

The Church of God

It is important to acknowledge that it is by no accident that the church is referred to by the name 'Church of God' throughout the New Testament. Although the church was called 'Israel' from the time of the Exodus to the advent of our Saviour, God's people have since always retained the name 'Church of God' as a sign of their allegiance to the pattern and example of the New Testament Church.

God Himself re-named His people when the Gentiles were included – Isaiah 62:2, *'And the Gentiles shall see your righteousness, and all kings your glory: and you shall be called by a new name, which the mouth of the LORD shall name.'*

In Jesus Christ's prayer before His crucifixion, He said, *'Holy Father, keep through your own name those whom you have given me, While I was with them in the world, I kept them in your name.... 26 And I have declared unto them your name, and will declare it: that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.'* John 17:11,12 ,26.

The Apostle Paul says in Ephesians 3:14-15, *'For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named.'* So it is that the true Church in history always referred to themselves as 'the Church of God', though they may have been called by other names by non-members, eg. Waldenses, Lollards etc.

The Church of God is not a physical organisation. It is a spiritual organism, with Jesus Christ at its head, and when you find any group claiming that they alone are the one true church, recognise that this is a symptom of an idolatrous wish to replace Jesus Christ as the head of the Church by a man-made system of control and dominion, against the instructions of Christ, designed for the advantage of those who lead that physical organisation. Matthew 20:25-27, *'But Jesus called them unto him, and said, You know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant.'*

Only Jesus Christ knows all the scattered members of the one true Church, who are linked to Him by the Holy Spirit as branches of the vine. *'I am the vine, you are the branches: He that abides in me, and I in him, the same brings forth much fruit: for without me you can do nothing.'* John 15:5.

The word 'church' is a translation of the Greek word 'ekklesia' from ek - out of, and klesis – a calling - the 'called out ones'. Each one of us has been chosen by Jesus Christ to be future members of the family of God, Romans 8:28, *'For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.'* We have been chosen for a special calling, 1 Corinthians 1:26-27, *'For you see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty.'*

This is what Jesus Christ and God the Father planned, even before they had created the earth. Ephesians 1:4-5, *'According as he has chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will.'* We are to be

prepared for service, Luke 1:17, *'And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.'* This involves our refining and purification - *'Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a people for his own, zealous of good works'*, Titus 2:14. Our goal is to become without blemish, *'That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish,'* Ephesians 5:27, in preparation for our marriage to Jesus Christ, Revelation 19:7-8, *'Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honor to him: for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his wife has made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteous acts of saints.'*

The Church has a two-fold role. It exists to edify its members in preparation for their future role as Kings and Priests in the Kingdom of God, here on this earth, after Christ's return, Revelation 5:10, *'And have made us unto our God a kingdom and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.'* Equally it exists to preach the gospel of the Kingdom of God to the world, Mark 1:14-15, *'Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent, and believe the gospel.'* Matthew 28:19-20, *'Go you therefore, and teach 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. Amen.'*

To achieve these goals, God has provided His people with special and individual gifts as we see in the example of the Apostle Paul, Ephesians 3:7, *'Of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power.'* These are not ranks, as some have mistakenly taught, for all in God's church are equal, but simply various kinds of servant or minister, 1 Corinthians 12:27-28, *'Now you are the body of Christ, and members in particular. And God has set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helpers, administrators, various kinds of tongues.'* These individual gifts enable the Church to function efficiently and successfully grow the church through the spreading of the gospel.

God also likens the church to a building, and Christians to the building blocks, set upon a firm foundation, Ephesians 2:19-21, *'Now therefore you are no more strangers and sojourners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone; In whom all the building fitly framed together grows unto a holy temple in the Lord.'* Notice here the inclusion of the prophets of the Old Testament, without whom we would know much less about the Kingdom of God!

Jesus Christ though, is the head of the Church – Colossians 1:18, *'And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the pre-eminence.'* The rest of us are likened to parts of that body, eye, tongue, hand or foot, based upon the gifts that God has given us, 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, *'For as the body is one, and has many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit were we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.'*

So, God's church is a **spiritual temple**, a holy people, and each of us a part of a royal priesthood, 1 Peter 2:5, *'You also, as living stones, are built up into a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.'* Guided by Jesus Christ and His holy spirit each of us must have an *active part*, participating in the work of God's church in spreading the **true gospel** as revealed in the Bible. By practicing and publishing these truths to the world, God's people are sanctified, John 17:16-19, *'They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through your truth: your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth.'*

Truth, of course, is the pure word of God, John 8:31-32, *'Then said Jesus to those Jews who believed on him, If you **continue in my word**, then are you my disciples indeed; And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.* God's Church will always be found keeping His commandments, 1 John 2:3-4, *'And by this we know **that we know him**, if we keep his commandments. He that says, I know him, and keeps not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.'*

