

No.2. The Institution of the Church

In the first study on this subject of *The Church* we looked at the word "church" seeking to give a definition of it by noting the different ways in which the word is employed in the Scriptures.

THE CHURCH IS A DIVINE INSTITUTION

Any honest consideration of the use of the word *church* by the writers of Scripture must surely lead to one vital observation at least, i.e., *The Church* is a divine institution. It is not a mere human society that owes its origin, existence and establishment in this world to the energy of its members but to the supernatural power of the Lord Himself. The Church possesses and enjoys Christ's presence & power in its midst, Matt 18: 20. It is governed, disciplined and regulated by His Word. It experiences the operation of the Spirit of God in its witness and ministry. It enjoys blessed communion with the Lord in the observance of His ordinances. It is therefore, a spiritual and living organism brought into being and continued by the grace and power of God in Christ. Therefore, the Church is not the creature of man in any sense. For example, the Church is not the product or creation of the civil state, holding its authority and privileges directly from the Lord, not from the state nor by the sanction of the state. We hold that the Church is not the product of the state in any sense in opposition to what is known as *Erastianism*, a theory put forth by a man named Thomas Erastus, 1524-83, who taught that the power of government and discipline in the Church is entrusted by God to the civil authority. Erastus argued that the Church's power is solely one of giving instruction or admonition, but that the power to discipline or punish belongs only to the civil realm. However, Erastianism was firmly rejected by God's faithful servants such as those who formed the Westminster Assembly. They held and taught that the church and the state each have their own separate powers, with each holding supreme power in its own arena, though ideally they should cooperate for God's glory.

THE CHURCH IS A SPIRITUAL INSTITUTION

The aims and objectives of the church are spiritual and are therefore entirely different in nature from those of the system of the world. The best summary of the spiritual goals of the church is that given by Christ in His final commission as recorded in Matt 28: 19, 20 & Mark 16: 15 -- the Church is to preach the Gospel to every individual, obviously to all who will give it a hearing; to make disciples in all nations; to administer the ordinances; and to teach its members to observe all that the Lord has revealed as the rule of life and obedience.

In the light of these Scriptures, Christ's Church is His spiritual kingdom present and operating in this world, but not of this world, John 18: 36, either with regard to origin or purpose. Being a spiritual kingdom or institution, the Church is not to be controlled by the thinking & behaviour of the world. God's people are to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. But it must always be kept in mind that Caesar has no lawful control over the things of God, a principle that governs the issue of the freedom of the believer's conscience on one hand the legitimate rights of the state on the other, Acts 4: 19, 20.

WHEN WAS THE CHURCH INSTITUTED?

Since the Church is a divine & spiritual institution, the question then arises as to when it was instituted. The question really is -- when in the history of man was the Church originated and instituted? In current Christian circles there are basically two answers to that question. Some, due to the influence of Dispensational teaching, hold that the Church originated a little more than 1,950 years ago on the Day of Pentecost when the Spirit was poured out. But Church history reveals that the historic & creedal view is that the Church originated in the Garden of Eden immediately after the Fall when God promised a Saviour and our first parents received that promise in faith.

The basis on which to determine the time when the Church was instituted is by determining what the Church is. In our first study, as noted again today, the Church is shown in Scripture to be comprised of those called out of the world of sinful humanity to be united with Christ through faith. The Church therefore, is a communion of believers in Christ. The *Apostles' Creed* defines the Church as "the communion of saints..." signifying a corporate & visible gathering of believers in the promised Saviour. The O.T. shows that there certainly was such a communion in that epoch -- those who received the covenant promise concerning God's purpose of grace and rested by faith in the promised Redeemer, the *Christ of prophecy*. Then, the N.T. saints are saved through faith in the *Christ of history*. The "Christ of prophecy" and the "Christ of history" are of course identical, and since the saints in both eras rested in Him, the *communion of saints* pertains to both the O.T. & N.T. believers.

But since the evidence in Gen 3 is that Adam & Eve rested in Christ, then the Church began with them. Note in v.15 the first covenant promise -- the promise of a deliverer and redeemer, the *seed of the woman*. Thus, the Lord was revealing that while man had disobeyed and was fallen, the human race was going to continue and a saviour would be born. Then note v.20, Adam gave his wife this name -- "Eve" -- meaning, *the mother of all living*. This was the evidence of faith, that immediate destruction would not come, and that there would be a seed. Note also in v.21 that the clothing of Adam & Eve by the Lord in this fashion would have meant the death & blood shedding of an innocent substitute. Adam & Eve would have seen in this action the revelation of the covering for man's sin that the Lord would provide through the promised Seed.

Thus, since Adam and his wife clearly believed what the Lord had set before them they constituted the first church on this earth -- the church began right in Eden and even when they were driven from Eden they continued to assemble as the church. Note in ch.4: 3, 4 that they had taught their sons what the Lord had revealed to them. While Cain was a reprobate, nonetheless the evidence is clear that this first family worshipped the Lord in a certain place, and according to a revealed manner. This is essentially the evidence of the initial gatherings of the Church. It is true that in those ancient times the Church was in its immaturity compared with its N.T. form. The Church came to its maturity with the out-pouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. Thus, the N.T. Church has the full revelation of God in possessing the entire Scriptures of truth, John 16: 13. It has greater freedom in that it is no longer under the ceremonial system, 2 Cor 3: 17. It has a truly universal aspect in that it is comprised of individuals from the nations of the earth, unlike the O.T. situation when it was confined almost entirely to Israel. Yet it is the same Church in both eras, instituted in Eden and continuing on right through time and into eternity itself, Eph 2: 12-21.