

The Church: Her Members

A. The Church as the Present Purpose of God

The church in the New Testament is revealed to be the central purpose of God in the present age. In contrast with God's purposes for individuals and nations of the Old Testament and a larger purpose for the nation of Israel, the church is revealed to be the company of believers formed of both Jew and Gentile who are called out of the world and joined together in one living union by the baptism of the Spirit.

In general, the concept of the church falls into two major categories. The principle emphasis in the New Testament is on the church as an organism, a living union of all true believers in Christ. This is the distinctive truth that is presented beginning with the day of Pentecost, with the advent of the Spirit, and concluding with the coming of Christ for His church, in which the church will be caught up out of the world and taken to heaven.

Another concept, however, is that of the local church or the organized church. This is a company of professing believers in

any one locality or a group of such local assemblies (1 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:2; Phil. 1:1).

The word "church" is a translation of a Greek word "ekklesia" and is frequently used of any assembly or congregation of people whether gathered for religious or for political purposes. The word actually means "called out ones." In early Greece, cities were often ruled by pure democracy in which every citizen in the town would gather together to act upon matters of mutual interest. As they would be called out from their ordinary occupations to an assembly where they could vote, the word came to mean the result of being called out, or those who were thus assembled.

This word is found frequently in the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament, to denote various assemblies in the Old Testament. It is used in a similar sense in such passages as Acts 7:38 and Acts 19:32, where the word is used simply of a crowd that had gathered. When used of the church as the body of Christ, however, it becomes a technical word referring to those called out of the world and joined together with a living union in Christ. This concept is not found in the Old Testament even though Israel sometimes was gathered together for religious purposes. The term when used of the saved applies specifically to the company of those who are saved in the present age whether on earth or in heaven.

B. The Church: A New Testament Revelation

Because the concept of a church formed of Jews and Gentiles alike — all of whom are saved and joined together by eternal life — is not found in the Old Testament, only the New Testament gives the divine revelation on this important subject. In the plan of God it was necessary for Christ to come first, to die on the cross, to be raised from the dead, and to ascend into heaven. With the advent of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, however, it was possible for God to fulfill His purpose of having a special company of believers disregarding the distinction between Israel and the Gentiles and having their own place in the eternal purpose of God.

According to Acts 2, as confirmed by the experience of Cornelius in Acts 10, believers in Christ were baptized by the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13) and became members one of another with

the advent of the Holy Spirit. From Pentecost on, as each believer became saved he became a member of the body of Christ, as was previously discussed in the doctrine of the baptism of the Spirit. Once the church is complete and caught up in the Rapture into heaven, the divine purpose will return to the normal distinction between Jew and Gentiles who are saved in the period of trial following the Rapture and also in the millennial kingdom.

C. The Jew, the Gentile, and the Church of God

In the present age, the Bible recognizes three major divisions of the human family — the Jew, the Gentile, and the church of God (1 Cor. 10:32). Observing these distinctions are most important to understanding God's present purpose.

1. *The Jews, or the children of Israel, are that nation which sprang from Abraham in the line of Isaac and Jacob, and who, according to divine purpose and promise, are the chosen earthly people of God.* This nation has been miraculously preserved to the present time and, according to prophecy, will yet be the dominant, glorified people of the earth in the coming kingdom age (Isa. 62:1-12).

The eternal promises of Jehovah to this people cannot be altered. These promises include a national entity (Jer. 31:36), a land (Gen. 13:15), a throne (2 Sam. 7:13), a king (Jer. 33:20-21), and a kingdom (2 Sam. 7:16). In the faithfulness of God, their promises, which are primarily earthly in character, have been fulfilled to the present hour and will be fulfilled to all eternity; for each of these covenants is said to be everlasting in duration.

Four words describe the out-working of the divine purpose in this people — "chosen," "scattered," "gathered," "blessed." It is obvious that they were chosen and are now scattered among all the nations of the earth. They will yet be gathered and blessed. The peculiar ministry of this people is stated in Romans 9:4-5 (cf. Gen. 12:3).

2. *The Gentiles are that vast unnumbered company, excluding the Israelites, who have lived on the earth from Adam until now.* Apart from certain individuals, there is no record that during the period from Adam to Christ God sustained any special relation or extended any immediate promises to them.

However, the prophecies of the Old Testament predict great earthly blessings to come upon the Gentiles in the yet future kingdom on the earth, and in the present age they partake alike with the Jews in the privileges of the Gospel.

