

# The Church (the Body of Christ)

## Introduction

What is the Church? When did it begin? The answer to the second question depends upon the answer to the first. Seven key passages in the New Testament describe the Church. They are the following: Ephesians 1.22-23; 2.11-22; 3.3-9; Colossians 1.24-27; 1 Corinthians 12.12-13; Galatians 3.26-28, and Romans 16.25-27. These passages provide the needed information to answer these questions.

## The Traditional View

The traditional and majority view of Christendom is that the Church, the Body of Christ, began on Pentecost. This study rejects this view. Below is the argument for the traditional view.<sup>1</sup>

1. The Church is the Body of Christ (Ephesians 1.22-23; 1 Corinthians 12.12-13; Romans 12.3-5; Colossians 1.24).
2. Membership into the Body of Christ is through the baptism of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12.13; Galatians 3.27).
3. The Church was future from Christ's pre-cross ministry (Matthew 16.18).
4. The Church was future from Christ pre-ascension ministry (Acts 1.4-5).
5. The Church was born on the day of Pentecost with the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2.1-4 cf. Acts 11.16-17).
6. After Pentecost, the term ἐκκλησία, which had occurred previously only in Matthew 16.18 and 18.17, becomes common, e.g. Acts 5.11, 8.1, 8.3, 9.31, etc.—23 times in Acts and 115 times outside of the Matthew passages.

The logic for the traditional view is the following: The Church is the Body of Christ. Membership into the Body of Christ is through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The baptism of the Holy Spirit occurred at Pentecost. Therefore, the Church began at Pentecost. The logic of this argument seems well-reasoned and appears strong. However, when other Scriptural data are considered, the traditional view collapses.

### Problems for the Traditional View

Three major problems exist for the traditional view. The first is God explicitly stated through the apostle Paul that the Church, the Body of Christ, was a “secret,” ([μυστήριον](#)). This presents a serious problem for the traditional view because Paul made this declaration long after Pentecost.

The second problem confirms the first point. No Biblical evidence exists to support the view that anyone at Pentecost recognized that the Church, i.e., the Body of Christ, had come into existence. On the contrary, the Scriptural evidence indicates at Pentecost the Twelve knew nothing about the Body of Christ. Peter only addressed Jews. But Paul declared the Church was that organism in which Jew and Gentile are equal. Peter obviously did not know this else he would have addressed Gentiles. Furthermore, only Paul wrote about the Body of Christ (Romans 12.5; 1 Corinthians 10.16, 17, 12.12, 13, 18, 25, 27; Ephesians 1.23, 2.16, 3.6, 4.4, 12, 16, 5.30; Colossians 1.18, 2.17, 19, 3.15). Such terminology is absent from the Gospels and the letters of Peter, James, John, Jude.

Lastly, Peter and the Eleven were looking for the *fulfillment* of prophecy, i.e., the kingdom of God on earth which God had revealed through the prophets, not the beginning of a new “Church” age. The Old Testament contains not a word about the Church, the body of Christ. The prophets, John, and Jesus had revealed nothing of the fact that Jew and Gentile would be equal in Christ in a Body. On the contrary, Peter

quoted Joel and expected the “sun to be turned into darkness and the moon into blood” (Acts 2.15-21). Peter expected the Lord to come in judgment and to establish His kingdom.

The logical argument for rejecting the traditional view that the Church began on Pentecost is the following: Paul stated the Church, the Body of Christ, was a secret. This means that the Church as the Body of Christ was an unknown entity. Paul declared this long after Pentecost. Nothing from the record at Pentecost indicates the Twelve knew anything about the Body of Christ. Peter and the other disciples knew only about the coming earthly kingdom of God. They knew nothing of Jew and Gentile becoming equal in the “body of Christ” seated in the heavens with heavenly citizenship (Ephesians 1.3; Philippians 3.20; Colossians 1.5). Therefore, it is impossible for the Body of Christ to have begun at Pentecost.

### The Meaning of Ἐκκλησία

Before proceeding further we should examine the Greek word [ἐκκλησία](#). Whenever a word is used in the Scriptures its use must be examined in its context. Just because the same word is used does not ensure that it always has the same meaning. A careful examination of the Scriptures reveals that when Jesus and the Twelve used the word ἐκκλησία it referred to a group of Jews who believed Jesus was the promised Messiah. When Paul used the term, however, it meant the Body of Christ, i.e., equality of Jews and Gentiles in Christ.

The word ἐκκλησία is usually translated “church.” But it is also translated as “assembly” or “congregation.” These were the common translations in the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The Hebrew word most often translated into ἐκκλησία is [קָהָל](#) which is usually rendered as “assembly” or “congregation.”

