

## THE CHURCH OF CHRIST \* WHAT IS IT?

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 of 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.

There is much confusion and misunderstanding regarding the meaning and application of the word church. People speak of GOING TO CHURCH, but no such statement or idea is found in the New Testament; and neither is the place of meeting ever referred to as THE CHURCH by inspired writers. The purpose of this study, therefore is to get a clearer conception of just what the CHURCH OF CHRIST IS. As we proceed in this lesson, let us notice:

FIRST, let us notice the general condition of affairs prior to the establishment of the church. Well do we know the story of the first chapter of Genesis. We know well how that Eve and then Adam ate of the forbidden fruit because of the temptation of the devil and the sentence that was pronounced upon them for heeding to the instruction of Satan. Before this memorable event took place man was in the sight of God good. He was God's helper, he was God's creation and God saw that it was good. But because of temptation man sinned against his maker and thus became alienated from God.

When man sinned in the Garden of Eden he lost his rightful relationship with the God of all the earth. He fell from the lofty position that God had given him in this life, thus, he was no longer as God had seen him at first. Listen to the reading of the apostle Paul in Romans 3:10-23, "As it is written, there is none righteous, no, not one. There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God; they have all turned aside, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not so much as one; Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace have they not known; there is not fear of God before their eyes. Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it speaketh to them that are under the law; that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may be brought under the judgement of God; because by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified in his sight; for through the law cometh the knowledge of sin. But not apart from the law a righteousness of God hath been manifested, being witnessed by the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ unto all them that believe; for there is not distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

To the Ephesians Paul wrote, "Wherefore remember, that once ye, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called Circumcision, in the flesh, made by hands; that ye were at that time separate from Christ alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of the promise, having no hope and without God in the world."

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Man had sinned in the sight of God. He had transgressed his law, and God being a just God, he must deal out some kind of punishment for the thing that man had done. But this was not without mercy. Though God punished man for disobedience, he did not hate him. He just hated sin and man had sinned. He still loved man, he loved him enough that he made a sacrifice greater than any that may might find a way back into his graces. Listen to the words of Ezeiel, "Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord Jehovah, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die." 33:11 Then the apostle Peter puts it in these words in 2 Peter 3:9, "The Lord is not slack concerning his promises, as some men count slackness, but is longsuffering to youward, not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance."

The sin and degradation of man caused a separation between God and man and there had to be some way for man to come back to God, in a certain extent on his own. Therefore there was a need for some way which man could come back. He could not do it himself, neither could God do it without setting down conditions upon which man should return. This condition prompted God to Send His Son to the earth to set up the kingdom, the Church.

Let us notice at this time the meaning of the ~~TERM~~ CHURCH. The greek word for church is **ekklesia**. The first part of the word, **ekk**, we have out, out is the meaning of this part of the word. The second part **kaleo** means to call or to summon. Putting these two together in our language we have out-called, or it can be reversed to fit our useage better as called-out. This word of the Greek was not coined by Christ or the apostles, but was in general useage by the greek speaking people during the time of Christ's Ministry here on earth. The term never had any religious significance among the Greeks. It literally meant the **called-out ones** or an **assembly**, and it was applied to any body of people called-out and gathered together for any purpose whatsoever. There is nothing about the word itself that designates the character of the assembly. It may be religious or otherwise. Twice the term was applied to the mob at Ephesus in Acts 19. In acts the nineteenth chapter verse thirty two it is used to apply to the mob and also in verse 39. In the 41st verse of the same chapter it is used to apply to the assembly of the proconsular court. Also in acts 7:38 the same term is used to refer to the children of Israel in the wilderness. "This is he that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel that spake to him in the mount Sinai and with out fathers; who recieved living oracles to give unto us." This is where many people get the idea that the church existed in the time of Moses. One assembly did, but not the church that Christ died for, not the church that Christ purchased with his blood. Thus, the **KIND** of church must always be determined by the context. Other terms and circumstances must decide whether the reference is to a church of God or a church of men.

