

## The Church That You Can Read About In The Bible

by Tim Haile

The question often arises over *which church* is the *right church*. This question cannot be honestly and objectively answered by looking within ourselves. Jeremiah the prophet said, "*Oh Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself, it is not in man who walks, to direct his own steps*" (Jer. 10:23). In things religious, we must not "*lean to our own understanding*" We must acknowledge God's ways (Prov. 3:5-6). After all, "*as the heavens are higher than the earth,*" God's ways and thoughts are higher than ours (Isa. 55:8-9). If we want to know which church is the right church, we must look in the Bible.

### Distinguishing Marks of the Lord's Church

The New Testament paints a very clear picture of the church. By reading the New Testament, and hearing it taught, we gain an understanding of the church (Eph. 3:4-5). We read of its *founder, time of origin, place of origin, designations, standard of authority, entrance requirements, nature, work, worship and organization*. Basically, the Bible tells us everything we need to know about the church. Let us read and consider some of the important and distinct identifying features of the New Testament church.

#### 1. The church of the Bible was founded by Jesus Christ (Matthew 16:18).

Consider these statements from God's word:

- a. "*Every house is built by someone...*" (Hebrews 3:4).
- b. The church is "*the house of God*" (1 Timothy 3:15).
- c. "*Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it...*" (Psalm 127:1).
- d. Jesus said, "*Upon this rock I will build my church...*" (Matthew 16:18).

Like every other organization, every church has a founder. Human churches can all be traced back to their human founders. For example, the Lutheran church was established in Germany, in 1517, by the followers of Martin Luther. The Mennonites were established in Holland, in 1525, by Menno Simons. The Baptist church was established in England, in 1611, by John Smyth. John Wesley established the Methodist church in England, in 1729. The Mormon church was established in 1829, in New York, by Joseph Smith. Obviously, the church you can read about in the Bible was not established by any of these people. They came along far too late. By reading the Bible, one learns that Jesus Christ established His own church. He did not leave this to someone else. As He predicted, this was done not long after His death on the cross. Based upon the rock solid foundation of His own divinity, Jesus proclaimed,

*"Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of death shall not prevail against it"* (Matthew 16:18).

Passages like Acts 2:47 and 8:3 prove that the church was indeed established, just as Jesus said it would be. Notice that Jesus called the church "my" church. This denotes *ownership*. Paul said that Jesus purchased the church "*with His own blood*" (Acts 20:28). The church that you can read about in the Bible was established by Jesus. Those have "labored in vain" who have established their own churches! A church that was established by anyone other than Jesus Christ cannot be the church of the Bible.

#### 2. The church of the Bible was established in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, on the first Pentecost following the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We know that Jesus would establish his church some time after His death, for He said that death would not prevent or “prevail against” Him (Matt. 16:18). But *how long* after His death would this be? By simply reading the Scriptures, we are able to pinpoint the exact day of the establishment of the Lord’s church. Jesus went on to tell Peter,

*“And I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven... Verily I say unto you (apostles, th), There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom”* (Matthew 16:19, 28).

Notice that Jesus called the church, of verse 18, the “kingdom.” He also said that this kingdom would be established in the lifetime of at least some of the apostles. So, the church/kingdom would be established some time *after* the death of Christ, but some time *before* the death of all of the apostles! We are closing in on the time of the establishment of the church, but more information is needed. Mark’s account adds, that the apostles would “*see the kingdom come with power*” (Mark 9:1). Before His heavenly ascension, Jesus told the apostles that this “power” would come “*with the Holy Ghost*” (Acts 1:8). Now, if we can find out when the apostles received the Holy Ghost we can find when the church was established! This is actually very easy to find. All one has to do is continue reading into chapter two of the book of Acts. When he reaches verse 3 of Acts chapter 2 he has found the answer. The Holy Ghost came on the first Pentecost following the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. By merely connecting the things that Jesus connected, we are forced to conclude that the church was established on that same Pentecost! A church that was established at any other time cannot be the church of the Bible!

### **3. The church of the Bible was established in the city of Jerusalem.**

As noted above, the churches of men have been established in various locations, from Germany, to England, Holland, and North America. Now, let us consider another important identifier of the New Testament church. Along with specifying *when* the church would be established, Jesus also specified *where* it would be established. According to Luke’s account of the ascension, just before departing, Jesus told His apostles,

*“And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high”* (Luke 24:49).

