

The Church (Part Two)

Introduction

We begin this final lesson in the series with a beautiful New Testament verse: 'But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.' That's 1 Peter 2:9. There's no richer description of God's church than that. It depicts the church as the product of God's call to people in darkness to come into His light.

Do you want to bring the picture into even sharper focus? Let me read 1 John 1:7: 'But if we walk in the light, as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanses us from all sin.' John shows that the fellowship of Christians results from walking in the light or surrendering to God's word. Thus understood, the church is an exciting topic, not the depressing theme presented by much of today's confused and contradictory religion.

Our continued study of the church is an attempt to understand the nature and activities of that early body. We have a particularly enjoyable assignment with this lesson, because it's mostly concerned with the individual's relationship with the church. First, we look at how each colony of Christians was organized. This brings us to the first detailed diagram at the left center of our lesson sheet.

Christ the Head of the Church

Already we've been prepared for the most important component of the church's organization, headship, from Ephesians 1:22, 23 and other passages. We have seen that Jesus was declared the head of the church. We've also noticed that He provided His guidance and instruction for His body through inspired men, especially apostles and prophets. Understandably, then, Paul can tell the Ephesians that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone. That's found in Ephesians 2:20, also recorded on the study sheet.

A Royal Priesthood

To make clear a fundamental relationship of all Christians enjoy with God in the church, I'm asking you to turn to 1 Peter 2:9. Of course, 1 Peter's towards the back of your New Testament, but before 1 John, after Hebrews and James. This is the passage with which our study began. At this point, we're looking at the second phrase Peter uses to describe God's people: 'A royal priesthood.' The expression emphasizes the right Christians have to stand before God without other human beings interfering, no other earthly mediator, intercessor, or priest.

Now would you please look back at verse five: 'You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.' This verse draws together four important points. First, God established through Christians a spiritual house or family. Second, this family is intended to be his holy priesthood. Third, the priesthood is to offer up spiritual sacrifices, not animal, vegetable, or liquid offerings as in the Old Testament. And finally, all sacrifices are offered through Jesus.

These facts help us lift our thinking out of the mold of modern religion, where there's often a two-tier system of clergy and laity. While the clergy isn't necessarily seen as a priesthood through which the laity reaches God, it still makes a distinction between people that's foreign to the New Testament. Our understanding of Jesus' church must include the view of a priesthood made up of all believers. This isn't to deny, though, that there were specially defined works in the church. Some of them are written in the diagram: elders, deacons, preachers, and teachers.

Works in the Church

I say some, because there were other specific works. For example, in Ephesians 4:11, Paul says that included in God's gifts to man were apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. So there we have apostles and prophets, in addition to works mentioned on the diagram. However, these works are perpetuated today through the New Testament writings. Living apostles aren't either necessary nor available. The other works aren't performed through the written word, but are prescribed by that word. All these works were designed to equip the saints to serve, that's intimated in verse twelve.

Elders, Overseers, and Shepherds

Philippians 1:1 opens a window on a typical New Testament congregation. Let's turn to that passage. It's immediately after Ephesians, you'll remember. I want you to notice two groups of workers that Paul includes among those he greets. Philippians 1:1: Paul and Timothy, bond servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons. Yes, overseers and deacons. You'll see that overseers is written with the word elders on the diagram, and also with shepherds or pastors.

To see why, let's turn to Acts chapter twenty and look at verse seventeen. The twentieth chapter of Acts records Paul's journey from Macedonia to Jerusalem. This verse tells of a special meeting he arranged along the way, at a place called Miletus. Acts 20:17: And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church. Now drop down please to verse twenty-eight and notice what Paul, as he spoke to these elders, called them. Verse twenty-eight: Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to feed the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

First, you'll see them called overseers. In older translations, the word 'bishops' is used here. But overseers provide a virtually literal translation of the word used in the original. There's another word I want you to see, and it's pretty well obscured in our translation. Behind the word feed, to feed the Church of God, the word used here means to shepherd or to tend. It's from this word

the word pastors is derived. That helps you see that all of the words in that section of the diagram, elders, overseers, shepherds, or pastors, refer to the same men. Each word shines more light on the men and their work. They were older men who were overseers and caretakers of God's family.

