

Identifying The Church Today

TEXT: “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.” (Matt. 16:18)

THESIS: Identifying the Church today is vital to ensure that we are in the right place.

INTRODUCTION:

1. The Church that Jesus built is not that which is built with hands, but is the Ekklesia or the “called out” assembly.
 - a. The Church is a collection of souls redeemed by the blood of Christ which are called Christians first in Antioch. (Acts 11:26)
2. It is these Christians whom the Lord made reference to when he said, upon this confession that Peter made, He would build His Ekklesia!
 - a. It is this Church that is made up of many congregations, yet just one body.
 - b. It is this Church that began on the Day of Pentecost when people joined together under the blood of Christ.
 - c. It is this Church that one can only be added by the Lord and not by any committee meeting.
 - d. It is this Church which the Lord knows by name in Heaven and not by a bookkeeper on earth.
 - e. It is this Church that consists of all the saved, but also some that are lost.
 - f. It is this Church that one must enter to be saved, otherwise they are condemned to Hell.
 - g. It is this Church that has no earthly headquarters, but does have an earthly organization.
 - h. It is this Church that cannot be divided, yet there are parts of the body that exists throughout the world.
 - i. It is this Church where the membership is never affected in death although the local numbers may dwindle from time to time.
3. When looking at these differences, I hope it is possible to better equip ourselves to identifying the Church that Jesus built.
 - a. It can be extremely difficult to identify the Church to many people because each religious body in reference to Jesus Christ claims to be part of the Lord’s Church.
 - b. How can one ascertain which Church belongs to the Lord?
4. I would suggest that the Lord has answered this in the Bible and shows mankind,
 - a. How to identify the Church universally.
 - b. How to identify the local church.
 - c. Examine the Gospel being preached.
 - d. Examine the practice with the New Covenant pattern.

DISCUSSION:

- I. HOW TO IDENTIFY THE CHURCH UNIVERSALLY?

- A. One way that people can identify the Church that Christ built is to read about it in the Bible.
1. It is here that we learn that God, “hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.” (Eph. 1:22-23)
 2. Thus, “There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling.” (Eph. 4:4)
 - a. This means that there is one “soma” or body of people.
 - b. Just as there is one body of stars, yet unnumbered amount of them, so is the church in reference to the one body, but many members.
- B. This body or Church we read about is the one that has, “. . . come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.” (Heb. 12:22-24)
1. Thus, the church is not that which sits next to you unless that person who sits next to you is of the firstborn, the called out ones who have obeyed the Gospel’s call.
 - a. Yet, those sitting next to you are interested in the church and we should be helping them find their way to Jesus Christ who is the only way to the Father & to eternal life with Him (Jn. 14:6).
 2. Furthermore, the church is that which is holy and without blemish.
 - a. The apostle Paul penned, “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.” (Eph. 5:25-27)
 - b. Are you holy? Are you without blemish?
 - (1) Sadly, those who are part of the “ekkleisia” who refuse to repent, are in trouble.
 - (2) Jesus said, “Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.” (Jn. 15:2, 6)
 - (3) In addition, “Thou wilt say then, The branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in. Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear: For if God spared not the natural

branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee. Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off.” (Rom. 11:19-22)

(4) Jesus said, “So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.” (Rev. 3:16)

(5) We ought to be on fire for the Lord!

3. These Christians are called such not because we joined the church, but because the Lord added us to His church when he saved us (Acts 2:41, 47)

C. Now, if we can find such a church, we might want to be a member of it.

1. But, the church has to have the right founder, the right place, the right time of origin and the right head to be considered the Lord’s Church.

2. The church has to have the right organization, the right name, the right worship in order to be considered as the Lord’s Church.

a. This Church which the Lord has made is the one where Christ is the cornerstone. (1 Pet. 2:6)

b. Where, His prophets and apostles are the foundation (Eph. 2:20)

c. And, where Christians are the living stones. (1 Pet. 2:5)

3. And also, where death does not affect the church membership

a. The apostle Paul said, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour: yet what I shall choose I wot not. For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better:” (Phil. 1:21-23)

D. There is one body and if one can find the church that is like what is mentioned in all aspects, then it is the New Covenant church today.

