

The Church Of The New Testament (Part 4 of 8)

February 17, 2009

The Identity of the Church

In this series of lessons, we have studied about the establishment of the church, the mission of the church, and the unity of the church. In this lesson, I want to consider the identity of the church. Now when I say "identity of the church," there are a number of things implied. I imply, first of all that there is such an institution upon the earth known as the church. That is something easily established, because it was promised by the prophets, and also by Christ himself, for he said: "Upon this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). At that time, the church was yet future, but later on in the divine record, we read of the Lord's adding to the church (Acts 2:47), making it a historic organization. From that time on, the Bible speaks of the church as a definite institution. For example, the apostle Paul said: "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word" (Ephesians 5:25,26).

So, evidently there was in New Testament times a church, founded by Christ, filled with his Spirit, and of which every Christian was a member. Since there was a church of the New Testament, having a definite existence, wherein all spiritual blessings were offered to mankind, it follows that outside the church there is not a ray of hope or a crumb of comfort promised to any man.

The Danger of Counterfeits

But, I ask the question: After the passing of these nineteen hundred years since that record, can such an organization be found upon the earth? If so, how can we know it when we read about it, or learn things concerning it? You see, there is a danger of counterfeit churches. Just as there are false gods, and false Christs, there is a danger of false, or counterfeit, churches. How can we avoid being misled? Now, a counterfeit always implies a real article. For example, there could be no such thing as a counterfeit three-dollar bill, because there is no genuine, or real three-dollar bill. Therefore a counterfeit always implies the reality, and as you know quite well, the nearer like the genuine a counterfeit is, the more dangerous and deceptive it is.

Take a twenty-dollar bill, for example. If someone tried to pass a twenty-dollar bill printed with purple ink, no one would be deceived for a moment. But take a fake bill which is the same size, and the same color, and with

the same superscription, and you deceive multitudes. If it is important to avoid being deceived in material things, how much more important to avoid deception in spiritual things? Let me try to illustrate the necessity of assured identity.

Suppose an automobile is stolen. The owner reports the theft to the police department and offers a reward for its return. Suppose it is described as "a white, 1997 model, Chevrolet Caprice, a four-door sedan, with an Oklahoma license number, CX-8446. In this way, the car is described and the identity is sufficiently complete. Do you think you could pick that car out, and know you had the right automobile? Let us say that the police department takes its stand by the side of the road and watches cars go by. Fords, Plymouths, Chryslers, and Mercurys go by, but no one gives them any notice, because they do not meet the description. Pretty soon, another car comes down the road. The officers perk up, and give attention. As it comes in view, they observe that it is a white car. Interest increases. They see that it is a Chevrolet Caprice, a 1977 four-door sedan. They feel pretty certain that it is the one. They see that it bears an Oklahoma license, and so they stop the car and say, "This is the stolen automobile. Of that we are positively sure. Why? Because it measures up to the requirements, but there is one mark yet to be checked. What is the number on the license plate? When the number is checked, the number is different from the one stolen. Therefore, it is lacking in one essential mark of description. No court on earth would be justified in turning that automobile over to the man who described his stolen one. Surely everyone understands that all the essential marks must be found.

I believe the apostle, Thomas, could be an example to us in making certain of our beliefs. Do you remember that on the first day of the week when Jesus arose from the dead, the disciples assembled behind closed doors, and Jesus appeared in the midst of them, and showed them his hands and his side? Thomas was not present, and when the other disciples told him about it, Thomas said: "Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe" (John 20:25).

I ask you: What's wrong with that? Thomas had some marks of identification that he intended to ask for when someone came along claiming to be the Christ. Perhaps Thomas should be censured for not being present at the first meeting, but remember that the other disciples had already seen the marks of identification. The disciples had been warned about false Christs. Jesus had said: "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves" (Matthew 7:15). On another occasion, Jesus warned: "Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am

Christ; and shall deceive many" (Matthew 24:4, 5).

So, Thomas had some marks of identification, which he intended to look for when anyone came claiming to be Christ. He intended to identify Christ by: (1) the nail prints in his hands; (2) the scar in his side. On the next first day of the week, Jesus met with his disciples, again behind locked doors. This time Thomas was present. Jesus said: "Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing." Thomas said: "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28).

Today the world is filled with churches. The person who thinks that there are no counterfeits among them is terribly naive, and ignorant of biblical teaching. What we need to do is to take the word of God, and find the distinguishing characteristics of the Lord's church, and try to find that church in the world today. In the book of Revelation, the apostle John said: "And there was given me a reed like unto a rod: and the angel stood, saying, Rise, and measure the temple of God, and the altar, and them that worship therein" (Revelation 11:1). The measuring reed, by which we are to measure the temple, or the church, is the word of God. When God's word is the guide, the house is built upon the rock, and Jesus said it will stand the test of judgment (Matthew 7:24-27).

Identifying Marks of the Church

What are some of the identifying marks of the church that Jesus built? What about the name you wear, religiously? Did God ever say anything about it in the New Testament? Can you find the name you wear in the New Testament? What about the items and the form of worship in which you engage? Are you following the practices which you can read in the word of God, or are you following the doctrines of men? Jesus said: "Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Matthew 15:7-9). What about the doctrine of the church in which you claim membership? Do you teach only what Christ and the apostles taught? Remember the apostle Paul said, "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:8, 9). What about the church of which you are a member? What about its teaching regarding how to be saved? These are very important matters. Don't be deceived, but be sure that you are a member of the church you can read about in the New Testament.

Its Organization

What about the organization of the church? Is it after the biblical pattern? The apostle reminded us that "Moses was admonished of God when he was about to make the tabernacle: for, See, saith he, that thou make all things according to the pattern showed to thee in the mount" (Hebrews 8:5), and he said that served as an example and shadow of heavenly things. Can you believe that God had a pattern, which Moses had to follow when he was building the tabernacle, but that he had no pattern, no blueprint for the church?

