

THE IDENTITY OF THE CHURCH

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Since that great day so many years ago in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, when the church of Jesus Christ was established, as has been so aptly portrayed before us tonight by brother Johnny Elmore, there have been hundreds of warring sects and denominations that have arisen. Today we live in the midst of a denominational world, and many thoughtful people, I suppose, at one time or another are made to ask whether the Lord ever really established a church, and if He did, where is it in the world today? How can we identify it? Really, is the church that Jesus established some kind of an invisible thing, some kind of a spiritual thing that exists only in the mind and the spiritual nature of man? Well, I submit to you tonight that the church that Jesus established is a church that has distinct qualities that are positively identifiable in an objective way. And that is what I'm going to talk to you about for a while, — the identity of the church.

But first of all, I would like to point out that this distinctiveness of the church is not necessarily to be found in the odd shape of its church buildings, in the size of its church treasuries, nor in the unusual and peculiar dress of the members of the church. Now I said that simply because there are evidently a lot of people who identify true religion by the size of its buildings, the money that's involved in them, and the way that people look, so far as the peculiar dress is concerned. Now if the distinctiveness of the church is found in building big buildings, then it will soon lose that identity because there's always some other group who can build bigger ones. If the church has its distinctiveness tonight because it has a big church treasury, I will assure you that there is always some other organization who can contribute more. And tonight my friends, if you think because people dress strangely that identifies them with true religion, you might as well think again because there is always someone who can dress even more strangely.

Not long ago, I was down in the South, where I went through the battleship 'Alabama', while down there, and a battleship you know, has very small rooms in it. Well, it just so happened that when my family and I got on that thing, another group got on at the same time. Now these were religious people. They were very obviously religious because they had on strange-looking clothes and they had let their beards grow way down to their stomachs. They acted so good and so pious that I thought I was going to get too close to one of them in those little rooms of that ship and contaminate one of them. Although their dress was distinct, there is always someone who can outdo them. Because just about two days later, I was down on Jackson Square in New Orleans, where you will find some of the strangest people on earth, I guess. I saw an old boy walking down the street, who had a pink bed-sheet wrapped and gnarled all around himself. At one time his hair had been growing down his back, but he had shaved every bit of it off except one little twig, which he had plaited and let hang down his back. From his strange appearance, it was obvious he was of some kind of religious order. My point is this: I don't care how strangely you dress, someone can always outdo you, and you will thereby lose your distinction. And as far as the church is concerned, neither is she identified by these outward signs. But the church is identifiable, and that is what we want to study for just a few minutes this evening.

I'd like to, if I may, notice to begin with the 3rd chapter of Ephesians, and the 10th verse where the apostle Paul teaches that the manifold wisdom of God is made known through the church to principalities and powers in heavenly places. Then in the 11th verse, he says that this is "according to the eternal purpose which He purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Now there are several passages of scripture we could notice this evening which teach us this eternal plan or this eternal purpose that Paul alludes to, was a thing hidden in past ages, but now is made known and culminates in the church of Jesus Christ. For example, in Romans 16:25- thru 26, Paul makes this statement, "Now to him that is of power to establish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began, but now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations

for the obedience of faith." Also see Eph. 3:5 and I Cor. 2:6-10. This great plan, this purpose of God that was hidden in past ages, has now been made known through inspired apostles and prophets. This great mystery, the great plan of salvation was accomplished by the bringing together of Jew and Gentile into one body, into one church.

This great plan of human redemption was initiated at the fall of Adam and was a mystery down through the ages, and has now been made known through, and embodied in the church of Jesus Christ. You see, the church is the instrument through which God accomplishes His eternal purpose and that eternal purpose is the redemption of fallen humanity. The great plan of human redemption is now incorporated in the church. The church embodies the plan of salvation, and the fact that the church exists upon this earth, makes known this great wisdom of God in bringing to fruition this wonderful plan of salvation. In the sense that the church is the manifold wisdom of God, it is perfect in every respect simply because it does embody the wisdom of God. Just as a building shows the wisdom of its architect, the church shows the wisdom of God. The church came from a perfect builder and it could be no less than perfect itself. It has a perfect plan that God has revealed in His word (the New Testament) through His apostles and prophets concerning work, its nature and its worship.

The only way this evening we have of identifying the New Testament church is to go to the New Testament. It is the only authoritative source to which we can go to make any evaluation at all of the church. But listen, when we do go to the New Testament, we are going to find that it will produce the very same thing that it did in the first century. The word of God is one of the ways that we identify the church because the word of God is the seed of the kingdom, according to the parable of the sower that was taught by Jesus. And remember, we read in I Peter 1:22-25 that those in the early church were born of incorruptible seed, by the word of God. So, it is the seed as the word of God that helps to produce the church, for seed always produces after its kind.

