

The Church Of The New Testament (Part 3 of 8)

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The Unity of the Church

I have been discussing the church which Jesus promised to build in Matthew 16: 18. We have studied the establishment of the church and the mission of the church. And concerning the church, I am aware that there is a philosophy that states that a man does not have to become a member of the church to be saved.

Let me say in reply to that teaching; that if one man can be saved on the outside as well as on the inside, then two men could also be saved. If two men can be saved without being in the church, then two thousand could; and if two thousand could, why not two million? If two million could be saved without the church then why couldn't the entire human race, and thus render the church absolutely useless? Why should Christ establish it, fill it with his Spirit, and become head of it, if the human family can be saved without it as well as with it? Surely we can see the folly of such reasoning.

I might also point out that the church of the New Testament is not simply an extension of a Jewish institution, coming down from the days of Abraham. The Jewish nation does not believe that but there are many professed followers of Christ who declare that to be the case. There is one example that ought to settle that point forever. In the third chapter of John, there is an account of a man named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, who according to birth and background, would have been a descendant of Abraham, and entitled to such benefits. However, this man came to Jesus by night and Jesus plainly told him the terms of entrance into the kingdom of God. Jesus said: "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5) i.e., "Even if you are a descendant of Abraham, and a ruler of your people, such relations will not allow you to enter the church I have come to establish. Except a man be born of the water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."

Jesus taught, therefore, that all affiliations and relationships based on the flesh are of no profit, and that one must submit to a new rite unheard of previously and unknown before that time, or else he cannot be inducted into the family of God.

Based upon that statement, I declare that every person this very day is either a servant of the kingdom of Satan or else he is a child of God and

a member of his family. There is no middle ground. Either I am on one side or the other. If I am saved, I can rejoice that my name is written in the book of life, and therefore I am a member of the body of Christ, the church of God, the family of the first-born. Or, if my sins are unforgiven, I am a member of Satan's family, and I stand condemned and consigned to the regions of the lost.

The Church is Not a Denomination

Every person ought to be able to recognize just what the church of the Bible is. The church is composed of all the redeemed, the saved, all those who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. What I want to stress is the unity and the oneness of the church. That very statement denies and opposes the idea of denominationalism. In fact, you can put it down in your book that when you read in the Bible about the church, you are not reading about some human denomination, because no man can read from the book of God a single, solitary statement or even a hint of anything that smacks of denominationalism. Denominationalism is modern, recent, and unknown to the book of God, and there is not a man living today who can take God's book and find anything that looks like even a distant relation of modern denominationalism.

Let me ask you this question: When you turn to the Bible and hear the Savior say, "Upon this rock I will build my church," do you get the thought that Jesus was talking about some denomination? If so, which one? When the apostle Paul said, "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for it," (Ephesians 5:25), what denomination was that? The truth is, no man lives who can trace denominationalism any further back than the sixteenth century. Before that time, history, both sacred and profane, is as silent as the stars of heaven.

In Bible days, or in apostolic times, Christians were simply called "Christians," and were known as members of the church. No one ever asked the inane question, "What church?" because there was only one - the one Jesus built. No one ever talked about what "branch" the apostles and disciples were members of. They were not members of any branch. They were branches themselves and members of the true vine. Until we get to that point, we can only expect confusion, infidelity, and embarrassment to confront us on every hand.

Jesus understood that full well, and Jesus prayed in John 17:20, 21, "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; that they all may be one (not two, or two hundred as we are now), but "that they all may be one, as thou Father, art in me, and I

in thee." Now note the reason Jesus gave for being one: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. "The greatest curse on the earth is religious division. The greatest hindrance to the cause of Christ is denominational rivalry. The greatest handicap and discouragement to faithful, godly men is the fact that people who claim to be members of the body of Christ are torn apart, divided and separated by human opinions and popular preference. We divide and sub-divide rather than submit to God's will and all determine to speak the same thing, and be of one mind and judgment, even as the Lord prayed and the apostles pleaded.

If there is anything the New Testament pleads for and insists upon, it is the unity of the church. The apostle Paul said: "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit" (1 Corinthians. 12:12, 13). What does the apostle stress in that statement? He stresses the unity, the oneness of the body, the church! Paul argues that just as the human body is one, and has many members and all members of the body are one, so also is Christ. The apostle Paul further stated that there is only one body and that by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body. That's the way it was in Bible times! Is that the way it is today?

How is it today? All religious organizations demand that people submit to what they call "baptism," but into what are people being baptized? One preacher is baptizing into one body, another preacher is baptizing into another body, and a third preacher is baptizing into a third body, and so on. All the while Satan rejoices because of such an obvious departure from the Scriptures. Is that calculated to convince the world at large of the truth of Christianity? No, it does not sound like the apostle's statement that "By one Spirit are we all baptized into one body," because today they are baptized into two, three, or two hundred, as the case may be.

Again, the apostle Paul said in Ephesians 4:4: "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling." From that statement, do you get the idea that the apostle implied that there might be 199 others? No, when he said, "One Lord," in that same connection, I understand that there is only one. When he said, "One God," I understand there to be only one, and when he said, "One Spirit," I understand him to teach there is but one. I get the impression, and you do too, that there is only one God, only one Lord, and only one Spirit. In the same connection, Paul said "There is one body," and therefore we conclude that there is one and only one.

The Church Compared to the Human Body

But again, the apostle compares the body of Christ to the human body when he says: "For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another" (Romans 12:4, 5). Thus, Paul argues that just as the human body has different members some to see, to taste, to smell, to hear, and to feel, and so on, and yet when they are brought together they compose this one body, even so in Jesus Christ every child of God on earth is a member, and the sum total thereof makes up but one body, of which Christ is the head.

