

There Is But One True Church of Christ

by Dale R. Larsen

An observing person, concerned about God, truth and eternity has reason to be perplexed. Why is Christendom fragmented? Are some churches right, and some wrong? Does it make a difference?

A FEW THOUGHTS COME INTO FOCUS

Most every denominational organization and sect that claims a Christian purpose calls itself a "church." In spite of all their diversity, that common term stands out. Where did the idea come from? The Bible introduces the church, but also clearly depicts it to be a single, unified organism. The Bible, which traces the Divine church through prophecy and its founding, should also be the one authority for the church's organization, pattern of worship and doctrine today.

Just listening to the many radio and television programs on a given Sunday morning presents another enigma. The plans of salvation they preach do not agree. A few of these groups may, on the surface, seem to be preaching doctrines that are about alike, but the teachings of some are in direct opposition to those of others. Two opposites, each claiming to be truth, cannot both be correct.

The existence of so many varied denominations, most claiming to be the church, testifies to the fact that, somewhere, there is, or was a true original. Even counterfeit money is evidence there is a real thing - and that it is valuable.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

There is only one place to go for answers about the church. The Bible, the word of God, tells all about God's church, and it clearly presents one church! From the very first of the Bible we find God's oneness stressed, and the unity of His followers taught. The harmony of God's creation is revealed in Genesis 1:31 "...it was very good." God is not a God of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33). Deuteronomy 6:4 is one of many passages which teach the oneness of God. Genesis 2:24 reveals the beginning of marriage and says the man and wife:...shall be one flesh." An inspired apostle, Paul uses the Divine institution of marriage to illustrate the nature of the church, which is his body (Ephesians 1:22,23; Colossians 1:18). The figures of the body and the oneness of husband and wife carry through many verses of Ephesians 5. Paul culminates the comparison by saying, "...I speak in regard of Christ and of the church" (Eph. 5:32). The Bible says "There is one body,...one spirit,...one hope,...one Lord,...one faith,...one baptism,...one God...: (Eph. 4:4-6). Jesus prayed for unity of his people, "that they may all be one" (John 17:21).

For further identification of that one church we look briefly to Old Testament prophecies: Both Isaiah and Micah speak of a special kingdom (future) and

describe it as "the mountain of Jehovah's house" (Isaiah 2:2,3; Micah 4:1,2). These predictions designated the beginning place as Zion, or Jerusalem, and a message called "the word of Jehovah." Jesus said the Kingdom would come during his generation, and that it would come with power (Mark 9:1). The great Pentecost occasion recorded in Acts 2, fulfills all of these predictions, and from that time forward the New Testament speaks of the church as being in existence (Acts 2:46,47; 20:28; 1 Cor. 16:19). Matthew 16:18,19 and Acts 20:25-28 use interchangeably the terms "kingdom" and "church." The first letter to Timothy (3:15) calls the church "the house of God."

None would deny God's relationship to the church, but in a very special sense it is Christ's church. Jesus said, "...I will build my church;" (Matt. 16:18). The word "church" is singular. The passage in Acts 20:28 says the Lord purchased the church "with his own blood," and Ephesians 1:23 calls it "his body." The church is a living organism with Christ the head and Christians members of that body.

So undenominational was that original church that it was sometimes spoken of simply as "the Way" (Acts 9:2). The basic meaning of the original Greek word for church was "the called out ones." The New Testament pictures one universal church with one common message: "And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned" (Mark 16:15,16). The members of this one body, or way, were scattered everywhere and as they met in their respective geographic locations they were called, in a local congregational sense, "churches of Christ" (Romans 16:16).

HOW DID DIVISIONS ORIGINATE?

Nowhere in the New Testament is there a record of Roman Catholicism or any of the numerous Protestant denominations. How did the variety of present-day "churches" come into existence? The church always has been made up of human individuals, susceptible to human error. Paul warned the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:10-13) not to follow men - not even good men - instead of Christ. In that very passage he asks, "Is Christ divided?" Implied in his answer, "No!" Division comes from humans and their views, and especially so when we look to men rather than to the Bible for our authority.

The Roman Catholic system of religion evolved as men departed from and altered the original pattern. Examples of such unauthorized additions are: holy water; penance; Latin mass; extreme unction and purgatory. These practices came too late to be apostolic or "original." Perhaps the greatest departure came in the area of organization, and over a period of a few hundred years the traditional Roman Catholic hierarchy emerged, about 606 A.D., with an unscriptural leader (pope) called Boniface III.

Protestants began as protesters. A denomination (of anything) is a division. Early leaders of Protestant movements were Catholics: Peter Waldo; Martin Luther; Ulrich Zwingli; etc. Their intention was to reform a church which had

become full of abuses and errors. Instead, many of these leaders were excommunicated and their efforts crystallized into new organizations. These were established too late to be the church of the New Testament, and they were founded by someone other than the one who spoke in Matthew 16:18. Many teachings and practices of Protestant denominations are additions to, or subtractions from, the New Testament pattern, and several are retained from the Catholic church. Throughout the years still more denominations with new doctrines have continued to arise.

WE MUST BE IN CHRIST'S CHURCH

What is wrong with selecting a "church" of one's choice? As free, moral agents we do have the capacity to choose, but our "choosing" can be wrong. In the case of the church, Christ built it, purchased it, and is its head. Those who respond to his invitation, on his terms, will be added to his church (Acts 2:41). Acts 2:47 states that the Lord added those that were being saved. He is the author of eternal salvation "...unto all them that obey him" (Hebrews 5:9). He is the savior of the body, his church (Eph. 5:23). Proverbs 14:12 warns: "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man; but the end thereof are the ways of death." Jesus himself said there would be those who professed the name of the Lord and who did works in his name, who would be lost. He said those who did the will of his Father who is in heaven would enter heaven (Matt. 7:21-23).

A will, or testament, of man is strictly honored by the courts. As we prepare for final judgment and eternal life we must make certain we are members of Christ's church (the one described in the New Testament) having complied with his will, and having been obedient to his commands! On this basis we shall be judged (John 12:48).