A good example of this sense is found in Acts 19.32, 39, 41. When Paul went to Ephesus, he aroused the anger of the

silversmiths and other tradesmen whose were in the idol business. One of the silversmiths named Demetrius stirred up a riot against Paul. Each of the verses below contains the Greek word ἐκκλησία. Nowhere do we find the word translated as “church.” In each case the word is translated “assembly.”

- “So then, some were shouting one thing and some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and the majority did not know for what cause they had come together” (v. 32).
- “But if you want anything beyond this, it shall be settled in the lawful assembly” (v. 39).
- “And after saying this he dismissed the assembly” (v. 41).

From the context, we can see that in verses 32 and 41, “crowd” or “mob” would serve as a better translation of ἐκκλησία. In verse 39, “court” would be a better translation. Therefore, while ἐκκλησία is usually translated “church” in the New Testament, it need not be. The basic sense of ἐκκλησία is an assembled group.

### The Body of Christ: A Secret

The Church, the Body of Christ, was a new creation, a “secret” (μυστήριον) God revealed to Paul. As such, it did not exist before Paul (Ephesians 3.3-9; Colossians 1.26-27; Romans 16.25-27). Paul wrote to the Ephesians about the Body of Christ. He declared it was a secret God had revealed to him alone. Paul wrote:

<sup>1</sup> For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— <sup>2</sup> if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace which was given to me for you; <sup>3</sup> that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. <sup>4</sup> By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, <sup>5</sup> which in other generations was not made known to the

*sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; <sup>6</sup> to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, <sup>7</sup> of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power. <sup>8</sup> To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, <sup>9</sup> and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things (Ephesians 3:1-10).*

Paul wrote the Ephesians that "by revelation" the "secret" was revealed to him (v. 3) and that this secret was unknown to "other generations" and "sons of men" (v. 5). What was this secret? It was, "Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body" (v. 6). What body did Paul mean? He meant the Body of Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 12.13).

One might be tempted to conclude that when Paul wrote "it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets" that God had revealed this secret to the other apostles, the Twelve. Reading further into this passage reveals this was not the case. Paul had declared this secret was to him (v. 2-3) and that God gave him the grace to preach to the Gentiles the "unfathomable riches of Christ and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God" (v. 7-9). The Twelve learned about the "secret" of the body of Christ through Paul. No Biblical evidence exists to support the view that they knew of it before Paul. The doctrine of the Body of Christ is unique to Paul. No other Biblical writer mentions it. The passages in Acts which recorded the events surrounding Pentecost provide evidence the Twelve knew nothing of the Body of Christ. God did not reveal this "secret" to them. Consider Paul's words to the

## Colossians:

<sup>24</sup> Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions. <sup>25</sup> Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, <sup>26</sup> that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, <sup>27</sup> to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory (Colossians 1.24-27).

Note carefully Paul's words. Paul wrote, "of this church I was made a minister" (v. 25). Which church did Paul mean? Did he mean the Jewish church to which the Twelve had been ministering? No, he meant the Body of Christ. Notice the personal pronoun "I." Were Peter and the Eleven ministers of the Body of Christ? They were not if we accept what Paul wrote. This was a ministry the ascended Lord gave to Paul, not the Twelve. More evidence of this fact is in Paul's letter to the Galatians. Paul wrote:

<sup>6</sup> But from those who were of high reputation (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—well, those who were of reputation contributed nothing to me. <sup>7</sup> But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised <sup>8</sup> (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), <sup>9</sup> and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of

*fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised (Galatians 2:6-9).*

Paul met with the Twelve and declared his gospel to them (Galatians 2.2). He revealed God had commissioned him as the “apostle to the Gentiles” (Romans 11.13; Ephesians 3.1) and that his gospel was the “gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20.24). The Lord did not appoint the Twelve as apostles to the Gentiles and had not been ministering to Gentiles (Matthew 10.5-7; Acts 11.19). They were apostles to Israel (cf. Matthew 19.28). No scripture indicates the Twelve ever had a ministry to Gentiles. They did not preach the “gospel of the grace of God.” They preached “the gospel of the kingdom.” In their meeting with Paul, the Twelve officially recognized and set as policy that Paul would go to the Gentiles and that they would go to the Jews. It is helpful to pause and consider when this occurred. Paul was probably converted about 37 A.D. He spent three years in the desert in Arabia. In about 50-51 A.D. the counsel in Jerusalem met (Acts 15). After this, Paul wrote Galatians—perhaps in about 54 A.D. Therefore, a considerable amount of time had passed when Paul met with the leaders of the Twelve. During this time the Twelve had never evangelized Gentiles (with the exception of Peter’s meeting with Cornelius—Acts 10). The reason they had not done so was because they were operating under the kingdom program. They were still operating under the instructions the Lord had given them earlier:

*<sup>5</sup> These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them: Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; <sup>6</sup> but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. <sup>7</sup> And as you go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand. (Matthew 10.5-7).*

