

# Guard The Truth!

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## What Is the Church?

How does God define the church? What comprises it according to the Bible? Must there be only one organization at a time?

Perhaps the best place to begin answering these questions is by tracing the etymology of the word "church" itself, and then looking at the way it is used in context. Many have assumed that it derives from the Greek *ekklesia*, but this is not true. The English word "church" descends from an Old English word *cirice*, akin to an Old High German word, *kirihha*. Both words derive from a Late Greek word, *kuriakon*, which comes from the Greek *kuriakos*, the possessive form of the word *kurios*, the term for "lord." *Kuriakos* thus simply means "lord's," showing possession, or "belonging to the lord" (*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1985, p. 240). It can denote anything that belongs to the Lord.

The apostles, when they wrote the books of the New Testament, could have used *kuriakos*, but it appears only twice in the Bible: in I Corinthians 11:20 (*Lord's* supper) and Revelation 1:10 (*Lord's* day). Neither usage contains any reference to "church." Instead, the apostles used the word *ekklesia* 112 times. *Ekklesia* does *not* mean "belonging to the lord," though that may be implied. The apostles used *ekklesia* because they had a more specific meaning in mind.

The word "church" to an English-speaking person is a dominating, inclusive term with definite spiritual connotations. A particular quality is always inherent in the use of the word "church" because it means "the lord's." The church is the Lord's. Yet *ekklesia* is different.

In comparison with other terms, *ekklesia* was relatively neutral and colorless, conveying by itself little theological meaning. It was open to use without basic shift in meaning, by unbelievers as well as by believers. (*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1, p. 607)

Bible dictionaries, lexicons and commentaries agree that *ekklesia* means "called out," and generally implies an assembly of people. It lacks qualitative implication to anything either carnal or spiritual. The context in which it appears must always supply the specific reason one is called out or assembled.

Again from the *Interpreter's Dictionary*: "*Ekklesia* was used primarily to designate a particular communal reality, not to describe its qualitative aspects" (*ibid.*). *Ekklesia* describes anything that might be happening within a community that requires an assembly. This assembly could be social, governmental or religious. It could be legal or illegal.

## Riot in Ephesus!

When the apostle Paul first preached in Ephesus, his message caused a stir among the people. In Acts 19:26 they accused him of saying that "they are not gods which are made with hands," arousing the

ire of the local idol makers. They resented what Paul said because his preaching was diminishing their incomes. Naturally, they responded by making an outcry against the apostle and those who were with him. They filled the streets in riot!

And when they heard this, they were full of wrath and cried out, saying, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" So the whole city was filled with confusion, and rushed into the theater with one accord, having seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians, Paul's travel companions . . . . The assembly [*ekklesia*] was confused, and most of them did not know why they had come together. (verses 28-29, 32)

They knew they had been called to assemble, but they did not understand the reason for their calling.

"And when the city clerk had quieted the crowd, he said: . . . 'if you have any other inquiry to make, it shall be determined in the lawful assembly [*ekklesia*]' (verses 35, 39). He reminded the people that a legal assembly could be arranged. "For we are in danger of being called in question for today's uproar, there being no reason which we may give to account for this disorderly gathering" (verse 40). To this point the assembly, the *ekklesia*, was a confused mob of people, aroused in anger against the apostle Paul. "And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly [*ekklesia*]."

These verses show very clearly that *ekklesia* by itself requires qualitative modifiers. It can refer to a gathering that is either carnal or spiritual. The context has to define its usage.

*Ekklesia*, then, is more flexible than the English word "church," transcending its narrow boundaries. *Ekklesia* is not bound, as will be seen, by race; language; city, state, or national boundaries; corporate laws; space or time. God may have inspired the writers to use it solely to connote the transcendence of *His* calling out. Tracing it back to its beginning and bringing it forward to the present will show this fact clearly.

### **Classical Greek Usage**

The roots of the word go all the way back to the city of Athens in its classical period, which stretched from roughly 550 to 350 b.c. Within the city-state *ekklesia* consisted of all the citizens who had retained their civil rights. The *ekklesia's* powers were almost unlimited. It elected and dismissed magistrates and directed the policy of the city. It declared war, and it made peace. It negotiated and approved treaties and arranged alliances. It chose generals, assigned troops to different campaigns, raised the necessary money and dispatched those troops from city to city. It was an assembly in which all members had equal right and duty. As the Roman Empire rose and supplanted the Greeks, the Romans adopted the term into Latin.

The concept that distinguishes biblical usage from classical Greek usage is the emphasis that it is *God's* assembly. *Ekklesia*, therefore, means God's people, called together by God to listen to or act for God. The emphasis is on the action of God, which has the force of a summons (as from a judge). The biblical *ekklesia*, the church, is a body of people, not so much assembling because they chose to come together, but assembling because God called them to Himself—not assembling to share their own thoughts and opinions, but to listen to the voice of God.

Paul says to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28: "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to 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." Here the *ekklesia* is identified as the possession of the One who

called it. This establishes the nature of *ekklesia* as a society or community. It belongs to Him because He called it into being, dwells in it, rules over it and accomplishes His purpose within it and through it.

### **Biblical Examples**

When Jesus said, "I will build My church" (Matthew 16:18), He was not describing a church in its normal English usage, as an organization with buildings, offices, services and activities. He was implying a fellowship of believers. God's *ekklesia* is not a church in the denominational sense, but a fellowship of *all* believers in Jesus Christ, not identifying it with any particular group men might establish, but embracing *all* who fit the Bible's qualifications. So, when the biblical writers use *ekklesia* in a context involving God and His people, they are drawing attention to the transcendent purpose for which God calls them out.

