

LESSON 1
January 7, 2024

THE ORIGIN OF THE CHURCH

GOLDEN TEXT

“Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”. (Acts 2:38).

USEFUL PRCTICE

The Church is the family of God, purchased with the blood of Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit.

SCRIPTURE READING

Acts 2:1, 2; 37, 38

- 1** When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.
- 2** Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.
- 37** When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”
- 38** Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- I) **To describe** the trajectory of God's people in the Bible and in history;
- II) **To present** the Church as a divine creation;
- III) **To identify** the Church as the community of the saved.

INTRODUCTION

Having a quick look at the New Testament is enough to understand what the Church really is and how important it is. For the apostles and the first Christians, the Church was relevant. Paul, for example, called it the “the pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15); and Peter called it the “chosen generation” (1 Peter 2:9). In this lesson, we will show what the Bible actually reveals about the Church of God. We will see that the *ekklesia*, the Church of God, far from being merely an association of people, is a divine institution.

I – THE PEOPLE OF GOD IN THE BIBLE AND IN HISTORY

1. In the Old Testament. The Hebrew term *qahal* is used to refer to a gathering of God's people under the Old Covenant. In this aspect, its use is “a summons to an assembly” or “the act of assembling”. In this way, *qahal* is described as the people gathered together (Deut. 4:10); congregation of the people (Judges 20:2); multitude (1 Sam. 17:47 – NIV); congregation (1 Kings 8:22); congregation of Israel (1 Chr. 13:2) and great gathering (Neh. 5:7). The term *qahal*, therefore, in the context of the Old Testament, refers to ethnic Israel, a nation that came together or gathered for both religious and non-cultural purposes.

2. In the New Testament. The Greek term *ekklesia* refers to the Christian church. However, in the New Testament context, its meaning will differ from that given in the Old Testament, both in form and function. It is not just one race or nation, but all those, of different races and nations, who have been purchased by the blood of Christ (Eph. 3:6; Acts 20:28; Rev. 5:9). Thus, its meaning in the New Testament is mostly sacred, that is, of an assembly of believers who came together to worship God (Acts 12:5; 13:1). It is not just a gathering of people, but an assembly of regenerated believers who come together to worship God. Jesus, for example, used the term *ekklesia* in an exclusive sense – the people purchased by his blood (Matt. 16:18). Thus, Paul's use of *ekklesia*, in his epistles, always designates the community of the saved. This way, we see Paul greeting the church (1 Cor. 1:2); teaching the churches (1 Cor. 7:17); disciplining the use of gifts in church worship (1

Cor. 14:4,5,12,19,23,28,33,34,35) and giving guidelines to the church (1 Cor. 16:1).

3. In Christian history. There are those who believe that the Church continues to be governed by Peter's successor and the bishops in communion with him. Evidently, the Protestant tradition rejects this concept, since it does not reflect the context of the New Testament where the figure of Peter's successor is totally alien and unknown. After the Reformation of the 16th century, the Protestant tradition sought to give a more precise, biblical sense of what a church actually is. In a large historic Protestant denomination, the Church is defined as “a local congregation of regenerated persons baptized after profession of faith.” On the other hand, according to a document from a large American Pentecostal denomination, we understand the Church as “the body of Christ, the dwelling place of God through the Holy Spirit, with divine appointments for the fulfillment of his Great Commission, where each believer, born of the Spirit, is an integral part of the Universal Assembly and of the Church of the firstborn, who are enrolled in Heaven” (Eph. 1:22, 23; 2:22; Heb. 12:23).

II – THE CHURCH AS DIVINE CREATION

1. The Church as a God's ideal. From eternity, the Church was in the heart of God and was idealized by Him. In essence, it is a divine project: “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” (Eph. 1:4). In his Letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul speaks of a “mystery” which was not made known (Eph. 3:3-6). That mystery that had been revealed was exactly the Church! In the mind of God, therefore, the Church already existed. God's love caused Him to provide a plan to save fallen man. Thus, Christ loved the Church and gave himself for her (Eph. 5:25).

2. The Church as a concrete reality. As we have seen, the Church did not just remain in the mind of God; it came into existence in a concrete way. The beginning of the Church takes place in the fullness of time: “But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law” (Gal. 4:4). In this way, God will “put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ” (Eph. 1:10). Then the question arises: “When did the Church actually come into existence? When did it establish itself in its concrete form?” Most theologians argue that it was at Pentecost. The Church, for example, is not mentioned in the Gospels of Mark, Luke and John. Matthew speaks of its existence, but as a future event (Matt; 16:18).

3. The Church at Pentecost. After Pentecost, Luke highlights that “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). In this way, the Church, which existed only in the heart and mind of God, became a concrete reality when the Holy Spirit is poured out at Pentecost after the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 2:1, 2).

III – THE CHURCH AS THE COMMUNITY OF THE SAVED

1. Regenerated by the blood of Christ. At Pentecost, the apostle Peter said, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). With these words, the apostle Peter was saying how a person enters the Church, that is, through repentance and baptism. The Church is a Christian community made up of regenerated people who have made a public profession of faith. Someone's entry into the Church is not through membership, but through conversion. This is exactly the meaning of the Greek word *metanoeo*, translated here as repentance. It means a change of mind. Thus, the Church is formed of people who were in sin, on the path to eternal damnation, but who, thanks to the Gospel, have had their lives transformed.

2. Sealed by the Holy Spirit. It has already been said that the Church has its origins on the day of Pentecost. Through the Spirit of God, we are baptized into the Body of Christ, the Church, then, we become part of it. This is exactly what the apostle Paul says to the Corinthians in his First Letter: “For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Cor. 12:13).

3. The Baptism of Christ and the Spirit. The apostle Peter, who exhorted those present on Pentecost to repent, also said, “And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38). Thus, we can affirm that Christ baptized believers with the Holy Spirit and with fire, a baptism of empowerment (Acts 1:4), while the Spirit baptized them into the Body of Christ, a baptism of initiation, forming the Church (1 Cor. 12:13).

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we saw how the Church founded by Jesus Christ emerged. It first existed in God's plan until it was established in the New Testament after the death, resurrection of Christ and the infusion of Christians into the Body of Christ through the Holy Spirit. The Church, therefore, was not idealized by any man, nor is it founded on human theses. Its foundation is

Christ, who is the head of the Church. Therefore, it is a great privilege to be part of the Church, the Body of Christ.