The Twelve ministered to Israel and preached the gospel of the

kingdom. They knew Israel must repent for the kingdom of God to come and that it would be in this kingdom that Gentiles could be blessed according to prophecy. They knew nothing about "the Body of Christ" even after Pentecost. Outside of Peter's going to the house of Cornelius in Acts 10, no Scripture supports the view that the Twelve ever had a ministry to Gentiles. Luke's account of Peter's visit to Cornelius reveals Peter did not initiate the visit and that the Twelve were outraged when they learned he had gone to a Gentile's house. Only when Peter recounted the entire story of how he came to go to Cornelius' were they silenced. But even after Peter's defense before his fellow apostles we read,

*So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone (Acts 11.19).*

Could words be more clear?

What Was Pentecost?

Pentecost was a Jewish feast day which occurred fifty days after Passover. It was the time that Jesus told His disciples to await and remain in Jerusalem to receive the Holy Spirit (Luke 24.49; John 14.16-17, 26, 15.26; Acts 1.8). The coming of the Holy Spirit was a key component of God's prophetic program to Israel (cf. Isaiah 44.3, 59.21). It was not the birth to the Church, the Body of Christ for nothing in the Old Testament spoke of the Church. Rather, the baptism of the Holy Spirit was an essential part of the fulfillment of the New Covenant which Jesus had initiated at the Last Supper (Matthew 26.27-28). God had promised through His prophets that He would make a new covenant with them different from the old or Mosaic covenant. Jeremiah had written:

*But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD, I will put My law*

*within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people (Jeremiah 31.33 cf. Ezekiel 11. 16-21).*

Jesus initiated the New Covenant at the Last Supper. During the three years prior to this event He preached that the kingdom of God was near. His death and resurrection fulfilled all that was required to atone for sin. He had risen from the dead. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended and Jewish believers were baptized. Israel was at the threshold of achieving all that the prophets had foretold. Only one thing was required: the nation had to repent (Acts 2.38; 3.19a). If they would, God would establish His kingdom on the earth (Acts 3.19b-21; cf. Matthew 6.9-10).

Peter and the apostles understood the great prophetic plan was unfolding according to the Scriptures. The great hope of the prophets was the kingdom of God on earth. Jesus had preached that this kingdom was near for three years. The disciples understood this clearly. The last question they asked Jesus before he ascended was about the kingdom. In Acts 1.7 they asked, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" And why not? Jesus had promised they would rule over the twelve tribes of Israel in this kingdom (Matthew 19.28; Luke 22.30). Wouldn't you have done this same?

Who was Peter's audience at Pentecost? Pentecost was a Jewish feast day. The nation of Israel had assembled for Pentecost. The Holy Spirit was poured out upon them as John and Jesus had prophesied. The result was that they spoke in unlearned, foreign languages. What also happened? They received power as Jesus had told them in Acts 1.8. What was this power? They were able to perform the same kind of miracles Jesus had performed in his earthly ministry to authenticate His messiahship. These miraculous powers confirmed their ongoing divine message and program that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah and that the kingdom was near if the nation would

repent. What was Peter's message to the Jews? He said,

*<sup>19</sup> Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; <sup>20</sup> and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, <sup>21</sup> whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time (Acts 3.19-21).*

He told the Jews that if they would repent God would send the "times of refreshing." What was the "times of refreshing" but the prophetic and covenanted promise of the kingdom of God on earth. This was the first clear offer of the establishment of kingdom of God to Israel. Prior to this time, the kingdom had been "near." This message was still "all Jew." No Gentiles were in view. Therefore, it makes no sense for the Church, the Body of Christ, to have begun at Pentecost when Peter continued to preach the prophesied "kingdom of God" to Jews only following Pentecost.

Had Israel repented and accepted Jesus as the Messiah, the apostles would have begun to "make disciples of all the nations" (Matthew 28.19-20). Gentiles would have found salvation and blessing through Israel in fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant and the other prophetic Scriptures. This was the whole point behind the Great Commission. Israel refused to repent, however. But the plan and will of God cannot be defeated. One day Israel will repent. The prophesied kingdom the prophets, John, and Jesus proclaimed will be established. But for now, in this present time, according to Paul, Israel's transgression has resulted in placing Gentiles into the place of blessing (Romans 11.11-12) and has brought reconciliation to the whole world (Romans 11.15). Had Israel obeyed God, the Gentiles would have been blessed through the success of Israel. But in grace, Gentiles are being blessed

due to the failure of Israel. Men fail but God is gracious. Our God is indeed awesome.

