

How Do You Enter the Church?

Some things are expensive but are not really valuable—like fine clothing; some things are inexpensive but valuable—like sunshine or rain; some things are very expensive and very valuable—the church of Christ falls into this category.

The New Testament leaves little doubt about the priceless worth of the church. Its value is brought out in at least three ways: First, we see its worth in *its divine origin*. It was planned and purposed in the eternal counsel of heaven (Ephesians 3:10, 11), and it was prepared for through the earthly ministry of Jesus (Matthew 4:17). It was a divine forethought, not a mistaken afterthought. Second, we see its worth in *its precious cost*. We are told by Paul that it was purchased by the blood of Christ (Acts 20:28). The ultimate purpose of the death of Christ was to bring the church into existence. If purchase price indicates value, then the church, having been purchased by Christ's blood, is certainly the most valuable of all earthly bodies. Third, we see its worth in *the great*

value that is placed upon it. Christ urged us to seek the kingdom of heaven above all other pursuits. He said, "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Matthew 13:45, 46). He not only likened the church to a precious pearl, but He likened it to the most precious of all pearls!

This supreme value of the church suggests that ignoring the New Testament church would be the greatest of all mistakes. A millionaire is like an orphan if he does not find and enter the Lord's church. The greatest man outside of the church becomes the least of men.

In light of the unmistakable worth of the church, reason dictates that we sincerely ask, "How is the church entered?" Perhaps no greater question can be considered. Let us devote ourselves to finding the New Testament answer to this question.

THE ANSWER ANNOUNCED

Christ was definite about what He wanted His disciples to do after He returned to heaven from His earthly ministry. Three rather full accounts of His commission are recorded in the New Testament (Matthew 28:18–20; Mark 16:15, 16; Luke 24:46, 47). The significance of these accounts can hardly be overestimated. They give Christ's guidance for His disciples for the entire Christian Age.

Christ first gave a worldwide charge to His disciples, by saying, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation" (Mark 16:15). Second, He specified the conditions upon which salvation is to be offered as the gospel is preached. He told His

disciples what to do—"Go," and He told them what to say—"Preach the gospel." With the words "go" and "gospel," He summarized their future work.

One time, according to Mark, Christ gave the commission and emphasized the condition of belief. He said, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned" (Mark 16:15, 16). Baptism is clearly mentioned as a condition in this record of the commission, but the emphasis seems to be upon belief.

According to Luke, Christ gave the commission at another time and stressed repentance. He said, "Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for¹ forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46, 47). Repentance, a turning from sin to God, was to be a main idea in the gospel preaching of the Christian Age.

Matthew pictured Christ as giving the commission on a mountain in Galilee, where He emphasized baptism. He said, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

Obviously, then, the three conditions upon which salvation is to be extended are belief, repentance,

¹Some manuscripts read "and" here instead of "for."

and baptism, each of which was singled out by our Savior and stressed in the three accounts of the Great Commission.

These three conditions are evident and are easily perceived. No one can take seriously Jesus' commission without acknowledging these conditions and recognizing their significance in the Lord's plan. They constitute the terms or conditions of entrance into the Lord's kingdom or church. They are to govern the entire Christian Age.

THE ANSWER AMPLIFIED

The conditions of salvation are not only unmistakably given in the New Testament, but they are also clearly illustrated in the Acts of the Apostles.

For example, the book begins with the thrilling story of the establishment of the church. In Acts 2 a multitude of people who were convicted by Peter's sermon cried out, "What shall we do?" Belief in Jesus had prompted their crying out. Peter commanded them to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38). Three thousand were baptized that day (Acts 2:41). Accordingly, Acts 2:47b says, "And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved." The group to which they were added is later referred to as the church (Acts 5:11). Our Lord, in His final commission, had specified belief (faith), repentance, and baptism as the conditions upon which salvation was to be proclaimed. The people who entered the church on Pentecost complied with these three conditions.

