



“Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you,” Hebrews 13:17.

The Church Established

Lesson Aim: The study of Articles 15, 17. 15. Establishment of a visible church by Christ Himself during His personal ministry on earth. 17. Perpetuity of Missionary Baptist churches from Christ's day on earth until His second coming.

L332. Date: November 1964. **Text:** Matthew 3:1-3; John 1:35-42; Matthew 16:15-18. **Topic:** Church: Beginning of; Perpetuity of.

INTRODUCTION—Here is a personal testimony of one church member: “Thank God for my church! It is a divine institution which the Lord Jesus set in the world to perpetuate the preaching of the gospel and the teaching of the saved. It is a spiritual lighthouse in my community which would be in heathen darkness without the witness she gives. It was because of the witness of my church that I became conscious of sin and trusted Jesus as Saviour. Now the teachers who labor there and the pastor who preaches are my spiritual leaders by whose efforts I have been led to grow in grace.

“My church gives me a part in obeying the Great Commission which Jesus gave, Matthew 28:19-20. In her visitation program I have a part in a local evangelistic missionary program. Through her denominational affiliation my offerings help preach to people of other states and nations. Through her Sunday school and Training Service I am helped and can also teach others. In her worship services I can be one of a congregation of God-fearing, Bible-believing Christians who worship God in spirit and in truth. Through her auxiliaries I enjoy Christian fellowship in study and service.

“I owe my church a great debt. Money alone cannot pay it. Therefore, I dedicate my time, interests, money, and abilities to her welfare. I can do no

less. This is not just a congregation of people, but a group of God's children whom He has joined together to propagate His Kingdom in the world. It is a divine institution! I can do nothing less than dedicate myself to the promotion of the purposes of my God by promoting the work of His Church. I believe He desires glory to come to Himself through one of His local congregations, Ephesians 3:21.” (Note: The term “church” is used in this study in an institutional or local sense, depending on the context.)

EXPOSITION

I. PREPARED MATERIAL, Matthew 3:1-3.

1. A chosen man. The membership of the first church was composed of people who had often prepared for that purpose by the ministry of a man of God. John 1:6 identifies this messenger as “a man sent from God, whose name was John.” The Old Testament had told of one who would precede the Messiah to prepare a people for Him, Isaiah 40:3-5. This divinely-ordained man appeared first as a baby born to Zacharias and Elizabeth, Luke 1:5-20, 57-58. He had unique qualifications for this task, being filled with the Holy Spirit from birth, Luke 1:15. Almost nothing is recorded of his childhood nor early adulthood. Shortly after his birth he dropped from view only to appear again almost thirty years later.

About A.D. 27 the people of Palestine were startled by the appearance of an unusual preacher. He was unusual in his dress (camel's hair and a leather girdle), his place of preaching (in the wilderness of Judaea), his message (“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”), and his authority (“I am he of whom Isaiah spoke”). He foretold the soon coming of the Messiah and called upon the people to repent. Scores of people from over Palestine came and were baptized of him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. So it was that when Jesus began His public ministry there was a group of people who (1) were expecting the Messiah to soon appear and (2) had already sincerely repented of their sins in preparation of His coming.

Whence came John's authority to baptize? Without doubt, it came from God, John 1:6, 33. However, John could not pass this authority on to others that they might continue it after his death. His baptism was valid when he performed it but was not continued after his death, Acts 19:1-7. When the church had been instituted, the authority to baptize lay within her for she had been so authorized by Jesus, her Head.

2. Sincere repentance. The central theme of the teaching of John the Baptist was a call to repentance in view of the coming of the Messiah,

Matthew 3:2, 8, 11. He demanded all men to repent. He would baptize no man without evidence that he had repented of his sins. Even the religious leaders were commanded to repent the same as the publicans and harlots. Repentance means (1) a change of mind and (2) a change of attitude. Such a change was necessary before sinners were ready to meet the Messiah and such a change was what John demanded.

