

The Unique Church



DAVE MILLER, Ph.D.

DOCTRINAL MATTERS

CHURCH ORGANIZATION

DENOMINATIONALISM

SALVATION

On Thursday night, April 21, 1938, in a public discussion in Little Rock, Arkansas, before an immediate crowd of 1,000 people and a radio audience of thousands more, N.B. Hardeman engaged the famed debater Ben Bogard on the subject: “The Establishment of the Church.” On that occasion, Hardeman articulated an extremely significant truth about the church of Christ when he stated: “The kingdom, friends, has always existed.... It existed in *Purpose*, in the mind of God; it existed next in *Promise*, as delivered unto the patriarchs, and it existed in *Prophecy*; and then it existed in *Preparation*; and last of all, when the New Testament went into effect, it existed in *Perfection*” (1938, p. 178, italics in orig.). More than sixty years have come and gone since that insightful observation. But it remains an accurate expression of biblical truth. Before Adam and Eve inhabited the Garden of Eden together; before the skies, seas, and land were populated by birds, fish, and animals; before the Sun, Moon, and stars were situated in the Universe; and before our planet Earth was but a dark, watery, formless mass—God purposed to bring into being **the church of Christ**.

Indeed, Scripture describes this divine intention as “eternal.” Central to the great purposes of God from eternity has been, not only the sending of His Son as an atonement for sin, but the creation of the church of Christ—the blood-bought body of Jesus and living organism of the redeemed. Listen to Paul’s affirmation: “To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Ephesians 3:10-11). It is difficult for human beings to fathom “**eternal**.” There are times when the notion of “everlasting” is abbreviated—like Jonah 2:6 where Jonah said he was in the fish’s stomach “forever.” It must have seemed like it to him. So the word can be used in an abbreviated way. In Philemon 15, Paul said Onesimus would be with Philemon *aionion*—“forever when he returns to you.” But the context limits the meaning to just until he dies.

But when we speak of deity (e.g., Psalm 90:1-2) or the church, we are talking about **everlasting, eternal, forever**. Hebrews 12:28 asserts confidently: “Wherefore we, receiving a kingdom which...” will someday end? No! Rather, “a kingdom that is unshakable,” destined to be around forever—an eternal institution. No wonder Daniel was informed: “The saints of the most high shall take the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, even forever and ever” (Daniel 7:18). With that grand **purpose** in mind, God gradually began foreshadowing through **promise** and **prophecy** the eventual accomplishment of that purpose.

Some 750 years before Christ came to Earth, Isaiah announced the eventual establishment of the “Lord’s house” in the “last days” in Jerusalem (Isaiah 2:1-4). At about the same time, Micah

enunciated essentially the same facts (Micah 4:1-3). Some 500 years before Christ, Daniel declared to a pagan king that during the days of the Roman kings, the God of heaven would set up a kingdom that would never be destroyed (Daniel 2:44). He also stated that the “Son of man” would pass through the clouds, come to the ancient of days, and be given an indestructible kingdom (Daniel 7:13-14). Thus, the church, which existed initially in **purpose** in the mind of God, now existed in **promise** and **prophecy** in the utterances of His spokesmen.

With the appearance of John the baptizer and Jesus on the Earth, the church of Christ entered a new phase of existence. Now, more than ever before, the kingdom was presented with a sense of immediacy, nearness, and urgent expectation. Now, God’s emissaries actively prepared for its imminent appearance. John exclaimed: “[T]he kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). Jesus echoed His harbinger with precisely the same point: “[T]he kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). As John made preparations for the Lord (Matthew 3:3; 11:10; Isaiah 40:3; Malachi 3:1), so the Lord made preparations for the kingdom. He announced His intention personally to establish His church (Matthew 16:18). He declared that it would occur during the lifetime of His earthly contemporaries (Mark 9:1).

Just prior to His departure from Earth, Jesus further noted that the apostles would be witnesses of His death and resurrection, and would preach repentance and remission of sins in His name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. He would even send the promise of the Father upon them, which would entail being “endued with power from on high” (Luke 24:46-49). This power was to be equated with Holy Spirit immersion (Acts 1:4-5,8).

Now that the kingdom had existed in **purpose**, **promise**, and **prophecy**, and in **preparation**, the time had come for the church to come forth in **perfection**. After urging the apostles to “tarry in Jerusalem,” Jesus ascended into a cloud and was ushered into heaven. The apostles returned to Jerusalem and for ten days awaited the fulfillment of the Savior’s words.

