

THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

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Approximately six hundred years before the birth of Christ the Old Testament prophet Daniel was called upon to reveal and to interpret an important but forgotten dream of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. When he stood in the king's presence, "Daniel answered before the king, and said, The secret which the king hath demanded can neither wise men, enchanters, magicians, or soothsayers, show unto the king; but there is a God in heaven that revealeth secrets, and he hath made known to the king Nebuchadnezzar what shall be in the latter days. Thy dream, and the vision of thy head upon thy bed, are these." After telling the king that he had dreamed of a giant image, Daniel continued, "As for this image, its head was of fine gold, its breast and its arms of silver, its belly and its thighs of brass, its legs of iron, its feet part of iron, and part of clay. Thou sawest till that a stone was cut out without hands, which smote the image upon its feet that were of iron and clay, and brake them in pieces." (Dan. 2:27-28, 32-34.

Having revealed the forgotten dream to the king, Daniel then went on to interpret the dream. The head of gold represented Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian, world-wide empire. The silver represented another universal empire which would follow. Still a third universal empire was represented by the brass, and finally a fourth all-encompassing empire was represented by the iron, with the added feature that the iron would be mixed with clay. From our vantage point of history, we know that this prophecy was literally fulfilled. The Babylonian Empire gave way to the Persian Empire, which in turn gave way to the Greek Empire. Finally, there came the Roman Empire, which was the last of the world-wide kingdoms. We also remember that the Roman Empire was divided into ten provinces and that while the empire was ruled with a rod of iron, the provinces constantly posed problems to the Caesars.

All of this has been said in order to read as the culmination of this prophecy the following words, "And in the days of those kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed, nor shall the sovereignty thereof be left to another people; but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever." (Dan. 2:45). This was a prophecy that in the days of the fourth kingdom, the Roman Empire, God would establish his own kingdom, a unique kingdom, "a stone cut out of the mountain without hands."

This is the fifth in a series of studies of Biblical doctrines. Because Christians everywhere need regularly to review the basic principles of the Christian religion, and because those who have not had previous acquaintances with these principles, our own children as well as others, need this information, it is our practice to set forth simply but comprehensively these basic tenets of the Christian faith. In this particular study our concern is to examine God's word in order to determine the Biblical doctrine of the church, or kingdom.

The Beginning of the Church

It is interesting to read the New Testament, giving special attention to the manner in which God established his church. One finds in Matthew 3:1 a brief account of the preaching of John the Baptist, forerunner of Jesus. "And in those days cometh John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, saying, Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." As he announced that the kingdom was near, multitudes from Jerusalem, Judaea, and the region round about the Jordan went out to hear him. Just a little later Jesus began his public ministry, and his teaching began to lay a foundation of understanding for the establishment of his kingdom. While he set forth principles relating to the kingdom on many occasions, no occasion was more fully dedicated to that end than that described in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew. It is here that we read of his teaching in parables--simple stories out of the experiences of his hearers which had deeper spiritual meaning.

The first of these stories began, "Behold, the sower went forth to sow." (Matt. 13:3). Jesus then described how the seed fell upon the wayside, where it was immediately snatched away by the birds; upon the rocky ground, where it immediately sprang up but soon withered away because it had no depth of root; on the thorny ground, where it was choked by the thorns; and upon the good ground, where it brought forth thirty, sixty and a hundredfold. When the disciples were alone with the Lord they inquired about the meaning of this parable. Jesus responded, "When anyone heareth the word of the kingdom ..." (Matt. 13:19). He then indicated that the gospel would be preached, falling upon the ears of wayside hearers, rocky ground hearers, thorny ground hearers, and those who would respond by bringing forth a harvest.

Jesus began another of his stories, "The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man that sowed good seed in his field: but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares also among the wheat ..." (Matt. 13:24-25). The lesson of this parable was simply that in the kingdom the good would live with the bad until the judgment, at which time a great separation would take place.

Still another facet of the kingdom was revealed when Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a grain of mustard seed." (Matt. 13:31). The teaching here was that it would begin small, as a tiny mustard seed, but that it would grow large, as the tree that results from the tiny seed of the mustard.

Again Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, until it was all leavened." (Matt. 12:33). The influence of his kingdom would spread throughout the earth, as leaven spreads through dough. Yet again Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a treasure hidden in a field." (Matt. 13:44). The man who found the treasure sold all that he had, bought the field, and possessed the treasure.

