

# **The Church: God's People**

**Matthew 16:13-19;  
Ephesians 1:22-23; 2:13-16, 19-22; 3:8-11, 20-21; 4:1-6; 5:25-27**

**A sermon preached by Dr. Calvin Warpula  
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There are hundreds of churches meeting in Houston and millions throughout the world. One out of three Texans claims to be an active member of some church, another one-third are nominally associated with some church. What is this group called "the church"? Why does it exist? Are all churches equally good, equally bad, or some good, and some bad? Why should a person attend any particular church over another church? Does it really make any difference just so you enjoy what you are doing? Why does the Church of Christ exist among all the other options in the world?

These are all excellent questions and they deserve clear and concise, straight forward answers.

## **The Meaning of the Word "Church"**

Let's begin with the first time the word "church" appears in the English Bible. Turn with me, please, to the first reading this morning from the gospel of Matthew, the first book of the New Testament, to chapter 16 and verse 13. Jesus asked a simple question, "Who do people say the son of man is?" The title "son of man" is Jesus' favorite description of himself. Well, the disciples answered, "Some say, John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Those answers are from the populace, the masses of people who really did not understand who Jesus was. The answers are all wrong. So Jesus asked a personal, penetrating question, "Who do you say that I am?" The apostle Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Peter confesses that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the anointed and chosen one of God, the Messiah, the Savior and Lord, the very image of God himself in human flesh. This answer is the foundation for all Christianity. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

Jesus pronounces a blessing on Peter for boldly speaking the right answer. Jesus says that this answer did not originate with man but came from God in heaven. Jesus then adds, "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (v. 18). Jesus engages in a little word play when he says, "You are Peter." The New Testament was originally written in Greek. The Greek word is *petros* which means, "a little stone." When Jesus said, "on this rock," he used the Greek word *petra* which means, "a big rock ledge." In effect, Jesus is saying,

“You are a little stone, but on this rock ledge of truth that I am the Christ, the son of God, I will build my church.” Jesus claims to be both the founder and the foundation of the church (see I Corinthians 3:11).

The word “church” is the Greek word *ecclesia*. It is not a newly-coined, holy word restricted to biblical usage only. In secular Greek *ecclesia* means “an assembly, a gathering of people.” Hundreds of years before Jesus, the word was used to describe the governing assembly of the city of Athens. In the N.T., it is the word for “the assembly” of the Ephesian mob (Acts 19:32, 39, 41). In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament (called the Septuagint, abbreviated LXX) made some two hundred years before Jesus, *ecclesia* is used eighty times for the community of Israel as a whole.

When Jesus said the word “church” in Aramaic, the language he spoke which is a kindred cousin to Hebrew, and it is then written by Matthew in Greek as *ecclesia*, it meant “an assembly of people, a community, a company of people” who would be disciples and followers of Jesus Christ. The word “church” is only three times in the gospels (Matthew 16:18; 18:15,17) but it is used 111 times in the N.T. to mean the people of Jesus.

### **The Church Followed Jesus by Listening to His Word**

The people of Jesus, the church, were not a “loosey-goosey,” feelings-and-experience-led group seeking comfort, convenience, or entertainment driven by a consumer mentality or a market motivation. No. The people of Jesus were committed to following Jesus, to doing what he said, to living out his commands and his will on this earth (I Corinthians 7:19). The word of Christ dwelt in them (Colossians 3:15) and whatever they did in word or deed, they were to do in the name of Christ (Colossians 3:17).

Jesus delegated to the apostles the authority, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to deliver God’s will to people. After promising to build his church, Jesus says, “I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:19). The literal translation of the Greek tenses here are, “Whatever you bind on earth has already been bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth has already been loosed in heaven.” The message of the apostles did not originate with them but came from heaven itself. Jesus said the Holy Spirit would guide the apostles into all truth and bring to their remembrance all the things that Jesus had taught them (John 16:13). The things they spoke and wrote were the commandments of the Lord (I Corinthians 14:37). Whoever received the apostles’ message received Jesus; whoever rejected the apostles’ message rejected Jesus (Luke 10:16). They were to go to the entire world and preach the gospel of Jesus to every creature (Mark 16:15). Those they baptized were to be taught to obey all things that Jesus taught (Matthew 28:19-20).

