

Churches of God

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For ye, brethren, became followers of the churches of God, which in Judaea are in Christ Jesus: for ye also have suffered like things of your own countrymen, even as they have of the Jews: (1 Thess 2:14)

The ignorance which prevails in Christendom today concerning the truth about the Churches of God is deeper and more general than error on any other Scriptural subject. Many who are quite sound evangelically and are well taught on what we call the great fundamentals of the faith are most unsound ecclesiastically. Mark the fearful confusion that abounds respecting the term itself. There are few words in the English language with a greater variety of meanings than “church”. The man in the street understands by “church” the building in which people congregate for public worship. Those who know better apply the term to the members in spiritual fellowship who meet in that building. Others use it in a denominational way and speak of “the Methodist Church” or “the Presbyterian Church.” Again, it is employed nationally of the state-religious institution as “the Church of England” or “the Church of Scotland.” With Papists, the word “church” is practically synonymous with “salvation,” for they are taught that all outside the vale of “Holy Mother Church” are eternally lost.

Many of the Lord’s own people seem to be strangely indifferent concerning God’s mind on this important subject. One from whose teachings on the church we differ widely has well said, “Sad it is to hear men devoted in the Gospel, clear expounders of the Word of God, telling us that they do not trouble themselves about church doctrine; that salvation is the all-important theme; and the establishing of Christians in the fundamentals is all that is necessary. We see men giving chapter and verse for every statement, and dwelling upon the infallible authority of the Word of God, quietly closing their eyes to its teachings upon the church, probably connected with that for which they can give no Scriptural authority, and apparently contented to bring others into the same relationship.”

What constitutes a New Testament church? That multitudes of professing Christians treat this question as one of trifling importance is plain. Their actions show it. They take little or no trouble to find out. Some are content to remain outside of an earthly church. Others join some church out of sentimental

considerations, because their parents or partner in marriage belongs to it. Others join a church from lower motives still, such as business or political considerations. But this ought not to be. If the reader is an Anglican, he should be so, from conviction that his “church” is most in accord with God’s Word. So, if he is a Baptist or Methodist, etc.

There are many others who have little hope of arriving at a satisfactory answer to the question, “What constitutes a New Testament Church?” The fearful confusion which now obtains in Christendom, the numerous sects and denominations differing so widely both as to doctrine and church-order and government, has discouraged them. They have not the time to carefully examine the rival claims of the various denominations. Most Christians are busy people who have to work for a living, and hence, they do not have the leisure necessary to properly investigate the Scriptural merits of the different ecclesiastical systems. Consequently, they dismiss the matter from their minds as being one too difficult and complex for them to hope of arriving at a satisfactory and conclusive solution. But this ought not to be. Instead of these differences of opinion disheartening us, they should stimulate to greater exertion at arriving at the mind of God. We are told to “buy the truth,” which implies that effort and personal sacrifice are required. We are bidden to “prove all things.”

Now, it should be obvious to all that there must be a more excellent way than examining the creeds and articles of faith of all the Denominations. The only wise and satisfactory method of discovering the Divine answer to our questions, “What constitutes a New Testament Church?” is to turn to the New Testament itself and carefully study its teachings about the “church.” Not some godly man’s views; not accepting the creed of the church to which my parents belonged; but “proving all things” for myself! God’s people have no right to organize a church on different lines from those which governed the churches in New Testament times. An institution whose teachings or government are contrary to the New Testament is certainly not a New Testament “church.”

Now if God has deemed it of sufficient importance to place on record upon the pages of Inspiration what a New Testament church is, then surely it should be of sufficient importance for every redeemed man or woman to study that record, and not only so but to bow to its authority and conform their conduct thereto. We shall thus appeal to the New Testament only and seek God’s answer to our question.

