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Talks From The Bible: Questions ??? About The Church

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TALKS
FROM
THE

Bible



QUESTIONS ???
ABOUT THE CHURCH

A Prayer

Our Father,

Bless these words, we pray,

To the honor and glory of Thy Name,

And to the salvation of the souls of men.

In Jesus' Name,

Amen.

Questions about the Church

It is perfectly legitimate for people to ask questions about the church. They have a right to receive a scriptural answer. To one and all who belong to Christ, the apostle Peter has directed, "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear." (1 Peter 3:15.) It is our purpose in this talk from the Bible to notice some of the questions that are most commonly asked about the church revealed in the New Testament.

Origin

There are those who say that the church of Christ is just another denomination. This leads many to ask, "What is its origin? Did it not have its origin in the nineteenth century? Did it not have its beginning in the United States of America? Were its fundamental doctrines not framed by some intelligent scholar?"

Let me suggest to you that we may find full information concerning these matters in the Bible. We must be satisfied with that which the Bible reveals. We who are members of Christ's church do not claim to hold

to any form of human mechanism and, therefore, we refer you to the word of God concerning the origin of the church. In Isaiah 2:2, 3, the prophet says, "And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills: and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths; for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." This is a passage of scripture relating to the establishment of the church of the Lord, the kingdom of God. In Mark 9:1, Jesus said, "There be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power."

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, "And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter; and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." As we come to the second chapter of the book of Acts, we find the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, the consummation of the promise of Christ, and the church of our Lord is established. The church of Christ, the Lord's church, did not have its origin in the nineteenth century! It originated in

the city of Jerusalem in A.D. 33, just as the Lord of heaven revealed to us through prophecy and promise that it would. It came into being during the time of the Roman kings, and it is interesting to note that it was established upon the first day of the week. As this particular Pentecost day fully bloomed into being, the multitudes came running together to hear the preaching of the apostles in the various tongues represented by the throng. It was declared in the presence of the tremendous crowd assembled that Jesus, the promised Messiah, had come. He had given his life. He had been buried. He had been raised from the dead. He had ascended into the presence of God. Now, the kingdom is born, the kingdom of Christ and of God. The promised church is established. What a magnificent beginning!

What is the origin, then, of the church of Christ? The time . . . *33 A.D.* The place . . . *the city of Jerusalem.* The day . . . *the first Pentecost after the ascension of our Lord,* the first day of the week. Any religious body or group that had its beginning before the time set forth in the New Testament was started *too soon* to be the church of Christ. Any religious body or group that had its beginning after the time set forth in the New Testament was started *too late* to be the church of Christ. Any church beginning in some other place than Jerusalem could not

be the church of the Lord for the Lord's church had to begin in Jerusalem.

When Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build my church," he surely intended for all men for all time to understand that the church is his. It must neither be tampered with nor polluted by the tools, ideas, concepts, opinions of men.

Name

Another question frequently asked by honest and sincere people is, "What name should the church wear?" The troubled waters of the religious world are further aggravated and disturbed by the factions, isms, and divisions that exist that are dedicated to upholding names which are completely foreign to the holy scriptures. Our Lord did not have this sort of arrangement in mind when he established the church. God cannot be blamed for the "confusion of tongues" in this matter for the Bible teaches, "For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace" (1 Cor. 14:33).

The great diversity of religious names indicating the variety of religious affiliations, loyalties, doctrines, and the like stand as a bold, blatant challenge to the truth. The truth is that which will make us free. (John 8:32.) Let us hold fast to the truth for the truth is that which will stand while

the errors and innovations of men can expect only ultimate change, disintegration, and defeat. The wise man has counseled us to "buy the truth and sell it not."

Our Savior plainly stated, "Upon this rock I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18). When Jesus referred to the church which he would build as "my church" he eliminated all ideas that men might ever conceive of other ownership. The church belongs to Christ. It is, therefore, logical as well as scriptural to refer to it as the church of Christ.

The Bible not only teaches us that Jesus was the builder of the church, but it also teaches us that he was the "buyer." "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." (Acts 20:28.) The church cost the Christ his life, his blood. The only price sufficient in the eyes of God to purchase the church was the blood of Christ, "as a lamb without spot and without blemish."

Today, if one should proceed to buy a piece of property and pay for the erection of his house upon it, there would be no argument or doubt as to the name by which it would be recognized. It would be accepted in the name of the one who bought and built it! The church was bought and built by

Jesus the Christ. It surely should wear his name.

As the apostle came to the closing words of the Roman letter, he said, ". . . the churches of Christ salute you" (Rom. 16: 16). We know from this that it is eminently scriptural to refer to the church as the church of Christ.