Removal of Jewish and Gentiles distinctions that characterized the Jewish program clearly did not occur at Pentecost. Peter addressed only Jews in Acts: “men of Judea,” Acts 2.14; “men of Israel,” Acts 2.22; “brethren,” Acts 2.29; “all the house of Israel,” Acts 2.36; “men of Israel,” Acts 3.12; “brethren,” Acts 3.17; “you who are the sons of the prophets and the covenant which God made with your fathers,” Acts 3.25. We have no hint that Gentiles were included in Peter’s message. The apostolic focus continued to be the prophetic plan, i.e. repentance and preaching the kingdom of God that had begun under John the Baptizer and Jesus.

#### The Jewish or Prophetic Program

All of the attention of the gospels and the first half of the book of Acts (including Pentecost) is upon Jews. Gentiles are hardly in view. Matthew 18 provides a good example of how the word ἐκκλησία should be interpreted prior to Paul. Jesus said,

*<sup>15</sup> If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. <sup>16</sup> But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. <sup>17</sup> If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. <sup>18</sup> Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven (Matthew 18.15-17).*

In this passage, Jesus instructed His disciples on how to deal with a sinning brother. He enumerated a series of procedural steps to follow. One of these restorative steps for the

sinning brother who continued to be recalcitrant and unrepentant was to take the problem to the church, (ἐκκλησία). If the sinning brother refused to listen to the church, then he was to be regarded as a "Gentile and a tax collector." This statement only makes sense in a Jewish context. It make no sense whatever in the existing Body of Christ. Jesus clearly maintained the distinction between Jew and Gentile. Such a distinction is now over. How do we know? Paul revealed that the Church is composed of both Jews and Gentiles and that they are equal in Christ.

Some may be troubled by the fact that Jesus made a distinction between Jew and Gentile and that under his teaching the Jew had priority. This priority had been God's plan ever since God chose Abraham from among the Gentiles to be the father of a new race through whom He would reveal Himself and establish covenants. By means of this calling, God chose to reveal Himself through the Jewish people to the Gentiles. When Jesus came, He preached repentance to Israel and presented Himself to the nation as her Messiah. Establishment of his kingdom was contingent upon Israel's repentance and acceptance of Jesus as Messiah.

Failure to recognize the nature of Jesus' mission has led to serious interpretive errors. Tragically, many people have been taught that Jesus came to found the Church. Even a cursory reading of the Gospels reveals this is false. Jesus did not come to found the Church; He came to present Himself to Israel as their Messiah-King (cf. Romans 15.8). His message to the nation was one of repentance because the kingdom of heaven was near, i.e., the King was present. Repentance was the basis on which the Messianic kingdom, prophesied by the Jewish prophets for hundreds of years, was to be established. God's prophetic program was "Jew first." Once the Jewish nation repented and accepted Jesus as their King God would establish his earthly kingdom. Israel would then fulfill its destiny as the source of blessing to the Gentiles (cf. Zechariah 8.20-23; Isaiah

42.6-7; Luke 2.32; Acts 13.44-48). Because of this prophetic plan, Jesus ordered his disciples not to go to the Gentiles (Matthew 10.5-7).

Jesus rarely interacted with Gentiles. One exception was the Roman centurion Matthew recorded in his gospel in chapter 8. Another was the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15.21-28. Jesus told this woman when she confronted him, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Could words be more clear? If Jesus commanded his disciples not to go to Gentiles He could not have been forming the Church, the Body of Christ, in which Jew and Gentile are equal. Jesus made an exception with the Canaanite woman. He yielded to her plea to heal her demon-possessed daughter because in the midst of an unbelieving and obstinate Israel, a Gentile woman responded in faith to Jesus. She followed the pattern of Jacob, who refused to turn loose of the God-man he wrestled at Peniel until he was blessed, and Ruth, who refused to turn loose of Naomi. Even though the woman wasn't Jewish, even though she didn't fit into Jesus' immediate mission, Jesus made an exception to the divine plan of "Jew first" and responded to her because of her great faith. Jesus said to her,

*O woman your faith is great; be it done for you as you wish. And her daughter was healed at once (Matthew 15.28).*

As late as Acts 10, long after Pentecost, Peter and the apostles had gone to no Gentiles. In Acts 10, God gave Peter a vision and a specific command to go to the Gentile Cornelius' house. Peter obeyed, but not joyfully. Luke recorded,

<sup>14</sup> *But Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean."* <sup>15</sup> *Again a voice came to him a second time, What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.* <sup>16</sup> *This happened three times, and immediately the object was taken up into the sky (Acts 10.14-16).*

<sup>27</sup> As he talked with him, he entered and found many people assembled. <sup>28</sup> And he said to them, You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean (Acts. 10.27-28).

How did Peter's fellow apostles respond to Peter's action? Did they say, "Wonderful! God has sent you to the Gentiles to preach the gospel!" Hardly, Read Luke's record:

<sup>1</sup> Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.

