

Article of the Month
September, 2023

The Church

It's a common enough word -- "church." But it is also likely that very few actually understand what the Church is and what it's for. It comes from a Greek word (*ekklesia*) which means "**called-out ones**." (In English, we get words like "ecclesiastical" from it. In Spanish, the word for "church" is "iglesia." We can *hear* the original Greek word coming through!) But that doesn't help us unless we know WHO is called out, WHEN they are called, WHY they are called, to WHERE they are called, and FROM WHAT they are called. Additionally, we've probably not given much attention to those who are NOT "called out."

We are all products of our upbringings, and most of us have had little or no reason to pursue these questions. The word "church" is, of course, exclusive to Christianity. But just knowing THAT is enough to make us wonder about the whole rest of the world. After all, Christianity is a minority religion in the world. What about the vast majority of humanity? The "Church" MUST NOT BE EVERYTHING! It must just be a piece in the vast tapestry of God's plans.

As we look at this matter, we may come to some wonderful and shocking realizations. If we are not willing to question our understandings, we should probably not bother reading this article. It may shatter much of what we believe.

MISUNDERSTANDINGS

(1) Some automatically may think of a building when they hear "church." But the Church of the Bible has nothing to do with buildings.

(2) Some may think of salvation when they think of "church." But that is a somewhat distorted perspective. The Church of the Bible is a group called out because it will eventually participate in SAVING OTHERS who are not a part of the church.

(3) Some may think of "church" as a ticket to heaven -- or a guarantee against some "eternal torment." Those who are "called out" (and, therefore, a part of this "Church") WILL (if faithful) obtain a spiritual (or heavenly) resurrection. However, accepting the "call" to the church *just* to go to heaven will insure failure! And as far as eternal torment is concerned, the Bible never teaches it!

Return to 2023 Index

(4) Some think that, as long as we "go" to some "church" we will be "okay." But the Church of the Bible is NOT a denomination. And the various denominations DO NOT constitute the "Church" of the Bible. The Church is NOT there so that someone can be "okay!" It is something we can BE rather than something we "go" to!

WHAT THE CHURCH IS, AND WHAT IT'S FOR

We don't find "church" in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, the word (in the King James translation) occurs 117 times. It only occurs in one of the four Gospels (Matthew); then it occurs in all other books except II Peter, I & II John, and Jude.

Its general usage in the Scriptures is "a CONGREGATION of saints." (In THAT sense, we CAN "go" to it.) Saints are fully devoted, consecrated, and dedicated individuals who have been called by God for a special purpose, and who have, as a result, been begotten with the Holy Spirit so that they can eventually, if faithful, be born in the resurrection as spirit beings. Saints ARE the Church; and the Church is composed of the saints. All other humans who have ever existed will experience an awakening and resurrection on earth as human beings. That's why Jesus confidently taught us to pray, "Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven." (Matthew 6:10)

Suffice it to say that not all who are in congregations of Christian-believing people fit this description of saints! But this was prophesied by Jesus in Matthew 13 where he points out that the true saints (which he calls "wheat") will grow up between his two advents in the midst of people who claim Christianity but do not meet its high standards. Jesus calls these people "tares." The tares outnumber the wheat greatly. Thus the true Church is a definite minority in almost any Christian community.

So, WHY HAVE A CHURCH? It is a reasonable question. If the Church constitutes only a fraction of Christians, and Christians constitute only a fraction of people in the world, it seems only logical (and Scriptural) that God doesn't want everyone in the Church. The Church is a body of persons who will, with Jesus, be used by God to "bless all the families of the earth" as was promised to and through Abraham thousands of years ago. (Galatians 3:8) The Church isn't there to BE those who will be "saved;" it is there because ***IT*** WILL SOON SAVE BILLIONS OF OTHERS who are not a part of the church.

AN ASTOUNDING HISTORY

The beginning and subsequent history of the Church is hardly an historical secret. The Bible records it first as a desire in God's mind -- followed by its literal founding at the time of Jesus' first advent. To be specific, it was officially founded on the day of Pentecost (springtime) in A.D. 33 in the city of Jerusalem. But it existed and was planned in God's mind from "before the foundation of the world." (Ephesians 1:4)

Return to 2023 Index

Saints had a difficult time soon after Pentecost. They were persecuted by Jews and by Gentiles alike. In the period between the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) and "The Edict of Milan" (which officially ended persecutions in the Roman empire in A.D. 313), the saints had sometimes literally to live underground. They were tortured and murdered wholesale. Only with the intervention of God's powers was the Christian Church able to survive.

