

WHY The Church?

Churches are everywhere. One cannot drive through many neighborhoods without seeing the familiar shape of a church building on a street corner. Churches are as familiar as shopping centers, fire stations, homes, and parking meters - a part of society. But WHY? Are churches merely one of the underpinnings of a stable society, like the government, schools, and homes? Are they for "keeping the kids off the street?" What should the church be *doing*?

by Garner Ted Armstrong

Is there any more familiar Christmas card than the New England snow scene with the softly-lighted windows of snug houses with smoke curling upward, rolling, snow-covered fields, and a traditional church steeple pointing toward the sky?

Is there any more familiar sound than the mournful tolling of church bells on a Sunday morning - any more familiar sight than people filing into a church on a prominent street corner?

There are tens of thousands of churches in the United States; tens of thousands more in England, Canada, Australia, South Africa - across Europe. There are huge cathedrals, basilicas, abbeys; buildings of all sizes and descriptions, including the largest church "building" in the world near "El Escorial" in Spain; a monumental cathedral hollowed out of solid rock in a mountain which could swallow up St. Peter's basilica in the Vatican.

There are Catholics, Anglicans, Dutch Reformed, Lutheran, Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalian, and hundreds more - enough sects and denominations to require a sizable book just to list them, including groups calling themselves by such names as "Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Predestinarian Baptists."

WHY? What are they supposed to do?

Must You Belong To A Church To Be Saved?

Unless we really think about it, asking *why* a church seems a ludicrous question. Everybody knows churches relate to heaven the way a thrift store relates to clothing; the way a sporting goods store relates to tennis racquets. One goes to a candy store to buy salt-water taffy, and one goes to a church to get to heaven, right? One goes to a church because one is "saved," Or wants to be; because one wants one's family to experience the same rewards.

Many years ago, a young boy in a prairie province of Canada was trudging down a dusty country road on Sunday morning, headed toward his neighborhood church, about a section and a half distant. His farm neighbor came chugging along in a Model A Ford, stopped, and asked if he wanted a ride. Grateful, the boy hopped in. When his neighbor pulled up in the church yard, and the boy was getting out, a thought came to him.

"Why don't you come on in here?" he asked.

"Oh, I couldn't do that," his neighbor replied. "My church is a couple more miles down the road."

Puzzled, the boy shrugged, thanked his neighbor for the ride, and went inside. It was several years before he came to understand that one church is not just as good as another.

Are they all the same? No. Otherwise, they would all belong to the same organization - would believe and preach the same doctrines.

It is amazing how disparate some can be. Others are almost undiscernably similar, so slight are the differences. But so what? Aren't they all headed in the same direction, but by different routes?

No.

Christ said, "I will build *my* church" (Matthew 16:18). He *did* build His church; call out His special *ekklesia*, or assembly of "called-out ones."

Is Christ the living Head of *all* these differing, bickering, disagreeing denominations? Only half of them? Only a few of them? Paul asked, "Is Christ divided?" urging the Corinthian church to admit the obvious, biblical answer, "no." He insisted God was *not* the Author of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33), and said there was only "one body" of Christ, which is that one true church.

If Christ is not the Head of *all* these different religious organizations, is He the head of *any* of them?

Did Christ Build His True Church? If So, Where Is It Today?

Christ promised, "I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). If He *kept* this promise, then His church must be in existence *today*, for He promised the gates of the grave would not prevail against it; promised He would be *with* that true church always.

The Greek word for "church" is wholly misunderstood today - misapplied in the English-speaking world. Millions think "church" means a building, or a denomination, or an organization. Few understand it applies to a scattered group of individuals in whom is God's Holy Spirit - a *spiritual organism* of called-out ones who *may not even know* one-another, and who do not necessarily "belong" to the *same political organizations!*

Christ said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: *no* man cometh unto the Father but by [through] me" (John 14:6). He described the *way* into the Kingdom of God as a sheepcote. "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber.

"But he that entereth in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep.

"To Him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear His voice: and He calleth His own sheep by name, and leadeth them out.

"And when He putteth forth His own sheep, He goeth before them, and the sheep follow Him: for *they know His voice*.

"And a stranger they *will not follow*, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers" (John 10:1-10).

Christ is that unique and only *door* through which we may be saved! There are not many routes to salvation - only *one!* Christ said, "Enter ye in at the strait [narrow, difficult!] gate: for *wide* is the gate, and *broad* is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and MANY there be that go in thereat:

"Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and *few* there be that find it" (Matthew 7:13,14).

