

## THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

From the very beginning, God has desired to have a people unto Himself -- a nation of people who would love Him and serve Him with their whole beings. He began moving toward this end by calling Abraham out of his homeland and from his people and promising to make of him a new and a great nation of blessed people (Gen. 12:1-3). The Lord soon extended these covenant blessings to the descendants of Abraham (Gen. 17:1-14), thereby succeeding not only in forming a great people, but also in redeeming them AS A NATION out of bondage of Egypt (Ex. 19:1-6); Deut. 10:22 and 15), and establishing them in their new homeland, the land which had been promised to them as the heirs of Abraham (Deut. 29:10-13; 30:20).

The pages of the Old Testament contain the failures of Israel in their keeping of the old covenant; they also record for us the Lord's promise of a new covenant which He would only day make with his people -- a covenant which would once and for all render their hearts capable of loving and serving only Him (Deut. 30;56, Ezk. 36:24-27).

The New Testament is the unfolding of the fulfillment of the Lord's promises. National Israel was rejected for a season because of their unbelief, and the Gentiles, who had formerly not been a people, became a people of God (Rom. 9:22-23) by being "grafted into the Olive tree -- Israel (Rom. 10:1-24), and thus becoming by faith the inheritors of the promises made to Abraham (Rom. 4:6, 9:6-8; Gal. 3:29). See also Rom. 2:28,29 and Gal. 3:27,28. This plan of God which spans the ages is sized up very well by Eph. 2:11-22. Please read above scriptures.

### **1. WHAT CONCEPTS DOES THE BIBLE USE TO TEACH US ABOUT THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF GOD'S REDEEMED COMMUNITY?**

#### **A. The Body Of Christ, with ourselves as members.**

"Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it." I Cor. 12:27

#### **B. God's Building, whit ourselves as living stones.**

"Having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit." Eph. 2:20-22

Many Christians make the mistake of assuming that their being "living stones" automatically makes them a part of the church structure. There are even those who feel that any and every gathering of Christians (home prayer meetings, Charismatic "Prayer and Praise" services, etc.) is a gathering of the local church. This is not only inconsistent with Scripture, but it doesn't make sense from a natural point of view either. For instance, a load of bricks delivered to a building site doesn't make a house. They must be laid upon a foundation and built together row upon row until the whole structure takes shape and eventually becomes a dwelling.

This is the message of the above verses from Ephesians 2. Notice the verb tenses: 1) having been built upon the foundation (past tense), 2) being fitted together (present tense), and 3) are being built together (present tense). And here is the final purpose of it all:

"You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." I Peter 2:5

You see, each Christian, as a "living stone", must be laid upon a common foundation with other "living stones", and be built together with them into a spiritual household.

**C. "God's Own Nation Of Set-Apart People (the universal church).**

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." I Peter 2:9,10

**D. The Congregation Or Assembly Of Believers (local church)**

"And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own; but all things were common property to them." Acts 4:32

**E. The Family Of God,** whit God Himself as our Father; Jesus the Firstborn among many brethren, and ourselves as brothers and sisters.

"From whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name." Eph. 3:15

NOTE: We must stress that the church is a family, not an organization. The concept of family is the same the world over, and yet every family is different, must as each individual within the family is different. so it is with the church. The unity of the church is not going to be expressed in the "sameness" of exterior practices and beliefs, but in the inner oneness of mind and Spirit.

**F. The Church**

"And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it." Matthew 16:18

## **2. WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE WORD "CHURCH"?**

In the New Testament, the Greek word ekklesia, which has been translated "church", means "that which is called out". This concept does not originate in the New Testament, however, but also occurs over seventy times in the Old Testament, being used regularly for the "assembly" or the "congregation" of the people of Israel. It is obvious from the various applications of the word "church" throughout the entire Bible, but especially in the New Testament, that it refers to THE PEOPLE and not to the place or building where they congregate. Neither does it refer to the ecclesiastical organization of any denominational structure.

## **3. WHAT DOES THE NEW TESTAMENT USAGE OF THE WORD "CHURCH" SIGNIFY?**

The word "church" as it is used in the New Testament signifies two things:

A. The Universal Church, which is the world-wide Body of Christ, consisting of all those who are the called-out from all nations to be a separated people unto His name.

