

The First Church

The Characteristics of the Church Christ Died For

Lesson I

Written by Dr. Edward Watke Jr.

Introduction:

Too often Christ is not given much credit concerning the Church age. Study Acts chapter one and note that the Book of Acts is the continuation of what Christ began to do and teach. (See Acts 1:1-5). We need to understand the importance of the local church and its ministry in our lives.

Questions:

1. What was the first church like -- that is -- the Church that Christ started, the Church that was empowered at Pentecost like?
 2. What are the characteristics of the early, New Testament Church which ought to be evident in our midst today in the twenty-first century.
 3. How was Paul's ministry directed by the Holy Spirit?
 4. What did Paul endeavor to consistently do from place to place?
 5. Does it matter if we understand what a Church ought to be like?
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I will share about the important characteristics of the Church in this and the other following sections.

I. THE CHURCH IS LOCAL.

There are many in Christendom who emphasize the universal Church almost to the total neglect of the importance of the local church. In so doing, many neglect the local church, or de-emphasize its importance in their lives. Thus, there are many who accept Christ as Savior and then feel they have little if any particular responsibility after that.

Have you ever seen a church that was not local? The emphasis in the Word of God is on the local church. The word church (Greek-Ekklesia) is used about 119 times in the New Testament and over 100 times it speaks of a local church in a local place doing God's will in God's way for God's glory.

There are a number of pictures, types, or imageries used in the New Testament to speak of the saved and of the church. All these refer to or give us an emphasis of something local.

1. A **rock** is local. (See Matthew 7:24; I Peter 2:5.)
2. A **building** is local. (See I Corinthians 3:9; Ephesians 2:21, 22.)
3. A **field** is local. (See I Corinthians 3:9.)'
4. A **body** is local. (See Ephesians 2:10-23; Colossians 1:18; I Corinthians 12:27.)

5. A **bride** is local. (See Ephesians 5:23-33.)
6. A **flock** is local. (See Luke 12:32; John 10:1-16; Acts 20:28.)
7. A **temple** is local. (See I Corinthians 3:15; I Peter 2:5.)
8. A **pillar** and **house** are local. (See I Timothy 3:15.)
9. A **candlestick** is local. (See Revelation 1:20.)

A study of all of these points helps us to see very clearly that the Word of God puts the emphasis upon a local church. The great commission (Matthew 28:18-20) was given to the church, and can only be carried out by a local church in a given place by people who are committed to the ministry of that local church. (See Acts 20:17-32.) There are many para-church organizations which try to take the place of the local church, but in reality they cannot do so and they will find it impossible to carry out all the commands, etc., given to the local church. The church will not be able to serve the Lord when it has finally gone home to glory, we must do it now. Then it will be too late to send missionaries (Acts 13:1-5), to take up offerings or to win the lost, plus a host of other things.

II. THE CHURCH IS CALLED OUT.

The church is made up of the "called out ones," for the very meaning of the word Ekklesia (Greek) means a people called out for a specific purpose. The church is made up of saved people gathered out from the world to serve the Lord. The church must be an assembled people. God is calling out a people for His name sake. (Acts 15:

1. Called Out to Follow His Will

With little delay in the early church, people were baptized and then added to the church. (See Acts 2:41-47; 4:4; 5:13; 9:26; 18:8.)

So many today treat church membership lightly. The need of membership is denied, debated and sometimes ignored. But God added daily such as should be saved, and you can add some number to a question mark. Also God in His word let us know there were 3,000 souls saved on the day of Pentecost. Paul built churches everywhere he went. Of necessity Paul spoke of and taught the importance of the local Church, because that is God's will.

Christ gave His all for the church. (Eph. 5:25) The very least we can do is obligate ourselves to the ministry of a local church.

2. Called Out To Be Effective, Victorious

How can a church be effective unless it is -- organized, visible, obedient, and of course a local church? Such a church needs leaders who are God-given. (See Eph. 4:11-14.) This will include pastor-teachers, evangelists and missionaries. What a contrast to the much emphasis on the universal church that has never met and will not until we meet in glory.

3. Called Out To the End of This Age

Prophetically, the seven messages to the churches, as given in Revelation chapters two and three, cover the period of the history of the church age.

