

## LESSON SIX: THE CHURCH AND THE GOSPEL PLAN OF SALVATION

In the previous lessons of this course you have studied God's plan for the redemption of man in its preparatory stages during the Old Testament period and in its culmination in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We come now to a study of those events and teachings of the New Testament in which God's plan of salvation is applied directly to you and to all men today. Please study and consider this lesson with great seriousness and care, for it has to do with those matters affecting your eternal well-being and happiness.

As a basis for your study, please now read carefully Acts 1-2 and then return to this place in the lesson.

### THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CHURCH

(Acts 1-2)

As you saw in your reading, the events following the ascension of Christ are these.

The apostles return from Matthew Olivet to Jerusalem and wait there as Christ had told them to do. On the day of the feast of Pentecost, Christ sends the Holy Spirit to fill the apostles with miraculous powers of a kind never possessed by any servants of God before them. As a result, they are able to know and infallibly speak what Christ's will for men is (Compare: John 14:16-17, 26; 16:13-15). Further, they are empowered to speak in foreign tongues, so that men of every nation can understand their teaching.

Peter then preaches the first gospel sermon, and he convinces his audience that Jesus of Nazareth, whom they have crucified, is the Christ, the Son of God. Stricken by guilt, remorse, and fear, they ask Peter and the rest of the apostles what they should do to be saved from the terrible sin, which they have committed (Acts 2:37).

Peter's reply to this question is of the greatest importance to all of us, for it contains heaven's instructions by which man is to be saved from his sins. In Lesson Two we saw the nature of sin and its terrible consequences, and in Lessons Three-Five we studied the preparation for the coming of Christ as well as the sacrifice he made—all intended to make possible man's salvation. Now, in Peter's reply to those on Pentecost, we learn what God and Christ command us to do in order that we might have the benefits of Christ's sacrifice for us and be saved from our sins.

Peter's answer is this:

[Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost \( Acts 2:38\).](#)

His audience already believes that Jesus is the Christ. Hence he commands them on the basis of this belief to repent of their sins and to be baptized for the remission or taking away of their sins. As a result of their obeying this command, then, they will be saved.

In response to Peter's instruction, about three thousand people are baptized (Acts 2:41). This body of people constitutes the church, which Christ has established here on the day of Pentecost.

In the days following, others are saved from their sins, and at the same time Christ adds them to his church (2:47). As members of this body they happily go about serving the Lord (Acts 2:41-47). Soon they become known as Christians, the only name necessary to distinguish them as followers of Christ (Acts 11:25).

### THE PLAN OF SALVATION

Although we have read only two brief chapters from Acts, we have already learned from them everything necessary for a person to know and to do in order for him to be saved from his sins and to be added by the Lord to his church. A summation of the steps involved is as follows. First, one must hear the gospel message which Peter first preached on Pentecost: Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Son of God. He has died on the cross in our place that we might have the opportunity to be saved from our sins, and God has raised him from the dead. If any man will believe on and obey Him, he will be saved.

Second, one must of course believe that this gospel message is true and that indeed Jesus is the Christ. Compare Mark 16:16; John 5:24; 8:24; Acts 8:12; Romans 1:16; 10:10.

Third, one must repent of his sins. This means he must resolve to stop committing sins against God which he has committed in the past, and he must turn away from a course of sin and live a life of consecration and obedience to God. Compare Luke 13:3; 15:7; 24:46-47; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 17:30; 2 Corinthians 7:9-10; and 2 Peter 3:9.

Fourth, one must confess before men that he believes that Jesus is the Son of God. Compare Matthew 10:32; Romans 10:9-10.

Fifth, one must be baptized for the remission of his sins. Compare Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16; John 3:3-5; Acts 2:38; 8:12; 8:36-38; 10:48; 16:14-15; 16:33; 18:8; 22:16; Romans 6:4; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:26-27; and 1 Peter 3:21.

When a person has obeyed all of these commands, Christ adds him to His church. Compare Acts 2:47; 1 Corinthians 12:13.