The apostles were told to wait in “the city of Jerusalem” until they received power from on high. Let me remind you of our previous observations:

- a. The church is the kingdom (Matthew 16:18-19).**
- b. The kingdom would be established in the lifetime of at least some of the apostles (Mark 9:1).**
- c. The kingdom would come with power (Mark 9:1).**
- d. The power would come with the Holy Ghost (Acts 1:8).**

Luke 24:49 adds one more important piece of information about the New Testament church. If we were to add a point “e” to the above list, it would be:

- e. The power would come in the city of Jerusalem (Luke 24:49).**

This pinpoints the exact *place* where the church would be established. According to these passages, the church of Christ was to be established in the city of Jerusalem, on the first Pentecost following Christ’s resurrection. These apostles were definitely *in Jerusalem* on that Pentecost (Acts 1:12; 2:5).

This accords with Isaiah's prophecy which stated that, following the establishment of the Lord's "house" (remember 1 Timothy 3:15 – "house" = "church"), the "*word of the Lord would go forth from Jerusalem*" (Isa, 2:3). Acts 1:8 says that after the miraculous endowments of the Holy Ghost upon the apostles, the gospel would be preached in all nations, "*beginning at Jerusalem.*" Isaiah's kingdom prophecy was fulfilled **in Jerusalem**, on the first Pentecost following the resurrection of Christ. Any church that was established in any other place cannot be the church of the Bible.

#### **4. The church of the Bible is designated by certain scriptural terms and phrases.**

Jesus said, "*I will build my church.*" This church would therefore be the church *belonging to Christ*. It would not be the church of "Ellen G. White," or "Mary Baker Eddy," or "Joseph Smith," It would be *the church of Jesus Christ!* It would belong to Him. He had established it, and He would be its *head* (Eph. 5:23).

The Bible uses several different phrases to describe different aspects of the church. As noted above, the expression "house of God" is used in 1 Timothy 3:15. Ephesians 2:21 uses the term "temple" to describe the church. These emphasize the *holy character* of the church, and its relationship to God. John 15 uses the imagery of a vine with its branches to emphasize fellowship with Christ. Of course, the church is not actually a "house," or a "temple," or a "vine." These merely describe different *aspects* of the church. The apostle Paul did use an expression that does emphasize the true identity and ownership of the New Testament church. He wrote,

*"Salute one another with a holy kiss. **The churches of Christ salute you** (emphasis mine, th)"* (Romans 16:16).

Other descriptors may be found, but this one encompasses them all. When writing to the Corinthians Paul referred to the church there as the *church of God* (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1). Keep in mind that Acts 20:28 calls the church the *church of God*. However, Paul went on to say, "*which He purchased with His own blood.*" Obviously, the person of deity that Paul here had in mind was *Christ*. It was not God, the Father who died on the cross! Interestingly, Paul wrote the Roman letter from the city of Corinth. This means that in Romans 16:16, Paul called the "church of God" at Corinth a "church of Christ." Salvation is in the name of *Christ*. In fact, "*there is no other name under heaven, given among men, whereby we must be saved*" (Acts 4:12). In Romans 16:16 Paul referred to all of the local churches with whom he associated as, "**churches of Christ.**" It is only proper and fitting, that as the "bride" of Christ, the church should wear His name out of respect and honor (Rev. 21:2; 2 Cor. 11:2). One thing should be clear to the honest Bible reader: The expression "church of Christ" is certainly *biblical*. We should not be afraid to call ourselves, *collectively*, by that which the Holy Ghost called us.

*Individually*, saints were simply called "Christians" (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Pet. 4:16). They were not hyphenated – Christians: They were just "Christians." A church that is called by other names (unbiblical names) cannot be the church of the Bible.