In light of the definition that we have just observed, the church of Christ is the people who heed the call of Christ through the Gospel and thereby become his subjects, His people, or his body. The call that we are speaking of at this time does not consist of some miraculous thing that happens to a person. We have heard many stories how that a person had been called into the service of God. However they must coincide with the truth in this respect also. I am not speaking of an occasion, which many of them we have heard, where God speaks directly to man and calls him. In Mark 16:16 Christ lays down terms of entrance in to the saved body. "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." We are not left to doubt or wonder how the Lord calles those out ~~into~~ in the world into his fold. Listen to the words again of Paul, "But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you brethren beloved of the Lord, for that God chose you from the beginning unot salvation in sanctification of the Spirit and be-

lief of the truth: whereunto he call you through our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." (2 Thes 2:13-14) Again Paul said in his letter to the church at Collossae, "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to the which also ye were called in one body; and be ye thankful." Many other instances in the new Testament could be cited to show that Christians are called of God, through the Gospel, and not by some miraculous power, and that they are called into one body as Paul just stated. (Col 3:15)

However, the church of Christ is not called together literally and physically, as was the uproarous assembly in Ephesus, or as were the Israelites in the wilderness. It is a spiritual body, and its members are called out of and separated from the world in a spiritual sense. They are associated together upon a spiritual basis, and are bound together by spiritual bonds.

But someone will surely be wondering, if these things are so concerning the word and use of the word church, why was this term ever applied to the people of God? It should be kept in mind that the word "church" is not the only term used to designate God's people. They are also referred to as a kingdom. After Christ said he would build his church he also said, "and I will give unto thee the keys to the kingdom of heaven, and whatsoever thou shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever thou shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven". He spoke of the church and the kingdom in the same breath so they must be one in the same institution. Whether we speak of the kingdom of heaven, "the kingdom of God" or "kingdom of Christ" we are speaking of the same institution. The church is also spoken of as a flock, Acts 20:29, a house, "a Temple," and a "Body".

As has already been observed, the people of God are called out of and separated from the world in a spiritual sense, and the term "church" is applied to them, because it accurately describes the SPIRITUALLY CALLED-OUT feature of the body of Christ. Listen to the words of Peter in this regard, "but ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that ye may show forth the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light." (1 Peter 2:9) Now Paul, "Who delivered us out of the power of darkness and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of his love." On another occasion Paul wrote to the church at Rome thusly, "Know ye not, that to who ye present yourselves as servants unto obedience, his servants ye are who ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness? But thanks be to God, that, whereas ye were servants of sin, ye became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching whereunto ye were delivered; and being made free from sin, ye became servants of righteousness." Romans 6:16-18)

It is right to designate the people of God as a church ~~also~~ because the term also conforms to the mission of Christ. This is what he did, came to call those out of the world into his spiritual body. Luke says in Luke 16:10 "The son of man came to seek and save that which was lost." Also in Acts 15:14 "Symeon hath rehearsed how first God visited the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name."

But let us notice also the New Testament use of the word church as applied to God's people. First of all it is used in a general sense. In Col 1:18 Paul wrote, "And he is the head of the body, the church, who is the ~~first~~ beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things he might have the pre-eminence." Also in Ephesians 1:22-23, "And he put all things in subjection to him under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all." Again in the 5th chapter of Ephesians, verse 25. "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for it."

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Again "to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect." Heb 12:23. In this sense, the term embraces all the saved, all the called out, in the whole world. A physical assembly is not necessary, for a man's family is always his family, whether they are assembled together or not. In the times of the establishment of the church the word house was used to designate a man's family. Paul used this term in the same sense when writing to Timothy in chapter 3 verse 15. "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 the ground of the truth." The term is applied to the people of God in the general sense also in acts 8:3 where the record tells us that "Saul laid waste the church, entering into every house, and dragging men and women committed them to prison."

The term is also applied to the people of God' with geographical limitations. It is so used in Act 8:1 "And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church which was in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles." In I Corinthians 1: 2 it also is used in this sense because the letter is addressed to "the church of God which is at corinth. Also acts 9:31. "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace, being edified; and, walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit was multiplied." Here the essential idea is the same as when applied to the whole body of God's people, that is, it embraces all the saved, all the called-out in the territory named.

But again, the church is used also in the local sense, In Romans 16:3-5 Paul wrote, "Salute Prisca and Aquila my Fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who for my life laid down their own necks; unto whom not I only give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; and salute the church that is in their house." Also in Col 4:15 and Philemon 2 the term is used to designate a local body of Gods people. The reference, in this sense, is to a body of people banded together for work and worship, and meeting together in one place. Membership in such congregations is not determined by geographical bounds, but by various circumstances, such as convenience, opportunities for greater service, etc. The church of Christ on Fifth Avenue does not refer to Christians living on that avenue but rather to those who regularly meet on Fifth avenue for worship through none of them live on it.

CONCLUSION: it is evident, therefore, from the things mentioned already, taking these into consideration, that the church of Christ is that body of people over which he is the head----the ones who were called out of sin and bound together in his service by the Gospel as revealed in the New Testament.