

The New Testament Church



LESSON SEVEN

BIBLE CORRESPONDENCE COURSE

BY JOHN M. HURT

Who Loved Her Best



A little boy with ruffled head
Leaned in the doorway worn and gray.
"I love you, Mother," he kindly said,
Then turned and ran aside to play.

His mother, tired with labors long
Continued working till at last,
His sister with a smile and song,
Slipped gently in, and wandered past.

"I love you, Mother," she whispered low,
Then turned aside to leave her there,
With eyes that could not see her woe
And heart that could not feel her care.

Then last of all there came that way
Her other brother, kind and true.
He had no words of love to say,
No noble speech of praise to do.

But quickly took his Mother's broom,
So she might sit and rest awhile,
And cleaned and tidied up the room
And rocked the baby with a smile.

Though not a word of love was said,
How do you think their mother guessed
That night when all were safe in bed
The one who really loved her best?

by John M. Hurt

Churches may order additional lessons through Religious Bookstores or directly from Hurt Publications. Students should not return any material to the address below since this will greatly delay a prompt response.

HURT PUBLICATIONS
P.O. BOX 126, SMYRNA, TN 37167

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

One of the most impressive facts revealed in the New Testament is the marvelous unity with which early Christians worshipped and served God. Not only were they united in their form of worship, but were united even in the doctrines which they embraced (Acts 2:42 & 46). One of the classic facts of both secular and biblical history is that in the days of the apostles there were no separate denominations and all faithful Christians were in complete fellowship with all other Christians throughout the world (I John 1:7; II Corinthians 8:18).

The reason for such unity lay in the complete harmony of the apostolic teaching. When Paul went to Rome, for example, he preached the same doctrine which he had preached in Ephesus, Corinth, Galatia and throughout the world, therefore no separate denominations were formed as a result of his teaching (Acts 15:36; Romans 15:19). The same was true of all the other inspired teachers. Being divinely guided by God they never taught conflicting doctrines or practices and thus established no conflicting denominations (John 16:13, 14:26, II Timothy 3:16). In the New Testament we do not read of a plurality of "denominations," but simply of THE church. In Acts 2:47, for example, we read, "And the Lord added to THE CHURCH daily such as should be saved." Again Jesus said, ". . . upon this rock I will build MY CHURCH; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against IT" (Matthew 16:18).

The singular character of the New Testament church thus stands in sharp contrast to the widely divided condition of the religious world of the present. In our next lesson we shall learn why and how the hundreds of modern denominations have come to be formed. In this lesson, however, we shall by-pass all modern denominations and study the church as it actually existed in the days of the apostles.

UNITY Was Basic

The fact that all faithful Christians in the First Century were united in one church was no mere accident. This unity was in response to the prayer of the Savior and the emphatic teaching of the apostles. In the upper room, only a few hours before his death, Jesus prayed that his followers would never be divided into separate denominations. In speaking of the apostles he said, "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; **THAT THEY ALL MAY BE ONE:** as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" (John 17:20-21). Just as God and Christ are united, so Jesus taught that his disciples were also to be united.



Reason for Unity

One of the reasons for unity, Jesus said, is “. . . that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (John 17:21). This reason is more clearly demonstrated today than ever before in countless communities throughout the country. In areas large enough to provide only one or two large congregations, there are, instead, numerous small conflicting denominations, each struggling to support a separate preacher and provide a separate building for worship. With a world dying in sin such a pathetic waste of money and effort, supposedly devoted to the progress of the gospel, should be of vital concern to every religious person.

If the unity which God requires of his people existed among all who claim to follow Christ, perhaps four preachers out of every five now teaching in this country could be relieved to go into the mission areas of the world with full support. Such unity today, as in the First Century, can result only when a complete return is made to the pattern of the New Testament church laid down by Christ and his inspired apostles.

Evidence of Unity

In order to provide a well rounded study of the New Testament church a few of the more direct references concerning religious unity are here given. As can be seen from the quotations below, the Bible clearly points out that Christ did not establish a plurality of denominations teaching and practicing different doctrines, but that all First Century Christians were part of one great body, the Church.

COLOSSIANS 1:18—“And he is THE head of THE body, THE CHURCH.”

EPHESIANS 1:22-23—“. . . and gave him to be THE head over all things to THE CHURCH, WHICH IS HIS BODY . . .”

EPHESIANS 4:4-5—“THERE IS ONE BODY, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling . . .”

EPHESIANS 5:23—“. . . Christ is THE head of THE CHURCH: and he is THE saviour of THE BODY.”

I CORINTHIANS 12:13—“For by one Spirit are we ALL BAPTIZED INTO ONE BODY, whether we be Jews or Gentiles . . .”