Another example is found in Acts 8. In the latter part of Acts 8, Philip was told by an angel to go south for further preaching (Acts 8:26). At a certain inter-

section, Philip saw an Ethiopian eunuch traveling down the road in a chariot (Acts 8:27, 28). This man was a very religious man, but he was not yet a Christian. Philip was instructed by the Holy Spirit to go near and join the Ethiopian (Acts 8:29). Running to him, he discovered that the Ethiopian was reading in the Book of Isaiah but did not understand what he was reading (Acts 8:31). Philip started with the passage which the Ethiopian had been reading and unfolded to him the story of Christ (Acts 8:35), telling him, no doubt, all about Christ's coming into this world and dying for our sins.

As they traveled along, talking about Christ, they came to some water. The Ethiopian asked, "Can I be baptized?" Since the Ethiopian believed, it was appropriate for him to be baptized.² They stopped the chariot and waded down into the water, and Philip immersed the Ethiopian (Acts 8:38). Following his baptism, the Ethiopian went on his way rejoicing.

Once again, the terms our Lord laid down for salvation in His final commission were followed. Belief in Christ became a reality as a result of the preaching done by Philip (Acts 8:35, 36). The Ethio-

²Verse 37 of Acts 8 does not appear in many reliable manuscripts of Acts. This has led to the conclusion that this verse may not be part of the original text of the New Testament. It must be granted, however, that the leading statement posed in this verse by Philip is the most natural thought to raise in this circumstance. The Ethiopian eunuch did not know of Christ or about whom the prophet was writing. Then, after only one conversation about Christ, the eunuch wanted to be baptized. Hence, the statement "If you believe with all your heart, you may" is most appropriate and can never be out of place in the preparations made for baptism. The confession of Christ as God's Son is an affirmation of faith and grows out of the condition of the Great Commission to believe.

pian was a religious man who was sincerely trying to do the will of God. Repentance, therefore, is evident from his acceptance of the message about Christ which Philip brought him. Baptism is portrayed in this account more clearly than in any other in the Book of Acts. Both Philip and the Ethiopian waded down into the water, and Philip immersed him. (See the chart entitled "Examples of Conversion in Acts" on page 200.)

Imagine that you live in a kingdom and know the king as a personal friend. One day, while in a conversation with the king, you are told that if you will return later to see him, he will forgive your taxes. You receive this news with joy and resolve to return to see him in one month. Eventually, you return to see the king, anticipating the forgiveness of your taxes. Upon your arrival at the palace, you are told that the king has gone on a trip to another country. You tell the royal gatekeeper that the king told you that your taxes would be forgiven if you returned to see him. The gatekeeper says, "The king has made special arrangements for you." He ushers you into a room which is occupied by twelve administrators. You tell them your story. In response, they say, "When the king was here, he had the power to forgive taxes through just a word, but the king is now gone. He left behind specified terms upon which taxes are to be forgiven. You will now have to abide by these terms. You must first return to your home; second, write a letter to us stating your story; third, list all the members of your family; and fourth, sign the letter in the presence of three witnesses. When these terms are met, your taxes will be forgiven."

Compare this story with what Christ has actually

done. When He was here, He would often forgive sins with just a word. For example, He forgave the thief on the cross (Luke 23:43). However, when Christ got ready to leave this earth and return to heaven, He gave us the terms upon which salvation would be imparted to people during the Christian Age. In addition, He indicated that His commission was to be in effect until the end of the world (Matthew 28:20). Now that the King is gone, His terms of forgiveness are in effect.

THE ANSWER APPLIED

These terms of entrance into the church should be applied to each of us. The final commission of Christ has not changed. It is the same today as it was when it was given. The terms of salvation are precisely the same for us as they were for those who heard the first sermon preached by Peter. Christ sets the terms of entrance into the church and does the actual adding to it. Men's arguments and instructions do not alter His last will and testament. The King is gone, and the terms He set down for the Christian Age must be followed.

