



“And I say unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it,” Matthew 16:18

The Church Established and Preserved

Lesson Aim: To study Articles 15 and 17 of our Doctrinal Statement.

L319. Date: November 1969. **Text:** Matthew 3:1-3; John 1:35, 42; Matthew 16:15,18. **Topic:** Church: Beginning of; Perpetuity of; Doctrine: Studies In.

INTRODUCTION—We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ took material prepared by John the Baptist and established a visible, local church during His personal ministry upon the earth and that there is and will be a perpetuity of true churches from His days on earth until His second coming.

The discussion of this proposition concerns us in today's lesson. It deals with two great themes. (1) Jesus set up the church as an institution during His personal ministry, before His death and resurrection, and hence before Pentecost. (2) There has been, is now, and will always be true churches in the world until He comes again. The former deals with the establishment of the church; the latter deals with the perpetuity (continuing without interruption) of the church.

Perpetuity of the church does not mean we can trace through history an unbroken chain of ordained pastors, nor an unbroken chain of baptisms, nor an unbroken chain of churches, nor an unbroken chain of congregations calling themselves “Baptists.”

Perpetuity means there has never been a time in history since the Lord Jesus instituted the church when there was no genuine church of the New Testament order in the earth. We trace the identity of the true churches through doctrine. Those major doctrines which identify them are: regenerated church membership, believer's baptism, salvation by grace through faith, two church ordinances, democratic government, priesthood of believers, and a separated life.

We do not insist that any one congregation will last forever to prove our doctrine of perpetuity. We believe individual congregations may come and go, but there always has been, and always will be true churches in the world until Jesus comes.

The church is important. It was built by the Lord Jesus, Matthew 16:18. It was added to of the Lord God, Acts 2:47. In it God is to be glorified through the Lord Jesus Christ, Ephesians 3:21. It is engaged to Christ, II Corinthians 11:2. One day it will be presented to Him, Ephesians 5:25-27.

Today's study should increase your esteem for your own church.

EXPOSITION

I. PREPARING THE MATERIAL, Matthew 3:1-3.

There is a long process between the resolve to build a house and occupying it as a finished edifice. Plans are drawn, materials are ordered, lumber is sawed, bricks are placed, wiring is laid, paint is applied, and so the building arises.

Just so, there was a process which transpired between God's plan to build a church and the realization of it among men. A key man used of God in preparing the material is called John the Baptist.

1. Who? John was born to aged parents named Zecharias and Elizabeth. He was their only child. His birth was almost miraculous (though his conception was natural) because it came so late in life for them.

Luke 1 records the account. An angel appeared to Zecharias, a priest, as he ministered in the temple in Jerusalem. He announced the birth of the child, said it would be a boy, and commanded that he be named John. As a sign that it was so, Zecharias was struck mute until the birth of the child.

The baby, John, was to be "filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb," Luke 1:15. (This statement is made of none other in the Bible.) He was to be "great in the sight of the Lord . . . and many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God . . . and he shall go . . . in the spirit and power of Elijah . . . to make ready a people prepared for the Lord," Luke 1:15-17.

And so it was that about A.D. 29 there appeared a strange preacher in Judaea. This was John the Baptist beginning the ministry which had been spoken of him before his birth. He was, in truth, "a man sent from God," John 1:6. What happened to him between infancy and manhood is unknown. His parents doubtlessly died while he was still young. The Bible simply states, **"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.

It is very likely that John lived in some Essene community during those silent years. This is indicated by (1) simplicity of dress, (2) severe message against sin, (3) call to repentance, (4) refusal to enter the cities, (5) knowledge of the Scripture. The Essenes were the most conservative and purest of the sects in Judaism. John would have been in good company among them.

2. How? John prepared material for the Lord to use by preaching a message of repentance. His ministry excited great interest among the people. Not only common folk, but even the religious hierarchy in Jerusalem took an interest in him and came to check up on him, John 1:19-28.

He was an unusual preacher. He was unusual in his dress (camel's hair and a leather girdle). He was unusual in his place of preaching (in the wilderness of Judaea). He was unusual in his message (“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”). He was unusual in his claim to authority (“I am he of whom Isaiah spoke”).

From all over Palestine people came to hear his message of repentance and the soon coming of the Messiah. Scores of them truly repented of their sins, and were baptized of John in the Jordan River.