In a majority of scriptures the *ekklesia* is the whole of God's people, of which a congregation, a denomination or a corporate entity form but a part. Remember the classical Greek usage: *ekklesia* included *all* the citizens of Athens. An army parallel may help illustrate the point. A division is part of an army. The army has several divisions. So then a division is an element of a greater army, and the army in turn is part of something even greater, the nation. *Ekklesia*, in this analogy, is the nation. In the Bible it is most often used in this sense.

Acts 11:26 shows *ekklesia* in another of its usages. "And when [Barnabas] had found [Paul], he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people." It is an occasion when a specific congregation gathers for the hearing of a message, for prayer or meditation, or for the deliberation of a matter that has come up within the congregation. This is also the sense of Romans 16:5, where a church was meeting in a house.

Notice a second and very interesting usage found in Romans 16:1, 4. "I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea . . . [Priscilla and Aquila] risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles."

These verses refer to a community of believers gathered from a specific area. The area could be a specific household, city, province, nation, race (the Gentiles), or culture. The major difference in this usage is that the people are *ekklesia* whether they are together or not. The church in Cenchrea was still *ekklesia* whether they were holding a service or scattered throughout the area identified by the city. This principle shows also that, if there were only one person in God's church, he would still be *ekklesia*. This further demonstrates that it is not restricted by ordinary human conventions, as demanded by the English word "church."

### **The Time Element**

The time element encompassed by *ekklesia* is also essential. Paul mentions its past in Ephesians 3:9-11. He says God chose him

to make all people see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The *ekklesia*, called here "the fellowship of the mystery," and in other translations "the dispensation of the mystery," existed in the beginning of the ages, but was hidden in the mind of God. From the Creation at the latest, He purposed that there would be a group of called-out ones to do His will.

Now notice Ephesians 1:3-5:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will . . . .

In the past the church has explained this passage to mean that God planned to call a body of people to bring them to spiritual completion and to do His Work. More than that, the church existed collectively in His mind and plan from the beginning.

Revelation 1:20 shows *ekklesia* since the church's founding in a.d. 31. "The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches [*ekklesia*] and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches." These seven churches span the time from Christ and the first-century church until His return.

Hebrews 12:22-23 describes *ekklesia*'s future. "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church [*ekklesia*] of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect." Notice the locations that he names: Mt. Zion, the city of the living God and heavenly Jerusalem. Then the author names the church of the firstborn. The revealing of these places and groups is still to happen! The firstborn, the called-out ones, have yet to put on incorruption. True Christians have not been "made perfect." Their change has not yet occurred (I Corinthians 15:49-54), but they are already part of the assembly of the firstborn—that is, in God's mind.

These three scriptures together show that *ekklesia* transcends the boundaries not only of space (reaching out even to the heavenly city, far beyond the confines of earth), but also of time! It covers all of time from the earliest plan of God to the resurrection!

It does *not* consist only of those who are alive now, but also includes all that have ever been part of the *ekklesia*, beginning with the time of God's thought before the foundation of the world. Then from righteous Abel, *ekklesia* includes any who were converted, having His Spirit, up to the resurrection when the firstborn will inherit the Kingdom of God.

Put simply, *ekklesia* includes all who will be in the first resurrection. It includes all the people of God whom He gathered from among the nations to do the redeeming work of Christ and to participate in the kingdom of God that He inaugurates. Members of the *ekklesia* are the recipients and channels of God's glory and the heirs of the promises.

## **Difference in Covenants**

A statement made by John the Baptist explains a major difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. In speaking to the religious leaders of his day, he said, "And do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones" (Matthew 3:9).

The Old Covenant was limited to the political entity called the Children of Israel. Few Gentiles ever entered into it. Those who were a part of the political entity of Israel consisted of those who had made the covenant with God, and as a result God dwelt among them. Israelites felt that they were born into this relationship with God.

But with the coming of the New Covenant, birth into this relationship is totally removed. The called-out ones, the *ekklesia*, still make the covenant with God, but the basis is no longer national or racial. Under the New Covenant the spiritual realities of repentance, faith in Jesus Christ, receipt of God's Holy Spirit, and obedience to God through the Spirit become the primary points of focus.

Now the result is that God is not just among the people who have made the covenant, but actually in them! They are now designated as the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16). God now distinguishes two different Israels. Again this shows that *ekklesia* is bound *only* by the limits God sets, not even the boundaries set up under the Old Covenant.

## Church History

Beginning with the Biblical account and moving through the centuries to today, the record shows that during most of its history, the *ekklesia* of God operated as a loose association of independent congregations. The church was tightly organized at times, especially during the Ephesian Era (c. a.d. 31-100). Nonetheless, first-century Christians possessed no telephones, no television, no telegraph, no radio, no jet travel, no trains or automobiles—nothing by which they could have rapid transportation and communication. The apostles, leaving Jerusalem after receiving their commission, personally spread the Word throughout the world, operating with very little contact with one another. Their fellowship was with Christ in heaven through the Spirit.

If time and experience began to show differences in approach or doctrine, as described in Acts 15, they would occasionally come together in an attempt to unify their approach. But after their meetings, they would return to their respective areas of operation and continue independently of one another, in faith, trusting God through Jesus Christ to keep them on track.