They were local churches, all seven in Asia, which were called out by God. These were the seven golden candlesticks referred to in Revelation 1:12, 20. Christ sent His angel to testify unto us about these messages to the churches. (See Rev. 22:16.)

The Church Age continues on until the time of the rapture of the Church. Do we sense the urgency to carry the burden, the ministry and purpose of the local church upon our hearts. We ought to put away the indifference that is so often apparent among God's people.

4. Called Out to Continue What Christ Began. (See Acts 1:1)

We are to continue to do what Christ began to do and teach. This is why the Holy Spirit was sent-- to empower the saints of God, as a member of a local church, to continue that ministry which Christ began.

The work of Christ in the gospels and the work of the apostles and disciples in the book of Acts was very similar. Pentecost only accelerated, and enlarged the work.

Christ's commands, teaching and training were to be fulfilled by the apostles. His plan for our ministry is the same today, it has not changed.

Some applications:

Here is a charge to all of us. I believe with all my heart that church members can have a great impact upon their pastor and assistants and their ministry. These following three things are very vital.

1. Have the right attitude. Understand the pastor or leaders position that is given by God. Be patient and give loyalty and respect.

2. Be involved in the right action. Be a prayer warrior as you seek to support the labors of everyone together. (See Romans 15:30; I Thess. 5:12,13; Heb. 13:7, 17)

3. Be accountable. Consider your own influence upon your children, upon other members or attenders and your accountability before God.

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Lesson II

There are many wonderful characteristics of the early church. All of these ought to greatly thrill our hearts and have an impact on our lives. In this second section we will examine additional characteristics of the early church. These also should challenge us in our service to Christ.

Questions (for discussion)

1. Why is it important to recognize that the early church was begun by the Apostles?

2. What was their ministry compared to what we consider the ministry of the church today?

3. In what ways do you consider yourself a part of the church for which Christ died? What does the local church mean to you?

4. What is the basic problem in regard to peoples' attitude toward the local church or this church age?

5. Do you feel Christians have the respect they ought to have for the local church? If not, why not? (Of course I am writing about a church that truly teaches the Word of God and stands on all the doctrines of the faith.)

I. THE EARLY CHURCH WAS APOSTOLIC.

(Luke 6:13-16; Acts 14:14; I Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 2:20,21; 3:5)

The Apostles were the original twelve whom Jesus called to be His disciples, (plus Paul), whom He trained for His ministry. I will no name them here, bu they were called Apostles, and were the foundation for the church as we find stated in Ephesians 2:20-22 and 4:11-14.

1. The Apostles Were Prepared By Christ.

These men were commissioned by Christ prior to Pentecost. The work of the Apostles and disciples was the same after Pentecost as it was before Pentecost. After Pentecost they had a full measure of the Holy Spirit's person and power to fulfill their labors. The administration of the church changed from the present, visible Savior to the indwelling Holy Spirit. (Acts chapter one)

The twelve made up the Church before Pentecost and were a distinct entity, a closely knit group, a called-out body of men with Christ as their sole head. They forsook their former associations to become followers of the Pastor-Christ, the Great Shepherd. But now they looked to the Holy Spirit for direction. In studying the Book of Acts, one would find the name, "Holy Spirit," or "Spirit" over 60 times. A thorough study would bring a person to the conclusion that the Holy Spirit is the One who continues the work started by the Savior. They looked to the Spirit for leadership and power.

2. The Apostles Were Taught By Christ.

Christ taught or instructed these men in many aspects of ministry. They went out two by two calling on the Jews, they heard Him teach and preach, and were given many truths which prepared them for a later ministry.

- taught to witness -- Matthew 4:19; Acts 1:1; 1:8
- taught to evangelize -- Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 24:44-49; Mark 16:15; John 20:21, parables of Luke 14; urgency of sowing seed as seen in Matthew 13.
- Urged to bring forth fruit -- John 15:16
- Taught to be Spirit led and taught -- John 14:16, 26; John 15:26; John 16:7-13
- taught to pray -- Luke 11, 18; John 14:13,14
- taught to suffer persecution -- John 15: 15:33
- taught to practice the ordinances -- John 3:22, 26; 4:1,2; Matthew 26:26; Luke 22:19, 20

3. They Were the Foundation of the Church, Laid by Christ.

It is very vital for us to realize that Christ, the Chief Cornerstone laid a foundation for us-- namely the Apostles. We ought to rejoice that we are a part of the local church Christ planned.

