

THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

Proclaiming the Timeless Truth of the Church to a New Generation of Believers

Volume 97-1

Dear Reader,

“Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for her” (Eph.5:25). If Christ so loves the Church that He willingly went to the terrible death of the cross so He might righteously possess her as His bride for eternity, we should also deeply love the Church. We should love it so much that we will find out all we can about it and then seek to please the Lord in our conduct in relation to it.

Yet the Scriptural doctrines (teachings) concerning the Church or Assembly are seldom emphasized today in the Christian community. There may be a general understanding among some Christians that the Church is spoken of as the body of Christ. Yet the Scriptural doctrines concerning church-fellowship are known by only a very few and actually practiced by still fewer. The great mass of what is today called “the Church” is a sad counterfeit of the plan so plainly taught in the Bible.

Even among those who claim to emphasize and follow so-called *Assembly Truth*, there are widespread variations in beliefs and practices which thrive on lack of knowledge on the part of those being led astray. How can dear fellow-believers be helped to know and to practice “Assembly Truth” to the glory and honor of the Head of His Church, our Lord Jesus Christ? The apostle Paul told his spiritual son, Timothy, in a time of disorder in the early Church, to “*preach the Word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching*” (2 Tim.4:2).

The Newsletter

It is our exercise to follow Paul’s directions in relation to the Church by means of a Newsletter sent out *free of charge* in the United States and Canada six to twelve times a year. We desire to proclaim the truths of the Assembly in today’s English to our brothers and sisters in Christ of all ages. We desire for them to have a greater appreciation of that Church which Christ loves. We further desire the Newsletter to help adjust thoughts and church-practices to closer conform to Scripture. The emphasis of the Newsletter will be limited to the Biblical teachings of the Church and its related practices. We believe the need for the moment is Assembly Truth. We will publish selected letters to the editor if kept under 150 words, written in Christian kindness, and signed. We will comment on those letters as deemed helpful.

Currently, Bob Costen and Roger Daniel are responsible for the content of this Newsletter, acting as both writers and editors. But the final authority is always the Word of God (Acts 17:11; 1 Thes.5:21) and we would always seek to turn you to that Word of God.

This first edition will begin at the beginning — *What is the Church?* — because there are so many wrong views circulating throughout professed Christianity. We can only touch the highlights of this subject in the six pages of the Newsletter, but we pray it will be helpful and will encourage you to study the subject on your own. The next issue, the Lord willing, will take up *When Did the Church Begin?*

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WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

The word *church* is so well known that almost everyone has a definition with which he or she is comfortable. When we see a building with a steeple and/or a cross on it, we say, “There’s a *church*.” We speak of the Lutheran or Baptist *church*, and because of its size and influence, to many, the *church* is the Roman Catholic church. My dictionary confirms these meanings. It says, “A building for public and especially Christian worship” and “a body or organization of religious believers as ... a *denomination*.” It also defines the church as “a public divine worship, as going to *church* every Sunday.” But there is a problem with these definitions and a big one at that! *Not one of these definitions fit the biblical definition of the Church!* The Church of the Bible *never* refers to a building. It *never* speaks of a *denomination* (a group of religious people gathered on some subset of doctrines or practices not common to all Christians). And one *never* “goes to church” on Sunday.

So it seems thus far that we have done a rather good job of defining what the Church of the Bible is *not*. What then is the Church? Let’s turn to the scriptural definitions and thus get *God’s* perspective on this important subject. It’s important to have right thoughts on this subject because the Church is so important to God. Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for her (Eph.5:25). We will discover that the Church is God’s chief interest today.

Redeemed People

First and foremost, the Church is redeemed *people*. Every born again, truly saved person *today* (in this present dispensation of grace, from the day of Pentecost to the Rapture of the Church to heaven) automatically belongs to this Church: they are a part of it. “And the Lord added to the Church [or, *together*] daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). The “togetherness” was “to the Church” as seen in Acts 5:11 and throughout its early history as seen in Acts. We will look at the beginning of the Church in more detail in the next issue. These early Christians came together to have fellowship in the study the Word, to break bread and to pray (Acts 2:42). So, on Sunday, when we meet together, *part of the Church* goes to some building or convenient location to study the Scriptures, break bread and pray together.