In the twentieth century, God called Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong into the true church, known by the name Church of God, Seventh Day. This church had at least three different, independent conferences. Mr. Armstrong worked mainly with the Oregon Conference of the Church of God, Seventh Day (*Autobiography of Herbert W. Armstrong*, vol. 1, pp. 409-411, 414, 427). He frequently mentions in his articles and in his *Autobiography* that another conference of the Church of God was headquartered in Stanberry, Missouri (*Autobiography*, pp. 314, 409). A third conference operated out of Salem, West Virginia (*Autobiography*, p. 557). Was only one of them the true church? Though they had different Boards of Directors and operated independently, they all retained the same basic doctrines.

When Mr. Armstrong came out of the Church of God, Seventh Day, beginning another era of the true church with a different organizational form, God blessed him and the Work. Now there were clearly

at least two different, simultaneous organizations. In this twentieth century, God has given a clear and well-documented example of two different organizations, each with a different organizational form and somewhat different bylaws. Yet both of them had nearly similar doctrine, and both were the church of God.

## The Body of Christ

Is not the church Christ's Body? Can the church be in different organizations?

The answer is found in Ephesians 1:22-23. "And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church [*ekklesia*], which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all."

In his discussion of these verses in *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Kenneth S. Wuest writes, "The Church [*ekklesia*] is described as that 'which is His body.' The word 'which' is *hetis* 'which is of such a nature as,' and has a qualitative nature to it." The nature of *ekklesia* in this context comes from the association with its head, Jesus Christ.

Of the word "body," *soma*, *Expositor's* says: "The word *soma*, which passes readily from its literal meaning [the human body] into the figurative sense of a *society*, a number of men constituting a social or ethical union, . . . is frequently applied in the N.T. epistles to the Church, . . . as the mystical body of Christ, the fellowship of believers regarded as an organic [living] spiritual unity in a living relation to Christ, subject to Him, animated by Him, and having His power operating in it. The relation between Christ and the Church, therefore, *is not an external relation*. . . ." (vol. 1, "Ephesians and Colossians," p. 56, emphasis ours)

In other words, it is not bound by human convention. It is not bound by corporate laws that men establish, for Christ is in the *ekklesia* wherever its members may be.

Continuing from *Wuest's*:

The relation between Christ and the Church, therefore, is not an external relation, or one simply of Superior and inferior, Sovereign and subject, but one of life and incorporation [within Him]. The Church is not merely an institution ruled by Him as President, a Kingdom in which He is the Supreme Authority, or a vast company of men in moral sympathy with Him, but a Society which is in vital connection with Him, having the source of its life in Him, sustained and directed by His power, the instrument also by which He works. (ibid., pp. 56-57)

This is the usage of *ekklesia* in the New Testament. It is a mystical body with no external relations. It is something that is internal; it is something mental; it is something of the spirit. It is not bound by race, by language, by city or state or nationality. It is not restricted to the earth or to time.

The word "mystical" means "having a spiritual meaning or reality that is neither apparent to the senses [an external relation, sensed by the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, touch] nor obvious to the intelligence; involving or having the nature of an individual's direct subjective communion with God"

(*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1985, p. 785). The church, the *ekklesia*, consists of those who have been called out by God, summoned by Him, to receive His Spirit and have direct communion with Him.

Paul makes a similar statement to Ephesians 1:22-23 in I Corinthians 12:12-13.

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks [transcends national boundaries], whether slaves or free [transcends cultural or social status]—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.

The *ekklesia* is not a humanly defined corporation, but the mystical body of Christ, having the Spirit of God.

During the baptismal ceremony, the minister says, "I baptize you, not into any organization or denomination of men, but into the name of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Spirit"—into the Family of God! God's family is a spiritual family, having a spiritual union. We are tied together by the Holy Spirit of God.

### **Not Debtors to the Flesh**

Paul writes in Romans 8:10-17:

And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit that dwells in you.

Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh [not according to the external], to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God [the *ekklesia*!].

For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.

So we are debtors, not to that which is external, [the flesh], but to the Spirit, that is, to Christ. Thus, in matters of government or doctrine our responsibility is to God.

Often in the history of the church, if the faithful had not left the then-dominant body of Christian people, they would have returned to the world! The people of God have consistently been the ones either to leave or to be thrust out. In some way they have been detached, either by their own actions or by God's, from an existing organization.

This process begins very early in the Bible. Noah left society and boarded the ark. God called Abraham out from Ur of the Chaldees. Lot and his family left Sodom and Gomorrah. The more

righteous Judeans retained the worship of God and seceded from Israel during the reign of the evil Jeroboam I. And of course, God commands His people to come out of Babylon (Revelation 18:4). The Bible is full of such examples.

## Questions of the Faithful

The book of Malachi seems to have been written about such a similar situation. Malachi wrote in Judea between the return from Babylon and Christ's birth. During that period God's people had grown lackadaisical in their worship, yet a faithful few remained.

"Your words have been harsh against Me,' says the Lord" (Malachi 3:13). God accuses them of calling Him into account for what was happening within the nation. They were experiencing difficult times, just as the people of God have frequently endured difficult times. These are times when we cry out to God, "Why, God? Why are you allowing this to happen? When are you going to intervene?" but He does not seem to be listening.

"Yet you say, 'What have we spoken against You?'" (verse 13). They did not feel that their accusations were against God, but He gives them an example.