"And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church." Ephesians 1:22

B. The Local Church, consisting of those who are the called-out in any given area or community, and formed together by the Holy Spirit as a local expression of the Body of Christ.

"To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours" I Cor. 1:2

## **4. HOW DO WE BECOME MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH?**

At the time we are born again, we become members of the Church. In the Scripture below, notice what other things Peter instructed someone to do when inquiring how to be saved.

"Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'" Acts 2:38

The local church's membership then is open only to those who have become part of the Universal Church.

## **5. MUST EVERY BELIEVER BE A FUNCTIONING PART OF A LOCAL BODY?**

Spiritual new birth immediately places us in a covenant relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and initiates us into the Universal Body of Christ, thus establishing our salvation and eternal future. We have seen, however, that this alone does not sufficiently fulfill God's will for us, but that He has determined that each of us find our place of life and ministry in the local church. We may use the illustration of a child being born into this world: he immediately becomes a member of the human race -- definitely a part of mankind -- simply by virtue of birth itself.

In order to go on and mature properly, however, that child needs to have a home, with parents -- being a member of a family unit, where he can be provided for and raised responsibly.

Since the world-wide body of Christ must express itself locally, all the believers in any given locality are required to submit themselves to the ministries of oversight, which are provided by the Lord in that area to watch over them and bring them into maturity.

"And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ. Ephesians 4:11-16

Once a believer has found that place where the Lord wants him to settle down and be shepherded, a verbal commitment on his part should be made publicly, in the assembly, to the church and to those in the place of oversight. The pastors then, on behalf of themselves and the entire congregation, accept that commitment and make a like pledge, in return, to watch over him and minister to his needs.

Commitment is indispensable to the proper functioning of the local church.

## **6. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BASIC, UNCHANGING AND NECESSARY PRINCIPLES OF THE CHURCH?**

A. Mutual commitment to:

1. The gospel of Christ. "Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ; so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel." Phil. 1:27

2. One another: "Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you;

however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained." Phil. 3:15,16

B. Mutual doctrinal foundation (at least in each local church). "Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus." II Tim. 1:13

C. Proven and responsible oversight of the church by elders (shepherds). "And this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God." I Cor. 8:5

D. Submission to the oversight on the part of believers (sheep). "Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you." Hebrews 13:17

E. The spiritual and natural care of the sheep both by the shepherds and by the flock itself. "And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds." Hebrews 10:24

F. Concern for healthy growth and reproduction (making disciples). "And after they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch." Acts 14:21

NOTE: As was stated in the Preface, the very word "disciple" implies the discipline involved in the process of learning about our new Master and becoming more and more like Him. It is a discipline which includes a systematic impartation of truth as well as a day-to-day sharing of life from one believer to another. The matured, experienced ones are the teachers, the young and inexperienced are the ones who must learn. It is dangerous for any believer to feel that he does not need to be a part of this disciplining process.

## **7. WHAT IS TO BE THE MISSION AND WORK OF THE CHURCH?**

A. The church is the WORSHIP GOD and glorify Him on the earth. "Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved." Ephesians 1:4-6

B. The Church is to EVANGELIZE the World with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." Matthew 28:19

C. The Church is to TRAIN its members, bringing them to maturity in Christian experience and ability. "Teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Matthew 28:20 PRAISE GOD !!!

**8. IS IT IMPORTANT FOR THE CHURCH TO HAVE A CENTRAL MEETING PLACE?**

Yes. Some people believe they are to meet with only a few people in the home. They miss the whole idea of ministering to each other and to our generation. We should have a central meeting place:

- A. To assume responsibility in ministering to our community.
- B. To maintain spiritual unity among ourselves in promoting God's program in our local area.
- C. To recognize and submit to leadership ministries God has given.
- D. To experience the wonders of congregational worship, prayer and communion.
- E. To influence our children in the habits, disciplines, and ordinances of Christian living and cooperation.

"And on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to depart the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight." Acts 20:7

**9. WHY IS THERE A NEED FOR GOVERNMENT IN THE LOCAL CHURCH?**

- A. Without government, there would be lawlessness, anarchy, and disorder. "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." Judges 17:6
- B. Carnal or fleshly persons do not appreciate government. "And especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority. Daring, self-willed, they do not tremble when they revile angelic majesties." II Peter 2:10