Two Aspects and Two Words

The Church is seen in two ways in Scripture — as a united whole and as the local representation of the whole Church. When spoken of as the total or universal Church, the one body (Mt.16:18; Eph.5:25; etc.), the word *Church* will be capitalized to help the reader. When spoken of as the local representation of the whole Church (1 Cor.1:2; Gal.1:2; Rev.2-3; etc.), the word *church* will not be capitalized and may also be referred to as the local church or local assembly. Although there has been great failure, God intended the local churches to be like branch offices of a large corporation, each one carrying out the plans and conducting itself according to the directions of headquarters.

Because of the wrong definitions of the word *church* being so common, many prefer to use the word *assembly* to define the Church (Assembly) of the Bible. This new word didn’t get used just to be different. The Greek word translated “church” in most Bible translations is *ekklesia* (or, *ecclesia*) and means *called-out ones*. The English word *assembly* is a better translation of the Greek because the dictionary defines *assembly* as “a company of persons gathered for deliberations and legislation, worship or entertainment.” The people who form the Church are called out of the general mass of people to gather together for a specific purpose. The very accurate J.N.Darby translation uses *assembly* to translate the Greek *ecclesia*. But either *church* or *assembly* can be used as long as we understand and have proper thoughts as to the meaning of *ecclesia*.

My Church; the Church of the Living God

Even before the Church began the Lord named the Church and thereby helped explain what is the Church. In Matthew 16:18, He said, “I will build *My Church* ...” So we have in Romans 16:16, “The churches of *Christ* greet you.” The whole Church belongs to Christ, so each local assembly (as simply a local representative of the whole Church) also belongs to Him. The thought is clearly one of *ownership*. It is not *our* Church where *we* make up the rules, but *Christ’s* Church. Each local assembly is to act strictly according to the Owner’s directions.

In 1 Corinthians 1:2; 11:16, 22; and elsewhere, we have the expression “Church (or, *churches*) of *God*.” In 1 Timothy 3:15 the expression is expanded upon — “the Church of the *living* God.” Of course, Christ is God, but the emphasis here is on *divine* ownership by a God who is living and powerful, fully aware of our day-by-day activity in relation to His Church. He expects us to know how we should conduct ourselves in our daily “assembly” activities and will hold us responsible for doing so. We will further discuss our conduct under the subtitle *House of God*.

A Mystery

A *mystery* in the Bible is not something mysterious as in a murder who-done-it story. Rather, it is a divine truth that was always in God’s mind, but not revealed until the right time in God’s master plan. The Church is one of several *mysteries* found in the Bible. It was “the mystery kept secret since the world began, but now (through Paul’s preaching) has been made manifest” (Rom.16:25-26). This mystery of His will was that God might gather together all things in Christ (Eph.1:10). Paul received this mystery “by revelation ... which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: that the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel, of which I became a minister ... to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God ... to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the Church” (Eph.3:3-11). In Ephesians 5, what seems to be instructions to husbands and wives (which it is by application) is really “a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the Church” (Eph.5:32). The Church has the same relationship to Christ as a wife to a husband and the earthly marriage relationship is to be a practical example of Christ and His Church.

The Body of Christ

Perhaps the best known of the pictures that God uses to describe the greatness and uniqueness of His Church is the expression *body of Christ*. The picture is that of a *person* — one wonderful unity — with each part of the body working together to fulfill the desires of the head. So Christ “is the Head of the body, the Church” (Col.1:18); “the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (Eph.1:22-23). Just as the human body is always complete, although not necessarily fully matured, so the body of Christ is always looked at as complete on earth at any one time.

We get the greatest expounding of the truth of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. The body is *one* (unity) but has many members — pictured by the thousands of parts and millions of cells of the human body, all working in harmony together. So is *the* Christ (v.12, JND) — Christ and His Church. *Unity* under the direction of Christ our Head is a main feature of this picture.

How did we become a part of the one body? We were baptized by the Holy Spirit into it (v.13). Each part of the body is necessary and we are set in the body where it pleased God, and we are not to complain, but are to seek to please our Head where He has placed us (vv.15-26). The Corinthians were of the body of Christ. They didn’t comprise all of it, but were a part of that living organism. Further, each individual was a member (v.27). God has sovereignly placed spiritual gifts and gifted people in the body that it may function properly for Him (vv.28-31). In fact we all have some spiritual gift for the profit of all (vv.7-11).