### **The Beginning and Growth of the Church**

The book of Acts tells the story of the beginning of the church (chapter two). Here the apostles proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ: his appointment by God the Father to come into the world to obey the Father in all things, his performance of good works of healing and miracles, and his obedience in dying on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. The apostles proclaimed that Jesus was crucified, buried and resurrected three days later. After forty days of giving the apostles many infallible proofs of his resurrection (Acts 1:3), Jesus ascended into the heavenly world and God the Father crowned him Lord and Savior, King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Acts 2:34-36). Those hearers that were convicted of their sins of rejecting and crucifying Jesus cried out, "What shall we do?" The apostles commanded them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:37-38). That day three thousand penitent believers were baptized into Christ.

This forms the first church that Jesus built through the preaching of the apostles. The new disciples continued following the apostles' message (2:42). They worshiped, fellowshiped, shared, served and evangelized together (2:42-47). Beginning here, and through the next thirty years, the word spread throughout the world. About A. D. 60, the apostle Paul wrote that the gospel had been preached "to every creature under heaven" (Colossians 1:23).

### **The Trustworthiness of the New Testament**

Within two to four decades, most of the N.T. was written by the apostles or by close friends of the apostles. By the close of the first century A. D., all the N.T. was written. These inspired documents contain the entire revelation of God for us today. The written words of the apostles are just as authoritative as their spoken words. The words of Jesus remain "spirit and life" (John 6:63) because the word of God is "living and alive and sharper than any two-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12).

This N.T. contains the words of Jesus Christ and his apostles and other apostolic men. These documents are still the will of God for us today as much as they were the will of God for those to whom they were first written. The story of texts and manuscripts assures us that we know certainly and absolutely that we have 99.9% of the exact message of Jesus and the apostles. The few words or verses that are in doubt have nothing to do with the doctrinal teachings of the N.T. Through the knowledge of textual transmission and the science of textual criticism, we are certain that what we have written in our language today is exactly what the apostles originally wrote in the Greek of the original autographs.

When you read this N. T. you can be absolutely assured that this is the message that was originally conveyed by apostolic words and documents in the first century. "All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). God's word is indestructible. Jesus said that the Scripture cannot be broken and that it is eternal (John 10:35; Matthew 24:35). Jesus said that his words would judge us at the last day (John 12:48). We are to "guard the deposit of truth" that the apostles gave us (2 Timothy 1:14). When we love God, we will obey his commands (John 15:10, 14). "Those who obey his commands live

in him, and he in them” (I John 3:24). God “has given us all things that pertain unto life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3).

We do not need a new Jesus or a new faith. We are commanded by the apostle John to “see that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you will also remain in the Son and in the Father” (I John 2:24). The Lord’s brother, Jude, commands us to “contend earnestly for the faith that was once and for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). A principle found throughout the Bible is that no one is to add to or take away from the word of God (Deuteronomy 4:2; Proverbs 30:6; Revelation 22:18-19). Thus, the truth that we have in Jesus as delivered by his apostles is authoritative, sufficient, and complete.

This means that we can have the same church in faith, life and practice that was founded by Jesus through the preaching of the apostles. If the word of the apostles produced the first church, and it did on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, and the word of the apostles produced churches of God throughout the Mediterranean world, and it did, then that same word, now written, remains active and powerful to produce the same kind of believers and churches today. Nothing has happened in the last nineteen centuries to change God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the nature of man, the needs of man, salvation, what God wants from us in our lives, the how, why and meaning of worship, and the future coming judgment and eternity.

### **Where Is the Church Today?**

Where does this N.T. church, the one Jesus built through his apostles, exist today?

The answer: Where did it exist in the first century? It existed where the apostles preached the facts of Jesus Christ and men and women yielded their lives in obedience to those truths. This is the case throughout the book of Acts, from the beginning in Jerusalem in chapter 2 to the last paragraph where Paul is preaching Jesus in Rome while under house arrest in chapter 28 (vs. 30-31). There was one original, authentic gospel (I Corinthians 15:1-4; Galatians 1:6-9). This gospel was the good news of God loving the world so much that he sent Jesus to come in human flesh, live among us, do good deeds, preach God’s rule and kingdom, and die on the cross as a vicarious sacrifice for our sins, be buried, and be raised on the third day from the dead. In the N.T. men and women obeyed that gospel by believing in Jesus as the son of God, turning from their sinful lives and by being baptized into the name of Jesus. (The insert in today’s bulletin gives all these details and Scriptures. All the teaching in this leaflet is nothing but Scripture). This is God’s will for the human race. There is one God, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one body, and one hope (Ephesians 4:4-6).

