

# GOD JUST TOUCHED ME - WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT

## Chapter 8 - THE CHURCH

### **Definition of the Church**

If you were to ask someone "What is a church", they would probably tell you it is a building where religious people gather one day a week. Over the years these buildings have been known as places of worship, the house of God, a sanctuary, a tabernacle, a temple, a holy place, and often in scripture, a house of prayer. Whatever it is called, the building is used by worshipers. The most elaborate buildings were built more for the edification of the people than for God, something they can point to with pride. In the book of Acts the Christian worshipers met in members homes. The church is not a building.

Some folks see the church as being denominations. They can list many of them for you: Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, various Orthodox Catholics, Assemblies of God, Four Square, Nazarene, Church of God, and the list goes on. Today there are over 34,000 denominations and splinter groups that claim to be Christian. Denominations were man's idea, not God's. During His time of prayer just before being arrested and crucified, Jesus prayed four times for unity among His disciples (see the Gospel of John, chapter 17). The first church split came over a dispute of authority among bishops. Then came error and an attempt to clean it up, but the various reformers could not agree together. As time went on some split because they didn't like what they were hearing, and some started up emphasizing a fundamental belief that was being neglected by the other denominations. Denominations are man-made organizations that have defined structures, codified rules, and defined chains of authority. In this country they are also non-profit organizations, incorporated under the laws of the land. They are legal entities that provide a framework and a set of beliefs for their worshipers to live under. Sometimes they serve the worshipers well and fulfill God's will. Some times they become self-serving, more concerned with finance and rules than with the will of God. Sometimes they become apostate, ignoring or perverting the Word of God. Some of them try to make a prime directive out of an historical event the scripture identified as having happened, but nowhere identifies as essential for salvation. Some magnify their difference and ignore their common faith, judging others as lost. Some of them really hate some of the others. God recognizes people as His family, not denominations.

### **God Always Had One**

God has always had a church. In the Old Testament it was called the congregation of God's people (Exodus 12:3) and the assembly of the chosen people (Exodus 12:6). His church was made up of the people of Israel, His people chosen to represent Him to the world. Whenever His church was referred to it was as the gathering of His people assembled together. They were also called the assembly of saints (Psalm 89:7) and assembly of the upright (Psalm 111:1). They were expected to be different from the world, set apart. In the New Testament His church is called "church" (Matthew 16:18) which is the assembly of called out people. They were called out of the world to be set-aside for Him. In all cases God chose His people, they did not choose Him. God loves His church, His chosen people (John 10:11-13). He wants us to know that we are His and that He loves us (Revelation 3:9b).

### **The First Century Church**

The first century church was born on Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). God made His presence real to this group of believers in a most incredible way. A mighty wind shook the building and tongues of fire danced over the heads of everyone there. They were filled with the Holy Spirit. Until Pentecost

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people had no idea what John the Baptist was talking about when he said that Jesus would baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit. This frightened group of disciples then moved out into the world in a mighty and effective way. Their power came from an indwelling God (1 Corinthians 3:16). The local church or Christian community is God's temple. As such it is not to be spoiled or ruined by division, controversy, or any other sins as the members come together to Worship God. A God of peace and love will not dwell in the midst of internal strife and contentious people. Although there had been snobbery among the Jews concerning the Gentiles, the Holy Spirit brought them together into one church (Ephesians 2:11-22). Barriers between people were destroyed and the Holy Spirit called people to unity. Peter's message was filled with the power of the Spirit (Acts 2:37-41). So powerful was the Spirit in the disciples that while talking to unbaptized Gentiles the Holy Spirit fell upon the Gentiles (Acts 10:44-48). The disciples were really confused because God was not behaving in accordance with their expectations.

When Jesus walked this earth He went about healing people, and His church continued that work (Acts 3:1-10, Acts 5:12-16). The story of the first century church is a story of divine healing in the name of Jesus, revealing God's glory (Acts 9:32-35, Acts 14:8-10). People were not only convicted, but were attracted by the visible presence of the power of God. The effectiveness of the disciples was strengthened by their corporate prayers, and by being in agreement with one another and with the Holy Spirit. Some clearly supernatural events occurred because of prayer (Acts 12:5-8, 12). They lived in community as one loving family (Acts 2:42-47), sharing all their material things and caring for one another. Outsiders were impressed by the love they had for one another because it was foreign to worldly life. When the scriptures refer to breaking bread together they are referring to the Lord's Supper, the communion that Jesus said to do in remembrance of Him. The Lord's Supper is to Christians what the Passover Supper was to the Jews, except that those early Christians celebrated daily instead of annually. A healthy Christian community did, and still does, attract people to Christ.

