

Christ's Teaching About the Church

Introduction

As we begin this study of the church, we want to build on the very best foundation. And that foundation would be what God's Word says about the church. You would think that if you wanted to get the definitive word about what the church is to do and to be, then you should go to the words of Christ Himself. And that is exactly what we are going to do in this session – we want to find out exactly what Christ said about the church. One of the things that may surprise us is that Christ's teaching about the church is rather sketchy and limited. Jesus did not give us very much direct guidance about the church, so we need to understand what He did say as well as why He did not say more.

Christ's Prophecy of the Church

In this passage we see Christ's prophecy concerning the church: "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it" (Matthew 16:18). By way of background, the context describes Christ presenting His kingdom to the nation of Israel (as recorded from Matt 4 through Matt 12). But the leaders of the nation of Israel rejected Him as their Messiah and rejected the kingdom that Christ offered. From that point on, Jesus began to open up to His disciples in private and to train them for what was to come. Matt 16 records Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah), and it comes at a time when Jesus wanted His disciples to know who He is. Jesus knew that they would need to be firmly convinced of His Messiahship in order to face the days ahead.

This passage contains the first recorded use of the word "Church" – but did the church exist at that point in time? No. Jesus used the future tense, "I will build My church." The church did not yet exist – there was only the implication that Peter and the other disciples would someday have a part in it. Jesus made it clear that He had every intention of building the church at some time in the future, but He did not give any specific definition of what the church was to be or any instructions for how the church was to come into being. Here He merely gives a prophecy that something called the church will be built during a future time period.

Christ's Hints about the New Fellowship to Come

There are other places in the Gospel accounts where Christ gives hints about some type of community of believers. For example, in John 10 Jesus used the illustration of a flock of sheep.

John 10:11-16

- (11) "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.
- (12) "He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.
- (13) "He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep.
- (14) "I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me,
- (15) even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep.
- (16) "I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd.

Jesus used the future tense in John 10:16 to say that there are other sheep which do not belong to this fold, and "they will hear My voice and they will become one flock." Jesus gave a hint here about other sheep which will become part of the one flock, but He gave no details about when or how that will happen – only that it will happen in the future.

Christ Instituted Specific Practices

In various places recorded in the gospel accounts, Jesus discussed specific practices that He wanted His followers to carry on.

Conflict Resolution:

In Matthew 18:15-17 Jesus taught about conflict resolution:

(15) "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.

(16) "But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED.

(17) "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

This was only the second passage recorded in the gospel accounts where the word "church" was used. AND, you have now heard ALL of the instances in which Jesus used this word in His teaching. There are no other Bible passages where Jesus used this word. As we mentioned earlier, was Jesus building His church right then? No. The existence of the church was still in the future. Matthew 18:15-17 was a record of Jesus' teaching about conflict resolution which He wanted His disciples to remember and apply during that future time when He would be building His church.

The Lord's Supper:

In Matthew 26:26 Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper:

(26) While they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body."

(27) And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you;

(28) for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.

(29) "But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom."

(30) After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Notice that this passage does not record Jesus commanding the disciples to continue this practice in their future fellowship. However, Jesus must have instituted the Lord's Supper as a regular practice because the apostle Paul wrote that he received it as an on-going ordinance for the church:

1 Cor 11:23-26

(23) For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread;

(24) and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me."

(25) In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me."

(26) For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

Baptism:

In Matthew 28:18-20 Jesus instituted the practice of baptism as an on-going ordinance:

(18) And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.

(19) "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,

(20) teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Here Jesus commanded His disciples to carry on the practice of baptism as part of their on-going disciple-making ministry in the future. None of these practices would have any meaning without having a specific group in which to practice them. But the "church" did not yet exist at the time when Jesus was teaching these things. The entire teaching of Christ about the subject of the church is contained in these few passages that we have discussed so far. You can see why I mentioned that Jesus' teaching about the church is a little sketchy or limited. Jesus only gave hints and prophecies about the church. Why is this so? Why did Jesus not provide more extensive teaching about the church?

Why So Little Teaching, Lord?

Other Bible passages give us the answer to this question. There were several things that had to happen before the church could come into existence.

The Death and Resurrection of Christ:

In Acts 20:28 the apostle Paul was giving his farewell address to a group of church leaders, and he made this comment: "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." The church is described as a group of people that became the property of the Lord Jesus after His sacrificial death on the cross. The church could not be the church before the cross of Christ.

