

624 What was the church of the New Testament Like?

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God's Answers to Life's Questions

Imagine yourself back in the first century. You find a church and visit it. What is it like? How does it worship? How was it organized? What did it call itself? What was the church of the New Testament like?

Last week we talked about the church of Christ as an undenominational body of people devoted to the Lord and His word. We believe going back to the New Testament for our faith and practice is important in serving God. If the Bible is God's revealed will for all time and applicable to us today, then we should follow its instructions. One thing is sure: the church of the New Testament is unlike the kind of Christianity you see today. I think you'll find some surprises as we explore what the church of the first century was like.

The church of the New Testament began on the day of Pentecost after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He appeared to the disciples for a period of forty days by many convincing proofs. He instructed them to stay on in Jerusalem and that they would be endowed with power. On the day of Pentecost, the apostles were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance (Acts 2:4). Peter preached a magnificent sermon to a multitude of Jews from every country about Jesus. He preached the gospel, telling of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Peter and the eleven boldly declared, "This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses." He argued that God had exalted Jesus to sit at His right hand in heaven. Peter concluded in verse 36, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified." The church was built upon the fact that Jesus Christ had died for our sins, was buried, and on the third day arose from the dead. Because of this, Jesus is to be regarded as both Lord and Christ. He is Lord in the sense that He is the only and only authority in the church. He is Christ as the Messiah, the king of His kingdom and the Savior of His people. Jesus has saved us from our sins.

In response to Peter's preaching, several Jews cried out, "Men and Brethren, what shall we do?" Peter responded in Acts 2:38-41, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls." The church was formed by the power of God, when people in faith and repentance responded to preaching and obeyed the gospel by being baptized in the name of Christ. The church was made up of people saved from a crooked generation by having their sins forgiven and by being added to the followers of Jesus. They were the church. Acts 2:42 describes them, "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." They wanted to be together, so Acts 2:46-47 says, "And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." They loved to eat together and did so with joy. They loved each other and were so filled with good things, people wanted to know about them. The church grew larger every day in the first century. When people were saved (baptized for the remission of their sins), the Lord added them to their number, that is, the church.

Churches in the first century had very simple worship. They met for study of the apostles' teaching about Jesus. The early church felt learning was important so they devoted themselves to the apostles'

teaching; they could not get enough of the stories and wisdom of Jesus. The only Bible they had in the beginning was the Old Testament, but what they focused on was the apostles' teaching—that is, the things Jesus taught. As the epistles and gospels were written over time, churches shared those letters with one another. Slowly, all 27 books of the New Testament were written. They read these books in church. Paul told the church at Colossae in Colossians 4:16 "And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea." Paul said of the Bereans, "Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so" (Acts 17:11). The study of God's word always held a high place in the early church. Gathering together as a church to worship was important to keep them strong. Each Lord's day (Sunday, the first day of the week and never to be confused with the Sabbath, which is Saturday) the early church gathered to remember the Lord by partaking of the Lord's Supper. The Lord's day and the Lord's Supper were very closely tied to each other. In the Lord's Supper, they ate unleavened bread and remembered the body of Jesus that was given for them. They drank fruit of the vine and remembered the blood that Jesus shed for the remission of sins. This simple memorial meal was a communion of the church with the Lord Himself.

The worship of the early church was filled with singing. They believed in glorifying God with their voices. Hebrews 13:15 instructs, "Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name." They sang praise to God, giving Him thanks, and encouraging one another. Paul told the Colossians in chapter 3, verse 16, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God." It might surprise you to know that churches sang a cappella (without any instruments of music) for several hundred years. Their emphasis was on the words of the song. They were to teach and admonish one another with songs; they gave thanks in their singing; they praised God with singing; and they edified one another. They did not have choirs or special music solos in the early days; everyone sang. When someone had a new song, he taught it to them, and they all sang. Worship was not like a theater or a performance. It came from the heart and through the lips. Jesus said in John 4:23-24, "But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." Christian music in the first century was not an industry with churches competing for the best performers. Jesus warned his disciples in Matthew 6:1, in the Sermon on the Mount, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven." I fear that there is too much showmanship in our churches and not enough real worship of the Father for all that He has done for us.