The Lord's desire is for unity in His church (Psalm 133:1-3). Those first Christians knew how to do that (Acts 4:32-35). If the church was to survive it had to have a spiritual unity under the headship of Christ (Galatians 3:28). The church was founded to be Christ's representative on earth and had a unity of Spirit, hope, Lord, and baptism (Ephesians 4:1-6). It was a spiritual hospital where sinners could be healed back to full spiritual health.

The early church was constantly under attack by those who would destroy it (Romans 16:17&18). The disciples knew how to test whatever others told them by the Word of God. Their call was to get into agreement with each other (1 Corinthians 1:10). Agreement was not always easy to achieve because self and the enemy were forever getting in the way. In this life we might not always agree on everything, but we can at least agree on purpose and fundamentals. If we are to be trustworthy in wielding the awesome power God gave His church, we must have unity. We are given power to proclaim God forgiveness for sin (John 20:23), and we are called to bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:1&2). Still some today would accuse the church of being the only organization that shoots it's wounded instead of trying to heal them. During that first century the community saw both God's power and glory in His church.

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### **Church Offices**

God promised pastors for His church, spiritual shepherds who would follow Him, filled with His knowledge, wisdom, and understanding (Jeremiah 3:15). Sometimes individuals will proclaim themselves to be sent by God and are really the enemy's disciples. If the leaders are not selected by God and following God they can lead us astray. Those first leaders were the apostles and other God appointed church leaders. There were three levels of authority identified that had defined tasks and qualifications in scripture. These are identified as bishops, elders, and deacons.

The highest authority defined was that of bishop. Jesus is the bishop of our souls (1 Peter 2:25), our shepherd. All others with that title are under-shepherds. Bishop could also be called superintendent or overseer. The bishop oversees a number of local congregations and is tasked with being a defender of the faith. There are some strict qualifications for anyone who would hold the office of overseer (Acts 20:28, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, & Titus 1:7-9). Church leadership is a serious business. The church belongs to Christ, not the overseer. The superintendent under the authority of Christ has a serious obligation to Jesus and is held to a higher standard.

The elders, sometimes referred to by their Greek name of presbyters, were the spiritual authority in the local congregation, under the authority of their overseer. The apostles and other overseers appointed elders in every church and installed them by the laying on of hands (Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5&6). The office was one of honor and was to be respected (1 Timothy 5:1,17). When controversy was brought to Jerusalem for resolution it was brought to the apostles and elders together, and the decision was made by the apostles and elders together (Acts 15:2,4,6,22,23). Note that the council was led by James, the brother of Jesus, an elder but not an apostle. Apostle was not a church office, but a special ministry given to the church, initially those who lived with Jesus and were taught by Him. The apostles acted within the church as overseers. The apostles and Paul went around instructing the elders, ensuring there was no error allowed in the church (Acts 20:17, Acts 21:18). People in the local congregations were directed to go to the elders both for healing and forgiveness (James 5:14&15). Like the overseers, the elders were held to a higher standard and had specific tasks (1 Peter 5:1-7). They were to provide spiritual supervision, protection, discipline, instruction, and direction to the local congregation. Peter referred to Himself as an elder.

The deacons were appointed to take care of the physical needs of the church so that the overseers and elders could concentrate on the spiritual side without distraction (Acts 6:1-6). They were ordained by the laying on of hands, and had special qualifications. Like the overseers and elders, they were also held to a higher standard (1 Timothy 3:8-13). However, if you read through the Book of Acts you will see that the deacons were effective preachers and evangelists as well as caretakers. Jesus did not leave us unattended, each to discern His truth on our own. He gave us spiritual leaders to carry on in His place under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

### **The Body of Christ**

The church is the body of Christ (Ephesians 1:22&23). Jesus is head, not only of the church, but head of everything. He is the creator who has all authority in heaven and on earth and is in control of everything (Colossians 1:18). As His body the members of the church have an obligation to cooperate with each other while engaged in God's work. Collectively we are known as the church of

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the living God (1 Timothy 3:15) and the church of the firstborn (Hebrews 12:23), both of which refer to Jesus.

Just as the human body has many parts with diverse functions, so has the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). Each part has a specific function that is required by the body to be healthy. Though we are individually different we must work together to accomplish our assignment of bringing as many souls as possible along with us on our journey. None should feel pride in their abilities because even the lowliest tasks are required. Neither should any believe that they have nothing to offer the body. Even the most talented and capable individual would be of no avail without helpers. The helper is as necessary as the one being helped. As members of the body of Christ we are in fact members one of another (Romans 12:5). Sometimes within the human body the immune system goes awry and starts attacking other parts of the body. The results are serious, causing illness, ineffectiveness, and sometimes death. So it is in the body of Christ. Internal strife and attacks on each other can be fatal to the body. We are united by the call of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:4-6) and by sharing in the Body of Christ in communion (1 Corinthians 10:17). The Spirit driven call even brought about the unlikely union of Jew and Gentile under Christ (Ephesians 3:6).

