

The Beginning of the Church

Matthew 16:18

This is the second part of a two-part series that I have simply titled “Back to Basics.” Last week we looked at *Salvation*, and in this study we are going to look at *Church Membership*.

The word “church” is a word that is very familiar and a word that is also very misunderstood. The church is one of the few aspects of Christian theology that can be observed in our everyday living. For many people, the church is the first point, and perhaps the only point, where Christianity is encountered. In his work “Church Dogmatics,” Karl Barth says that one of the ways in which the church witnesses is simply by its existence. In other words, the *presence* of the church in the world in which we live is *proof* of the church’s existence.

Added to the confusion surrounding the church is the fact that it is mentioned in the media, but there are never any specifics and all beliefs are lumped together. Legislative documents refer to it. In the United States the *church* is to be kept separate from the state. People belong to a church; they go to church on Sunday. But for all this familiarity, there is still much confusion when it comes to truly understanding the *biblical concept* of the church.

The Bible and the church stand together. While the *church* was prophesied in the Old Testament, it was born on the Day of Pentecost and became entrenched as a New Testament institution. Therefore, it is in the New Testament that we find the *origin* of the church, the *pattern* of the church, the *mission* of the church, and the early *history* of the church.

The New Testament, therefore, must forever be the handbook of the church. Manmade creeds are not to be substituted for the authority of the New Testament. Most of the errors that have found

their way into the local church, and/or denominations, can be traced to a departure from, or misinterpretation of, the teachings of the New Testament.

Although the New Testament evidence for local church membership is not abundant it is consistent and clear. At the very least local church membership is a natural implication of God's command to distinguish between His chosen people, and the world that surrounds them. To say it another way, local church membership is a means by which we establish the borders of the church.

Therefore, in this study, we will seek to see what the Bible has to say about the church. It is not my desire to teach any *denominational doctrine* or *traditional beliefs* – simply to look at biblical insight concerning the Church.

The church as a Christian institution is not mentioned in Mark, Luke, or John. In the remainder of the New Testament it is mentioned many times. It is found 19 times in Acts, 62 times in the epistles of Paul, once in Hebrews, once in James, and 23 times in the writings of John (the three epistles and Revelation).

You might be surprised to know that the word "church" is never used in the New Testament to refer to a house of worship. That was a later development. The early Christians did not have church buildings, but met in public buildings and in private homes.

The basis of today's brief study of the Church is found in Ephesians 2:19, and reads like this, "Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God." In this verse, Paul says you are a member of God's very own family and you belong in God's household with every other Christian.

First, the church is a family. In Galatians 6:10 the church is referred to as "the household of faith." It doesn't say the church is like

a family. It says the church *is* a family. The church is a spiritual family.

Second, God expects me to be a member of a family. 1 Timothy 3:4 says, “You are a member of God’s very own family.” That says it is God’s will. It is not an option. Every Christian needs a church family.

There are two ways the word “church” is used in the Bible:

Remember, Pentecost marked the birthday of the church. There was no church in the Old Testament, and there was no church in the Gospels. Remember, Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, “... on this rock I will (future tense) build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” Therefore, every person that has received Jesus Christ as his or her personal Savior from Pentecost until today is a member of the mystical, Universal church of God. It does not matter if you were saved in a Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, Catholic, or driving down the road in your car, or in a Motel Room reading a Gideon Bible – the moment you asked Jesus Christ to come into your life, forgive you of your sins, and make you a Christian – you were saved and sealed with the Holy Spirit. And that, my friend, makes you a member of the Universal, mystical, Body of Christ known as the Church!

1 Corinthians 12:13 says, “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.” The moment you were saved, by the power of the Holy Spirit you were placed into the Body of Christ, the church.

Second, the Bible refers to the “church” as a local fellowship of believers. Acts 9:31 seems to use the word "church" to include all believers in a given territory, "Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.” This was in the early history of the church, and we have

no evidence that there were any established churches except the church in Jerusalem. In Acts 8:1 we read, "At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles." Years later, in Galatians 1:22, Paul spoke of "the churches of Judaea."

As one studies the Scripture, it becomes very clear that a vast majority of the times the word "church" makes reference is to the local congregation. In fact, the word "church" is used about 93 times when referring to local congregations. 1 Corinthians 1:2 says, "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth..." Therefore, the Bible is clear that there are local churches, as seen in Galatians 1:2, "And all the brethren who are with me, unto the churches of Galatia." So, the Bible is simply teaching us that when we are saved we are placed into the Body of Christ. But there is also a "local" church family that we are to be involved in, like here at Mountain Grove.

Before we talk about how you might become a member of Mountain Grove Church, I want to share with you some of this church's Essential Beliefs. Essential Beliefs are those biblical doctrines that qualify this church (or any other for that matter) to be a New Testament Church.

The Essentials We Believe:

About God: (Genesis 1:1,26,27, 3:22). God is One God Who is eternal (He has always been), He is sovereign (in total control of everything), He is omnipotent (having all power), He is Omniscient (having all knowledge), He is omnipresent (He is everywhere all the time).

About Jesus Christ: (John 14:9, Colossians 1:13-16). He is God the Son and is God in the flesh. He is the God-man (all God and all man) and is co-eternal and co-equal with God the Father.

About the Holy Spirit: (2 Corinthians 3:17; John 16:7-13, 14:16,17). He is God the Holy Spirit and is ***co-eternal*** and ***co-equal*** with God the Father and God the Son.

About the Trinity: There is only one God. (The example of self) Colossians 1:15 says, “(Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation.” Colossians 2:9 says, “For in him (Christ) dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.”

About the Bible: (2 Timothy 1:13, 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21). ***The Bible is the inerrant, infallible Word of God.***

About Human Beings: (Genesis 1:27; Romans 3:23). ***We are made in the image of God to have fellowship with Him.***

About Salvation: (Romans 10:9-10). ***Salvation comes through simple child-like faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ.***

Now, when to decide to join Mountain Grove Church there are three ways to join:

First, you can come by baptism based on your profession of faith in Christ. That is, to become a member of Mountain Grove Church each person must be baptized by immersion either from another Christian church or by Mountain Grove Church. or baptism based on your profession of faith.

Second, you can come by “transfer of letter” from another church. That is, if you already have a *Church Membership* in another church, when you join Mountain Grove we will simply write that church and let them know that you have joined this church and they can remove you from their church rolls.

Third, you can come by Statement of Faith. Let me give you a couple of examples:

First, let's suppose you were saved and baptized years ago as a youngster. Maybe you moved away, or even joined the Military, and just drifted away from church. And you either moved into this area or heard about Mountain Grove and came for a visit and found this is where God wants you to be. **The problem is, you don't know the address of that church where your membership is, or if they even still have you on the church roll as a member.** How do you join Mountain Grove? Now watch this – that is, based on your personal statement that you have received Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, and been baptized by immersion, we will receive you into our church family on Statement of Faith.

Second, let's suppose you are coming from a church of another denomination that just may not be willing to transfer your membership to Mountain Grove. In that same manner, based on your personal statement that you have received Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, and been baptized by immersion, we will receive you into our church family on Statement of Faith.

The bottom line is, we want you to become a part of our Church Family. We want this Church to be YOUR CHURCH not just where you ATTEND. We want you to find your ministry and fulfill God's purpose for your life and we think you can do that here at Mountain Grove.

Everyone please stand for prayer.

Father,

Thank You for the simplicity of faith and your desire for me to find my place in a local church family. Give me the courage to be obedient to your Word and will. In Jesus name. Amen.