Unfortunately, in that more than two-century period (A.D. 70 - 313), those professing the Christian religion began to have severe dissensions and struggles among themselves over power within the congregations. Many people lost the spirit of Christ's Church, and apostates began not only to multiply but to dominate. Compromise was being made in doctrine and in behavior. But this provided for the first big surprise!

While the Church was founded as an institution *free from worldly concerns and earthly entanglements*, the persecutions led to a desire for peace (at any cost) and the stability of a "good life." The entire "tare" class was willing to compromise in order to obtain these things. And the opportunity came! The Roman Emperor, Constantine, realized that Christianity had grown into such a large and influential force that it would be to his advantage to harness that strength as a unifying religion for the *entire empire*. After all, a multiplicity of religions was difficult to control! One "official" religion would solve many problems! -- or so he thought.

The appeal the Gospel message had (no matter if it was or was not received inappropriately), made it quite easy to make it the official religion of the empire. This was done over a relatively short period of time following 313. The result was an "official" state-church -- something God never condoned. "Christianity" (in a very tainted form) became "The Roman Catholic [universal] and Apostolic Church." (Paul documents how this was to happen in II Thessalonians 2. It would come from a "falling away" -- an APOSTASY.) Eventually, it was to be so much an integral part of the empire that the empire, itself, became known as "The *Holy* Roman Empire." It was an abomination in the sight of the Lord, and its practices of foul doctrine, foul deeds, and near-total power ended up in what many historians would ultimately call "The Dark Ages." THAT Roman Church exists to this very day -- although now separate from the empire which both created and nourished it. The "Holy Roman Empire" officially dissolved in 1806.

During those terrible centuries, the true Church (the "wheat" of Jesus' parable), had to struggle mightily to maintain any semblance of the teachings of Jesus. But they did, and they often died for it -- usually at the hands of the Roman counterfeit "church."

Eventually, the Lord provided a "little help" -- in 1521 and following. (Daniel 11:34) This was known as "The Protestant Reformation" -- a movement which (as the Daniel text shows) had its own problems. But Protestantism, as it grew, allowed the true saints some liberty of thought and some localized relief from "Holy Roman Empire" persecutions. Nevertheless, until the period known as "The Time of the End" (Daniel 12:4; 7:21, 25) -- a time which is Biblically established to have begun in 1799 -- the

Return to 2023 Index

Roman church maintained an ability to "wear out the saints." (Daniel 7:25) At that moment (1799), the Roman church's power to persecute the saints was forever terminated -- mostly due to the interventions of Napoleon.

The years following 1799 saw incredibly vigorous movements in Bible study. Bible Societies sprang up immediately all over the earth, translating and distributing the Holy Word in all the languages on the face of the earth. (Matthew 24:14) The result was intense Bible investigation -- some of it leading to mistakes which caused spiritual "indigestion!" (Revelation 10:9, 10) But the result is evident today during the "Harvest" (Matthew 13:39) as saints rejoice in vast amounts of Biblical understanding. Daniel prophesied this period prior to the Harvest as the "cleansing of the sanctuary" and the "running to and fro" in Scripture which has resulted in the return of pure doctrine (as pictured as a white horse). See Daniel 8:14; 12:4; Revelation 6:2 at the first advent, and 19:11 at the second advent.