You have said, 'It is vain to serve God; what profit is it that we have kept His ordinance, and that we have walked as mourners [been repentant and humble] before the Lord of hosts? So now we call the proud blessed. For those who do wickedness are raised up; yes, those who tempt God go free. (Malachi 3:14-15)

The faithful can see that these others are not very godly. Maybe they see that "the proud" are sinning openly, breaking the commandments of God. Maybe the proud do not have a submissive, quiet and gentle spirit. Maybe they are aggressive and assertive, and they maneuvered themselves to the head of the group. And they seemed to be getting away with it!

## How the Faithful Respond

Notice what these faithful people did in response to the difficult times they were enduring as part of the *ekklesia*. All of God's faithful people should do these things:

Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who meditate on His name. (Malachi 3:16)

- 1). **They feared God.** They respected and revered Him. They stood in awe of Him. Some may have even felt an appropriate measure of terror.
- 2). **They thought on His name.** They meditated on it. It can suggest that they esteemed His name. They spoke highly of it. They honored Him. They looked to Him, though they were complaining for leadership and guidance. His name, of course, stands for everything that He is. He does not have just one name, He has many names. They show, or advertise, what He is, what He will do, and what He requires.
- 3). **They fellowshiped with one another.** No doubt they spoke of their trials and their blessings, about the things that were going on in the *ekklesia* of that day, of their studies

into God's Word, of their plans, of their expectations of the kingdom of God. God heard! God watched and responded, maybe not when they would have liked Him to respond, but God did respond in His time, when it was right for His purposes.

So will He respond to us!

Then God makes a wonderful promise to those who fear Him: "'They shall be Mine,' says the Lord of hosts, 'on that day that I make them My jewels [special treasure—margin]. And I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him'" (Malachi 3:17). In Isaiah 49:15-16 God says, "Yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands...." He is watching! He's aware of what is going on, and He will act!

### **God Intervenes!**

"Then you shall again discern between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him" (Malachi 3:18). After He spares the God-fearing, it will be clear who is really part of His *ekklesia*. God will intervene on behalf of His people!

Will Christ intervene directly to correct His church? Most members hope that He will. Most agree that problems exist. They agree that they dislike what is going on. But their justification for remaining with it is that they expect that Christ will intervene.

If Christ is going to intervene, then why did He not intervene during the Ephesian era? If He would have intervened then, the Catholic and Protestant churches would never have begun. But He did not intervene. Instead the Ephesian church broke into small groups of those who wanted to hold fast to the doctrines that the apostles had given them. The main body went on and eventually blended back into the world.

So how will God make the distinction between the righteous and the wicked (Malachi 3:18)? What form will His intervention take?

The context of Malachi 3 indicates it, but a clearer prophecy of this time can be found in the book of Revelation.

But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent . . . . And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ. (Revelation 12:14, 17)

This is how He will intervene! This is how He will fulfill what He said in Malachi 3.

He will cause a separation!

Those who are to be spared will depart from the main body and be protected from the great time of trouble just ahead. The other group must prove their dedication to God by bearing the full force of Satan's wrath. There must be two separate bodies of people, or they would share a common fate!

The exact time the separation is to occur is not given. Revelation 12 only shows that it *will* occur. When it occurs, it will be abundantly clear who was faithful and righteous and who was not. Compare these scriptures with Revelation 3:10-11, 16-19.

### ***Ekklesia* Is Exclusive**

The true church of God, the true *ekklesia*, will have certain identifying signs. It will have the correct name (John 17:11; Acts 20:28; Galatians 1:13; etc.). It will have the testimony of Jesus Christ and will be keeping the commandments of God (Revelation 12:17), including the Sabbath (Exodus 31:12-18; Isaiah 56:6-7; Mark 2:28; Acts 18:4-11).

A clear understanding of the principle of what *ekklesia* is, the mystical body of Christ, will prevent it from being unscripturally extended to include the worldly churches as well. The "Christian" churches of this world do not have the correct testimony of Jesus Christ, which begins with the understanding of what the true gospel is and makes the right application of the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The testimony of Jesus Christ encompasses all that He said and did, including the keeping of the commandments of God. Worldly Christianity has set aside the commandments of God that they might keep their tradition, though they claim Jesus Christ to be Savior.

Thus the principle of *ekklesia* being the mystical body cannot be stretched to include anyone and everyone who might call themselves Christian. *Ekklesia* has to be defined by the limits that God's Word imposes on it.

### **Should You Leave?**

Should you leave a church that is sliding away from the Truth? Are not splits and schisms wrong?

Under better conditions, godly unity as the apostle Paul defines it in Philippians 2:1-5, should override the differences that normally occur within any group. However, when doctrinal differences change both the focus of the gospel and the image of God, producing confusion of purpose, the loss of right goals and apathy, it is time to make a separation to protect your relationship with God.

If the doctrines are changing, does that not suggest the Teacher has changed? Our Teacher says, "I do not change" (Malachi 3:6).

Is it permissible for you to leave the church? **ABSOLUTELY NOT!** When you understand what the church is, it is *never* right to leave it. Leaving the *ekklesia*, the mystical or spiritual body that we call the church of God, implies breaking off your relationship with God! Rejecting God and His relationship with His people is far different than leaving a corporation, or a body established by men with the name "Church of God"—even if it had previously been under God's direction.

You should not be too concerned about leaving a corporation. If you leave a corporate church to hold fast to the truth given by a true apostle, you are not leaving the body of Christ. You *must* leave to keep firm an established relationship with God that resulted from the teaching received through His true ministry.