I. A New Testament church is a local body of believers. Much confusion has been caused by the employment of adjectives which are not to be met with in the New Testament. Were you to ask some Christians, To what church do you belong? they would answer, The great invisible church of Christ – a church which is as intangible as it is invisible. How many recite the so-called Apostles’ Creed, “I

believe in the holy catholic church,” which most certainly was not an article in the Apostles “creed.” Others speak of “the Church militant” and “the Church triumphant,” but neither are these terms found in Scripture, and to employ them is only to create difficulty and confusion. The moment we cease to “hold fast the form of sound words” (II Tim. 1:13) and employ unscriptural terms, we only befog others and ourselves. We cannot improve upon the language of Holy Writ. There is no need to invent extra terms; to do so is to cast reflection on the vocabulary of the Holy Spirit. When people talk of “the universal Church of Christ”, they employ another unscriptural and antiscritptural expression. What they really mean is “the Family of God.” This latter appellation includes the whole company of God’s elect; but “Church” does not.

Now the kind of Church which is emphasized in the New Testament is neither invisible nor universal; but instead, visible and local. The Greek word for “church” is ecclesia, and those who know anything of that language are agreed that the word signifies “An Assembly.” Now an “assembly” is a company of people who actually assemble. If they never “assemble,” then it is a misuse of language to call them “an Assembly.” Therefore, as all of God’s people never have yet assembled together, there is today no “universal Church” or “Assembly.” That “Church” is yet future; as yet it has no concrete or corporate existence.

In proof of what has been said above, let us examine those passages where the term was used by our Lord Himself during the days of His flesh. Only twice in the four Gospels do we find Christ speaking of the “church.” “Upon this Rock I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matt. 16:18) What kind of a “church” was the Saviour here referring to? The vast majority of Christians have understood it as the great invisible, mystical, and universal Church, which comprises all His redeemed. But they are certainly wrong. Had this been His meaning He had necessarily said, “Upon this Rock I am building My church.” Instead, He used the future tense, “I will build,” which shows clearly that at the time He spoke, His “church” had no existence, save in the purpose of God. The “church” to which Christ referred in Matthew 16:18 could not be a universal one, that is, a church which includes all the saints of God, for the tense of the verb used by Him on this occasion manifestly excluded the Old Testament saints! Thus, the first time that the word “church” occurs in the New Testament it has no reference to a general or universal one. Further, our Lord could not be referring to the Church in glory, for it will be in no danger of “the gates of hell”! His declaration that, “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it,” makes it clear beyond all doubt that Christ was referring to His church upon earth, and thus, to a visible and local church.

The only other record we have of our Lord speaking about the “church” while He was on earth, is found in Matthew 18:17, “If he shall neglect to hear them, tell it

unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.” Now the only kind of a “church” to which a brother could relate his “fault” is a visible and local one. So obvious is this, there is no need to further enlarge upon it.

In the final book of the New Testament we find our Saviour again using this term. First in Revelation 1:11 He says to John, “What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia.” Here again it is plain that the Lord was speaking of local churches. Following this, we find the word “church” is upon His lips nineteen more times in the Revelation, and in every passage the reference was to local churches. Seven times over He says, “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches,” not “what the Spirit saith unto the Church”- which is what would have been said had the popular view been correct. The last reference is in Revelation 22:16, “I Jesus have sent Mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches.” The reason for this being, that as yet, the Church of Christ has no tangible and corporate existence, either in glory or upon earth; all that He now has here is His local “churches.”

In further proof that the kind of “church” which is emphasized in the New Testament is a local and visible one, we appeal to other facts of Scripture. We read of “The church which was at Jerusalem” (Acts 8:1). “The church that was at Antioch” (Acts 13:1). “The church of God which is at Corinth” (I Cor. 1:2) – note carefully that though this church is linked with, yet is it definitely distinguished from “all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord,”! Again, we read of “churches” in the plural number: “Then had the churches rest throughout all Judea, and Galilee, and Samaria” (Acts 9:31), “The churches of Christ salute you” (Rom. 16:16), “Unto the churches of Galatia” (Gal. 1:2). Thus, it can be seen that, that which was prominent and dominant in New Testament times was local and visible churches.