In his first epistle to the Corinthians, Paul referred to the church as "the church of God" (1 Cor. 1:2). Later, he mentioned the church as "the body of Christ" (1 Cor. 12:27). In many instances God's people are called simply, "the church." To use any of these terms mentioned, and still others found within the sacred precincts of the New Testament is entirely in order. God knows what he wants the church called!

It is entirely without scriptural authority or precedent to call the church by the name or names of men. To do so is a violation of God's will, Christ's authority, and reflects the spirit of rebellion, disobedience, or ignorance on the part of those who do so. Christ is to have "preeminence" (Col. 1:18). The names of men are as nothing. To call the church by the name of Christ is to obey the admonition of the word of God to give Christ the pre-eminence of which he is entirely worthy.

History

Another interesting question that has been asked repeatedly is, "What is the history of the church?" Briefly, we learn from the Bible that the church continued through the apostolic era, yet, even before the apostle Paul died he forewarned the people of God concerning the approach of the great apostasy, or falling away. When he talked to the elders of the Ephesian church in Acts 20:29, 30, he said, "For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them." The apostle clearly set forth the fact that the church was to see an apostasy, a falling away. This apostasy, according to the warning of Paul, came about through the eldership. The way that it came about through the eldership was the exaltation of one elder above another. (No one elder in the church has any more authority than another elder in the church. Men who are elders in the church may have differing degrees of ability, but one elder does not have any more authority than another.) Finally, we see that one elder became the bishop of a city, another became the bishop of a territory or a diocese and eventually a hierarchy was organized. Thus,

the church departed from its original ground of faith and purity, ceased to be the church of Christ and became, as the writer of Revelation points out, "The Mother of Harlots." "And upon her forehead was a name written, Mystery, Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and abominations of the earth." (Rev. 17:5.)

Paul described this apostasy as "The man of sin." "Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God." (2 Thess. 2:3, 4.) Thus, the history of the church; founded by the Christ, existing for a period of time, then suffering an apostasy. After awhile we see a reformation, set in order by great men who were interested in *reforming* the religious institutions of their day. Later, such men as Abner Jones, James O'Kelly, Barton W. Stone, Thomas and Alexander Campbell, John Smith, and many others reached the conclusion that the only way that people could be well pleasing to God was to get back to the *original ground* of faith and unity, which is the new covenant of Jesus Christ. They set about to bring the people out of apostasy, away from

the man of sin; out of the clutch of the mother of harlots, that the church once again might stand in all of its purity and glory in the presence of God, as the church that Jesus built.

As time went along, they met opposition. There were those who were so ingrained in their religious prejudices and practices that they persecuted these men and others who sought to bring people back to the ancient order of things. After awhile, following much intense and prayerful effort, we see rising above the clouds of denominational systems and tenets of faith, *the church that Jesus built.*

The question that may be in your mind at the present time is this, "What, then, happened to the church that Jesus built during the dark ages, that period of twelve hundred years when the Bible was chained to the clergy?" The answer that we would give to that question is that the church continued to exist, at least in its *seed form*. Suppose one took a mustard seed and put it in a container where the seed would not be corrupted. He would then bury that seed in the earth in its container and mustard should cease to exist, as far as men would know, upon the face of the earth for one thousand years. A man then might be walking along through the field and kick this container with his foot, notice something unusual

about it, break it open and there he would see the mustard seed. He would examine the seed and, not knowing what it was, drop it back into the place from whence it came. After awhile, that seed would sprout and grow. What would it produce? Wouldn't it produce mustard? Why would it produce mustard? Because the seed was mustard. The church of the living God existed at least in its *seed form* through the dark ages. *If* there happened to be no loyal congregation of Christians, yet the church of the living God existed in its *seed form*. Jesus said in Luke 8:11, "Now the parable is this: The seed (talking about the seed of the kingdom) is the word of God." That being true, whenever one plants the will of God in the hearts of men and women, what does it bring forth? Why, it brings forth after its kind. Seed does not produce something that is not after its kind. If a man wants to produce watermelons, he plants watermelon seed. If a man wants to grow pumpkins, he plants pumpkin seed. If a man wants the *true church* of Jesus Christ to exist among men, he plants the word of God. *There is no exception to that rule!* Therefore, if the gospel of Christ is preached today, it will produce the same thing that it produced in the days of the apostles. When the gospel of Christ was preached a hundred years ago by earnest, prayerful men, it

produced the same thing then that it produces *now*. And what does it produce? It produces members of the church, citizens of the kingdom of God. One who dares to preach anything else jeopardizes his soul and leads astray sincere and conscientious people. John said, "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son" (2 John 9).