Its Mission

What about the mission of the church? Is the work of the church in which you claim membership confined to the divine mission that God announced for the church?

Its Character

What about the character of its members? Does the church in which you claim membership demand purity of life and character? These are important matters. These are some of the identifying marks of the church. If it does not measure up in any of these points, it cannot be the church that Jesus built. Let us take these up, one by one, and have something to say about them.

Its Name

What about the name you wear religiously? Can you read the name in the word of God? Some of my friends say that the name does not matter, but I find the apostle Paul condemning the wearing of human names at Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:10-15; 1 Corinthians 3:3-5). In order to be built according to the divine pattern, the church must be called by a name designated by the God of heaven and found upon the pages of his word. What name do we read in the word of God? Names applied to the church in general were: The church of God, 1 Corinthians 1:2; and churches of Christ, Romans 16:16. In its different phases, it is called: The kingdom of God, Matthew 13:24; Body of Christ, Ephesians 1:22, 23; and house of God, 1 Timothy 3:15, 16. Names applied to individual members were: Christians, Acts 11:26; saints, Philippians 4:21; disciples, Acts 16:1; 20:7; brethren, Colossians 1:2. These were individual names and were never in scripture applied to the church.

Its Worship

What about the worship of the church in which you claim membership? The church which Jesus built met on the first day of the week to break bread, Acts 20:7, using a cup of the fruit of the vine, and a loaf of unleavened bread, having received instructions from Christ through Paul to do so, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. They sang psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 5:19. This was the only music provided in the New Testament plan. They had prayers, Acts 2:42; 1 Timothy 2:1, 8. We also read that they continued steadfastly in fellowship, which was laying by in store according to prosperity, 1 Corinthians 16:1, 2; Acts 2:42; and they also taught and preached the word of God, according to Acts 20:7; Acts 2:42.

New Testament Christians were admonished not to forsake the assembly of saints I Hebrews 10:25. The only scriptures which mention the first day of the week in this respect are Acts 20:7, and 1 Corinthians 16:1, 2. Acts 20:7 says they came together to break bread; 1 Corinthians 16: 1, 2, mentions the laying by in store, or contribution. Does it seem a little strange to you, that with a few exceptions, churches come together upon the first day of the week, and all take up collection, but that most leave off the very thing which the early church came together to observe - the Lord's supper? A corruption of this plan of worship by changing the day, the spirit, or any item of worship furnished by the Scriptures, means the destruction of the identity of the church as the church of God.

Its Teaching

What about the teaching of the church in which you claim membership? Does the church limit its teaching to the word of God? The New Testament says that we are to "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3). The Bible teaches that there is only "one faith" (Ephesians 4:5), and that we are to all speak the "same things" (1 Corinthians 1: 10). How can we test the identity of the church by what it teaches? Let me ask you some questions:

(1) In becoming a member of the church to which you belong, were you asked to do something more than people were required to do in New Testament days? Compare your religious experience with the cases of conversion in the book of Acts. Look at the Pentecostians, Acts 2:36-41; the eunuch, Acts 8:34-39; Saul of Tarsus, Acts 9:18, Acts 22:16; Cornelius, Acts 10; and Lydia and the jailor, Acts 16. They were taught to believe on Christ, repent of sins, confess Jesus as the Christ, and be baptized for the remission of sins.

(2) Has the church to which you belong undertaken to excuse you from

doing something which it is the will of God for you to do? Remember, Jesus said: "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). No church has the right to excuse you from something that Jesus has commanded you to do.

(3) In order to find your practice, can you go to the New Testament, or do you have to consult some human creed?

(4) Are you left free to believe and teach whatever the New Testament says, or have you subscribed to the doctrines and commandments of men, that is, humanly authorized theology of some church?

(5) Can you depend upon the teachings of the New Testament to learn how to worship and serve in the church to which you belong? Remember: corrupting its teaching can as easily destroy the identity of the church as by changing its worship or its name.

How was the early church organized? We read about the organization of the church in the New Testament. The churches were spoken of as independent, self-governing units, Galatians 1:2. Each church had a plurality of elders, when completely organized, Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17. In Philippians 1:1, Paul writes to the church at Philippi and says: "To the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops (elders) and deacons." The local organization was the only medium through which early Christians worked. Can you find the names of your church officials in the New Testament? Or does it speak of officers and rulers which are unknown to the word of God?

What about the mission of the church in which you claim membership? Is its mission social? That was not the mission of the New Testament church. The mission of 'the church of the New Testament was described as being "the pillar and ground (support) of the truth. Its primary mission was to evangelize the world, to edify the body, and to practice benevolence.

What about the character of the church in which you claim membership? Does it teach its members to come out from the world and live a life of purity and holiness? Over and over, the New Testament teaches that the members of the church are to live holy lives. They are to: (1) Be separate, touch no unclean thing, perfect holiness, 2 Corinthians 6:14: 7:1. (2) Be not conformed to the world, Romans 12:1, 2. (3) Sin no longer to have dominion, Romans 6:12-14. (4) Not to continue in former practices, but walk as new creatures Colossians 3:1-14. (5) Keep themselves unspotted from the world, James 1:27.

The Bible teaches that it is possible for the church to corrupt God's plan and lose its identity. In the example of the Ephesian church, its candlestick, which represented the identity of the church, was to be removed, Revelation 2:4, 5; Revelation 1:20. To not be identified with the Lord and his people is fatal, for in the end, he will say, "Depart, I never knew you" (Matthew 7:23).

By Johnny Elmore, Used By Permission