The Bride of Christ

Probably second in recognition of all the pictures of the true Church is the expression *bride of Christ*. In 2 Corinthians 11:2 we are told that Paul (by his preaching) “have betrothed you to one husband that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.” Here we believers are seen as bindingly-engaged to Christ for a future day of presentation at the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev.19) which we will look at shortly.

In Ephesians 5 we see that the divine features of an earthly marriage between a man and woman are simply a reflection of the relationship of Christ and His Church (5:32). Christ is the Head of His Church (not here, the *body*) so the husband is the head of the wife. “Therefore, just as the Church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything” (vv.22-24). Christ loves His Church and wants her pure when He presents her to Himself to be His bride. So the Lord nourishes (spiritually feeds) and cherishes (cares for, holds dear, shows affection to) His Church (vv.25-29). The Lord longs for that day when He and His Church will be together forever (v.31).

Let’s in our mind go on some seven years or more into the future, to the end of the Great Tribulation. That seven years approximates the interval between the rapture of the Church and the coming of Christ to reign over the earth. Christ is about to come to put down all opposition and to reign, but first, there needs to be the official “marriage” of the Lamb (Rev.19:7-9). His *wife*, the Church, is ready, having been dressed in the beautiful acts of righteousness she had done for her beloved Lord, as displayed at the Judgment Seat of Christ (1 Cor.3:11-15). Then He and His beloved wife are seen returning towards earth from heaven (Rev.19:11-16), but He alone does the fighting. Note that in this paragraph we have used the term *wife*. The distinction between *bride* and *wife* is small but important: read on!

The Wife of Christ

Scripture uses both the expressions *bride* and *wife* when speaking of Christ and His Church. As with all other words of Scripture, this is not by chance. When the thought is freshness of first love, affection and display, the term *bride* is used. When the thought is relationship of dignity and administration, the word *wife* is used. The Church is going to help administer the Kingdom (the Millennial reign of Christ). We will live and reign with Christ 1000 years (Rev.20:4). So when the administration is about to begin, the Apostle John is shown “the *bride* [because she will be displayed in love to the universe], the Lamb’s *wife* [because she is about to reign with Him]” (Rev.21:9). Finally, when the millennial reign of Christ comes to an end and the eternal state begins, with a new heavens and a new earth, we see the Church as “a *bride* adorned for her Husband” (Rev.21:2). Reigning time is over and a thousand years has not dimmed our blessed Lord’s affection for us. “So shall we ever be with the Lord” (1 Thes.4:17). “Even so, come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev.22:20).

The City

It is not so commonly known that the Church is viewed as a city, but that picture is needed at this point to wrap up the Church as the bride and wife of our Lord. First we have in Revelation 21:9-10 an angel telling John, “Come and I will show you the bride, the Lamb’s wife. And he ... showed me *the great city, the holy Jerusalem*, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God.” The rest of chapter 21, through 22:5, describe that city which is *the Church in administrative rule*. Why the picture of a city? Two reasons. First, the false church of Revelation 17 is pictured as an evil city, Babylon the Great. Here in chapter 21 we have the true Church also as a city, but as a *holy* city. Second, a city (at least in theory) has everything that meets man’s need. Just look at all the available resources in the Yellow Pages. In this millennial city, the Church is supplied with every need to administer, to reign with Christ, according to His will and to meet the need of the healing of the nations.

The book of Revelation constantly carries one forward in time and then goes back in time to pick up a new emphasis. Chapters 17, 18, 19, 20, up to 21:8, in one smooth flow of action, carry us from some time in the last half of the “Tribulation” on through the Millennium, past the Great White Throne judgment, to the eternal state with the new heavens and new earth. Then the account goes back to the beginning of the Millennium and to the picture we have just studied in the preceding paragraph. But in

21:2, *in the eternal state*, the bride, the Church, is still pictured as a holy city, now called *New Jerusalem*, coming down from heaven. This is the Church — ourselves — which will be in a love-relationship with our Lord forever. Every need for every believer — all those Old Testament believers and all those saved during the Tribulation and Millennium — will be met through that city, the Church, the eternal Bride of Christ.