Christ promised to establish HIS Church on this earth. He did so on the Day of Pentecost, probably somewhere near June 16th or so, in A.D. 31. This miraculous occasion is described in the first two chapters of

Acts. Christ had promised, "And I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you for ever:

"Even the *Spirit of Truth*; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth Him not, neither knoweth Him; for He dwelleth with you, and shall be in you...the Comforter, which is the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you" (John 14: 16-26).

God's Holy Spirit was "poured out" upon the disciples on Pentecost with audible and visible manifestations of the sound of a tornado, and flames of fire settling down on each of the twelve apostles like brilliant crowns.

God's Word describes the receiving of the Holy Spirit as a spiritual *begett*, analogous to human conception. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to His abundant mercy hath *begotten us again* unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" ([Peter 1:3). James wrote, "Of His own will *begat* He us with the word of truth [metaphor for the Holy Spirit - God's method of spiritual begett], that we should be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures" (James 1:18).

The apostles did not decide to form a corporation. They did not hold a conference, file documents with the Roman government, or apply to the Sanhedrin for permission to form a "church." They did not draft by-laws, adopt a constitution, or draw up organizational charts. They did not make a formal declaration that they now constituted a "church."

Rather, by the receiving of God's Holy Spirit, God the Father *begat* each of them as His son. Now, joined by God's Spirit to the True Vine which is Christ (John 15:1-8), they were *put into* the spiritual assembly of "called-out ones" God was choosing.

You *cannot* "join" God's true church. God must PUT YOU INTO it by His Spirit.

Notice, "...And the Lord *added* to the church [*ekklesia*: "assembly of called-out ones"] daily such as should be saved" (Acts 2:47).

Paul wrote, "For *by one Spirit* are we all baptized [immersed; plunged into, wholly and fully] into one body [the church, called the "Body of Christ"], whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit" (I Corinthians 12:13). Paul also wrote, "...Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His" (Romans 8:9).

Today, millions see billboards or television advertisements, "Join the church of your choice." Counselors at large evangelistic campaigns, in a spirit of ecumenism, tell people to "select an appropriate church." When I was very young, I once dated a girl who thought we should be religious. She wasn't too particular. She said, "Well, I think we should have some faith, or other." To her, it didn't matter which, so long as it was "respectable," meaning one of the recognized, "mainstream" fundamentalist churches.

Surveys have proved people "choose" churches for varieties of reasons: the location in the neighborhood, size of parking lot, the beauty of the building, the choir, the local programs and activities, the soloist, the talented speaker. Most, of course, go to the denomination of their family. Some, dissatisfied, drift from one church to another, looking for a church "home," where what they see and hear squares with their own convictions; where they can feel comfortable.

Some choose carefully, depending on how closely that church's doctrines match their own personal Bible study. Others search the Scriptures prayerfully, trying to find the very church Jesus Christ built - the church of which He is, even today, the living *Head*.

The apostles were *drafted* into Christ's service. He told them, "You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen *you*, and *ordained* [set apart for a special purpose] you, that ye should *go and bring forth fruit*, and that your fruit should remain..." (John 15:16).

What was this "fruit" the evidence of their labors they were to produce?

Christ's Great Commission

When Jesus Christ appeared to His apostles following His resurrection and ascension to heaven, He said, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.

"Go ye therefore, and teach [make disciples of; enlist as students, or learners] all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit:

"Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world [age]. Amen" (Matthew 28:18-20).

Jesus did NOT say, "Establish many local church organizations; build bingo parlors, family life centers, featuring ping pong tables and bowling alleys; conduct cookouts, potlucks and barbecues; have athletic contests; make cheerleading costumes for your daughters; choose a charity; sponsor a mission field; form a choir; buy an organ; erect a steeple ..."

Instead, He commanded them to *go into all the world*, preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom of God as a witness. Christ prophesied, "And this Gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in all the world as a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come" (Matthew 24:14). So the *work* of the assembly of called-out ones was, *first*, to preach the Gospel to the world as a witness!

What was the *second* part of Christ's commission to His apostles? "Feed my lambs!" (John 21:15-25). Three times, Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him, using a more powerful expression each time. When Peter embarrassedly had to confess his love, smarting in shame and remorse over his three-time cursing denial of Christ as He died, Christ said, each time, "Feed my sheep."

Naturally, as we read in Acts the second chapter of the apostle's preaching on Pentecost, the *fruit* of the preaching of the Gospel is *converts*, disciples for Christ.

These are "added to the church" by the receiving of God's Holy Spirit. But, as newly-convicted, converted, baptized members are added, it is NOT God's intention they divert the work of the church AWAY from the first commission, demanding so much attention, so many activities, that the church abandons its vital preaching of the Gospel as a witness and a warning, and sinks down in upon itself as just another of the churches of this world!