The Ascension of Christ into Heaven:

In Ephesians 4:7-8 we are told that it was at the time of His ascension when Christ gave the spiritual gifts that are required for the operation of the church:

(7) But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.

(8) Therefore it says, "WHEN HE ASCENDED ON HIGH, HE LED CAPTIVE A HOST OF CAPTIVES, AND HE GAVE GIFTS TO MEN."

Immediately after this passage, the apostle Paul described how these gifted men were to function within the church. Christ clearly told His disciples that He was required to ascend into heaven before the Holy Spirit would come to "guide them into all truth" (John 16:13):

John 16:7 "But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you."

The Coming of the Holy Spirit:

This leads us into the next important reason that the church did not exist during the ministry of Christ: The Holy Spirit was required in order for the church to exist.

The apostle John recorded an incident where Jesus invited thirsty souls to come to Him and that "rivers of living waters" would refresh them from within:

John 7:37-39

(37) Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink.

(38) "He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'"

(39) But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

John's last comment is very interesting, because he clearly states that even though Jesus was teaching about the future ministry of the Holy Spirit within believers, that the Holy Spirit had not begun this ministry in the lives of believers – because Jesus had not ascended into heaven where He was glorified. So even during the ministry of Jesus, the Church-age ministry of the Holy Spirit had not begun. Later in John 15:26 Jesus said, "when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me." This special ministry of the Holy Spirit could not begin until Christ inaugurated it from heaven.

In Acts 1:5, even after Christ's resurrection, it is clear that Jesus had not yet sent the Holy Spirit and that the church had not yet come into existence:

(3) To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God.

(4) Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," He said, "you heard of from Me; [back in John 15 & 16]

(5) for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

It is clear that the church would not come into existence until after Christ's death, resurrection, ascension, and the sending of the Holy Spirit. Acts 2 records this special coming of the Holy Spirit and the inauguration of the church. This event was the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy and His promises concerning the church.

God Instituted a New Way of Working with Mankind

Jesus' teaching about the church was sketchy and limited because the church would not come into existence until after his departure. But this was not the only reason for Christ's brevity. The book of Acts records a transitional time period in God's dealings with mankind – God was instituting a new way of working with mankind.

Prior to that time, God focused His efforts on the nation of Israel – and the key to pleasing God was to become part of the nation of Israel. Provision was even made for those who were not born as Israelites to become auxiliary members of the nation (see Exodus 12:48). But starting with the record of Acts chapter 2 God began a new way of working with mankind. This new thing called the church was something that God chose to keep hidden until the time that it came into existence. There was no clear teaching in the Old Testament about the church, and Jesus taught only in prophecy and hints about the church. God in His own wisdom and according to His own plan, chose to keep it a secret.

The New Testament word that tells us this is so is the word "mystery." A mystery is defined as something that was not previously revealed, but now is being revealed through the apostles and prophets. One passage that clearly defines this for us is Romans 16:25-27:

(25) Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past,

(26) but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith;

(27) to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen.

An example of the use of this term to describe the church is in Ephesians 3:1-7:

(1) For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles--

(2) if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you;

(3) that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief.

(4) By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ,

(5) which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit;

(6) to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel,

(7) of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power.

Before the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, all non-Jews would have to become proselytes of Judaism and obey the Mosaic Law in order to be pleasing to God. But now, God has a new way of working with mankind through the church – He is taking people from among all of the nations of the world and is making them members of one body (the church), and it is not the nation of Israel but a unique entity distinct from Israel (see 1 Cor 10:32).

Christ's teaching was brief because of the mystery of the Church

God's revelation was given progressively throughout human history.

We now see why Jesus did not teach more clearly about the church, but only gave hints and prophecies. The Bible is probably the only religious book that is tied to the historical timeline of mankind. God revealed Himself and His plan little by little over the course of world history, and His overall plan in history sometimes called for differences in the way He related to and dealt with people.

Since Jesus' teaching about the church was rather sketchy, it will be important to spend some time looking at what additional teaching the New Testament gives about the church. If we want to know more about the church, we must go to subsequent teaching later in the New Testament – the revelation of the mystery that was given to the apostles and prophets after the actual inauguration of the church.