1. And, it is the Lord who keeps the records of who is enrolled in Heaven and who is not.

2. For, “To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect.” (Heb. 12:23)

3. Thus, “Wherein I suffer trouble, as an evil doer, even unto bonds; but the word of God is not bound.” (2 Tim. 2:9)

4. And, “. . . the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body.” (Eph. 5:23)

E. Now, while these ideas may be fine to find the universal church, how can one find the local church?

1. For example, does the Church have elders and deacons?

2. Does the church claim to begin in 33 AD or 29 AD Jewish corrected calendar?

3. Is the Church we consider, created on the day of Pentecost, the one that when the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit, wherewith all were

amazed when they heard uneducated Galileans speaking every man his own tongue, claiming that the Spirit according to Joel was to be poured out and that signs and wonders (miracles) were presented before the people which was evidence of the Lord who was born of Nazareth, who was crucified by the people's wicked hands, whom God raised up, who is greater than David, who is on the right hand of God reigning as both Lord and Christ, who when the people heard, some were baptized for the remission of sins, were added to the church, who continued in the foundational words of the apostles, in breaking of bread and in prayers, coming together, going from house to house and praising God and having favour with all the people by which others obeyed the Gospel message? (Acts 2:1-47)

- F. When we look across the Church and see people evangelizing do we stop and say that the Lord is in the process of building His one true Church?
1. Do we tell people that the Church that the Lord built consist of all the saved in the world because it was the Lord who added to the body when that person obeyed Him?
 2. Do we tell that precious person whom we talk to that they can be saved and become a member of the Lord's Church?
 3. In regards to the local church, once one is saved, do we tell them that the New Covenant teaches that they should be in fellowship with brethren of like precious faith?
 - a. But, which one?
 - b. How can a newborn child of God identify which of the myriad or indefinite number of congregations are considered by the Lord his faithful church?
 - c. Are we telling people that our local church is the only one without backing it up with book, chapter and verses of Scriptures to prove it?

II. HOW TO IDENTIFY THE LOCAL CHURCH

- A. The name is a good place to begin.
1. The name of a local congregation reveals much about it.
 2. Is the church concerned about promoting unity in the body of Christ?
 - a. If the name is a denominational name, religious division is not a major concern for them.
 - b. Too often, religious groups will get together and agree to disagree.
 - c. But, the body of Christ will never agree with one who is walking in darkness!
 3. Thus, the name should be a scriptural name.
 - a. Now, there is no ONE scriptural name for the Lord's church found in the New Covenant.
 - b. Names such as: the Church of God (1 Cor. 1:2), the Churches of

Christ (Rom. 16:16), The Body of Christ (Rom. 7:4), the Kingdom of God (2 Thess. 1:5), the Bride of Christ (Rev. 21:9) and the Temple of God (2 Cor. 6:16) are all scriptural names!

4. The use of scriptural names instead of humanly conceived names reflects a desire to follow the Scriptures and not human traditions.
 5. It conveys a desire to honor God and Christ and not some man, some creed, or some particular doctrine.
- B. Yet, the name alone is not a guarantee that this is the Lord's Church.
1. Just as the name Mrs. Notgrass alone is not a sure guide if your were seeking to find my wife.
 - a. There are several women in the world who go by the name of Mrs. Notgrass, but only one who bears the name is properly my wife.
 - b. So, there can be many congregations that have the same name, but they may not be truly honoring God.
 - (1) For example: the Church of God is a scriptural name to use, but there are over 200 separate denominations which use that name.
 2. How are we to know which church is the Lord's?
 - a. We must find out more about what lies behind the name.
 - b. Yet, the name is still of utmost importance.
- C. Another way to identify the church is to see if the church is made up of Christians.
1. Paul wrote, "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours." (1 Cor. 1:2)
 2. He also wrote, "Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Thess. 1:1)
 3. So, there are many churches (Rom. 16:16), but one universal church.
- D. Another way to identify the church is to see if anyone is enrolled through human governments or if one person controls it.
1. The beloved John penned, "Beloved, thou doest faithfully whatsoever thou doest to the brethren, and to strangers; Which have borne witness of thy charity before the church: whom if thou bring forward on their journey after a godly sort, thou shalt do well: Because that for his name's sake they went forth, taking nothing of the Gentiles. We therefore ought to receive such, that we might be fellowhelpers to the truth. I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not." (3 Jn. 5-9)
 2. You know, some may kick others out of the church.
 3. Sadly, the Church consist of both saved and lost.
 - a. Read your Bibles in Rev. 3:1-4, "And unto the angel of the church

in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy.”