In the first century, the apostles sowed the seed of the kingdom, the gospel, under the great commission. The result of this sowing was that many people believed the gospel that was taught. They obeyed it, and as brother Johnny Elmore noticed, they were added to the church, Acts 2:47. Today, we still have that seed of the kingdom. We still have that word of God, and when we sow it as they sowed it, we are going to produce the same thing that they produced in the first century. When men and women today are willing to obey the word of God, it will produce a New Testament church of Jesus Christ, which is the only way on earth it can be produced.

In Genesis 1:11, God declared that the things of the earth were to be reproduced after their kind by means of seed. At first, God created man, and He created plants and animals in perfection. Within these He implanted the means of self-perpetuation. It was done through seed. In like manner, God created the church. In Eph. 2:15 it says, "He made in himself of twain one new man." He created the

Church. He made one new man and He did it in perfection, and He provided for its perpetuation through the seed of the kingdom, the word of God. My friends, as long as we have this word of God, the church can be reproduced in any age. When the good seed is planted in good soil, the hearts of good and honest people, it will produce the very same crop, the very same product that it did in the first century. Now it won't be something similar to it, it won't be something like it, but it will be the very same thing, the same kind. Now if we do what they did, we'll be members of the same church of which they were members, because the seed of the kingdom, this mark of identification, produces only Christians.

You know, it's strange to me today that people want the same Christ that they had in the first century. They want the same grace and love of God that they had. They want the same principles that they lived by, but they don't want the same church that Jesus established. But we live under the same rule under which they lived. We'll be judged by the same standard by which they will be judged. According to I Cor. 15:24-28, Jesus will reign till He hath put all enemies under His feet. According to Acts 17:30-32, we're going to be judged by the same rule by which they will be judged. Therefore, it seems to me that we should desire to be members of the very same church of which they were members. As I noticed in Acts 2:47, we find that when they

obeyed this word of the kingdom, this seed of the kingdom, they were added to the church. "The Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." Which just simply means this: everything that is involved in salvation culminates in the church that Jesus purchased with His blood.

My friends, it is an erroneous idea which teaches that one can be saved and never become a member of the church, the body of Christ, because the very act whereby one is saved, is the same act that makes him a member of the church. Mark 16:16 says, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." Acts 2:38, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins." I Pet. 3:21 says "even baptism doth also now save us." You will notice in each one of these verses, salvation is always after baptism, never before. Never is salvation in the New Testament put before belief, or repentance or baptism. The reason for this is because baptism is the concluding act in our salvation. Baptism is the act that puts us into Christ, Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27, and it is that very same act that puts us into the church of Jesus Christ. I Cor. 12:13 says, "For by one spirit are we all baptized into one body." The body is the church, according to Eph. 1:22, 23; Col. 1:18. There is no difference in being saved in Christ and being saved in the church. Eph. 5:23 says that Christ is the savior of the body. So this evening, it is really quite ridiculous for anyone to contend that the church is unessential and unnecessary to salvation. In fact, this is what the church is. It is saved people, saved members in one body, Romans 12:4. On the day of Pentecost, three thousand people heard the gospel, they believed it, they repented and they were baptized for the remission of their sins. The Lord added them to the church. So, one would have to contend that the church contains all who are saved. That's what the church is, it's the institution that contains all who are saved. As previously mentioned, one of the identifying marks of the church is its origin, which is the seed. And another identifying mark of the church which is closely related, is its terms of admittance, faith, repentance, confession and baptism.

In the strictest sense, I don't believe this evening that we are baptized into a local congregation, as such, but rather, we are baptized into Christ, into His church in a universal sense. The word church, *ekklesia*, is used to refer to a church in a given location, as well as to the universal church. In Matt. 16:18, when Jesus said, "I will build my church." He was talking about the universal church. In Rom. 16:16, when Paul says "The churches of Christ salute you," that is the church in a local sense. It is a misunderstanding of this principle here, a difference between the terms, the church universal and the church locally, I think, that has caused some of the difficulty in identifying the church.

Let us notice something. The church locally is a spiritual relationship to Christ just as it is with the church in the universal sense. But the church locally is the only organized form that the church takes upon this earth tonight. The church universal does not function as an organization. The church locally, as a congregational unit, is the only organized form the church has, and is thereby one way it can be identified. It is through the church, as a local unit, the congregation as a working and worshipping unit, that the members of the body of Christ carry out certain functions together. That is what the church is as an organization, members performing together.

