

ANABAPTIST MENNONITES: A SCRIPTURAL VIEW OF THE CHURCH. THE BODY OF CHRIST- THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Upon this ROCK I will build my CHURCH;
and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.
Matthew 16:18

Like all other great doctrines of the Bible this doctrine of the Church is set forth in Holy Scriptures in a clear and full manner as warrants its importance. The Greek word that is translated into our English word Church is 'ekklesia' a combination of two Greek words meaning 'to call out from' and has been defined by one commentator as "a body of believers who have been called out from the world, and who are under the dominion and authority of Jesus Christ. (Evans)

Some short definitions of terminology used to help our understanding of the concept of Church:

1. *The visible Church* is the Church here on earth as man sees it.
2. *The Church militant* is the body of Christ maintaining the standard of righteousness and waging an aggressive warfare against sin and unrighteousness.
3. *The Church of Christ* is the body of true believers in the present dispensation.
4. *The Church triumphant* that innumerable body of overcomers whose faith in Jesus Christ enables them to live an overcoming life here and to share in the complete triumphs of righteousness in the end.

In another sense we speak of the Church as an assembly of believers and in our day the name is frequently applied to houses of worship and to denominations.

The church of God is not an afterthought or an option in God's overall plan. Early in Old Testament history, there were godly people faithfully serving God and keeping His Word. The first hint we have of that is in Genesis 4:26: "*When men began to call upon the name of the Lord*" In Acts 7:38 Stephen referred to the congregation of Israel during their wanderings in the wilderness for forty years as "the church in the wilderness" David in Psalm 22:32 testifies like this: "*In the midst of the congregation (church) will I praise Thee.*" The Tabernacle, the Temple and later the synagogues were erected for the convenience of sacrifice and congregational worship. Through Abraham and his descendants, later known as Israelites, a special, called out, and set apart people came into being. They were physically identified by genealogy and the rite of circumcision. They were not chosen due to their large numbers (see Deuteronomy 7:6-7). Rather, like Gideon's small band of three hundred, the smallness of the Israelite nation allowed God to show His glory again and again through the victories and miracles wrought among them. During the Exodus, God's presence among them was verified in the wilderness by the cloud during the day and pillar of fire at night.

Over time the Israelite people degenerated in faith and practice. The Church of Christ, the body of God's people in this dispensation, was heralded forth in Old Testament prophecies as the prophets soon began to speak of a new and better day, referring to the coming of Jesus and the establishing of an everlasting kingdom that should never be destroyed.

This new day was announced when John the Baptist came on the scene. He was followed almost imme-

diately by Jesus; both told the people that they needed to repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand. This was not a literal or civic kingdom but a spiritual one. To enter it, a change of heart needed to take place. Fruits of repentance, which evidenced this change, needed to be brought forth. Genealogy and circumcision were not the determining factors, but being a new creature through the new birth.

As God's people in the Old Testament were set apart to bear witness to His glory and greatness, so Jesus also began to separate His true followers and build His church. He first chose the twelve apostles. They heard Him teach, they worked with Him, and suffered with Him. Jesus commissioned them to preach the gospel and continue to build His church. The Sermon on the Mount laid out the way Christ's followers should live in simple detail. The Church established by Christ was first heralded forth in prophecy, preparations made for it in the ministry of John the Baptist, after which it was organized and commissioned by Jesus Christ and quickened and empowered at Pentecost. From that day forth it has been dedicated to the one great cause of Christ, making Him and His gospel known to the entire world so that all who hear and desire to be saved can choose to do so. (John 3:17, John 10:9) It is for all peoples everywhere and for all times and this work will go on until Christ returns for His own and to judge the world.

In the gospel of John, Jesus refers a number of times to His followers as sheep, He being the true Shepherd. Sheep are timid and helpless creatures. To prosper they need a shepherd to care for them and provide protection. Sheep know their shepherd's voice and respond to it. They do not know a stranger's voice, rather being afraid. Jesus' spiritual sheep, those who are new creatures in Christ, also know His voice and follow Him, being obedient to His commands.

This great Shepherd of the sheep also has a spiritual sheepfold, which is the church. The plan of God through Christ is that His sheep will be gathered into this sheepfold. *"And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear My voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd"* (John 10:16). Even the high priest, although he was not a follower of Jesus, spoke of this when he prophesied of Jesus' death: *"And not for that nation only, but that also He should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad"* (John 11:52).

