

-What Is A Church?-

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The Following is an article by Edward Dennett ⁽¹⁾. It was taken from the booklet *Recovered Truths*, Present Truth Publishers, 411 Route 79 Morganville, NJ 07751 USA. Please email me with comments, requests, or suggestions. Enjoy!

The Question which I desire to consider with you in this letter is that of the church. Perhaps that is the most important subject for believers at the present time, both on account of its intrinsic character, and also on account of the confusion not to say ignorance that prevails on this point in Christendom. A Catholic will of course tell you that the church is the Church of Rome; but many Episcopalians would equally identify it with the Establishment, which is indeed termed *the* Church of England; Dissenters ⁽²⁾ will tell you that while the church composes all believers of all times, they are yet members of the church meeting at Blackheath Chapel, or, to increase the confusion, at Brownford Congregational *Church*; whereas Wesleyans will modestly say that they are members of the *Society*, etc. Now if we do not know what the church is, we cannot know the privileges which attach to our belonging to it; and hence we desire to ask, *What Is The Church?* ⁽³⁾

1. In the first place, it is material to notice that the church in the sense, under discussion, of the body of Christ is not found in the Old Testament. This statement is often denied on the basis of a single passage in the Acts of the Apostles, which it is therefore incumbent upon us to carefully examine. In the speech of Stephen before the Sanhedrim, we find these words: 'This is he that was in the church ⁽⁴⁾ in the wilderness,' etc. (Acts 7:38); and on these words the whole question turns, because there is not a single passage in the Old Testament Scriptures themselves which even hints at the existence of the church as known in the New Testament. Now we admit at once that the word 'church' is that which is also used of the church of God; it is *ekklesia*. But what does this word *ekklesia* mean? It means simply an 'assembly,' leaving the nature of the assembly to be defined by the context. For example, the same word is applied three times to the tumultuous gathering at Ephesus, which was brought together through the actions of Demetrius the silversmith and his fellowtradesmen (Acts 19:32, 39, 41); and here, in each instance, it is translated assembly. What then, we ask, was the assembly in the wilderness? The answer is plain. It was the congregation of Israel. But was this congregation the church of God?

Impossible; for while there men born of God amongst that congregation, the congregation was composed of the nation of Israel after the flesh, so that every child born of the Jews was, by virtue of his birth, a member of it. If therefore it is contended that this was the church of God, the inference which meets us is that the church of God in the wilderness was composed of men after the flesh; for the new birth clearly had nothing whatever to do with forming its members, inasmuch as the whole nation was included. So stated, every instructed will at once perceive that the assembly or congregation of Israel was not, in any sense, the church according to the New Testament Scriptures.

2. Another important point is, that the church is not seen as existent in the Gospels. Indeed the word is only found three times in Matthew, and not at all in the other evangelists. We have only then to examine the places where it occurs in the first Gospel. The first passage in which it occurs is as follows: 'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church,' etc. (Matt. 16:18). Now mark the language employed by our Lord. He says, 'Upon this rock I WILL build my church,' speaking in the future tense of something

which had not yet begun to be, but which He was going to build. Such language would have been impossible had the church been in existence, and reveals, as plainly as words could reveal, that the commencement of the church was at that time a yet future thing. The only other passage (for the word occurs twice in it.) Is Matt. 18:17, containing instruction as to how we should deal with a brother who should trespass against us. But the very place of this instruction, coming as it does after the revelation of the future building of the church, and bound up with church or corporate action, as it is in the context, explains its significance, especially if we are careful to note that the Lord concludes this instruction with the especial promise of being in their midst when they should be gathered together *unto His name*, (Matt. 18:20) a thing that could take not take place as long as He was present with them. The church therefore is no more found in the Gospels than it is in the Old Testament Scriptures.

3. It is not until we find it in the Acts of the Apostles that we find it actually existent. And accordingly, the word, either in the singular or plural, is now found no less than twenty or twenty-one times (I say, or twenty-one, for Acts 2:47 is, to say the least, doubtful); and the thing signified by the word the assembly of God is met with in almost every chapter. When then, we ask, did the church commence its existence? Or rather, When did the Lord Jesus commence to build His church on the rock of which He had spoken? *It was on the day of Pentecost*, and not before, that those who received the apostles' words, and who were baptized, were built upon the Rock; and, being baptized by one Spirit into one body, became the church of God. I will not dwell further on this point now, as successive proofs of this will appear as we proceed.

4. Let us then now consider distinctly from the Scriptures our question, *What is the church?* We have a twofold reply. It is the body of Christ, and it is the house of God. Thus, in Ephesians, after the apostle has spoken of the display of the mighty power of God in the resurrection of Christ from the dead, and His supreme exaltation, he proceeds, 'But gave Him to be head over all things to the church, *which is His body*, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all' (Eph. 1:20-23. See also Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 10:16, 17; 12:27; Eph. 2:16; 4:4, 12, 16; 5:30; Col. 1:18-24; 2:19). And in the epistle to Timothy we read of '*the house of God, which is the church of the living God*' (1 Tim. 3:15); and in Ephesians, 'In whom ye also are built together for an *habitation of God through the Spirit*.' (Eph. 2:22. See also Heb. 3:6; 10:21; 1 Peter 2:5; 4:17; also 1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16, etc.). If you will be at the pains to search out the several passages given, you will see that these are the two characteristics of the church as presented in the word of God.