Deacons, Evangelists, and Teachers

The other classification of workers mentioned in Philippians 1:1 was deacons. This is a word carried over into English from a Greek word meaning servants, though not overseers or shepherds, and not necessarily as old as the overseers. Deacons were to ensure that necessary work of Jesus' body was done. The word servants indicates as much. We've made earlier reference to Ephesians 4:11, where Paul spoke of evangelists and teachers. Some see teachers here as being descriptive of pastors. Even if that should be true, there are other passages which speak of a separate and distinct work of teachers.

A careful reading of 2 Timothy four verses two and five, passages not on your study sheet, will reveal that an evangelist is a preacher or proclaimer of the word of God. A teacher, on the other hand, is one who communicates God's word to another, without that communication necessarily including the idea of proclamation. Now we move to the worship of the Lord's church. Jesus once said to one of his apostles, 'Have I been so long with you, and you have not come to know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father,' John 14:9.

Worship in Spirit and Truth

It's an exciting teaching of the New Testament that this one whom we know as Jesus was with the Father before being clothed in earthly flesh through his mother Mary. See John 1:1-3. He knew the worship God had received from man for centuries. Since Moses' day, the Israelites had, by God's instruction, concentrated their worship in a special location. First in a tent-like structure or tabernacle, later in a temple at Jerusalem. In John four, a chapter to which we should now turn, Jesus said that the time had arrived for a dramatic change. The location of worship was no longer important, but two special characteristics of worshipers were.

He said God was looking for worshipers with these two qualities of worship. Let's read verse 24, John 4:24: 'God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship Him in spirit and truth.' To worship in spirit is to be a God-sensitive, God-centered worshipper, one who understands that worship's a deliberate activity of the human spirit in adoration of its God. In spirit calls for the right attitude. To worship in truth calls for people who deeply respect what's right, who love God, who pledge to truth, who worship not to please themselves or impress others, but to live truth. Those who worship in truth worship as God pleases and directs, not as they please.

The Lord's Supper

But Jesus doesn't only give this bold statement of principle. He leads us into a more specific understanding of how we may worship God. The Apostle Paul explained how he did this when he wrote to the recently formed church in Corinth. Please turn to 1 Corinthians 11. Here we look

at a passage in which Paul puts into writing an account the Lord had given him. It states how Jesus asked people of the future to remember Him. We'll read verses 23 to 26.

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus, in the night in which he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Notice these significant points, Paul wrote more than two decades after Jesus had been raised from death and taken back to God, but he said Jesus left a simple procedure with bread and cup by which his followers could remember his body and blood. They were doing this when Paul wrote, and they were to do it until Jesus comes again. These verses are set in a wider context. It's one in which Paul discussed the Corinthians' behavior and attitudes when they assembled for worship. Although he was critical of ungodly aspects of their conduct, he recognized and approved their custom of regular assemblies. See, for example, chapter ten, verses sixteen and seventeen, and chapter eleven, verses eighteen, twenty, and thirty-three.

Prayer and Singing

Also, from the larger context, we can see facets of their worship other than the bread and cup. In chapters twelve through fourteen, Paul discussed miraculous abilities or gifts given many early Christians for the full revealing and establishing of Jesus' teaching. Near the close of that discussion, in chapter fourteen and verse fifteen, and that's written on the sheet, he wrote: 'What is the outcome then? I shall pray with the spirit, and I shall pray with the mind also. I shall sing with the spirit, and I shall sing with the mind also.' The verse is interesting because it shows the need for both spiritual and mental involvement in worship. But it's the prayer and singing that claim our attention at this point. They are both seen as components of first century worship. You might like to take a break, and we'll conclude the study when you're ready.

