

*The Church of
The New Testament*

Of necessity, living in this world requires making decisions. Most of our decisions are small, momentary, and somewhat insignificant. Other decisions are so critically important that they affect the way we will live before God in this life and will determine our eternal destiny. These decisions which influence life and eternity require serious thinking and prayerful research before being made. No more far-reaching decision can be considered than the decision to enter the New Testament church. The decision we make regarding this question will influence our daily living for God, our spiritual identity, our worship, and our spiritual service. This question, then, must be thoughtfully considered until it is answered according to the clear teachings of the Scriptures and our best unprejudiced reasoning.

Our world is filled with different religious groups which plead for our commitment and allegiance. A decision must be made. Which is the New Testa-

ment church? How shall we decide?

Commonsense guidelines obviously must be followed to help us think carefully about the evidence and make the right choice, the choice which will please God. If we follow these guidelines with integrity, we can identify the New Testament church in the world today.

What are these guidelines?

HOW WAS THE CHURCH IDENTIFIED IN THE FIRST CENTURY?

The first view of the church given in the New Testament is found in the latter part of Acts 2. The Gospels have created in us an expectation, an anticipation, for a picture of the church through their record of prophecies about it given by Jesus and His apostles (Matthew 16:18; Mark 9:1; Acts 1:4–8). Then, in Acts 2, as the church is established, a living picture of the church is set before us by the Holy Spirit.

This picture of the church helps us to see the main characteristics of it. No longer are we left to wonder what the church which Jesus established looks like in real life.

Survey carefully the chief traits of the church in the picture of it given by Luke in Acts 2:

They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were

sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved (Acts 2:42–47).

What characteristics of the church do we see in this picture?

Strong in Commitment

The first trait is a steadfast commitment to the apostles' doctrine or teaching. Luke said, "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42).

This commitment of the church to the apostles' teaching manifested itself in a faithful following of their teaching; in their fellowship together in worship, service, and giving; in their observance of the Lord's Supper or the "breaking of bread";¹ and in prayer. Christ was their head, and they were recognizing His leadership of His church by honoring His Word which had been given to them through the apostles.

We must not allow the divisions of the Christian world to confuse the simplicity of following Christ as His church. The church is not a man-made body. It is

¹The frequency of the observance of the Lord's Supper is not discussed in this passage by Luke, but he does intimate in Acts 20:7 that the supper was partaken by the church every first day of the week, the day on which Jesus arose.

a group of people who have yielded to the message of the Holy Spirit and, therefore, by their obedience to the gospel, have been bonded together by the Holy Spirit into Christ's church. They belong only to Christ. They look to no human leadership but are guided by the head of the body, Christ, through His revealed Word. They view faithfulness to Christ in terms of abiding in His inspired Word. The Bible guides Christians' worship, their work as Christ's hands in the world, and their daily living for Christ.

As we look at the Holy Spirit's picture of the church, we see the trait of strong commitment.

Unselfish in Compassion

Another characteristic that we cannot miss in this divine picture of the church is the church's unselfish compassion for each other. Their sincere obedience to the truth produced in them a compassionate love for each other. Luke said, "And they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need" (Acts 2:45).

Jews had come from all over the Roman Empire to keep the Day of Pentecost. They thought that this Pentecost would be a normal one; but, to their complete surprise, it was not. It was the historic day toward which the prophets had looked. After hearing Peter's message, many of the Jews decided to become Christians (Acts 2:41). Their obedience to Christ meant a radical change for them. For one thing, they needed to stay in Jerusalem and be taught further by the apostles about the church of which they had become a part. The sudden decision to stay in Jerusalem would be difficult for some of them because they had made no advance plans for such a stay. They would need

housing and food, no doubt. How did other Christians who did not face such a crisis respond to these brothers and sisters in distress from distant places? Their response is a picture of compassion and love that is seldom equalled. Some sold houses and land in order to care for these brethren. Their actions illustrate the trait of compassion which Christ intended always to be a part of His church.

A truth which makes their sharing beautiful beyond description is that the gifts were completely voluntary. Their giving was not forced or demanded by the apostles (Acts 5:4). It sprang from hearts of tender compassion and Christlike love. Christ had produced in them a new nature, one of unselfish sympathy.

Their giving was not just giving or sharing so that all might be equal or have the same amount of goods. It was not communal living; it was caring love. They gave to those in need. They satisfied *needs*, not *greeds*. They knew that *every emergency demands urgency*. As people developed needs, others acted in love to meet those needs—even if it called for sacrificial giving!

Luke later said of the church, “For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles’ feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need” (Acts 4:34, 35). He also said, “And not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them” (Acts 4:32b).

Compassion is a basic attribute of Christ’s church. His church cannot exist where faithful obedience to His Word is not present; neither can His church exist

unless compassion abounds as an expression of the very heart of Christ. True Christians have an active brotherly love which is created by God's love dwelling in their hearts. John wrote, "But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?" (1 John 3:17).

In the Spirit's first picture of the church, unselfish compassion is plainly a significant trait.