When Jesus began His ministry there was a group of people who were expecting the Messiah soon to appear and who had already sincerely repented of their sins in preparation of His coming. And thus did John “make ready a people prepared for the Lord,” Luke 1:17.

John preached and baptized. Whence came his authority to do so? From God! That's all the authority he needed: he was “a man sent from God,” John 1:6. But though John had authority to baptize, he did not pass this authority on to following generations after his death. Some who tried to continue it perverted it so that it was no longer Christian baptism, Acts 19: 1-7. Jesus authorized the continuance of baptism but John did not. See Matthew 28:19-20.

3. Why? The ministry of John the Baptist was needed. Men were then, as they have always been, sinful. For Jesus to begin His ministry in a proper way, some must be ready to receive him. John was sent to call men to repentance. Taking the little band of disciples from the converts John made, Jesus began His ministry.

John preached repentance. He demanded it of all. Even the religious leaders were called upon to repent the same as the public sinners. He would baptize no man without evidence of repentance, Matthew 3:2, 8, 11. Repentance means to change one's attitude so that love for sin dies in the heart and by an act of the will one repudiates sin that he may know the

Saviour. Such a change was necessary before sinners were ready for the Messiah to come.

Those who repented were baptized—immersed—in the Jordan River. This testified to the washing from sin which they had experienced inwardly (the baptism of repentance) and expressed their commitment to live like men raised up from death that they might welcome the Messiah.

When Jesus came on the scene, He received baptism at the hands of John. By this act He identified Himself with the sinners He came to save and testified (through burial and resurrection in water) by what manner atonement would be made. After His temptation, He began to gather His own disciples from the disciples of John. John identified Him to the crowd, “. . . **Behold the Lamb of God,**” John 1:36. Each of the original twelve disciples who became Apostles were converts of John the Baptist according to Acts 1:22. John did a good job preparing the material.

II. GATHERING THE MATERIAL, John 1:35-42.

1. Who? Jesus personally gathered those who formed His band of disciples. He invited two disciples of John to spend the day with Him and from henceforth they became His disciples, John 1:37-39. Through them He began gathering others, John 1:40-42. Peter was enlisted by Andrew who had been personally called by Jesus. Philip responded to Jesus' call and brought his brother Nathanael with him. And so the movement grew.

These who formed the first church were gathered around the person of Jesus. John was commissioned to prepare a people for the Lord, but it was Jesus who brought the first church into existence. This is as we would expect.

Jesus is the Head of the church and is to have preeminence in her, Colossians 1:18. The church is His body and His fulness fills her, Ephesians 1:22-23. In her God is to be gloried through the Lord Jesus, Ephesians 3:21. The gathering of men to form such a holy institution would be left to none other but the Lord Himself.

2. When? It is evident that these disciples were gathered around Jesus near the beginning of His ministry. This means they were gathered at least three years before His death and resurrection. Hence, the church was instituted well before Pentecost. The church was instituted during the personal ministry of Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, and has been exercising her world-wide commission of missionary evangelism since then.

It is difficult to pin-point the exact spot when the church could be

considered to have been instituted. Since the word “church” in the Greek language means “a gathered assembly,” and since the disciples were gathered over a period of time and space, it is almost impossible to say when the “gathered assembly” is considered to have been realized. Some feels it was when Jesus called the first disciples, John 1:35-51. Others feel it was not until all the disciples were called to one place and the office of apostle was set in the church, Mark 3:13-19. The exact spot is not of great importance. If it were, the Bible would have expressed it more positively. It is enough to know the church is the product of our Lord's own hands.

3. How? The disciples were brought into the early church through a two-fold method. Some were gathered by a divine call. The Lord Jesus personally said to Philip, “**Follow me,**” John 1:43. To Peter and Andrew, James and John, He addressed a like call, “. . . **Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men,**” Matthew 4:18-22.

But other disciples were enlisted through the personal evangelistic efforts of those disciples whom Jesus called. They wanted their friends to know Jesus, too. So they went out and spoke to others about Him. They brought them, one by one, to Jesus and He did not reject a single one that His disciples brought.

This is the way the Lord intended the church to grow in our generation. We are under His command to “make disciples” wherever we go in the world. Personal testimony is one of the most effective means of winning men to Jesus. Our generation desperately needs a revival of personal evangelism.

It is not enough to build houses for worship and conduct services at stated times. Men are dead in sin; blind to spiritual things; enemies of God. Why should we expect them to seek out the church? Let the church go to them with the message of salvation and the Lord will bless the witness with converts. Try it and see. This is the way the early churches grew!