Then it happened. With stunning splendor, after centuries of eager anticipation (1 Peter 1:10-12), God poured out His Spirit upon the Twelve on the first Pentecost after Christ’s resurrection (Acts 2). This miraculous outpouring enabled these one dozen “ambassadors” (2 Corinthians 5:20) to present a stirring defense of Christ’s resurrection, convicting some in the audience with the guilt of the crucifixion. Peter then simultaneously detailed the conditions of forgiveness and the terms of entrance into the kingdom of Christ. These terms consisted of being pricked in the heart, repenting of sins, and being immersed in water (Acts 2:37-38).

The church of Christ was now **perfected** into existence on the Earth, consisting of approximately 3,000 members—all of Jewish descent. From this moment forward, the kingdom of Christ on the Earth was a reality. To its Jewish citizenry, were added the first Gentile converts in Acts 10, when those of the household of Cornelius obeyed the same terms of entrance that their Jewish counterparts had obeyed some ten to fifteen years earlier. By the cross, Christ had made “in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one

body” (Ephesians 2:15-16).

This “one body” is totally unique, and is unlike any other entity on the face of the Earth. She is distinguished by several unique and exclusive characteristics:

First, she wears the name of her head, owner, and savior—Christ (Daniel 7:14; Matthew 16:18; Romans 16:16; Ephesians 1:23; 4:12; Revelation 11:15). Her members wear the divinely bestowed name of “Christian” (Isaiah 62:1-2; Acts 11:26; 1 Peter 4:16).

Second, her organization was arranged by God to consist of Jesus as head, elders/pastors/bishops as the earthly overseers or managers, deacons as the designated workers/ministers, evangelists as the proclaimers of the good news, teachers as instructors in the faith, and all the other members, who are active in serving the Lord (Acts 6:1-3; 14:23; 20:17,28; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

Third, her unique mission consists of bringing glory to God (1 Corinthians 6:20). As Peter explained: “If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1 Peter 4:11). This task is accomplished by disseminating the Gospel of Christ to the human race (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:46-47; Acts 8:4; Romans 10:14; Philippians 2:15-16; Hebrews 5:12-14); by endeavoring to keep Christians faithful (Romans 14:19; 15:1-3; Ephesians 4:12; Jude 20-24); and by manifesting a benevolent lifestyle (Matthew 25:31-46; Galatians 6:10; James 2:1-17). In short, every member of the church is to strive for complete conformity to the will of Christ (Matthew 22:37-38; 2 Corinthians 5:9; 10:5; Ecclesiastes 12:13).

Fourth, her entrance requirements are unlike any other entity on the face of the Earth. The individual who is struck with the heinousness of sin, recognizing the purpose of Jesus’ atoning sacrifice through His death upon the cross, comes to believe in Jesus as the Son of God and the New Testament as the only authentic expression of His will. This belief leads him to repent of his sins, to orally confess Jesus as the Christ, and to be baptized in water, with the understanding that as he rises from the waters of baptism, he is forgiven of sin and added to the church by Christ (Mark 16:16; Hebrews 11:6; Acts 2:38,47; Romans 6:1-6; 10:9-10). These terms of entrance were given by Jesus to the apostles, who declared them on the occasion of the establishment of the church (Matthew 16:19; Acts 2).

Fifth, her instruction manual is likewise exclusive and unique. The Bible, consisting of both Old and New Testaments, constitutes her one and only authentic and authoritative guide (Galatians 1:6-9; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 2:15; Acts 17:11; 2 Peter 3:16). These 66 books, written by some 40 men over a period of 1,600 years, are actually the product of the Holy Spirit, Who empowered the writers to pen only what God wanted written (2 Samuel 23:2; 1 Corinthians 2:9-13; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 1 Peter 1:10-12; 2 Peter 1:20-21). The Bible is thus verbally inspired of God, inerrant, and all-sufficient.

Many other characteristics of the church of Christ could be cited. But these five are sufficient to show that the church is easily identifiable and not to be confused with any other religious group. It was inevitable that people would deviate from the simple guidelines given in Scripture (1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Peter 2:1-2). The result has been the formulation of unbiblical doctrines, unscriptural practices, and unauthorized churches (Matthew 15:9,13; 2 John 9-11).

The Scriptures make clear that God never has and never will sanction such a state of affairs. The only hope of any individual is to be in the one true church living faithfully to God's desires. Many in our day are working overtime to obscure and blur the distinction between the New Testament church and the manmade, counterfeit churches that exist in abundance. They seem oblivious to the fact that no denominations are ever found in the Bible. Many people do not seem even to be aware of the fact that the Bible describes a single church—Christ's church.