Also it is very important to note that not all Apostolic experience was to become Apostolic doctrine. If all their experiences were to become doctrine for us to practice,

then many things they did or how they did it would be doctrine to be fulfilled today. An illustration at hand is that Christ heal three blind people in three different ways. That is, there was not any one method He used in performing the miracles, and He could have healed all of them by merely speaking the word.

Application:

1. He is the foundational stone, and we also are a part of a greater edifice, the local Church made up of born again people, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, manifesting a new nature. He purchased this church with His own blood. The builder fits the pieces as He sees fit.

2. Christ began His divine masonry while He was here and that work continues on as we are “living stones” of His planning and work through faith in Him for salvation. Does this excite you about your part in a local church, a manifestation of His work and plan? (See I Peter 2:1-11.)

3. As stones of His planning and making we are to be substantial, solid, steadfast, stable, strong and we are safe in Him. Stones do not decompose, rust, nor decay. They are local, definite, tangible, visible, and recognizable.

II. THE EARLY CHURCH WAS DISCIPLINED.

1. Christ Labored With Them.

The Church was made up of the Apostles with whom Christ labored, preparing them, molding their lives into a group of dedicated, disciplined men who would be ready to serve Him and do His will.

Using the imagery of living stones, they as “God’s living stones,” had to be shaped, chiseled, squared, and polished with divine care. they needed also the power of the Holy Spirit to bring about personal discipline so they would be ready to withstand the onslaughts of the Satan. (Luke 22:32; I Peter 5:8-10)

Christ’s works in our lives to bring about His will and plan. To bring this to fruition requires His shaping and polishing us. Sometimes this takes place through suffering, trials, and chastening.

2. Christ Had Called Them.

He planned to make them “fishers of men.” To follow Christ would necessitate a personal dedication and discipline we probably do not think about. It meant leaving their homes at times, their families, jobs, future, etc., and entering into an itinerant ministry for Christ. Of course we do not know about all of them, and where they labored, but we know He called them. (II Peter 1:9)

Doubtless, this was not easy, but meant an arduous life of much privation and difficulty. It would require self-determination, and the putting away of a self-centered life. There could be no pampering, no shortcuts and no snap courses in the route to becoming an Apostle. We forget they spent much for three years with Christ. To be used of Christ requires no less discipline for us today. The problem is we live in a very undisciplined age.

Application:

Likewise, there are no shortcuts to our becoming a vessel He can use. (II Tim. 2: Possibly we would rather He did not call us and bring such demands upon our lives. Contrarily, we ought to be thrilled that Christ would choose us and then call us to serve Him.

When we study the Book of Ephesians, which covers many things about the church age, we read much about the walk of the Christian. It would be wise to make a study of chapters four, five, and six and note the extent to which the Apostle Paul deals with our walk. Such a Biblically correct, godly walk always brings a demand for our surrender.

III. THE EARLY CHURCH WAS A MISSIONARY CHURCH.

We find the same charter, constitution and chart for the Church in the Gospels as found in the Epistles. We have the same Savior, commission, divine program, motive and message as the Apostles had before us.

1. They Were Sent.

Christ first sent them two by two, as seventy were sent forth. (See Matthew 10:5-8). A total of thirty-five missionary teams were sent out. No wonder there was wonderful growth in the early church, as many lives had been touched. They knew something about being sent. (John 4:36-38) As He sent them they were organized and given a mandate of service.

Later He also sent out the twelve, two by two, as they went forth preaching repentance. (See Mark 6:7, 12).

2. They Were Empowered.

The power available for them is the same we are promised today. (See Acts 1:8; Luke 24:44-49.) They were to tarry for the power of the Holy Spirit upon them. (Note also Acts 4:31-33.) Only by the power of the Holy Spirit (who also empowered Christ, experiencing His unction), will we be used of God to impact the world around us.

Application:

1. Why are we so powerless today compared to the early church?

2. What is lacking in the churches today? How could we see a change? Why do we have so little impact on those around us?

3. We too are living stone with all we need to be fruitful. What can we do to become more fruitful? (See I Peter 2:1-9; II Peter 1:1-11)

4. Could it be our biggest problem is we are indifferent to God's glory in the local Church? (Eph. 1:12)