When God calls us to repentance and baptism, He grants us the gift of His Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands, Acts 2:38, *'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 you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'* Any true Christian, who fulfils the above requirements and has themselves received God's Holy Spirit, may baptise another and lay their hands upon the head of the new convert to pass on the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Today, it has to be admitted that it is hard to find such a church, as was long ago prophesied for the end-time spiritual Temple, Ezekiel 8:1-6, 9:4-6. The Church of God has been attacked and splintered by Satan, so that even the larger splinters, which superficially look fine, with impressive magazines etc., still worship the 'image of jealousy' mentioned in Ezekiel, and are more concerned with their large paycheques, numbers and income than the Truth. If you find that hard to believe, just go along and check out how receptive their ministry is to any suggestion that there is some Biblical Truth which they omit and which needs serious investigation. Their rejection of any such suggestion will sadly reveal their dominion over the laity which Jesus Christ condemned. 2Timothy 3:5, *'Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away.'* Never should we find dominion, constraint or fear of men within God's Church, *'By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another.'* John 13:35.

So, it is in small and scattered independent groups and individuals that God's Church is likely to be found in the nations of Israel today, Luke 12:32, *'Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.'* Matthew 18:20, *'For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.'* We should not be discouraged by this, but all the more determined to serve God by contacting each other to join together to do His work, meet together when we can, and ready ourselves for our combined future work in Jerusalem. (Read our article, 'God's End – Time Church in Jerusalem'). If you are such a Christian, feel free to contact us to find others who may live near enough for fellowship.

We find the true pattern of the organisation of the Church of God revealed in the New Testament. Jude, verse 3.... *'you should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.'* There were no large corporations or hierarchical organisations to be seen there, but rather small

independent churches, often even meeting in someone's home, or on a river bank under the trees, linked together by God's Holy Spirit and the occasional visit by one of the Apostles or an evangelist.

While the original Apostles were alive, and the church was young, there were things still to be decided as they met together in Jerusalem, and their decisions were documented as New Testament scripture for us today, but now we have the complete word of God as our guide and the Holy Spirit to lead us in its application.

Although this simple pattern guided the true Church down the ages (*'And I say also unto you, 'That you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hades shall not prevail against it,* Matthew 16:18), the vast majority were soon even deceived into rejecting God's 4th Commandment, by the false teaching of a powerful monolithic organisation headed by Popes, falsely claiming to be the Apostle Peter's successors. So came about the tradition of an elite and separate priesthood with power and control over the laity, and eventually even over nations and kings!

The true Church was quickly driven underground by persecution and the Inquisition, retreating into the wilderness areas of Europe and its outer reaches and islands, where it had been established long before the Roman Catholic Church even existed. From Britain, it established a foothold in America and returned to Europe and then the World; at its best, retaining the pattern and example of the New Testament Church.

There will always be those new in the faith, and those who have been in God's Church longer, who can sit down and explain the scriptures. God's word calls these more experienced Christians, 'elders', and Paul instructed Titus that, where numbers require it, such male elders be ordained, set apart for the teaching of God's word, Titus 1: 5,9, *'For this cause I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed you: ... Holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to refute the opposition.'*

These, often unpaid elders, still today serve and shepherd God's people, leading them in the carrying forward of the gospel, Jeremiah 3:15, *'And I will give you shepherds according to my heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding.'* The qualifications for ordination are provided in 1 Timothy 3, where the word 'bishop' means overseer, one who looks out over the church to maintain order in worship, edification and the carrying forth of the gospel to the locality. The role of the ministry also includes the responsibility of recognising the fruits of the spirit in order to ordain future elders, even as the brethren were asked to recognise deacons in Acts 6:3, *'Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.'*

Consequently, God's true ministers should always be suitable, mature elders in the faith, not youngsters put through a crash Bible course, even in a church college, which we have seen encourages a separation between God's people and their ministers. We see a good example in Apollos, *'This man was instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, he spoke and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only the baptism of John,'* Acts 18:25. Such men fully understand their role as defined by Jesus Christ and the Apostles, 1 Peter 5:1-3, *'The elders who are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking*

the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for dishonest gain, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock.'

We must not assume that this leaves God's true ministers without authority, for they have all the authority they need, in God's word, 1 Corinthians 11:1, *'Be followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.'* 2 Timothy 3:16, *'All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.'*

In the final analysis though, within the Church the responsibility always lies with God's people to recognise truth or error in that which they are taught, and to be prepared to speak up, and stand alone, if necessary, for the truth, *'I know your works, and your labor, and your patience, and how you can not bear them who are evil: and you have tried them who say they are apostles, and are not, and have found them liars.'* Revelation 2:2. Like Isaiah, *'For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch.'* Isaiah 62:1, ESV.

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