

*The Church
or Assembly.*

BY

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The Church or Assembly.

NO one can carefully read the Acts of the Apostles and the epistles without being struck with the frequent use of the word "church," and that it is used as a term with which saints of God in those days were familiar. Nowadays the word is used very indefinitely, and perhaps hardly two persons have the same thought when using it. Let us look at Scripture and see what the church or assembly was when it began, and of what it was composed: The first mention of the church in the New Testament is in Matthew xvi. 18, "Upon this rock I will build my church."

The word "church" means an *assembly*

of *persons*, and in this passage just quoted Christ says, "my church," a company about to be formed that Christ would own as His.

Reference to a few passages makes clear that *persons* compose the church. "There was great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem." (Acts viii. 1.) "I persecuted the church of God." (1 Cor. xv. 9.) "I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it." (Gal. i. 13.)

These passages could not be applied to a material building of stones, brick, etc., but only to persons, and it is of persons *alone* that the word "church" is used in Scripture.

The word was used in the singular, "church," and also in the plural, "churches"; but the latter only when *locality* was in question, and not when *doctrine* was being taught.

If the word "church" was used in the *singular* it referred either to an assembly in a *place*, as "the church of God which is at Corinth" (1 Cor. i. 2), or the assembly in its *largest aspect* (embracing all those who really belonged to Christ from Pentecost till the Lord comes), as "Christ loved the church" (Eph. v. 25), or again, all those who professed the Lord's name on earth at any given time, as "Give none offence . . . to the church of God." (1 Cor. x. 32.)

If the word was used in the plural, then it referred to the assemblies in different places, as "churches of Galatia." (Gal. i. 2.) Galatia was a province of Asia Minor, and there were assemblies scattered over it, and one letter was written and sent addressed to them all. Again, "Write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia." (Rev. i. 11). Asia was a

country, and seven separate towns were mentioned where saints were gathered, and these looked at together were spoken of as churches. In a town or city the singular was always used, as "the church at Ephesus." (Rev. ii. 1.) This point, if seen, helps very much to the understanding of the subject of the church as presented in Scripture.

When Stephen was giving his defence before the Jewish Sanhedrim, he spoke of the "church in the wilderness" (Acts vii. 38), which was the assembly of Israelites gathered round the tabernacle; and they were Jehovah's assembly, or "church," at that time, and continued to be so after they entered the land of promise until the revolt of the ten tribes, when it was partially broken, but finally at the destruction of Jerusalem.

In Matthew xvi. 18 the Lord speaks of something then future, for He says,

“I will build” ; He refers to something that at that time had not begun. He began by saying “on this rock.” He did not refer to Peter, for Peter was only a stone, as we read, “Thou shalt be called Cephias, which is by interpretation, a stone.” (John i. 42.) Now a stone and a rock convey very different thoughts ; for instance, the Jews took up stones to throw at Jesus, they could not lift a rock. In the scripture we are looking at Jesus said “upon this rock.” What did He refer to? Peter had just confessed “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” The “Son of the living God” referred to His divine Person, and is “this rock” on which the church is built. Son of Man and Son of David are also titles applied to Christ, but both these refer to His earthly glory and His position in connection with Israel.

Son of God is outside earthly associa-

tions, and nothing can fail which is connected with the truth of His divine Person. The Father had revealed this to Peter, so Christ could then reveal His intention of building His church. There are no dates in Scripture connected with the church; but with Israel there are dates, and when God brings them again on the scene as a nation we find dates. (See Daniel ix. 27; xii. 11, 12; Rev. xi. 2, 3; xii. 6, 14; xiii. 5.) But regarding the church we read, "Of the times and seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you." (1 Thess. v. 1.)

Christ said "build"; the thought in this word is stability, something immovable, and is applied by Christ to the company of believers whom He calls "my church." Now the question naturally arises, when did this new structure commence? In Acts ii. 2 we

read, "Suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost." Here was a new beginning, and it was commenced with both *sound*—a rushing, mighty wind; and *appearance*—tongues like as of fire; but also with certain persons. Who were these persons? In Acts i. 15 we read, "disciples . . . the number of names together were about one hundred and twenty." This company was the object of heaven, and the Holy Spirit came upon them in this way to mark the new beginning.

This was the introduction of these persons into the new position of being Christ's assembly on earth, and later on they were taught that they were not only

His assembly, but also members of His body. The church thus formed began to grow, for we read, "there were added unto them about three thousand souls" (Acts ii. 41), and again, "the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." (Acts ii. 47.) This is how the assembly *increased*. Persons composing Christ's assembly have continued on the earth ever since that time, some leaving by death, while others have been converted and added to it. God still owns the church by His Spirit remaining in it. Christ still owns it as His, and nourishes it by the constant flow of spiritual grace from Himself, because He is Head to His church, which is His body. The Holy Spirit still owns it by dwelling in it, thus proving what the assembly is to the three Persons of the Godhead. What ought it to be to every spiritually-minded believer?

