



## THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH

### QUEST LESSON F-1

The Problem: What is the Christian Church and how should it be organized and controlled? This is a question that has exercised Christian thinkers ever since the apostolic age of the first century A.D. There have been a number of different answers. The church of the Middle Ages was ruled by its bishops, who were subservient to the leading bishop. The theory was that Christ had given Peter personal authority over the church, and that authority was inherited by every one of Peter's successors. It was believed that, in matters of doctrine and discipline, the bishops were the final authority. They had the right to exclude from the church those who did not obey, and they had the right to stipulate what the members of the church should believe. It was a very authoritarian system in which the everyday people were taught that obedience to church policies and practices was essential to salvation. And such obedience was enforced by the secular authorities. The governments of Western European nations were committed to the one universal church and accepted the responsibility of ensuring that its beliefs and practices were enforced by law.

With the coming of the Reformation of the sixteenth century, the understanding of the church changed. Now, it was accepted by many that the true church was a spiritual fellowship of all true believers in Jesus Christ. The church was thought not to be primarily an earthly institution but an invisible communion of all those who were thoroughly committed to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. The visible church organization was thought to be essential but not of the greatest importance. It was said to contain some false members, and many who were true Christians did not belong to it. Salvation was a matter of belonging to the communion of the saints, those who had accepted Christ into their hearts by the Holy Spirit.

As the Reformation proceeded, and in later centuries, a number of countries in which Protestantism was prevalent developed state churches. One notable example was England. These national or state churches tended to be more like the medieval church in organization because they were ruled by bishops who were responsible to the political authorities. Only in more recent times has complete religious freedom been accepted as a principle by many European countries.

Our purpose at the beginning of this series of studies on the church is to determine how the Bible defines the church, and what it teaches about church organization and control. Since the Christian faith is based firmly on the Scriptures, it is a matter of vital importance that we discover the Scriptural teaching on the question of the church. Let us lay aside our personal biases for just a little while and search the sacred

pages to discover the divine concept of the church. After all, Jesus and the apostles are the ultimate authorities on this subject. So, we turn expectantly to them for the answers to our questions.

#### Objectives

- First, we note that the Christian church was established by Jesus Christ.
- Second, we study the organization and development of the apostolic church.
- Third, we ask, what are the major characteristics of the true Christian church?
- Fourth, what are the major functions of the church?
- Fifth, basically what is involved in being a church member?

## I. The Christian Church Was Established By Jesus Christ

This is an obvious fact that every Christian believes. It should follow from this that the church should be the kind of organization that Jesus visualized. Unfortunately, all too often, Jesus' plan for His church has been sadly ignored, and man's idea of how it should be organized and administered has been substituted.

### The Word

1. Why did Jesus ordain 12 apostles? Mark 3:14-15.
2. Upon whom did Jesus establish the church? Matthew 16:16-18; 1 Corinthians 3:11; 1 Peter 2:3-8.
3. Who is the "head" of the church? Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:15; 5:23; 1 Corinthians 11:3; Colossians 1:18.
4. Next to Christ, whose teachings are foundational for the Christian church? Ephesians 2:19-22.
5. Why are the teachings of the apostles and prophets so important for the church? 2 Peter 1:20-21.
6. What did Jesus mean by the "keys of the kingdom of heaven"? Matthew 16:19; 18:18; compare John 6:63; Revelation 1:18; 3:7.
7. Is the church to be ruled by its leaders? What authority and responsibility do they have? Matthew 23:8-11; Mark 10:42-45; 1 Peter 5:1-4,
8. What respect should be given to spiritual leaders? 1 Timothy 5:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13.
9. Upon whom must every member of the church depend directly and completely? Jeremiah 17:5; Psalm 2:12; John 5:23; Deuteronomy 32:4.

Explanation: Jesus ordained 12 disciples so that He could train them to preach the Gospel and heal the people spiritually and physically (Mark 3:14-15). Although Jesus gave the 12 apostles inspired messages for people in all ages, He founded the church upon Himself. He is the "rock" (Greek *petra*), the great foundation stone, upon which His church is built. Peter means "rock" (Greek *petros*), but a rock which can be moved; by contrast with Christ who is the immovable foundation of the church (Matthew 16:16-18). Both Paul and Peter accepted Christ as the One upon whom the church is built and, to change the metaphor, the supreme head of the body.

When Jesus gave the "keys of the kingdom of heaven" to His followers, He did not give them to one person. (See Matthew 18:18 in context). He conferred upon every believer the right and privilege of presenting His Word as the great soul-saving agency that will open heaven to those who accept it. Accepting Jesus as Savior and Lord is accepting the One who holds in His hand "the keys of hell and of death" (Revelation 1:18). And it is the privilege of every Christian to present Christ to those who do not know Him. In this sense, every Christian is a priest (1 Peter 2:5) who, under Christ, can open heaven for responding sinners (John 6:63; 17:3).

