

The First Century Church - Lesson 1

Introduction to Course

Jesus said, "I will build my church" - Matthew 16:18. This course is a study of that First Century church as revealed in the scriptures. The church as it first appeared under the guidance of the Christ=s apostles is a model and ideal for the church in every century. This study will be of special interest to those who want to pursue New Testament Christianity in the twenty-first century.

1. The Meaning of the word "church."

- A. The Greek word translated "church" in the New Testament is EKKLESIA, which means "a called-out assembly." Therefore the church of Jesus Christ is made up of those who have been born again through the gospel to follow Christ, who are called to be his own people, separate from the people of the world. It will help us if we see the church in this way, rather than thinking of it merely as an organization or an institution, as the world does.

Because Christians have fellowship with God through Christ, they also have fellowship with each other - 1 John 1:3-7. All those who have fellowship with God and with each other constitute the church as God sees it. Because we cannot see everything or know hearts as God does, and because acceptance with God is by grace, the full extent of the church is known only to God, who sees "the invisible church" - Luke 9:49, 50.

- B. The word "church" (singular) in the New Testament sometimes refers to the one world-wide, universal church, as in Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 1:22,23 (4:4); 5:25; 1 Corinthians 15:9. Other times it refers to believers in a given locality, as in 1 Corinthians 1:1,2; Acts 14:23; 20:17; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; Revelation 2:1,12,18.
- C. The word "churches" in the New Testament always refers to a plurality of individual local congregations, as in Romans 16:16; Acts 15:41; 1 Corinthians 7:17; Galatians 1:1,2; or to their local assemblies, as in 1 Corinthians 14:34,35. Never in the New Testament is the term "churches" used in the sense of "denominations." Denominationalism is a later development.

2. Some names of the church in scripture:

- A. The church of God - 1 Corinthians 1:2
- B. The household (or family) of God - Ephesians 2:19
- C. The body of Christ - Ephesians 1:22, 23
- D. The flock of God - 1 Peter 5:2
- E. The children of God - John 11:52
- F. The saints - Ephesians 1:1
- G. The believers - 1 Timothy 4:12
- H. The chosen (elect) - Colossians 3:12
- I. The kingdom of God - Mark 9:1

- J. The kingdom of Christ - Colossians 1:13
- K. The kingdom of heaven - Matthew 3:2; 16:19
- L. Christians - Acts 11:26
- M. Disciples - Acts 11:26
- N. Brothers (brethren) - Acts 16:2
- O. Churches of Christ - Romans 16:16
- P. The People of the Way - Acts 9:2
- Q. The church of the firstborn - Hebrews 12:23

3. It is important to know what the scriptures say about the church because:

- A. The church is made up of those saved by Christ - Acts 2:44-47.
- B. Jesus bought (redeemed) the church with his own blood - Acts 20:28; Ephesians 5:25; 1 Peter 1:18, 19.
- C. Through the church is shown the wisdom and glory of God - Ephesians 3:10, 21.
- D. God wants people to worship and serve him in the church - Titus 2:14; Ephesians 2:10; 1:4-6; Hebrews 13:15, 16.
- E. God works in the church to accomplish his will - Philippians 2:13.
- F. The church is the expression of the kingdom of God on earth - Matthew 16:18, 19; Colossians 1:13; Revelation 1:9. This kingdom on earth is being prepared for heavenly glory.

4. What we will study in this course:

- A. God's plan from before creation for our salvation in Christ.
- B. God's gradual revelation of this plan from the time of man's fall, through the prophets who foretold the establishment of the church.
- C. The preparation for the church through the calling of a chosen nation prepared to receive the Christ (Messiah), son of Abraham and son of David.
- D. The work of John the Baptist and the ministry of Jesus in preparation for the opening of the kingdom.
- E. The establishment of the church/kingdom on Pentecost after Jesus arose and ascended to heaven.
- F. The character of the church as revealed in various figures in scripture.
- G. The salvation offered in Christ, and entrance requirements into the church.
- H. The worship of the church.

- I. The work of the church.
- J. The organization and discipline of the church.
- K. The unity of the church.

The Church in Plan and Preparation - Part 1

The planning and preparation we make to receive and care for a visitor shows how much love and respect we have for the visitor. So the long, careful and extensive preparation God made for his church shows how much he loves us.