The church or assembly does not teach, but is taught—taught by persons who (while themselves a part of the assembly) are gifted by Christ as teachers to unfold the Scriptures and thus edify the assembly.

Neither does the church or assembly preach the gospel to the world, but has in its midst those who are able with more or less ability to preach to the unsaved, and by this means persons are brought to the knowledge of salvation, and afterwards to their place in the church or assembly.

There is immense importance in understanding from Scripture the truth of the church.

The church or assembly may be looked at in three ways. In its *largest view* it comprises all the saints of God from Pentecost till the Lord comes again. (See Eph. v. 25.)

Another way of looking at the church is as embracing all saints on the earth at any given time. (See 1 Cor. x. 32, and Eph. ii. 22.) *A third way* of looking at the church is all believers in any given town. (See 1 Cor. i. 2; 2 Cor. i. 1; 1 Thess. i. 1; 2 Thess. i. 1.)

In each of these three views *persons* are the subject, and these persons are those who have already received the individual blessings of the gospel, and who also are privileged to share through grace the blessings of the assembly. Mere professors may have crept into the company of God's saints, but they do *not* belong to them, and when Christ comes they will be left behind as those who are destitute of saving grace.

What is the church or assembly to God?

It is the temple of God. (See 1 Cor.

iii. 16, 17.) It is also "the house of God," "the church of the living God." (1 Tim. iii. 15.) As the tabernacle in the wilderness *was* God's dwelling-place, and afterwards the temple at Jerusalem, so now the church *is* the temple of God. It is in the assembly of God that His mind is learned; it is where He speaks to the hearts of His saints.

What is the church or assembly to Christ?

It is undoubtedly His chief interest on earth, as we read, "Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it." (Eph. v. 25.) This refers to His devoted service of love in that which has passed. Now He is in heaven He is engaged about the saints who compose the church, in carrying on that moral purification which is effected in the washing of water by the word; also as the High Priest

supporting them in their service. (Eph. v. 26; Heb. vii. 25.) Thus the church is His body and His bride, the object of His unceasing care, that which He nourishes and cherishes, as a man does his wife; and by-and-by He will present it to Himself, a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing. He will then publicly display this object of His affections, when the marriage of the Lamb shall have come, and His wife have made herself ready. (See Rev. xix. 7.)

What is the church or assembly to the Holy Spirit?

The Spirit dwells in the church, as we read, "The Spirit of God dwelleth in you." (1 Cor. iii. 16.) And again, "Ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit." (Eph. ii. 22.) The Spirit not only dwells in

the assembly, but also acts through those who compose it, for the edification of the whole body, and also in the testimony of the gospel, by which other persons are brought into the sphere of blessing. The Spirit has a very important place in the church, and the more this is realized and regarded the more blessing there will be when the saints come together.

What is the church or assembly to believers ?

It is the association of saints on earth, where their *collective* privileges can be enjoyed, and where fellowship in all those exercises which should characterize saints, when gathered to the Lord's name or for edification, is promoted. In entering the assembly at the beginning of Christianity those who received the gospel by faith left their

former religious associations, whether Jewish or heathen, by baptism, and were received into the company of saints on earth, where the Holy Ghost was blessing, through the various gifts, those who composed this company. The Spirit was also active in the judgment of evil when it manifested itself, as in the cases of Ananias and Sapphira his wife, who through Peter were struck dead because they lied to God (see Acts v. 4), and tempted the Spirit of the Lord. (v. 9.)

Later on at Corinth we see how a wicked person was put out of the assembly in order to maintain the holiness of God's dwelling, and the enjoyment of the privileges of Christ's assembly on earth.

Whatever may be the present ruined aspect of the assembly, as seen in the endless divisions around us (which ought

to break the heart of every one who knows the mind of God about the saints), yet it is a comfort to know that nothing can alter God's purposes, and at the coming of the Lord the church will be taken away from the scene of her sad failure and appear in perfection in heavenly glory. If this is what Scripture teaches, how should every exercised heart act in the midst of such a scene of confusion? Would it be right to stay in what is wrong, and strengthen it by our fellowship with it? Or would it be acting in obedience to purge ourselves from the vessels to dishonour, and follow with those that call on the Lord out of a pure heart? (2 Tim. ii. 19-22.)