Break

And observe two more interesting facts that have a bearing on the disciples' worship. 1 Corinthians 16: verses 1 and 2. Paul here refers to a special collection he'd been working on for some months, amongst the churches of Asia Minor and Europe. Through this, the needs of poor Christians in Judea would be met.

Giving on the First Day of the Week

1 Corinthians 16 verses 1 and 2. Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia. So do you also. On the first day of every week, let each one of you put aside and save as he may prosper, that no collection be made when I come. The first relevant point is that all able Christians participated in giving. The second is that the giving took place at a common time, the first day of the week, or Sunday.

While the epistles contain several references to the worship of Christians, this is the only passage that gives any significance to a particular day. But being aware of these facts, we see a clear pattern emerging when we turn to Acts 20 and look at verse 7. This verse records another interlude in Paul's aforementioned journey to Jerusalem. That stop included a meeting for a specific purpose at a specific time.

The Lord's Day

Acts 20 and verse 7. And on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to depart the next day. And he prolonged his message until midnight. You'll recall that in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul spoke of the Lord's Supper or breaking of bread as something they did regularly. For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, but he didn't say when. This verse sheds light on when the Church at Troas did it. And it's the same day as that on which Paul instructed the churches to make their collection, the first day of the week.

When at the end of the New Testament, Revelation 1:10, we read of a day called the Lord's Day. The passages we've already noticed would point to that as being the first day of the week. Interestingly, Christian writers from the period immediately after the New Testament speak of the first day of the week as being the Lord's Day. I would also like you to notice from Acts 20:7 that when they gathered, Paul preached to them. The reading and preaching of God's Word were also part of those first century meetings.

Assembling Together

This is more clearly seen from the Book of 1 Timothy. You might care to note some examples. 1 Timothy chapter 4, verses 6, 11, 13, and 16. From the first few chapters in Acts, it's apparent that in the earliest days in Jerusalem, Christians met very often, even daily, to praise God. But beyond Jerusalem, there doesn't appear to have been the same opportunity for such regular togetherness. Yet the final scripture for this topic, Hebrews 10:25, shows that there were regular meetings which all members were encouraged to attend, doubtless according to the first day of the week pattern we've already seen.

Let's turn to Hebrews ten twenty-five to get the context for this verse. We'll begin reading at verse 23. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another. And all the more as you see the day drawing near. Well, that's a brief glimpse of the worship of the early church.

New Testament Worship Contrasted with the Old

If we'd had time to see the worship of Israel in the Law of Moses and later Old Testament books, you'd have seen a striking contrast between it and New Testament worship. Old Testament

worship was outward and ritualistic in nature, while New Testament worship was inward and simple. In the Old Testament they had such features as a specially appointed and robed priesthood, animal sacrifices, incense burning, and at least later in the period, various instruments on which they played music. But you've already seen the simple way in which the early Christians worshipped, remembering Jesus' death, singing, hearing the Word, praying.

The Work of the Church

It's time, though, to look at the work of the New Testament church. For this purpose, we'll turn first to another familiar passage, 1 Timothy 3:15. In this verse, Paul tells us about the church's work simply by some designations he uses for it. 1 Timothy 3:15. But in case I am delayed I write so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth. Notice, please, the first designation for the church, the household of God. It presents the church as God's family.

In the final section of the lesson, we'll see again that at conversion the Lord adds people to His family, in which they're to be faithful until death. All their spiritual development therefore is to take place in the church. The church is comparable to a human family in which children are nurtured and their needs supplied. God's church exists as the context of nurture for His children. In view of this, it's not surprising to read many New Testament passages that teach Christians to be concerned for fellow members of Jesus' body. Overseers and evangelists especially are instructed to prepare others for the building up of the body.

In James 1:27, we read a simple statement of what constitutes pure religion. It mirrors the degree of concern the Church of Christ often demonstrated in the first century. This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father. To visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. But let's look again at the passage from First Timothy. Do you see how Paul describes the church in the latter part of the verse? The pillar and support of the truth.

