

## What is the "Church"?

The RCC insists that it is impossible to be saved outside of the RCC. "It must be held by faith that outside the Apostolic Roman Church, no one can be saved; that this is the only ark of salvation; that he who shall not have entered therein will perish in the flood." Pope Pius IX, Dec 9, 1854 (see also Pope Innocent II Dec 18, 1208; Pope Leo XIII in *Sapientiae Christianae* Jan 10, 1890; Pope Pius X *Lucunda Sane* March 12, 1904; Pope Innocent III & Lateran Council IV AD1215; Pope Boniface VIII *Unam Sanctum* Nov 18, 1302; Pope Eugene IV & Council of Florence Feb 4, 1442)

We have shown in the prior segment that the RCC claim to be the only true church fails under biblical scrutiny. Therefore, the claim also fails. The question then arises: "What is the 'church' envisioned in all of those NT passages?" The first key is the definition of the word itself. *"Ekklesia"* literally means "citizens called out from their homes into an assembly". In the literal sense, it has nothing to do directly with religion, being a more general term. But NT writers adopted the term, probably because of its element of "calling out". Church members are called out of their worldly lives into a life of devotion to God. This is exactly what is being said by John in Revelation. At the end of time, all those who would choose God are asked to do so. We are to "come out of" the "whore" (apostate religion), and come to God. When this call is finished, the fate of all is settled with the cry of Rev 22:11 "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still."

The church is described using a number of different metaphors. God uses these figures of speech because they convey additional meaning beyond the bare words. It would have been possible to describe the church and our obligations in it using sterile formulas, but these would not allow the richness of meaning found in metaphors. When Jesus uses the vineyard imagery (Matt 21:33ff), it allowed Jesus to teach about the unfaithfulness of those who had been entrusted with His oracles (Acts 7:38, Rom 3:2, Heb 5:12, 1 Pet 4:11). Paul was then able (Rom 11:16-21) to expand the picture using pruning and grafting to explain membership in God's kingdom. A sterile textbook is replaced with wonderful word pictures of great impact.

Our first look at the specifics of the church is Eph 1:22-23. Here Paul clearly states that the "body of Christ" is the church, and that Christ has been given the headship over it. We must emphasize the fact that the head of the church is Christ, not some human, regardless of office. It is worth noting that Paul does not state this as a new idea, but rather as fulfillment of a prophecy given in Psalm 8:6. Again and again we will see that the apostles give OT statements as the foundation of their statements. The observation we made when studying *sola scriptura* that there are no new doctrines in the NT is again borne out here. The more we study, the more apparent this will become.

In 1 Cor 12, Paul continues the metaphor of the "body of Christ" to describe the church. The church has many members, just as the body does. And just as Eph 1:22-23 points out Jesus' control over the church, here again, He controls the membership, by placing members within it. Each of us acts to accept Christ's sacrifice, then we are washed by Jesus' blood, and become members of the church by grace. God grants us different spiritual gifts, so that we may complement each other to complete the work. Just as the body would not do well being made up of only one body part (multiplied), the church would not do well with only one spiritual gift. "All persons" (v6) are invited to be "brethren", and part of the church. 2 Peter 3:9 makes it clear that God does not anyone to die, but for everyone to come to the truth, become part of the church, and be saved.

The second metaphor we will explore is that of a building. Peter explores this idea in 1 Peter 2:4-8. He uses prophecies from Is 28:16, Psalm 118:22 and Is 8:14 to show that Jesus is the cornerstone: the first stone of the foundation. This is a reiteration of Jesus' statement in Matt 16:18, showing that Peter understood Jesus to be describing Himself as the foundation of the church. The same language is used to describe us as "living stones" which will be built up into the spiritual house of God. Each of us has a part to play in building the church, just as each part of the body joins with the others to make up the whole. The comparison of us to "living stones", with Jesus as the "cornerstone", brings to view the statement in the Creation account where we are made in God's own image. Jesus is asking us to return spiritually to the image of our maker.

Paul expands the metaphor slightly in Eph 2:19-22. There he describes Jesus as the "cornerstone", and the apostles and prophets as the foundation. We are then built upon this foundation. We are the church, not Jesus or the apostles. Any failure to remain firmly planted on the cornerstone of Christ or the

foundation of the apostles (founded on Christ) will result in our living stone falling out of the true church structure. This is further expanded by Christ Himself in His illustration of the house built on the sand (Matt 7:24-27). No accident of heritage will allow us to be in God's church. The Jews lost their position as God's favored people (Matt 21:43-44, cf Is 8:14; 26:2; 43:28; 66:20-21), and new members were grafted in (Romans 11:16-21).

The condition for being a member of the church is simple. We must obey God's voice, and keep His covenant. Those who follow God's commands will be remnant rescued from the earth.

It may not be absolutely necessary for a believer to be a member of an organized body of believers, or congregation, since this is not listed as a condition of salvation. However, it is of considerable benefit, and comes highly recommended. Gathering together allows us to receive the wisdom of those who have been in the truth longer and are more studied. We can encourage one another. These are activities which are of great benefit to the Christian. But simple benefits are not the end.

We have duties as members of the body of Christ. We are commanded to gather together, as a means of holding fast to the truth. Failure to assemble can allow the truth to become distorted or diluted, while times of refreshing keep the purity and vitality of the message intact. We are commanded to bring tithes and offerings into the church to further its activities in moving the work forward. Inside the body of Christ, we are each given gifts to further the work. We are expected to use those gifts, or we will be accountable for the failure to use them (Matt 25:14-46).

We are to be examples. The Christian is the only gospel many will read, so we are required to reflect Christ. This is important, not only in the world, but in the church for the encouragement of other members.

The church requires a form of government. Christ appoints apostles, evangelists, teachers and so on. Each of these persons has duties relating to his gift and office. In particular, there will be "overseers". This requires that these persons have some authority in their office. The question then arises as to the nature of that authority.

Authority exists for the purpose of bringing the believers into uniform understanding of the truth (Eph 4:11-13). Therefore, a form of authority which acts to compel the membership is wrong. Leaders are to be servants, not commanders. Peter describes this task as "shepherding the flock" in a voluntary manner, not compelling but acting as examples in the faith. Members are to submit themselves (Heb 13:7,17) to this leading, recognizing that their leaders are striving to be Christ-like. At the same time, we must never blindly submit, accepting without question their teaching. We are warned that there will be false teachers, and we are to prove all things again and again against the one standard, the Bible. In this way we will not be rebelling against the authority of the leaders to protect the word, but will be strengthening our own understanding of it.