



Articles and Sermons :: Biblical Concept of the Church

Biblical Concept of the Church - posted by lwpray (), on: 2004/11/14 15:01

A Biblical Concept of the Church

AROUND THE BEGINNING OF WORLD WAR I we had a visitation in the United States, not of spiritual power, but of what I have named tabernacleism. Anyone with a good personality and preaching ability would start a tabernacle around the corner, get a crowd, pull out of the churches and proceed to poke fun at the churches. I can understand why there was such a revolt—the churches were pretty dead. A lot of money was spent to build these tabernacles, but often the men who founded them left town and nobody else could keep them up, so the crowds wandered away. The mortgage holders foreclosed, and the tabernacles were left high and dry.

The depression killed the movement. Nobody had any money, so it did not pay to go around starting churches. As a result, however, today we have immense church buildings throughout the United States. They are not good for anything, but they left behind a residue—a bad and dangerous philosophy. This philosophy is actually a dangerous theology regarding the church. The church was thrown out and said to be of no account—come when you please, go when you must; hold no creed but Christ, no law but love, no pastor but Jesus, no membership, no anything. This philosophy has left us high and dry like a shore after a storm when the wind has blown.

It is time for us to reconsider this matter of the church. Most people think of the church as a familiar social fact. Their attitude toward Protestantism generally is that of a matter of course, and people, even average Christians, think they are in favor of the church. They favor the church much the same as they support motherhood, decency and sanitation. It is as accepted as a convention that we never question or doubt. If anybody does question or doubt, they are considered communists or atheists. People will even pour out their money to support social convention.

But I wonder how many ever sit down and say, “What is this? Maybe the church is just something that is here; it doesn’t have any value and doesn’t have any reason for being here.” How many present-day Christians have ever searched the Scripture with a serious burden on their hearts to know what the church is? Is it simply a convention that is carried on? How many Christians have ever prayed earnestly for light from heaven about it?

Re: Biblical Concept of the Church - posted by lwpray (), on: 2004/11/15 2:16

It seems that the average person spends more time and intellectual labor each year filling out income tax forms than he or she spends in a lifetime trying to learn from the Scriptures and from the light of the Spirit what the church is and what he or she ought to do about it. Why is it in the world? What did Jesus mean when He said, “On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matthew 16:18b)? If people were to chew their pencils and walk the floor and go out for a walk and come back and work on it and search and think and discern and divide and go through all that they have to go through to make out their income taxes every year, I believe that they could come up with some wonderful answers.

Must understand the universal church

When we know what the universal church is, we will understand what a local church is. The average local church is to a large extent a social organization where well-intentioned people get together and know each other. They are drawn together by coffee, tea, friendship, skating parties and things like that. Those things are harmless. But when we know what the church really is, we will understand that while these things are all right on the margin of the church, they are not the purpose of it.

Meeting, shaking hands and drinking coffee are perfectly legitimate if we do not need them—they are not what holds us together. But when those activities are what hold us together, we do not have a church; we have something else. Unfortunately, we might as well admit it: That is often all that the churches have.

First we have to have a philosophy about the church. What is the church? I want to use three illustrations to show what the true Church of Jesus Christ is.

Re: Biblical Concept of the Church - posted by lwpray (), on: 2004/11/15 16:02

The bride of Christ

First, the church is the bride of Christ. Jesus was a complete man. He had all the nature of a man, but He never married. He could have, but He never did. He never married any woman though He was a true and complete man. He never married a daughter of a woman that He might marry His whole church, the bride.

A true local church is the bride of Christ in recapitulation, in miniature. Everything that is in the whole church of Christ should be recapitulated in the local church. The church, part of it in heaven and part of it on earth, is the bride of Christ. Our Lord Jesus washed His bride, regenerated her and prepared her. He is coming back to take her—the whole church—as His bride.

But any local church is the whole church in recapitulation, just as a local election recapitulates a national one. The same liberty is expressed. The same candidates run. They talk about each other; they plead their own worth and put up bulletins and do the same thing on a small scale that they do on the federal level. That may be a poor illustration, but the whole bride of Christ is recapitulated. Any local church is what the whole church is, just in miniature.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church. (Ephesians 5:25–29)

This figure drawn from husbands and wives is applied directly without apology to Jesus Christ and His church. Just as a young man would not marry a dirty bride, so Jesus Christ will not marry a church that has stains or wrinkles or blemishes. His desire is for a glorious church, and He wants to love that church as a man loves his own bride.