1. Before the world began, God planned for the church and its salvation through the offering of Christ - Ephesians 1:3-6; 2:10, 3:10,11; 1 Corinthians 2:7; 1 Peter 1:18-20; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; Matthew 25:34.

2. After the creation and the fall, God did not completely reveal at first his plan for saving man and creating the church. This knowledge was kept as a "mystery," was gradually revealed, and was only plainly revealed through Christ and his apostles - Ephesians 3:3-6; Colossians 1:25-27; Hebrews 1:1, 2; John 1:17; 1 Peter 1:10-12. (In scripture the term mystery does not mean something no one can understand. Rather, it means something that God keeps secret until the proper time for it to be revealed.) God helped people to understand his will little by little as a father teaches a growing child - Galatians 3:23-25; 4:1-4; Matthew 5:21,22,27,28; 19:7-9. In the Old Testament people knew God primarily in terms of his care and direction for their fleshly lives; now Christians know God in terms of spirit - John 4:24. The knowledge of the early patriarchs was like starlight that of Israel under Moses like moonlight, and our knowledge through the gospel like sunlight. Because of different levels of understanding, God dealt with people differently at different times.

- A. A brief summary of God's preparation for the church during Old Testament times.

After Adam and Eve fell in the garden, God made the first promise of a savior. The seed of woman would someday bruise the serpent's head - Genesis 3:15. God taught Adam's descendants how to relate to him through animal sacrifices. Adam's children multiplied and the people of earth became very wicked. About 2500 B.C. God cleansed the earth with a great flood, saving only righteous Noah and his family - Genesis 6-8. The earth was repopulated from Noah's family. About 2000 B.C. God called one of Noah's descendants, Abram (later called Abraham), to become the father of the chosen nation through whom the Savior of the world would be born. God made three great promises to Abraham - (Genesis 12:1-7; 22:17, 18). 1) His descendants would be a great nation, as numerous as the stars; 2) They would be given the land of Canaan as their home; and 3) Through the seed of Abraham all nations would be blessed. Briefly speaking, God gave Abraham a *nation* promise, a *land* promise and a *blessing* promise. These promises came true in the nation of Israel, their possession of Canaan, and the birth of Jesus in Israel as the Savior of the world. In fact, all the remaining events in the Bible after Abraham grow out of these three promises. That's why it is important to remember them.

Abraham became the father of Isaac, who became the father of Jacob, later called Israel, of whom were born twelve sons who became the patriarchs of the "twelve tribes of Israel."

Before Jacob died, he prophesied that the kings of Israel would come from the tribe of Judah "until Shiloh (Christ) comes" - Genesis 49:10. The Israelites lived in Egypt 430 years and suffered as slaves of the Egyptians. God heard their cries and sent Moses to deliver them from Egypt and lead them to the Promised Land (in the Exodus). Leaving Egypt the people came to Mount Sinai where God gave them his laws and made a covenant with Israel as his own special people. This later became known as the "Old Covenant" (Testament) - Exodus 20ff. At Sinai Israel was born as a nation. Israel wandered in the wilderness 40 years because they had lacked faith to conquer Canaan. The prophet Balaam prophesied of the distant Messiah (Christ), "A star shall come forth from Jacob and a scepter shall rise from Israel" - Numbers 24:17. Moses also prophesied (concerning Christ) that God would send another prophet like Moses - Deuteronomy 18:15, 18.

Joshua led the people in conquering and occupying Canaan. They were ruled by various judges until the time of Samuel, when they received their first king, Saul, about 1053 B.C. When Saul disobeyed, God raised up King David, the first of the kings from the tribe of Judah. God promised David that he would preserve his descendants always on his throne - 2 Samuel 7:16; Psalm 89:36; 132:11, 12. Christ, the eternal king of Israel, descended from David (Matthew 1:1; 21:9-11) and is now reigning on David's throne spiritually in heaven - Acts 2:29-36. Solomon, son of David, reigned 40 years during the height of Israel's earthly glory. When his son Rehoboam, succeeded him in 933 B.C., the northern ten tribes split off and crowned Jeroboam as their King - 1 Kings 12. The kingdom was divided from this time and the northern tribes were called "Israel" while the Southern Kingdom was called "Judah."