I shall not at this time point out the distinction between the 'house' and the 'body,' as it would lead us too far away from the subject in hand;⁽⁵⁾ but I shall now seek to show that these two terms conclusively prove the statements already made as to the time of the commencement of the church. Thus take the term 'body.' The church, as we have seen, is the body of Christ; and if so, as indeed is also stated (Col. 1:18), Christ is the head of the body. Consequently it was not until after the death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus that the Head was in heaven, and the body formed; for while in the flesh the Lord Jesus abode alone, union with Him being possible only in resurrection. (John 12:23, 24)

Again, let me ask, How is {was} the body formed? 'By one Spirit are we all baptized into one body,' etc. (1 Cor. 12:13). But 'the Holy Ghost was not yet [given], because that Jesus was not yet glorified' (John 7:39); and hence, until Jesus was glorified, the Spirit was not down here on earth to baptize believers into one body, and thus we see again that the church could not be formed until on and after Pentecost. Once more, let me remind you that the characteristic of the body is, that all national distinctions are abrogated, that it is composed alike of Jews and Gentiles (1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:13-16; Col. 3:10, 11); but up to the crucifixion of Christ the Jewish nation possessed its special and peculiar privileges, and we are expressly told in the Ephesians that these national distinctions were abolished through His death. The

apostle says, 'For He is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition [between] us: having abolished in His flesh the enmity, [even] the law of the commandments [contained] in ordinances; for to make in Himself of twain one new man, [so] making peace; and that He might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross,' etc. (Eph. 2:14-16). Finally, we are expressly told that the mystery of the body was not revealed until after Pentecost until, in fact, the time of the apostle Paul (Rom. 16:25, 26; Eph. 3:211; Col. 1:25-28).

The same result will be reached if we consider the term house the church, as the house of God. Thus in Eph. 2:20 we are told that believers 'are built upon the foundation of apostles and prophets.' Are these the prophets of the Old Testament, or of the New? The order of the words has surely special significance; or if not, turn with me to Eph. 4, where we have an enumeration of gifts that proceeded from the *ascended* Christ. 'He gave some,' it is said, 'apostles, and some prophets,' etc. (v. 11); and thus the question is settled (for it is the same order of words.), that they are New Testament prophets, and consequently the church was not built upon this foundation until after Pentecost. Another consideration (I hope you will not be wearied with the abundance of proofs.) points exactly the same way. As the house, the church is the habitation of God through the Spirit (Eph. 2:22); and as we have seen, the Spirit was not given until Pentecost (Acts 1:4; 2:23); and therefore God could not have had His habitation through the Spirit in the church before that time. God indeed dwelt in the tabernacle of witness and in the temple both of which were shadows of His temple in the church; but just because they were shadows or types, it proves that the thing adumbrated or typified was not yet existent.

It is therefore abundantly plain as all the different lines of argument we have adduced from the Scriptures show that the church of God had its commencement here on earth on the day of Pentecost. But the church is also the bride of Christ (see Eph. 5:23-33; 2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 19:69; 21:29, etc.), and hence the church must be complete when the 'marriage of the Lamb' takes place. Now it is seen from Rev. 19 that this event will occur previous to the Lord's appearing to His coming to the earth to establish His kingdom (vv. 69), and we know from manifold Scriptures (e.g. 2 Thess. 1; Col. 3:14; Rom. 8:16-21; 1 Thess. 4:13-18, etc.) That the hope of the church is the coming of the Lord, that having suffered with Christ she will be glorified and reign together with Him in His kingdom. Hence *the period of the church extends from Pentecost until the Lord's coming for His saints*; and consequently the church of God comprises all believers during that period all those believers therefore who have been indwelt by the Holy Ghost, baptized by Him into one body, and united therefore by Him to the glorified man, Christ Jesus, as their Head in heaven.

Such is the answer which the word of God supplies to the question, What is the church? And we are very sure that it is the only answer that can be found in the Scriptures.

1. Mr. Dennett, 1831-1914, was from England, Bembridge. He was born into the church of England and led to Christ as a boy through the instrumentality of a concerned clergyman. He went to school at London University & pastored a Baptist chapel at Greenwich. Mr. Dennett was dedicated to his work as a Baptist pastor. But the blessed Holy Spirit began to work in his heart regarding the simplicity yet profoundness of the person of Christ, His headship over the church, and other truths rudimentary to sound teaching on the church. Eventually, the leading by the Spirit into closer communion with Christ, brother Dennett resigned his pastoral position and began to meet with a group of brethren in humble simplicity, gathering only unto the Name of the Lord Jesus. His remarkable and pious testimony is well chronicled in such works as *The Step I Have Taken, Hindrances To Fellowship, & The Name Above Every Name*, among others. [Back to footnote 1](#)

2. *Dissenters*, as referred to here, would be anything contrary to the church of England at the time of Mr. Dennett's writing. They would probably resemble an independent fundamental church or Bible church in the U.S.A. [Back to footnote 2](#)

3. For an interesting comparison chart, see the article, [Compare Churches](#) at this site. [Back to footnote 3](#)

4. This is one of those unfortunate renderings of a word by the King James Bible translators, which can create needless confusion, especially doctrinal. For instance, the NASB renders the word *church* in this verse as "congregation," which is certainly to be preferred. [Back to footnote 4](#)

5. E. Dennett's *The House of God: Traced Through Scripture*, is available from Present Truth Publishers, 411 Route 79, Morganville, NJ 07751 USA. [Back to footnote 5](#)