

The Circuit Rider

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“THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST”

“He (Jesus) asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets. He said unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matt. 16:13b-19)

Whenever we think about the “church” of Jesus Christ, usually our first thoughts are those of a structure made from wood, metal, brick, and mortar. However, the true “church” of our Lord Jesus Christ is not made from such material. It is comprised of people who have been “born again” (Jh. 3:3) by the transforming power of the “Holy Spirit” (Jh. 3:8). A person is joined to the “church” of Jesus Christ at the very moment of his conversion and should seek out a local assembly of which to be a part (Heb. 10:25). In the early days of the “church”, they met in people’s homes (Rom. 16:5, Philemon 2). It was later in church history where buildings for the purpose of worship were actually constructed. These early buildings were patterned somewhat after the concept of a local Jewish synagogue.

The visible “church” of Jesus Christ is simply a congregation of regenerated believers who ban together in the “fellowship” of “the gospel” and in the practice of their “faith” (Acts 2:41-47). The New Testament “church” is an assembly of people who observe the ordinances commanded by Christ and who are governed by His teachings. It is a “body” of Christian believers who exercise their spiritual gifts and privileges (I Cor. 12) under the leadership of God called pastors (I Tim. 3). It is a congregation of individuals who are actively involved in carrying out the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20).

In our text is recorded an instance which Jesus spoke directly of His “church”. Only twice in the New Testament is it recorded that Jesus actually used the word, “church”. But, it is a word that is used well over 100 times in the New Testament, most of which refers to an assembly of believers who have gathered in the name of Jesus Christ.

THE DEFINITION OF THE CHURCH

In the Greek, the word for “church” is ekklesia, which means, called out ones. In a general sense, it speaks of a gathering of citizens in a public place (Acts 7:38). Biblically, it refers to a group of believers who have been called out of humanity by God’s “grace” (Eph. 2:8) and set aside as belonging to the Lord. It’s a company of Christians as prescribed and ordained by God Himself (Jh. 1:12-13). The “church” of Jesus Christ is a “blood ... bought ... body” of believers who have been “purchased” by His death on the cross (Acts 20:28). Therefore, those who make up the “church” of the Lord Jesus Christ are not their “own”, but the possession of Christ (I Cor. 6:19-20). All believers of all ages, regardless of race, geography, culture, tradition, or denomination comprise the Lord’s true “church” (Rev. 5:9-10). In other words, God’s elect make up the “church” of Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:4-23).

When we think of the word, “church”, there are three different concepts that may come to mind. First, there is the local “church” which meets in the various villages, towns, and cities throughout different communities. Secondly, there is the universal (militant) “church” which refers to the total body of Christ all over the world who are still actively fighting the warfare of faith against the enemy of their souls. Thirdly, there is the triumphant “church”, consisting of all the redeemed who have died in the Lord and have already entered into His divine presence.

THE DESIGNER OF THE CHURCH

Christ makes it perfectly clear that He alone is the Founder and Designer of the “church” by calling it “my church”. The Bible profoundly states that “Christ” is the “head” of His “church” (Eph. 2:22-23, Col. 1:18-19). We should be able to identify with a local assembly, but no mortal man has the right to call it his “church”. We, as Christians, ought to have a local congregation that we can call our church home from the standpoint of an institutionalized setting. But, when a local church sincerely acknowledges Jesus Christ as “head”, there will be no place for power plays and no room for selfish control, only surrender to God’s authority over His “church”. When Jesus spoke to Peter, He was calling him by his new name, “Cephas, which is by interpretation, a stone” (Jh. 1:42). In the Greek, the name for “Peter” is PETROS, which means a small rock, or in this case, a chip of rock from the massive “rock”. The word “rock” in the Greek is Petra that spoke of the massive stone from which the small stone was taken. Christ is the “foundation” (I Cor. 3:11) “rock” of the “church” upon which all the “lively stones” (I Pet. 2:5) have come and been built upon.

Although every local church was designed to be autonomous, they were also to work together for the common good (I Cor. 5:4-13, II Cor. 2:5-8, Gal. 6:1, II Thess. 3:6, 14-15). A great biblical distinctive of a local church should be its autonomy. Many local congregations are controlled to some degree by a synod, convention, denomination, headquarters, or some individual. But, a local church should treasure and practice the scriptural teaching of local

autonomy. Such a position believes that a local church is free from outside interference and is under the authority of Christ alone and accountable only unto Him.

Even before Pentecost, we can see the coming together of the New Testament church as Jesus selected His twelve disciples and established the ordinance of baptism. On the eve of His crucifixion, as He ate His last Passover Meal with His disciples, He instituted the observance of the Lord's Supper. Through the church, Christ stressed the propagation of the gospel, the perpetuation of the ordinances, and the preparation of believers for Christian service.