Just before Pentecost, Christ said to His apostles, "...ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Spirit is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto Me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth" (Acts 1:87). These were the very *last words Christ spoke on this earth!*

Now, what IS the "Gospel of the Kingdom of God?"

The Real Gospel

The English word "gospel" is much misunderstood, often misused. Today, we hear of "gospel music," or "gospel singers," or preachers allegedly delivering the "gospel."

To millions, the Gospel consists of a brief statement: Christ died to save sinners. You are a sinner. Confess

your sins, call upon Christ; receive Him as your personal Savior, and you shall be saved.

This message is repeated tens of thousands of times in thousands of ways; embellished with stories, testimonies, examples, similes and analogies -told and retold in thousands of churches, and over thousands of television programs each week.

But the old Anglo-Saxon word "gospel" comes from *two* words, which meant "good news." The terms "glad tidings," or "joyous announcement" are equally applicable.

But joyous announcement *about what?*

Millions have supposed that brief statement above pretty well sums up the Gospel. Millions have heard, interminably, a message "about Jesus." They suppose this is the Gospel. But, while the entire life's purpose, example, death, burial and resurrection of Christ *is* very much a central focal point of the Gospel, there is MUCH, MUCH MORE included in the Gospel.

Paul put it this way: "Moreover, brethen, I declare unto you the Gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand;

"By which also *ye are saved* [this is *saving* knowledge!] if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain.

"For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures;

"And that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the scriptures:

"And that He was seen of Cephas [Peter's name, pronounced "KEEphas"], then of the twelve:

"After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present..." (1 Corinthians 15:1-6).

Surely, then, Christ's death, burial and resurrection are absolutely *central* to the Gospel.

Christ came *preaching the Gospel*, and said He was delivering a *message* from God the Father; that His Father inspired that message; that He spoke not of Himself, but that the Father spoke through Him, did the works through Him. He said, "...the words that I speak unto you [the Gospel] I speak *not of myself*: but the Father that dwelleth in me, He doeth the works" (John 14:10). Christ insisted that He *brought a message* - the Gospel - from His Father in heaven to deliver to mankind. The Gospel must therefore include the *message Christ brought*, and is not *exclusively* a message about the person of Christ. It *includes* everything about Christ. But it also includes the message He delivered.

That message is called "the Gospel of the Kingdom of God."

Notice, "Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, and saying, 'The time is at hand: *repent* ye, and *believe* the Gospel!'" (Mark 1:14,15).

Time and time again, the Bible describes the *message* Christ brought as the Gospel of the "Kingdom of God."

Christ promised that kingdom will be established on this earth; that it will *rule* over all nations for one thousand years: that those who *repent*, and live a life of overcoming, will have a *part* in ruling the world!

How many people are told the Bible teaches that Christ brought a message about CO-RULERSHIP OF THE WORLD? Where does the fanciful notion about "going to heaven" fit into this Bible truth?

You will see *proved* that Christ is coming to inherit an *earthly* throne -the throne of His "father," David. You will see the promises about *rulership over the nations of this earth* for the saints - *not* heaven! A sample: "And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works [Christ Himself is speaking] unto the end, to him will I give *power over the nations* and he shall RULE them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father" (Revelation 2:26).

The Gospel message Christ brought is very much *prophetic* in nature. Christ was the greatest of all prophets. His "Olivet" prophecy (Matthew 24; Mark 15; Luke 21) is the framework through which Daniel and the Revelation must be viewed. This famous prophecy gives a step-by-step series of overlapping events from the first century until the time of Christ's return. It is like an *outline* for all prophecy.

Only when you study this gripping prophecy can you come to understand the real meaning of Christ's commission to His disciples. He did *not* intend for them to establish the large, visible churches of this world at all - He intended for them to *preach the Gospel of the Kingdom of God as a witness and a warning to all the world before the end of the age!*

Always, that *first* part of Christ's great commission to His church was paramount!

Notice Paul's example near the end of his life, during his Roman imprisonment. Luke writes, "And when they had appointed him a day, there came many to him into his lodging; to whom he expounded and testified the *Kingdom of God*. persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning till evening" (Acts 28:23).

Here is Paul, expounding things concerning Christ as future KING OF KINGS, ruling over the Kingdom of God on this earth. He teaches these people *daily*, and takes *all day* doing it.

What were his texts? The *Old Testament* of your Bible, just as Jesus Himself quoted from the prophets; from Moses, and from the Psalms concerning God's Kingdom and Christ's mission on this earth!

