

The Doctrine of the Church

from *Great Doctrines of the Bible* by William Evans

THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH.

There is great danger of losing sight of the Church in the endeavor to emphasize the idea of the Kingdom of Heaven or Christendom. We are prone to think it a small thing to speak of the Church; the Kingdom and Christendom seem so large in comparison. We are tempted to distinguish and contrast Churchism, as it is sometimes called, and Christianity, to the disparagement of the former. It is well to remember that Jesus Christ positively identifies Himself with the Church (Acts 9) and not with Christendom; He gave up His life that He might found the Church (Eph. 5:25). The Apostle Paul sacrificed himself in his endeavors to build up the Church, not Christendom. He speaks of his greatest sin as consisting in persecuting the Church of God (1 Cor. 15:9). The supreme business of God in this age is the gathering of the Church. Some day it will be complete (Eph. 4:12), and then the age will have served its purpose.

I. DEFINITIONS; DISTINCTIONS.

1. OLD TESTAMENT USE OF THE WORD.

Lev. 4:13—"And if the whole congregation of Israel sin through ignorance, and the thing be hid from the eyes of the assembly ..." The Hebrew word for *assembly* means to *call* or *assemble*, and is used not only for the act of calling itself, but also for the assembly of the called ones. In this sense Israel is called a "church," an assembly, because called out from among the other nations to be a holy people (Acts 7:38, "the church in the wilderness"). There is always a religious aspect associated with this particular call.

2. THE NEW TESTAMENT USE OF THE WORD.

It is from the New Testament primarily, if not really exclusively, that the real meaning and idea of the Church is derived. The Christian Church is a New Testament institution, beginning with Pentecost, and ending, probably, with the rapture. Two words are of special importance in this connection:

a) Ecclesia, from Two Greek Words Meaning "To Call Out From."

This word is used in all about 111 times in the New Testament. It is

used in a secular sense in Acts 19:39—"It shall be determined in a lawful assembly"; of Israel in the wilderness (Acts 7:38), and of the assembly of believers in Christ (Matt. 16:18; 18:17; 1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 5:25-27). In keeping with this idea the saints are said to be the "called-out" ones (Rom. 8:30; 1 Cor. 1:2; cf. 2 Cor. 6:17).

b) "Kuriakon"—That Which Belongs to the Lord.

So we have "the supper of the Lord" (1 Cor. 11:20); the "day of the Lord" (Rev. 1:10). See also Luke 22:25 and Rom. 14:8, 9, as illustrating that over which the Lord has dominion and authority.

To sum up then: The Church is composed of the body of believers who have been called out from the world, and who are under the dominion and authority of Jesus Christ.

c) The Growth of the Church Idea in the New Testament.

At first there was but one Church at Jerusalem. The meetings may have been held in different houses, yet there was but one Church with one roster: so we read of the total membership consisting at one time of 120 (Acts 1:15), again of 3,000 (2:41), and still again of 5,000 (4:4), to which there were daily additions (2:47). The apostles were at the head of the Church (2:41-47). See Acts, chapters 1 and 2, for a fuller account of the first Church.

The second stage in the growth of the Church was its spread throughout Judea and Samaria, as recorded in Acts 8.

Antioch, in Syria, then became the head of the Gentile Church (Acts 13:1), as Jerusalem was the head of the Jewish Church (Acts 15); Paul representing the Church at Antioch, and Peter and James at Jerusalem. The assembly at Antioch was called "the church" just as truly as was the assembly at Jerusalem (11:22; 13:1).

Because of the missionary activities of the apostles, especially Paul, churches sprang up in different cities, especially in Asia Minor, e.g., Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, and Philippi.

In view of all this the term "church" came to be used of the Church *universal*, that is, the complete body of Christ as existing in every place (1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:2, 13; Matt. 16:18); of *local* churches in any one place (Col. 4:16; Phil. 4:15; 1 Cor. 1:2, etc.); of *single meetings*, even where two or three met together (Matt. 18:19; Col. 4:15; Phil. 1:2; Rom. 16:5).

It is evident, then, from what has here been said, that by the term

"church" is included all that is meant from the Church Universal to the meeting of the church in the house. Wherever God's people meet in the name of Christ to worship, there you have the Church.

3. DISTINCTIONS:

a) The Church and the Kingdom.