And that is the history of the Church until now -- now in the "Harvest." It's not quite finished, but it will be soon. And once that true Church is finished, it will rule from heaven for the benefit of all who dwell on earth. (Revelation 19:6-8)

The "Bride of Christ" IS the church. It has been being selected, developed and polished to be a part of the mediator of the New Covenant under which mankind will return from death, be perfected as humans on a perfected earth, and live eternally with nothing to harm or destroy the all-pervasive goodness. (Isaiah 11:9; Matthew 6:10)

The true Church has been developed in secrecy over the centuries, during which it has been nearly invisible and persecuted. It will number only 144,000 individuals (Revelation 14:1). It is "the mystery hid from ages." (Ephesians 1:25-27) Its counterfeit, apostate "Christianity," has flourished meanwhile and has, for all to see, been the root of nearly all the social, political, and religious woes ("abominations") which the western world has experienced. (Revelation 17:5)

BIBLICAL CHURCH "PERIODS"

The book of Revelation details in its symbols the seven chronological-historical periods of the development of the Church. Using the meanings of the names of seven early congregations in Asia Minor, the Revelator convincingly symbolizes the entire history of the Church's development. (Revelation chapters 2 & 3) Jesus also outlines these seven periods of the Church by way of his seven parables in Matthew 13. He there explains the characteristics of each of these seven historical periods. The Revelation periods are symbolized by these names:

Return to 2023 Index

- EPHESUS -- This is the Church from A.D. 33 to 70 while the Apostles were yet alive among them, and Jerusalem was yet the functional center of Christianity.
- SMYRNA -- This is the Church from A.D. 70 to 313 -- the period of many and severe persecutions.
- PERGAMOS -- This is the gradual elevation of the apostate church into temporal and spiritual authority from 313 to 1160.
- THYATIRA -- This Church represents the total repressive control by Papacy from 1160 to 1371.
- SARDIS -- This is the nadir of the true Church's history from 1371 to 1521 -- just prior to the Protestant Reformation. The saints nearly "gave up."
- PHILADELPHIA -- This is the Protestant Reformation period from 1521 to 1874 -- an extremely active, enlightening, confusing, and complicated time in the Church and the world.
- LAODICEA -- This the "Harvest" time of the Church from 1874 until the Peaceable Kingdom. There is *great* enlightenment.

Each of these periods had a human "angel" (a messenger) assigned to it who delivered to the saints what they needed to know about overcoming the prevailing problems of their own time in history. It is, with a little study, not too difficult to identify these men who were *heard loudly* in their days (as the seven trumpet-blowers of Revelation), and who delivered the "present truth" messages needed to help the "wheat" keep themselves separate in character from the predominant "tares."

Sometimes these seven men ("angels" or messengers) were considered by at least some to be the most vile of heretics! The list includes two Apostles (Paul and John) and some famous names in church history: Arius, Peter Waldo, John Wycliffe, Martin Luther, and Charles Russell (who, by the way, IS NOT the founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses! This is no truer than is the claim that Peter founded the Roman church. It is remarkable how lies and misrepresentations can corrupt history itself!)

WHY GOD PLANNED THE CHURCH

The Church is called "the firstborn" throughout the New Testament as well as in the types, shadows, and prophecies of the Old Testament. It is called that for two reasons: (1) The firstborn are the INHERITORS. And those who will constitute God's Church will inherit (along with Jesus) all of the powers, honors, wisdom, and glory that they will need to bless all the families of the earth. (2) But they are the "firstborn" in another sense. They will be the first from among mankind to receive life in its *fullest sense*. They will be a part of the FIRST RESURRECTION of Revelation 20:6. And THAT resurrection will be to the Divine Nature -- *the very nature of God, Himself!* They, along with God and Jesus, will have "life within themselves" -- a life dependent

Return to 2023 Index

on NOTHING! They will not need air, food, water, or even the permission to live. They will be indestructible. (II Peter 1:4; John 5:26; Hebrews 1:3)

But the personal reason that God creates the Church is so heart-warming and magnificent that to grasp it is to fall in love with the breathtaking concept!

First it is interesting to note in Genesis God's statement regarding Adam: "It is not good for the man to be alone." (Genesis 2:18) Adam DID have the friendly companionship of all the animals. But they were not on his level. He had communication with God. But Adam was not on His level. God knew how important it was that all intelligent creatures have OTHERS on the same level of being as themselves. Thus, God created Eve and a family for Adam.

But God was alone in the Divine nature. He always had been. And the same consideration that was true for Adam was also true for God. It was not good that He should be alone. He DID have the friendly companionship of lower beings like angels. But they were not on His level. Thus, long before the foundation of the world -- actually as His first thought about ANY kind of creation -- God determined that he would create beings JUST LIKE HIMSELF. He would make a Divine and intimate family of His own -- beings with whom he could have a relationship on His own level -- the Divine nature level.

