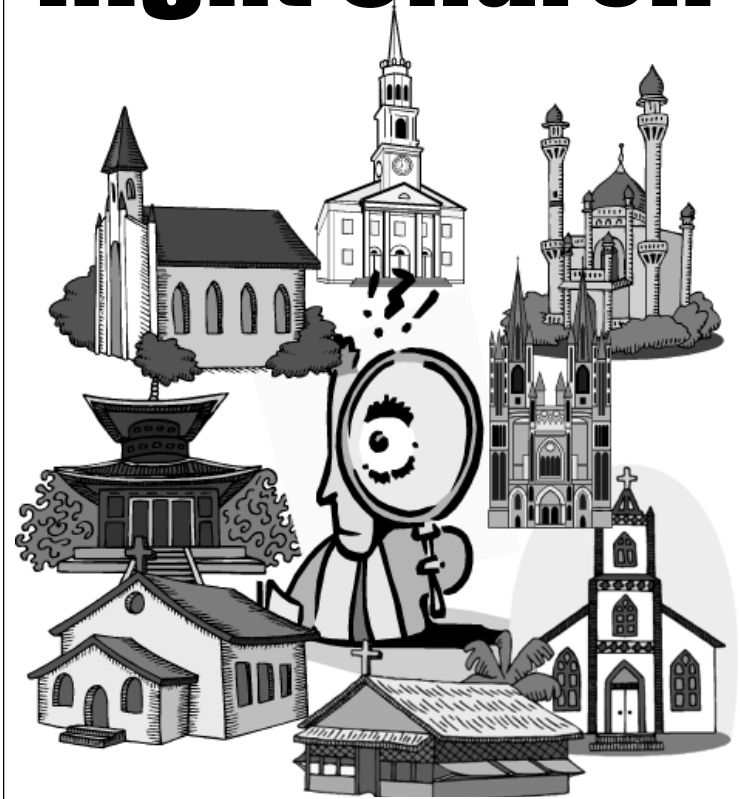


Finding the Right Church



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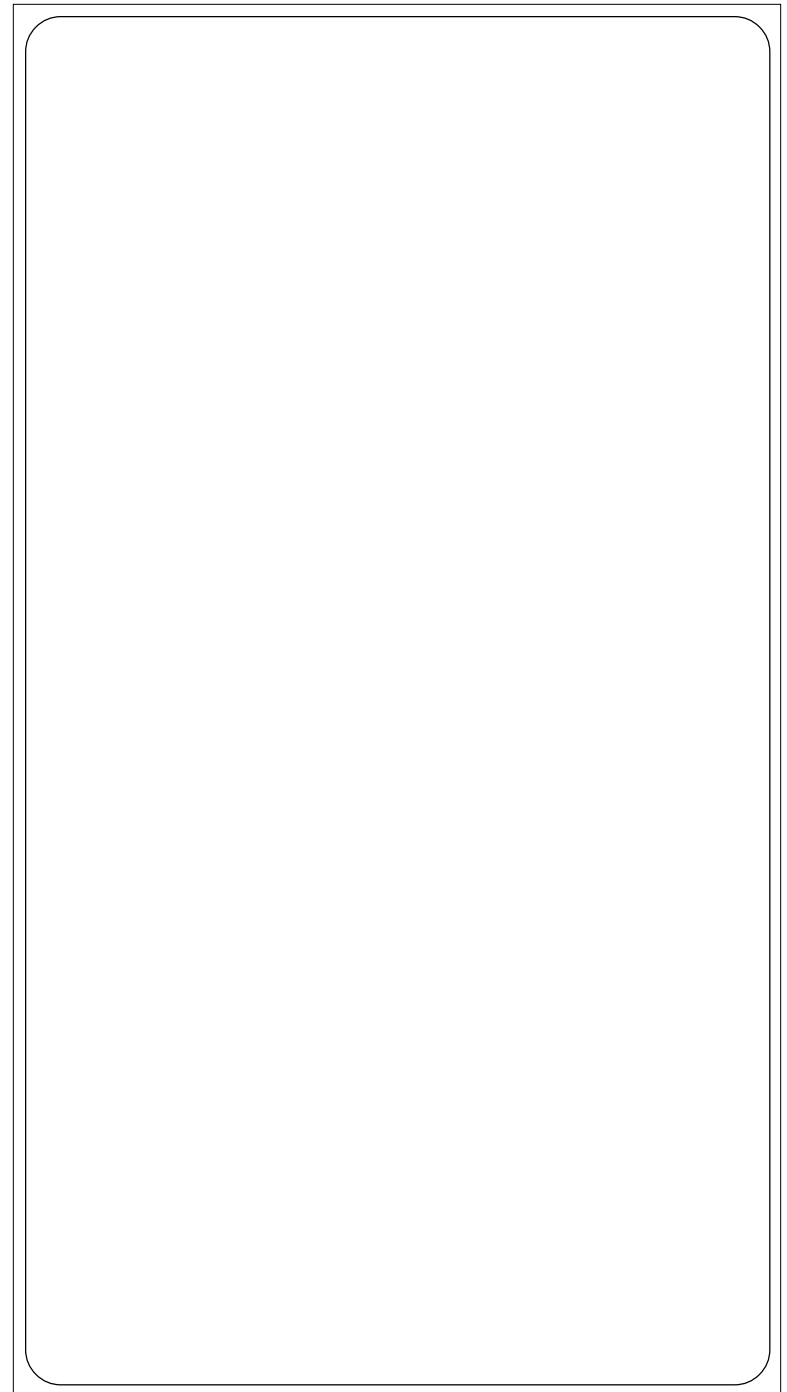
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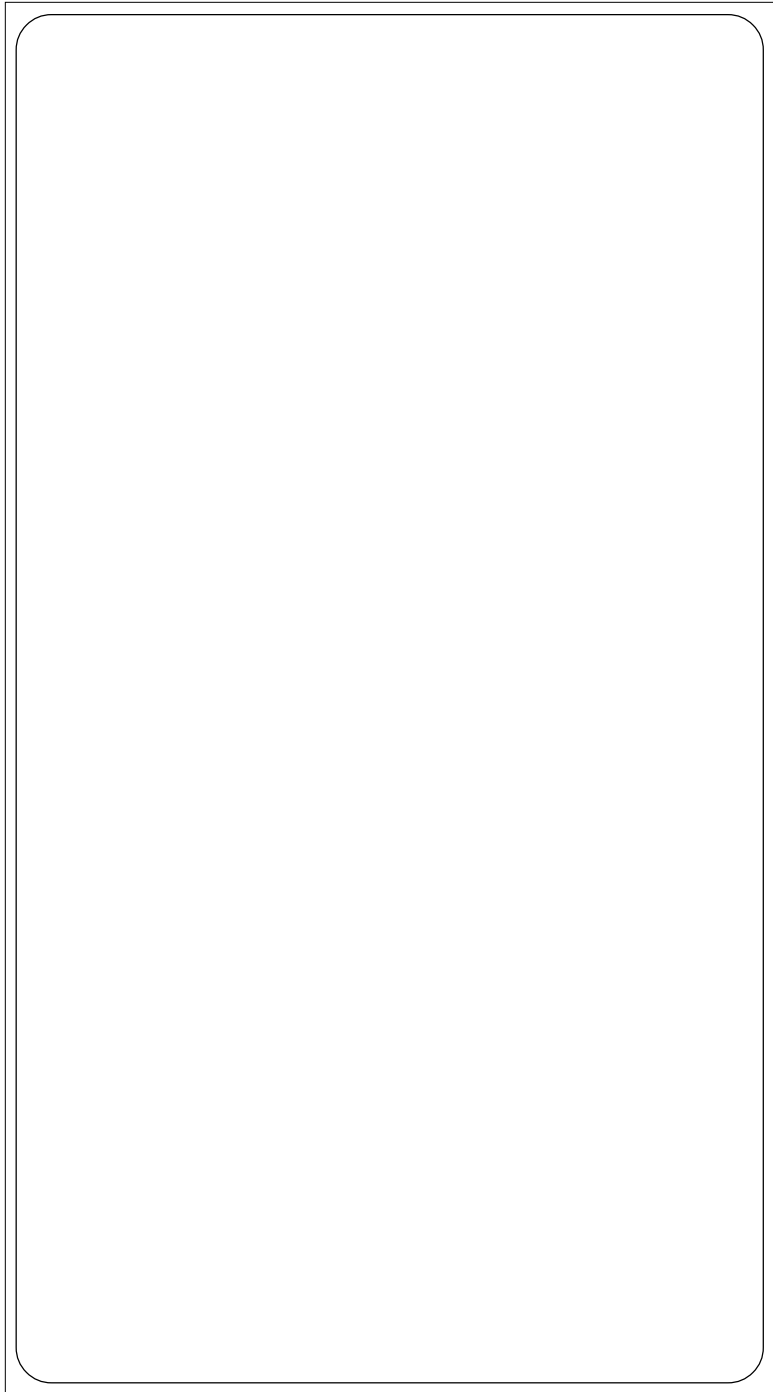
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Finding the Right Church

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1. *The Local Nature of the Church*
2. *Understanding the New Testament Church*

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The criteria mentioned are important, but there are two additional criteria that affirm a healthy church. Love and Holy Spirit confirmation. In John 13:34-35 Jesus states that, “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” This statement shows that Christ considers the manifestation of love in a congregation a vital part of affirming that the church members are His disciples. A church that lacks love is a sick church that lacks a healthy relationship with God Himself.