The Church (which is the mystery) and the Kingdom in mystery are now contemporary. The Kingdom will be fully manifested at the coming of Christ. The Church is within the Kingdom; probably the regenerate are "the children of the kingdom." The Kingdom is comprised of both good and bad (Matt. 13); the Church, of real saints only. The Jews rejected the Kingdom under Christ and the apostles. That Kingdom, now rejected, will be set up again when the Messiah comes. This conception will help us to understand the parables of Matthew 13, as well as the Sermon on the Mount. The tares are sown not in the Church, but in the field, which is the world. The Church may be looked upon as part of the Kingdom of God, just as Illinois is part of the United States. The Kingdom is present, in a sense, just as the King is present in the hearts of his own people. There is a difference between the Church and Christendom, just as there is a difference between possessing and professing Christians. Baptized Christendom is one thing, and the Church of Christ is another.

b) The Church Visible and Invisible: Actual and Ideal.

The Church *Visible* is composed of all those whose names are enrolled upon its roster; *Invisible*, of those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life; *Actual*, people imperfect, yet aiming after perfection, alive here on the earth; *Ideal*, departed saints who are now triumphant in heaven (Heb. 12:23). There is a Church in heaven just as there is one upon the earth; indeed, it is but a part of the one Church; called the Church *militant* while upon the earth, and the Church *triumphant* in heaven.

c) The Church Local and Universal.

By the first is meant the Church in any particular place, such as "the church at Corinth"; by the latter, the Church as found in every place (1 Cor. 1:2).

II. THE FOUNDING OF THE CHURCH.

1. FORETOLD BY CHRIST.

Matt. 16:16-18—" ... On this rock I will build my church." Here is the

Church in prophecy and promise; the first mention of the Church in the New Testament. Note the distinction here recognized between the "Kingdom" and the "Church."

The Church is to be founded on Peter's confession of Jesus Christ as the Son of the living God. No supremacy is here given to Peter, as a comparison of these verses with John 20:19-23, and Matt. 18:18—in which the same privilege of the binding and loosing is given to the whole Church and to all the apostles—will show.

In Matthew 18:15-20 our Lord recognizes the fact of the Church, and also that it has the divine seal and sanction in the exercising of the power of the keys.

2. HISTORICALLY FOUNDED BY THE APOSTLES.

Acts 1-2:47. The promise and prophecy of Matt. 16:16-18 is here fulfilled. Here is the account of the first Christian Church in its glorious beginning, and as it actually existed in Jerusalem. When a man became regenerate by believing in Jesus Christ he was thereby constituted a member of the Church. There was no question as to whether he ought to join himself to the Church or not; that was a fact taken for granted. So we read that the Lord was adding to the Church daily such as were being saved. The Church was already a concrete institution to which every believer in Christ united himself.

"The Apostles' doctrine" formed the standard of faith—a fulfillment of Christ's prophecy and promise in Matthew 16:16-18: "On this rock I will build my church," etc.

The Church had *stated places of meeting*: the upper room (Acts 1:13), the temple (5:12), the homes of members (2:46, 12:12), and the synagogue; *stated times of meeting*: daily (2:46), each Lord's Day (20:7), the *regular hours* of prayer (3:1; 10:9); *a regular church roll*: 120 (1:15), 3,000 (2:41), 5,000 (4:4); *daily additions* (2:47).

That there were definitely, regularly organized churches is clear from the fact that the Apostle Paul addressed many of his epistles to churches in different localities. The letters to the Corinthians (e.g., 1 Cor. 12-14) show that the churches had already recognized certain forms of service and liturgy; those to Timothy and Titus presume a regularly organized congregation of believers. That there is a Church in the world is clear from 1 Cor. 5:9-13. The Christian Church is as much an entity as the Gentile, or the Jew (1 Cor. 10:32). The existence of church officers proves the existence of the Church in an organized form: bishops and deacons (Phil. 1:1), elders (Acts 20:17), the

presbytery (1 Tim. 4:14). Church letters were granted to members (Acts 18:27).

III. MEMBERSHIP IN THE CHURCH—ITS CONDITIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS.

1. REPENTANCE AND BAPTISM REQUIRED OF ALL ITS MEMBERS.

Acts 2:38-41—"Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls."

2. FAITH IN THE LORD JESUS CHRIST AS THE DIVINE REDEEMER.

Matt. 16:16-18; Acts 2:38, 39. Peter's entire sermon in Acts 2 illustrates this fact.