III. USING THE MATERIAL, Matthew 16:15-18.

1. Foundation. The church is founded upon one blessed truth concerning one divine person: **the Christ, the Son of the living God!** This is what Jesus taught in Matthew 16:15-18. Asking the disciples, “**Whom say ye that I am?**” He received the answer, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” His response was, “Upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

Not everyone agrees with this interpretation. Since the name “Peter” means “a little stone” some interpret the word “rock” to refer to Simon

Peter. Doubtlessly Jesus is using a play on words. Peter is **petros** and rock is **petra**. But there is a great difference between the two.

Petros refers to “a little stone.” **Petra** refers to a huge layer of rock. It is something like the distinction between a gravel and a mountain of rock.

Again, observe the difference in spelling of these two words. The different endings indicate they are of different gender. According to the rules of Greek grammar, if “Peter” and “rock” were the same, they should have the same gender and so be spelled the same. The fact that this is not so indicates that they do not relate.

This is an important fact. It means the church does not depend upon any man, nor a priesthood, nor a professional clergy, but upon the Lord Jesus Christ alone as her foundation. And to this many other passages of Scripture give witness.

He is “the stone which was set at nought of your builders, which is become the head of the corner,” Acts 4:11. He is “the chief corner stone” of the church, Ephesians 2:20. As the chief corner stone which God has laid in Zion, He is elect and precious, I Peter 2:6. **“For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ,”** I Corinthians 3:11.

Jesus, alone, is the foundation of the church. And He, alone, is enough.

2. Building. Upon the foundation of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the church is built. It is made up of believers who are “living stones” built upon “the chief corner stone,” I Peter 2:5-6. All the churches are built upon the same foundation if they are true New Testament churches. And each church is “an holy temple in the Lord” for therein is the “habitation of God through the Spirit,” Ephesians 2:19-22. Therefore, since God dwells within the church (that is, the people who make up each church) it becomes a holy institution. Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, **“Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are,”** I Corinthians 3:16-17.

This does not mean your church building is a shrine. It is a building like any other building in your community. It means each believer is indwelt with the Holy Spirit. When believers are joined together to form a local congregation in the Lord their assembly, in a very special way, is the dwelling place of God. And it is the assembled congregation which is “an holy temple in the Lord” and must not be defiled. Yes, the church is holy. And you are the church!

3. Perpetuity. Concerning the church which Jesus instituted, He promised, **“... the gates of hell shall not prevail against it,”** Matthew 16:18. By this He has guaranteed the perpetuity (continued existence) of the

church.

The term “hades” refers to the unseen world, the abode of the dead. In this context it refers to the spiritual forces which oppose the way of righteousness. These are called “principalities, powers, rulers of the darkness of this world, spiritual wickedness in high places,” Ephesians 6:12.

There is here acknowledge that the church will face severe testings by a fierce opponent. There may even be some suggestion that people may question whether the church will be able to endure. But Jesus settles all doubts. The church will last. She will not be overcome by her satanic opposition. The doors of obligation shall not close over her.

There are two ways of looking at this text. Some see it as the church in a defensive posture. Gathered up in her fortress with her battlements well defended, the church will not permit the forces of hades to overcome her.

But this is not the picture of the church which the Lord Jesus draws. She is never to close her doors, draw in her defenses and hide herself behind walls. She is to go out to a hostile world. She is to expose herself in the proclamation of the gospel and the call of men to faith in Christ. So Jesus' promise is that when the church goes out in her duty she will overcome and never be swallowed up in death. She has his promise that when she goes forth His presence is with her: **“Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen,”** Matthew 28:20.

Let any church refuse to obey the command of the Lord to go forth with His gospel, and she cannot claim His promise of perpetuity. Indeed, she has no reason for existence if she is not missionary and evangelistic. But the church which fulfills her missionary mission in the world can expect the special watchcare of the Lord over her. How is it with your church!

CONCLUSION—There is in the world an institution which we call the church. It came into being during the personal ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. He took as His disciples a number of people who had been converted by the ministry of John the Baptist. These men were taught, trained, and made pillars upon whom the early Christian witness depended.

Jesus promised that the institution called the church would not pass away when He left and went back to heaven. Since the members were gathered around Him and their allegiance was to Him alone, one would have expected the church to be temporary. But not so. Jesus said that the “gates of hades” (the doors of death) would never close on the church He instituted.