#### **5. The church of the Bible accepted only the scriptures as their guide of faith and practice.**

The early church "*continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine...*" (Acts 2:42). The "*apostles' doctrine*" is simply the *doctrine of Christ* (see 2 John 9-11). To *listen to* an apostle was to *listen to Christ* (Luke 10:16). Paul said that the things he wrote were "*the commandments of the Lord*" (1 Cor. 14:37). The inspired scriptures completely furnish us with all of the information we need to obey God (2 Tim. 3:16-17). The scriptures are "*perfect*" (Jas. 1:25). Something that is *perfect* cannot be improved upon. In fact, God condemns any attempt to make such "improvements." Modifications to God's word are

expressly prohibited (Galatians 1:8-9; Rev. 22:18-19). A church that has other creeds, or that refuses to follow the scriptures as their sole creed cannot be the church of the Bible.

## **6. The church of the Bible accepts those as members, who believe, repent, confess, and are baptized in water for the remission of sins.**

The book of the “Acts of the Apostles” doubles as an account of many “acts of conversion.” In Acts 2, we see thousands of penitent believers being baptized “for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:37-41). As a result of their actions, God “added them” to His church (Acts 2:47). This pattern continues throughout the book of Acts:

- a. Acts 2:36-41 (Pentecost)**
- b. Acts 8:12 (Samaritans)**
- c. Acts 8:36-38 (Eunuch)**
- d. Acts 9:1-18; 22:16 (Saul)**
- e. Acts 10:43-48 (Cornelius)**
- f. Acts 16:14-15 (Lydia)**
- g. Acts 16:30-33 (Philippian Jailer)**
- h. Acts 18:8 (Corinthians)**

One is “*translated into the kingdom*” by being delivered from the power of darkness (Col. 1:13). To enter the kingdom, one must be “born again” (John 3:3-5). Being “born again” equips one with a clean conscience (1 Peter 1:22-23). Peter also said that baptism equips one with a clean conscience (1 Peter. 3:21). The new birth must be water baptism!

- Faith and baptism save one from his sins (Mark 16:16).**
- Faith and baptism allow one to put on Christ (Galatians 3:26-27).**
- Faith and baptism allow God to put one into the church (Acts 2:41,47).**

According to the above passages, the same process and conditions that save a person, make him a Christian, and add him to the church. Any church that has other entrance requirements, or that refuses to accept these biblical requirements, cannot be the church of the Bible.

## **7. The church of the Bible has a spiritual mission.**

Too many churches are rapidly moving towards the social gospel. There was a time when the word “church” suggested *seriousness, holiness* and *spirituality*. Today, the word suggests fun, potlucks, ball games, arts and crafts, entertainment and recreation. What was the nature and purpose of the church that you can read about in the Bible? Did it focus its energy and resources on food and fun? No, it did not.

*“The kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but peace, righteousness, and joy in the Holy Ghost” (Rom. 14:17).*

Jesus made the same point to Pilate, in John 18:36. He said, “*My kingdom is not of this world...*” Jesus meant that His kingdom would not be patterned after the world’s designs. It would not necessarily satisfy the world’s desires.

The church’s mission is not to entertain or recreate. That work belongs to the home, not to the church. Paul said the church is “*the pillar and ground of the truth*” (1 Tim. 3:15). It has a *spiritual* mission. In the Bible, we read of the church gathering for worship, prayer and Bible study. Not one time do we read of the church gathering for the purpose of sports, entertainment and recreation. Some will cite

the fact that local churches sometimes fed the hungry. Yes, limited benevolent work was sometimes conducted, but this was towards *needy saints* (Romans 15:25-26). It served the purpose of satisfying a legitimate need. It was not for mere *social* purposes! It was never towards the well off, or towards non-saints! Some have literally hi-jacked noble Bible words and concepts like “church” and “worship,” and they have used them to advance their own agenda. In too many places, churches are more like *country clubs* and their worship is more like *pep-rallies*. Folks need to get back to the Bible. Any church that focuses its time, energy and resources on social activities like entertainment and recreation cannot be the church of the Bible.

## **8. The church of the Bible practices the works of evangelism, edification and limited benevolence.**

The inspired scriptures sufficiently furnish us “unto all good works,” so if we wish to know what works are “the works of God,” we must look to the scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16-17; John 6:28). By reading the New Testament, one finds three distinct works that God has assigned to the local church. As we noted above, the church is the “pillar and ground” (support) of the truth. The church’s primary mission is to educate people in the word of God. There are two basic sub-categories: evangelism and edification.

