

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

61 What Is the Doctrine of the Church?

Editors Note: This lesson was not originally included in the corpus of work that Pastor Christensen prepared under the overarching title, **Questions We Want Answered**. He prepared it separately for a church membership class. The editor thought it was of such helpfulness that it should be included in this book

WHAT WE BELIEVE

We believe that the true church is composed of all such persons who through saving faith in Jesus Christ have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit and are united together in the body of Christ of which He is the head.

We believe that only those who are thus members of the true church shall be eligible for membership in the local church.

We believe that Jesus Christ is the Lord and Head of the church, and that every local church has the right under Christ to decide and govern its affairs.

INTRODUCTION

Timothy Dwight expressed the feeling of untold millions when he wrote, "I love Thy Church, O God! Her walls before thee stand, dear as the apple of Thine eye, and graven on Thy hand." Indeed, those who have met the challenge of the Lord in the formation of His church understand the meaning of these words.

The words "*church*" and "*churches*" appear about 110 times in our New Testament. Ninety of these occurrences have to do with local congregations or assemblies, and the remaining twenty references have the universal or catholic church in view. Rightly understood, there is a true catholic church. It does not belong to Rome or to Canterbury. It does not belong to any other ecclesiastical seat. Moreover, it is not confined to the church in any given time; rather, it spans the centuries. The true or universal church overcomes the separation caused by death and forges a bond with those who have entered into their rest. The redeemed on earth and the redeemed in heaven, these all compose the catholic church. Further, it is a "holy" catholic church made so by the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (Hebrews 10:10) The overall purpose of our Lord is to present "*to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any*

such thing." (Ephesians 8:27) Let us be sure to understand that "*churches*" may come and go, but the "*church*" (local-universal) is eternal. The Scriptures portray the local or visible Church as a microcosm of this true eternal church, and may be understood in the following way.

I. THE FOUNDATION OF THE CHURCH:

The foundation upon which the true church is built is the person and work of Jesus Christ. For that reason, the church will not fail. If such were to be built upon the power and wisdom of men, failure would be certain. Jesus' words to Peter recorded in Matthew 16:18a, "*upon this rock*" (*petra*) "*I will build my church*" are particularly significant. (Literally: the church of me) I Corinthians 3:11 warns against the thought of another foundation. (**Illustration: Castle Of Banias**)

II. THE FORMATION OF THE CHURCH:

Jesus said, "*I will build my church.*" This He continues to do through the centuries and across the lands of earth. He gathers whom He will. He it is who builds. No power shall stand against this ingathering to stop it. The results of this work produces a church which may be identified as "true" and "local." There are several Biblical expressions which are synonyms for the "true" church. It is called the "invisible church," "the universal, church," "*the body of Christ.*" (Ephesians 1:23), "*the temple of God,*" (I Corinthians 3:16) "*the called out ones,*" (Matthew 16:18) "*the pillar and ground of truth,*" (I Timothy 3:15) and the "*heavenly Jerusalem.*" (Hebrews 12:22-23) A workable definition of the true church is "that community of believers, whether in heaven or earth, who believe in and are sanctified in Christ and who are joined to Him as their head."

It is an invisible church because some of its members are in heaven, some have not been born, and inasmuch as its members are located all over the world, there cannot be a visible gathering at any one time. This is the church which is known to God. It will be identified when Christ returns for his bride. This is one of the important teachings of I Thessalonians 4:13-18. Until that time its absolute identification is known only to God. Matthew 13:24-30 indicates the wheat and tares will grow together until the time of harvest when the true identity of each professor will be revealed. Wisdom dictates that every person work out his own salvation with fear and trembling lest there come a time of rude awakening. (Philippians 2:12; Matthew 7:22-23)

It is a local church as believing individuals gather in a given place in the name of Christ. We believe the local church is governed by vote of its membership as guided by Scripture, the Holy Spirit and conscience. No higher authority on earth is recognized. Pastors are distinguished from others only in their distinctive function in a shepherd and believer sheep relationship. (John 21:15-17) There are several references to the local church in the New Testament. See Acts 2:41, 8:1, 3, 12:1, 13:1; Revelation 2-3) Nine of the thirteen letters in the New Testament were addressed to local churches. Passages which help to shape our view (Congregational / Baptist) of church government are:

1. **The Headship of Christ Over the Church:** Ephesians 2:20-22, 4:15-16, 5:23; Colossians 1:18.
2. **The Holy Spirit as Christ's Vicar on Earth:** John 14:16, 26, 16:7; Acts 1:8a.
3. **The Believer as Indwelt by the Holy Spirit:** I Corinthians 6:19, 12:13; Ephesians 1:13
4. **The Priesthood of the Believer:** I Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 1:6; Hebrews 4:14-16, 10:12.

III. THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE CHURCH:

A survey has revealed that the majority of criminals in this country are members of some church. This is no mystery to those who understand what the Bible teaches about the church. Churches are organizations and those who become members may or may not be Christians. We may understand that participation in religious rites, moral instruction, esthetic surroundings and good people are not able to change human nature. It is the grace of God that changes human nature. Where there are people who love Christ, church happens. These people are not the criminals of the world. Neither buildings nor denominations are church. The New Testament does not know the Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church or the Evangelical Free Church as such. The true church is **Exclusive** in its character (Acts 20:21) and **Inclusive** in its composition (Romans 10:9)

IV. THE FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH:

The words "*keys of the kingdom*," found in Matthew 16:19, intrigue people. The truth is that the church justifies its existence in the world by unlocking (revealing) truth to a watching and waiting world as well as to a worshipping and working people. The church exists for the purposes of witness, worship,

edification and fellowship. Also, the church is to act as salt in the restraint of lawlessness. (Matthew 13:52; I John 2:20-21; II Corinthians 2:1, 5-16) The key imagery arises from the Jewish scribe. When fully trained and authorized to teach, his superiors presented him with a key which he carried in his girdle or woven into his robe as an open sign of authority to unlock treasures of knowledge and truth. It is in this way that we are to understand the presence and purpose of the church in this world until removed by Christ at His coming.

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