### **The Church: A Spiritual Organism**

Herbert W. Armstrong spoke on the subject of the true church in a World Tomorrow radio broadcast aired March 31, 1981, on WMAQ, Chicago, Illinois. The following excerpts are from that broadcast:

The true church was to become divided, scattered and persecuted, driven apart by the world . . . II Timothy 4:3-4:

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.

Let's get back to the church that Jesus Christ did found because it has always existed through every generation. That church has had its ups and downs.

It has always kept the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus and it has kept God's festivals and not the pagan holidays that the world and the world's churches are observing. That church has always existed.

The true church of God is an invisible spiritual organism, of those people that have and are led by the Spirit of God, in whom Jesus Christ has come to live His life for them. That's the true church, composed of all those people regardless of whether they are organized together, know each other and are working together, or whether they're not. Whether they assemble in one place or whether they're completely scattered. It is those individuals that make up the true church.

Now in many times we find their history on down through every century, and at times they've been completely scattered and unorganized. At other times at least a large portion of them, or groups of them, have gotten together and have been organized, and they have known one another, and they have actually been organized and conducted God's Work. And at the time when God intends that His Work should be carried forth to the world, God does bring them together and see that they are organized.

And even in Paul's day many among those attending at Antioch, at Jerusalem, at Ephesus, at Corinth and in other places, began to apostatize and to turn away from the truth. Divisions sprang up and those individuals, unconverted, turned from God's truth and way of life, were no part of God's true church, though visibly assembling with those who were. The mystery of iniquity was already working, as the apostle Paul wrote in II Thessalonians 2. And it was working inside the visible church.

This apostasy increased, and by the year of 125 a.d. the majority in most churches now, the majority assembling for services in most churches (and incidentally, they still were assembling on the Sabbath day, believe it or not . . .) [were not of the true church]. Gradually, a smaller and a smaller portion of the visible churches going by the name Christian remained truly yielded to God and to His Truth and led by His Spirit. And after Emperor Constantine took virtual control of the visible, professing church, in the early 4th century, the visible organization became almost wholly pagan and they began excommunicating and persecuting all who held to the true Word of God, the Bible.

And finally it became necessary for all real Christians, even though a scattered people, it became necessary for them to flee! And they, the ones that were led by the Spirit of God, the ones in whom Jesus Christ was living His life, . . . they alone composed the true church, and they had to flee from the jurisdiction of the government in order to truly worship God. That's what happened, my friends, to the church. But God still has His ministers.

### **The Importance of Doctrine**

In Paul's letters to Timothy, he urged the young evangelist in the strongest of terms to stand firm and to hold fast to the doctrine that the apostle had given to him (I Timothy 6:20). Paul needed to warn him because by about a.d. 65 the church was already sliding away from the truth that Jesus Christ had entrusted to the apostles.

Why is doctrine so important to God? Why does He not want his people to deviate from what He spoke in His Word? The answer is basic and simple: deviation from orthodoxy will not produce the right fruit in fulfilling His purpose.

God makes allowances, of course, for minor variations. Not everyone will have the same level of obedience or understanding. Not everyone is equally wise or educated. However, His people will have a strong belief in the doctrines most important and central to His purpose. If these central doctrines are missing, then the deviations that are present will endanger the purpose He is working out.

### **Principles from Baking**

Perhaps the analogy of following a recipe in the baking of a cake will suffice to show the principles involved in keeping doctrine pure. If in baking a cake, a baker left out certain ingredients, or if he added others that the recipe did not call for, or if he used the right ingredients but in the wrong proportions, it is entirely possible with any of these combinations not even to end up with a cake! Obviously, to produce a perfect cake, one must use the right ingredients in the right proportions.

Though this is certainly an ideal, God wants His people to aim for it because of His purpose. One may never hit such a high target, but that does not relieve one of the burden of striving to develop the right proportion of the right ingredients in every part of life. Ephesians 4:13 says, "till we all come . . . to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

The called of God have a tremendously high purpose and hope: to be gods! The Bible unequivocally states that we are to be like Him, that is like Jesus Christ (I John 3:2). It follows that the ingredients that produce that potential be as close to perfect as possible.

### **Principles from Childrearing**

A scripture used primarily in terms of childrearing adds another principle to consider. "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6).

No parent trains his children perfectly because everyone is a product of the confused and derailed system the Bible calls "this evil world." Parents tend to repeat and pass on whatever this corrupt system imposes on them. Psychologists and sociologists verify that people who were abused as children often repeat that behavior when they become adults. A recent statistic, mentioned in the television program *Scared Silent*, says that abused children are six times as likely to abuse their own children when they become parents than non-abused children. The abused become abusers. The system gets a hold on them, and they pass the system on.

Muriel Beadle paraphrased this scripture in her book, *A Child's Mind*. "Today the proverb could be amended to read '. . . and when he is old, he will be unable to depart from it'" (p. xx). Her point is that an adult's hope of change is a slim one. It is extremely difficult for one to change what is ingrained in him when he is young. The cliché of a man being "set in his ways" is true.

Succinctly, the principle is that the right training produces the right results. Thus, athletic teams, ballet and stage productions and armies train—drill, drill, drill, over and over—until all of the participants, if possible, can do their parts automatically. The skills become such an integral part of them that they perform well routinely.