Where do you stand in respect to His terms of entrance into His church? Do you believe? The source of faith is the Word of God (Romans 10:17). Man's wisdom, learning, or accomplishments cannot produce faith. Do you believe in God? Do you believe that Christ is His Son and the Savior of mankind?

Have you repented of your sins (Acts 17:30, 31)? Have you turned from sin to the living God? Have you committed your heart to the will of God regardless of what it means and regardless of where it leads?

Have you stated publicly that you believe in Jesus as God's Son (Romans 10:10)? Have you confessed with your lips that Jesus is Savior and Lord?

Have you been baptized? The baptism of the Great Commission is by immersion (Romans 6:4), into Christ (Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27), for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16), and in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19, 20). Have you been baptized according to the New Testament pattern?

When one today adheres to the terms which Christ laid down in His final commission, is it not reasonable to believe that our faithful Lord and Savior adds him to His church or kingdom? No one can explain away the Lord's terms. We must not permit any substitution for them or any corruption of them. True commitment to Christ will allow nothing but obedience.

CONCLUSION

Have you entered the New Testament church? Would you like to enter it today?

It is surely the greatest and grandest news for us that the church found in the New Testament can be entered by anyone who will sincerely comply with the Lord's terms of entrance. All nations, all races, and all peoples can enter into His kingdom and be one in Christ (Ephesians 2:14).

Wisdom demands that we start at the beginning, making sure the foundation is true. If you have not obeyed the Lord's terms of salvation, fulfill those terms completely and immediately. Enter His kingdom, and from now on live as a citizen of His kingdom and of His kingdom alone.

The church of Christ is not really valuable to you unless you enter it.

STUDY QUESTIONS

(answers on page 269)

1. Describe the incomparable worth of the Lord's church.
2. Are the conditions of the Great Commission binding upon Christians today?
3. Why can we not be saved today as the thief on the cross was saved?
4. How can one become a member of the church today?
5. Do men add the saved to the church?
6. Is there any reason to believe that, if one does what was done in the Book of Acts to become a Christian, God will not do for him what He did for those who obeyed His will in the Book of Acts?
7. How can one be sure that he is in Christ's church?
8. When the Lord's conditions of salvation are corrupted, has great damage been done?

WORD HELPS

Jesus' last will and testament—the New Testament (Hebrews 9:15–17).

peculiar—different; set apart. First Peter 2:9 says of Christians, "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (KJV).

EXAMPLES OF CONVERSION IN ACTS					
HEARD	BELIEVED	REPENTED	CONFESSED	BAPTIZED	SAVED
Jews Acts 2	"they were pierced to the heart" (v. 37)	"Repent" (v. 38)		"be baptized" (v. 38); "were baptized" (v. 41)	"for the forgiveness of your sins" (v. 38)
Samaritans Acts 8	"when they believed" (v. 12)			"they were being baptized" (v. 12)	
Ethiopian Acts 8	["if you believe"] (v. 37)		["I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (v. 37)]	"baptized" (v. 36); "he baptized him" (v. 38)	"went on his way rejoicing" (v. 39)
Saul Acts 9; 22; 26		fasting and praying (9:9, 11)	"Lord" (9:5)	"was baptized" (9:18); "be baptized" (22:16)	"wash away your sins" (22:16)
Cornelius Acts 10; 11	"believes in Him" (10:43)	"repentance that leads to life" (11:18)		"baptized" (10:47); "ordered . . . to be baptized" (10:48)	"forgiveness of sins" (10:43)
Lydia Acts 16				"baptized" (v. 15)	
Jailer Acts 16	"believe in the Lord Jesus" (v. 31); "having believed" (v. 34)	"washed their wounds" (v. 33)		"was baptized" (v. 33)	"you shall be saved" (v. 31); "rejoiced greatly" (v. 34)
Corinthians Acts 18	"were believing" (v. 8)			"were . . . being baptized" (v. 8)	