Worship

"What is the worship of the church to be like? Why does the church worship as it does?" These questions are also frequently asked by those who are seeking to know the way of the Lord more perfectly.

The worship of the church on the first day of the week is composed of *five essential elements*. There is to be prayer, praise, preaching or teaching, giving, and the Lord's supper. Each of these we shall notice briefly.

Prayer. Who would think of seeking to worship God without approaching him in prayer? Prayer is the most powerful means of communication at our disposal. The early church would come together, and engage in prayer. (Acts 2:42.) The word sets forth that they "continued stedfastly in . . .

prayer." Our prayers are to be offered unto God through Jesus Christ who is our Mediator.

Praise. We lift our voices in singing. We praise God by the "fruit of lips" (Heb. 13: 15). We are taught, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (Col. 3:16). We sing because this is that which our Lord desires that we do in worship to him.

Here, let us point out why we do not sing to the accompaniment of a mechanical instrument of music. The New Testament is very explicit. We are taught to sing. This is *vocal* music. The New Testament does not imply, or teach in any way, that we are to play upon a mechanical instrument of music. To do so would be *instrumental music*. God requires *vocal* music. In our worship we want to do that which God has ordained. "God is a Spirit; and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." (John 4:24.) The *truth* reveals that we are to sing. We dare not add to that which God has spoken to us through his Son. (Heb. 1:1, 2.)

Preaching. Though men are ever seeking that which is new, we who would please God must continue in that which is old. We are to preach (or teach) God's will and word

when we come together to worship. To preach something else will bring upon us the anathema of heaven. The early disciples, under the leadership of the apostles of Jesus "continued stedfastly in the apostles doctrine" (Acts 2:42). We know from many statements found in the Acts and the Epistles that the church engaged in teaching in its worship of God.

Giving. The apostle Paul said that the Savior taught, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). If one has truly given himself to Christ, it will not be difficult for him to realize that he is to give liberally of his means. One brief statement from the New Testament is sufficient to our purpose for this present time. "Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, That there be no gatherings when I come." (1 Cor. 16:2.) This statement tells us: *When?* Upon the first day of the week; *Whom?* Every one of you; *How Much?* As God hath prospered him. As the church assembles to worship upon the first day of the week (Sunday) every member of the church should bring a *sacrificial offering* unto the Lord.

Lord's Supper. We are told in Acts 20:7, "And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them." With apostolic

sanction and approval, the church met to observe the Lord's supper on the first day of the week. *The church met on the first day of every week.* The Lord had said, "This do..." (1 Cor. 11:25). The observance of the Lord's supper (communion) is a command of the Lord. We know *when* it was done. Every week has a first day. We are to observe the Lord's supper on the first day of every week. What power and grace are brought together in this memorial! Our minds traverse the centuries, our hearts throb with the dying Jesus. Our spirits thrill that he "died for our sins according to the scriptures."

Baptism

Still another question that is commonly asked is "Why does the church contend for baptism?"

It is unfortunate, indeed, that an act of such simplicity, dignity, and beauty should have become a battleground among religious people. Especially is this true when we see how very simple and comprehensible the Lord has made this commandment.

Let us keep in mind that our Lord has said, "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21).

Our Savior has placed his personal emphasis upon the necessity of obedience and has clearly shown its undebateable essentiality. One must obey God!

Baptism is a command of God. "And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord." (Acts 10:48.) This command was delivered at the house of Cornelius by a Spirit-inspired apostle of Jesus. If not essential, why the command? If one can be saved in some other way, why did the Spirit (through Peter) designate this way? The apostle had earlier stated, "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons." (Acts 10:34.) *By this we know that God has one way for all men.* The way of God includes the act of baptism as an act of obedience.

We turn our attention now to the eighth chapter of the book of Acts. We are thrilled as we read with intense interest of the *conversion* of the Ethiopian nobleman. After hearing Jesus preached, and as they came to a certain water, he asked, "What doth hinder me to be baptized?" The answer given was, "If thou believest with all thine heart thou mayest."

The chariot was stopped. Both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water. "He baptized him." They both came up out of the water. All evidence points to the fact that *God was pleased* with that which

was done. God is never pleased when men disobey or rebel. Baptism is for all men. It is a command of God. It must be obeyed. The church, therefore, must contend for baptism.

Friend, if you have never obeyed the Lord; if you are not a member of the church for which Jesus died; we plead with you, we urge you, yea, we beg you to renounce the way of sin and of error, take God at his word, do what he commands, be what he wants you to be, and some day when the scroll of time is finished, heaven will be your home.

NOTE

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The speaker on the program is Charles E. Cobb, minister of the South Water Avenue Church of Christ, Gallatin, Tennessee.

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