Finally, it is important that a believer seek God’s guidance in finding a church home. This does not require an impractical, sophisticated skill for research. The example for us in the Book of Acts is that when a person believed, he was baptized immediately by those who ministered to him. Of course, the church at that time did not have to compete with counterfeits yet. But the point is that God brings church ministries into our lives to minister to us. Such a ministry relationship establishes a natural bond. Because the Holy Spirit directs every believer to a particular church, He confirms this bond in the hearts of the believer and of the church. Every believer should be able to say that “God is adding me to this church.” Such confirmation establishes a deeper commitment and obligation to be an active participant in the church. But it should also be pointed out that many believers mistake feelings and superficial criteria for leadership of the Spirit of God. Fortunately, the Spirit of God will never contradict the Scripture. Believers should affirm the voice of the Spirit of God with the criteria of a true New Testament church as described in the Word of God. Likewise, believers should confirm the genuineness of a church that teaches the correct Gospel message and church authority with Holy Spirit affirmation.

¹*Foxes Book of Martyrs*, Foxe

²*Trail of Blood* by J. H. Carroll

Brief History of the Baptists by E.J. Overbee

Have you ever asked yourself or heard someone else ask, “Does God have a particular church for me?” I have, and there is good reason for considering such a question. First Corinthians 12:18 says, “But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.” The church was built by Jesus Christ (Matthew 16:18). He claims it for Himself. He maintains it, nurtures it, preserves it, and guides it. He has a church for every believer, and every believer has a church to belong to. Unfortunately, many believers are not in “their” church. This is evidenced by the fact that many churches are weak and lack balance and variety of gifts among their membership. It is also evidenced by the fact that many believers are in churches that are not true New Testament churches.

Some recoil at the idea that not all churches are true churches, but the Bible shows that we should expect counterfeits and corrupted churches because we live in a world ruled by Satan. Second Corinthians 4:4 describes Satan’s goal saying, “... the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.” The blindness that Satan fosters upon human minds includes not only a false Gospel of salvation, but also a false notion of what is the church.

The failure to understand and recognize what is a true New Testament church is promoted by Satan by encouraging the development of counterfeit churches and challenging the Biblical doctrine that God has a church home for every believer. Sincere believers join false churches because they are untrained and have not studied the Bible to determine what is a Biblical church. Revelation 3:1 shows that it is possible for a church to claim to be of Christ but in reality is dead. Christians need to avoid such churches for their own spiritual well being. Sadly, many if not most Christians have been blindsided by the notion that doctrine and church membership are unimportant.

It has been erroneously said that, “*All* that matters is that you trust Jesus and love Him.” But this notion suggests falsely that the majority of verses in the sixty-six books of the Bible are unimportant and ignores the mandate to teach the whole counsel of God (Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 20:27; Second Timothy 3:16).

What are the criteria for identifying a true, New Testament church built and empowered by Jesus Christ? This is easier than it might first appear. First, a true church teaches the Gospel of salvation by grace kept by grace without works. Second, a true church serves the true God and Savior Jesus Christ. Third a true church practices God-authorized baptism and church planting.

The first criterion is obvious. “Churches” that do not teach the correct Gospel message do not bring souls to Christ. Rather, they teach lies of the Devil and contribute to the blindness of souls, keeping them in darkness and condemnation. Such churches are, obviously, not Jesus Christ’s churches.

What is salvation by grace kept by grace without works? It is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, proclaimed by His churches, and declared in numerous passages of the Bible such as ...

Ephesians 2:8-9, “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.”

Galatians 2:16, “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.”

Titus 3:5, “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.”

Romans 3:28, “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.”

Galatians 3:11, “But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith.”

John 10:28, “And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.”

heretics who also belong to the same convention. The peer pressure and camaraderie of the conventions influences church leaders to corrupt in their doctrine. It is always gradual, subtle, and almost imperceptible, but the end result is predictable. The churches that formed the first convention became the Catholic Church, which serves as a precedent of how convention-organizations will eventually end up.