II. A New Testament church is a local body of baptized believers. By “baptized believers”, we mean Christians who have been immersed in water. Throughout the New Testament, there is not a single case recorded of any one becoming a member of a church of Jesus Christ without his first being baptized; but there are many cases in point, many indications a proofs that those who belonged to the churches in the days of the apostles were baptized Christians.

Let us turn first to the last clause in Acts 2:14: “And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be (the V. R. correctly gives it “were”) saved.” Note carefully it does not say “God”, or “the Holy Spirit”, or “Christ”, but “The Lord added.” The reason for this is as follows: “The Lord” brings in the thought of authority, and those whom he “added to the church” had submitted to His lordship. The way in which they had “submitted” is stated in vv. 41-42: “Then

they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls,” etc, thus, in the earliest days of this dispensation, the “the Lord added” to His church saved people were baptized.

Take the first of the Epistles. Romans 12:4-5 shows that the saints at Rome were a local church. Turn now to Romans 6:4-5 where we find the apostle saying to and of these church members at Rome, “Therefore we are buried with Him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of His death, we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection.” Thus, the saints in the local church at Rome were baptized believers.

Take the church at Corinth. In Acts 18:8 we read, “Many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized.” Further proof that the Corinthian saints were baptized believers is found in I Cor. 1:13-14, I Cor.10:2 & 6, and I Cor. 12:13. Rightly translated and punctuated, these passages expressly affirm that entrance into the local assembly is by water baptism.

Ere passing to the next point, let it be said that a church made up of baptized believers is obviously and necessarily a “Baptist church” – what else could it be termed? This is the name that God gave to the first man whom He called and commissioned to do any baptizing. He named him “John the Baptist.” Hence, real “Baptists” have no reason to be ashamed of or to apologize for the scriptural name they bear. Someone may ask, Why did not the Holy Spirit speak of the “Baptist church at Corinth” or “The Baptist churches of Galatia?” We answer, for this reason: there was, at that time, no need for this distinguishing adjective; there were no other kind of churches in the days of the apostles but Baptist churches. They were all “Baptist churches” then; that is to say, they were all composed of scripturally baptized believers. It is men who have invented all other “churches” (?) and church-names now in existence.

III. A New Testament church is a local body of baptized believers in organized relationship. This is necessarily implied in the term itself. An “assembly” is a company of people met together in organized relationship, otherwise there would be nothing to distinguish it from a crowd or mob. Clear proof of this is found in Acts 19:39: “But if ye enquire anything concerning other matters, it shall be determined in a lawful assembly.” These words were spoken by the “town clerk” to the Ephesian multitude which was disturbing the peace. Having “appeased the people,” and having affirmed that the apostles were neither robbers of churches or blasphemers of their goddess, he reminded Demetrius and his followers that “the law is open, and there are deputies,” and bade them “implead one another.” The

Greek word for “assembly” in this passage is ecclesia, and the reference was to the Roman court, i.e., an organization governed by law.

Again, the figures used by the Holy Spirit in connection with the “church” are pertinent only to a local organization. In Romans 12 and in I Corinthians 12 He employs the human “body” as an analogy or illustration. Nothing could be more unsuitable to portray some “invisible” and “universal” church whose members are scattered far and wide. The reader scarcely needs to be reminded that there is not a more perfect organization on this earth than the human body – each member in its appointed place, each to fulfill its own office and perform its distinctive function. Again, in I Timothy 3:15 the church is called the “house of God.” The “house” speaks of ordered relationships: each resident having his own room, the furniture being suitably placed, etc.