But, look at Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 12:18-20, "But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. And if they were are all one member, where were the body? But now are they many members, yet but one body." Note: the members were not set in by popular vote, but by God as it pleased him. But did you see also, that Paul first said, "There is one body," but now he says: "yet but one body." Not only does the Bible teach that there is one body, but it also says that there is "but one," or "only one." While Jesus was on earth, he had only one head, and one body, composed of different members. Today, Jesus is at God's right hand, but he still has only one body, over which he is the one head, with many members in that one body.

What is that body, which is spoken of so many times? Turn to Ephesians 1:22, 23, where the apostle Paul was speaking about the glorious resurrection of Christ, and his triumphant ascension: "And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him (Christ) to be the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all." Therefore, Paul states that the church is the body of Christ.

The Church is the Bride of Christ

But there is more. The apostle Paul continues: "For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the savior of the body" (Ephesians 5:23). Here the church is represented as married to a husband. Just as a husband here on earth is the head of the wife, even so Christ is the head of the church, and he is the savior of the body.

Now we believe it is wrong for a man to practice polygamy - that is, to have more than one wife at a time. If a man is found guilty of that, he is judged rather severely. But some, who are so strict with reference to polygamy in the physical sense, wink at and permit, at least in theory - they permit Jesus to be married to two hundred different bodies on the

earth. What would that be called? It would be polygamy (spiritually). True to every illustration with which we are familiar, Christ is the husband, the church is the wife - one husband, one wife; one head, one body; one Father, one family. The man does not live on earth today who can find support for anything except the unity of the church and oneness in the church.

But there is another passage. In Colossians 1:18, the apostle said: "And he is the head of the body, the church; who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence." Just as there is one body, and but one, and just as that body is the church, then it follows that there is only one church, which is recognized by God.

Unity is the Answer to Infidelity

And I wonder what we can say in the face of the skeptics and infidels? What will be our defense in standing up for God and for the Bible, yet all the while hanging on to organizations which are absolutely unknown to God's book?

Suppose a skeptic who argues that the Bible is only a fairy tale, and who denies many of the things that you and I hold sacred confronts us. Suppose he steps up, with Bible in hand, to a preacher and says: "Sir, I am here to tell you that you do not believe the Bible." "Oh, yes I do," states the preacher. "You believe the Bible?" "You are governed by it in all things?" "You propose to stand for it against all forces of destruction?" "Well, I want you to take that Bible and show me on the inside thereof any place where God ever made mention of any kind of organization in which you claim membership and to which you give your time, talent and money. Now that's your Bible - just turn to it, and read it, and I'll hush up."

Suppose that preacher has to say, "Well, I am bound to admit that I can't turn to the Bible and read the name of the institution in which I claim membership, and which I ask others to be members of." You talk about a victory for infidelity! Here he claims membership in something, which is foreign and unknown to God's book - he can't even read the name in the Bible, yet he claims to support the word of God. The infidel would have every right to say: "Either come back and take a firm footing on the Bible, and claim membership in only that which you can read, or else join hands with me and let's march hand in hand denying it."

Every Biblical Figure Stresses Oneness

But sometimes dear friends will say: "Brother, let me tell you how it is. There is really only one body - we are all one - we just have different

heads." Then he begins to tell me who the head of his order is, and who the head of mine is, and so on. Well, what a picture! One great body of all professing Christians and yet from that one body projecting in different directions, two hundred heads! What a monstrosity! I try to be patient and kind toward anyone who advances such a thought, but I can't accept it. Reason and logic forbid it!

Then I have had them to justify denominationalism from a different angle. They say: "This is the way it is - all of us have one common head, that is, Christ, the Lord, but we are just different bodies of people. Over there is one body, and here is one body, and so on." Again I say, what a monstrosity. Did you ever in all the world see a head with two hundred different bodies? Did you ever see such a thing, even in the animal world? If I ever see such a thing, I am not going to wait around for it to be identified!

Every illustration in the Bible emphasizes the oneness of the church. Look at the lesson of the vine and the branches. Jesus said: "I am the true vine, and my father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit . . . I am the vine, ye are the branches" (John 15:1-5). There is a close relationship between the vine and its branches. Every branch is identical in character, in kind, in fruit and in prospect to every other branch. There never was a vine that bore several different kinds of fruit, and yet people would have us believe that the parable of the vine and the branches illustrates the condition of denominationalism today. There never was a vine from which there sprang out branches differing in origin, doctrine, and practice. That simply cannot and does not happen.

When Jesus compared the church to the fold, or the flock of Christ, he said, with reference to the Gentile world: "And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; (now get this) and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd" (John 10:16). When Cornelius and his family were invited into the church of Christ, that passage was fulfilled. The Lord never did plan to have two flocks - one with Gentile sheep, the other with Jewish sheep. He said: "There shall be one fold and one shepherd." We would not think of asking professing Christians, "Which shepherd are you following?" But men think it not strange when men ask: "What fold or flock are you a member of?"

I say again that oneness, unity, is a characteristic of the church of the Lord. It is also characteristic of every page of teaching in the New Testament. Wouldn't it be wonderful today if every professed follower of Jesus Christ were content to have only the Bible as his rule of faith, his discipline, his church manual, his church directory throughout life?

I want the foundation upon which we rest to be based upon God's word. I cannot conscientiously, consistently, or scripturally accept a human name unknown to the Bible. I cannot subscribe to any rule of faith except the Bible. I cannot bear any name other than the name mentioned in the pages of God's word. I cannot become identified with any religious order whose name is not found in God's book.

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