There was a man named Adam, and he was the first bachelor. God told Adam to call in all the animals and name them. According to the Bible, names were given after the nature of the animals. Adam named the bear after the bear nature and the lion after the lion nature. Then the Bible makes this touching comment—“But for Adam no suitable helper was found” (Genesis 2:20b). Some people think that just means there was no woman yet. But what it means is that God and Adam had not found any nature like Adam’s yet. Adam had to have someone who was satisfactory for him. No one was worthy of him. There had to be somebody with his nature. There was no one appropriate because the rest were the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air—they did not have the same nature as Adam, who was made in the image of God.

God told Adam to lie down. Adam obeyed and went into a deep sleep. There in a state of deep anesthesia, God operated on the man and took from his chest a rib. God then fashioned the rib into a woman, gave her life and called her woman—the life-giver, who shall give life to all the race. When Adam came out of his sleep, he looked around and saw Eve. She looked good in his sight. Adam knew Eve, she conceived a son and thus the race began.

But then there was another Adam. First Corinthians 15 tells us about a second Adam, the last Adam, Jesus Christ the Lord. He had a nature that was divine. He was divine, God in flesh. Jesus was a perfect and complete man, but He married no daughter of woman. He married no daughter of woman because there was none found worthy of Him.

Re: Biblical Concept of the Church - posted by lwpray (), on: 2004/11/16 0:25

Just as He had done with Adam, God put Jesus on the cross in a deep sleep and opened His side. Out from His side flowed not a rib but water and blood. From that water and blood God is washing, cleansing and preparing a bride worthy of Jesus. God did not create Eve from nothing as He had Adam, but He created her from the wounded side of Adam. Even so, the Lord is not creating a race that does not now exist to be His church. He takes the race that now exists—certain members of it—and washes it in the blood that came from the wounded side. By the Holy Spirit, He gives the nature of Christ to the bride, so she will be worthy of Him.

There was not among the daughters of Eve one that was appropriate and satisfactory for Jesus. Therefore He is preparing Himself a bride who has His nature, as Eve had the nature of the husband out of whose side she came. A theologian once noted that God took the bone that made the woman not from Adam’s head, that she might lord it over him; not from his feet, that he might lord it over her; but from his heart, that she might understand him, and he might love her. That is what the church is—the bride of Christ.

If you are a member of the true church of Christ, then you are a member of the company that will make up the true bride of Christ. As a local church, we are a miniature of the bride of Christ.

Re: Biblical Concept of the Church - posted by lwpray (), on: 2004/11/16 4:15

The body of Christ

A second description of the church is the body of Christ. Jesus Christ is the head, and as the head of His church He directs it. My hands move because my head tells them to. My head directs my body. The head of a local church is not the pastor, but Jesus Christ the Lord. He is the head of the universal church of which the local church is a part. A local church is not all the body of Christ, but in miniature it is the body of Christ.

Third, the church is depicted as an ark on the flood waters. As the ark of Noah floated on the waters and contained all who would be salvaged, so the church of Jesus Christ is an ark on the flood waters and contains all who will be salvaged. Remember that! All in the ark are saved, and all outside the ark perish. All around us is a perishing world, and we float on top of it in a little ark called the church. All that are not in the church—the ark—will perish.

You say, “Now hold on a minute. Do you mean to say that if you don’t join the Avenue Road Church, you will be lost?” No, but what I do say is that the church is the ark containing the ransomed, and inside the ark is life. Outside the living church of Christ are the lost. Inside are the saved. You are not saved by joining a church, which is a mistake local churches make.

The animals all came into Noah’s ark by the door. Christ is the door to the church, and whoever will be saved must come in by the door. There is no other ark on the flood. Suppose someone said, “Well, hold on a minute. Don’t be so narrow-minded. Let’s be tolerant. We do not want to get in Noah’s ark; we want an ark of our own.” Well, there weren’t any other arks on the flood. It was either get into Noah’s ark or perish. A few got into Noah’s ark, and God preserved the race.

In the church of Christ, God is salvaging a small number from the flood. A fatal error is the independent life—to say that you are a Christian, but you don’t associate with any churches. You are a Christian, but you don’t feel the necessity to join a church. It is true that there are hypocrites in the church—not in the true church, but in the local assembly. Even Jesus had His Judas. The local assembly and the true church of Christ are sometimes not synonymous.

Sometimes people come into the local church who have never come into the universal church. People join a church who have never been born into the true church. Some churches actually throw the doors open and say, “Now we’ll sing the closing hymn for those who want to unite with the church. Come to the front.” Al Capone could come in and join. Nobody asks any questions; they just take in anybody. I do not believe in that at all, and I know you do not either.

