

GOD AND CHURCH

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While some may doubt that God created government, no one can seriously doubt that He was not involved in the creation of the church. Both the Gospels and the book of Acts testify to this reality. Today we are going to take a look at several passages of Scripture in these two books. But before we do, let's begin with this question. Where did the word "church" come from? It's used almost universally to describe Christian gatherings, but what does this designation really mean? Without going into a lengthy discussion, the word "church" is Old English in origin. It is derived from a term that is still used in Scotland, where a church is called a "kirk." Going all the way back to the New Testament Greek, the word for church is "ecclesia." It refers to an assembly or gathering of people called together for a special purpose. That special purpose, of course is to worship and serve the Lord Jesus Christ. So there you have it. We're an assembly of Christians.

But how about our origin? If we're one of the three institutions that God has established, who created us, how did we come into existence, and what was it like to be a member of one of those early churches? Let's take a look at each of these questions beginning with the first one. Who created us? The answer is found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. All three describe this same event in the life and ministry of Christ. Being included in all three of the four Gospels indicates that this was something of great importance. So let's turn our attention to what is recorded in Matthew's account, chapter sixteen, verses thirteen through twenty.

In Matthew's Gospel he tells us that Jesus and His disciples had taken a break and journeyed to northern Galilee. It was a time for reflection and introspection, which is clearly evident by what Jesus asked His disciples. He said, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" He was referring, of course, to Himself. The disciples told Jesus what they had heard. Some people were saying that He was another John the Baptist, the first one having been recently beheaded. Others were saying that Jesus was another Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the other prophets. In other words the people believed that like these famous individuals Jesus was not afraid to boldly proclaim the truth. Then Jesus turned to His disciples and asked them, "Who do you say I am." Having been with Him for some time, Jesus wanted to know if He was something more to them than just prophetic spokesman. As was often the case, Peter was the first one to speak. Without hesitating for even a moment, he almost shouted, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

In response Jesus replied, "Blessed are you Simon of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:17-18). Based upon Peter's rock like

affirmation that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the Son of God, Christ was going to build a church, an assembly of believers, on that same rock like faith. It would be a church that was so strong and so resilient that not even the forces of Satan himself could destroy it. Most importantly of all, this church would belong to Jesus. He would be its creator and protector. The same is true today. We may call ourselves Bedford Presbyterian Church,

but that does not represent our true ownership. We belong to Jesus Christ. We, along with all of the other churches in all of the other denominations in the whole world, belong to Jesus. We are His unique possession. It's something that we need to keep in mind. He is the One who is ultimately in charge of our congregation and we need to continually look to Him for leadership and guidance as we move forward.

Now let's take a look at that second question. How did the church come into existence? Just prior to His ascension into heaven following His resurrection, Jesus told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the promised gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:1-2:41). They didn't have to wait long. It was the day of Pentecost, a Jewish holiday celebrating the ingathering of the first harvests in the early summer months. The disciples along with Mary and Jesus' brothers were meeting together in the Upper Room where they had celebrated the Last Supper. Suddenly a great wind swept through the room and tongues of fire descended upon their heads. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and immediately began praising God and declaring His wonders. Those who witnessed this miraculous event did not understand what was going on. In response, Peter preached his first sermon and this was the result. "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day" (Acts 2:41). That was a phenomenal spiritual event. It was also the birthday of the church. That's when it came into existence. That's when it was born.

The birthday of the church which we still celebrate in the spring/early summer is called Pentecost Sunday. It is a reminder that even as the Jewish people celebrated the gathering of the first crops for harvesting, in like manner the ingathering of the kingdom of God began on that day. It's also a reminder of our purpose as God's people. Under the direction and empowering of God's Spirit, we are to do the same kind of things as those early Christians did. We too are to declare the wonders of God as well as leading people to faith in Christ Jesus. Just recently I read an article about a church right here in Bedford. Not only do they have a multitude of services attracting a large congregation, but they have been instrumental in establishing thirteen other churches. Years ago Bedford Presbyterian was also instrumental in establishing other churches. In 1893, Augusta Graves departed for missionary service in China. Then in 1912, Junia Graves was appointed to start a mission on Taylor's Mountain right here in Bedford, which eventually became the Cool Springs Presbyterian Church, a congregation still serving the people of that community to this day. They knew, both the ones who were sent and those who sent them, that the church was born with a singular purpose in mind, to lead people to Christ.

We need to adopt that same attitude. Otherwise we will have forgotten why we were created.

Now on to that last question. What was it like to be a member of that first church which was established nearly two thousand years ago? A brief summary is provided at the end of chapter two in the book of Acts. In the space of just five verses, verses 42-47, we are given this snap shot of life in the early church. This is what its members were engaged in: they listened to the apostles' teaching; they enjoyed each other's company, especially when they ate together; they practiced generosity, sharing their possessions with those in need; they worshipped the Lord in the temple, praising God for what He was doing in their lives; and

finally, they experienced continual growth as well as enjoying the favor of those who lived around them. What does all of that sound like? It sounds like the life of today's churches. In fact, it sounds like the life of our church. We do those same kind of things. We worship together on Sunday mornings praising the Lord and listening to the proclamation of His Word. We enjoy each other's fellowship, especially when we have those covered dish luncheons. We provide assistance to those in need and like the early church we pray.

There is, however, one thing that the early church did which we are not so good at. They were outreach oriented. They wanted to tell everyone about their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. As stated earlier, that was the first thing they did after they were brought into existence on the day of Pentecost. Simply stated, churches that bring people to Christ and invite them to become a part of their church family grow. They are fulfilling their calling and their destiny ordained by God. Those which do not wither and die. I close with this example. The Moravian Church was born in Europe during the Reformation. It was a rather small group of persecuted Christians. Nevertheless, it became one of the most evangelical, outreach oriented bodies of Christ in the entire world during the 1700's . They sent their people as missionaries to the far corners of the world. They established entire communities of believers in places like Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and Salem, later known as Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Gradually, however, over time they lost interest in missions, leading people to Christ, and began to withdrawn unto themselves. Today they are known for their brass bands and Easter sunrise celebrations and that's just about it. They are gradually fading away.

Our church was officially established in 1844, because there was need for a vibrant witness for Christ in the frontier town of Bedford. That need still exists and God is both able and willing to bless us if we will only both be and do that which the early church did. They lived their faith and shared their faith with those who lived around them. It be said of us that which was said of that early church in the pages of the New Testament, "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).