Israel, the northern kingdom, was the quickest to sink into the evils of idolatry, but Judah was close behind. God warned both kingdoms through his prophets but they would not repent. The prophets also revealed more about the coming Christ, such as his virgin birth (Isaiah 7:14), his divinity (Isaiah 9:6, 7), his character (Isaiah 11:1-5; 12:1-4), his work (Isaiah 61:1-3), his birth place (Micah 5:2), his death (Isaiah 53), and his resurrection (Psalm 16:8-10). Finally God punished the Northern Kingdom (Israel) by allowing the Assyrians to carry them away into captivity and scatter their people (722 B.C.), and the Southern Kingdom (Judah) by allowing the Babylonians to carry them into captivity (606/586 B.C.).

When the Persians conquered Babylon in 536 B.C., they allowed the Jews to return to their homeland. The temple and the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt during the ministries of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi (536-400 B.C.). The Jews waited with much hope for the promised Messiah. Malachi promised his coming and also that of a forerunner, "Elijah," who would prepare the way.

World kingdoms also prepared the way for Messiah's coming. The Assyrians and Babylonians, by punishing God's people, cleansed them from idolatry. They also scattered them to all nations where they later became, as believers of the Old Testament scriptures and synagogue worshipers, the first converts wherever the gospel was preached. Through the Persians God restored some of the Jews to their homeland where the temple worship was revived and the Christ was later born. The Greeks taught their language to every nation they conquered, thus providing a language for international communication of the gospel. The Romans provided the peace, stability, and communications necessary for the gospel's spread.

When the right time came and all was ready (Galatians 4:4), Jesus, son of Abraham, son of David, was born in about 5 or 4 B.C. Before Jesus began his ministry, God sent John the Baptist preaching repentance and baptism in preparation for the coming kingdom.

During his 32 year ministry Jesus also prepared people for the kingdom by his teaching and his acts. He trained the twelve apostles who would be his witnesses as the church was founded and expanded through their preaching of the gospel. Jesus was killed by evil Jewish religious leaders, and arose on the third day. He commissioned his apostles and disciples to go everywhere and preach - Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15, 16; Acts 1:8. Jesus ascended to heaven and sent the Holy Spirit on the disciples at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost - Acts 2. Thus the church was born.

- B. A summary of God's dealing with mankind during the three major ages or dispensations of Bible history.

(People cannot have fellowship with God without an agreement or covenant. A person cannot just come to God in any way the person chooses; he or she may come to God only in the way that God commands. This is the honor due to God. When God reveals his will for our worship and service to him, and we accept God's terms, there is a covenant relationship. Those who keep the covenant faithfully have fellowship with God.)

1) The Patriarchal Age (over 4000 B.C. to 1500/1300 B.C.)

- a. This age began with Adam and ended when God made his covenant with the nation of Israel at Sinai.
- b. During this age God chose people by families to be his people.
- c. The father (patriarch) of the family was its ruler, priest, and prophet - Genesis 8; 20, 21; Job 1:5.
- d. Worship in the Patriarchal Age:
 1. The father led in the worship.
 2. There was no central or set place of worship; they worshiped anywhere - Genesis 8:20; 22:9; 26:25.
 3. Expressions of worship:
 - A) Undifferentiated animal sacrifices burned on altars - Genesis 8:20; 12:7, 8; 26:25.
 - B) Prayer - Genesis 20:17; 24:26; 29:35.
 - C) Blessing of inferiors by their superiors - Genesis 14:19, 20; 27:27-29; 28:1; 48:20.
 - D) Preaching - 2 Peter 2:5.
 - E) Singing - Job 35:10.
 - F) Offering of tithes (1/10 of produce, profit) - Genesis 14:20; 28:22.
- e. In the Patriarchal Age God made his three great promises to Abraham (see above). He also gave Abraham and his descendants the ritual of circumcision as a sign of God's covenant with Abraham - Genesis 17:10. Circumcision became the mark separating Israel from other nations. God wanted his people to be separate and holy. The ordinance of physical circumcision was continued in the Mosaic Age. But the circumcision of Christians is spiritual, the cleansing of evil from the heart - Romans 2:28, 29; Colossians 2:11, 12; Galatians 5; 6.

2) The Mosaic Age (or the Jewish Age) (1500/1300 B.C. to 29 A.D.).

