



“Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.” Ephesians 3:21.

A New Household of Witness

Lesson Aim: To set forth the New Testament church as the particular medium through which God manifests Himself to the world today.

L310. Date: November 1974. **Text:** Matthew 3:1-3; John 1:35-42; Matthew 16:15-18. **Topic:** Church: Work of.

Thank God for the church! She is more than just an assembly of people. She is a congregation of God's children through whom He works by the Holy Spirit to minister to the spiritual needs of mankind. She is a divine institution.

Think of the blessed work assigned to and performed by the church. She is a lighthouse in the community which would be in heathen darkness without her. Her witness of Christ brought you to saving faith. Her teaching ministry directed you in spiritual growth. Her program gives you an opportunity to share in missionary-evangelism at home and abroad. The work of the church is the work of God!

You owe your church a great debt. Money alone cannot pay it. You should, therefore, dedicate your time, interests, offerings, and abilities to promote her assigned task.

Jesus instituted the church (Matthew 16:18). The Holy Spirit adds to the church those who are being saved (Acts 2:47). God is glorified in the church (Ephesians 3:21). The church is engaged to Jesus Christ (II Corinthians 11:2). One day the church will be presented to Him “. . . a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish,” Ephesians 5:27.

Today's study is concerned with two great truths. (1) Jesus instituted the church during His personal ministry upon earth. (2) True churches have continued from Jesus' personal ministry in the flesh and shall continue to His

return in glory. It is the aim of the study to encourage you to holy loyalty to the church as the particular medium through which God manifests Himself to the world.

I. MAN OF GOD

The preparation for the institution of the first New Testament church was made by a man of God named John. He was a Baptist.

John was an unusual man. He was unusual in his birth. It was announced to his father before conception. It was confirmed by his father's being mute until John was born. He was "filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb," Luke 1:15. His ministry was declared before he was conceived. An angel of the Lord announced, "**He shall be great in the sight of the Lord . . . he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb . . . many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord . . . he shall go . . . in the spirit and power of Elijah . . . to make ready a people prepared for the Lord,**" Luke 1:15-17. He was born according to the word of the angel of the Lord. "**And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his showing unto Israel,**" Luke 1:80.

John preached an unusual message. One day a messenger of God appeared in the wilderness of Judea preaching, "**Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,**" Matthew 3:2. That preacher was none other than John the Baptist. His message of repentance was not unusual. Many prophets before him had called Israel to repentance, but it was unusual for him to announce the kingdom of heaven to be "at hand." It meant the long-awaited kingdom was about to be revealed. His message created great excitement. People from Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region surrounding went to hear him. A message of the coming of God's Kingdom was worth hearing.

John administered an unusual ritual. Many responded to John's message by true repentance toward God. Those who responded were immersed in water. Baptism was not unknown in those days. Converts to the Jewish faith were baptized, but for Jews to be baptized in preparation for the coming of the Messiah was unusual. Through John's ministry, baptism took on a new meaning.

Whence came John's authority to administer baptism? The Bible simply answers that he was "a man sent from God," John 1:6. God authorized him to baptize, but John did not authorize others to continue "the baptism of repentance" (Acts 19:4) which he administered.

Was John's baptism a true "Christian baptism"? Yes. He baptized those who repented and trusted to forgiveness in view of the soon-coming Christ. We baptize those who repent and trust to forgiveness in view of the already revealed Christ. He baptized the Christ. That alone would make his baptism Christian.

John reached an unusual climax. One day, a man came to be baptized of John. His name was Jesus. He had walked from Galilee, a distance of some sixty miles, to be baptized at the hands of John. John hesitated at first, but then he baptized Him upon Jesus' insistence. ". . . **And, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: and lo a voice from heaven, saying. This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased,**" Matthew 3:16-17. At the climax of his ministry, John baptized the Son of God!

II. DISCIPLES OF GOD

The perfecting of the structure of the first church was performed by Jesus Christ.

John the Baptist prepared men to receive the Lord Jesus when He revealed Himself as the long-awaited Christ of God. John's message was, in substance, "Turn away from your sins, turning from sin to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is coming very soon." Many did turn from their sins. They prepared their hearts by repentance and faith to welcome the Messiah.

Some wanted in on the good of the Kingdom of Heaven without meeting the demands of the Kingdom. They came to receive the rituals of baptism, the external rite indicating readiness to receive the Kingdom, but they had not truly repented. Repentance was the internal renewal necessary to recognize and enter the Kingdom. They met John's stern denunciation. "You offspring of vipers," he replied, "who warned you to run from the vengeance which is drawing near? Show that your hearts are really changed..." Thus did John refuse to have a part in religious hypocrisy.

It was from among those disciples of John the Baptist that Jesus chose His first disciples. The miracle of the opened heaven, the descending Holy Spirit, and the speaking of the Father was proof to John that Jesus was the Christ. John testified, "**I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost. And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God,**" John 1:33-34. John passed this information to his disciples, identifying Jesus as "the Lamb of God," John 1:36. "**And the two disciples heard him**

speak, and they followed Jesus,” John 1:37.

Gradually the band of disciples grew around Jesus. The first two disciples of Jesus were Andrew and an unnamed believer. Andrew brought his brother, Simon Peter, to meet Jesus. Jesus met Philip and invited him to follow Him. In turn, Philip found Nathanael and invited him to “Come and see” the Messiah. (See John 1:35-51.) Enlisted by the personal call of Jesus, or by the testimony of His disciples, the band of men who followed Jesus continued to grow.

