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The New Testament Church Today

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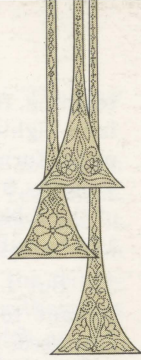
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The New Testament Church Today



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The New Testament Church Today

Would you allow me to ask you an unusual question? A question that I strongly believe you must answer before your life becomes completely meaningful. The question is this, "Has today's man, or to make it more personal, have you, a trustworthy, sufficient guide to a satisfying relationship with God? The Apostle Peter believed that man has such a source of spiritual direction when he wrote that God, in "his divine power hath granted unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that called us by his own glory and virtue; . . ." (II Peter 1:3). Peter says in the next verse of this reading that God "hath granted unto us his precious and exceeding great promises; that through these ye may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world by lust" (II Peter 1:4).

The Apostle Paul explained how fully the Bible, or the "inspired scriptures", guide the "man of God" when he said that the "sacred writings" are "profitable for

teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness: that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work" (II Timothy 3:14-17). These are but two such direct claims of the Bible for its own authority. The Bible is an authoritative, sufficient guide for a satisfying spiritual life!

But I must also ask another question just as important to our study today as the one we have just answered. Think about this for a moment: "Is the life of the Christian organically related to the life of the Church?" The most common reply would be "no." But, on second thought, consider these teachings from God's word. Paul talks about "many (individual, jac) members" who constitute "one body in Christ" (Romans 12:4, 5).

The Christian, Paul says, is a member of the body of Christ, the Church. This also is Paul's theme in I Corinthians, chapter 12, where he teaches that the same baptism that brings one "remission of sins" (Acts 2:38) also places one into full membership of the body of Christ, the Church (I Corinthians 12:13). To be a Christian, in the words of this passage, is to please God in our surrender to Him. Yet, our very act of surrender causes God to "set (us) the members each one of them in the body, even as it pleased him" (I Corinthians 12:18).

The Christian can not live separated from the body of Christ, which is the Church. Today's man does have a trustworthy and sufficient spiritual guide in the Bible. The life of the individual Christian is necessarily related to the life of the Church.

At this point you probably have at least one or more questions you would like to ask me. If one's life as a Christian is so definitely and vitally involved with the Church, you have every right to ask, "Which Church?" It is to that question and its answer that we turn for the next few minutes.

As I have talked with you for the past three weeks on this program about "God's Great House," (Sermon Number 771), "The Christian and the Church" (Sermon Number 772), and "Christ and His Church" (Sermon Number 773), my constant purpose has been to thoroughly study with you the Church of the Bible. But in a much more specific sense I have called your attention to the Church described, pictured, and explained in the New Testament. When you, therefore, ask me "Which Church do you have reference to in this lesson?" then I reply without reservation or condition, "the Church in the

New Testament." Will you now study with me "The New Testament Church Today"?

It must be obvious at this point in our discussion that I believe with all my heart that the New Testament, in a specific and distinct way for the Christian era, is the contemporary believer's authority in religion. John writes for all the Evangelists when he states the following purpose of his Gospel. "Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name" (John 20:30, 31).

Not only does the New Testament furnish the inspired testimony that produces one's faith in Christ but Paul also states another, and equally important, function of God's Word. We have already looked at this passage but listen again, carefully. "Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness: that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work" (II Timothy 3:16, 17).

Through the instruction of the New Testament one comes to Christ accepting Him in God's plainly prescribed way, and then "the inspired writings" direct Christians' steps so that they know, in Paul's words again, "how to behave themselves in the house of God, which is the church of the living God" (I Timothy 3:16).

You may be surprised to know that the New Testament reveals the Church in prospect. Jesus promised His apostles, ". . . upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). This is but one of many passages in the Gospels that point to an imminent beginning of the Church or kingdom in the first century.

The New Testament fully describes the actual beginning of the Church in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. Just as Isaiah, Micah, and Daniel prophesied, it all took place in Jerusalem under conditions specifically foretold. The apostles delivered their first public testimony of Jesus Christ after His ascension here; and three thousand people responded in repentance and baptism. The last verse of Acts 2 reveals the church in existence. In the chapters that follow in the Acts, everywhere Christ is preached and men surrender to Him, the Church comes into existence in that locality.

It is in the New Testament that we learn conclusively the early church's message. Luke records that even in

the face of persecution and distress the early disciples "ceased not to teach and to preach Jesus as the Christ" (Acts 5:42).

We learn of the Church's growth. Such passages as Acts 9:31 are found throughout the New Testament. "So the church throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria had peace, being edified; and, walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, was multiplied" (Acts 9:31).

The Church's government is thoroughly explained within the New Testament. The universal church knows but one governing head, in heaven and on earth. Christ is the head of the Church (Ephesians 1:22, 23). The church as it exists and is governed in local groups of believers is pictured by Paul when he addressed just such a local group, the Church at Philippi. "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus that are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons" (Philippians 1:1).

The New Testament also teaches us how the Church acquires her members. Church membership, at least in the Church of the New Testament, is the action of God on the lives of all men who surrender to Him through Christ (Acts 2:45; I Corinthians 12:18).

It is, finally, in the New Testament, that we learn the Church's nature as "the body of Christ" (Colossians 1:18, 24), "the house of God" (I Timothy 3:14, 15), "a spiritual house" (I Peter 2:5), and "the people of God" (I Peter 2:9, 10).