<sup>2</sup> And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him, <sup>3</sup> saying, You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them (Acts 11.1-3).

They "took issue with him." In their view, Peter had abandoned the divine program. Only after Peter related the entire episode did his fellow Jews quiet down and accept him. Peter concluded:

<sup>17</sup> Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way? <sup>18</sup> When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life (Acts 11.17-18).

Jesus proclaimed the prophetic plan of God. This plan had been manifested and prophesied throughout the Old Testament by the prophets. God further revealed the plan through his covenants with Israel. But God also had a *μυστήριον* or "secret" plan unknown and unrevealed until he disclosed it to Paul. God revealed his "secret" following Israel's rejection of the

Messiah. Paul wrote about this in Romans 11.25-27:

*<sup>25</sup> For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; <sup>26</sup> and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob. <sup>27</sup> This is My covenant with them, When I take away their sins.*

The Lord Jesus Christ is the foundation of the Church but His earthly ministry was to Israel, not the Church. Paul is the founder of the Church, the Body of Christ, because God revealed this new program through him. The Lord Jesus as the foundation of the Church is its Head and Lord (not King) and this relationship is heavenly, not earthly.

The Baptism of the Holy Spirit

We have noted that the baptism of the Holy Spirit occurred at Pentecost. Was this the same baptism that Paul described in 1 Corinthians 12? According to what Paul wrote the Corinthians, the Holy Spirit is the baptizer of the Church:

*<sup>12</sup> For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. <sup>13</sup> For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit (1 Corinthians 12.12-13).*

The Holy Spirit is the person of the Godhead who baptizes us into Christ as the Body of Christ. In the Jewish program for the Jewish Church present at Pentecost, Jesus is the baptizing agent, however. He is the baptizer of Israel (Matthew 3.11;

Mark 1.8; Luke 3.16; John 1.33 cf. Acts 1.4-5; 11.15-16).

John the Baptist prophesied saying,

*As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I, and am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matthew 3.11).*

According to John the Baptist's testimony, Jesus was the one who was the baptizer of believers at Pentecost. Jesus had promised the Holy Spirit before his crucifixion (John 14.16-17, 25-26; 15.26-27; 16.5-15). After his resurrection he told his disciples:

*For John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now (Acts 1.5).*

## Christ's Death As Good News

Peter's message in Acts was a message of repentance. His message echoed the message of John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Twelve except that it followed Jesus' resurrection. Peter did not preach the death of Christ as a glorious victory over sin but as a cause of condemnation for Israel. As for Christ's resurrection, it offered the nation a renewed opportunity to accept their King and bring forth the promised kingdom. Not until Paul was Christ's death and resurrection preached as good news and the message of reconciliation declared (2 Corinthians 5.18-21). For Peter, the kingdom of God, proclaimed throughout the gospels, was still the plan of God. He called upon the nation to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2.38). Paul's message was "believe and be saved" not "repent and be baptized." Paul's gospel is the message for the Church today.

## All Goods Common

Notice also in Acts 2 that the believers in Jerusalem sold

their possessions and held them in common. Such was the character of the Jerusalem church. Jesus required this for citizens of the kingdom of God (cf. Matthew 19.21; Mark 10.21; Luke 12.33, 18.22). The disciples, obedient to Jesus, left everything to follow Him (cf. Matthew 19.27; Mark 10.28; Luke 5.11, 28). How many sermons have you heard a preacher tell his congregation to sell their possessions and give the money to the church? Paul never told believers to leave everything, sell their possessions, and give them to the Church. A new and different order began with Paul—the Church, the Body of Christ.

### The Church and Israel

The Church is composed of all believers who have put their trust for salvation in the death and resurrection of Christ (1 Corinthians 15.1-4). Unlike Israel, the Church is not under a covenantal relationship with God. Prior to the calling of Abraham, God made a covenant with mankind through Noah in which he promised never again to destroy the world with a flood cf. Genesis 9.9-17. After God created the Hebrew race he made covenants with them (see the Covenants of Israel). But God never made a covenant with the Church. God’s relationship to the Church is grace alone and is not under the Law of Moses. The Church does, however, share in the blessings of the New Covenant as the blessing of this covenant are spiritual rather than physical (as are the blessings of the other covenants).

The Church is separate and distinct from Israel. The below chart outlines the key differences.