Proper training will endure throughout life. This principle also applies to what God is doing in a Christian's life. People are material and mortal. But God puts His children through a training program to prepare them for eternal life. He trains them in a way that will endure for all eternity. In dealing with eternal consequences, we understand why God considers doctrine—teaching, instruction—so important.

A satirical interpretation of this verse reads, "Train a child according to his evil inclinations [let him do his own will], and he will continue in his evil way throughout his life." So either way, the principle is a true one. Training determines what a person will become. And doctrine will determine what His people will become.

### **"A Child Left to Himself..."**

"The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother" (Proverbs 29:15). If a child is "left to himself," where is his training coming from? Obviously, in this case, mom and dad are not having a great impact on their child. The training must then be coming from society, most likely from the child's peers. Because "foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child" (Proverbs 22:15), a child left to himself brings shame—he is bound to get into trouble if his training is haphazard or undirected, or if he is not drilled or disciplined. The flipside of this verse says, "But the rod of correction will drive it far from him." The rod symbolizes that someone has taken an interest in the outcome of this child's life. He is giving direction, correction, instruction, to steer this child where he is to go. The training, the teaching, makes all the difference in the world.

An example from the life of David illustrates this proverb. "And [Adonijah's] father had not rebuked him at any time by saying, 'Why have you done so?' He was also a very good-looking man. His mother had borne him after Absalom" (I Kings 1:6). David was very old and was very shortly to die. His family and his close advisors probably knew that he intended to pass his crown to Solomon. But Adonijah tried to prevent that. He made a political move to grab the throne before Solomon had a secure grip on it. His ploy failed because Bathsheba, Solomon's mother, and David's faithful advisors appealed to the king, and he made it very clear whom he had chosen to succeed him.

David, though a man after God's own heart, did not take an active hand in teaching Adonijah. In this verse God states why Adonijah rebelled. In essence, David actually encouraged his son to rebel by not taking an interest in rearing him. David failed to train him in the way he should go, so that he would not depart from it. Instead, David trained him in a way that was bound to produce rebellion. This flaw of David's shows up in others of his children: Absalom, Amnon and others. It does not matter whether one is a child of God having His Spirit or not. If a parent does not carry through with the right kind of training, then the results will surface in his children.

### **Tend Your Spiritual Garden**

The teaching from which the training emanates is exceedingly important in how the person conducts his life. This can be seen almost all the way back to the beginning. "Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it" (Genesis 2:15). Very simply and in a straightforward way, God states the purpose for which He created the garden, and begins to reveal foundational parts of the training program for Adam and Eve. Spiritually, this principle extends to His modern children as well.

Adam's job in the Garden was to "tend and keep," or "cultivate and guard." A deeper study of the words show that in combination, tending, or cultivating, is a form of keeping. Cultivation is the effort a farmer makes to ensure that he will produce as bountiful a crop as possible. He plows the ground, fertilizes it, plants the seed, then he promotes further growth by watering, weeding and so forth. If the farmer is lazy, if he fails to cultivate his ground, if he does nothing to promote growth, then what occurs? Nature follows its course and the farm begins to degenerate!

This law can be illustrated by somewhat different examples. Suppose you own a new house, complete with a fresh coat of paint on the exterior. If nothing is ever done to maintain the house in good condition, the house will degenerate very quickly. The same applies to an automobile. If you never change the oil, never lubricate it, never inflate the tires to the right pressure, never wash it, degeneracy results. It is part of the law of the universe. If a thing is not maintained, if nothing is done to guard against decay, degeneration will surely occur. If nothing is done to cultivate, nature will take its course, producing degeneration.

In very simple terminology, God's purpose is accomplished because men and women cultivate and guard. They cultivate what is provided to them in terms of both physical and spiritual things. If cultivation occurs, it will guard against degeneration. So another principle begins to emerge: not only must sound training come from pure doctrine, but we must make an effort to cultivate, producing more fruit and greater growth. If we neglect this great salvation, our spiritual lives are going to degenerate. The truths that we formerly held in high esteem will begin to slip away.

At the very beginning of the book, God warns of a natural tendency in everything toward disintegration. As will be shown later, a revival of God's truth is invariably followed by a waning of God's truth. Gradually, the body that was doing God's truth disintegrates, breaking into smaller groups of people, determined to maintain what they have. These small groups leave because they do not want to lose the truth as part of the degenerating group. Thomas Jefferson wisely noted, "The price of liberty is eternal vigilance," another way of saying that vigorous effort is required to both maintain and cultivate.

### **Paul Admonishes Timothy**

Throughout II Timothy the apostle Paul strongly urges the young evangelist Timothy to maintain the teaching he had learned from boyhood. Paul was on death row and needed to ensure the faithful transmission of Christ's teaching to another generation. He chose Timothy for this critical task.

"When I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also. . . . And that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (II Timothy 1:5; 3:15). Paul had reason to entrust Timothy with the church's doctrine: he had been trained in the scriptures, in a Christian way of life, by his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. He was a third-generation Christian, and he had the training that gave him the background to be an evangelist within God's Work. How extensive and personal his training was is open to question. At least he had a form of the right kind of training.

"Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (II Timothy 1:6). Remembering that Timothy was a minister of the Church of God, the gift was the power and authority to fulfill his responsibility within it. Though this book was originally just written to Timothy, it has application for all Christians. The principles in it involve every one who has the Spirit of God. Each has been given gifts by God to carry out his portion of God's work within the body.