Some would argue that there is advantage to a church being accountable in a convention or association. But there is no advantage. First, churches gain a reputation among other churches regardless of their affiliation or non-affiliation with an association. One does not have to belong to the same convention to know that a church is corrupt. Second, as head of His church, God is more capable of cleansing and chastising churches that are not doing right than any man-made organization. To suggest there is any advantage in belonging to an association is to suggest that man has a better idea than God and better control over God’s churches. Third, the convention controls that are designed to influence churches to stay true to their doctrine and to hold them accountable can be used by whoever gains power in the convention for good or evil. Fourth, the presence and influence of doctrinally corrupt, liberal churches in conventions proves that convention association does not lend advantage to holding churches accountable. It did not work for the Catholic Church. Fifth, the creation of a convention that will eventually corrupt only serves to create an ominous and large enemy that competes with and attacks true, New Testament churches.

Is there advantage to mission work being controlled by a convention or association? No. Most of the money designated for missions in most associations end up paying for the association overhead, and heretics employed by the association receive salaries as well. The missionaries actually get a fraction of the funds that were designated for them by local churches or members of those churches.

The search for true, New Testament churches will lead saints to look for churches that are Baptist, unaffiliated with conventions, and teach a sound Gospel message. Most of these churches are known as Independent Baptist churches. Though many Baptist churches that are affiliated with conventions are doctrinally sound and of proper lineage, they are making themselves vulnerable to corruption. This is something to be concerned about.

of these doctrines is not sufficient because a church can teach the correct Gospel message but not have a proper lineage. Likewise, a church that teaches a false Gospel cannot be a true, New Testament church regardless of its lineage. The threat to remove the candlesticks of the churches mentioned in Revelation 2 & 3 shows that true churches can corrupt and lose that authority to represent God in spite of their proper origin and heritage. Fortunately, Christ promised in Matthew 16:18 that the gates of hell will not prevail against His church. In other words, there will always be true, New Testament churches on earth regardless of the failure of some.

More specifically, it is possible to eliminate many churches from consideration by virtue of their lineage. Obviously, churches organized without authorization from true churches, like the Assembly of God and Pentecostal churches, are counterfeits of the real church. And churches with a false Gospel message like the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church cannot be true, New Testament churches. Further, all churches that are descendents of false churches like the Catholic church are not true, New Testament churches because they were birthed from a false church (teaching a false Gospel) having no authority to pass to them. Thus, all protestant churches such as the Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches are not true, New Testament churches. Denominational affiliation eliminates a lot of work for those who are seeking a true church because churches already identify themselves publicly as belonging to a particular lineage and associated with a specific set of doctrines. Consequently, believers do not have to examine every individual church on earth. Denominational groupings screen most churches from consideration, save believers a lot of time in their search, and reduce the confusion that would arise from a world of unidentified churches.

Well-known church denominations that have an authorized lineage include Baptists, Mennonites, and Brethren.² However, only Baptists have, by and large, maintained the Gospel of salvation by grace, kept by grace. Those Baptist churches that have corrupted the Gospel obviously are not true, New Testament churches. Thus, by process of elimination, true, New Testament churches can be found among the Baptist churches. Unfortunately, some of these are forsaking the doctrine of church perpetuity and are compromising their practice of baptism. Many of the Baptist churches associated with conventions are corrupting because of their association with

Any church that preaches a false Gospel is a false church. A false Gospel does not bring souls to Christ. Paul admonishes in Galatians 1:8, “But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.”

It is important to realize that false churches claim to be true churches. They invoke the name of Jesus Christ, they use the Bible, they pray, they witness, and many promote good will and love. Many are lively in song and entertainment, provoking emotions of warmth, happiness, and enthusiasm. Some promote sober reverence in their service. Others offer stern and serious religious ritual in sober devotion to God. But these characteristics are superficial and easily produced as works of the flesh. Jesus explained in Matthew 7:22-23 that, “Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.” The superficial manifestations of religion are not sufficient for salvation, and they are the wrong criteria by which a true church can be known. Unfortunately, many Christians are unaware of the warning in Matthew 7: 22-23 and are duped into joining counterfeit churches and groups because of superficial characteristics. The doctrine of salvation is ignored—often in the name of love and unity. After all, as many false churches remind us, “All that matters is Jesus because Jesus unites, doctrine divides.” This may feel good to say, but it is deadly. Thus, the first criterion of a true New Testament church is that it teaches the true New Testament Gospel message of Jesus Christ—salvation by grace kept by grace without works.