Let each believer answer this question before the Lord. The judgment-seat of Christ will bring to light what part each saint has taken in connection with the

ruin of the church or assembly during his or her stay on earth.

What is the church or assembly to the world?

At the beginning of its history it was an object of hatred and persecution on the one hand, but the witness of the light and love of God to sinners on the other. All gospel testimony flowed from the church, through those who had gifts, given them by the ascended Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit their testimony was largely used. The world is Satan's kingdom, and persons being rescued from it stirred the enemy, who moved all his powers to stop the gospel. During the times of persecution the saints were made to feel that they were not of the world, and that the world was the enemy of God and His saints; but Satan can change his ways, and when

violence will not answer, then he tries *corruption*. So when persecution could not hinder blessing he brought, through false teachers, the doctrine of Balaam into the assembly, and since its introduction it has been gradually and now almost universally accepted in Christendom.

We first read of it in the address to Pergamos, where it had been accepted by some. "Thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumbling-block before the children of Israel." (Rev. ii. 14.) Balaam taught Balak to invite the people of God to *mix* with the Midianites, who were God's enemies, and through joining with them they learnt their idolatrous ways. When saints join with the world in religious exercises it destroys all true testimony to the grace of God, to the love of Christ, to the presence of the

Holy Spirit, and to the judgment that is coming on all Christ-rejecters.

When thus mixed the saints cannot testify that they are not of the world, for they are all professedly on one common ground. This mixture of the saints and the unconverted in the assembly has produced sad results. The saints have lost one truth after another, because truth is unpalatable to these worldlings and also to real believers when going on with the doctrine of Balaam, so that hardly any truth is held now as it was in the days of the apostles. The words of Scripture may be held, but they convey little meaning, and are almost a dead letter in the professing church. Pious persons cherish those portions of Scripture that speak of sinners being saved, and of Christ as being the One to whom all saints should look for their personal comfort; but

beyond this there is very little discernment of the mind of the Spirit, as shown in the different parts of Scripture. How is this to be accounted for? The Spirit of God has been quenched through the saints having mixed with persons whom they well know are unconverted, and joined with them in the things of God; thus the precious ministry of the Spirit has been hindered.

Where is the mark of separation to-day between saints and the world?

The doctrine of Balaam was to join the saints and the world, and it has not only been accepted, but now even supposed to be a right state of things. A few saints cry out, "We get no food"; but while they are mixed up with the world they are not likely to get any, for the Holy Spirit is grieved with whatever dishonours Christ, and

He cannot minister of the things of Christ.

The unconverted worldlings do not want spiritual food, but are satisfied with political or scientific discourses, anything in fact so long as it does not make them feel uncomfortable about their state and eternity. So the saints are *starved*, and the unconverted *lulled to sleep*, through the doctrine of Balaam being held and taught.

So long as the separation between the church and the world was maintained, there was the power of the Holy Spirit in the church for edification; that is, plenty of spiritual food and instruction, which made saints grow; and also for outside testimony to the world of the blessed news of present salvation from the coming judgment, to every one who would believe the gospel. This double testimony of the Spirit through the

saints has been gradually lost through the doctrine of Balaam being accepted. We know from Scripture, where God's ways are traced out, that He never restores any dispensation when it has failed, but He has brought out of every ruin a remnant to witness to the original truth, and these remnants have always found blessing and power according to their *faith*. The Old Testament gives many illustrations of this truth. So now, when saints separate themselves to Christ, hold sound doctrine, and walk consistently with it, they will find that the truth which the apostles taught can be enjoyed as it was at the beginning; for it *comforts* the saints, and *strengthens* them in their testimony to their fellow-believers, and towards those who are yet in their sins. These separated believers would try to get the unconverted to come to Christ for salva-

tion; but *worship* and the *Lord's supper* would be known to belong *only* to those who are really the Lord's, and walking in subjection to Him.

The Spirit of God would have the saints who form His church take the present confused state of things to heart, and not be contented to go on with what is contrary to the Lord's revealed mind in the Scriptures. In looking to the Lord, and searching the epistles where the subject is found, light will come, and the path of faith will become plain. Paul's second epistle to Timothy especially contemplates the present ruined condition of the church, and gives instruction in connection with it. Very many of God's saints have found both guidance and comfort from this part of the Scripture, especially chapter ii. 19-22, and by seeking grace to act on the light they had got they

have received more. "For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance." May it be so with every exercised saint, for the Lord's glory here and our reward up there. Remember, the Lord says three times over "I come quickly" in the last chapter of Revelation. (See verses 7; 12, 20.) May our hearts answer, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

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