SOME DEFINING MARKS OF THE CHURCH

This sheepfold, or church, is not a broad and all-inclusive body without boundaries, proper order, and oneness. *"For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints"* (1 Corinthians 14:33), and in verse 40, *"Let all things be done decently and in order."*

What, then, are some of the defining marks of the body of Christ, or the Church established by Jesus Christ? Anabaptist Articles of Faith express the following: (1) saving faith, (2) new birth, (3) good works, (4) her beauty and obedience, (5) faithful ministers, and (6) unfeigned and godly love. Dr. Philip's Handbook has the following points: (1) pure unadulterated doctrine and true ministers, (2) scriptural use of baptism and the Lord's supper, (3) feet washing, (4) separating unfaithful members, (5) love, (6) the keeping of all the commandments, voluntarily following Christ, (7) true believers will be persecuted.

Jesus died on Calvary's cross to purchase His bride, the Church. Those who, upon true repentance and faith in Christ Jesus, are born again are commanded to be baptized. Water baptism is synonymous with being joined with the Church of God, the body and bride of Christ (Acts 2:41).

Only those who are fully agreed with the "all things" taught by Jesus and His apostles are baptized. The Acts of the Apostles testifies to the oneness of faith and doctrine of those who were brought into the fel-

lowship. "And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart" (Acts 2:46). Paul writes clearly in Ephesians 4 about the oneness that is expected and practiced within the body of believers. They were a separated people. No one durst join himself to them (Acts 5:13).

MEMBERSHIP OF THE CHURCH

The popular idea of church membership is to receive all who want to unite with the body of Christ, the Church, irrespective of their lifestyle but the Bible holds to a different standard. The Bible conditions for membership are:

1. *Faith*.—In response to the question, "What doth hinder me to be baptized?" Philip replied, "If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest" (Acts 8:37-38). When the jailer asked, "What must I do to be saved?" he received the reply, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 16:30-31). Upon evidence of this faith he was baptized. Since faith is essential to salvation (Mark 16:16; Hebrews 11:6), it should also be made a test of membership in the visible Church.

2. *Repentance*.—John the Baptist called for "fruits meet for repentance" as a requisite for baptizing the multitudes of people before him. (Matthew 3:7-8) Peter's admonition, "Repent, and be baptized" (Acts 2:38), is in harmony with John's attitude. Receive into Church any one who is willing to come, and the chances are that you have a Simon the sorcerer, an Ananias, or some other unconverted member. Receive him upon evidence of repentance and you receive one whose sins have been remitted. Luke 24:47.

3. *Conversion*.—True repentance results in conversion. Peter understood this when he said, "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:19). Conversion is essential to salvation, and should be held essential to church membership. To receive unconverted people into the Church is an injustice to the applicant, for the influence of such a procedure is to blind the applicant with false hopes; and an injustice to the Church, because it plants more of the leaven of wickedness into it.

4. *Obedience*.—You may ask, "How can a person not yet in the Church manifest obedience?" He can do as they did on the day of Pentecost: "Gladly" receive "His word" (Acts 2:41). The convert who comes dictating terms to the Church is a convert only in name. While the keeping of ordinances is reserved until the convert is taken into fellowship, there are many other commandments which, if the conversion is genuine, will be obeyed from the time the convert is enlightened. The Church has a right to expect a submissive attitude on the part of every convert.

GOVERNMENT OF THE CHURCH

As we know from practical experience no organization or home can function without rules or discipline. And thus we need Church government based on Scriptures:

1. *The Church is an Organism*.—It is important that we think of the Church as the mystical body of Christ and every member an integral part of it. Read 1Corinthians 12; Ephesians 2:14-22 and Ephesians 4:11-16.

2. *The Church is an Organization*.—Not only is the Church an organism, but also an organization, in which the members are (or ought to be) properly related and organized, properly supplied with officers and leaders, all subject to Christ the Head and directed by the Holy Ghost as Leader and Guide.

3. *The Church is an Absolute Monarchy*— Christ is our King. A conception of this fact is essential to the highest interests of the body. Equally important is it to remember that the Monarch is not some pope,

bishop, presbytery, council, committee, conference, or board, but none less than God Himself. Here are a few facts: (1) No man was consulted when the Law of God was promulgated. (2) There was no referendum submitted to the apostolic Church as to whether they should accept or reject the Gospel of Christ. (3) There is a fearful penalty attached to any effort to modify, add to, or subtract from any part of God's Word. John13:8; Galatians1:8-9; Revelation 22:18-19. Reverently we stand in His presence, recognizing that our Gospel was conceived in the mind of the Infinite, and therefore in perfect wisdom and love.

