

What is the Church?

Part 1

What Makes us God's People?

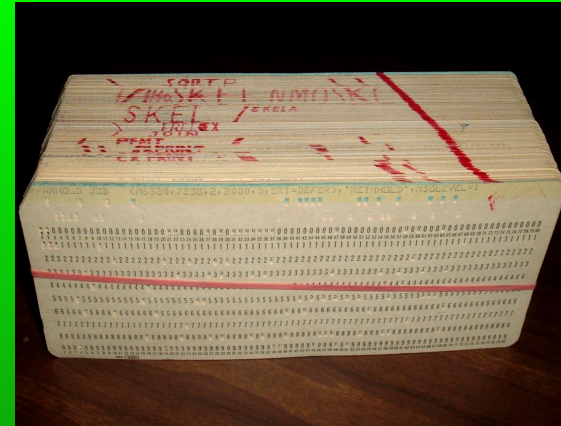


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My Grandpa was born in 1943, in the middle of World War 2. He was born into an American Seventh-day Adventist Family. A couple years after his birth WW2 would end, and he got to grow up with a typical Seventh-day Adventist upbringing in the late 1940s and 1950s. When he was in his teens and early 20s the United States entered the Vietnam War, which lasted from 1955 to 1975. In order to fill up the ranks of the United States military during the war, the US instituted the draft, or mandatory conscription, anyone within a certain age group could be randomly forced to join the military for a certain period of time. In 1967, my Grandpa was drafted and sent to Vietnam.



Like all Seventh-day Adventists, my Grandpa was a conscientious objector during the war, meaning he refused to fight and kill for religious reasons. Luckily the United States Military recognizes religious liberty, and does not force soldiers to fight who refuse to kill because of their religious beliefs. Before he had been drafted, my Grandpa had worked as a punch card machine repair man. Punch card machines are wildly out dated today. But back then it was the closest they had to a modern computer when it came to sorting and organizing information. When he got to Vietnam, God worked it out for him so that he was given the job of repairing the Military's punch card machines on the base he was stationed at. Thus for his whole tour of duty, he did not have to fight, and never saw combat.



Stack
of
Punch Cards

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Punch
Card Machine

Another issue, besides fighting, was the Sabbath, luckily, the commanders respected this also. And did not force him to work on Sabbath. There was a Seventh-day Adventist Church in Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, which was not too far from the base he was stationed at. So every Sabbath, he started requesting a pass to leave the base and go visit the church, after the church services he would stay at the family of a brother, and spend the Sabbath with the Seventh-day Adventists in the city. Before long he noticed though that they did not even check his pass when he left on Sabbath, so he stopped even bothering to get a pass when he left the base every Sabbath.



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On one Sabbath he left the base to go to church, as he always did, but this time, he got sick, really sick, he contracted Dysentery. It left him so sick that he was not able to return to the base until Monday. During this time he was away from the base, the base was attacked by the Viet Cong, it was the only time the base was attacked during his entire tour of duty. And it just so happened to occur when he wasn't there. The Bible verse in Romans 8:28 was fulfilled about all things working together for good for those that love God, even dysentery.



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But when he got back to the base, he was in trouble. Normally he could have gotten away with not having a pass for leaving on the Sabbath. But this time, since he had been gone for 2 days, and he had been gone during an enemy attack, without permission to be gone, the military officers thought that disciplinary action was required. They decided the best punishment for this situation, would be to ban him from going to Saigon for a period of time. But they did not want to violate his religious rights. And they weren't certain if his religious beliefs required that he go to church every Sabbath. Of course my Grandpa knew that he did not need to go to church to keep the Sabbath.



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Ultimately the officers, went to a Seventh-day Adventist pastor, and asked him if being a Seventh-day Adventist required going to church every Sabbath. The Pastor assured them, that keeping the Sabbath simply meant not working on that day, and spending the time with God instead, not going to church. You did not have to go to church every week to be a Christian, if you couldn't go for some reason, the really important principle, was the relationship with God, and that could be done just as easily at base with the Bible and prayer.

After awhile the ban was lifted on my Grandpa and he was able to return to attending church in Saigon, and after a few months he would return to the United States, eventually becoming a pastor. And He is still alive today



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But the reason why have told this story today, is because I think it helps to teach us the lesson I want to present today. What makes us God's people, what it means to worship God, and to keep the Sabbath, is not attending church every week, or any other forms of worship, but having a relationship, a friendship with God. It means to walk with Christ every hour of every day. True Christianity, is not a set of forms, it is not about being part of a specific group, or attending church every week, (though these things have their place) it is about knowing God personally as a friend. It is a living power in the life, a living relationship with our creator.

Satan always tries to make Christianity a form, he tries to make it about attending church every week, about being part of a specific denomination, and believing on a specific creed, anything and everything, but a friendship with Christ. For it is a living relationship with Christ that gives Christianity true power in the life. Satan's goal is to make Christianity a dead form, instead of a living reality. Most people in this world have a religion, but few, even in Christianity, have a relationship with God.

This lesson of what constitutes true Christianity was given by Christ to the Samaritan woman at the well.



“The woman saith unto him, Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet. Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God *is* a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship *him* in spirit and in truth.” **John 4:19-24**

What God truly values, is not the outward forms, (these are just the fruits) but the heart, whether we are worshiping him from the heart, in spirit and in truth, or just outwardly.

But this brings us to a even more fundamental question, a question that will be our study today, and really over the next few studies. We know that true christianity is a relationship with Christ and our heavenly father, but what then is the church as a whole, we know what makes us Christians individually, but what about as a group? What makes us God's people as a whole? What is the church?

Today there are 100s of Christian churches, almost everyone claiming to be God's true people. In Christ day there were also many religious groups within Judaism and among the Samaritans. Everyone had their beliefs. Throughout the ages, through to today, who has been and who is God's church, his true people?

What Christ said to the woman of Samaria about in spirit and in truth applies to more than just the individual Christian, but to the church as a group. The women of Samaria thought that the question of who was God's people, the church, was whether the Jews and their temple were the true people of God and correct place to worship, or the Samaritans and their hill of worship. But Christ revealed to her something far deeper, that the question of what is the church and who are God's people is not based on outward appearance, on specific temples or buildings or church organizations, but on the heart. On our individual relationship with God. The church is spiritual, just as God is a spirit. And being a part of the church, was not based on being a Jew or a Samaritan, or going to the temple or hill, but on the heart. This truth Stephen tried to impress upon the mind of the pharisees at his trial:

"But Solomon built him (God) an house. Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet, Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? saith the Lord: or what is the place of my rest? Hath not my hands made all these things?" **Acts 7:47-50.**

The Jews trusted in their temple, the Samaritans in their hill, and today Christians trust to their church. They made their structure their Saviour. But are church is not our Saviour. God dwells not in places made with hands, God is not bound to a specific organization or name, God is a spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit. In other words the church is not a literal building, a specific organization or denomination, it is those who are worshiping God in Spirit and in Truth. It is spiritual just as God is a spirit. We are the temple of God, "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" **1 Corinthians 3:16.** The church of God is made up of all those who love God and are worshiping him in spirit and in truth. The church of God is invisible, not visible, it is spiritual, not carnal. The church of God is not a specific group with a name, it is all those who have Christ living in the temple of their heart.



“Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.” **Ephesians 2:19-22.**

“if so be ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious. To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: And he that believeth on him shall not be confounded. Unto you therefore which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, The stone which the builders disallowed, The same is made the head of the corner, and A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed.” **1 Peter 2:3-8**



“According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” **1 Corinthians 3:10-11**

The Bible compares the Church to a spiritual building or temple where Christ lives among his people, with Christ as the foundation and chief corner stone, and God’s people as the living stones. In other words the church is not a literal building or organization made by human hands, it is spiritual, it is all those who are building on Christ as their foundation, or who love Christ and are living up to all the light they have. God doesn’t care about the structure as much as he does the people.



Ellen White Says:

“God has a church. It is not the great cathedral, neither is it the national establishment, neither is it the various denominations; it is the people who love God and keep His commandments. ‘Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them’ (Matt. 18:20). Where Christ is even among the humble few, this is Christ’s church, for the presence of the High and Holy One who inhabiteth eternity can alone constitute a church.” **Upward Look, page 315.**

“The church is God’s fortress. His city of refuge, which He holds in a revolted world. Any betrayal of the church is treachery to Him who has bought mankind with the blood of His only-begotten Son. From the beginning, faithful souls have constituted the church on earth. In every age the Lord has had His watchmen, who have borne a faithful testimony to the generation in which they lived.” **Acts of the Apostles, page 11.**



The word church in the original greek is: **ekklésia**

It means, according to Strong's:

- "1. (properly) a 'calling out'
2. (concretely) a called out assembly of citizens
3. (specifically, of Christ) the community of the Redeemed of Christ whether being on earth or in heaven or both {used only of people, not a location, structure, etc. Of Christ, used only of the Redeemed, not of the unredeemed in their midst}"

The literal meaning of the word is those who are called out, called out of the world, and when it comes to Babylon, those who are called out of Babylon, which has joined the world. The meaning of the name does not refer to specific group with a specific creed, it refers to those who have been called out to follow Christ. As under the 3rd definition of Strong's, it is used only for people, it refers to the redeemed, not to sinners, even if those sinners are church members.

We become part of Christ's church, not by joining a denomination, but by faith in Christ, and coming to know the Father through Christ. It is righteousness by faith that makes us part of Christ's church. This is why the message to come out of Babylon of Revelation 18, the loud cry of the third angel, is righteousness by faith, because it is this that makes us part of Christ's church, and it is the loss of this that has made the denominations in the world lose their place as part of Christ over all church.

Even now there are many true Christians who are a part of Christ's church who are members of the Babylonian churches, these people are living up to all the light they have, and they are who now being called out of these corrupt organizations. God says to Babylon, come out of her my people, meaning that most of God's people are in Babylon, and must come out.

Another example of the church in Bible is the vine, where Christ is called the vine and we the branches, whoever is connected with Christ is part of the plant, or part of the church. Christ is also compared to the head of the body, and we his people the rest of the body, when one of us suffers, Christ suffers with us. Again by being connected with Christ we become part of Christ's church, not by joining a specific denomination. A denomination is not our Saviour.

All of this teaches us, that are salvation, are allegiance to Christ and to present truth, does not require being a member of a specific church. Often it is thought, by those still in a church, when someone leaves a Babylonian Church, that they have abandoned the truth. But the truth is not dependent on a specific organization, the truth is much larger than that, it is part of Christ's invisible church, and as long as someone is a member of Christ's spiritual church, they have the truth.

“And it came to pass, when Joshua was by Jericho, that he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, behold, there stood a man over against him with his sword drawn in his hand: and Joshua went unto him, and said unto him, *Art thou for us, or for our adversaries?* And he said, Nay; but *as captain of the host of the LORD* am I now come. And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and did worship, and said unto him, What saith my lord unto his servant?”
Joshua 5:13-14

Christ's response to Joshua here is very interesting, he did not respond I am for you, or against you, he said nay to both questions, and said I am captain of the Lord's host. This is an important principle. Christ is not for a specific denomination or group, the question is, is a specific denomination or group for Christ? A church group is only part of God's people, as long as they are for Christ. Christ's church is not a specific denomination, it is all those who know him.

A denomination can be a part of God's people if they are for Christ, but Christ is not specifically on their side, are they on Christ side? And if they are not, or turn away from Christ, then they are no longer part of his church. A church, no matter how it has been led by God in the past and served him faithfully, if it begins to separate itself from Christ, can no longer be part of his church, and if it does not repent, it will become Babylon fallen, and will have to be separated from by any of God's true people who may still be a part of it. The point that Christ made here, is that He is not loyal to an organization with a specific name no matter what it does, no group is invincible to sin, and forever his people, if it turns from him, then he cannot be for it. In other words, we cannot trust in our organization as always being God's people, it can fall. So the question that Joshua asked Christ, is instead a questions for us, are we for Christ, or for his enemies?

I do want to clarify what I mean, I don't mean that we are not to have organizations or unity, we must have order, it is not wrong to fellowship with other believers or to have a church building where brothers and sisters come together to worship God. But my point is, is that all these things are not the church, they are a part of it, and that these things have no power to save us. The church is something larger, grander, an organization may be a part of God's people, a part of the church, but the church itself is spiritual and invisible. It includes all those who sincerely love Jesus, whether or not they are members of our specific organization, both here on earth, and in Heaven. The point is, our faith is not in a church organization, or a denomination, but in a person, Jesus Christ.

The Church is not a specific group with a name, it is a spiritual temple, an invisible building, built out of all those who love Jesus and are sincerely living up to all the light they have. This is a very important point to understand, it was this point that was part of the foundation of the Reformation, that Christ's church was not the Catholic church which claimed to be the universal church, but all those who had found faith in Christ, that salvation was not dependent on being part of a group the world called a church, but on knowing Christ. The question is not whether we are part of a specific church with a name in this world, the question is are we part of Christ's invisible church, do we know him? For we can be a member of a physical church on this earth, but not be a member of Christ's invisible church.

But this brings up other questions, what about Babylon, what about present truth? What about organization and unity? These will be the subjects of our next studies.

To Be Continued...