United in Christ

A third characteristic of Christ's church seen in this picture is its unity. The Holy Spirit, through the obedience of these people to the gospel and to the apostles' teaching, had given the members of Christ's church a oneness of mind. Luke said, "And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common" (Acts 2:44). He further said, "Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart" (Acts 2:46).

As we behold this beautiful unity which existed in the church that Jesus built, let us remind ourselves of the importance of this first picture of the church. This picture gives us the result of Christ's earthly life and death. What kind of church did Christ come to establish or create? Is it a big organization with many bodies which wear different names, live by different creeds, and have no fellowship with each other? Or did He create a united body over which He reigns as head? In Acts 2 we see the clearest image in perhaps all of the New Testament of what Christ wants His church to be and of how He wants it to live in the

world. This picture unmistakably reveals that unity of mind and life characterized that church. This has to be what Christ desires for His church today. The division which prevails throughout the religious world is a sure sign that man, in his worldly wisdom, has left Christ's church and has manufactured churches of his own.

The unity of the Lord's church can be illustrated in marriage. A man and a woman who are different in background experiences and family life become one in marriage (Ephesians 5:31). After their wedding ceremony, they emerge as a new family. They belong to each other now, and they take on a new nature. Selfish ambitions and personal goals die; new ambitions and goals for the good of this new family come to life. They dwell together in unity, being of one heart and soul, working together for the maintenance, love, and future of their home. How were they given this unity? It was given by their common consent to enter marriage and their fulfillment of the marriage law. How do they maintain this unity? They maintain it by loving each other, caring for each other, forgiving one another, honoring their marriage vows, and honoring the blessed state of marriage.

Is this not true of the church? How do we enter the unity of the church? By personal consent, we decide to yield our lives to the gospel of Christ and enter His body, the church. As we enter that body, we are united by the Holy Spirit to Christ and to every member of it. With one heart and soul, we begin to love, serve, and live as His body. How do we maintain this unity? We keep it intact by loving and forgiving each other and by honoring the Word of Christ in worship, service, and daily living.

An undeniable characteristic of Christ's church is unity. Christ's true church cannot exist where division remains. We are given this unity by the Holy Spirit when we enter Christ's body; and, as we live as His body, we will either maintain it or harm it. Division in the body of Christ should be unthinkable to every Christian. According to the Holy Spirit's picture, the one place where unity is to be found in this world is in the body of Christ.

HOW CAN THE CHURCH BE IDENTIFIED TODAY?

Consider Its Beginning

One of the identifying marks of the New Testament church is the time of its beginning. Any church which began at a different time from the New Testament church is obviously not the New Testament church.

Three-fourths of the way through His personal ministry, Jesus promised, "I will build My church" (Matthew 16:18). He fulfilled His promise on the first Pentecost Day following His resurrection (Acts 2:41-47). From this Pentecost Day forward, the church is spoken of as being in existence throughout the rest of the New Testament (Acts 5:11; 7:38; 8:1, 3).

Suppose someone said, "My church started in the Old Testament." His church is too early. The Old Testament predicts the coming of the kingdom, but it does not record its establishment. Suppose someone said, "My church started during the third century A.D." His church is too late. This cannot be the New Testament church. The New Testament

does not end looking for the establishment of the church some day in the future. Rather, it ends with the Roman Empire quaking under the mighty spread of the church throughout the world.

In general, the Protestant churches sprang into existence during the sixteenth century, during or after the Reformation. No denomination of any kind is found in the New Testament. The New Testament church was established, and then centuries later, as apostasies from the New Testament order began to occur, denominations were formed. The picture in the New Testament is that of people becoming Christians, living, and worshiping as the body of Christ long before any denominations came into existence.

As you consider a specific church, ask, "When was its actual beginning?" If it goes back to any time other than the time of the first Pentecost after our Lord's resurrection, it cannot be the New Testament church.

Consider Its Aim

Another identifying characteristic of the New Testament church is its purpose or aim. The New Testament church has no other goal in this world but to be the New Testament church. It does not seek to be similar to it, akin to it, or nearly it. It intends to be it!

When considering the question "Which is the New Testament church?" you may ask of a specific church, "What is its aim or purpose in this world?" The New Testament church was the body of Christ in the world. Paul said, "So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one

of another” (Romans 12:5). Any church that is not seeking to be the body of Christ in its community is simply not the New Testament church.

Christ did not ask His disciples to be a sect. He asked them to be His living body in the world. This body is to wear His name, worship together in His name, and do His work in the world for His glory.

Consider Its Practices

Still another identifying mark of the New Testament church is its practices. It is one thing to say that a church is the New Testament church, but it is quite another for that church to demonstrate its identity by its practices. Anyone can claim to be the New Testament church, but the proof of the claim is always in the practice.