The second criterion of a genuine, true New Testament church is knowing the true God and Savior Jesus Christ. Knowing who can save you is as important as how He saves you. Jesus Christ is God and saves you once and forever. He is the one from whom you receive eternal life.

John 1:1 and 14 say of Christ, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.”

In John 20:28, Thomas confesses to Jesus Christ, “My Lord and my God.”

And First Timothy 3:16 says, “And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.”

A church that does not know Jesus Christ as God serves a false god and is a false church. They proclaim a false savior and a false hope. They lead souls to hell not to heaven.

The third criterion to identify a true New Testament church is by its teaching and practice of church authority. This doctrine provides visible *approval* of what belongs to God. To eliminate counterfeits from consideration as true churches, God requires that churches be historically and physically connected by divine authorization. Historical connection is achieved through teaching the doctrine of church authority. Physical authorization is practiced through the ordinance of baptism.

Just as Genesis one proclaims kind begets kind in the plant and animal kingdoms, so likewise kind produces kind among churches. Just like you are Adam because you are a descendent of Adam by direct lineage, likewise a genuine, true, New Testament church must come from the direct, physical lineage of genuine true New Testament churches. Just as horses do not come from dogs, so likewise, true, New Testament churches do not come from false churches.

If we were to examine the lineage of a church, we should discover that there is an unbroken lineage of churches that traces back to the first church that Christ built in Jerusalem. If a church does not have a direct, unbroken lineage to the first church at Jerusalem, then it has come from another lineage. It is not from the lineage of true New Testament churches. It cannot be a true NT church.

However, for most churches, documenting an unbroken lineage is not possible. The historical documentation is indeterminable for all but a few churches. The problem of documenting historical lineage is obvious. Records can be lost.

Fortunately, there is a better way to establish direct, historical lineage than by paper records or hearsay. The better way is the doctrinal teaching and practice of church authority.

Christ set up His church to be the “pillar and ground of truth” (First Timothy 3:15). It is His authorized institution on earth to

empowered, and cherishes as His own bride. Such attitude and perspective is not conducive to one’s spiritual well being. It is no wonder the early believers were baptized immediately after being saved. They cherished and valued church membership as a privilege and a vital resource to them. And it is no wonder that many believers were martyred for their rejection of unauthorized baptisms by false churches.¹

From God’s perspective, the church is the center of activity on earth. It is the place of greatest significance because it is God’s embassy on earth commissioned to proclaim the Gospel to the world. It is the institution Christ built and entrusts with the Gospel message. It is the hub of spiritual activity and warfare. Thus, when God designates a believer in particular to a church in particular, it is that believer’s assignment and responsibility to fulfill God’s purpose for him through that church. Further, because the church is of greatest importance in the earth, a believer should seek the church that God intends him to participate in before he seeks even a secular job location. God’s work comes first.

Do true, New Testament churches have a monopoly on good teachers? Obviously not. Apollos was a great teacher and was engaged in persuading many Jews to Christ. But, more than likely, being the godly man that he was, once he learned about the importance of church authorized baptism, he gladly submitted himself to the same. Having Apollos added to the church was a great blessing not only to him but to the church as well. Likewise, how many churches would be better off if the godly teachers in the world today submitted themselves to church baptism and became members of true, New Testament churches?

If many saints are not members of true, New Testament churches, it follows that many churches are suffering from a lack of membership and the gifts associated with that lack of membership. Thus, saints should not criticize churches, and they should not abandon churches by starting or joining para-church organizations. Rather, the correct response is to strengthen the church with their participation.

How can true, New Testament churches be identified? As mentioned previously, the critical three criteria are the doctrines of 1) salvation by grace, kept by grace, 2) the deity of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, and 3) the succession of church authority. Having just one

Ephesians 4: 11-16 says that the church is a vital resource, “For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ....” It also protects believers so, “That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine.” God gave believers the church to build them up in the faith. It is a very important resource for us. Who would dare to call unimportant what God has called important? And who would refuse membership in the very institution that God built for the purpose of ministering to His children?

The importance of membership in the church is demonstrated by the threat of having one’s membership revoked. If church membership were not important, there would be no significance in being *in* or *out* of the church. However, First Corinthians 5:13 instructs the church at Corinth to remove people from their membership who are not living up to a testimony worthy of Christ. And First Corinthians 11:30 indicates that God will afflict a church with sickness and even death if the ordinance of communion is taken unworthily. Church membership is very important to God, and that alone should make it very important to every believer!

