

# **The Teachings of Jesus**

## **The Church**

Lesson #8 for August 23, 2014

Scriptures: Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 28:1; John 15:1-5; 17; Matthew 5:23-24; 7:1-5; 18:15-18.

1. Although God has tried to have a relationship with everyone, He has always had at least a small group of human beings here on this earth with whom He has especially related. In the beginning, it was Adam and Eve; then Enoch; and later, Noah; then Abraham, etc.; down to the present time when God relates especially to His church. God's "church" is not any official organization but rather a group of believing, trusting, faithful Christians whose faith is firmly set both intellectually and spiritually in the Lord Jesus Christ so that they cannot be moved. (See 4SDABC 1161.6.)
2. There have always been divisive pressures within the church. In times past, there have been doctrinal conflicts, cultural differences, and a host of smaller issues threatening to tear apart the unity of the church. At the present time, there are some very divisive differences among different groups over women's ordination, the place of homosexuality in the church, and always the challenge of how to maintain unity in a worldwide church.
3. But, we must understand that the church is not a human organization. Christ Himself is the One who established the church and is its rightful Head. He claims the church as His future bride. He said, "I will build my church"; (Matthew 16:18) and He is the giant, unmovable Rock and Cornerstone of the church's existence upon which each of us has an opportunity to be built as a smaller stone into the church's everlasting structure. So, in this lesson, we will discuss the *foundation* of the church and the *unity* of the church.
4. Read Matthew 16:18-19. As the largest Christian body in the world, the Roman Catholic Church has claimed that the keys to the kingdom were given to Peter and have subsequently been handed from one pope to another down to the present day. They further claim that for this reason unless one is baptized—by sprinkling—as a Roman Catholic, s/he cannot be saved. This claim does not take into account Matthew 18:18 and John 20:23 which clearly suggest that Jesus was handing the keys to the kingdom to all of His disciples.
5. The name of Peter in the Greek original—*petros*—suggested a small stone while the *petra* on which the church is built suggests a large, solid, bedrock foundation. However, there are other reasons for suggesting that this large Stone, the Chief Cornerstone, refers to Christ Himself. The very context—Matthew 16:13-20—was discussing Christ's identity and mission, not Peter's. Matthew 7:24-25 suggest that the Rock on which we must build is Christ Himself. Furthermore, in his speech recorded in Acts 4:11-12 and later in his first epistle as recorded in 1 Peter 2:4-8, Peter himself clearly recognized that Christ was the Chief Cornerstone.
6. These are not the first suggestions that the God of the Old Testament, Jesus Christ, was and is the Rock. See Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 28:1; 31:2-3; 42:9; 62:2; and Isaiah 17:10. Paul also referred to Christ as the Rock in Romans 9:33 and 1 Corinthians 10:4. He was even more decisive in his statement in 1 Corinthians 3:11 (GNB) saying: "For God has already placed Jesus Christ as the one and only foundation, and no other foundation can be laid." Notice Jesus's words in Matthew 21:42-44.
7. Ephesians 2:20 makes it clear that the apostles and prophets are part of the foundation of the church but that the Chief Cornerstone has always been Christ Jesus Himself. Is it

important for us to recognize that Christ is the Foundation and the Cornerstone of the church? Peter refused even to be crucified upright as Jesus was; and so, he was crucified upside down.

8. There is much discussion in the New Testament about the challenges of unity within the church. Christ's final intercessory prayer before entering the Garden of Gethsemane (John 17) was a prayer for unity. He first prayed for unity between Himself and His Father; then He prayed for unity between Himself and His first disciples; and then finally, He prayed for unity between Himself, His disciples, the Father, and all those who believe because of the testimony of the first disciples. (John 17:21-23) Obviously, that includes us.
9. But what does *unity* imply? And what is the difference between unity and uniformity? In a worldwide church, we will never all look the same, speak the same language, have the same cultural background, or be uniform in a host of other ways. Can we still have unity within the church? The only way that kind of unity is possible is to have everyone from all their different backgrounds draw closer and closer to Jesus Christ Himself, thus coming more and more into harmony with each other. As we study His life and character and seek to become more and more like Him, surrendering our selfish goals and motives, we will, in fact, become a more and more unified church.
10. What are the major threats to unity within the church? Could the selfishness, the envy, and the pride of Christians be the worst enemy of Christian unity?
11. What provision did Christ make to try to bring the church together in unity? He provided the divine Word or Scriptures and also lived as the divine Word here on this earth. He illustrated the guiding principle which is divine love. The Father and the Son cooperated in giving us "the truth." (John 14:6,24; 17:8,14,17)
12. In order to have unity, we must agree on a common body of biblical beliefs. Without that, all efforts at unity would end in failure. And as we study the life and death of Jesus and learn to practice His love, our selfish pride must die.