### **The Conversion of the Man of Ethiopia**

(Acts 8:2.6-40)

To further see how a person may be saved from his sins and become a Christian, we can turn to any one of several examples of conversion recorded in the book of Acts which illustrate how people in the first century obeyed the gospel. Please read Acts 8:26-40 and return to this point in the lesson.

As you can see, the man from Ethiopia was saved in precisely the same manner as those on Pentecost. First a preacher of the gospel told him of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Acts 8:30-35). The Ethiopian, seeing how this gospel message agreed with the scripture he had been reading, believed in Christ and wanted to obey him immediately. Arriving at a body of water suitable for the purpose, he asked Philip to baptize him (Acts 8:36-38). After he was baptized, he rejoiced in the knowledge of his salvation (Acts 8:39).

Similar examples of conversion are found in Acts 8:5-12; 10:1-48; 16:13-15; 16:25-34; and 22:6-16.

### **THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH**

Having seen the establishment of the Lord's church and how one becomes a member of it, we should now consider the purpose and nature of that institution.

The mission of the church of Christ is to bring as many people as possible to be saved by obeying the gospel, and then to help them live lives of faithful service to God until death so that they can spend eternity with God in heaven. The church accomplishes this mission through efforts of evangelism, edification, and benevolence.

Evangelism is the preaching and teaching of the gospel in obedience to Christ's final commission to his disciples:

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: 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 (Matthew 28:19-20).

And he said unto them. Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned (Mark 16:15-16).

The members of the early church daily went about teaching the gospel to all who would hear them (Acts 5:42). And carrying the gospel to the whole world was the work of great preachers such as the apostle Paul, whose missionary journeys are recorded in the latter half of the book of Acts. Paul's epistles also stress the church's mission of preaching the gospel (compare all the following scriptures: Romans 10:8-15; 1 Corinthians 9:16; Ephesians 3:1-10; Colossians. 1:23; 2 Timothy 4:1-2).

Edification is the building up and encouraging of the members of the church so that they will remain faithful to the doctrines of Christ and grow stronger and more effective as servants of God. Paul commended the church to God's word as their source of strength and growth (Acts 20:32), and he urged that in all of their works and relationships they do all things with the purpose of edifying one another:

For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:12-13).

Compare Romans 14:19; 15:2; 1 Corinthians 8:1; 14:3-12, 26.

Benevolence is care and provision for the physical needs of others. The first-century Christians were especially generous (Compare: Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35), and kindness toward others, especially fellow Christians, is a part of the church's mission (Acts 11:29-30; 20:35; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15; Galatians 2:10; 6:10; Ephesians 4:28; Philippians 4:14-16; Hebrews 13:16). All of these purposes—evangelism, edification, and benevolence—have as their chief aim the spreading of one gospel and the salvation of men's souls, so that one day the church, the kingdom of God, may be delivered up to the Father to live with him throughout eternity (1 Corinthians 15:24; Ephesians 5:27).

## **THE ORGANIZATION OF THE CHURCH**

Jesus Christ is the head of the church (Ephesians 1:22-23; 5:23-24; Col. 1:18). He built the church (Matthew 16:18) and bought it (Acts 20:28). It is his kingdom (Matthew 16:19; Mark 9:1; Col. 1:13), and he only is its king (Mark 16:19; Ephesians 1:20-23; 1 Corinthians 15:25; Hebrews 2:8-9). He has all authority and power (Matthew 28:18; John 5:27), and all of the teaching and doctrine for the church come from him through the Holy Spirit (John 16:13-15).

When Jesus went back to heaven, he left his apostles, guided by the Holy Spirit, to administer the church and to watch over and direct it in its formation (Acts 2:42; 5:12-13). They continued to do this for the remainder of their lives, and through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit they and others who by their hands received inspiration wrote the doctrines of Christ in the books of the New Testament (Ephesians 3:4-5).

