

The Identity Of The Church

Introduction. When Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, "Upon this rock I will build my church," He spoke of a singular, divine institution. In the New Testament, the church is known as the body of Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23) and Ephesians 4:4 states that there is only one body. Therefore, from the Bible, we know there is one true church by which God will be pleased.

This lesson examines the identity of that one true church. "Identity" simply means, "The collective aspect of the set of characteristics by which a thing is definitively recognizable or known." The Lord's church has a definite identity.

I. ***We Must Build According To The Pattern***

- A. We are workers or builders together with God (1 Corinthians 3:8-9).
- B. We must follow God's plan or pattern (Hebrews 8:1-5).
 - 1. The pattern is revealed through the teachings of Christ and the apostles, and these teachings are to be our guide (Matthew 28:18-20; Philippians 4:9).
 - 2. The pattern is revealed through the examples of churches in New Testament days (1 Thessalonians 1:6-9).
- C. God will refuse to recognize houses built by human plans (Psalm 127:1; Matthew 15:13; 1 John 3:10).

II. ***The Church As Measured By Human Standards***

- A. Various reasons have been offered to justify the existence of sectarian efforts in religion: "Doing some good," "Good people in it," "Teaches some truth," "Enjoyable association," etc. But the same can be said for every fraternal organization and most human institutions in the world.
- B. These types of claims for divine recognition fail in three ways.
 - 1. They are dishonoring to God. It reduces God's ways to a level with human ways (Isaiah 55:8-9).
 - 2. They are disrespectful to His word. There is no justification for part of the truth being taught when another part is disrespected (Acts 20:27).
 - 3. They are deceiving to untaught men. It satisfies them with unscriptural efforts which God will not recognize (Colossians 2:8).

III. ***The Church As Measured By Divine Standards***

- A. The word of God is the measuring reed (Revelation 11:1). By it the temple or church is to be measured. When God's word is the guide the house is built upon the rock and will stand (Matthew 7:24-27). Because He built the church, our efforts will be judged by the word of Christ (John 12:47-48).

- B. The Lord's church and denominations differ in at least four areas.
1. They differ in their nature.
 - a) The Lord's church contains only those who are saved by God's direction (Acts 2:47). It contains those who have been "called out" of the world and of sin. It is therefore exclusive in its nature.
 - b) Denominations see themselves as one part of the great whole of God's people. They accept into their fellowship those who have been "saved" by methods of human wisdom. They are therefore inclusive in their nature.
 2. They differ in their standard.
 - a) The Lord's church uses only the word of God (1 Peter 4:11; 2 John 9-11; Colossians 3:17).
 - b) Denominations use culture as their standard. They change constantly to fit the world and remain attractive to the crowd. In fact, some men in liberal churches of Christ are openly declaring themselves "change agents."
 3. They differ in their function.
 - a) The Lord's church has a spiritual function (1 Timothy 3:16; John 6:63). Its mission is to save souls.
 - b) Denominations have a social function. They cater to the outer man with day centers, hospitals, benevolent programs, entertainment, recreation, and lectures on finances and health.
 4. They differ in the government.
 - a) The Lord's church has Christ, as its founder, as its head (Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 1:22-23).
 - b) Denominations have people as their head. They are controlled by councils, conventions, boards, and synods.
- C. When these distinctions are blurred, the Lord's church becomes a denomination!

IV. ***The Church Can Lose Its Divine Recognition***

- A. The church is God's family -- a holy nation and a people for God's own possession (1 Peter 2:5-9). Peculiarity and singularity must be maintained in order to be acknowledged and approved by the Lord (Titus 2:14).
- B. As a good soldier must not become entangled in affairs of the world (2 Timothy 2:4), the church must not become entangled in political, economic, or social endeavors.
- C. If we corrupt God's plan in any point we lose our identity. The candlestick, which represented the identity of the church, could be removed (Revelation 2:4-5; cf. 1:20). Therefore, a church can have its

divine recognition withdrawn by God, which will be fatal in the day of judgment (Matthew 7:21-23).

Conclusion. With a good and honest heart, one can surely see the peculiar marks of the one true church. It is our obligation to truth to do our best to be a part of that one true church and to uphold the truth while bringing as many others into the fold as possible.