Jesus said that the leaders of the church are not to be rulers but spiritual shepherds. They are worthy of respect because of the sacred message they bear, but they are not to be honored and obeyed as authoritarian rulers. Christians are to love and follow their human spiritual leaders because they love the Lord, who is ruling in the hearts of their leaders. But no church leader has the right or responsibility to dictate in regard to doctrine or practice. Jesus, through His Word, provides His church with the only rule of faith and practice that is necessary for salvation. Every Christian believer relies spiritually and directly upon the Lord. When human leaders are substituted for Christ, the spirituality of the church declines dramatically, and the members become tragically vulnerable to the attacks of Satan.

Christ is the Foundation and Head of the Christian Church, and our reliance must be continually upon Him.

Relevance: Authoritarian Christian denominations have diverged from the simple teaching of Jesus regarding the nature of the church. Only as Christian believers adhere unvaryingly to the teachings of Scripture will the church be the kind of institution that Jesus had in mind.

## II. The Organization And Development Of The Apostolic Church

After His ascension to heaven, Jesus directed the establishment and development of the apostolic church. It is very instructive to consider the kind of church that emerged.

## The Word

10. Who took the lead in the apostolic church? Why? Acts 1:21-26,
11. How did the church grow? In what way did church members help one another? Acts 2:40-47.
12. How did a twofold ministry of the church develop? Acts 6:1-63 compares Philippians 1:1.
13. What were to be the characteristics and responsibilities of "elders" or "bishops"? Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Timothy 3:1-7.
14. What were to be the characteristics and responsibilities of deacons? 1 Timothy 3:8-13; Acts 6:2-3.
15. Whose judgment was especially respected? Acts 15:1-4, 22

Explanation: The 12 apostles took the lead in the church after the resurrection of Jesus. They had been with Jesus "and had received directly from Him instruction regarding the message and mission of the church. They exercised the responsibilities of inspired prophets because they had received special revelations from the living Lord Himself. When the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the believers, they became zealous witnesses, and thousands of new believers were added to the communion of the church.

As the need arose, new aspects were added to church organization. A distinction was made between elders (bishops) and deacons. Elders or bishops were the ministers of the Word, the preachers who were the church's spiritual leaders. In the New Testament, the word "elder" (presbuteros) is used synonymously with the word "bishop" (episkopos). Deacons were appointed to care for practical matters that were not to distract the elders from their special task of preaching the Gospel. Both groups of ministers were to be spiritually above reproach, in charge of their own households, and so able to command the respect of the members of the church. They were not to rule but to lead. They were servants, not kings or political dictators.

The apostles were appealed to for leadership in matters of more serious concern. Their association with Jesus had qualified them to solve special problems as they arose. But never did the apostles appoint one as the ruler of the church or suggest that apostolic authority could be conferred by them upon those whom they would choose.

Relevance: In the apostolic church, organization was a means to an end. The most important consideration for all Christians, whether spiritual leaders or regular members, was the spread of the Gospel message to the populace around them. The purpose was to exalt Christ, not to exalt man. Salvation through Christ was the great burden of the message and the good news announced by all Christians.

### III. What Are The Major Characteristics Of The Christian Church?

Many people, both Christians and non-Christians, have asked the question, what exactly is the Christian church? The Bible's answer to the question is the only one worth seriously considering.

## The Word

16. In defining what the church is, what four metaphors does the Bible use?
  - a. Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 5:30
  - b. Luke 12:32; John 10:2-5, 11
  - c. Ephesians 2:19; 3:14-15
  - d. 1 Peter 2:5
17. Apart from the fact that the church is a spiritual communion of believers, do we have evidence that it is also a visible organization? 1 Corinthians 1:2; Acts 13:15 14:23.
18. Give some examples of visible churches that contained members who did not belong to the spiritual body of Christ. 1 Corinthians 5:1, 11; Galatians 3:1; 2 Peter 2:1.
19. What does God ask of His faithful ones who are outside the visible church? John 10:16; Revelation 18:4.

Explanation: In the final analysis, the true church of Jesus Christ is the spiritual communion of all believers in whose hearts the Holy Spirit is reigning. The metaphors used by Bible writers to describe the church make that point thoroughly clear. The church is the body of Christ, of which He is the Head. The church is Christ's flock, of which He is the Shepherd. The church is the family of God, of which He is the Father. The church is a spiritual building, of which Christ is the chief cornerstone. Each of those illustrations emphasizes the spiritual relationship between Christ and His people. The Bible says that only those in whose hearts the Holy Spirit is living belong to Christ (Romans 8:9-10). That being so, we are part of His body, His flock, His family, His spiritual temple, only if we are indwelt by His Holy Spirit.

The church as a visible organization has existed since apostolic times. However, it is important to realize that the organization was always designed to facilitate the preaching of the Gospel. Inevitably, within the visible church were some false members. That has been true at every stage of history. And it has also been true that God has faithful ones who are not yet members of the visible church. They are members of the spiritual body of Christ but not yet members of His visible church. That is why Jesus emphasized that He would call these faithful ones into the fellowship of His church, "and there shall be one-fold, and one shepherd" (John 10:16). As we approach the second coming of our Lord, the great proclamation goes forth calling the faithful to leave the fellowship of churches that are not following divine counsel and to join the communion of those who are (Revelation 18:4).

