

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH – ITS ESSENTIAL NATURE AND COMPOSITION ACCORDING TO SCRIPTURE

The subject of the essential nature and composition of the New Testament Church according to Scripture as a study is very important in view of the fact that so many contemporary Christians hold to different views on the subject. There are also many opposing groups within professing Christianity all claiming allegiance to the New Testament standards of Church life and government, with some even claiming to be the only true Church of Scripture thus excluding all others, yet they are so diverse in their systems of belief. This creates great confusion in the minds of young Christians zealous to follow their new-found faith in the Lord Jesus Christ for their salvation, they do not know which group is correct. Only Scriptures provide the real truth, and they alone must be the final arbiters on all matters of Church doctrine (CP Ac 17:11; 1Th 5:21; 2Pe 1:16-20; 1Jn 4:1-6). See also author's comments on Ac 17:4, 1Th 5:21, 2Pe 1:16-19 and 1Jn 4:1-6 in his book **A Question and Answer Study of the New Testament**, and his study *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture* in his book **Advanced Studies in the Christian Faith (Volume 3)**.

No matter what system of belief a Christian professes to follow, all professing Christians must come to the Word of God with open minds, teachable spirits, and a willingness to follow God's Word and be led in the way of truth as the Holy Spirit reveals it according to Scripture, regardless of the cost to any preconceived ideas they may hold to. And God knows there are plenty of professing Christians holding to preconceived ideas on what constitutes the essential nature and composition of the New Testament Church. Many believe the Church is an external and highly visible structured religious organisation identified by edifices like cathedrals, convents, monasteries, abbeys etc, and governed by a hierarchical system of authority composed of a ranking order of men under a titular head, such as the Roman Catholic Church with its Priests, Bishops, Archbishops and Cardinals under the headship of a Pope, the so-called "Vicar of Christ on Earth", which in time past proclaimed itself to be the "holy and apostolic Roman Church, mother and mistress of all Churches, outside of which no man can be saved".

But Scriptures do not teach that at all. That is not the essential nature and composition of the true New Testament Church of God which Christ is building in the earth. His Church is not an external and highly visible, structured religious organisation identified by cathedrals and such-like. Neither is it governed by a hierarchicacal system of authority composed of a ranking order of men under a titular head, whatever name he is given. In fact, nowhere in Scripture is it even taught that the New Testament Church, whether it be the universal Church as a whole, or local Churches individually, is under the jurisdiction of any one man, whether he be called "Pope" or "Pastor". God has not ordained any other form of government for His Church than that which is clearly and unmistakably laid down in Scripture (CP Eph 4:11-16).

Here we learn that the true New Testament Church of God is governed by a plurality of Elders co-equally, not solely by a one-man ministry of Pastor, as is the

norm in the contemporary Church. The names describing the ministries in Eph 4:11-16 are not titles, but functions in God's order for the New Testament Church (See author's comments on Mt 16:13-18(A) and (B), and 16:19, Eph 4:11-12 and 4:13 in his book **A Question and Answer Study of the New Testament**, and his studies *The Church* and *The Bride of Christ* in his book **Advanced Studies in the Christian Faith (Volume 1)** and *Jesus not Peter the Rock upon which the Church is Built* in his book **Advanced Studies in the Christian Faith (Volume 2)**).

It should be noted here before moving on that no named Church today is the true New Testament Church of God according to Scripture. This includes the Eastern Orthodox Church whose titular head is called the "Patriarch"; the Church of England or Episcopal Church as it is also called, whose head is the reigning monarch which operates under a constitution given to it by an Act of Parliament; the Apostolic Church; The Presbyterian Church; the Church of God; the Church of Christ; the Congregational Church; the Methodist, Wesleyan, or Uniting Church; the Reformed Church; the Baptist Church; the Salvation Army; the Seventh Day Adventist Church; the Lutheran Church; the Full Gospel Church etc, etc. The list goes on and also includes the Pentecostal Church and other so-called charismatic and evangelical Churches. They are all man-made "religious" organisations – evidence of the carnality of professing Christianity and the divisions within its midst which are contrary to Scripture (CP 1Cor 1:11-17; 3:1-11). While they profess Christ as their Saviour, present-day Churches all have their own rules and regulations, conditions of membership, statements or articles of faith, creeds, constitutions and by-laws etc, to try and maintain the Denomination. Some of these may be necessary to comply with the law of the land, but they are not necessary for the life of the Church, which is a living organism, not a lifeless organisation – the Body of Christ, which reproduces itself every time the Gospel is preached (CP Ac 2:36-47; 4:4; 5:12-14; 6:7; 11:19-26; 13:48; Ro 1:16-20; Col 1:3-6). This is the essential nature and composition of the true New Testament Church of God – a living organism whose Head is Christ.

