

Sound in the Faith

by Bob Pulliam

Lesson 3

The Church (It's Identity)



Memory Verses: John 8:31; II Timothy 2:15 (KJV)

The word “church” conjures a lot of different images, for a lot of different people. Some people think of a building. Perhaps a little brown building “in the vale”. Others think of a denomination, with a headquarters and member churches scattered all over the countryside. But the New Testament never presents these kinds of pictures of the church. The church is a very important concept to understand. But there are a lot of misconceptions created by nearly two thousand years of error. One of the most prominent misconceptions is that most churches claiming to be “Christian” are just a part of the one big universal church established by Jesus.

We need to understand the church as presented in the New Testament, and then get a picture of it that will allow us to identify it.

“I will build my church...”

Jesus asked his disciples who they believed He really was. And this was the reply that He received, and His response:

“Simon Peter answered and said, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.’ ” (Mt 16:16 - 18)

You’ll find many people who jump directly to verse eighteen and make their focus “*on this rock I will build My church*”. They conclude that Peter was the rock on which the church would be built. And this sounds reasonable when they explain that the name “*Peter*” actually means *rock*. But this does not agree with the grammar of the verse. Notice

that verse eighteen begins with, “*And I also say to you...*”. Why did Jesus say “*also*”? The reason is in the previous verse. The Father had revealed Jesus’ identity to Peter. Jesus is adding to what the Father had made known. The sense is, “*My Father has said unto you, and I also say unto you...*”. But what had the Father revealed? That Jesus is the Christ (v16).

In addition, it is important that we realize that the word for “*Peter*”, and the word for “*rock*” are not the same in the Greek manuscripts from which our English translations are taken. While both words do mean rock, the word for *Peter* refers to a small movable stone, like a pebble. But the word for *rock* refers to a large immovable cleft. If Matthew wanted his readers to understand that Peter would be the rock, he had a confusing way of getting it across.

So what is Jesus building the church on, in this passage? Place verse sixteen in parallel with verse eighteen, and you will get a little better view of His intention:

“You are the Christ, | the Son of the living God.”
“you are Peter, | and on this rock I will build My church,”

Jesus uses the same formula of Peter’s confession to formulate the affirmation that He would build His church. His church would be built upon the fact, or truth, that He is the Son of God.

You don’t have to know Greek, or have a degree in Bible interpretation to know that something is wrong with the “Peter is Pope” theory. All you have to do is look at the fulfillment of this prophecy. Jesus was telling the disciples what He would do in the near future. No one disputes that. But what does Jesus do, when He fulfills these words? A study of the book of Acts shows conclusively that Peter held no position of prominence over the other apostles. And this becomes even clearer as we study the epistles.

Peter is outspoken at the beginning of Acts; but there is nothing new there. He was outspoken all through the gospels. The significant thing here is that he did not hold any power over the other apostles when he spoke out. He spearheaded the selection of the replacement of Judas; but only in speech. The selection was made by a casting of lots, and the text does not have Peter pronouncing a special blessing over the lots. We are told that “*they prayed*” and that “*they cast their lots*” (Acts 1:24-26). Peter preached that famous sermon in Acts two; but he was “*taking his stand with the eleven*” (2:14). Afterward, the people “*continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine*” (2:42). Jumping to chapter fifteen, we find none of the apostles holding a place of prominence over the others (15:6-22). And this is in full accord with the instruction of Jesus, when He told the apostles,

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave;”

(Matthew 20:25-27)

Question Set Number One

- 1) What did Jesus ask His disciples?
- 2) What was Peter’s answer?
- 3) How many churches did Jesus say He would build?
- 4) What does the Greek word for “*Peter*” mean?
- 5) What does the word for “*rock*” mean?
- 6) What was the rock, on which Jesus would build His church?

- 7) How do we know something is wrong with the “Peter is Pope” theory?

- 8) After the church began, the people continued in what?
- 9) “whoever desires to become great among you, _____ _____ _____
_____ _____.”
- 10) “whoever desires to be first among you, _____ _____ _____
_____ _____.”

The Head of the Church...

The church has only one head. And that head is Jesus Christ (Eph 1:22f; Col 1:18). You will not find a scripture which offers a separate head upon the earth. The church is depicted as the body of Christ. Bodies only have one head, and a head has only one body. Most churches make an appeal for a head (headquarters) upon this earth. It may be called “headquarters”, or the “council”, or a “conference”, or a “synod”... but it all amounts to the same effort to place humans in charge.

The growth of the body is to be orchestrated from it’s only head, which is Christ (Eph 4:15; Col 2:19). If a body wants to be identified as the church that Jesus built, it must act solely by the guidance of Jesus as

it's only head. This is precisely why Paul used the metaphor of the head and body for Christ and the church.