God wanted His church to be well equipped so He gave it gifts, which were people with special talents (Ephesians 4:11-16). These gifts were oriented towards functions to be performed within the body and may be exercised through overseers, elders, deacons, or the laity. God also gave supernatural gifts to individuals for the purpose of strengthening the body (1 Corinthians 12:4-11). Though we are told to seek the gifts, they are given only as the Spirit determines, and no one has them all (1 Corinthians 12:28-30). They are distributed throughout the body, making unity and cooperation absolutely essential.

The church as the Body of Christ provides the only flesh and blood hands, feet, mouth, and ears He has available on earth. If any parts are sick, the body is weakened. If any parts are missing the body is handicapped. If any parts are rebellious the body is confused and ineffective. When the church exercises the gifts of the Holy Spirit the glory of Jesus will be seen by the world. When the church is seen as strong and loving, Jesus is seen as strong and loving. However, when the church is seen as weak, uncaring, and apathetic, Jesus is seen as weak, uncaring, and apathetic. God did not intend for Christians to live in isolation, but in close fellowship with Himself and with one another.

### **The Bride of Christ**

The church is also the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:25-27,32). There is a unique relationship between a bride and a bridegroom. The bridegroom is expected to love the bride more than life, provide for her, care for her, and protect her. That is the relationship Jesus wants between Him and His church. When the New Testament was written there were special cleansing ceremonies the parties went through to prepare themselves for the wedding, the uniting of two into one. Christ's death on the cross cleansed and sanctified the church. The church's task is to be prepared (Revelation 19:7&8). The bride of choice is one of beauty and purity, not one soiled by sin and polluted by the adultery of idolatry. If the church is to remain pure it must be selective in what it does (Romans 12:9) and in what it is willing to accept (1 Thessalonians 5:21&22). Failure to maintain God's purity could result in the bridegroom turning away in disgust (1 Peter 3:8-12). If we are to be God's, we must choose that which is good (3 John 11).

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God referred to Himself as the husband of Israel, and is taking that same position with the church. When the people of Israel worshipped other gods He called it adultery (Ezekiel 23:37&38). It is the same with us. Anything we put before God is our idol, whether it is wealth, fame pleasure, TV, sports, another person, or anything at all. If the church is to remain pure and worthy it must reject false prophets (Deuteronomy 13:1-5). New ideas from inspiring people may sound good, but we must judge them by whether or not they agree with God's word. We must ask ourselves if the message is truth and if it focuses on God, not the speaker. Jesus warned the church that there would be enemy spies in the camp (Matthew 7:15-19). False prophets prophesy only what people want to hear, not the true word of God. Tolerating sin in the church can tarnish the entire church and set a terrible example for people who are young in the faith (1 Corinthians 5:1-5). The church must discipline flagrant sin among its members. The church has a responsibility to maintain God's standards of morality. Tolerating flagrant sin will have a dangerous influence on others, and tarnish the bride of Christ.

### **The Family of God**

The church is the family of God (Ephesians 3:14&15). The family of God includes all who have believed in Jesus in the past, all who do believe in Jesus now, and all who will believe in Jesus in the future. Note that belief is not just paying lip service, but requires a response. If you believe in your heart you will respond to Him. We are family because we all have the same Father. He is the source of all creation and the owner of everything that is. Our God promises His love and His power to His family, the church. We are all His children (2 Corinthians 6:18). The Holy Spirit makes us His children (Romans 8:14-17). According to Roman law, which prevailed when the scriptures were written, an adopted person lost all rights to the old family and gained all rights to the new family and became a full heir to the new father's estate (Galatians 4:4-7). God's desire is for a very large family (Romans 8:29), which makes us all brothers and sisters to Jesus.

Jesus said we were to love God with all our heart and soul and mind, and love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Then He told us we are family, and we are to act like family and love each other as He loved us (John 13:34&35). This command from Jesus is a whole new level of love. He even called it a "New Commandment". He didn't say to love our neighbors or the world as He loved us, but to love one another, all the other members of His family. That is the kind of love that puts others first; that is willing to die that others may live. The spiritual facts of life are that we do not love God anymore than our fellow Christian we love the least (1 John 4:20&21). The real test of our love for God is how we treat the people right in front of us - family members and fellow believers. We cannot love God while neglecting those who are created in His image. If you are going to love Him, you need to love His kids. He is a Father who loves and protects his family (Matthew 16:18), and He wants us to love and protect each other. God does not want remote admiration, He wants a personal and intimate relationship with us, His family. He wants us to know Him personally as our loving Father, not just know things about Him.