- b. Hypocrites may become members of the local church, but they don't sneak by the Lord on what they do.
- E. Another way to identify the local Church is to see if it has the earthly organization of elders and deacons and that these individuals are men . . . not women (Tit. 1)!
- 1. Paul spoke of these men (Phil. 1:1).
 - 2. Luke said that, “when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed. And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church. 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 20:17, 28)
 - 3. Elders and deacons are very vital for the Church because it is in the plan.
 - a. There is no plan for a head bishop, a preacher who controls it all, a headquarters who dictates from miles away, or a Pope who supercedes God's law.
 - b. I am thankful that this congregation has such men . . . elders and deacons!
- F. And, one can identify the local congregation when they see that a Christian's membership in the local church does not cease after death because the universal Church that the Lord made continues after we leave this world.
- 1. You know, the mob killed our dear brother Stephen with stones (Acts 12:2), but is still our eternal brother in Christ.

III. EXAMINE THE GOSPEL BEING PREACHED

- A. First of all, Christ is adding people to His church . . . through the Gospel not through a direct operation of the Holy Spirit, not through an experience, nor any other way.
- 1. One of the Apostles said, “Whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (2 Thess. 2:14)
 - 2. And as people heed the Gospel call, the Lord adds them to the body, which is the church.
 - a. For, “they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.

Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.” (Acts 2:41, 47)

- b. It is the engrafted word that is able to save the souls of men. (Jam. 1:21)
- B. Now, if the Gospel proclaimed by the local Church is different by changing either the facts or the commands of the Gospel then, people are not being saved and the Lord is not adding them to His church.
- a. For, you cannot be taught wrong and saved right!
 - b. And, if the Gospel proclaimed by the local church is different then that of the Bible, that church is using a perverted Gospel.
 - (1) Paul said that there were some that had done that in his days and it is clearly evident that people do it today. (Gal. 1:6-9)
 - (2) You know, a church can have the nicest bunch of folks you have ever see, have every activity that is imaginable, and still be unregenerated people. (Tit. 3:5)
2. It is true that many may wear the name of Christ, both as individuals and as a congregation, but still not truly be the people of God nor a part of the Church that Jesus built!
3. What is being preached must be examined and not believed blindly. (Acts 17:11)

IV. EXAMINE THE PRACTICE WITH THE NEW TESTAMENT PATTERN

- A. In the New Testament, we find a pattern regarding local churches.
- 1. The New Covenant describes the church during its first 60 years and by studying Acts and the epistles, it reveals a picture of the church.
 - 2. It is from this picture that a pattern emerges in reference to:
 - a. The worship of local Churches.
 - b. The work of Local Churches.
 - c. The organization of the local Church.
- B. This pattern emerges as we see the early Christians and how, “they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.” (Acts. 2:42)
- 1. It was told, “Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. 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. 16:1-2)
 - 2. Faithful Churches abiding in the apostles doctrine today will reflect this pattern.
 - a. Their worship will be like that described in the New Testament.
 - b. Their work as a congregation will be similar to that found in the New Testament.
 - c. Their organization as a congregation will seek to be like that

described in the New Testament.

CONCLUSION:

1. If we wish to identify the Church that Jesus built today we cannot point to one group of churches and say, there is the one true Church.
 - a. For the true church that Jesus built is a spiritual entity, a body made up of saved individuals throughout the world.
 - b. Yet, it has not earthly headquarters.
2. And, those that have joined themselves together as a local congregation, must follow the apostles doctrine as revealed in the New Covenant.
 - a. They must imitate the pattern seen in the New Covenant regarding the work, worship, and organization of the local church so it can be identified today as the Lord's Church.
 - b. Otherwise, it cannot be His Church and the one we read about in the New Testament.
3. Therefore, a person's first concern should be to look to the Lord through His word to save him, obeying that Word, thereby being added to the Church the Lord made.
 - a. Having done this, examine the New Testament to learn what to look for as one seeks to locate and be a part of His local church.
4. This congregation is one who is filled with the firstborn of God, Christians who are pieces of that one body having a scriptural name, who does not have a government or dictatorship to report to, but are lively stones upon the foundations of the apostles, where Jesus Christ is the chief Cornerstone.
 - a. This congregation is one where no one man controls it, where there are established elders and deacons, which consist of all the saved and prayerfully, not the lost.
 - b. This congregation of Christians have their names written in Heaven because Christ keeps the membership book because we have obeyed the Gospel's call, where that Gospel should not and is not being taught wrong, whose members study because they love God and study to see if they are being told the Truth.
5. This is how we identify the Church that Jesus built today!