### **Jesus Is the Only Way**

There is no other way. Jesus taught, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father but by me” (John 14:6). The apostles preached Jesus as the only hope of all humankind. “In no other name is there salvation, for there is one name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

The entire world rejoiced this week when 33 men trapped a half a mile under the earth for 69 days were rescued in Chile. People on top had to rescue them. The trapped miners could not save themselves. There was no way out except the one that the rescuers on the surface provided by drilling a thirty-inch hole through rock for a half a mile into the earth. This narrow shaft allowed the rescuers to drop a narrow, confining tube to transport each man, one by one, to the surface in a twenty-minute dangerous ride. The men were saved by the grace of those on the top. They had to enter the rescue capsule by faith. They had two choices: accept the one and only rescue vehicle, or stay where they were and face certain death. There were no other options. No man refused to be rescued. They all thankfully and gladly accepted the free ride to the top. Likewise, we are all trapped in the darkness, doom and condemnation of sin. God is the only one that can save us. We cannot save ourselves. God loved us so much that he sent his son to die on the cross as an atoning sacrifice on our behalf. God, the one against whom we had sinned, provided the one and only escape from the guilt of our sins and their eternal consequences. We are saved by grace and not by works of our own doing. We have a choice: accept God's offer to save us or be eternally lost in a place Jesus called hell. There are no other options.

### **The Church and Salvation**

How are people saved today? How are we put right with God now? Exactly the same way men and women were saved and put right with God on the day of Pentecost and throughout the book of Acts and the apostolic age. People heard the good news of Jesus, were convicted of their sins, believed in Jesus, trusted Jesus, and were baptized to surrender their lives to Jesus. When people accepted Jesus, God saved them and gave them eternal life. God added all those who were saved to his church, his people. The church is the people of God who are saved by grace through faith in Christ when they believe, repent and are baptized into Christ. The church does not save, but when God saves he simultaneously adds the saved to his church (Acts 2:47). All saved persons are in God's church. Jesus purchased the church with his own blood (Acts 20:28). He is the savior of his body, the church (Ephesians 5:23). God gets glory in the church and in Christ Jesus forever (Ephesians 3:21). The existence of the church demonstrates the majesty, power, love, and wisdom of God to all the invisible spirits of the universe (Ephesians 3:10-11). Jesus is the head of his church, his body (Ephesians 1:22-23). The only way to be connected to Jesus the head is to be in his spiritual body, the church (Ephesians 4:15-16; Colossians 2:19). There is no such thing as God saving someone and then not adding them to his church. Salvation and membership in God's church occur simultaneously.

### **What Happened in New Testament Churches?**

Throughout the book of Acts and the letters that follow, believers gathered in local churches or congregations. The Bible only speaks of the plural "churches" when it is referring to groups of believers in different geographical locations. There are no

denominations in the N.T. There is nothing but God's church, the one church, the one body of Christ. This church met in various locations like Jerusalem, Damascus, Antioch of Syria, Rome, Ephesus, Corinth, Thessalonica, Berea, Philippi, Cenchrea, Athens, Laodicea, Hierapolis, Thyatira, Sardis, Smyrna, and Philadelphia.

In these local assemblies, believers worshiped Christ as God, shared the Lord's supper, sang hymns and psalms of praise, prayed, encouraged one another, taught one another, supported one another, gave money to help one another, rejoiced with one another, confessed their sins to one another, wept with one another, and built one another up. The local church is the visible expression of the church of Jesus Christ of which he is the head. All persons who were saved and counted among God's people were always in communion, fellowship and connection with other believers in a local congregation. There was no such thing as a believer without a local or home church where he or she fellowshiped, worshiped and served with other believers.

### **Where Are God's People Today?**

Today, we are 1900 years of church history past the apostolic age. These nineteen centuries are filled with good news of progress and development of the kingdom of God on earth. They are also filled with bad, regretful news of believers dividing, fighting, and warring among themselves. Even though Jesus prayed for the unity of the church (John 17:20-23) and the apostles commanded that we make every effort to keep the unity of the faith (Ephesians 4:3), we still have thousands of denominational fractures, divisions and varieties in Christendom.