Notice further: "And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him,

"Preaching the *Kingdom of God*, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him" (Acts 28:31). So closes the book of Acts - just as it began. It begins with Christ's commission to go to the furthestmost parts of the earth with His Gospel of the Kingdom (Acts 1:4-8), and it ends with the testimony that Paul, near the end of his life in the flesh, was preaching the Kingdom of God in Rome, the seat of the Beast power, the Gentile world-ruling kingdom; witnessing not only to many of the population, but to Caesar's own household servants (Philippians 4:22).

So *what* did Christ command His newly-commissioned church to do? To *preach the Gospel of the Kingdom of God to all the world!* Secondly, if and when some were converted, those newly-converted disciples became a *part* of that growing church, to continually become more effective in preaching the Gospel!

WHY did Christ call out His own "assembly" of disciples (His church)? As a human instrument in Christ's hands to preach the Gospel!

Did Christ Establish the Church As a Social Club?

Look carefully at the many church organizations in the "churchianity" of this world. How many are lost in a

melange of social occasions; potlucks, dances, parties, field trips, picnics, sports events - a continual round of *physical food, drink and entertainment* - to keep the people happily ensconced in that church?

How many members of churches find themselves literally *cut off* from any outside contact - isolated, cloistered, involved in a continual, year-in, year-out merry-go-round of *church activities*?

How many sink down into a comfortable "us, them" concept of spiritual identity, spending their energies, thoughts, and money on an endless round of *internal* church pursuits?

But the church is *not* for the purpose of providing a "comfortable church 'home'" to religious hobbyists. It is *not* established for the purpose of making *this world* a better place in which to live!

Think about that statement for a moment.

Is it not a *major* goal of most churches to be an "influence" in their own communities? Do not religious organizations often attempt to influence politics, circulate petitions, picket abortion clinics, or even field presidential candidates?

But God commands His "called-out ones" of His church to "*come out*" of Babylon (Revelation 18:4), which includes the "churchianity" of this world!

This world will pass away, and all that is in it. A *part* of this world is its religions. They, too, shall pass away, and be replaced by the true worship of the true God and the Father of Jesus Christ when Christ comes to RULE this sin-sick world at last.

The church is *not* here to provide a Millennium-like life style for a few. It is *not* "God's government in action" on the earth. It is *not* commissioned to dispense "good housekeeping" seals of recognition for herbs, diets, vitamin pills, home remedies, poultices, cures; or to proscribe white bread, white sugar, soft drinks, and beer! The church is *not* an exclusivist, secretive *cult* of hideouts who cannot be found. The church is *not* an oasis in society for wayward youths; a bridge-back, or half-way house for drugs; a center for feeding all the poor of the world, providing houses for the homeless, and refuges for battered wives and unwed mothers.

To be sure, God fully intends converted people in His church to help the poor among them, and to be empathetic toward all those whose sins have wrecked their lives, offering them whatever help is available.

But God's church is not a maelstrom of activities, activities, activities.

The more programs, the more activities, the more material pursuits, the *less* the church works at its *main, chief GOAL* of preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom of God as a witness and a warning to all the world.

Actually, the legal description of an "evangelistic association" (a group formed for the purpose of evangelizing, or preaching the Gospel) more closely resembles what Christ established than does the legal description of a "church" in today's usage of the English language.

So, WHY did Christ say He would build HIS one true church?

He plainly said He did so to form a cadre of dedicated believers who would "Go into all the world, and preach the Gospel unto every creature."

Today, many large churches spend only a tiny *fraction* of their annual incomes on their various "mission fields," and much of the time these do not include preaching the Gospel, but the maintenance of orphanages, hospitals, schools, and the like. There is nothing wrong with this, of course, if the church does not abandon the

FIRST and most IMPORTANT part of Christ's commission in favor of ancillary facets of the second part.

The church can no more right all the wrongs in society than the United States can absorb all the squalid, sick, starving populations of the Third World countries on earth!

God did not *intend* for the church to attack the monumental, impossible task of somehow establishing the Kingdom of God on this earth by itself.

CHRIST will take care of that part!

It is the job of the church to *WITNESS* to people that God is the Ruler and Lawgiver; that His Son Jesus Christ died because of the sins of mankind; that we may have forgiveness through His shed blood, and that Christ *IS COMING AGAIN*.

This time, He is not coming as a humble carpenter from Nazareth, but as KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS!

It is the responsibility of the assembly of "called-out ones", Christ calls to carry *this* powerful message to the world!

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