We have certain obligations as Christians that can be fulfilled *only*, and let me emphasize "only" just as strongly as I can, in cooperation with other members of the body of Christ in a congregation. Some of these obligations are worship, benevolent work, evangelism, and so forth, which are the work of the church. It is impossible for one to fulfill these duties without being a member of a local congregation.

There is essentially no difference in the church locally and the church universally. In fact, the church locally is just that which makes up the church universally, and in this sense, there is simply no difference. It is impossible for a person to be a member of one without being a member of the other. And it's a misconception of what the church is, to say that one can be a member of some kind of invisible and spiritual institution without being a member of some visible organization.

It is true that we have obligations as individuals that cannot be fulfilled through a local congregation as such. We have obligations to our families, our jobs, our government and things of that nature. We also have certain obligations that can be fulfilled in both an individual capacity as well as a congregational capacity. We can evangelize, as individuals, we can do

benevolent work, as individuals, but we also have a congregational responsibility to do those things. We should fulfill our obligations in both areas as best we possibly can. But let me emphasize again, in order to fulfill the obligations that God has placed upon the church as the congregation, we have to be members of a local church. There just simply is no other conclusion that we could possibly reach. The only medium through which the church functions is the local congregation, the local organization, and this is its only organized form upon the earth. Therefore, we must be members of it. This is another way it can be identified. When Christians band themselves together as a congregation, they are under obligation independently for their own faithfulness to God's word in their work, in their worship and in their daily lives.

In order to identify this bride of Jesus Christ, the church must be scriptural in worship. The terms of admittance are no more important this evening than the terms of worship. One is no more important than the other and it's ridiculous for someone to say that it is more important to be baptized than it is to worship right. Eph. 2:21 speaks of the church as a holy temple in the Lord. Now just as the temple was the place of worship under the old law, the church today is the sphere of worship. One must be in that church even in order to worship God. One can't worship God just any way he wants to. He has to be in the church to do that. You know, none of us could ever conceive, dream or create anything that would necessarily please God in our worship. God is the one who is all-knowing and all-powerful and has need on nothing. Therefore, He is the one to specify how we should worship Him. As a congregation, as the body of Christ, the most significant way that we can be identified as the church of the New Testament is to have a "thus saith the Lord" in our worship. We should have a "thus saith the Lord" in *what* we do (the items of worship), *why* we do it (our love for God), *when* we do it (the Lord's Day), *where* we do it (in a congregation — One can't worship by himself out on a creek bank somewhere.), and of course *how* we do it (in spirit and truth). These aspects of worship are important in identifying the church of Jesus Christ.

In addition to this, the church, in order to be identified, must be scriptural in its work and organization. One of the most basic marks of the identity of the church is its organization. The local congregation is the church's only organized form, as I mentioned. Any organization larger or smaller than the local church is simply not the church. Don't forget it. That is an important point in identifying the church. If it's larger or smaller than the local church, it is not the church. Each congregation is a self-ruling, autonomous group of people, carrying out the work of God that He has given them, so far as their work and worship is concerned. The work of the church consists of edification, evangelism, and benevolence, and each congregation is to do its own work. Therefore, any errors in its work, organization, worship, or terms of entrance affects only that congregation, and not her sister congregations. This is why we consider a particular church to be in error, while another is not. Well, we have to be scriptural in organization and work to be identified as the New Testament church.

I'd like to add that it is important for the church to be scriptural in name. The church should be called by a name found only in the Bible. It just seems only logical to conclude that to identify the New Testament church, one would have to go to the New Testament and surely one would not wear a name or title other than that found in the New Testament.

And, last of all, the pure and godly life of its members is one of its marks of identity. It is essential to have the inward marks of a spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ as well as these outward things of the church that we have studied with you.

Now when you find a body of people today who has scriptural worship, who has scriptural organization, and work, who is scriptural in its name and terms of entrance, and whose people are living pure and godly lives in harmony with the authority of Jesus Christ, my friends, you have by the very nature of the case, identified the church for which Christ died. The church is not just people, but the church is people doing what the will of God says to do.

The church is not just a spiritual and invisible thing that cannot be identified in our world today. It is something that is identifiable and no matter what men may say, no matter how they may attack it, no matter to what unimportant state they may relegate it, the church, as our theme states this evening, still stands. And I'll tell you now, if there ever was a time we need to love it, we need to respect it, and exalt it to the highest hills, it is this age in which we now live. I would only be naive to stand before you tonight and say that there is nothing wrong with the

church. It is filled with people and any institution that has people in it is going to have its problems, because none of us are perfect. But in the sense of the unfolding of God's divine plan, the church is perfect. And after all is said and done, it's the only hope that any of us have.