- a. The Mosaical Age began when God made a covenant with Israel through Moses at Mount Sinai, and ended at the death of Christ - Exodus 19:24; John 1:17; Colossians 2:13-17.
- b. During this age God chose a whole nation to be his special people - Exodus 19:1-8. God dealt with them as a nation and taught them through the Law of Moses.
- c. Leadership during this age:
 1. God was Israel's only king until the people demanded an earthly king - Exodus 19:5, 6; 1 Samuel 8:1-7.
 2. The descendants of Aaron were priests and the rest of the tribe of Levi were their helpers - Exodus 40:13-15; Numbers 3:5-10.
 3. God sent many prophets to guide the people spiritually - Hebrews 1:1.
- d. How they worshiped:
 1. The whole nation worshiped together at special times - Leviticus 8:4.
 2. There was a central place of worship at the tabernacle or tent of meeting (replaced by a temple in Jerusalem in Solomon's time).
 3. Feasts and holy days:
 - A) The Sabbath day (seventh day of the week) - Exodus 20:8-11.
 - B) The monthly sacrifices - Numbers 28:14; 29:6; 1 Chronicles 23:31.
 - C) The Passover (Feast of Unleavened Bread) - Leviticus 23:5-8.
 - D) The Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) - Leviticus 23:15-21.
 - E) The Feast of Trumpets - Leviticus 23:23-25.
 - F) The Day of Atonement - Leviticus 23:26-32; Hebrews 10:3.
 - G) The Feast of Booths (Tabernacles) - Leviticus 23:33-36.
 - H) The Jews added the Feasts of Purim (Esther 9:29-32) and Dedication (John 10:22).
 4. Acts of worship:
 - A) Different kinds of sacrifices - Leviticus 1-7.
 - 1) Sin offering.
 - 2) Guilt offering.
 - 3) Burnt offering.
 - 4) Thank or peace offering.
 - 5) Grain offering.
 - 6) Drink offering.

- B) Public reading of scripture and preaching - Deuteronomy 5:1.
 - C) Singing and playing of instruments - Deuteronomy 32:44-47.
 - D) Prayer and praise - the Psalms.
 - E) Offering of a tithe (tenth) on one's income - Leviticus 27:30, 32; Deuteronomy 12:6.
- 3) The Christian Age (29 A.D. to the end of time) - Hebrews 1:1, 2; 8:8-12; John 1:17; Galatians 3:23-25.
- a. This time began at the cross of Christ and extends until the judgment.
 - b. In this age God does not choose a family or a whole nation, but he chooses each individual who believes in Christ and obeys the gospel - see Romans 1:16.
 - c. Christians are the children of the kingdom of Christ - Matthew 3:2; Colossians 1:13; Hebrews 12:28; Revelation 1:9.
 - d. Christ is our prophet, priest, and king - Hebrews 1:1, 2; 7:15-17, 25-29; Acts 2:36; Hebrews 1:8.
 - e. Every Christian is a priest and can approach God through Christ without need of going through some human priest - 1 Peter 2:5,9; Revelation 1:6; Hebrews 13:15,16; Romans 12:1,2; Revelation 5:8.
 - f. The New Testament is the law of the kingdom - Hebrews 9:15.
 - g. Christians are the subjects of Christ's kingdom - Hebrews 8:8-12; Colossians 1:13.
 - h. The territory of the kingdom is the hearts of people - Luke 17:21; John 18:36.
 - i. Christians enter the kingdom when they are born again by conversion and baptism - John 3:5; Titus 3:5.
 - j. How Christians worship:
 - 1. Christians assemble for worship in local congregations wherever it is convenient. There is no special or central place of worship on earth for Christians - John 4:21-24; 1 Corinthians 14:23; Matthew 18:20.
 - 2. The especially holy day for Christians is the first day of the week (Sunday) in memory of Christ's resurrection - Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:1,2; Revelation 1:10.
 - 3. Christian worship includes:
 - A) Singing - Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16.
 - B) Prayer - 1 Corinthians 14:13-19; 1 Timothy 2:1, 2, 8.
 - C) The Lord's Supper (Communion) - Acts 20:7; 2:42.

- D) Reading, preaching and teaching of God's word - Acts 20:7; 2:42; Colossians 4:16.
- E) Offering from what we have prospered - 1 Corinthians 16:1, 2; 2 Corinthians 9:6, 7.
- F) Sometimes fasting - Acts 13:3; 14:23.

In our next lesson we will look more specifically at the difference between the Old and New Covenants (Jeremiah 31:31-34) and how the Old prepared the way for the establishment of the church under the New.

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