

It is another Thursday morning, and it is time to read, think, study, meditate in the Word of God, and spend time with Him in prayer. Today my heart is focused on the church. This is one of my all-time favorite Devotionals, actually prepared for this posted series. As you read it to the end, I believe you will understand why. God bless you as you worship Him today.

LET THE CHURCH BE THE CHURCH!

A Devotional prepared by Dr. Robert L. Morris

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"A radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish but holy and blameless." (Ephesians 5:27)
One day Jesus came into "the region of Caesarea Philippi" and asked His disciples: "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" (Matthew 16:13; NKJV) It was Simon Peter who answered our Lord: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:16)

Then prophetically, based on that unshakable, eternally-established, devil-defeating, sin-destroying, hell-shattering proclamation of Simon Peter, Jesus stated The Irrefutable Law of Divine Intention: "On this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18)

God has blessed the Church with many talented musicians. Some are more poetic than others, and write lyrics. Others are gifted musically, and provide the beautiful music score for the lyrics. There are many who are "bi-gifted" in that they can produce both lyrics and music. Bill and Gloria Gaither are in this category, and have blessed millions around the world with their music. In the mid-1970's they gave to the Church the following thrilling lyrics of triumph for the Church, set to music.

Let the Church be the Church; Let the people rejoice.

For we've settled the question, We've made our choice.

Let the anthems ring out, Songs of victory swell,

For the Church Triumphant Is alive and well!

In 1986, gifted gospel song writer and singer Kirk Talley blessed the Church world with these powerful hymnic words, which became the signature theme song for the Talley Trio for some time. It is one of my personal all-time favorites!

Triumphantly the Church will rise.

Victorious meeting in the skies.

See the Father is ready to welcome His bride.

Triumphantly the Church will rise.

In a powerful challenge to the Church, grace-filled, and musically-gifted Nancy Harmon has written these fantastic, dynamic lyrics:

The Blood-Bought Church

They shall lift up their voice, they shall sing for joy,

They shall cry aloud and be free;

They shall glorify the name of the Lord;

It's the blood bought, the church, the redeemed.

Oh, pick up your heart, Oh Zion of the Lord;

Let the earth ring forth with His praise;

All His children rejoice from the islands of the sea;

It's the blood bought, the church, the redeemed.

Let the earth be silent, all winds cease to blow;

Every creative being hold your wing;

For there's a new song being sung, with a new melody;

It's the blood bought, the church, the redeemed.

Chorus:

And we are in that army of the Lord;

We've been washed in the blood and we are going forth;

There is nothing that can stop this mighty moving force,

With a shout of praise, a two-edged sword;

Every stronghold of bondage must fall beneath our feet,

Every prisoner held captive must be free;
For our deliverance has come through the power of the Son;
It's the blood bought, the church, the redeemed.

There are many other hymns and gospel songs that focus on the nature and work of the "church." We have come into the twenty-first century with a plethora of opinions, ideas, and concepts relating to the "church." Some of these are splendid, captivating, and instructive declarations of the Biblical teaching on the nature, purpose, and function of the "church." The Apostle Paul, writing under the clear inspiration of the Holy Spirit uses the term "church" nine times in his letter to the Ephesians. (1:22; 3:10; 3:21; 5:23; 5:24; 5:25; 5:27; 5:29; 5:32) It would be an exciting exercise in hermeneutics and homiletics to prepare a series of nine sermons, one each on these nine uses of the word "church." However, that is not the focus of this Devotional. It is my intention to look only briefly into Scripture and discover the true meaning of the "church," its nature, its purpose, and its function.

From the Word of God there is so much to be learned about the church. I am anxious that we all come to that moment when we will determine with resolute intention, to Let the Church be the Church. From the Holy Scriptures we need to note what "the church" is not as well as what "the church" is.

First, the church is not a building. In the era of the writing of the New Testament, there were no church buildings for the first 200 years of the church's history. Believers gathered in homes or barns or in the open air, or if they were being persecuted, in caves and catacombs beneath the streets and buildings of the towns and cities. The early New England Puritans spoke of the Meeting House to designate the house in which the church met. Therefore the "building" is but a means to a greater end.

Further, the church is not just an organizational unit of any particular religious fellowship. People do not speak of a Buddhist church or a Moslem church. One does not hear of a Jewish church. Other terms such as mosque, temple, or synagogue are used. The term church is strictly a Christian word. It translates the New Testament Greek word ἐκκλησία (ekklesia.) The prefix ἐκ means "out of" or simply "out," and the verb καλέω means "to call." When made into a noun the word refers to "those who are called out." That has a deep spiritual meaning. It resonates with Biblical authority. The Apostle Paul wrote in his second Letter to the Corinthians: "Therefore, come out from among them, and be separate, says the Lord, and do not touch that which is unclean, and I will receive you, and will be a Father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." (2 Corinthians 6:17-18)

What is "the church?" The Greek word ἐκκλησία is found 115 times in the New Testament. It is found in 17 of the 27 Books or Letters of the New Testament. In the Gospels it is recorded that Jesus used the word only 3 times. However, it used 24 times in the Book of Acts, 22 times in the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians, and 20 times in the Book of Revelation. In Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians and in his Letter to the Ephesians, it is used 9 times each. It is an important word in the New Testament, and needs to be defined carefully and Biblically. The remaining 28 occurrences are spread through 11 other Books or Letters of the New Testament. Further, of the 115 times the word ἐκκλησία (church) is used in the New Testament, 93, that is, over 80% of all occurrences refer to the local assembly of believers. The other 22 occurrences refer to the church in a universal or catholic sense. The word "catholic" is also a good word, signifying the general redeemed body of believers in Jesus Christ wherever they may be located, in all the ages, and now many of whom are in eternal glory with our Lord. It is in this sense that one must observe "the church" in any study of the New Testament.

