



March 4, 2018

What Is The Church

When discussions about the work of the church arise one of the things I have observed is that many folks don't have a clear idea about what the church really is. In this article we'll take a look at the nature of the church and its identity. Once we have a clear idea of that we can examine the work of the church as recorded in the New Testament. The problem we run into with a discussion like this is that there are over 1500 years of false teaching that has left certain impressions in the minds of most people. When someone hears the word church they think about an organization with a hierarchy, rules of conduct and various programs that particular "church" is involved with and so forth. So what is the church? To answer that let's take a look at the history of mankind.

In Genesis 1 God created the heavens and the Earth over a period of six days. The crowning act of creation was the formation of man from the dust of the ground (**Gen 1.26-27, 2.7**). Later woman was created as a helper for the man (**Gen 2.18-25**) and together they were to dress and keep the garden, be fruitful and multiply and they could eat of the herb of the ground and every tree bearing fruit (**Gen 2.15-17**). We're all aware of the fact that within a short time man sinned and was driven from the presence of God being separated by sin. The Lord himself however issued the first prophecy of salvation and reconciliation to come as he spoke to the serpent in the garden of Eden (**Gen 3.14-15**). This was the first prophecy of Christ who would provide the means whereby mankind could be reconciled to God.

As Christ came into the world he brought the words that God had given him (**John 17.8**) and told his disciples that he would build his church which the gates of Hell could not prevail against (**Matt 16.18**). This church would be built on faith in the fact that Christ was the son of God who was promised and had indeed come into the world. Prior to his death Christ told the disciples that he would send them a helper, one who would continue to guide them and reveal the truth (**John 14.26, 16.7-14**). This helper was the Holy Spirit who fell on the twelve on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. The word being proclaimed was inspired by God through the Holy Spirit and this was known as the "*apostles doctrine*" (**Acts 2.42**). This doctrine was that which had come from God and by preaching the word, those who believed, repented of their sins, confessed the name of Christ and were baptized were "*added*" to the church by God (**Acts 2.47**). No one joined anything, they were added to the body of saved believers by God as they responded from the heart to the Gospel being preached. This brings us to a point where we can identify what the church was from the day of Pentecost onward.

In the New Testament the word translated "church" like other biblical terms is one that has become obscured and lost its true meaning. The word usually translated as church is a Greek term referring to a gathering of individuals. The word is *ekklesia* and appears applied to the church collectively as we see in **Matthew 16.18** and **Ephesians 1.22**. There are other passages that refer to the church in what is generally called the universal sense which would include all saved believers. The term is also used to refer to local congregations such as we see in **Acts 20.28** referring to the congregation of the Ephesians and in **1 Corinthians 1.2** at the beginning of Paul's address to the church at Corinth. There are other passages that could be used to illustrate the point but I want to go back and focus on the choice of the word used.

The word *ekklesia* referred to a group of individuals and literally meant "*the called out*" or the "*called out ones*". We know that God sent Christ into the world at the fulness of time (**Gal 4.4**) and one of the characteristics of



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this time is the nature of the Greek language. Terms used in koiné Greek during the day had shades of meaning that we sometimes lose today in modern English. The term “called out ones” is most fitting to believers in the church and helps us identify the nature of the body of Christ. Note what Peter stated on the day of Pentecost as he exhorted the listeners to repent and obey the Gospel. “**And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.**” (Acts 2.40). On the day of Pentecost 3,000 were added to the church, or called out ones. Through their belief they decided to be saved and yielded themselves to God in obedience. Peter puts this very well in his statement about baptism when he writes that this was “**the answer of a good conscience toward God**” (1 Pet 3.21). Paul also talks about the process of being added to the church in his letter to the Colossians. “**Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son...**” (Col 1.12-13). Paul here states that God “**translated us**” into the kingdom. The kingdom is the church, the body of saved believers who have obeyed the form of doctrine we find in the New Testament. This provides the means to define the church and understand its spiritual nature. Note the following points.

1. The church is made up of those who have obeyed the Gospel from the heart
2. Members have been added by God who recognizes their obedience
3. This is the same as being “**translated into the kingdom**”
4. The Lord’s church can be thought of as a description of the saved recognized by God

When we think in these terms we realize that the church is not an organization in a worldly sense. The term church should be understood as a collection of saved believers who are united in their faith and doctrine. This is difficult for some to grasp and there are those who will point out that there is a structure or organization to the church. That point is correct but we have to understand the nature of the organization and now it operates in light of the scriptures and Christ’s leadership as the head. We’ll address that next week as we define the work of the church.

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