3. Scriptural baptism, Mark 1:4; Matthew 3:5-6. Those who repented of their sins confessed their changed life in the ordinance of baptism. It was the expected thing that believers submit to this ritual. It was a natural expression of repentance and faith. Only those who were willing to repent and confess their sins in this act were “prepared” for the Lord's coming.

Baptism is still important. Jesus has given the example of His own baptism, Matthew 3:13-17. He commanded His churches to make baptism a part of their ministry: (1) make disciples, (2) baptize them, (3) teach them to observe all the doctrines He taught, Matthew 28:19-20. Baptism fulfills a distinct purpose. It is a serious error to make it so important that it is thought to be essential in order to be forgiven of sins. It is also a serious error to make it so unimportant that it is neglected. Baptism is a sacred ordinance and no truly loyal Christian can afford to ignore it. How can one walk with Jesus daily if he refuses to take this first act of obedience and confession?

4. A coming Christ. The people were led to repentance by the announcement of the coming of Christ, Matthew 3:11-12; John 1:6-8, 15-18, 29-34. These passages are a record of John's witness to Christ Jesus. His ministry reached its climax on that day, when he introduced Him to the world as “the Lamb of God.” From that moment on John's resolve was, **“He must increase, but I must decrease,”** John 3:30.

For many generations the Jews had looked for a Messiah to come. They expected him to be a political, as well as religious, Messiah. John's purpose was to prepare the people spiritually for His coming. The second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ is still the pivot of the Christian's life and the glory of his hope. It is the church's message. It must never be neglected nor deserted.

II. GATHERED MATERIAL, John 1:35-42.

1. The centre, verse 39. The first church was gathered around the person of Jesus. While John was commissioned to prepare a people for the coming of Jesus, it was our Lord who called the first church into existence. This is the way one would expect it to be. Jesus Christ is the Head of the church (Colossians 1:18) and He is to have preeminence therein. The church is His body and His fulness fills her, Ephesians 1:22-23. The institution of

such a holy assembly would not be left to the hands of men nor angels, but to Him who alone is the Head. Wherever there is a true New Testament church in this twentieth century, Jesus is her Head.

2. The time. When was the church instituted? Here differences of opinion are evident. Some hold the Church was instituted as Jesus went about calling one and another of His disciples (Mark 1:16-20), others say it was instituted in the mountain after all-night prayer (Mark 3:13-19), while others suggest yet other occasions. Actually the specific time and place is not identified without question in the New Testament. If it was of urgent importance we would expect it to have been pointed out. It is enough to know that Jesus personally gathered and personally instituted His Church. That church is of divine institution, being set up during the earthly ministry of Jesus by the Lord Himself. It was empowered on Pentecost (but not organized there) and began a worldwide ministry under the Great Commission, Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 2.

3. The method: personal witnessing, verses 40-42. Those who came to know Jesus as the promised Messiah were anxious that their friends should know Him also. They went out to tell others and, one by one, brought them to Jesus. This is the way that the Lord intended that the church should grow. Personal testimony is the most effective means of winning men. Great mass meetings are impressive, but personal witnessing is most effective. The present generation desperately needs a revival of personal evangelism within the churches. It is not enough to build houses of worship and conduct services at stated times. An unsaved man is lost, dead in sins, and blind to the truth. Why should God's people expect him to come seeking the Lord unless they are interested enough to go seek him! It is a sin against God to neglect personal witnessing. This was the method Jesus used. Have you found one more effective?

4. The method: divine call, verse 43. The familiar, **“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men”** (Matthew 4:19) enlisted some of the early church. In this manner the Lord selected whom He would to compose the congregation of the first church. He is still building His churches in the same way.

Membership in a church must never be taken for granted. Paul says God sets every member in the church as it pleases Him, I Corinthians 12:18. Church membership, therefore, is a matter of sacred importance. When one unites with a church he testifies that (1) he is a new creature in Christ Jesus, (2) God has placed him here for membership, and (3) he will serve the Lord here with all his might. To fail in this solemn agreement is to betray both God and men. If church membership is so vitally related to God's will, no

man can neglect the duties of membership without committing sin. Each church member should either serve God where his membership now is or should seek God's will for another church where he can serve.

