

THE GLORIOUS CHURCH

1 - What Is The Glorious Church In The New Testament?

There is much confusion in the world as to the meaning and application of the word "church." We need to know what the Bible says about the church; not only to know the truth for truth's sake, but also to avoid the errors of men which corrupt what God teaches.

The church is a relationship. This may be seen in the meaning of the term itself. The word "church" is a translation of the Greek word "ekklesia" which means "the called out." The word does not refer to a material building, but to people; and to a particular people, those who are called out. It is not inherently a religious word. Jesus and His apostles did not originate the word. It is also translated "assembly." There are four times in the New Testament when the word is used where it does not refer to those Christ calls (Acts 7:38; 19:32,39,41). The word was applied to any assembly called for any reason.

The word used in all these cases was the same word Jesus used. "Upon this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). When Jesus used the word He referred to a particular called out assembly. What takes it out of the realm of the general is His calling it "My ekklesia." The church is not an accident. Christ called it. It is spiritual (I Peter 2:5). The church Christ called was a new thing in society. It was unique. Nothing created by man, past or present, can be compared to it. The church is not a non-essential body.

The word "church" carried a vital significance. The use of the term "called out" emphasized to the people called by Christ that they were distinctive; they were called out from the world. This assembly of people belongs to Him because He called them out of the world. He paid the price for them in His own blood. Thus the church is a group of people who have spiritual relationship to Christ because He saved them by His blood (Acts 2:47, KJV). There are two classes of people; those who have been called out of sin, and those who have not.

There are different ways in which the church is considered in the New Testament. It is often looked upon in a universal sense (Mt. 16:18). When Christ promised to build His church, the word is used in a somewhat figurative sense. He refers to all His called out people though they are not assembled. The universal church is composed of the individual Christians wherever they are. The whole body is never gathered into one physical assembly, but is a body of people called out of sin and comprising a great spiritual host. It has a real existence. Every child of God on earth is a member of that body.

"Church" is also used in a local sense (I Cor. 1:2). Here Paul is referring to those saints in Corinth who were called out. A church in this sense is made up of those who assemble together and have a spiritual fellowship. It is in reference to local assemblies that we have the plural "churches" (Gal. 1:2; Rev. 1:4). Those who composed these "churches" were all called out by Christ and were not therefore different denominations.

The nature of the church may also be seen in the terms used to describe it. It is called "the church of the Lord" or "of God" (Acts 20:28). "Of the Lord" or "of God" shows ownership especially in view of the context of having purchased it. Note also it is "the flock." This is used to stress the work of the elders who are to be shepherds, or tend as overseers for Christ.

Paul refers to the "church of the living God" (I Timothy 3:15). The living God is a contrast to the idols of men which have no life. The church is also called "the house of God." The early Christians from the pagan, Gentile background had to keep a clear vision and keen consciousness of the uniqueness of the church. Among and above the superstitions of the age stood the church of the living God.

Local churches were referred to as "churches of Christ" (Romans 16:16). The church in any place is composed of people cleansed by the blood of Christ. It is "of Christ" in the closest and dearest relationship to Christ. Knowing Paul was writing to the church at Rome, brethren sent their salutations through him and thus "saluted" their brethren.

Many have an "institutional" concept of the church. By this we mean they conceive the church as an institution rather than as individuals. Their concepts are organizational rather than relational. This institutional concept destroys the beauty and the appeal of the called out body which is in fellowship with God through Christ. Many think of headquarters, regional organizations, subsidiary organizations, chains of command, boards, and all the features characteristic of human institutions. The Roman Catholic view is that the church itself has power, authority, and salvation; and is both temporal and spiritual in nature.

As we understand the different terms used to describe the "called out" we better appreciate the true nature of the church as God planned it. It is called "the body of Christ" (Ephesians 1:22,23). Each term used to describe the church is intended to convey a certain aspect of it. The terms help us to get a clear picture of what the church is. When we think of a body, we think of a head. The head clearly directs the body. Thus Christ is our Guide. The wisdom of man is in his head. The wisdom of God is Christ (I Cor. 1:24). The church can only conduct itself properly when it follows Christ. Christ directs by the New Testament (II Peter 1:3; II Timothy 3:16,17).

"The flock of God" is another description of the church (I Peter 5:2). This verse is addressed to the elders, and most studies of the verse focus on the elders and what is said to them. There are some things to learn about the flock. The picture of God's people as a flock was a common one in Jewish thinking (Psalm 78:70-72). Sheep need guidance, and God's people need the same. The flock belongs to God, not the elders or any man or any group. God has only one flock even if the flock is diverse in nature (John 10:16). Since there is one flock, it must not be broken or scattered. Peter is addressing the local elders. It is their responsibility to maintain unity based on the word of God.

"The house of God" (I Timothy 3:15) and "the household of God" (Ephesians 2:19) are wonderful descriptions of the church. Some maintain that in I Timothy Paul is speaking of the church as the place where God dwells. Believers are God's house because He dwells in them. Formerly His peculiar residence was the temple in Jerusalem, but now it is the church of Christ, His people. The reference in Ephesians is to God's family which includes all who are saved. One of the great tragedies in life is to grow up without a family. We can all find security in being part of God's spiritual family. We all have a relationship to each other. What binds us is the faith (Gal. 6:10). Christ is over the house (Hebrews 3:6). This verse also outlines our responsibility as a part of God's house.

The last term we want to consider is "the kingdom" (Colossians 1:13). The kingdom is the rule God has established on earth. This obviously is the church of His Son (Ephesians 1: 22). If these Christians had been transferred into the kingdom, it must have been in existence, and not something to come in the future. The kingdom exists now, and has a glorious future (I Cor. 15:24). Since Christ is king, and we are the kingdom, there must be a spiritual law for guidance. It is the New Testament (II Tim. 3:16,17).

These are not all the terms used to describe the church. There are others, but these will suffice to help us gain some understanding of what the church is. The glorious church, as conceived in the mind of God, is a perfect church with a perfect law, governed by a perfect Head, and built upon a perfect foundation. God will add you to it when you obey the gospel of His Son (Acts 2:38,41,47).

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