Once the New Testament was completed, however, there was no need to have apostles living on earth to guide the church (1 Corinthians 13:8-13). From that time on the apostle's doctrine in the form of the written New Testament would be the sole authority and guide (1 Peter 4:11). There would be no man or men on earth who would pronounce new doctrine or otherwise exercise apostolic authority and power. Nor would heaven itself give new revelations or doctrines: the New Testament is complete itself and perfect, and nothing is to be added to it (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

In part for this reason also there would be no central or authoritarian organization for the church. Rather each congregation in a given locality would be autonomous and free from all others. While these congregations might work together and help each other (Compare: Acts 11:27-30; 2 Corinthians 8:1-5), they would remain independent. Hence the word church is sometimes used in the New Testament to refer to the body of Christ as a whole (Compare: Matthew 16:18; Col. 1:18) and at other times to indicate a particular congregation (Compare: 1 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:1).

But while no man or organization was to govern the church or dictate new doctrine for it, God did provide that each mature congregation have leaders called elders who would nurture and guide its members, and make decisions concerning the best way of carrying out the requirements of the scriptures (Compare: Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:4, 6, 23; 20:17, 28-31). The qualifications and the duties of these men are set forth in 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; and 1 Peter 5:1-4. In matters of expediency and judgment the elders would have authority, and they were to be obeyed (Acts 20:28; Hebrews 13:7, 17). To assist them and to carry out the daily work of the church, other men called deacons could also be appointed (Compare: Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8-13).

## THE WORSHIP OF THE CHURCH

From the very beginning of man's history his worship of God has been of paramount importance. As we have seen, Abel offered an animal sacrifice, and the law of Moses called for many different acts of worship. Just as important as the requirement to worship God was the requirement to worship him in the way that God commanded. When two priests, Nadab and Abihu, worshipped in an unauthorized manner, they were consumed with fire (Leviticus. 10:1-7). John 4:24 says: God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth. To worship in spirit we must worship with the proper attitude of reverence. To worship in truth we must do no more nor no less than what God has commanded, and we must worship in the manner in which he has commanded.

The New Testament authorizes five acts of worship. First, each first day of the week Christians are to **assemble in order to observe the Lord's supper**, a memorial of Christ's death which the Lord instituted the night before his crucifixion (Matthew 26:25-29; Mark 14:22-25; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:17-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-29). The observance consists of eating unleavened bread, a symbol of Christ's body, and drinking the fruit of the vine, a symbol of his blood. The requirement to observe the feast each first day of the week is established in Acts 20:7, where under the instruction of the apostles the church met on that day.

The other acts of worship are **prayer** (Acts 2:42); **singing of spiritual songs** (Ephesians 5:19; Col. 3:16); **preaching, teaching, and reading God's word** (Acts 11:26; 20:7; 1 Timothy 4:6-13; 2 Timothy 4:2); and **giving of one's means (earnings or income) to support the work of the church** (1 Corinthians 16:2).

In this lesson you have learned of God's simple plan for man's salvation and the purpose, organization, and worship of his church. You may, however, be troubled by the discrepancies which you see between what is taught in the Bible concerning these matters, and what is practiced today by denominational churches. In Lesson Seven we will study the problem of religious division and some of the errors commonly taught by the various denominations. Before we close this lesson, however, we offer you this observation and appeal. You now know everything that the Ethiopian or those on Pentecost knew about being saved from sin and becoming a member of the Lord's church. There is therefore nothing to hinder you from right now believing in Jesus, repenting of your sins, and being baptized for the remission of your sins, so that Christ will add you to his church. All of those on Pentecost as well as the Ethiopian and the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:25-40) obeyed the gospel the very hour they first heard it. If you recognize your need to obey the gospel, please do not hesitate to contact us by sending an e-mail at this address (address) and someone will contact you. They will be glad to study with you

and to assist you in obeying your Lord in baptism. This very day you can be saved from your sins and become a New Testament Christian.

Please feel free to read and study this lesson as many times as you wish to do so. After you are comfortable with the knowledge you have gained you may want to test yourself to learn how well you remember. Questions for review and study on this lesson may be found by going to <http://64.177.52.39/8LESSONS/6Q.htm> .

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