Heb 10:24-25 shows that the church is so important that attendance to meetings is commanded saying, “... let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.” God has given us His church to protect us and to build us up. Such a command to not forsake the assembly shows that God considers the meetings of the church vital to their spiritual well being.

What harm is there in not being a member of a New Testament church? Understanding the importance of the church answers this question in part. Church membership means you are: in the bride of Christ, in the institution built by Christ Himself, in the body of which Christ is the head, in the pillar and ground of truth, in the institution empowered to withstand even the gates of hell, and in a vital resource for spiritual development and ministry. It also means you are empowered to fulfill the Great Commission and to share in the privileges, honors, and responsibilities associated with the church. Therefore, failure to be a member in a true, New Testament church means loss of these privileges. To know these things and refuse membership is to disobey God’s command, to disregard the institution Jesus built,

represent Himself and His message (Matthew 16:18).

In Matthew 16:18-19 Jesus says, “That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” *Binding* has nothing to do with salvation. A church cannot give or take away a person’s salvation. *Binding* refers to church membership. Though most churches do not practice church discipline described in First Corinthians 5 and Matthew 18, Christ gave His church the responsibility to bind or lose believers into or out of membership. As His representative on earth, this includes His church making known what is approved or disapproved as a genuine, true New Testament church. A group of believers who never received the approval and authorization from a true New Testament church is a counterfeit church. A physical connection by direct church authorization ensures that every new church is officially approved of by God. This practice eliminates the danger of spurious groups springing up and claiming to represent God. It takes the guesswork out of distinguishing between a true church and a false church. It also guarantees an unbroken, historical lineage through New Testament churches.

Churches that are truly of God, want be born out of a New Testament church by legitimate means with the approval of that true church. Getting approval from one of God’s churches should be paramount to any group wanting others to think of them as God’s church. Granted, there are numerous churches without a heritage of authorization, but this in no ways justifies starting a church without proper authorization. And granted, there are those who insist that they need no approval from men or churches because they have been approved by God. But, self-righteous proclamations are not satisfying to careful seekers wanting to find the right church.

There is a great deal of protection built into the practice of church authorization. Organizing in the “name of God” without obvious authorized church approval promotes confusion because anyone can claim God’s name. Receiving authority and approval from a church with connection to a lineage of churches ensures that a group of believers are indeed qualified to be a church. The doctrine of authorized church succession should be worn like a badge to declare to others that it has an official credential required of all churches approved by God.

How does the doctrine of church authority guarantee an unbroken, historical lineage of New Testament churches? Churches that believe that authorization of a church must be received from a previously established true New Testament church demand of themselves that they originated by the authority of a true New Testament church. This of course requires that the authorizing church also believes and practices church authorization by succession, which means their origin demanded the same criteria, and the church prior to them, and the church prior to that one, and so on. Whereas the historical records may be incomplete, the doctrine of church authorization ensures that the lineage is unbroken. It would make no sense to create a doctrine that could not be practiced. Just as today's churches that practice this Biblical doctrine insist on a proper origin, churches in the past did likewise. The doctrine requires it. Subsequently, the lineage and succession of authority from the original church in Jerusalem is secured. Believers today should be in churches that teach and practice church authority. Churches that do not consider this doctrine important do not seek historical authorization. By historical, I mean a lineage of authority that connects with the original church in Jerusalem through an unbroken chain of true New Testament churches. If a church does not believe or practice this doctrine, how are searching believers to recognize that this particular church is truly approved by God?

Some would suggest that churches approved by God are "proven" by their growth in numbers, have lively services, experience the "moving" of God's Spirit, and perhaps there are benevolent miracles. The problem with using these "proofs" of God's approval is that false religious systems can offer the same proofs and, indeed, do. Islam can claim rapid growth in numbers as a blessing from Allah. Many churches that teach a message of works for salvation claim miracles, good feelings, and good fellowship as evidence that they are of God. Choosing a church based on these traits can mislead believers. Thus, a church does not have to be authorized by God to manifest "spirituality," so it is imperative that believers looking for the right church examine a church's Gospel message, its Savior, and its lineage. False churches will not have all three of these doctrines.