When we realize that it's the truth that makes man free according to Jesus in John 8:32, we see the vitality of the church's role. The liberating truth, or the gospel, must be held before enslaved mankind. It's the church's job to do it. It's the pillar and support of the truth. Can you think of duties given any institution apart from the home which are comparable to the exciting work God entrusted to His church. We come now to the final section of our study. And look at the lower right corner of the page, Membership in the Church.

Membership in the Church

The circle in the diagram represents the Church. Inside the circle are three statements based on three verses of scripture. Each statement indicates the connection between following Jesus and being a member of the church. We've already looked at one of the passages, Acts 20:28. In this verse, it says the Lord purchased the church with His blood. The two other verses are of similar import. They're found in Ephesians chapter five. The first is verse twenty-three, the second verse twenty-five. We'll read both verses.

First Ephesians 5 and verse 23. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church. He himself being the Saviour of the body. Please observe Paul's statement that Jesus is the Saviour of the body or church. Now let's read verse 25. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself up for her. Our reason for noticing these three verses in connection with membership is to see that Jesus bought the church with His blood. He's its Savior. He gave himself for it. Each expression's another way of saying the same thing, isn't it?

What these facts say is this: when people were saved, they were part of the church. To be saved or become a Christian meant to be purchased with the blood of Jesus, so that He was Savior, the One who had given Himself for the sinner's guilt. To be forgiven was to become a member of the church. You'll recall from lesson four that in order for a sinner to follow Jesus and call on His name, he had to be baptized. Through baptism, according to Galatians 3:27, he came into Christ. But in that lesson, we also saw that being in Christ was the same as being in His church.

This means that when people heard the Gospel of Jesus and were baptized, they were forgiven of their sins and made part of the church. The last three verses on the sheet, Acts 2:38, 41 and 47, verses we've read several times, make this fact beautifully clear. In Bible times, the center of the apostles' preaching was the crucified Lord. The church was started in city after city when people surrendered to Jesus and were forgiven. Isn't it exciting to realize that Jesus still lives and saves folk from their sins? Surely, He still adds the saved to His church.

Conclusion

Some years ago in Los Angeles, California, I held an ear of corn grown from ancient grain found in a pyramid of Egypt. How exciting to touch corn so closely related to the grain growing in Egypt when young Moses lived there! But even more exciting's the fact that we can plant God's spiritual seed, His Word, in human hearts today and see people become Christians, just as in Bible times, and together form His church as in Bible times. Well, our introductory Bible survey has come to an end.

I've attempted to stress the place God gives you in His wonderful plan. In doing this, it's been my aim to help you discover the Bible for yourself, by having you look up and read many of the passages and gain a reasonable level of proficiency in finding your way through the Bible. But as we began this meaningful encounter, so we end it with a choice set before you.

The first decision was to take the course or not to take the course. The second is a much more momentous decision: to follow Jesus or not to follow Jesus. You may have already sought the assistance of someone, probably the person supplying this material to you, to be baptized. If so, may I congratulate you. I suggest you keep in close touch with that person to get the help you need to grow in Christ. And I know you'll want to share Jesus with others.

But if you haven't been forgiven, why not? If you believe Jesus is God's Son, our Christ, why not talk with your contact person and secure any help you need to become a Christian? If there are still some barriers to your understanding, determine steps to remove those barriers as soon as possible. Nothing need prevent you from enjoying the life that Jesus brought to the earth. Remember, what you need to know to be God's child is Jesus, not a lot of detail.

There are no lists of rules to learn or examinations to pass. You don't have to gain the church's approval, just faith in Jesus that will cause you to be immersed into Him for your forgiveness. You'll then have a secure life in which you're accepted for Jesus' sake, and in which you follow His teaching. I commend you for persevering in this study. And thank you for the privilege of studying the Bible with you.

How wonderful! Through Jesus we can all, if we so choose, spend eternity together with God. If you now complete the final evaluation sheet, your contact person will either check it when visiting you, or take it away for checking and return it to you. I close with these words of Jesus in Matthew 11:

Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my load is light. If you trust Jesus, God will bless you.