I CORINTHIANS 1:10—“Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye ALL speak the same thing, and that there BE NO DIVISIONS AMONG YOU . . .”

MATTHEW 16:18—“. . . upon this rock I will build MY CHURCH; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against IT.”

ACTS 2:47—“And THE LORD added to THE CHURCH daily such as should be saved.”

The church which Jesus built is thus spoken of in the singular throughout the Bible. A few of many such passages are: Acts 12:1; 20:28; I Corinthians 12:28; Galatians 1:13; Ephesians 3:10 and 21; 5:32.

The only time the term “churches” is used in the entire Bible is in a local sense to refer to several congregations in different localities, such as “the churches of Galatia” or “the seven churches which are in Asia” (Galatians 1:2; Revelation

1:4). Paul used it in this way in I Corinthians 4:17 but stated that the same doctrine was taught in all of them.

It has sometimes been reasoned that Jesus endorsed many different churches when he said, "I am the vine, ye are the branches . . ." (John 15:5-6). An unprejudiced reading of this text, however, will show the very opposite to be the actual teaching of the Lord. The context (verses surrounding this verse) shows that Christ was speaking of individual disciples all united in Christ and not of different denominations. Another obvious fallacy of this point of view is that not a single modern Protestant or Catholic denomination is ever described in the Bible as being in existence during the New Testament age.

As we read these and many other such scriptures, we remember again the prayer of Jesus as he stood in the shadow of the cross; "That they all may be one . . ." (John 17:21). Let no man, therefore, thank God that there are so many different churches today unless he is thankful that the prayer of the Saviour is not being fulfilled in the present age, as it was in the days of the apostles (Acts 4:32).

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

When Jesus established his church, he provided it with several distinctive characteristics by which it may be recognized. We have learned already, for instance, that First Century Christians partook of the Lord's Supper each first day of the week, that they had purely vocal music in their worship and that they were baptized "for the remission of sins." A number of other characteristics of the church are also given in the scriptures.

I. NO ONE EVER "JOINED" THE CHURCH

In lesson five we learned that after scriptural baptism a person is a new-born child of God and is thus said to be "in Christ" (John 3:5; Romans 6:3). Paul said, "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Galatians 3:27).

Those who thus obeyed the gospel in New Testament days never attempted to "join a church." The reason for this was that when a person received the remission of sins the Lord immediately added him to His church and considered him to be as much a part of it as any other member. The inspired writer of Acts made this clear when he said, "And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved" (Acts 2:47).

The idea of voting people into the

New Testament church and voting them out was a practice unheard of in the First Century. The nearest thing to such a practice which can be found in the Bible was the action of an ungodly man named Diotrephes. The apostle John severely condemned his evil actions which he described in these words, "... neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, AND CAST-ETH THEM OUT OF THE CHURCH" (III John 1:9-10). In the church as God would have it, it is the Lord, not men, who accepts people into it and only He who has the right to take them out.



II. NO HUMAN CREEDS

Another characteristic of the New Testament church is that it was not bound by human creeds, church manuals, or any other uninspired, human writing. Members of the Lord's church in the First Century had the New Testament as their only rule of faith and did not require others to submit to any human writing in order to be accepted into their fellowship. Not a single human creed is ever mentioned in the Bible. The first such human document, the Nicean Creed, did not appear until hundreds of years after the death of the apostles, being written in 325 A.D. by a group of uninspired men.¹ The writing often called the "Apostles' Creed" also had no actual connection with the apostles. Bible scholars agree that it was not originated until hundreds of years after the apostolic era.²

III. CHARACTERIZED BY HUMILITY

Humility was one of the strong characteristics of devout members of the New Testament church. Although faithful preachers of the gospel were respected for their message, they did not attempt to place themselves on a higher pedestal than any other faithful member of the church and there was therefore no special exalted "clergy." In Luke 22:25-26 Jesus said, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve." In Matthew 23 Jesus condemns the Pharisees for wearing special clothing in order to call attention to the fact that they were more important re-

ligious leaders than other followers of God. In this passage Jesus said, "But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries and enlarge the borders of their garments and love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues and greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi. But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren. And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven" (Matthew 23:5-9).

This last statement clearly condemns using the term "father" as a religious title. That this does not condemn using the term to refer to one's physical parents is shown not only from the related thoughts of these verses, but also from several other Bible scriptures which freely use it in this sense. One of these is the familiar quotation, "Honor thy father and thy mother . . ." (Ephesians 6:2, see also Acts 16:3 and Acts 7:4). What is obviously being condemned in Matthew 23 is using the term as a religious title as the Pharisees did. The term "reverend" was also never applied to men in Bible times and is used in the Bible only to refer to God (Psalms 111:9).