If a church is a blessing to its members and has everything right with the one exception of church authorization, is its lineage to authority really that important? After all, if believers are being fed spiritually, and they are growing spiritually, how could God not

nized the significance of Cornelius speaking in tongues. Once he saw the sign of Holy Spirit empowerment manifested the same way as on the Day of Pentecost, he commanded Cornelius to be baptized. For Peter, there was no mistaking the connection between baptism and church empowerment of the Holy Spirit. This occurrence of tongues preceding baptism was a sign to Peter and those with him that God wanted Gentiles to be baptized too. Up to this time, Jews were resistant to the idea of Gentiles being included in the special covenant with God. Under the Old Covenant this was not allowed. However, under the New Covenant, things were different. Membership in the New Testament church is based on the condition of believing in Christ for salvation (Jew or Gentile) (Acts 8:37), receiving authorized baptism (Acts 19:5-6), and a willingness to maintain a good testimony for Christ (1 Corinthians 5).

According to Acts 8:14-17, baptism must be conducted by those who are authorized to do so. This passage tells of a group of people who had been baptized, but they still lacked the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. So, Peter and John went to them and laid hands on them signifying authorization. This event shows the importance of having the proper authority, which is associated with the church. Anyone can baptize and dunk people under the water. But only those who are baptized by a proper church authority receive the empowerment associated with being a church member. Being the only authority on earth to baptize makes the church the most important institution on the face of the earth.

Another indication that the church is important is indicated by First Timothy 3:15 by referring to the church as the pillar and ground of truth. No other institution on earth has been referred to as the pillar and ground of truth. The church alone is designated with this distinction. It is Christ's special institution of believers empowered to preserve and teach the Word of God.

Designating the church as the pillar and ground of truth corresponds with Christ's statement in Matthew 16:18 that even the gates of hell shall not prevail against His church. The church is important enough to withstand the corrupting influence and destructive powers of hell. This implies that the church alone is the reason the Gospel truth is preserved in the world. Once again, no other institution on earth has this promise. Such designation and empowerment makes the church more important than any other institution on earth.

believer and God. Believers who receive baptism are committing themselves to a covenant with God. This covenant is called the New Covenant or New Testament. For this reason, Christ's church is referred to as the New Testament church.

Matthew 16:18 shows that the church was important enough for Jesus to build. He said, "Upon this rock I will build my church." Prior to this time, the church did not exist. Christ's personal interest in the church to build it Himself and to claim it as His own makes the church very significant. What Christian, who is sensitive to the Spirit of God, would not want to be in Christ's church? Why would any believer settle for something less and join a church built by men?

Ephesians 5:23 and Colossians 1:18 show that the church is important because Christ is its head. Ephesians 5:23 says, "For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body." Colossians 1:18 says that Christ "... is the head of the body, the church." Considering that the church is likened to being the body of Christ of which He is the head, it is obvious that the church is of supreme significance. Thus, dismissing the church as unimportant is like dismissing Christ as unimportant. Obviously, believers should esteem the church as much as Christ does. To do less is to despise both Christ and the things He considers precious.

The church was important enough to empower. Acts 1:8; 2:1-6 records Jesus' promise to His disciples (who represented the first church) to empower them to witness of Him in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. On the Day of Pentecost, this empowerment was manifested, and the disciples went into the streets preaching the wonderful news of Jesus Christ to people from all over the world. The disciples had already been baptized and, in fact, had baptized others under Jesus' supervision (John 4:1-2). They did not need to get re-baptized. Instead, all that the new church lacked was the empowerment, and this was given to them on the Day of Pentecost.

As one reads through the book of the Acts of the Apostles, it is clear that this empowerment was passed on through baptism. Acts 10:47 shows that proper baptism was associated with the evidence of empowerment. In the early church, the sign of speaking in tongues indicated that people had been properly baptized. This sign ministry no longer legitimately occurs today. But notice that Peter recog-

approve of such a church? Having the right doctrine and being a blessing to others is commendable and good, but they are not enough to qualify a group as Jesus Christ's church. The purpose of church lineage is to ensure the integrity and identity of God's authorized institution so that believers can know how to recognize God's church. For example, Apollos was a godly man who persuaded many Jews to Christ, but his baptism and association with the New Testament church was incorrect. In spite of the good and right things he was doing, he still needed to be corrected.

Apollos was a Christian who lacked valid baptism from a true, New Testament church. He was fervent in spirit, mighty in Scripture, and convinced Jews to believe in Jesus Christ. But for all that was right about him, Acts 18:25 says that he knew only the baptism of John. Acts 19:3-5 shows Apollos' disciples in Ephesus being re-baptized by Paul because they had only John's baptism. Not having the proper baptism is a problem. Apollos was not baptized by the proper authority, and he was not baptizing others with the proper baptism. How could this be?