3. SAVED-REGENERATED.

Acts 2:47—" ... And the Lord added to the church such as should be saved." Cf. John 3:3, 5. It was essential that the members of the early Church should be "added unto the Lord" before they were added to the Church (5:14; 11:24).

4. BAPTISM IN THE NAME OF THE TRIUNE GOD AS AN OPEN CONFESSION OF CHRIST.

Matt. 28:19—"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Acts 2:38-41; 10:47, 48; 22:16: cf. Rom. 10:9, 10.

5. ADHERENCE TO THE APOSTOLIC DOCTRINE.

Acts 2:42—"And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship." Cf. "On this rock I will build my church" (Matt. 16:16-18); also Eph. 2:20.

6. CHARACTERISTICS OF MEMBERSHIP IN THE EARLY CHURCH.

The members were known as believers (Acts 4:32); brethren (11:29; 12:17; Rom. 1:13—the absolute equality of all believers, cf. Matt. 23:8-10); Christians (Acts 11:26; 26:28); saints (9:13; 1 Cor. 1:2; Rev. 13:7); elect (Mark 13:27; Rom. 8:33; Eph. 1:4).

IV. FIGURES UNDER WHICH THE CHURCH IS SET FORTH IN THE SCRIPTURES.

1. THE BODY, OF WHICH CHRIST IS THE HEAD.

Two ideas are contained in this symbol:

a) The Relation of the Church to Christ, Who Is Its Head.

Eph. 1:22, 23; Col. 1:18; 2:19. The Church is an organism, not an organization. There is a vital relation between Christ and the Church, both partaking of the same life, just as there is between the physical head and the body. We cannot join the Church as we would a lodge or any mere human organization. We must be partakers by faith of Christ's life before we can become members of Christ's Church, in the true sense. As the Head of the Church Christ is its Guardian and Director (Eph. 5:23, 24); the Source of its life, filling it with His fulness (Eph. 1:23); the Centre of its Unity and the Cause of its growth (Eph. 4:15; Col. 2:19).

b) The Relation of the Members One to Another.

1 Cor. 12:12-27; Rom. 12:4, 5; Eph. 4:1-4, 15,16.

2. A TEMPLE, A BUILDING, A HABITATION, A DWELLING-PLACE FOR GOD'S SPIRIT.

Eph. 2:20, 21; 1 Cor. 3:9-17; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 2:4-8; Rev. 21:3; 1 Cor. 6:19. Of this building Christ is the cornerstone, and the prophets and apostles the foundation. In 1 Cor. 3 Christ is the chief cornerstone and the apostles the builders; the whole building is held in place by Christ.

3. THE BRIDE OF CHRIST.

2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25-27; Rev. 19:7; 22:17. Christ is the Bridegroom (John 3:29). This is a great mystery (Eph. 5:32). The Bride becomes the wife of the Lamb (Rev. 21:2).

V. THE ORDINANCES OF THE CHURCH.

1. BAPTISM.

Matt. 28:19, 20; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38, 41; 8:36-40; 10:47, 48.

2. THE LORD'S SUPPER.

Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7—"And upon the first day of the week, when the

disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight." 1 Cor. 11:20-34.

VI. THE VOCATION OF THE CHURCH.

1. TO WORSHIP GOD AND TO GLORIFY HIM ON THE EARTH:

Eph. 1:4-6—"According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will. To the praise of the glory of his grace wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved."

2. TO EVANGELIZE THE WORLD WITH THE GOSPEL:

Matt. 28:19, 20—"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Acts 2; 5:42; 6:5-8; Eph. 3:8; Acts 15:7.

3. TO DEVELOP EACH INDIVIDUAL CHRISTIAN UNTIL HE ATTAINS UNTO THE FULNESS OF THE STATURE OF CHRIST:

Eph. 4:11-15. Hence the gift of pastors, teachers, etc. Herein lies the value of church attendance—it promotes growth; failure to attend leads to apostasy (Heb. 10:25-28), cf. 1 Thess. 5:11; 1 Cor. 12.

4. A CONSTANT WITNESS FOR CHRIST AND HIS WORD:

Acts 1:8—"But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." 8:1, 4.

5. THE FUTURE GLORY OF THE CHURCH:

Eph. 3:10, 21; Rev. 7:9-17.