Again Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a merchant seeking goodly pearls." (Matt. 13:45). This dealer in pearls found one pearl of great price, so valuable that he sold all that he had and bought the pearl. This, too, shows the supreme value of Christ's kingdom. Finally, Jesus told of a net that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind." (Matt. 13:47). When the net was drawn in, the inedible and useless fish were cast away, while those that were of some value were kept. At the judgment the good will be kept, while the evil will be cast away. All of these simple stories revealed various facets of the kingdom which Jesus was about to establish on earth. Together, they helped to explain the unique nature of his spiritual kingdom.

"Upon this Rock"

In Matt. 16:16, 18 we have the climax of the unusually significant conversation between Jesus and his disciples. Jesus asked, "But who say ye that I am?" "And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God ... Jesus responded, "And I also say unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock (the bed-rock fact of his divinity which Peter had just confessed) I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." The kingdom or church, was yet future, but it was soon to be established. A little later Jesus was crucified and raised from the dead. Shortly thereafter he ascended into heaven after telling his disciples, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer, and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name unto all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. Ye are witnesses of these things. And behold, I send forth the promise of my Father upon you; but tarry ye in the city, until ye be clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24:46-49).

Some ten days later the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles and they miraculously preached to the assembled multitude in the city of Jerusalem. On that occasion Peter preached the first full gospel sermon--a sermon pre-eminently about Christ. As he neared the climax of his sermon Peter said, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly, that God hath made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom ye crucified." The following sentence gives us the reaction of the multitude. "Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their hearts, and said unto Peter and the rest of the apostles, Brethren, what shall we do? And Peter said unto them, Repent ye, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:36-38). A few verses later we read, "They then that received his word were baptized: and there were added unto them in that day about three thousand souls ... And the Lord added to them day by day those that were saved." (Acts 2: 42, 47). Here, we have the account of the beginning of God's kingdom, the church. It occurred on Pentecost Sunday, a few days after Jesus' death, burial and resurrection, in A.D. 30 of the first century of our era. It had been anticipated for centuries through the writings of the prophets; from Pentecost forward the church is always spoken of as being in existence.

The People

As we read this simple account of the beginning of the Lord's church, we are impressed with its simplicity. Essentially it is a band of people who have heard the gospel of their Lord Jesus Christ, and have responded by becoming his disciples. Even the name church suggests this idea, for it comes from the Greek word *ecclesia*, which means literally "the called out." Christians, citizens of God's kingdom, are those who have been called by the gospel of Christ out of the world and away from sin toward Christ and righteousness. The church is primarily a group of people, rather than an organization. It is a way of life. The church is a group of people who have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior and have followed him, becoming citizens of his kingdom.

The book of Acts which tells of the beginning of the church also tells of the conversion of a number of people in that first century. At least eight times in the book of Acts, in a detailed manner, conversion to Christ is described. In every case it begins with the dynamic preaching of the good news that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the divine Son of God. This results in the hearer's believing in Christ as his Savior. This, in turn, leads him to turn from the world toward Christ, repenting of past sins. In one way or another he then confesses his faith in Christ before others. Finally, in every example given in God's book he is then baptized into Christ, through the beautifully symbolic likeness of the death, burial, and resurrection of his Lord. As a result God then adds him to the kingdom.

We are impressed with the tremendous growth that occurred in the early church. "The number of the men came to be about five thousand." (Acts 4:4). "Believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women." (Acts 5:14). "Now in these days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying ..." (Acts 6:1). Acts 8:4 gives us an inkling of why this growth was so tremendous. "They therefore that were scattered abroad went about preaching the word." It seems that everyone who had come to know Christ was immediately telling family, friends, and acquaintances about this new-found treasure. A few years later, Luke writes, "All they that dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks." (Acts 19:10).

In spite of opposition from the leaders of his own race, and in spite of persecution from the Romans, Christ's kingdom was spreading throughout the inhabited world. This spread was to continue, as prophesied by Daniel, until the great kingdoms had melted into dust. From the vantage point of nineteen additional centuries of history, it is interesting to look back and to think of all of the kingdoms of

men that have risen and fallen, while Christ's kingdom has gone on the centuries. We have every reason to believe, according to the scriptures, the kingdom of God will go on throughout eternity, just as it has throughout time.