Salvation is more than mere forgiveness of sin. Another part of God's salvation is that He gives gifts—abilities, talents, powers, authority—to do jobs within the church. Salvation requires a journey to the end of God's purpose. It is a way of life that leads to a goal. God gives every one of us the powers to succeed in reaching the end of the journey: gifts of the Spirit given to carry out our functions within the body.

Just as the apostle Paul used the human body in an analogous way, showing that every portion of the body has its function, so has every portion of the human body been given the power to carry out that function in behalf of the body. So with God's church: no matter how scattered it is, or how unified it is, God has given each Christian the power to carry out his function within the body. So Paul prodded Timothy to make good use of those gifts to help the church.

There is no indication within the context that Timothy was falling short in any way. It is clear from the verbal forms that Paul uses here that these were things that Timothy had done in the past and was continuing to do in the present. It could really be written more accurately in the English, "keep fanning the flame." He was stirring the gift, and Paul was saying, "Keep on stirring it!" Timothy was cultivating the doctrine, the major means by which one keeps or guards what has been given.

### **A Spirit of Power**

An indication of Timothy's personality comes through in the next verse. "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (II Timothy 1:7). Apparently, Timothy was an introverted, retiring personality who of himself would not do what he would be called upon to do. By the end of the book, Paul knew that he was going to die. From all indications, Timothy would bear the weight of responsibility for preaching the gospel after Paul's death. Paul knew what Timothy was like because he had spent years with him, traveling around the Mediterranean region. The apostle, concerned about Timothy having the mind, the personality, the will, to carry out his responsibilities, reminded him that God's Spirit is one of power and of love and of soundmindedness.

And so it is with each person God calls. He gives whatever gifts one needs to carry out his responsibility within the body. Most will find certain parts of the Christian life uncomfortable or the requirements that God has established difficult to meet. But there is no need to fear, for the power is available, or God is not God. He has promised that He will finish what He starts (Philippians 1:6). We can do whatever He asks because He does not require more than can be accomplished with the gifts we already have. He always works within the framework of His knowledge of each Christian.

"Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God" (II Timothy 1:8). Paul confirms that Timothy shrank from suffering. Anyone would. It is only natural that he would not want to face the discouraging things that he knew the apostle Paul had suffered all his life.

### **The Testimony of Our Lord**

"[God] has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began" (II Timothy 1:9). This verse begins a section introducing his admonition to hold fast what has been entrusted to our care which he calls "the testimony of our Lord."

What is a testimony? Most commonly it is used when a person is called upon to give an account of what he witnessed. This, however, is a narrow usage.

In a broader application, Webster says that it means "firsthand authentication of a fact," which is what one is called upon to do in a court trial, to verify a fact. A trial lawyer may ask, "Did you know this person before such and such a date?" The witness then authenticates whether or not this fact is true. Testimony also means "evidence." The lawyer asks, "What did you see?" And then the witness presents his evidence.

But it can also mean "a solemn declaration, an open acknowledgment." This is closer to what Jesus Christ did. He gave an open acknowledgment, a solemn declaration, of a message that He left with mankind. That was the testimony of our Lord, the message of the Messenger. The church knows it as the gospel of the Kingdom of God.

The apostle John later writes a similar phrase and explains it in Revelation 19:10. "And I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, 'See that you do not do that! I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren who have the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.'" The angel uses an interesting combination of words, to describe the gospel. The gospel is prophetic. He calls the testimony of Jesus, which is the gospel of the Kingdom of God, the spirit of prophecy.

"Spirit" is used in the sense of character, the nature of a thing. The testimony of Jesus is the nature of prophecy. Another English word is better: essence. Perfume is sometimes called an essence, an invisible, but substantive and beautiful fragrance that is its nature.

Essence means "the nature of," like the word character. It also means "the main part, the heart and core of, the real and ultimate nature of a thing." The testimony of Jesus is the real or ultimate nature of prophecy, meaning that all prophecy points toward the conclusion of the gospel. Everything in God's purpose points in that direction.

When prophecies are given, they speak of things that are yet future and unfulfilled. The testimony of Jesus is the very essence, the heart and core, the nature, of these future events. The gospel, whatever its message, is focused on the future. We then cannot relegate the future aspects of the gospel into a low place of importance without destroying the heart and core of the message that Jesus Christ brought.

### **When Did the Gospel Begin?**

"Who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began" (II Timothy 1:9). To turn this last clause into plain English, God began His purpose before time! Not only is the fulfillment of the gospel yet future, its beginning stretches all the way back before time began as human beings look at it. At some point in the distant past before mankind, God's purpose began moving toward completion.

If the gospel began before time, and if it is the essence of future events, then we can logically conclude that God's purpose is not completed! Completion of the purpose, of the good news, is still future. Whatever lies in the future is the goal toward which the purpose is moving, and that goal is *the* good news. Of course, there will be wonderful and encouraging accomplishments along the way. We could call them benchmarks. Although alone they are good news, it is the culmination of them that is *the* good news.

The apostle Paul writes in Hebrews 4:1: "Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it." Notice that the "promise remains" of entering His rest. This is the subject under discussion. At the time of the writing of Hebrews, the rest had not been attained. Nor has it been attained since. The rest is still in the future. It remains even for Christians today. Paul warns, "lest any of you seem to have come short of it," indicating that though one has received forgiveness, God's Spirit and gifts of the Spirit, there is still a possibility of falling away. The chance may not be great, but nonetheless, some may fall short of it.