It is not a building made with hands and it is not divided. The divisions within the professing Church are underpinned by Sectarianism – bigotry, a party spirit, factionalism, partisanship – as 1Cor 1:11-17 and 3:1-11 both teach. Sectarianism is doubtless the greatest sin in the professing Church. The very fact that there is an active "ecumenical movement" in the present-day Church is a sad indictment on just how divided professing Christianity really is. The term "ecumenical movement" defines the efforts of denominations and religious organisations within professing Christianity to try to achieve closer unity with each other, highlighting even further the problems they have created among themselves. "Ecumenism" is not a biblical term and does not apply to the true New Testament Church of God, yet Jesus foresaw the divisions, schisms and heresies that would rend the Church and He prayed against them (CP Jn 17:1-26).

Although Jesus foresaw the divisions, schisms, and heresies that would rend the Church, He was not praying here for a One-World-Church, as the proponents of the ecumenical movement would have us believe. He prayed that Christians would all be united in love (CP Jn 13:34-35), and one with each other in their faith and beliefs as He and the Father were one with each other. The unity that Jesus prayed for was Spiritual, not organisational. Paul teaches the same thing (CP Eph 4:1-6). Both Jesus and Paul referred to the same unity of Spirit – a oneness based upon Christians’ common relationship with the Father and the Son, and their same basic attitude toward God’s Word, the world, and the lost (CP 1Jn 1:5-7). What Jesus prayed for in Jn 17:1-26 was a Spiritual unity of heart, purpose, mind and will in all those who would come to believe on His name, which includes us (CP Jn 17:20). Spiritual unity among Christians bears witness to the Divine mission of Christ. Sadly, there is not enough Spiritual unity visibly manifest in the professing Church today. The many faiths and beliefs dividing the contemporary Church do nothing to promote the cause of Christianity in the world. Christ’s prayer for the Church though in Jn 17 will be answered in the Church He is coming back for. It will be “without spot or wrinkle” (CP Eph 5:25-27).

The true New Testament Church of God without spot or wrinkle which Jesus is coming back for according to Scripture, is the Church at Philadelphia, one of the seven Churches in Revelation that Jesus had John write to revealing their Spiritual state. These seven Churches are representative of every Church in every age of Church history, including those named in this study, from the first century Church in the Book of

Acts, until the First Resurrection, when Jesus comes back to take all the redeemed of God – both living and dead, New Testament and Old Testament alike – to Heaven with Him (CP Jn 5:29; 14:1-3; 1Th 4:13-18). See also author’s comments on Jn 5:28-29, 13:34-35, 14:1-3, 1Th 4:13-18, 2Th 2:1-3, 2:6-8, Rev 1:19, 2:1-7, 2:8-11, 2:12-17, 2:18-29, 3:1-6, 3:7-13 and 3:14-22, and his studies, *The Rapture* and *How Christians are to Love One Another* in his book **Foundational Truths of the Christian Faith**, and *The Significance of the Seven Churches in Revelation* in his book **Advanced Studies in the Christian Faith (Volume 1)**.

The clear teaching in this study is that as to the essential nature and composition of the true New Testament Church of God according to Scripture, there are four general principles applying: (1) All authority is derived from Christ as the Head of the Church and exercised in His name and Spirit (CP Mt 16:18-20; 28:18-20; Mk 16:15-20; Jn 14:12-14); (2) Christ’s humility is the pattern for Christian service (CP Mt 20:25-28; Php 2:5-8); (3) The government of the New Testament Church is neither hierarchical nor the responsibility of one man, but a plurality of Elders co-equally – Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors and Teachers (CP Eph 4:11-14); (4) To have a party-spirit or one’s own opinion contrary to God’s word according to Scripture, is Sectarian and sinful (CP 1Cor 1:10-24; 3:1-11). Nowhere in Scripture is it taught that New Testament Christians have to agree on every point of Doctrine. However, where they disagree, they must do so in love (CP Jn 13:33-34).