Re: Biblical Concept of the Church - posted by lwpray (), on: 2004/11/16 11:03

Get into the universal church first

believe that if you are going to get into a local church, you should first be in the universal church, which Jesus purchased with His own blood. You should get into the church with rebirth, the Holy Spirit and regeneration. Then you should join a local assembly. It is impossible to receive Christ and reject His people. How do you find the Shepherd? Go where the sheep are! If you do not know where the Shepherd is, then go where the sheep are. All else being equal, that is where you will find the Shepherd. Whoever receives Christ must receive His people too. Jesus said, “He who receives you receives me” (Matthew 10:40a). Whoever rejects the bride rejects the Bridegroom, and whoever rejects the flock rejects the Shepherd. I think that is clear enough.

Consider this illustration: Two young couples marry in June. One is a Christian couple and takes a serious view of life. Their home is full of love, and they are looking forward to a family. The other two love each other too, in a Hollywood sort of way, and look forward to skin diving, water skiing and just having fun. They do not want any children. In the course of time, after two or three years, both of the women have a little baby; one was wanted and one was not.

Christian parents look at their little baby, their hearts glow and they say, “Isn’t she absolutely wonderful?” This first couple feels a sense of sacredness, and so they pray, plan and say, “Wasn’t God good to give us this little one?” And she becomes a spiritual gift to them. They know that when she grows up she will be like other people with tantrums, but they take her as a gift from God. Bringing up this little baby becomes a sort of sacrament to them.

The other couple have their baby, and of course they love her, but they never quite see it like the other couple. It never occurs to them to pray, and as soon as she is old enough, they send for a baby-sitter and go on their way. The point is that at the first couple understood the sacredness of their baby. The other couple was not thinking of the sacredness of their baby, but rather they were thinking of having fun. They took the baby as a necessary evil that they learned to live with after a while.

This illustration also gives you two views of the church. Suppose I do not know what a church is, but I want to come to a church for the social fact and I join it because I think it would be better to join than not. In that case I take the same attitude

de toward the church as the second couple had toward their baby. The experience does not have the glow of sacredness. But if I see there is a great church being salvaged from the wreckage, just as Noah and his family were salvaged, and the church is found throughout the whole world in local groups, I begin to see the sacredness of the local church.

What a different attitude you will take toward the church! You will say, "How lovely that I ever got in." The church will glow to you and have a sense of sacredness on it. If you find any blemish in the church, you will do what the young Christian couple did with their baby—correct it.

If you want fellowship with the church, if you have not formally joined, there are two ways to do so. One is to pray in public, give money, show enthusiasm and fill out a card. The other is to do first things first—join the universal church—and then also fill out a card.

Re: Biblical Concept of the Church - posted by lwpray (), on: 2004/11/16 14:52

Public confession

An important part of joining the church is public confession. Why does the Lord want us to make a public confession?

The Bible says,

"The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. (Romans 10:8b–10)

The heart believes and the mouth confesses. Both are necessary to salvation. Even the thief on the cross made his poor pitiful confession.

That is why God wants us to fellowship with each other, get together and tell the world and tell each other—because with the mouth confession is made for salvation. My plea is for those who have never undergone the marvel of the regeneration of new birth to take this seriously. Remember you get into the ark through the door, and Jesus Christ is the door. If you reject the ark, you reject the door, and if you reject the door you perish in the flood.

Must be born into the family

To become a member of the body of Christ and join with the bride of Christ, you must be born into the family of Christ. It happens by believing in your heart that Jesus is Lord and confessing your faith with your mouth to the people. This is reasonable, and I do not understand why anybody should find fault with it.

Suppose you were somewhere in the world, and someone asked you your nationality. Is there anybody here that would be ashamed to say where you were from? Why then should you go through life being secret Christians, too frightened, too scared to say, "I am a Christian"? If Jesus Christ has honored you by finding you and laying His hand on you, you ought never be ashamed of Him. You should be able to stand anywhere at any time and say, "I do not care who knows it. I am a Christian." Be proud.

I want the world to know that I am a Christian. From reading the lives of the saints I know I have a long way to go, and I want you to know that, too! I have a sharp tongue and an abrupt manner, and sometimes I say things that hurt feelings. I do not want to hurt your feelings. Just forgive a fellow who is too dumb to know better. I may not be a good Christian, but I am still a Christian. I am a member of the body of Christ. I am in the ark along with the blessed few who have been honored by God with grace, and for that reason I am not ashamed and I do not want you to be.

We want a separated-from-the-world, heads-up, knees-bent, living church! Sure we can have our skating parties, gatherings and coffees. Nothing is wrong with that, provided we know that we do not need it. These activities are something on the side so we can relax. Jesus Christ is our center, and so the way to get in is by faith and confession.