The House of God

Every picture that God has for the Church has a reason that requires our understanding and response. The Church is pictured as God's house; therefore, God insists on us maintaining the *order* which is according to His holiness. Paul wrote that "you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the *house of God* which is the Church of the Living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim.3:15). Ancient pillars were our billboards: messages were displayed on them for all to see. The Church is to *uphold* and *display* God's order and holiness, so His rules alone apply, regardless of how undemocratic some may feel His rules are. The ground gives support: the truth of the house of God is the *basis* for our gathering together, and the Church is to secure and maintain that truth. See also Hebrews 10:21. Judgment begins at the house of God (1 Pet.4:17). God *must* have practical holiness in His house. This has been sadly neglected. Today, in one place or another, virtually every false doctrine and moral sin is tolerated, but that is no excuse for you and me to act in this neglectful, sinful way in relation to God's house, the Church, in our local assembly gatherings.

In one aspect of the house of God, it is seen as under construction. Each one of us, "as living stones, are *being built* up a spiritual house ..." (1 Pet.2:5). When the last stone is in place the Church will be complete and the Lord will come for her. What a day that will be!

The Temple of God

The Church is also spoken of as the temple of God. Paul told the Corinthians that they, *collectively*, "are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you" (1 Cor.3:16). In 6:19 we are also told that the Spirit dwells in each of our physical bodies, which likewise, *individually*, are the temple of God. But in 3:16 everything is plural. Here the emphasis is the wonderful fact of God dwelling in His Church by the Holy Spirit, and like the house of God, it is not to be defiled. "If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will *destroy* him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are" (3:17). The thought in the Greek of "destroy" is to "reduce to inactivity; make of no further use."

Like the house, we see a growth factor in one aspect of the temple. In the following verses we see both aspects. We are "members of the household of God, *having been built* on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, *being fitted* together, *grows* into a *holy temple* in the Lord, in whom you also are *being built* together for a *dwelling place of God* in the Spirit" (Eph.2:19-22).

One Flock

In John 10 the Lord spoke about the Jewish sheep and His shepherd-care and love. In verse 16 He continued, "And other sheep I have which are not of this [Jewish] fold; them also I must bring and they will hear My voice; *and there will be one flock and one shepherd.*" Note that the "one fold" of the KJV is in error: it is properly "one flock" (JND, NKJV, NASB), speaking of the Church which hadn't at that time been formed. The Lord has reached out to Gentiles, and Jew and Gentiles now are one flock with one Shepherd, Christ Himself. Although man has made a mess out of that one flock in testimony by dividing it up into literally thousands of segments, it is still *one* flock in God's eyes, just as it is *one* body, which *He* (not us) maintains.

One New Man

A similar thought to the above is found in Ephesians 2:14-16. "For He Himself is our peace, who has made both [Jew and Gentile] *one*, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that to create in Himself *one new man* from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God *in one body* through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity."

The Church is a new living organism, created in Christ. Believing Jews and Gentiles now are *one*. It is a *new* creation, never having existed before. It is a *man* because it is living, a living one-body of a living Head.

The Pearl of Great Price

"The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Mt.13:45). The Merchant is Christ. The pearl of great price is the Church whom Christ loves. He bought it by giving all He had, by His suffering and death on Calvary's cross. How those few lines in Matthew should touch our hearts and make us want to respond to Him in relation to His Church in our practical, daily, weekly "assembly lives."

RPD

Further Reading

As we begin publication of this Newsletter, we believe that you will profit from the reading of good books on the Church. We recommend two to begin with. The first, and more comprehensive, is "The Church of the Living God" by R.K.Campbell. The shorter one, covering many aspects of the Church in more outline form, is "The Church: Its Beginning, Doctrine and Order," by R.P.Daniel. Both of these books, as well as many other outstanding publications, are available through Believers Bookshelf, POB 261, Sunbury, PA 17801 (717-672-2134), or 5205 Regional Road #81, Unit #3, Beamsville, Ontario, Canada, L0R 1B3 (905-563-4929). You can write or call for their catalog or to place an order.

We Need Your Help

We need your help in soliciting names and addresses of Christians who would like to read this Newsletter. Please send to Roger Daniel (Newsletter compiler), 22240 Morley, Dearborn, MI 48124-2127. We urgently request your prayers for the Holy Spirit's clear direction in each issue of the Newsletter and that God may be glorified in its publication and the saints helped.

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