Israel	Church
Established by and under covenants	Established by grace alone (a “secret”)
Has earthly promises	Has heavenly promises
Operates under Law	Operates under Grace

Is a Kingdom	Is a Body
Christ is King	Christ is Head

Israel was established by a covenant God made with Abraham who became the father of the Jewish race. Subsequent covenants followed. The final covenant was the New Covenant. The Church's life is Christ as his Body. The Church was a creation held secret in the mind of God until God revealed the secret to Paul (Ephesians 2.11-22; 3.3-9; Colossians 1.26-27). Both Israel and the Church are beneficiaries in God's plan under the "eternal covenant" (Hebrews 13.20-21). This covenant was not made with either Israel or the Church. The Eternal Covenant was sovereignly made by God the Father and God the Son in eternity past as the means of redeeming fallen mankind, solving the problem of evil, and bringing glory to God. The Church's domain and destiny is heaven (Philippians 3.20). Israel's promised realm is earth (Matthew 6.9-10). God promised Israel an earthly kingdom (Acts 1.6). The Church has no earthly kingdom. The operative means of life for the Church is grace (Romans 6.12). Throughout most its history the nation of Israel operated under the Law of Moses and Jesus operated under the Law (Matthew 8.4) during his earthly ministry. In a future day, under the New Covenant, Israel will have the Law written on their hearts (Jeremiah 31.33). The Church is described as the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12.12-13, 27). Israel is described as a kingdom. Jesus is the Head of the Church, i.e., the Body of Christ, (Ephesians 1.22). He is never called the King of the Church. Jesus is the King of Israel (Luke 1.31-33). Ironically, the Roman governor Pilate, a Gentile, recognized Jesus' Jewish kingship (Matthew 27.37; Mark 15.26; Luke 23.38; John 19.17-22 cf. John 18.33-39) even though the Jews rejected His title (Matthew 27.29-31; Mark 15.17-20; Luke 23.35). In the Messianic kingdom, Jesus will rule as Israel's King in his role as David's greater Son. In this role he will fulfill the Abrahamic, Davidic, Sabbatic, and New covenants.

These twenty-one proofs from Acts show the Church did not begin at Pentecost:

1. The coming of the Holy Spirit was a Jewish promise, the New Covenant, which promised forgiveness of sins and the indwelling Spirit to Jews (cf. Jeremiah 31.31-34; Ezekiel 11.16-20, 36.21-28; Joel 2.28-29). This covenant promise was associated with God's regathering Jews into the promised land. Peter quoted Joel's prophecy (Acts 2.16-21), which stated the Spirit would be poured on "all flesh." The verses that follow qualify "all flesh" meant Jews, not "every person"—"your sons," "your daughters," "your old men," "your young men." Nothing in the New Covenant indicated the Holy Spirit coming on Gentiles.

2. Pentecost was a Jewish feast. Peter addressed Jews, not Gentiles (Acts 2.14, 22-23, 29, 30, 37, 38-39). He knew what the prophets wrote and Pentecost began the fulfillment of their prophecies. If this was the beginning of the Church, the body of Christ, Peter would have addressed Jews and Gentiles, not just Jews.

3. Peter's address said nothing about the Church, the body of Christ, in which Jew and Gentile are equal in Christ. Everything in Peter's address was Jewish; Gentiles were not in view. The idea of Jew and Gentile being equal was absent from the thinking of Peter and the other apostles.

4. Peter addressed the Jews about the crime of crucifying their Messiah. When they asked him what they should do, did Peter tell them to believe Christ died for their sins and rose from the dead for salvation (Paul's gospel)? No. He told them, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, for forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2.38). Is this the message of salvation today for one who becomes a member of the Church?

5. Peter told the Jews to be baptized "in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 2.38) and healed the lame man at the Temple "on the faith of His name" (Acts 3.16). "His name," spoke

of Jesus' identity, who He was, throughout the Gospels. This was the gospel of the kingdom. Did Peter tell the lame man to believe Christ died for his sins and rose from the dead for salvation (Acts 3.6)? Did he tell the Jews this after the healing of the lame man (Acts 3.11-21)? Why not, if the Church began at Pentecost? The message of Paul's gospel for those who become members of the Church is not to believe in Christ's identity (cf. Matthew 16.16; John 1.49, 11.27; Acts 8.37) but to believe in His work—He died for our sins and rose from the dead. Peter said nothing of this at Pentecost.

6. After Pentecost, Peter continued to address only Jews (cf. Acts 3.2-26, 4.8-12). If the Church began at Pentecost, why did Peter not address Gentiles?

7. Those who believed Peter's message sold their possessions and held everything in common (Acts 2.44-45). Do members of the Church, the body of Christ, do this? If the Church begin at Pentecost, why not? Why do church members not hold everything in common like those who believed Peter's message after Pentecost? What would happen if a pastor told his congregation to sell everything—stocks, bonds, houses, lands, etc. and put the proceeds into a common fund for all to use?

