

Institutionalizing the Church (1)

Introduction:

1. “It seems many think of the church as something like a little red wagon. ‘Established on Pentecost’—it stood ready to roll, and people could jump in and ride to heaven. But somewhere along the line a side-rail broke, an axle was bent, the tongue came loose, and finally a wheel fell away. Martin Luther tried to put the wheel back on, but further bent the axle in his effort. Others replaced the tongue with a new but different instrument—unsuited to the purpose and function of the original tongue. Alas, the church was broken down and out of service.

Then Campbell and Stone determined to restore the church. They straightened the axle, replaced the tongue with an original model, repaired the side-rail and put the wheel back in place. Now people could again ride home to heaven.”

2. Thus began Robert Turner in his PLAIN TALK, vol. 1; no. 1, Jan. 1964. Perceptions have not changed much in 52 (2017) years. Turner was right. People often think of the church as an institution that people get in to take them to heaven.

3. For some, evangelism, is converting people who are in blue, green and yellow wagons to get in the red one.

4. Such perceptions could not be further from the truth. The church of Scripture is not some institution or organizational entity that saves. It is saved **people**.

a. The Lord did not die for some institution. He died for **people**.

b. There was no institution established on Pentecost. There were about 3,000 **people** who received the word and were baptized.

5. And so, I ask not “**What** is the church?” but “**Who** are the church?”

Discussion:

I. The church is the **PEOPLE** of God.

A. Jesus built the church upon the rock of confessing Him as the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:16, 18).

1. The people who constitute the church are those who confess Jesus as the Christ the Son of God.

2. Institutions do not confess Christ; people do.

B. In 1 Cor. 1:2 Paul addresses the “church of God in Corinth.”

1. He is not addressing an institution, but people.

2. “Those who have been sanctified.”

3. “Saints by calling.”

4. “With all who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

C. In Acts 20:28 Paul says, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”

1. Is this flock some organizational entity, some institution that they were to oversee or

was it just a group of individuals?

2. What did Christ purchase with His blood? Titus 2:14 answers. "He gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself **a people** for His own possession."

II. The word "church," as used in Scripture, is a collective noun like: group, herd, hive, covey, flock, troop, crowd, congregation, family, assembly, crew, team, etc.

A. The word "church" never refers to an institution.

1. It always refers to a group of people.

- a. In Acts 19:32, 39, 41 as assembly (mob) in Ephesus.

- b. In Acts 7:38 of the congregation of Israel on Mt. Sinai.

2. It is used in a special sense to refer to the people of God (Matt. 16:18; 1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:22-23).

B. When you see the word "church" in Scripture you can usually just read "the people of God."

1. Acts 8:3 says, "Saul began ravaging the church." It is not a question of WHAT he ravaged, but WHO. He ravaged the people of God.

2. Rom. 16:5 says, "Greet the church in their house (the house of Prisca and Aquila; i.e., the people of God in that house).

3. Eph. 5:25 says, "Christ loved the church (the people of God) and gave Himself for her."

C. The church is a group of people who . . .

1. Confess Jesus as the Christ (Matt. 16:18).

2. Have been sanctified, are saints, by calling and call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:2).

3. Are purchased and redeemed by the blood of Christ (Acts 20:28; Titus 2:14).

4. Are the possession of Christ (Titus 2:14).

III. Usually the concept of the church focuses on two elements: the universal and local, but these two categories do not seem to cover all the facets of the concept.

A. Universal serves well as a label for the body of Christ. It includes all "the people of God" of all the ages (Heb. 12:23).

1. Someone might object, "Does this mean that Abraham is a member of the church? I thought the church was not established until Pentecost."

2. Remember there was no institution begun on Pentecost. The church is just a group of people come together as the people of God.

3. No harm is done to the concept if we allow it to represent all the people of God of all the ages.

4. Surely, we will not exclude Abraham, Joseph, Moses and the other great people of faith from this group (cf. Heb. 11:39). Surely their names too are enrolled in heaven.

B. The concept of the local church needs further defining. Just how local is local?

1. Sometimes local stands for a group in a house (e.g. Rom. 16:5; Col. 4:15).

2. Sometimes it stands for a group in a city (e.g. 1 Cor. 1:2).
 3. Sometimes it stands for the group in a broad geographical region. Acts 9:31 refers to the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria.
 4. Sometimes in its plural form it stands for groups in broader geographical areas (e.g. 1 Cor. 16:1, "churches of Galatia;" 2 Cor. 8:1, "churches of Macedonia." We know that Paul began churches in the cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea.
 5. The concept of the local church can include a group in a single house, a group in a city or many groups in a region.
- C. It might be more helpful if we distinguished between organized groups and those not organized.
1. The church at Philippi was organized with overseers and deacons (Phil. 1:1).
 2. The church at Jerusalem had its elders (Acts 11:30).
 3. The church in Ephesus had its elders (Acts 20:28).
 4. There were other groups of Christians that were not organized. Paul left Titus in Crete to appoint elders in every city (1:5). Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church as they revisited those who had become Christians on their first preaching trip (Acts 14:23).

Conclusion:

1. What difference does all this make? It makes a lot of difference. Modern denominationalism is based on the idea that the church is an institution.
2. What we need to understand is that the church is not an institution that people get in to take them to heaven.
3. The church is simply a group of people devoted to God. Some of the groups are organized with elders and deacons and some are not organized.