III. PERMANENT INSTITUTION, Matthew 16:15-18.

We believe in the perpetuity of true churches from the time Christ founded the first church down to this present hour. The Lord's church has been given an enduring character. It is preserved from extinction and caused to continue without a break. The doctrine of the "perpetuity of the church" means that true churches have existed in true, scriptural form and doctrines through all the years since the original institution and shall continue to exist until Jesus comes again. ("The church" means the institution and not any particular congregation, as the "husband is head of the wife" means no particular husband or wife.) A particular congregation may exist or not, but across the world the Lord will always have true churches.

1. Membership, verses 15-18. The local church is composed of people truly born again and so vitally related to God as His own children. Last Sunday's lesson dealt with the security of the believer in Jesus. Now if individual believers are secure, and the Holy Spirit abides within each one, the assembly of believers in church capacity will continue so long as there are believers in the earth. God has united many believers into a local congregation that they might, in their assembly, be a place for the special indwelling of His Spirit, Ephesians 2:19-22. He will not permit these assemblies to perish from the earth. Even periods of persecution have not stopped Christians from assembling, though they had to meet in secret. The fact that the members are so vitally related to God is one reason why they will continue to meet and the churches will continue to exist.

2. Foundation, verses 17-18. The foundation of the Lord's true churches is the truth expressed by Peter: **Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God!** If this truth was lost the church would cease being a church. This is the basic foundation, I Corinthians 3:11. If Jesus is not the Son of God, the Saviour, our faith is vain. Moreover, His promises are empty and vain and the Bible is untrustworthy, if He is not the Christ. Jesus is the Son of God or the church is nothing! This is the heart of the New Testament.

Some will argue that this passage teaches the church was built upon Peter. This is in no wise the case. True, in the Greek language there is a play upon the words "Peter" (Greek, **petros**) and "rock" (Greek, **petra**). Yet, observe the spelling of these words. They are of different gender. According to the rules of Greek grammar, they cannot refer to one another so long as

they are of different gender. (It would be about the same as referring to a man as “she” or “it” in English.) This is important, for it means the church does not depend upon a man, a priesthood, nor a professional clergy, but upon Jesus Christ alone as her foundation. The foundation of the church is already laid. The foundation is Jesus and He is enough!

3. Purpose, Matthew 28:19-20. The church, being composed of individual Christians, is to be God's witness to the world. The Great Commission is not given to preachers, but to the churches. The Holy Spirit empowers the entire church, not preachers alone, for this ministry of witnessing. God intends that the church should be a center from which the Gospel would radiate through a community and out to the world.

The purpose of the church is a missionary purpose. All faithful churches consider missions and evangelism their highest privilege and major task. It is God's plan that the gospel witness should be given to all the world before Jesus comes again. He will not permit the “gates of hell” to overpower the churches because she is His messenger with this good news. This means the Lord's churches will continue missionary and evangelistic work until Jesus comes again. Each church will be under the special care of God, built upon the foundation which He provided in Jesus Christ, until the saints are caught away to be eternally with the Lord!

CONCLUSION—The church (used here to refer to the institution or to the local congregation, according to context) holds a central place in God's plan. He sent John the Baptist to prepare disciples for Jesus. Jesus came and instituted the church, using primarily those who had been won by John. The church was then commissioned to spread the Gospel through the entire world.

Through the personal supervision of Jesus, the church has never ceased to exist. It cannot be traced through history by the name “Baptist,” but its doctrines are evident. Baptist churches are today the descendants of the original New Testament church. It is a distinct privilege to be a member of a Baptist church. God grant that each reader is faithfully doing his best to bring to pass, through his own church, the admonition: **“Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end,”** Ephesians 3:21.

QUESTIONS

1. How would you define “church”?

2. Who prepared a people for Jesus?
3. Who authorized him to preach and baptize?
4. Who instituted the church, and when?
5. What is meant by “the perpetuity of the church”?
6. Who is the “rock” of Matthew 16:18?
7. Why did God put a church in the world?
8. How is your church fulfilling that purpose?
9. How could you make your church's work more effective?
10. How will you serve God this week through your church?