Further proof that a New Testament “church” is a local company of baptized believers in organized relationship is found in Acts 7:38, where the Holy Spirit applies the term ecclesia to the children of Israel – “the church in the wilderness.” Now the children of Israel in the wilderness were a redeemed, separated, baptized, and organized “assembly.” Some may be surprised at the assertion that they were baptized. The Word of God is very explicit on this point. “Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (I Cor. 10:1-2). Therefore, they were organized; they had their “princes” (Num. 7:2) and “priests”, their “elders” (Ex.24:1) and “officers” (Deut. 1:15). Thus, we may see the propriety of applying the term ecclesia to Israel in the wilderness, and discover how its application to them enables us to define its exact meaning. It shows us that a New Testament “church” has its officers, its “elders” (which is the same as “bishops”), “deacons” (I Tim. 3:1,12), “treasurer” ((John 12:6, II Cor. 8:19), and “clerk” – “number of names” (Acts 1:15) clearly implies a register.

IV. A New Testament church is a local body of baptized believers in organized relationship, publicly and corporately worshipping God in the ways of His appointment. To fully amplify this heading would necessitate us quoting a goodly portion of the New Testament. Let the reader go carefully through the book of Acts and the Epistles, with an unprejudiced mind, and he will find abundant confirmation. Attempting the briefest possible summary of it, we would say: First, by maintaining “the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship” (Acts 2:42). Second, by preserving and perpetuating Scriptural baptism and the Lord’s Supper: “keep the ordinances” as they were delivered to the church (I Cor. 11:2). Third, by maintaining a holy discipline: Heb. 13:17; I Tim. 5:20-21, etc. Fourth, by going into all the world and preaching the Gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15).

V. A New Testament church is independent of all but God. Each local church is entirely independent of any others. A church in one city has no authority over a church in another. Nor can a number of local churches scripturally elect a “board,” “presbytery,” or “pope” to lord it over the members of those churches. Each church is self-governed; compare I Cor. 16:3 and II Cor. 8:19. By church-government, we mean that its work is administrative and not legislative.

A New Testament church is to do all things “decently and in order” (I Cor. 14:40), and its only authoritative guide for “order” is the Holy Scriptures. Its one unerring standard, its final court of appeal, by which all issues of faith, doctrine, and Christian living are to be measured and settled, is the Bible, and nothing but the Bible. Its only Head is Christ: He is its Legislator, Resource, and Lord.

The local church is to be governed by what “the Spirit saith unto the churches.” Hence, it necessarily follows that it is altogether separate from the State, and must refuse any support from it. While its members are enjoined by Scripture to be “subject unto the higher powers that be” (Rom. 13:1), they must not permit any dictation from the State in matters of faith or practice.

The administration of the government of a New Testament church resides in its own membership, and not in any special body or order of men, either within or without it. A majority of its members decide the actions of the church. This is clear from the Greek of II Cor. 2:6, “Sufficient to such a man (a disorderly brother who had been disciplined) is this punishment, which was inflicted of many.” The Greek for the last two words is “hupo ton pleionon.” Pleionon is an adjective, in the comparative degree, and literally rendered, the clause signifies “by the majority,” and is so rendered by Dr. Charles Hodge, of whom there have been few more spiritual and competent Greek scholars. Bagster’s Intelinear renders it “by the greater portion,” and the margin of the R.V. gives “Greek the more.” The definite article obliges us to render it “by the more” or “by the majority.”

To sum up: Unless you have a company of regenerated and believing people, scripturally baptized, organized on New Testament lines, worshipping God in the ways of His appointing – particularly in having fellowship with the apostle’s doctrine and fellowship, maintaining the ordinances, preserving strict discipline, active in evangelistic endeavors – it is not a “New Testament church,” whatever it may or may not call itself. But a church possessing these characteristics is the only institution on this earth ordained, built, and approved by the Lord Jesus Christ. Hence, next to being saved, the writer deems it his greatest privilege of all to belong to one of His “churches.” May Divine grace increasingly enable him to walk as becometh a member of it.