**a). Evangelism** is quite simply, the preaching of the gospel to others. Local churches spread the gospel by preaching in their immediate area (Acts 8:4), and by supporting men to preach the gospel in other areas (Acts 13:1-3).

**b). Edification** is the building up of member saints. God’s word is the standard by which men are edified (Acts 20:32). Ephesians 4:13-16 speaks of this edification. Members need to be taught in such a way that they will not be “carried away by every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14). By speaking the truth in love, men and women are built up in the faith (vs. 15).

**c). Benevolence** is the other work of the local church. This involves physical and financial support given by the church to needy saints. In every example of New Testament benevolence, the recipients were *needy*, and they were *Christians* (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35; 6:1-4; 11:29-30; Rom. 15:24-26; 2 Cor. 8:4,12; 2 Cor. 9:12-13). This constitutes a pattern of authority that must be followed.

Any church that refuses to do these works is not the church in the Bible. Furthermore, any church that does more works than those authorized in scripture is now the church of the Bible.

## **9). The church of the Bible worships in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24).**

God has never allowed men to simply worship Him as they please. Men have always been instructed with regard to worship. Some consider it “cold and ritualistic” to follow instructions in worship. Actually, it is called “faith.” It was by “faith” that Abraham “offered up Isaac” (Heb. 11:17). And it is faith that leads us to investigate the scriptures to find out what kind of worship God expects.

Worship that is “in spirit and in truth” is worship that does *what* God says, in *the way* He says do it! In the New Testament we read of the following items being practiced in the assembly:

- a. The Lord’s Supper (Matthew 26:26-29; Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:23-29).
- b. Giving as we have been prospered (1 Cor. 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 9:7).
- c. Praying (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 14:16).
- d. Singing (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16).
- e. Bible Study (Acts 2:42; 20:7).

Notice from the passages that two of these items are restricted to first-day-of-the-week services – the Lord’s Supper and giving (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2). Any church that refuses to worship God according to the prescribed New Testament pattern is not the church of the Bible.

## **10. The church of the Bible is organized under elders.**

The *universal* church has no organization except Christ as its head (Eph. 1: 22-23; 5:23). The *local* church is different. God has revealed a clear blueprint for the organization of the local church.

The term “elder” may sometimes refer merely to an “older” man, certain contexts do assign a special meaning and significance to the word. 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9 list qualifications for the *office of the elder or bishop*. Elders are the leaders of New Testament churches. Member saints are to submit to their leadership and direction (Heb. 13:7,17). Acts 14:23 speaks of them being appointed *in every church*. Titus was left in Crete to appoint elders in every city (Tit. 1:5). Paul addressed himself to the elders, deacons and saints at Philippi (Phil. 1:1). Verses 17 and 28 of Acts chapter 20 demonstrates the interchangeability of the terms “elder” “bishop” and “pastor.” This same interchangeability is seen in 1 Peter 5:1-2. It should be observed that God’s pattern consistently speaks of a multiplicity of elders in each church. There must be 2 or more in a church to be scriptural. The concept of “one-man rule” is foreign to the New Testament. The present day “pastor system” is therefore wrong. Actually, it is wrong for two reasons. It confuses “pastors” with “preachers.” Ephesians 4:11 distinguishes “pastors” from “evangelists.” And it allows a single “pastor” to rule the local church. This is contrary to God’s plan.

“Deacons” are not the same as “elders.” Their qualifications are given in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. Deacons are specially qualified servants of the local church. The elder’s work focuses more on the *spiritual* than does the deacon’s. God’s wisdom is seen in how these two functions compliment each other, providing a solid infrastructure for church work and growth. Any church that refuses to follow God’s pattern of organization is not the church of the Bible.

### **Conclusion**

By reading the Bible one is able to develop a clear picture of the Lord’s church. It is a church whose allegiance is to Christ, its founder. This allegiance motivates its members to honor Christ by wearing His name, both collectively and individually. This church was established in Jerusalem, on the first Pentecost after the resurrection of Christ. It respects the authority of Christ in everything that it does (Col. 3:17). It is not an entertainment organization. Its focus is on spiritual matters. It worships God the way it is told in the New Testament, and it is organized according to that same standard. If you have found such a church then give it all of the encouragement and support you can. If you have not found such a church, then keep looking!

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