The Church Is the Kingdom...

Some people are still waiting for Jesus to establish His kingdom. But the New Testament tells us that Jesus already established it. The problem is, people are looking for the wrong kind of kingdom. They want to see Jesus sitting in Jerusalem on a big fancy throne (piece of furniture). But Jesus clearly said, "*My kingdom is not of this world.*" (Jn 18:36) We need to get the romantic notions of an earthly kingdom out of our minds, and listen to the scriptures.

Paul told the Colossians, "*He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love*" (Col 1:13). The Colossians were in the kingdom. Jesus said, "*The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.*" (Lk 17:20f)

The word kingdom is used in several different senses. On one occasion, it may refer to the eternal kingdom, or heaven (II Tim 4:18). In other cases, it may refer to the power, or 'kingdom rule' (II Tim 4:1). But it always carries the idea of domination and subjection. And, as we shall see, the kingdom of Christ is the church.

The first requirement for a kingdom is to have a king. A kingdom is the dominion of a king. The apostles proclaimed Jesus as the King of kings (I Tim 6:14f; Rev 17:14). The second requirement is dominion. This requires a law. And the kingdom of the Lord was to begin when the law went forth from Jerusalem (Isa 2:2f). And that law did go forth, beginning at Jerusalem (Lk 24:47; Acts 2). These things were to take place in the "*last days*" (Isa 2:2); and Peter identified the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy on that day as being in the "*last days*" (Acts 2:16f).

What law are we under today? Some mistakenly tell us that we are not under any law (a misunderstanding of Romans 6:14, which refers to the law of Moses). But we are under the law of the Spirit (Rom 8:2), which is the law of God (Rom 8:7). If we are not under the law of God, then our minds are carnal, and enmity toward God (*ibid.*). Paul told the Corinthians that He was under law unto Christ (I Cor 9:21). And James told his readers to look "*into the perfect law of liberty*" and be a doer of the word (Jms 1:25). And most importantly, Jesus said that we must do the will of the Father in heaven, if we would enter into the kingdom of heaven... not doing so is called iniquity, or lawlessness (Mt 7:21-23). The obvious conclusion is that a law has been set in place for our subjection to the King of kings in His kingdom.

Add to this the fact that Jesus' promise to build His church included the giving of the keys of the kingdom (Mt 16:18f). Jesus would **build** His church, and then give keys for entry into what He had **built**. Over what does Jesus now rule? Is it not the church, as it's head? The church is the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

Question Set Number Two

- 1) Who is the head of the church?
- 2) What is the church depicted as?
- 3) “_____ only have ____ _____, and a _____ has only ____ _____.”
- 4) What do most churches make an appeal for?
- 5) The growth of the body is orchestrated by whom?
- 6) What must a body do, to be identified as the church which Jesus built?

- 7) What are some still waiting for Jesus to establish?
- 8) What did Jesus say about His kingdoms location?
- 9) Into what had the Colossians been conveyed?
- 10) Jesus said that the kingdom does not come with this...
- 11) Where did He say the kingdom is?
- 12) “The kingdom of Christ is the _____.”
- 13) What is the first requirement for a kingdom?
- 14) What did the apostles proclaim Jesus to be?
- 15) What is the second requirement for a kingdom?
- 16) What does this require?...
- 17) Where did the law begin to go forth?
- 18) List four different ways the law is described in the New Testament:
 - a)
 - b)
 - c)
 - d)

- 19) What must we do to enter the kingdom of heaven?
- 20) If we do not do that, it is called...
- 21) Jesus promised to give the _____ of the _____.
- 22) But what had He just promised to build?
- 23) Over what does Jesus now rule?

Process of Identifying...

The church of Jesus Christ has identifying characteristics by which we may locate her. Just as we might search for a missing person, we can also search for the church.

If we were looking for a person, we might begin with their name; then look at color of hair, color of eyes, height, build, etc... If you're looking for a man named Jack Slap, you can rule out anyone who does not have that name. If the man you're looking for has red hair, you can rule out any who do not have red hair. The more of the characteristics you utilize, the more certain you can be of having the right man when you've finished. If you just use a name, you can't be very sure at all.

When I first moved to West Virginia, I discovered that a man with the same name lived down the street. What's more, the mailman was delivering my mail to him. Some very important mail that was addressed to me was actually delivered to him. He had the same name, but he was not the same man. In fact, you couldn't possibly have mistaken us for each other, either in looks, or in personality. But the mailman assumed he was delivering the mail to the right person.