But the Divine nature is indestructible. For God to make beings on that level, He had to be certain that for all eternity this "family" of His would not -- even COULD NOT -- stray from faithfulness to Him. If this were not insured, there would always be the possibility of chaos in the universe -- a condition God could not and would not permit.

In order to develop such a Divine, personal, and intimate family, God would have to create them "backwards" from all other creatures. These Divine sons of His would have to be TESTED BEFORE THEY EXISTED as Divine beings! They would have to have their minds and inclinations developed before they were actually born into Divine bodies. This is the reverse of all other creations which receive their bodies before the developing of their minds. And the Church would have to be developed under the most unsatisfactory and trying conditions possible to insure the faithfulness of their characters.

This is one reason why God, in His great wisdom, PERMITTED EVIL to occur. This permission of evil not only served as an eventual lesson for ALL intelligent creatures (on earth and in heaven) to be instructional for their eternal commitment to righteousness, but it served as a testing ground for the faith and development of those whom He would make into His Church -- His 144,000-member personal and intimate family of Divine beings. They were to be developed under the great stresses of evil.

Jesus was the FIRST to obtain this Divine nature. At THAT POINT in history (A.D. 33), God had, *at last*, someone with whom He could communicate on his own level. Jesus was born as the first of the First Resurrection, and the first being other than God

Return to 2023 Index

to have the Divine and immortal nature. Consequently, God had a special rejoicing in Jesus' resurrection. Everything from the ancient ages had only been a prelude to this moment which God had planned and awaited from times before He had even begun any kind of creation. In Acts 13:33, the moment is recorded. It is a quote from the Old Testament which the Apostle quotes and explains. And, in its correct translation, it reads: "Thou art my Son! THIS DAY have I brought thee to the birth!" God's excitement is nearly palpable! What He had long-awaited had finally begun to come to pass. But Jesus was only the first of this "New Creation" -- which was actually (in God's mind) the oldest and first creation. Still to be brought to this same Divine resurrection were 144,000 more Divine sons. The number is nearly complete. God will soon have His whole new personal family of Divine creatures with whom He can communicate on the most intimate of levels. This is why has "called out" those who will be His Church -- His intimate and personal family. Can we not be SO HAPPY for Him?

The saints who will constitute this body have an early privilege while yet in the flesh. They get to call God their "Abba" (Mark 14:36; Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6) -- the term for father used by Jewish children to express their admiration and closeness to their dear fathers -- the beloved heads of their beloved families. It is a blessed privilege to use this term. It is a foretaste of the closeness we will share with God once we have received the First Resurrection and, in the fullest sense, become His own family.

And these 144,000 Divine beings (God's Church) will have the honor, as their first work for their new Father, to bless -- awaken and perfect -- the entire race from which they were called and taken. That human race will dwell eternally on a perfected earth in the ultimate paradise imaginable. (Matthew 6:10)

THE SUM OF IT ALL

Thus we see the glorious meaning of "The Church." For the last 2000 years since Jesus' sacrifice, God has been "calling out" from among mankind those whom He wishes to invite to be the "body" of The Christ -- the "Bride" of His dear son, Jesus. Since the number is specified as 144,000, we can see, that *on the average*, 72 people per year have been accepted into that blessed class. That is 6 people per month who die having been faithful to their "calling." (II Peter 1:10)

They have been called out of an imperfect and suffering race. This is testing their faith and fidelity and preparing them to be sympathetic priests for the race from which they have been called and which they will bless. They have been called out in order to bless that race with restoration and life. (Acts 3:21) They have been called out to qualify for the Divine nature -- God's own nature of immortal, life-within-itself, magnificence. They have been called out to delight God and to bless men.

And, as Paul states it, "The whole creation [ignorantly] awaits the manifestation of the sons of God [the Church]." (Romans 8:19) That will mark the end of all that has been

Return to 2023 Index

so terrible. It will be the period which Isaiah foretold: "The whole earth is at rest and is quiet. They break forth into singing!" (Isaiah 14:7)