Relevance: The most important consideration is that we belong to Christ so that He reigns in our lives. But also important, from His point of view, is that we belong to His true fold on earth. Then we can be a means of comfort and spiritual support to others of like faith, and they can be a source of strength to us also.

#### IV. What Are The Major Functions Of The Church

The church performs a lot of subsidiary functions for its members. Our concern here is to discover what the Bible says about the most important missions of the church,

##### The Word

20. What are we told concerning the preaching and teaching function of the church? Matthew 28:19-20; 2 Timothy 4:2; Revelation 14:6.
21. What kind of fellowship is the church designed to provide for its members? 1 John 1:7; Acts 2:42; compare Romans 1:12.
22. How is the love and power of Christ to be made known to the world? John 17:20-21.
23. To what extent should the church concern itself with a health and healing ministry? 3 John 2; Matthew 10:83 James 5:14-15.

Explanation: To present Christ and His message to the world is the major function of the Church. The Gospel includes the story of the Cross, the blessing of the new birth experience, the power available for holiness of life, a last-day message that the time of God's pre-advent judgment has arrived, and the time has come for His law to be exalted in the earth. His Sabbath day, as the sign of our allegiance to Him, is to be presented as an integral part of the Gospel message (Revelation 14:6-7).

Only as the members of the church are enjoying genuine Christian fellowship, loving one another in the true spirit of Christ, can they be effective witnesses for Him. The success of the preaching and teaching function of the church depends upon the relationship with Christ enjoyed by individual members and their relationship with one another. If pure reigns in the church, Christ will be exalted to the world!

The church also has a health ministry. The body of Christ is a spiritual body, but it is supported by a physical body.

If the physical bodies of His children are neglected, if they are weakened by intemperance, wrong eating habits, and neglect of work, rest, and exercise, the spiritual life of individuals and the church will suffer. Jesus healed bodies as part of the process by which He healed minds and hearts. And He wants His faithful believers to care for their bodies as the temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19-29), and to gently, patiently teach others to do likewise.

Relevance: The mission of the church is worldwide. The Gospel is to go to all the world before Jesus comes (Matthew 24:14). For that reason, every church member has a vital role to play in fulfilling the task assigned by Christ.

#### V. What Is Involved In Being A Church Member?

The answer to this question is embodied in what we have already discovered from the Bible. We will let the Lord summarize it in His own way.

#### The Word

24. What is the first step in becoming a member of Christ's church? Acts 4:4; 5:14; 16:31.
25. What is every true member of the body of Christ willing to do? John 14:15; 15:10.
26. What kind of service will the church member be willing to render? Luke 10:29-37.

Explanation: To believe in Christ is the most basic qualification for church membership. Believing in Christ is not just accepting the facts that the Bible teaches. It is surrendering your mind and body, and service to Him. It is allowing Him to reign in your heart by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 3:16-17). To be a member of the spiritual communion of all true believers in Jesus is foundational to being a member of His visible church on earth.

Second, every true member of Christ's church will be willing to do what He asks. Christ's commands are not burdensome to the committed Christian (1 John 5:3). He has received the divine power to be an overcomer (1 John 5:4; 2 Peter 1:4). He is willing to obey His Lord in everything because He knows that God's commands are given for our best good. There is not one of the ten commandments that the true member of Christ's church is not willing to obey. He will follow Jesus wherever He leads and, by His grace, do what He requests.

Third, the true member of Christ's church will be a friend to God and a servant to man. He will serve others because he loves them, The committed church member will work for others, irrespective of their nationality, class, or creed. Jesus died for all, loves all, and draws all to Himself. Hence, His true followers will unite their voices and their efforts with those of the Holy Spirit in saving lost souls from sin and bringing them into the warmth of church fellowship (Revelation 22:17). Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan illustrates beautifully how He wants His people to act towards others.

Relevance: Are you being a member of the spiritual communion of believers in Jesus Christ? You may become one right now! Receive Jesus into your heart, then you are His and He is yours. The next step is to join His visible church on earth. By searching His Word you can discover what He asks of you. Then, because you love Him, you may enter fully into the life of His church. What blessings and rewards there are! Only in eternity will we know the results of our dedication to Christ and His church. Let us plead with you just now to come to the Lord and come to His church.

#### Review Questions

1. True or False
  - a. Jesus appointed one man to rule His church.
  - b. In the apostolic church, there was a twofold ministry.
  - c. The church is meant to be primarily a social club.
  - d. Jesus wants there to be one church and one Shepherd.
2. Discuss: If all are guided by the same Holy Spirit, and all are allowing Christ to live in their lives, they should believe the same truths and be committed to the same mission on earth. Christ is not divided against Himself. What He taught is what He wants us to believe, and He makes it clear in His Word how He wants us to live. In other words, unity of belief and practice should characterize God's church. (See 1 Corinthians 1:10).