In short, when the phrase "New Testament Church" is used, we are referring to the Church revealed, explained, and presented in the New Testament. But we have thus far only quickly surveyed some of the prominent aspects of our subject. Now let's turn to a more detailed look at the "New Testament Church."

Seven hundred years before the time of Jesus, Isaiah, an Old Testament prophet, looked forward to the establishment of "the mountain of Jehovah's house" to which "all nations" would flow as members. This "house of the God of Jacob" would appear simultaneously with a very significant revelation from God. In Isaiah's words, God "will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths." All this was to begin with "the law" going forth from Zion or Jerusalem, and "the Word of Jehovah" spreading from the same place (Isaiah 2:2, 3).

Daniel, less than two hundred years after Isaiah, used a vision seen by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, to foretell the coming of "a kingdom which shall never be destroyed." God was to establish this kingdom — His kingdom — and was to "break in pieces and consume all earthly empires" (Daniel 2:44). Daniel here referred to a time in history when the Roman Empire would hold sway, that very political system under which Jesus was born, and the Church or kingdom established.

In the New Testament John the Baptist promises "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:1, 2), and so does Jesus (Matthew 4:17). Some of His disciples are even told that they will not die before seeing the "kingdom of God come with power" (Mark 9:1). During His earthly ministry our Lord promises in His words, to "build my church" (Matthew 16:18). As late as the ascension day the apostles inquire, "Lord, dost thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). He told them they could not know that time, but that they should wait in Jerusalem for power and direction (Acts 1:7, 8).

All these predictions converged in fulfillment on a particular Jewish festival day, the Pentecost, fifty days after the crucifixion, and not more than ten days after the ascension. According to Jesus' promises the apostles were empowered by the Holy Spirit to speak God's truth so that three thousand turned to Christ that day. Thus the first congregation of the Church upon earth came into existence (Acts 2).

We have already looked at the New Testament designations for the Church in her essential nature. "House of God" (Isaiah 2:2, 3; I Timothy 3:15), "People of God" (I Peter 2:9, 10), and "family of God" (Galatians 3:26) are some of her more prominent descriptions.

As to purpose or mission no human institution can begin to match the Church of the New Testament. Jesus charged His apostles with making "disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:19, 20).

The Church has been given "the ministry of reconciliation," Paul explains, and must constantly proclaim "the word of reconciliation" to a world filled with strife and hate (II Corinthians 5:18, 19).

The Church is also charged by Christ to care for the poor, the underprivileged, the unfortunate, the de-

pressed, and sick (Galatians 6:10). To those who asked, "Lord, when saw we thee hungry, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?" Christ answers hauntingly, "Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not unto one of these least, ye did it not unto me" (Matthew 25:44, 45).

We also learn, in the New Testament, of the Church's more formal designations or names. Paul addresses his Corinthian letters to "the church of God which is at Corinth" (I Corinthians 1:1, 2; II Corinthians 1:1, 2). When the same writer closes his Epistle to the Romans he remarks, "all the churches of Christ salute you" (Romans 16:16). Throughout the Acts Luke simply refers to "the Church" (Acts 8:1; 11:26). One cannot study these designations without realizing the unity that prevailed among all Christians in the first century. Denominational labels were totally unnecessary because such separations were unknown!

To become a part of the Church in the New Testament was to become a Christian. For all those who repented of their sins and were baptized for the remission of them, God "added to the Church daily such as were being saved" (Acts 2:47, KJV, ASV footnote). Church membership, in the New Testament Church, was the work of God within all obedient lives. Whenever and wherever men heard the Gospel and accepted the Christ proclaimed therein, the Church came into reality (Read Acts 2; Acts 8:4; 9:31).

Now let me suggest that the New Testament Church can exist today! When the New Testament becomes our sole guide in religion (II Timothy 3:16, 17); when men surrender to Christ on His terms (Mark 16:16); when we please God in obedience to His Word (I Corinthians 12:18); when we refuse "the traditions" of men accepting only the message of Christ which Paul warned cannot be changed (Galatians 1:6-9); when we test every teaching, every organizational structure, every essential element of the church's life by the New Testament (Matthew 7:21-23); when every act of worship, every important mission or goal, and every idea has positive Biblical authority (Matthew 15:7-9); then and only then can the New Testament Church be a reality.

Finally, and most importantly, I believe the New Testament Church is a reality today: among those who obey Christ in becoming Christians and remain obedient Christians (Hebrews 5:9); among those who refuse to be guided by human standards and religious traditions

(Matthew 15:9); and among those who have a positive instruction from God's word for every facet of their religious lives (John 12:48).

This issue that you now face is twofold. First, will you accept the New Testament as the trustworthy and sufficient guide that it is, thus surrendering to Christ in genuine faith, complete repentance, open allegiance to Jesus as Lord, and baptism? And second, will you seek out a fellowship of believers whose teaching, practice, and worship is New Testament? Christ and His body become real in the lives of all who obediently give themselves to Him in the way the New Testament so wonderfully and clearly reveals.



John Allen Chalk, dynamic evangelist and long-time radio speaker, is the first full-time speaker on the Herald of Truth radio program.

He began his work with the Herald of Truth on January 1, 1966. Previously, Chalk was the featured personality in a 13 week Herald of Truth television series.

A native of Lexington, Tennessee, he began preaching at 15. Chalk and his wife and two children now live in Abilene, Texas where he spends full time working with the Herald of Truth.

He is a graduate of Tennessee Tech and has written a book, "The Praying Christ and Other Sermons" and two tracts. Chalk was nominated for the Outstanding Young Man of Tennessee in 1964 and was named Cookeville's Young Man of the Year in 1963.