The practices of the New Testament church are easily seen in the New Testament. The New Testament church met for worship every first day of the week and broke bread in remembrance of the Lord’s death (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:20; Hebrews 10:25). Christians would sing together, making melody in their hearts and edifying one another. The New Testament gives no indication that they used instrumental music in their worship, nor does it give any command to do so (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). They gave of their material prosperity on the first day of each week for the carrying on of God’s work and the helping of the poor (1 Corinthians 16:1, 2). They prayed together and considered God’s will which was being revealed by inspired men (Acts 2:42). (See pages 250 through 254.) Practices such as venerating icons and using candles or incense in worship are not authorized and are not

a part of the practice of a New Testament church. Each congregation of the New Testament church governed itself through overseers or elders (1 Timothy 3:1–7), looking to Jesus as the only head of the church. Deacons (1 Timothy 3:8–11) and evangelists (2 Timothy 4:1, 2) served the church under the oversight of the elders.

To identify the New Testament church, we must list the characteristic practices of the New Testament church and then compare this list with the churches we see around us. When we find a true match, when we find a church which follows the New Testament pattern, we have found the New Testament church, the Lord's church.

Consider Its Designations

Another identifying mark of the New Testament church is its designations. The descriptive phrases which are used for the New Testament church in the Bible set it apart from denominations.

The New Testament church is referred to in the New Testament as "the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12), "the church of God" (1 Corinthians 1:2), "the churches of Christ" (Romans 16:16), the "church of the firstborn" (Hebrews 12:23), "the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 16:19), and simply "the church" (Ephesians 1:22). These phrases describe the nature and identity of the church. They are descriptions more than they are names.

What if you are considering a church which is known by a phrase or name which is not found in the New Testament? Surely we must admit that this is unacceptable. First, if this church is the New Testament church, why does it use a name for itself

which is foreign to the New Testament? Second, if this church is the New Testament church, why does it not use a New Testament phrase for the church to indicate to all that it is the New Testament church? Third, it is possible for a New Testament church to be using a phrase foreign to the New Testament as a name without really thinking about it. Surely, when this is called to their attention, they will gladly change to the New Testament names so that no one will mistake them for something other than the New Testament church.

If a church wants to be the New Testament church, develops the characteristics of the New Testament church, and wants everyone to know that it is the New Testament church, it should apply to itself the names given in the New Testament for the New Testament church and only those.

CONCLUSION

The Holy Spirit's picture of the New Testament church reveals three striking attributes which set Christ's church apart from all other religious bodies for all time. First, His church is a group of people who have been obedient to His Word and who steadfastly abide in His inspired Word. Second, His church is characterized by compassion for each member, a loving concern which considers a needy member of the church of greater significance than even material concerns and treasures. Third, each person who enters Christ's church through the gospel is made one with Christ and with all the other members by the Holy Spirit and maintains that unity by his love and daily adherence to Christ's Word. The church is pictured as one family with one heart and life!

How, then, can we be Christ's church today? Two words suggest the method: "duplicate" and "dedicate." Let us duplicate the way of becoming a follower of Christ that is found in this lesson. These people heard Christ's Word as it was preached by Peter and cried, "What shall we do?" Peter told them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; . . ." (Acts 2:38). Through the faith planted in them by the Word, they repented and were baptized for the forgiveness of their sins, and the Lord added them to His church. This is Christ's way of making people His own. When someone today follows this way, Christ will do for him what He did for them. He loves each of us even as He loved them; He died for us even as He died for them.

Let us obey Christ's Word and dedicate ourselves to living as His church. According to the picture in Acts 2, this should be done by holding to Christ's Word, living with the heart of Christ, and keeping the unity which the Holy Spirit has given to His church in Christ.

Now that we know what Christ's church looks like, let us make the decision to become Christ's church.

STUDY QUESTIONS

(answers on page 266)

1. Discuss the meaning of the phrase "continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42). What does this phrase mean for us today?
2. Describe the type of unity which the Jerusalem church had.
3. How is the church of Christ supposed to look today?
4. Why is deciding which is the New Testament church a

far-reaching decision?

5. List verses of Scripture which show that the New Testament church began on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2.
6. When did denominations spring up?
7. Who composes the body of Christ—individual Christians or denominational churches? (See 1 Corinthians 12:24.)
8. Why should a church designate itself the same way the church in the New Testament is designated?
9. Should the practices of the New Testament church be followed today?

WORD HELPS

abide in Him—to love, study, and obey Jesus' teachings (John 8:30–32).

breaking bread—the taking of the Lord's Supper. (See Acts 2:42; 20:7.)

deacons—qualified men (1 Timothy 3:8–13) who are selected to serve the congregation. They serve under the elders (Philippians 1:1; Acts 20:28).

elders—mature Christian men who are selected to oversee local congregations (1 Timothy 3:1–7).

instrumental music—songs played on man-made devices such as string, wind, and brass instruments, keyboards, or drums. Such music is not mentioned in the New Testament in relation to the worship of the church. God wants singing to be part of our public worship (Hebrews 2:12b; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). Singing in private devotions is encouraged in James 5:13.

Protestant—the name given to man-made religious groups whose faith and practice are based on the principles of the Protestant Reformation. The leaders of this movement "protested" against some Catholic practices (such as recognizing the authority of popes and priests). While this movement did reject some errors, the New Testament church must be based on God's Word—not on any reaction to what others may be practicing.