The early church was a praying church. Acts 2:42 says they devoted themselves to prayer. Paul commanded in 1 Timothy 2:1-2, "First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity." In verse 8 Paul said, "Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension." The worship leaders in the early church were males. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 14:34-38, "The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. If they desire to learn anything,

let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church. Was it from you that the word of God *first* went forth? Or has it come to you only? If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. But if anyone does not recognize *this*, he is not recognized." It was not that women were not important or had nothing to offer; it was a matter of God's order and the roles He gave. God determined that males were to take the lead in the worship. The early church also gave liberally every first day of the week, when the collection took place. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 16:1-2, "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come." Though this passage discusses a special contribution, it became the model for how churches supported their work.

The early church was made up of autonomous congregations. That means that each congregation had its own organization and tended to its own business. Paul established a number of congregations on his first missionary journey; later he returned to those cities. Acts 14:21-23 says, "After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and *saying*, 'Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.' When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." Notice that they had a plurality of elders in each church, not just one. The men who were elders had to meet certain qualifications. You can find those qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Elders were godly and faithful men who were the husbands of one wife and had believing children. There were also deacons in early churches. The word "deacon" means minister or servant, and deacons had specific tasks the elders charged them to perform. 1 Timothy 3 lists the qualifications of a deacon, who like elders were to be the husbands of one wife.

What was the Church called? If you look into the King James Version, you will find the word "church" used 112 times. First, it is called "my church" by Jesus one time (Matthew 16:18), a phrase showing ownership, not showing a name of the church. Second, it is called "the church" 95 times (beginning in Matthew 18:17), with no name attached. Third, it is called the "church of God" 12 twelve times (beginning in Acts 20:28), a phrase which denotes ownership: Jesus and his Father are co-owners (John 17:10). Fourth, some Christians were called "the churches of the Gentiles" (Romans 16:4), a phrase describing non-Jewish members, not a church name. Fifth, the phrase "the churches of Christ" occurs one time (Romans 16:16), a phrase that denotes ownership, not a name for Jesus' church. In parallel, the phrase "the dogs of John" tells who owns the dogs, not the names of the dogs. Sixth, the phrase "the churches of the saints" occurs one time (1 Corinthians 14:33), denoting the character of Christians, not a church name. Seventh, the phrase "the church of the firstborn" occurs one time (Hebrews 12:23). I used to think that the word "firstborn" in Hebrews 12:23 refers to Jesus (as it does in Romans 8:29; Colossians

1:15, 18; Revelation 1:5), but in Hebrews 12:23 the word "firstborn" is plural, meaning the "firstborn people," a figurative expression describing the elevated position of Christians. The King James translators knew that the word in the Greek is plural, and so they wrote about "the church of the firstborn which are written in heaven," using the plural verb "are." Thus the phrase "the church of the firstborn" is a complimentary designation of church members, not a church name.

To become a member of the church, one needed to obey the gospel. Remember that the Lord Himself adds a person to the church. The early church did not baptize babies; only people old enough to believe and repent were baptized. People who heard the preaching of the Gospel and believed it were led to change their lives by repenting of their sins. They would leave their sinful lives behind. If they had been pagans, they gave up their pagan practices. They turned from idolatry to serve a living and true God. In Acts 19:18-20 at Ephesus, "Many also of those who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices. And many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and *began* burning them in the sight of everyone; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing." When a penitent believer confesses Christ and is baptized in water for the forgiveness of his sins, the Lord adds him to His church. He is not a member of any denomination; he is simply a Christian, a member of the Lord's church. I hope you too will become a member of the Lord's church by obeying the same gospel they obeyed. My friend you can be simply a Christian by obeying the gospel just as they did. I pray that you will do that soon!

The church was God's plan for saving mankind. Jesus built it, purchased the church with His own blood, became the foundation of it, is the head of it, and is the Savior of it. We should not think, then, that the church is unimportant in God's eyes. The church is actually the bride of Christ. Being a member of the Lord's church is the way in which we draw close to God, to become part of His family. This is why being a member of the church is not a trivial matter. The Lord's people are in the Lord's church. I do not know of any promise of heaven or salvation made to people who are outside of Christ and his church. Jesus said in John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." If we go to heaven at all through Jesus, we go to heaven through the church He built and purchased with His blood. Jesus died for the church. To make the church of no importance is to make His death of no importance. If we hold Jesus dear and His death as important, then we will want to be part of His church and to draw as close to Him as possible. I don't know if you, my friend, are a member of the church or not. If you aren't, I hope you'll become one. Let's determine to go back to the Bible and commit ourselves to the Christianity of the New Testament rather than that of popular religion. Let's be God's people and follow God's Word.

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