"For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it" (verse 2). During the time of the Exodus, the people of Israel heard a message of good news from Moses. It consisted of redemption from slavery, the Passover, baptism in the Red Sea, and a journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land. The good news, then, included the occurrences of and the knowledge about all the steps along the way, all of the benchmarks. The purpose for which all those events occurred was the most important part. What good was it to have the death angel pass over their house, for them to receive the forgiveness of sin and redemption from slavery, if they never made it to the Promised Land? That is Paul's warning. The steps, though vital in themselves, are not as important as the goal.

This warning applies especially to today. What Jesus Christ did in His life, in His death and in His resurrection, is awesome, a wonderful and great gift. It is good news that these things have occurred, but they are not *the* good news. *The* good news is the goal, and that has not yet occurred. What Jesus Christ did is exceedingly important to the fulfillment of God's purpose, but it's still possible for us to reject the Son of God even after we have accepted His blood for the forgiveness of our sins, as Hebrews 12 also shows very clearly. So in this analogy, life in, possession of and governance of the Promised Land was the culmination, the good news, the fulfillment—at least physically—of the promises to Abraham.

The message that Jesus Christ brought, the gospel, is about the Kingdom of God, the culmination, the goal, the fulfillment. Certainly it includes the knowledge of and information about those benchmarks along the way, but the Kingdom of God is the goal toward which every Christian is aiming.

### **Going on to Perfection**

Again notice this in a slightly different context, stated in a different manner. "Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection [completion], not laying again the foundation [the elementary things] of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God" (Hebrews 6:1). These doctrines or principles are very important. God will grant us repentance and forgive us through the blood of Jesus Christ. What good news! But it is not *the* good news. That is the principle: being granted repentance and having faith in and through Jesus Christ are good news, but the result of those things is the real good news. It is the culmination of the process—"let us go on to perfection"—that is the good news.

Notice the strength of the exhortations to go on to completion in Hebrews 12:1-2:

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

He lived as He did because He was looking toward the end result. Abraham, the father of the faithful, looked for a city. Paul is saying that he looked for the end of his wandering. The good news points toward the completion, the goal, of God's purpose.

Other places also show this, in slightly different contexts. Matthew 6:30 really gets down to the nitty-gritty of daily living. "Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?" What is Christ saying? We have to live our lives, working, saving, paying bills, buying food and clothing—all of those things that occupy our time virtually every day. What is He trying to encourage us to do? Look to the end! He says, "Don't get so bound up and distracted by the struggle of daily life."

Therefore do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. (Matthew 6:31-34)

Our focus should be toward the end result. He gives this encouragement and admonishment to motivate us to understand and live all of life in relation to where it ends. Will life end in the Kingdom of God or in the Lake of Fire? That is a choice that each person makes. Even in the everyday, mundane things, eating and drinking, going to work, getting along with others, and so on, God wants His people to relate those daily experiences to their goal, the Kingdom of God.

### **Restoration of All Things**

Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began. (Acts 3:19-21)

These verses tie several things together.

II Timothy 1:9 says that God's purpose began before time. Could God plan His awesome purpose without an end result in view? Would He name His message of salvation after something that was going to happen in the middle, or would He name it after the goal toward which He was working?

Peter calls God's purpose "the restoration of all things," another descriptive phrase for the good news of the Kingdom of God. God will put the Kingdom of God on earth, governing through His law. These verses explain not only the end toward which God is moving, but also that God has been prophesying of this since the world began. God too is looking toward the goal.

God's purpose began before time, but He has revealed this purpose to mankind since at least the days of Enoch, who lived long before Noah. In Jude, Enoch is quoted as saying, "Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints" (Jude 14). We must take God's word at face value: from the beginning He has prophesied of the culmination of His purpose.

## **A New Creation**

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (II Corinthians 5:17). What this verse describes is a process being worked out, step by step, stage by stage, to its culmination. God's children are new creations, created through a process that lasts throughout their lives. We are part of this creative process that God draws toward its conclusion, called the Kingdom of God. By means of His Spirit, God works with us through the experiences of our lives. Once God's purpose is revealed to us, we have choices to make as we go through these experiences. And we are to make these choices in relation to God's purpose.

What happens if we focus on an intermediate stage of the purpose, rather than the goal? The process will not work. The same general results will occur as when a cake recipe is not followed: if we begin mixing the ingredients together for a cake, and halfway through the recipe, we decide to bake it, the result will not be the kind of cake the recipe is supposed to produce. It is a safe conclusion that God's creative process will slow to a crawl, or even stop entirely, in a person's life, if the "recipe" is not followed carefully.

Suppose those who invented the automobile stopped with putting four wheels on a chassis. What if no one ever tried to develop an internal combustion engine? Where would man be? He'd still be in the horse-and-buggy age! But some people had a vision of a vehicle that would take man beyond four wheels and a chassis. "Hey," someone said in a burst of realization, "we can make these four wheels self-powered: an automobile!" So they went on to develop it. First, they had the wheels and chassis, then they had an engine. Next, they had to develop all kinds of other mechanisms, such as gear boxes which would rev them up to more than two or three miles an hour. It was a great day, good news, when Charles Kettering invented the electric starter, when people no longer had to crank the engine. It was not *the* good news, at least as far as automobiles are concerned. The analogy should be easily seen.

### **Message or Messenger?**

What if the gospel concentrates on the Messenger rather than the message He brought? If it focuses on the greatness of the Messenger, all o