4. *Christ is the Head.*—Not only the Law but also the leadership of the Church is furnished by the Almighty. We praise the Lord that it is so, for that insures perfection in both law and leadership. We look to Jesus Christ as our Head (Colossians 1:18) and to the Holy Ghost as our Leader and Guide (John14:26; John15:26; John16:13). And as all normal members of the natural body when in good health are subject to the head, so are all normal members of the body of Christ subject to Him as the great Head of the Church

5. *The Bible is Our Discipline.*—Christ our Head instituted the Gospel as our rule of life, and by it we are governed. In it we find rules and regulations for the conduct of members, for the supplying of proper church officials, for the meeting of problems confronting the Church, for the evangelization of the world. In every trial of life, in every question of dispute, in every difficulty that may arise, we go to the Gospel of Christ as the final word on all these points. Not only is the Bible our discipline, but the Church is vested with the responsible duty of seeing that this discipline is made practicable in the life of every member.

Two things to be avoided in every church are (1) liberalism, which takes little or no account of the personal life, faith, and conduct of members, and (2) legalism, which insists on emphasizing technicalities to an extent that spirituality is crowded out. The first leads to anarchy, the second to formalism.

DISCIPLINE IN THE CHURCH

When Jesus first mentioned building His church, He also set in order discipline (Matthew 16:13-19; 18:15-18). If someone became disorderly or departed from the faith, such were to be admonished, seeking to restore them. (Galatians 6:1). If they did not hear or respond, they were to be severed from fellowship. The apostles confirmed this in their writings, giving more of the how and when of the application of discipline.

For such discipline to have the desired effect, the church needs to be recognized as the body of Christ. The head (Christ) is instructing the body (the church) what to do. To despise or ignore the discipline is to despise Christ and His Word. The avoidance of those excommunicated is explicitly taught in the Scripture and will be practiced by those who love the truth.

Willing obedience to the Word of God is one of the clear evidences of the Church of Jesus Christ. To take away or ignore any part of the Word or have man-made doctrines is clearly unacceptable, being disobedient to the truth.

Another hallmark of the Church is that of loving one another, caring for and about one another, both spiritually and materially. A further step of love is to love one's enemies. Jesus' example and teaching forbids revenge and bearing of arms. Rather, we are taught to patiently bear unjust treatment and false accusations, generally referred to as the Doctrine of non-resistance.

The Church of Jesus Christ has believed through the centuries that ministers and deacons should be

chosen from within the membership. These men are to meet the qualifications laid out in the Scriptures, being full of the Holy Ghost. Formal education is not the qualifying factor. Just as the Church is to ordain these, she also has the responsibility to discipline if such become unfaithful. Salaries or a regular stipend have been carefully avoided, believing that such can hinder the free and open preaching of the gospel. Rather, support is provided as needed.

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The Church was given a mission by her founder and King, Jesus Christ. The admonition in 1 Corinthians 10:31 that whatsoever we do we are to do all to the glory of God applies not only to individuals but also to the Church as a body. We are to glorify God. Jesus Himself in Matthew 5:13-14 tells us that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We are walking evidence of His gospel message or should be if we profess to be His disciples and it behooves us to let the light of Christ shine and be His messengers to evangelize the world. Read Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46-47; and Acts 1:8. The outstanding admonitions found in these scriptures are: "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you;" "Preach the gospel to every creature;" "Repentance and remission of sins to be preached among all nations;" "Ye shall be witnesses unto me . . . unto the uttermost part of the earth." May we faithfully fulfill our mission to promote spiritual growth in Christ amongst all peoples everywhere as well as the spiritual growth and preservation of all saints in the Church of Jesus Christ.

When the Church has brought people to Christ it has performed only half its mission. Converts are to be instructed and, after they are in the fold of Christ, built up in the faith and service of their Master. Man as a social being needs fellowship that will help rather than hinder his spiritual growth. This we get through Christian fellowship, service, and discipline. To foster this fellowship God has wisely instituted a number of Christian ordinances through which the most vital principles of Christian life and faith are symbolized and a higher state of spiritual life is attained. After conversion the soul longs for and enjoys the fellowship of God and of saints. It is a delightful "foretaste" which encourages the believer, strengthens the body of Christ, and enables the people of God to unite their powers in bringing the whole Gospel to the whole world. Acts 2:46-47; Ephesians 4:11-16.

SUPPORTING THE CHURCH

Concerning the excellence of this divinely instituted body the Church there can be no doubt, for God conceives everything in infinite wisdom and never makes any mistakes. But man has a part to perform, if this institution of God is to function as God designed that it should. The two human things essential to the proper functioning of the Church are members and proper support. They who accept Christ as Saviour and Lord become members of His body, and once members they will give the body support as they have enlightenment and opportunity. Following are ways in which we may give the Church its proper and needed support;

1. *Loyalty.*—"Ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's. . . . be not ye the servants of men" (1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23). "Hereby perceive we the love of God, because He laid down His life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (I John 3:16). Here, in a few words, we are reminded of our supreme duty to God and the Church. In loyal, willing, obedient, self-sacrificing, wholehearted service, without any reservations of a world-compromising

nature, our lives should be upon the altar, in which case God can use the whole powers of our being to the glory of His name and the advancement of His cause.

