

When Did Christ's Church Begin?

by Walton Weaver

The question concerning the beginning of the New Testament church should be of interest to all Bible students. Since the church was in God's purpose in eternity (see Eph. 3:9-10), we know that it was not simply an after-thought on God's part. God had planned to build the church sometime in the future, but when was He going to build it? Many different answers have been given to this question. Why is this true? Is it because the evidence is not clear? This can hardly be the reason for so many different answers to this question. Let's look at the evidence for the time of the church's beginning.

Christ the Builder

The evidence is clear on this point. Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18). For this reason we know that Christ's church was to be of divine origin. Inspired workmen were used to build it (Jno. 14:26 15:26; 16:13), but because they were inspired by the Holy Spirit sent by Christ they were simply the human agents used by Christ to build His church. Christ is the builder. Men have since built other churches, but they were not Christ's inspired spokesmen so the churches they have built are not churches Christ promised to build. They are the churches of men.

Started in Jerusalem

Since Christ built or established His church, where was it built? The Bible gives us the answer to this question, and it is not hard to find. Isaiah prophesied that "the mountain of the house of the Lord will be established as the chief of the mountains," and that "the law will go forth from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (Isa. 2:2-3). Later he said that the foundation would be laid in Zion (Isa. 28:16), and as we well know, this is another name for Jerusalem. So, the Lord's house, as well as the foundation for His house, the church (see 1 Tim. 3:15), were to be built and laid in Jerusalem. This helps explain why the law of the Lord was to go forth from Jerusalem, as Isaiah had promised, and why Jesus said that "repentance and remission of sins shall be preached in his name, beginning in Jerusalem" (Lk. 24:47-49).

The evidence all points to the conclusion that the Lord's church was not established during the Old Testament period. Prophecies like Isaiah 2:2-3 and Daniel 2:44 point to the future. The "last days" and "the days of these kings" in these two passages look to the time of Christ's coming and the establishment of His church in the world. Christ's church is not an Old Testament institution as some have assumed. The kingdom of prophecy of the Old Testament period was to be established by the Messiah and it was to make its appearance in "the last days," or after this present (and last) dispensation of time had begun.

Still Future During Christ's Personal Ministry

While Christ was still on earth the evidence is that His church had not yet begun, but the time of its establishment was drawing near. Consider these simple points:

1. *The kingdom, or church, was still future during the days of John the Baptist.* John preached, "The kingdom of God is at hand" (Matt. 3:2). The Old Testament prophets had prophesied that John would prepare the way of the Lord (Isa. 40:3-4). That Isaiah's words described John's role during Christ's time is made clear by the New Testament application of this passage to him (Lk. 1:16-17; Mk. 1:1-4). John was preparing the way of the Lord by calling men to repentance and announcing the establishment of the Lord's kingdom which was soon to come.

During these days of John the Baptist Jesus also preached that the kingdom of God was "at hand" (Matt. 4:17; Mk. 1:15). This was also the message of the twelve on the limited commission (Matt. 10:5-7) and the seventy sent out by Him (Lk. 10:10-11). "At hand" and "nigh unto you" show us that the kingdom would soon appear, but, at the same time, in language that cannot be misunderstood, these terms tell us that the Lord's church had not yet been established.

2. *The church had not been established after the time of John's death.* We read about the death of John the Baptist in Matthew 14:1-12. Some time after John's death Jesus said, "I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18). The church Jesus was going to build was yet future.

3. *The church Jesus promised to build was yet future at the time of the transfiguration.* Just a few days before this event Jesus said, "There be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power" (Mk. 9:1-12). This statement shows, first, that the kingdom has come (or else some of those disciples are over two thousand years old now!), but it also shows that Christ's kingdom had not come at the time Jesus spoke these words.

4. *The church Jesus was to build had not been established at the time of Jesus' death on the cross.* If so, God's purchased possession was in the world before the purchase price for the church had been paid. Jesus purchased the church with his own blood (Acts 20:28). Were men being reconciled "in one body to God through the cross" (Eph. 2:16) BEFORE Jesus died on the cross? The "one body" is the church (Eph. 1:22-23), but Jews and Gentiles (the "both" who were being reconciled to God "in one body") were not being reconciled to God in this one body prior to the cross.

5. *The church of Christ was not in the world at the time Jesus ascended into heaven.* If Christ's kingdom/church had been established before Christ's ascension then Christ had a kingdom before He had been made king over it. Can you have a kingdom without a king? Christ was not given authority, "dominion, glory and a kingdom" (Dan. 7:14)---He did not enter into His glory--- until after His death and triumphant resurrection from the dead (Lk. 24:26; cf. Jno. 12:23-24; 17:3). It was following His resurrection and

ascension that God "seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion" (Eph. 1:20-21). According to Zachariah 6:13 Christ was to rule as king over His kingdom as He sits on His throne, but He did not begin to sit on the throne until after He had been raised from the dead (Acts 2:30-36).

When Did Christ's Church Begin?

Christ's church began on the first Pentecost following Christ's death, resurrection and ascension into heaven. Christ ascended into heaven to appear before God, the Ancient of days, in order to receive the kingdom (Dan. 7:13-14). Jesus had said that His kingdom would come with power (Mk. 9:1), but the power was to come when the promise of the Father had come, even the Spirit which Christ had promised to his apostles to lead them into all truth (Lk. 24:46-49; Acts 1:8). Jesus told his disciples to go to Jerusalem and wait for the "power from on high." They were at Jerusalem when the power of the Holy Spirit came, and "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, " and they each spoke as the "Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:1-4). In this manner they began to be led into all truth by the Holy Spirit. As salvation was offered through Jesus Christ, those who were convicted of sin were told what to do to be saved (Acts 2:37-38), and as they repented and were baptized for the remission of sins, they were added to the Lord's church as they were being saved (Acts 2:47).

From this time forward we no longer read that the kingdom or church is at hand, that it will be built, or that it will come with power. The kingdom promised by the prophets, preached as at hand by both Jesus and John the Baptist, and promised to be built by Jesus had come.