Yet anyone who cares to consult the inspired guidebook can see that the church described in the Bible is easily identifiable today. The matter may be easily determined upon the basis of two criteria. First, can one know how to become a Christian? If so, then the church can be identified, i.e., those who have obeyed the one and only Gospel plan of salvation. Second, can one know how to live the Christian life faithfully and obediently before God? If so, one can identify those who continue to constitute the saved body, the church.

In light of these simple truths, no legitimate claim may be made by denominational bodies to consider themselves as churches of Christ. The pluralistic mindset that has permeated our thinking has prodded us to be more accepting of other viewpoints and to "lighten up" in our opposition to false religion. For some years now, we have been goaded and prodded into feeling guilty about claiming **certainty** about anything, let alone biblical truth. But the truth continues to be that denominations are manmade divisions, unmitigated departures from the faith.

Denominationalism is about the best thing Satan has come up with to subvert the truth of the Bible and to bring otherwise religious people under his influence. The world religions, as well as those who embrace humanistic philosophies like atheism, by definition, have rejected the one true God and have capitulated to Satan. So where do you suppose Satan is going to focus the brunt of his assault upon the Earth? The more he is able to muddy the waters and to obscure the certainty of the truth, the more chance he has of luring people into his clutches.

We are at a moment in history when Satan is making great inroads into the church, and scoring impressive victories against the cause of Christ. As the book of Judges records a cyclical pattern among God's people of apostasy, punishment, repentance, faithfulness, and then back into apostasy, we are at the point in history where apostasy holds sway. This periodic purging process seems to be an inevitable recurrence. What God would have us to do is to stand confidently and courageously upon His will, unmoved and unintimidated by the overwhelming forces that pressure us to succumb. In this fashion, the justice of God will be made evident at the Judgment and, in the meantime, impetus is given to the redeemed to strengthen themselves in the struggle to stay loyal to the Master. Every possible soul must be "snatched out of the fire" (Jude 23).

While the Lord would have us to demonstrate concern and compassion for the lost denominational world, He also would have us exercise discretion in the extent to which we fellowship and affiliate with such groups. Regardless of the fashionable sentiments prevalent among some in our day, the Bible still delineates God's disapproval of the righteous associating with error and false religion. When we become proud of our ability to mingle with denominationalism—manifesting acceptance and tolerance of their unbiblical beliefs—we are guilty of the very attitude that Paul condemned in 1 Corinthians 5:2, that Jesus condemned in Revelation 2:15-16, and that John condemned in 2 John 11.

We need to return to the Old Testament, and learn afresh the lessons that Israel failed repeatedly to learn. We need to stand at Elijah's side and breathe deeply his spirit of confrontation as he boldly distinguished between true and false religion (1 Kings 18:17-40). We need to follow Phinehas into the tent and learn to identify with his jealous intolerance of disobedience and defiance to the will of God (Numbers 25:1-15). We need to step across the line to stand at Moses' side and witness the calm fury with which he sought to expunge sin (Exodus 32:25-28). We need to identify ourselves with the young king Josiah and feel the same sense of horror and tearful concern as we watch him burn, break, desecrate, destroy, cut down, stamp, and slay everything and everyone who represented unauthorized religious practice (2 Kings 22 and 23).

Perhaps once we have honestly filled our minds with these inspired accounts, and allowed these truths to penetrate and permeate our being, we will possess the proper frame of mind to view denominationalism, and all other alternatives to the one church, in the same way that God views them. Maybe then we will perceive counterfeit churches and rival religions with the depth of righteous anger and displeasure that God perceives them. Until then, we will be gripped by an unconcerned, blasé, live-and-let-live mentality that will allow Satan to proceed with his subversion of humanity. If we do not stand up and proclaim the distinctiveness of the one true church of Christ, nobody else will, and we will lose our souls along with them. If Noah had not been comfortable with standing in a minute minority in an effort to stem the tide, the tide would have swept him away in the Flood along with the rest.

Do you love the church for which Jesus shed His blood? Do you? Do you love the body of Christ

deeply enough to temper your concern for the lost with a righteous regard for the purity and loyalty of that body? Rather than obscure the reality and identity of the unique church of Christ, we would do well to take note of the clearly defined borders of the kingdom, that we might be able to give our attention to bringing in those on the outside. Fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness is not the answer; teaching and exposing them is (Ephesians 5:11).

If we would truly fathom that the church of Christ is distinctive, exclusive, and unique; if we would truly view fraternization with the denominations as traitorous; if we would love the genuine body of Christ with the same fervency and jealousy with which Jesus loves her; then we would be in a position to proclaim with Paul: “Unto Him be glory **in the church** by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end” (Ephesians 3:21).

REFERENCES

Hardeman, N.B. and Ben M. Bogard (1938), *The Hardeman-Bogard Debate* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate).

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