John's baptism was valid under the authority of the old covenant between God and Israel. However, after Christ declared His rejection of Israel (Matthew 23) and thereby voiding the covenant with them, the church, with a new covenant, became the new authority. Thus, the baptism of John was no longer valid. Therefore, proper baptism must be conducted by a church approved of God. Baptism from any other source is not valid. For this reason, Apollos needed to be instructed more perfectly, and his disciples needed to be re-baptized.

Was it important to correct Apollos of his error? Priscilla and Aquilla thought so, and Acts 18:26 says that they instructed Apollos more perfectly in the way. Why did they bother? After all, he was very eloquent in speech. He was mighty in Scripture, fervent in spirit, already instructed in the way of the Lord, and a diligent teacher of truth. He appears to have everything right except for a valid baptism. Other than this one thing, he was doing very well. But it was for this one reason that Priscilla and Aquilla taught Apollos about baptism. The doctrine of baptism and the church is important even if everything else is right.

What makes baptism so important? The practice of baptism physically connects churches.

Baptism is one of the four commands in the Great Commission. Matthew 28:19-20 records Jesus' commission to His church as represented by His disciples saying, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, **baptizing** them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen." Christ does not give commands that are unimportant. Considering the size of the Bible and all that could be said from the beginning of creation to its end, every message, command, and story in the Bible has been distilled down to the most important elements. Thus, the Great Commission is of utmost importance, and because this involves baptism to fulfill it, baptism itself is of utmost importance. Though many believers attempt to fulfill the commission their own way by ignoring baptism and the command to teach observance of all things, the only legitimate way to fulfill Christ's command is to do it His way. God's way is always the best way. Baptism should not be ignored and treated as unimportant.

It has been argued that salvation is the **only** thing that matters because salvation of one's soul is the most important thing that can happen to anyone, therefore, nothing else matters. However, this perspective fosters a rebellious attitude toward God and a belittlement of His Word. After all, God considers many topics important enough to be included in the Bible. He speaks of creation, governments, how to live, how to talk, how Israel should grow crops and conduct festivals, etc. To say that nothing else matters is to say that most of God's inspired message in the Bible is trivial. Of course, this is blasphemous, and no spiritually sensitive believer would want to knowingly harbor such an attitude. Granted the message of salvation is the most important thing that anyone deals with. But the most important message does not make the other messages in the Bible unimportant. On the contrary, Hebrews 12:5-7 tells us that God chastises His children for doing wrong. This clearly indicates that issues in a believer's life, though not pertaining to salvation, **are** important to God. Such issues include baptism.

What is it about baptism that makes it so important? Why does God command us in Matthew 28:20 to baptize believers? Why did Peter command Cornelius and those with him to be baptized? Should we continue the practice of commanding believers to be baptized?

God commands us to be baptized because He wants us in His

church, and God requires that believers be baptized before He adds them to His church. Though many think that church voting or the act of baptism adds them to the church, First Corinthians 12:18 shows that God is the one who adds to the church saying, "God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him." The association of baptism with church membership is shown in Acts 2:41 which says that as many as received Peter's message of the Gospel were baptized and subsequently added to the church at Jerusalem. Acts 2:47 explains that **God** added to the church daily as many as were saved. Clearly, God adds to the church. But He adds believers to His church after they are baptized. Note also that the early believers did not hesitate to be baptized. Every new believer received baptism immediately, and, subsequently, God added them to the church. This occurred daily. What a precedent for us today! Obviously, baptism was important to God, to the early church, and to the new believers. Baptism is not important because of the experience of being dipped in water. It is important because it qualifies a believer for membership in Jesus Christ's church.

Is membership in a local church really important? Of course. Peter **commanded** the listeners in Jerusalem to be baptized (Acts 2:38) and, later, he commanded Cornelius to be baptized (Acts 10:38). Jesus **commanded** the disciples in the Great commission to baptize (Matthew 28:19-20). Because church membership is important the threat of losing God's approval as a church is significant (Revelation 2:5). If being a church, approved by God, were unimportant and trivial, then what concern would there be in the threat of removing that approval? Further, there are other indications that the church is important.

The church is important enough to be called Christ's bride (Ephesians 5:23-27 & 32). This signifies a special relationship between God and those in His church. Does God have favorites? He sure does. The Bible cites many examples of believers who found favor in the eyes of the Lord and received special blessings. Does this mean that he does not love all believers? Of course not. Some parents may favor one child over another but still love all of their children. Likewise, Christ has a special relationship with His bride just as does a husband to his wife. This does not mean that a husband hates all other women. It simply means that his wife has a special relationship with him that others do not. To signify this special relationship, there is a covenant between the husband and wife. This is true with the