This is the same problem when it comes to the church. Institutions have been established, and claims made about them being the church. People assume that they must be the church, because they have been told that these institutions are the church. Never assume! Identify the church by the description of her that we find in the New Testament. In the next few lessons, we will be looking at distinct characteristics of Jesus' church. These will help us recognize local churches with which we should, and should not, associate ourselves. The remainder of this lesson will just concentrate on two characteristics out of the many we should be concerned with.

The Name...

As mentioned above, the name is not enough; but it is important! If the name is not right, how can anything else be right? If your employer put the wrong name on your paycheck, do you suppose your bank would overlook it, and deposit it in your account? We all know how important a name is; but we are inconsistent in that conviction if we think that the church is any different.

The church in the New Testament did not have a denominational name attached to it. Instead, it had a descriptive name. For example, when Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, he addressed his epistle "*To the church of God which is at Corinth*" (I Cor 1:2). The phrase "*church of*

God” means the church *belonging to God*. Notice how this descriptive name gives glory to God. Paul sent greetings to the Romans, telling them that the “*churches of Christ greet you*” (Rom 16:16). This name gives glory to the Christ, who shed His blood to purchase the church (Acts 20:28).

In modern religion, it is common to have churches named after men (*e.g.* Martin Luther), doctrines (*e.g.* Seventh-Day Adventist), church organization (*e.g.* Presbyterian), or practices (*e.g.* Baptist). And while all may have good intentions, and are acting in sincerity; they still do not have names you find attached to the church in the Bible. It is surprising that more people do not wonder why their churches aren’t even mentioned in the Bible.

At times, you will find churches named accurately from the pages of scripture. But do not allow this to be the end of your investigation. Just because it says “church of God”, or “church of Christ”, on the sign, doesn’t mean you’ve found the church of the Lord.

Means of Entry...

Another important aspect of your search should be how one becomes a member of the church in question. If You were searching for a building with only one door, and you came to one with three, would you think you had found the right one? Certainly not! The New Testament tells us how people got into the church of Jesus Christ; and that is what we need to search for. And there was only one means of entry, not many.

You’ve already done what the Lord commands; but not everyone believes and practices what the scriptures teach. Some teach that you must plead for salvation (praying through), and are only saved after the Lord has given a sign of such. In more recent years, these signs have been somewhat watered down; but churches used to require that they be quite significant (*e.g.* lightning striking, or surviving a deadly fever). In some churches, the congregation votes on the candidate to determine whether they may be a member. In others, you must speak in tongues to be a member. Obviously, such things never went on in the first century church.

Other churches make it very easy to get in. They instruct people to pray the prayer of faith, asking the Lord Jesus to come into their heart. People who do so are eventually baptized as a sign of God’s grace, and church membership. Again, the New Testament does not present this procedure for salvation and church membership.

There are very few churches who teach what the New Testament church taught on this subject. Today, people are caught up in accepting the consensus of opinion, and that consensus is that one is saved by believing, and nothing else.

The New Testament teaches that one must be born again (Jn 3:3). Such consists of being born of the water (baptism - I Pt 3:20f), and the Spirit (the word - I Pt 1:23). Faith comes by hearing the word of God (Rom 10:17), rather than personal testimonies, or the Holy Spirit giving it. When one believed, and wanted to be saved, they were told to repent and be baptized for the remission of their sins (Acts 2:38).

The scriptures teach us that baptism washes away sins (Acts 22:16; Eph 5:26). To get into Jesus Christ, the Bible presents only one way - to be baptized into Christ (Rom 6:3f; Gal 3:26f). While most denominations and churches practice some form of baptism; few of them teach that it washes away sins, and puts one into Christ. This is one reason why it is important to go beyond a consideration of the name, to identify the church.

Finally, when one is saved, they are added to the church of Christ by the Lord (Acts 2:47). That individual has a responsibility to become a functioning member of Christ's body (Acts 9:26f; Eph 4:15f; Heb 10:24f).

Question Set Number Three

- 1) What may we use to locate the church of Jesus Christ?
- 2) We must identify the church by what?
- 3) The name is not enough, but it is what?...
- 4) Would your bank cash your paycheck if it has someone else's name?
- 5) What kind of name did the N.T. church have?
- 6) The church at Corinth was called...
- 7) The Romans were greeted by....
- 8) What is surprising that people do not wonder about their churches?
- 9) If a church has the right name on the sign, it must be correct. T F
- 10) How many ways were there, for getting into the N.T. church?
- 11) How many churches teach the truth on salvation and membership?
- 12) Most think one is saved by...
- 13) Faith comes by...
- 14) What must we do to wash away sins?
- 15) Who adds the saved to the church?
- 16) What is our responsibility?