THE DUTY OF THE CHURCH

The main purpose of the "church" is to worship God, study the Word, pray, and fellowship with those of like mind in the Lord (Col. 1:28). The church is to operate in the area of evangelism and missions as it proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. It is also to function in the role of discipleship as it teaches and leads the redeemed to "grow in grace" (II Pet. 3:18). The church of the Lord Jesus Christ should not only be a proclaimer of the "truth" (Jh. 14:6), but a protector and defender of it. When one sees the church of Jesus Christ, they ought to see a stabilizing force of godly influence in society. Unless it is bringing honor and glory to the name of Jesus, it is serving no useful purpose. If all we have is a "form of godliness" (II Tim. 3:5) and are not "filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18) of Christ, then all we do and say is in vain.

THE DURATION OF THE CHURCH

Although we're living in a world of uncertainties, the future of the church is steadfast and sure. While the commission to evangelize (that is telling the story of Jesus) has been given to the church, the responsibility of adding to it is solely that of the Lord's (Acts 2:47). It's possible for us to talk someone into joining a local assembly, but only Christ can make them a member of His body. Unregenerate church members have always been a thorn in the side of the church just like the mixed multitude that came out of Egypt was to Israel. Only genuine believers (the elect) are a part of the true church of Jesus Christ and therefore are fit subjects for believer's baptism and membership in a local assembly (Acts 8:36-37). People who enter the baptismal waters in a lost condition will come out of them the same way. If someone acknowledges Christ after being no more than dunked in the baptistery, then they need to be biblically baptized as an outward confession of their inward faith.

While it's true that the devil and all the forces of hell cannot "prevail against" the "church", the word "hell" that is used in our text is not gehenna, but hades. The word, gehenna, translated "hell" in the KJV speaks of the burning fires of eternal torment. The Greek word, hades, is also translated "hell" in the KJV and it speaks of either the grave or death. In our text, Jesus is declaring that the prison doors of death "shall not" overcome a genuine believer in Him. Death may claim the human body, but it cannot conquer the soul of a saint. That's because Christ has already won for us the "victory" by His own glorious resurrection (I Cor. 15:55-57). The death, burial, and resurrection of Christ guarantee for His church the same triumph over our death.

CLOSING

A local New Testament Church is the channel through which God has chosen to take the gospel message of saving grace to the ends of the earth. It is not subject to the authority of any external body, but only to Christ. Every member of a local assembly is responsible for seeking God's will individually and participate in the unifying of the body through surrender to the Holy Spirit. When one member of the body fails to function, as they ought, then the entire body will suffer.

There are several descriptions given in the New Testament that helps to depict the "church" of Jesus Christ. The "church" is called a "body" and is likened to the many "members that comprise a human body (I Cor. 12:12-27). The "church" is spoken of as a "holy priesthood", reminding us of the priesthood of all New Testament believers with no distinction between the priest and people as it was in the Old Testament (I Pet. 2:5). The "church" is referred to as "a chosen people" of God who proclaims loud and clear God's sovereignty in salvation (I Pet. 2:9-10). The "church" is said to be members of the "household of God" and "of faith" (Gal. 6:10, Eph. 2:19). The "church" is allegorized as the "wife" or "bride" of Christ (Eph. 5:22-32, Rev. 19:7-9, 21:9, 22:17). The "church" is an expression of the "kingdom" of God as Christ rules and reigns in the hearts of His elect people (Col. 1:13).

Being the "church" of Jesus Christ, we ought to be practicing our privilege of prayer and seek out the Lord's "will" (I Jh. 5:14-15) in every individual and congregational decision we face. We ought to be students of the Word of God, learning and growing in the faith. We ought to be personally involved in Christian service and use whatever spiritual gifts God has given to us. We ought to be teaching our children and grounding our families in the Christian Faith. We ought to be engaging in evangelism, missions, discipleship, witnessing, and outreach to the glory of God. We ought to be a part of a local assembly, actively participating for not only our good, but also the well being of our homes, and the benefit of the body of Christ.

MINISTRY UPDATE

The distribution of "*The Circuit Rider*" continues to grow. The Lord has now enabled us to expand our postal mailing of this quarterly Bible Study. Many of you who have been receiving this by e-mail will now be receiving it by regular mail. We're also glad to report that the Book of Esther has been downloaded to the audio page of our website. Our goal is to have the Book of James ready for broadcast by the first part of 2009. The worldwide response to our web page has far exceeded my expectation; therefore, we plan to definitely invest in keeping this arm of our ministry going. Also, I'll be checking into the possibility of purchasing some radio time toward the last half of this year. Thank you for your support and prayers.

Because of His Sovereign Grace ...BWM