cor 11:20-34

"When ye cometogether in one place therefore; this is not to eat the Lord's supper, for in eating every one taketh before other his own supper; and one is hungry, and another is drunken. What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in? or despise ye the church of God, and shame them that have not? What shall I say to you? shall I praise you in this? I praise you not. For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread; and when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you; this do in remembrance of me. After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood; this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come. Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep."