

THE ORIGIN OF THE CHURCH

Matthew 4:18-22; 16:18

by Royce Smith

Only God has no beginning; being eternal, He is without beginning or end. But everything else—every creature and every institution— has a beginning or origin. The first of our texts pinpoints for us the origin of the church. The second passage defines for us what the Lord promised to do to the church He had already founded upon Himself: namely, to build it up (*oikodomeo: to build to completion*). The Lord is still building His church (I am speaking of the institution which has its existence in each local church.) He did not say He would start or institute the church, but would build it up, implying the church had already been instituted previous to the time of this statement in Matthew 16:18.

If the church were anything other than an assembly of baptized believers devoted to our Lord Jesus Christ and His teachings, we would have difficulty seeing it in our first text. In fact, we could not find it at all because it would not be there. Since, however, the church is a congregation of baptized believers, we do find it in this text. If, on the one hand, the church were composed of all the saved from the beginning of time to the time of our Lord's ministry on earth, it would have already been in existence, having been founded long before His earthly ministry. If, on the other hand, Christ had started the church on the first Pentecost following His resurrection, He would have founded it when He was bodily absent from the earth, contrary to what He said in Mark 13:34: "[For the Son of man is] as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch." (KJV) The house He left was the New Testament church.

But since the church is a *called-out assembly* of baptized believers under the Headship and teaching of Christ, the church clearly had its origin during His earthly ministry. He spoke of *my church* or *ekklesia* (Matthew 16:18). There were *ekklesias*

other than His. There was the *ekklesia* in the wilderness. Acts 7:38, "*This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and [with] our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us.*" (KJV), but it was not Christ's *ekklesia*. There was an *ekklesia* at Ephesus, a lawful one (Acts 19:39), but it was not His *ekklesia*. Christ's church is more than just an assembly; it is a *called-out assembly*. If it were just an assembly, it would cease to exist when not assembled, but because it is a *called-out assembly of a particular people*, it continues to exist in the individual members when not assembled. This fact refutes those who belittle a church roll. A church roll is nothing more than that which identifies those who are that *called-out assembly*. A specific people constitute any New Testament church even as a special *called-out body* of citizens constituted the lawful assembly in Ephesus.

PROPOSITION: *having defined what the church is, we can now identify the time and place of its origin together with the purpose of its origin, and most important of all, who its originator is.*

WHO FOUNDED THE CHURCH?

The Lord Jesus Christ is the *Founder* of His church. When He said, "*Upon this rock, I will build my church,*" it is obvious He was speaking of that which was His, not of that which was another man's. Thus, He promised to build up that which He Himself had founded. The *building up* of the church He had already founded, then, not the *starting* of the church, is the subject of Matthew 16:18.

Therefore, the church was not founded by one of the patriarchs or prophets of the Old Testament. Neither was it started by Peter or one of the other apostles. It was not even founded by the Holy Spirit; otherwise, it would be the Holy Spirit's church. I do not wish to beg the point, but *the fruit of the Spirit* and the *gifts of the Spirit* are rightly attributed to the Holy Spirit because they come from Him. If the Holy Spirit

had started the church, as some claim, then should not the church be called the *Church of the Holy Spirit*? John 16:13-14, "Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, [that] shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come. 14 He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew [it] unto you." (KJV) The Holy Spirit has the ministry of exalting the Lord Jesus, and all He does is to that end. But He did not usurp from Christ the prerogative of starting the church. Christ's church certainly was not founded by some other great religious leader or leaders of whom we read in history. However great they may have been, their religious societies are not the Lord's church.

Thus, the same One who founded His church—as an institution reflected in every individual church—is the One who is still building it. Therefore, we observe that it is Christ Himself who called out the disciples who constituted the first church.

WHEN CHRIST FOUNDED THE CHURCH

Since Christ's church is a *called-out assembly* of baptized believers who are devoted to His Headship and teachings, we will find the origin of that church at the point in which we see Him calling out such an assembly. The account of this *calling-out* is given in both Matthew 4:18-22 and Mark 1:16-20. How do we know this incident records the origin of the church? We know it because these passages reveal four facts which pinpoint this occasion as the beginning of the church.

First, the men whom He called-out were believers. Having been the disciples of John the Baptist, they were looking for the coming Messiah. When John pointed out Jesus to two of his disciples (John 1:36, 37), they immediately followed Him. One of the two was Andrew who brought his brother, Simon, to Him (John 1:38-42). There is indication that the incident recorded in this passage occurred before the calling out of the disciples in Matthew 4:18-22 making it clear that those whom the Lord called-out knew Him. The fact that John the Baptist would not baptize unbelievers proves these men, with the exception of Judas, were believers. Luke 3:7-8, "Then said he to

the multitude that came forth to be baptized of him, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance, and begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to [our] father: for I say unto you, That God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham." (KJV) John the Baptist consistently refused to baptize unbelievers, not just scribes and Pharisees. Thus, those men whom Jesus called, having first been John's disciples, were genuine believers.

Second, the men whom Jesus called to form the church had been baptized Scripturally by John the Baptist. John's baptism, despite statements to the contrary by some, was valid Christian baptism. John 1:33, "*And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shall see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost.*" (KJV) Note that John said God had sent him to baptize. If God sends someone to baptize, then that baptism is as valid as it can be. In fact, one of the qualifications for being an apostle was having been baptized by John the Baptist. Acts 1:21-22, "*Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 Beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection.*" (KJV) The Church at Jerusalem certainly recognized the validity of John's baptism. So did all of the later New Testament churches. They never re-baptized anyone whom John had baptized. While Paul re-baptized those whom Apollos had baptized *unto John's baptism* (Acts 19:1-6), nothing is said of Apollos, who had been baptized by John the Baptist, being re-baptized.

Third, these men were each *called-out* from their former manner of lives to follow Christ. He but called, and they followed Him as disciples. Thus, we have Scripturally baptized believers following Christ, acknowledging Him as their Head—they called Him *Lord* and *Master* (Luke 6:46)—and accepting His teachings. Is this not an *ekklesia*?

Fourth, these *called-out baptized* believers assembled together with Him for worship and instruction. Therefore, we conclude that they were His *ekklesia* or church. Nothing was missing which is necessary to the existence of a New Testament church. They had the gospel (Mark 1:1), observed the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:19,20), had rules concerning church discipline (Matthew 18:15-18), had a treasurer (John 12:6), and Christ Himself as their Head (John 13:13).

Some object to the fact a New Testament church existed before the Day of Pentecost. It is argued that the church could not have existed before Pentecost because it would have been without the Holy Spirit, for the Holy Spirit did not come until then. But the fact is the church did have the Holy Spirit before the Day of Pentecost. John 20:22, "*And when he had said this, he breathed on [them], and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost.*" (KJV) The very same assembly *called-out* in Matthew 4:18-22, with the exception of Judas, received the Holy Spirit on this occasion several days before Pentecost.

Again, it has been argued that Hebrews 9:16,17 prohibit the *called-out* assembly of Matthew 4:18-22 from being a New Testament church before the Day of Pentecost. Hebrews 9:16-17, "*For where a testament [is], there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament [is] of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth.*" (KJV) Not one statement in this passage prohibits the existence of the church before Pentecost! Our Lord died fifty-three days before Pentecost and was raised fifty days before this day. Everything relating to this testament was valid with this assembly at least fifty days before Pentecost. Hence, this assembly was a New Testament church. If there were no New Testament church before the death of Christ, neither was there a new covenant. But Jesus said, "*For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins*" (Matthew 26:28). Furthermore, it is not death that makes a covenant or a will; it is a person. It is that individual person's will to make a will or a covenant which gives it existence. Death can only confirm a will or covenant which has been previously made.

WHERE CHRIST FOUNDED THE CHURCH

The place where we locate the origin of the church is the shores of the Lake of Galilee (Matthew 4:18-22). When these first four baptized believers followed Christ, the church was born. Everything necessary to a New Testament church was present. It has been objected that Christ would never build His church on the sands of the seashore. He didn't; He built it upon Himself, the Rock, but He called it out, and it had its beginning on the seashore of Galilee.

Some older Baptists contended the church originated on the mountain when Christ chose twelve of His disciples to be apostles after He had prayed all night (Luke 6:12-16). Sometimes no distinction was made between the *origin* and *organization* of the church. If they took this incident to be the *organization* of the church, I concur. One can have a house in existence before he has it organized. But this incident does not record the *origin* of the church. The church existed before the apostles were chosen, but the Lord gave it organization on the mountain, setting in it first the apostles. 1 Corinthians 12:28, "*And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.*" (KJV) Whether we take His setting some in the church to relate to a priority of office or a sequence of time, the bottom line is the same. The church had to have been in existence before the apostles could be set in it. A man must first build a house before he can set his furniture in it. Christ first established the church; then He organized it, taught it, and commissioned it, all in good time and order.

HOW CHRIST FOUNDED THE CHURCH

Christ founded the church the same way in which He formed the heavens and the earth. "*He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast*" (Psalm 33:9). He said to certain baptized believers, "*Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.*" Because He commanded, and His word is always effectual, it was done. These baptized believers immediately followed Christ, and the New Testament *ekklesia* was formed.

In this same manner every succeeding New Testament church has come into existence. The Lord speaks to Scripturally baptized believers, giving them the desire to form a church according to the teachings of the New Testament. For example, a baptized believer moves into a new area and finds no New Testament church. He first begins to have a desire for a church. Finding other baptized believers, he shares his burden with them. Then they also begin to long for a New Testament church. From whence comes that longing? "*For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure*" (Philippians 2:13) Do we not call such desires the leadership of the Holy Spirit? God but speaks, and that word is effectual, leading them to enter into a covenant relationship with one another, and another New Testament church is born after the pattern of the first *ekklesia*.

Notice I did not say that just any group of believers or baptized believers, but a group of *Scripturally baptized believers* have a desire to form a church. This qualification itself necessitates a prior church relationship, but the starting of the new church is initiated by the Lord Himself, not a so-called mother church. No church can take the place of the Lord Jesus Christ, nor should it ever want to attempt to do so. We are offended when the Catholic Pope claims to be the *vicar* of Christ. Why are we not equally offended when any preacher or church would claim to be the *vicar* of the Lord Jesus Christ? Certainly a sponsoring church should assist in forming a new church, but only as Scripturally baptized believers enter into a covenant relationship with one another under the Headship of Christ to execute the commission He gave can a new church be founded. Bethel Baptist Church has helped organize two churches in the last ten years. The church gave guidance and consent to those who desired to start a new church, but not one vote of Bethel Baptist Church brought either of these two churches into existence; the new churches were formed when the baptized believers who constituted them voted to enter into covenant with one another under the Headship of Christ. Does this not sound very much like what we have read in Matthew 4:18-22? The Lord is indeed the *Founder* of His church!

WHY CHRIST FOUNDED THE CHURCH

Christ founded the church to represent Him on the earth, to propagate His teachings, to proclaim His gospel throughout the world, to make disciples, to baptize them, and to teach them to observe all the things He had commanded. The church is His body; it is one with Him as the head and body are one in all living creatures. It is an *executive* body, not a *legislative* body, entrusted with ordinances and a commission. It is distinct from all other bodies, having been charged to do a sacred work. It is the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15). To be what He intended it to be and to do the works He has given it to do are the chief reasons Christ founded the church during His earthly ministry.

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