When thinking of the general or overall Biblical teaching relating to "the church," it is important to think of "the church" in two ways.

1. First, the church triumphant consists of all born-again, obedient believers living on planet earth, and walking with God under the leadership of the Lord Jesus Christ by the enabling grace of the Holy Spirit, as He instructs them in the Word of God.
2. Second, the church translated, consists of all "whose rest is won," and who have gone on to be with the Lord, are now in His glorious presence, and are worshipping Him with the saints of all the ages as together they sing "the song of the blood bought, the church, the redeemed."

Unfortunately, at times it has become too easy to compromise and suggest a limited concept of "the church." By this, some speak of "the church" as a group or groups of people who, on their own personal level of commitment, adhere to or follow a composite body of beliefs, (doctrines, teachings) that appeal to them, and who practice a litany of established rituals and customs, ensconced within a system of polity and organization.

Sometimes there is an embarrassing element of disagreement that in some ways has the effect of rendering the ministry of the local church or denomination ineffective. There is also the danger of neglecting a deeper New Testament concept of “the church.” Let’s be more specific.

1. The Biblical term “the church” refers in its basic sense to all believers of every tribe, nation, and language throughout the world who are redeemed by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, by His shed blood alone, and for His glory alone. We usually refer to this as “the universal church.”

2. The Biblical term “the church” also refers more specifically, and obviously more frequently to a group of people committed to Jesus Christ and to one another in a given location, as defined in Acts 2:40-47. This is what God’s people usually refer to as “the local church.”

3. The Biblical term “the church” finally refers to the saints of all the ages whose rest is won, and who have passed through the veil of death into the glorious realm of heaven, and are forever in the presence of the King of kings and Lord of lords. This is what we usually refer to as “the glorified church.”

Summarily then, it should be a given that the church is a composite of people who have repented of their sins, placed their faith and trust in Jesus Christ by believing in the atoning sacrifice He paid on the Cross, and have committed their lives to walk in loving obedience to His Word, believing that at the time of physical death, they will be with Him in heaven. Until that time, they live in anticipation of His returning for His beloved Bride, the blood-bought church. The Apostle Paul, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit has given to us the heart of what the Christian life ... the life of the people of the church ... should look like. “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearance of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.” (Titus 2:11-14; NKJV) To better understand how this all began, one should read again that very foundational passage, Acts 2:44-47.

Further, the Bible makes an additional heart stirring, mind challenging, and life captivating call to everyone who professes to be a part of the blood bought, the church, the redeemed: “Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.” (Hebrews 10:24-25) And so we gather together! If one is to be true to the Scripture, it is absolutely necessary to remain uncompromising on the New Testament teaching concerning “the church.” When all the New Testament teaching on “the church” with all its parts is carefully examined and observed, we can define what we mean by “a New Testament Church.” The definition is as follows:

A New Testament Church of our Lord Jesus Christ consists of a group of people:

1. Who by lip and by life, profess and give evidence that they are redeemed by grace through faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and are awaiting the eternal glory of heaven;
2. Who are united by a covenant of faith structured from and in the Word of God;
3. Who faithfully gather together for worship, inspiration and instruction (Hebrews 10:24-25);
4. Who are governed by and carefully walk in obedience to the teaching of the Word of God;
5. Who exercise the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by the Word of God;
6. Who believe in, practice, and support the ordinances of Christ, (that is, baptism and holy communion);
7. Who consistently seek to extend the Gospel to the ends of the earth; and
8. Who function in a somewhat organized fellowship served and led by pastors, teachers, and others, both men and women, as taught in the Holy Scriptures.

In Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians the role of the church is uncompromisingly stated:

“To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ, to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him.” (Ephesians 3:8-12; NKJV)

And so, I repeat the words from the hearts and pen of Bill and Gloria Gaither stated above.

Let the Church be the Church; Let the people rejoice.

For we’ve settled the question, We’ve made our choice.

Let the anthems ring out, Songs of victory swell,

For the Church Triumphant Is alive and well!

“Amen!” And again, it flows strongly from my heart. Let it flow from your heart as well!

Triumphantly the Church will rise.

Victorious meeting in the skies.

See the Father is ready to welcome His bride.

Triumphantly the Church will rise.

To the end of this Kirk Talley chorus, I would append the last line of Bill and Gloria Gaither’s song:

For the Church Triumphant is alive and well!

Now, with those beautiful expressions of God’s great promise anchored within our hearts and minds, let’s allow the words of a great hymn spur us onward. In 1892 Ralph E. Hudson penned the words and wrote the music score for a triumphant hymn that expresses beautifully what this Devotional is all about. Sing it again and again.

A GLORIOUS CHURCH

1. Do you hear them coming, brother, thronging up the steeps of light?

Clad in glorious, shining garments – blood-washed garments pure and white.

2. Do you hear the stirring anthems filling all the earth and sky?

‘Tis a grand, victorious army. Lift its banner up on high.

3. Never fear the clouds of sorrow; never fear the storms of sin.

We shall triumph on the morrow; even now our joys begin.

4. Wave the banner; shout His praises, for our victory is nigh!

We shall join our conqu’ring Savior; we shall reign with Him on high!

Refrain, sung after each stanza:

‘Tis a glorious Church, without spot or wrinkle, washed in the blood of the Lamb.

‘Tis a glorious Church, without spot or wrinkle, washed in the blood of the Lamb.