Where does God's church exist today? How can we find it?

We are not God, and we do not know the mind of God except as he has revealed it to us in his holy word. I do not know where all God's people are. The Bible says that "God knows all those that are his" (2 Timothy 2:19). I am confident that there are saved people that I have never heard of and will never meet until all the saved enter into eternal glory. I am confident that not all the saved are in any brand name of Christian faith or denomination. I am confident that some of God's people are in spiritual Babylon and need to come out of that state (Revelation 18:4). I am confident that there are righteous and holy individuals who are members of mostly-sinful congregations (Revelation 3:2, 4). I am confident that not all the saved are in the Churches of Christ of the American Restoration Movement of which we are heirs. Our plea is that we are "Christians only, not the only Christians." I am also confident that not everyone in the Churches of Christ of the American Restoration Movement is saved. Jesus spoke of the weeds growing among the wheat and that he would separate them on the Day of Judgment (Matthew 13:37-43). Jesus said that some religious people who work miracles, prophesy and do many good works will be cast away on the Day of Judgment because he does not know them (Matthew 7:21-23).

You and I are on this earth for such a short time. We did not create the denominational divisions and factions. They were here when we were born and they will be here when we die. However, we do not have to perpetuate the errors of our ancestors or make new ones. We can make a difference by being the kind of believers that honor Jesus Christ in word, practice and deed. We must work for unity with all those with

whom God has unity. Anyone in Christ is my brother or sister. Anywhere the word of Christ goes and anybody who hears that word can be a Christian if they never hear of us or the American church.

### **What God Wants from Us Now**

The bottom line is this: God wants you and me to be holy, faithful, and separated from sin (Ephesians 5:3-19; I Thessalonians 4:1-8). He wants us to let our light shine and be the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13-16). He wants us to surrender to the Spirit and let the Spirit produce his fruit in us (Galatians 5:22). God wants us to follow the N.T. forms for the church but he also wants us to practice the N.T. functions of the church such as edification, evangelism, and ministry. It's true of the body of Christ as it is of the human body: "The body without the spirit is dead" (James 2:26).

Let us judge no person except as Christ judges him in his word. Let us not presume to add to or take from the Scriptures of God (Revelation 22:18-19). Let us not offer anything in worship to God except what God says he wants in worship (John 4:23-24). We are worshiping God, not pleasing ourselves (Ephesians 5:10). God has not given us the luxury of innovative worship based on "human teachings and commands" (Colossians 2:22). Let us not perpetuate division by carnal and sinful attitudes. Let us work for peace among all those that call on the name of the Lord (Romans 12:18; 14:19). Let us be doers of the word, and not judges of the law (James 4:11-12). Let us be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves (Matthew 10:16). Let us be ready to read the Bible and pray with any sincere person (as Philip in Acts 8:26-39 and Paul in Acts 17:2-3, 11). Let us not construct barriers of tradition or allow our personal opinions or preferences to separate us from other believers (Romans 14:1-13).

I have written in this booklet several articles affirming the truths I have spoken of today [show, "Let Me Answer Your Questions"]. If you like, please pick one up in the foyer.

The only way to work for unity on God's terms is to let God guide us by his word. We will never unite on opinions or human ideas, but we can unite on Christ and his word. God being my helper that is what I am going to do here in my ministry and all the days of my life.

The church of Christ exists on the earth today where two things occur. These two things made the first church, and these two things will make a church of Jesus Christ today. These two things are plainly given in the first sermon that produced the first church in Acts chapter two. First, the church exists where the same message about Jesus is preached. Second, the church exists where the same response is given. Anywhere the same Jesus of the N.T. is preached, and where men and women respond in faith, repentance and baptism, the church of Christ exists. That's the way God made Christians then; that's the way God makes Christians now.

Today, we ask you to do these same two things: Believe in the same Jesus, the son of God, crucified, buried, and resurrected, reigning, ruling and coming again, and, then make the response of faith in Christ, repentance of sins, and baptism into Christ. We can help you do that today, right here, right now. We invite you to come to Jesus and obey his word, while we stand and sing.

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