### **The Twenty First Century Church**

God had expectations for His church in the first century, and those expectations still exist in the twenty-first century. All that He has called us to be must be lived out in our every day lives. It needs to be part of who we are and what we do. One of the primary aspects of the Christian life is true worship, not empty ritual for the sake of ritual (Hebrews 10:5-7). God desires obedience and a right

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heart, not empty compliance to the rules. He finds comfort, not in religious rites and ceremonies, but in loving obedient children. The only way to be what we are expected to be is to have our foundations firmly planted in Jesus (Colossians 2:6&7). We must commit our entire lives to Him and submit our wills to Him. We must seek to learn from Him, from His life and His teachings. We must also recognize the Holy Spirit power in us, and use it for His glory. The world places value in things, position, power, creature comforts, and ego inflators. The church is to seek things of value to God (Colossians 3:1-4). The things that we dwell on in our minds are the things we will eventually seek. God's plan is different (Matthew 6:33). If we constantly seek worldly values we will always be struggling for more. If we seek God's kingdom we will discover that everything we really need has been provided in abundance by our Father. If you are faking it for the purpose of material gain it will not work. If you are sincerely seeking God, He will bless you (Hebrews 11:6).

We face multiple enemies, not only the devil, but also the world and the flesh. Though we live in this world we are not to participate in its goals or values. We are to influence the world, not be a part of it (1 Peter 1:13-16). We are here to serve our God and Father, not the world. We are not to cater to the flesh either (1 Peter 2:11&12). The flesh has many appetites and will run them all to excess if allowed. When the body dies the flesh decays and returns to dust, but the spirit lives on for all eternity. We must hold the flesh in obedience under the control of the spirit. People that live by the flesh end up slaves to the flesh, bound by addictions to drugs and alcohol, greed, sexual perversions, gluttony, and all sorts of physical desires gone wild. Mere human willpower is not sufficient to overcome the devil, the world and the flesh. We must walk in the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49). If the apostles, who walked with Jesus for three years, being taught by Him and witnessing His power and authority, needed to have that power to survive, how much more do we need it (Acts 1:4&5). The Holy Spirit marks the beginning of the Christian experience and is the power of our new lives in Christ. The Holy Spirit unites the Christian Community under the headship of Jesus.

Many people think of a sacrifice as anything difficult or painful. That is not the meaning God had in the Old Testament. It was a love offering, giving to God the very best you had because of your love for Him and out of gratitude for what He has done. God got upset with those people who brought maimed or disfigured animals to His altar, because they reflected a lack of love or even a disdain for God. We are called to make a sacrifice to God also (Romans 12:1&2). Our Lord does not want earthly things; He wants us (Psalms 51:16&17). It has been said that it does not take much of a person to be a Christian, but it does take all that there is of the person. The Lord cannot do His work of transforming us into the likeness of Jesus if we hold back any part of ourselves as our own private domain. He seeks true worshipers who trust Him enough to trust all of who we are to His care (John 4:23). When we hold back it hinders the work of the Spirit. When we became part of the church we did receive the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit does not really have us until we release all (Matthew 19:29).

The last words Jesus left us with were to seek out others (Matthew 28:19&20). Our task is to complete the work that Jesus started of harvesting souls. Often Joseph, in the Old Testament, is identified as a forerunner of Jesus because of his work to save Israel from starvation during the drought. We should heed his words to his brothers concerning Benjamin, "You will not see my face unless you bring your brother (Genesis 43:3). We are empowered to do just that (Acts 1:8). Often enthusiastic young Christians misunderstand that directive and go forth to "witness" by beating people over the head with a scripture those people do not recognize as coming from God. If we read Acts 1:8

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carefully, we will discover that we are not told "to witness", a verb, but to "be a witness", a noun. Jesus told us how to do that by how we live (Matthew 5:14-16). We need to live in the awareness, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, that we are Jesus' representatives here on earth. Everything we do, whether at home or work or play, must be done unto the Lord. We need to be aware that when other people know we are Christians, they, and all the world, are watching for us to fail. When people come to you wanting to know what you have that they would also like to have, you can tell them about Jesus in your own life, not hearsay about someone else's life, no matter how much you believe it. When they accept Christ, give them God's Word. The Bible was given for the church, not the world. The Church is here for the world, living walking talking gospels and epistles. Now, in this twenty-first century, with all the division and worldly influence creeping into God's family, what will Jesus be coming to claim (Luke 18:8b)? We are the first century church, aged two thousand years.