8. If the Church began at Pentecost, what was the case of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5.1-11) who sold their possessions but concealed some of the proceeds? Peter declared they lied to the Holy Spirit and God struck them dead. Is this the nature of the Church, the body of Christ today? What happened to Ananias and Sapphira was a picture of Christ's earthly kingdom where He will rule with a rod of iron. Peter exercised the authority the Lord gave the Twelve to rule and judge the twelve tribes in the kingdom (Matthew 19.28). The Lord did not promise the Twelve authority over the Church, but rule over Israel, Jews. How could the Church begin at Pentecost when the Lord gave them no authority over the Church?

9. What are we to make of the healings, signs and wonders

that continued, the lame man Peter and John healed at the Temple (Acts 3.1-10), the apostles' healing the sick and removing demons (Acts 5.12-16), Philip's healing and expelling demons in Samaria (Acts 8.5-7)? Do these acts characterize the Church, the body of Christ? Why not? These miracles were signs to prove to Israel that the apostles' message that Jesus was the Christ was true.

10. If the Church began at Pentecost, why were all believers not filled with the Holy Spirit? Acts 8.14-19 states Peter and John went to Samaria after they learned the Samaritans had been saved and prayed and laid hands on them to receive the Holy Spirit. Does this sound like the Church? Do ministers or fellow believers pray and lay hands on new believers to receive the Holy Spirit? Over a decade after Pentecost Paul encountered believers who knew nothing of the Holy Spirit. Paul laid his hands on them and they received Him (Acts 19.2-6). If the Church began at Pentecost, why did these believers not have the Spirit? For the Church, one who believes Paul's gospel is immediately indwelt with the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12.13; 2 Corinthians 1.22, 5.5; Ephesians 1.13). It is not a later event.

11. In Acts 8.22, Peter told Simon to repent from his evil and pray to the Lord so he might be forgiven. Are members of the Church, the body of Christ, told to repent and pray that our sins might be forgiven after we believe? On the contrary, we are told we have been forgiven (Ephesians 1.7, 4.32; Colossians 1.14, 2.13, 3.13). Why did Peter not tell Simon this? He did not tell him, because he did not know this. This was a Pauline revelation. The same is seen in 1 John 1.9. Members of the Church are never told to confess our sins so we might be forgiven. John knew nothing about Church truths, for God had not yet revealed them.

12. How was the Ethiopian eunuch saved after Philip witnessed to him? Did he believe Christ died for his sins and rose from the dead, how one becomes a member of the Church, the body of Christ? Did Philip tell him this? Acts 8 states Philip proclaimed the gospel to him—Jesus—the

gospel of the kingdom—that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. The Ethiopian responded, “I believe Jesus Christ is the Son of the God” (Acts 8.37). Is the message of salvation today to believe Jesus is the Son of God? Or, is one saved by believing Christ died for one’s sins and rose from the dead? What occurred next? The Ethiopian was baptized. Several passages state that under the gospel of the kingdom, water baptism was required for salvation (Mark 1.4, 16.16; Luke 3.3; John 3.5; Acts 2.38, 22.16). Is water baptism required for salvation under Paul’s gospel? Is water baptism required to become a member of the Church, the body of Christ? Paul wrote there is one baptism, the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4.5). One means one. Water baptism is outside the realm of salvation under Paul’s gospel. No church should be practicing water baptism. To do so is to disobey God.

13. What did Paul believe in the case of his salvation? When he met the Lord on the road to Damascus, he asked, “Who are you, Lord?” That was the appropriate question under the gospel of the kingdom. The Lord asked His disciples, “Who do you say I am?” Peter responded that He was the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matthew 16.15-16). After Paul was saved, what did he immediately proclaim in the synagogues? He declared, “He is the Son of the God” (Acts 9.20). Paul was also water baptized for remission of sins. Ananias declared, “When you get up, be baptized and wash away your sins after you call on the name of the Lord” (Acts 22.16). Are our sins washed away with water baptism? No. We have forgiveness of sins by believing Christ died for us and rose from the dead, Paul’s gospel (1 Corinthians 15.1-4; Galatians 1.11-12; Ephesians 6.19). This did not occur at Pentecost.

14. Throughout Acts, before Paul’s salvation, the salvation message was proclaimed to Jews only. No Gentile evangelism occurred. Acts 8.1 (years after Pentecost) states that even under intense persecution the apostles did not leave Jerusalem. Why? Their focus was Israel’s repentance. For

Jesus to return, every Jew had to repent (Acts 2.36, 38-39; cf. Matthew 23.37-39). Jesus gave them the order of their ministry: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and then the ends of the earth (Acts 1.8), Jew first. Is this the order of evangelism in the Church?

15. Acts 10 records Peter's receiving the vision of the sheet and the command to go to Cornelius' house, a Gentile. If Peter and the apostles were evangelizing Gentiles, why the command? Why did Peter tell Cornelius it was not permitted for a Jew to visit and associate with a Gentile if they were evangelizing Gentiles (Acts 10.28)? Does this sound like the Church, in which Jew and Gentile are equal in Christ, with no distinction between Jew and Gentile?