2. Public Worship.—"Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another" (Hebrews 10:25).

3. Prayer.—We recall numerous instances recorded in the Bible where the cause of Christ and the Church was strengthened through the instrumentality of prayer. Witness, for instance, the apostolic company in that upper room in Jerusalem previous to the outpouring of the Holy Ghost on the day of Pentecost (Acts 1:13-2:4); the disciples in the home of Mary praying for Peter (Acts 12:5, 12)¹—the praying church at Antioch previous to the sending forth of Paul and Barnabas as missionaries to the Gentiles (Acts 13:1-4), and numerous other occasions where prayer was resorted to with great faith and power.

4. Giving.—For some reason this subject has gotten to be connected with the giving of money, and for this reason we shall connect it with the same idea. But let us say, first of all, that when the spirit of giving, accompanied by true enlightenment, takes possession of the heart it reaches every part of the being—heart, mind, hands, affections, pocketbook, all. But speaking of the financial support of the Church, it is essential, for the following reasons:

a. It is needed for the material support of the various enterprises of the Church—buildings, traveling expenses, living expenses on the part of those who are giving their time to the work of the Church, literature, support of Church institutions, care of the poor and needy, etc.

b. It is needed for the spiritual welfare of the givers. It was Christ who said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). With this agrees the testimony of Paul when he says, "He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully" (2 Corinthians 9:6). This is true of churches as well as individuals. For the sake of the giver, as well as for the sake of the Church, we need to cultivate the spirit of liberality in whatever may be the nature of our gifts.

c. It is needed for prosperity. Hear the testimony of the prophet of God: "Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in Mine house, and prove Me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it" (Malachi 3:8, 10).

Here, then, are the three Biblical reasons for a liberal material support of the Church: (1) because it is needed by the cause of Christ; (2) because it is needed for the proper spiritual development of the giver; (3) because it is needed that God may be glorified in the spiritual and material prosperity of His people. No wonder that we are told that "God loveth a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7).

As to the amount of our spiritual and material support of the Church, that will take care of itself so long as we obey Bible instructions as to motives and methods. Here is the New Testament standard: "Freely" (Matthew 10: 8), "to the poor" (Matthew 19:21), "not grudgingly" (2 Corinthians 9:7), "as he purposeth in his heart" (2 Corinthians 9:7), cheerfully (2 Corinthians 9:7), "to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31), "as God hath prospered" (1 Corinthians 16:2). Follow this standard, and neither God nor sensible men will ever find fault with you that you did not give enough.

5. Promulgating Christian Doctrine.—The giving of finances is but one among a number of ways in which the cause of Christ and the Church may be advanced. It was our Saviour's instruction to His disciples that they "teach all nations. . . . to observe all things whatsoever" He had commanded them. Personal

loyalty is good as far as it goes, but what is good enough for ourselves is good enough for others. We give the Church substantial support when we obey, defend, and promulgate the doctrines known as the tenets of faith; thereby enlarging the borders of the Church and extending the sphere of her influence and labors, thereby strengthening the Church in giving practical testimony in support of the things "most surely believed among us."

6. *Service.*—The cry for laborers has been heard ever since the Christian Church was in the process of forming.

The last message of Christ to His disciples was that they should go "into all the world, and preach the GOSPEL to every creature" (Mark 16:15). Workers are needed in the home, in the schoolroom, in the social circle, in business life, in the home community, in neglected quarters near our doors, in sparsely settled rural districts, in crowded cities, at home and abroad, everywhere, to maintain the standard of the cross, to carry the banner of King Jesus. to make known His "glad tidings of salvation," to "shine as lights in the world," to support the Church in faithful, humble, loyal service. In the language of God through Paul we conclude this chapter by saying, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord."

This is a brief summary as to how the Church of Jesus Christ can be identified. It is unscriptural to claim to be the Church of Jesus Christ if the simple truths of the Word of God are ignored or, worse yet, nullified or spoken against.

The Sermon on the Mount makes it clear that God's people will shine forth as a city on a hill and that they will be persecuted and spoken against even as Jesus experienced.

May we consider it a blessed privilege to be one with the body. Let that, in turn, inspire us to faithfully serve the Lord in obedience, being subject to one another in the fear of God and bringing honor and glory to His name.

Sources used: 1. *The Messenger of Truth, Vol.106, No.24. PO Box 230 Moundridge Kansas.*

2. *Doctrines of the Bible, Edited by Daniel Kauffman, Herald Press, Scottdale PA.*

3. *All Scripture References from the KJV Bible.*

Recommended Reading: Doctrines of the Bible, Editor Daniel Kauffman.

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