In Acts 10 we read that the apostle Peter would not allow men to bow to him or show him undue honor. When Cornelius fell at his feet he said, "Stand up; I myself also am a man" (Acts 10:25:26). Even an angel from heaven would not allow such homage to be paid him (Revelation 19:10). Such humility would be of great value to the cause of Christ today.

1. See Frederick Giolow, Jr., *Popular Outline of Church History*, p. 38-39

2. See *The Popular and Critical Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1, p. 126

NAMES

NAMES WORN BY GOD'S PEOPLE

NAMES

Still another characteristic of the New Testament church was the names used to designate God's people. Often they were called simple "Christians" (Acts 11:26), but were never described as any special "kind" of Christian. They were also referred to as "children of God" (Galatians 3:26). Early Christians were often known as "saints" (Romans 1:7). It should be noted that this term was not used merely to refer to certain special disciples who were dead, but to all living Christians. In John 15:8 they are called "disciples" which means a learner. All early Christians were also called "priests." This term did not refer to a special class within the church but to all Christians everywhere (I Peter 2:5-9). Each was a priest in the sense that each could offer his own prayers to God through the direct mediation of Jesus Christ (I Timothy 2:5) and could offer "living sacrifices" through their dedication to the gospel (Romans 12:1). Since all were commanded to maintain an attitude of humility they were all also called simply "brethren" (Galatians 6:1).

In the New Testament age the church did not have a name except for wearing the name of the Lord. In the book of Romans we read, "... The churches of Christ salute you" (Romans 16:16). These words were not a title but a description. They are used in very much the same sense as when we say, "John's hat" or "the house of David" (Luke 1:27). They were a description of the fact that the church belongs to Christ and were not a mere title.

Human names were never used to refer to the Lord's church. It is sometimes called "the church of God," referring to the fact that it belongs to the Lord (I Corinthians 1:2, John 20:28). Jesus called it simply "my church" (Matthew 16:18). Several other terms are also used such as "body of Christ" and "house of God" (Colossians 1:24; I Timothy 3:15). These terms are also other ways of saying that the church belongs to Christ. They are appropriate since he was both its builder and purchaser. (Matthew 16:18; Acts 20:28).

The importance of the name of Christ is pointed out in the book of Colossians, "And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him" (Colossians 3:17). Again in Acts 4:12 in speaking of the name of Christ Peter said, "Neither is there salvation in any other; for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." In view of these facts we are not surprised to find local congregations referred to as "churches of Christ" in Romans 16:16.

In our next lesson we shall conclude this study with a discussion of New Testament Christianity in the present age. A beautiful certificate will be awarded to you upon the successful completion of lesson eight.

Questions

Please answer the following questions and return this last page to be graded.

LESSON VII

I. MULTIPLE CHOICE: Draw a circle around the correct answer below.

1. Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build . . .
A. many denominations." B. my churches." C. my church."
2. The inspired writer who said that we are "baptized into Christ:" was
A. Paul B. Luke C. Peter
3. In John 17:20-21 Jesus prayed that his disciples would
A. be one B. be divided C. form many denominations
4. People became members of the New Testament church by
A. joining B. being voted in C. being added by the Lord
5. In the book of Ephesians, after stating that the body is the church, Paul said,
A. "there is one body" B. "there are two bodies" C. "there are many bodies"

II. TRUE-FALSE: If the statement is true circle "T", if false circle "F".

- T F 1. In the days of the apostles Christians had many denominations.
T F 2. Paul established many conflicting denominations.
T F 3. Jesus prayed for unity of all disciples just before his death.
T F 4. Jesus described himself as the vine and individual disciples as branches.
T F 5. Early Christians took the Lord's Supper each first day of the week.
T F 6. The Bible says the New Testament church used instrumental music.
T F 7. Diotrephes' wickedness was condemned by John.
T F 8. In the Bible the term "reverend" is applied only to God.
T F 9. The New Testament church followed a human creed.
T F 10. The Bible teaches that there is nothing in a name.

III. NAME THE SCRIPTURE: Circle the Scripture which states:

1. "But if we walk in the light . . . we have fellowship one with another . . ."
A. Acts 2:42 B. I John 1:7 C. 3 John 1:9-10
2. "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body . . ."
A. Acts 10:48 B. 1 Thessalonians 5:21 C. 1 Corinthians 12:13
3. "And call no man your father upon the earth:"
A. Mark 16:16 B. Matthew 23:9 C. 1 Corinthians 16:1-2
4. "Now I beseech you brethren . . . that there be no divisions among you . . ."
A. 1 Corinthians 1:10 B. John 17:21 C. Acts 2:42
5. "And he is the head of the body, the church."
A. Colossians 1:24 B. Colossians 1:18 C. Romans 10:10

NAME _____ GRADE _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____

ZIP CODE _____ DATE _____