16. When Cornelius and his household believed Peter's message and the Holy Spirit came on them, why were Peter and the six Jews with him astonished "that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles" (Acts 10.45). If the Church began at Pentecost, if they had been evangelizing Gentiles, would they be astonished? Does this make any sense?

17. In Acts 11.1 we read, "Now the apostles and the brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles also received the word of the God." If the Twelve and the believing Jews in Judea had been engaged in Gentile evangelism would this have been news? It was news because it had not been occurring.

18. After Peter returned to Jerusalem, why did the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem upbraid him for visiting Cornelius? They declared, "You went to uncircumcised men—and ate with them!" (Acts 11.3). If the Church began at Pentecost, would Gentiles not have been brought into the Church after over a decade? If the Holy Spirit came on and had been indwelling both Jews and Gentiles at Pentecost, why did Peter say, "Therefore, if the God gave the same gift to them as also to us after we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, how could I hinder the God (Acts 11.17)? How did they reply? They said, "So the God gave repentance to life also to the

Gentiles” (Acts 11.18). If the Church began at Pentecost, does Peter’s statement make any sense? Does their response make any sense?

19. If Gentiles were being brought into the Church, the body of Christ, since Pentecost, why does Acts 11.19 state that those who were scattered as a result of Stephen’s persecution (Acts 8.1, 4) travelled to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, “speaking the word to no one except Jews only?” Could the Church begin at Pentecost if no Gentile evangelism occurred for more than a decade?

20. Why did the Twelve send Barnabas to Antioch (Acts 11.22-24) when they learned Gentiles were being saved from the Jewish ministry in Acts 11.20? What was the gospel they proclaimed? They proclaimed “the gospel—the Lord Jesus”—the gospel of the kingdom, who Jesus was, His identity—not that He died for our sins and rose from the dead.

21. Why was the first thing Barnabas did after he confirmed Gentiles were being saved was to find Paul and bring him to Antioch (Acts 11.25-26)? Were the Jerusalem leaders unable to deal with Gentile believers if the Church began more than a decade earlier?

Could Paul write that the Church was unknown in other generations, revealed to him if the Church began at Pentecost (Ephesians 3.1-10, 6.19)? What occurred at Pentecost was no secret. Jeremiah and Ezekiel wrote about it 600 years before Christ. Jesus told His apostles to stay in Jerusalem until they were “clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24.49). None of this was a secret. What was secret was that God would create a new entity, the Church, the body of Christ, in which Jew and Gentile were equal in Christ through faith alone, believing Christ died for one’s sins and rose from the dead. That did not happen at Pentecost.

## Conclusion

God established the Church, the Body of Christ, with the conversion and commission of Paul as the apostle to the

Gentiles. It has the following characteristics.

- The Church is the Body of Christ (Ephesians 1.22-23; 1 Corinthians 12.12-13; Colossians 1.24).
- All who put their trust in Christ in this age are members of the Body of Christ, i.e., the Church (1 Corinthians 12.12-13).
- Membership into the Body of Christ, i.e., the Church, is through the baptism of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12.13; Galatians 3.27).
- One is baptized by the Holy Spirit when one exercises faith in Christ (Galatians 3.26-27).
- Members of Christ's body, i.e., the Church, are indwelt by Christ (Colossians 1.27).

In order to understand what "church" means one must make Scriptural distinctions and understand where one falls in God's plan. A "church," an ἐκκλησία, in the broad sense of an assembly of those who have put their trust in YHVH or Jesus. In Jesus' day, the "church" or "assembly" was composed of those who repented, were baptized, and believed that He was the promised Messiah. This was the requirement to be a citizen of the Messianic Kingdom. Through Paul, God created a new entity, the Church, the body of Christ, in which no distinction exists between Jew and Gentile. This was a "secret" God revealed to Paul alone. Paul was commissioned as the "apostle to the Gentiles" (Romans 11.13) who revealed this new Church, the Body of Christ. These key verses describe the Church: Galatians 3.26-29, 1 Corinthians 12.12-13, Ephesians 1.22-23, Ephesians 2.11-22, Ephesians 3.1-10, Colossians 1.24-27.

For further reading about other "secrets" God revealed to Paul alone, see the author's article, [Paul's "Mystery"](#). Also, see the author's [Paul: Chief of Sinners?](#) for a discussion of when the Church began.

<sup>1</sup> S. Lewis Johnson, "The Birth of the Church." Dr. Johnson's

excellent lecture is [online](#) and the text above summarizes his argument. Dr. Johnson went to be with the Lord, January 28, 2004. He now knows the Church, the Body of Christ, began with Paul, not at Pentecost. Given his wit and humor, this knowledge must be a source of mirth to him.

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