The disciples had one common bond. Each was assured that Jesus was the long-awaited and divinely-promised Christ—the Messiah of Israel. Andrew invited his brother Peter to meet Jesus, saying, “We have found the Messiah.” Philip witnessed to Nathanael with these words. “We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth . . .” Each disciple agreed in mind and heart with the words of Nathanael, when he had met the Lord, **“Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel,”** John 1:49.

Jesus is still the common bond uniting those who are children of God by faith. He is the Head of the church which is His body. The union with Him is so vital that the Bible speaks of believers as being “in Christ” and of Christ's being in them. No philosophy, or ethics, or institution, or any other thing can unite men like a common faith in Jesus Christ. Jew and Gentile, bond and free, male and female are as one in Him. Look upon each believer as one who is precious to God.

III. CHURCH OF GOD

The certain future of the Lord's churches is declared by Jesus Christ.

In her essential nature, the church is an assembly of baptized believers in Jesus Christ, united in belief of what He said and joined in obedience to what He commanded.

There have always been true churches since the day Jesus personally instituted the first. There will be true churches until the day Jesus comes again. A particular congregation may flourish or fade, but true churches will continue always.

The church is composed of people who have exercised personal faith in Jesus Christ to the forgiveness of sins and who have confessed their faith by the ordinance of baptism. The Holy Spirit dwells in each of them. Joined in a holy assembly of believers, the church then becomes “an habitation of God through the Spirit,” Ephesians 2:22.

Jesus declared, **“I will build my church,”** Matthew 16:18. The Greek

term, “**ekklesia**,” translated “church” in English, is used many times in the Greek New Testament. Its basic idea is “assembly.” It is used to refer to a secular assembly (Acts 19) as well as to a religious assembly. Any time a group of people were called together they were called an **ekklesia** in the Greek language. Jesus took that same word (**ekklesia**) and used it in a different, highly exalted, way. He seemed to say, “There are many assemblies in the world, but I will build MY OWN assembly.” Such words identify the church as unique among the institutions of men.

The foundation of the church is expressed in one tremendous truth: **“Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God,”** Matthew 16:16.

The statement was made by Simon Peter. Jesus had asked the disciples, **“Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?”** They had replied, **“Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”** He had further asked, **“But whom say ye that I am?”** Simon Peter answered for the group, **“Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.”**

That affirmation of faith has caused problems. Jesus' response to Simon's statement was, “. . . thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church . . .” Matthew 16:18. The problem is that the term, “Peter,” means “rock.” Some have declared that Jesus was announcing that He would build the church upon Peter and those who followed him in a kind of episcopal succession.

Jesus did not announce that He would build the church upon Peter. Jesus simply used a play upon words in the statement He made. The Greek word for “Peter” is **petros**. The Greek word for “rock” is **petra**. Observe the difference in spelling. **Petros** means “a little stone,” whereas **petra** refers to “rock” in its larger sense. According to the rules of Greek grammar, if Jesus were saying He would build the church upon Peter, He would have had to use the same spelling of the word. **Petra** is feminine whereas **petros** is masculine. They cannot mean the same thing in the same sentence without being of the same gender. Jesus did not say He would build the church upon Peter.

What is the “rock” upon which the church is founded? It is Jesus, the Messiah-Savior, the Son of the living God. Jesus is the foundation of the church. Jesus alone is the foundation of the church. **“For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ,”** I Corinthians 3:11.

Jesus declared that the church would never be overcome: **“. . . the gates of hell shall not prevail against it,”** Matthew 16:18.

The church will be victorious against all the powers of the unseen spirit

world. They are called “principalities, powers, rulers of the darkness of this world, spiritual wickedness in high places,” Ephesians 6:12. That is a list of formidable opponents. It reminds one of the statement by the Apostle Paul, “We wrestle not against flesh and blood . . .” Imagine! The sovereigns of the cosmic powers of evil who have mastery in these dark days, spiritual agents from the very headquarters of evil, oppose your church. How you should defend her by putting on the whole armor of God and standing ready to battle.

Do not misinterpret the picture, however. Jesus did not picture the church in a defensive posture. She is not to enter her fortress, lock herself behind defenced walls, and resist attack. No, the church is on the offense. She goes forth to challenge Satan in his strongholds. Jesus promised that as the church went out in missionary evangelism, she would never be swallowed and destroyed by evil forces. Why? **“Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world,”** Matthew 28:20.

The church is very important. She is the basic unit in the Kingdom of God. God values the church very highly.

John the Baptist prepared men for Jesus. Jesus took prepared men and instituted the church. Then He commissioned her to go into all the world with the gospel message.

It is a distinct privilege to be a member of a New Testament church—one like the church which Jesus established. There is also a great responsibility attendant upon membership in one of the Lord's churches. Enter the joy of privilege and responsibility in being a faithful member of the church where God places you to serve.

“Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end, Amen,” Ephesians 3:21.

Questions

1. What is a church?
2. Why is a church important?
3. How did John prepare men for Christ?
4. What is the meaning of repentance?
5. How did Jesus select His band of disciples?
6. What common faith held His disciples?
7. What does Matthew 16:16 mean?
8. Who are the opponents of the church?

9. How can you resist them and promote your church?
10. How can you glorify God in your church?