3. *The church of God refers, not to the membership of organized churches, but to the whole company of the redeemed who will have been saved in the present age.* They are a distinct people because (a) all individuals in that company being born again enter the kingdom of God (John 3:5) and are destined to be conformed to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29); (b) they are no longer in Adam partaking of the ruin of the old creation (2 Cor. 5:17), but are in Christ partaking in the new creation of all that Christ is in His resurrection life and glory (Eph. 1:3; Col. 2:10); (c) in the sight of God, their nationality is changed, for they have come upon new ground where there is neither Jew or Gentile, but Christ is all in all (Col. 3:11); (d) they are now citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20; Col. 3:3), and all their promises, their possessions, and their position are heavenly (2 Cor. 5:17-18). By so much this heavenly people are distinguished from all other people of the earth.

D. The Church Formed From Both Jews and Gentiles

The respective earthly positions of the Jews and the Gentiles have already been pointed out. To this it should be added that God, during the present age and for the purposes of grace, has placed both Jews and Gentiles upon a common ground (Rom. 3:9). They are now said to be "under sin," which means that they are now shut up to salvation by grace alone.

At the death of Christ the change in the divine program from the recognition of a favored nation to an appeal to individuals, Jews and Gentiles alike, was most difficult for the Jew to understand. He did not understand that his covenants were set aside for a time, but not abrogated. The nation's struggles with this problem are recorded in the Book of Acts.

The Jew is unadjusted to this age-program to the present time, and it is predicted of him that he will remain blinded in part until the church is called out (Rom. 11:25), after which the Deliverer will come out of Zion and will turn away ungodliness from Jacob. This, it is stated, is God's covenant with them

when He will take away their sins (Rom. 11:26-27). Nevertheless, through the preaching of the Gospel both Jews and Gentiles are now being saved and the church is being completed. The apostle directed that the Gospel should first be preached to the Jew (Rom. 1:16), and his own ministry was ordered according to this program (Acts 17:1-3).

As has been suggested, two revelations were given to the Apostle Paul: one, of the gospel of the grace of God — probably while in Arabia at the beginning of his ministry (Gal. 1:11-12); and the other, of the church which is the body of Christ — probably while in prison (Eph. 3:3-6). The vital feature of the second revelation is that out of the two sources — Jews and Gentiles — God is now forming one new body (Eph. 2:15). This was a mystery, or hitherto unrevealed divine secret. That God had purposes for Israel, or for the Gentiles, was no secret since it is the theme of Old Testament prophecy; but the secret “hid in God” was the making of a new heavenly order of beings from both Jews and Gentiles.

E. Church Membership

The answer to the question, “Could a person be saved and not be a church member?” depends upon the meaning which is given the word “church.” It is obviously true that a person may be a Christian and not be a member of a local organized church. In fact, all should be saved before they join a church; and, if saved, it is normal for the individual to choose the fellowship of the people of God in one form or another.

On the other hand, it is impossible to be saved and not be a member of the church which is Christ’s own body; for a part of the divine work in salvation is the uniting of the saved one to Christ by baptism with the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). As used in connection with the work of the Spirit, “baptize” is a word of discriminating meaning which reaches far beyond the limits of the outward ordinance of water baptism and represents that ministry of the Spirit for the believer which is more far-reaching in its effects than any other divine undertaking in salvation. It is not surprising that Satan has undertaken to distort the plain meaning of the baptism with the Spirit and the divine ministry it represents; for only on the ground of this ministry can we understand the riches of divine grace or enter into the celestial joy, with its impulse to a holy life, which these riches impart.

On the earth, the church is seen to be a pilgrim band of witnesses. They are not of this world even as Christ is not of this world (John 17:16), and as the Father has sent the Son into the world, so has the Son sent these witnesses into the world. As to what they really are through riches of grace, "it doth not yet appear" (see Col. 3:4; 1 John 3:2). Being the heavenly people in contrast with Israel the earthly people, the church — glorified in the realization of her divine purpose — is seen in heaven where she appears as the bride of the Lamb, co-reigning with the King, and partaker forever in the glory of the eternal Son of God.

Questions

1. How does the purpose of God for the church contrast with the purposes of God for individuals and nations in the Old Testament?
2. What are the two major categories of the concept of the church?
3. What is the original meaning of the word "church"?
4. How is the word "church" used in the Old Testament, and how does this differ from its use in regard to the church which is the body of Christ?
5. What was necessary in the plan of God before the advent of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost?
6. How does the baptism of the Holy Spirit relate to the church?
7. Name the three major divisions of the human family in the present age, and define each.
8. What are some of the eternal promises which God has given to Israel?
9. What promises has God given the Gentiles?
10. In what sense is the church a distinct company of people?
11. On what common ground has God placed Jew and Gentile in the present age?
12. What has happened to Israel's covenants during the present age?
13. How is Israel characterized according to Romans 11:25 during the present age?
14. What will happen to Israel after the rapture of the church?
15. Name and define the two major revelations given to the Apostle Paul.
16. How does the salvation of an individual relate to his being a member of a church?
17. Is it possible to be saved and not a member of the church as the body of Christ?
18. What is the destiny of the church after the present age?