Sometimes the scriptures speak of the church as a family, with God as the father, Christ as the elder brother, and Christians as brothers and sisters. Sometimes the Bible speaks of the church as a body, with Christ as the head and Christians as the various members of the body. Sometimes the word of God speaks of church as a building, with Christ as the foundation and Christians as "living stones" making up the walls of this temple of God. Then, in keeping with our theme, sometimes the scriptures speak of the church as a kingdom, with Christ as the king and Christians as his devoted obedient subjects. All of these are rich figures of speech that help us to comprehend the beauty, the magnitude, and the supreme significance of Christ's church.

Worship and the Church

All of us are aware that those who make up Christ's church worship him regularly. What is the worship described in the Holy Scriptures? Immediately after the church began, "they continued stedfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers." (Acts 2:42.) Here are three avenues of worship--the apostles' teaching, which we now have in the Bible itself; the breaking of bread, which refers to the Lord's supper; and the prayers, which are moments of conversation with God.

In addition, the New Testament reveals two other avenues of worship. In Eph. 5:19, we read, "Speaking one to another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord. Col. 3:16 uses almost identical words, suggesting that the early Christians sang praises to God. I Cor. 16:2 mentions the fifth and final avenue of worship, "Upon the first day of the week let each one of you lay by him in store, as he may prosper." Here, then, are the five acts, or avenues, of worship, through which the Christian is directed to approach God. John 4:24 tells us how this worship is to be carried on. "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and in truth." Heb. 10:25 warns, "Not forsaking our own assembling together, as the custom of some is, but exhorting one another; and so much the more as ye see the day drawing nigh." Christians are to worship reverently, sincerely, and regularly.

Organization of the Church

While the church is primarily a way of life, there is a simple organization necessary for its efficient operation. In the first century there were apostles, but these were not to be a permanent part of the church organization. When they died, they were not replaced as permanent officers in the Lord's kingdom. Instead, the permanent organization of Christ's kingdom has a plurality of elders in each local congregation. These elders are sometimes called presbyters, bishops, overseers, and pastors, since the words are used interchangeably in the scriptures to refer to the same group of men. Actually, all of these titles come from three Greek words: Presbuteros, which may be translated either elder or presbyter; Episkopos, which may be translated bishop or overseer, and Poimen, which may be translated pastor. All of these words were used from time to time to refer to this group of godly men who have the oversight of each local congregation of the Lord's church. These are men who must meet rigid qualifications before they are appointed to this spiritual leadership. These qualifications are set down in I Tim. 3, Titus 1, and I Peter 5. Under the direction of the elders there were deacons, evangelists, and teachers. Each congregation was autonomous, under its own elders, who were under the direction of Christ. As we read in the New Testament we find no super-organization linking the churches together in a hierarchy.

Work of the Church

The early Christians were charged with three special responsibilities. First, they were to evangelize the world: "Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." (Matt. 28:19-20). Secondly, they had the responsibility of edification, which is described in Eph. 4:12 in these words, "for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering unto the building up of the body of Christ." Finally, the church had the responsibility of benevolence, as suggested in James 1:27, "Pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world." Christians are to teach the gospel of Christ to all men, nurture the new converts until they become full-grown men and women in Christ, and provide for those who are in need, whether sick or in prison or naked or hungry or orphaned or aged.

Conclusion

While this survey of the kingdom of God is too brief to be fully satisfying, it is comprehensive enough to let us see the magnitude of its importance, the chief aspects of its nature, and many phases of its work. This is God's institution for the saving of mankind. It is the ark of safety into which every person must enter if he expects to share eternity with the redeemed. It has no boundaries of time, or of race, or of color. All are invited to become citizens in this greatest of all kingdoms. All are welcome; none are refused.

If you have not accepted Christ's invitation to become his disciple, heed carefully this invitation. As in the apostolic period, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, repent and turn away from the sins of your own life and of the world about you, make known your faith in Christ before men, and be buried with your Lord in baptism for the forgiveness of your sins. Then, you have the

assurance that God will add you to his kingdom, his family, his body, his church. No greater blessing is known among men. The refusal to accept the Lord's invitation is the greatest of all tragedies. May we close this study in the words of the inspired scriptures in the final chapter of the final book of the Bible. "And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And he that heareth, let him say, come. And he that is athirst let him come: he that will, let him take of the water of life freely." (Rev. 22:17).