When those who claim to believe the truth are sanctified through the truth, when they learn of Christ, His meekness, and lowliness, there will be complete and perfect unity in the church. (*ST*, September 19, 1900 par. 4.)
13. The church has always struggled with two somewhat competing principles: 1) A high view of truth, and 2) A deep love for one another among believers. There have been times in the history of the church when the only thing that seemed to matter was doctrine. At the present time, the pendulum in Christianity is swinging in the other direction; many Christians are talking only about love and unity. "Love without truth is blind and truth without love is fruitless. Mind and heart must work together." (*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for Tuesday, August 19)
14. The new head of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis, is doing everything he can to appeal to the "separated brethren" from other Christian groups to rejoin the "mother church," thus demonstrating their mutual love. As we have noted in previous lessons, he has said that the biggest obstacle to church unity is people who want to strictly adhere to their divisive beliefs. He calls such people "ideologues" and says that they are the biggest obstacles to church unity! In modern times, there has been a massive ecumenical movement among Christian churches. So, if Christians are supposed to be known for their love, what could be wrong with all of us reaching out with wide-open arms to embrace our Christian brethren?
15. Read Matthew 7:1-5. There is no question that one of the major problems to church unity

is the fact that it is so easy for selfish human beings to be critical of their fellow believers. By criticizing others, we falsely believe that we are somehow superior to them. Even as recorded in the Old Testament, God warned us of the dangers of whispered gossip and talebearing. (Leviticus 19:16; Proverbs 16:28)

16. Are there times when we do need to speak out regarding the wrongs or bad behaviors of a fellow believer? What principles should guide our actions, our thoughts, and our speech on such occasions? (See Matthew 18:15-18.) Consider the following three guiding principles when you think it is necessary to speak up against a fellow believer: 1) Are you certain that what you are going to say is the truth? Remember that the ninth commandment makes it clear that we are not to bear false testimony. (Exodus 20:16) We can bear false witness not only by openly perverting the truth but also by putting in our report assumptions, guesses, or even unconsciously erroneously judging the motives of other people. 2) Is what you are going to say really going to help the church? (Ephesians 4:29) If the criticism or the words we are about to speak are not designed to help build up the church, wouldn't those words better be left unsaid? 3) Even if the words are critical of another, is it possible to say them in a loving way? We need to speak any critical words in the most caring, compassionate, loving way that we possibly can. If our manner of speech offends others, we are not helping to build up the church.
17. The book of James speaks a great deal about the dangers of the tongue. (See James 3; compare Proverbs 26:20.) Wouldn't it be best if we all practiced these guidelines: "Instead of gossiping, thus creating mischief, let us tell of the matchless power of Christ, and speak of His glory."—Ellen G. White, *The Upward Look*, page 306.4; compare *MH* 253,254 (1905); *2MCP* 758.1. We need to remember that we have never been given the task of judging others or even of comparing ourselves with others. The only One to whom we should try to compare ourselves is Jesus Christ.
18. Read Matthew 5:23-24. What is implied by these verses? Is God refusing to forgive us if we still have an issue with a fellow believer? Jesus went to considerable length to spell out exactly how differences within the church are to be handled.
  - 1) The offended party should go first to the erring person and try to resolve the issue between the two of them. (Matthew 18:15; Leviticus 19:17) Try to make it as easy as possible for the erring person to recognize their mistake and together resolve the issue.
  - 2) If that person is unwilling to admit wrongdoing and to try to rectify his course, one needs to take one or two witnesses with him; (Deuteronomy 19:15) and in the hearing of these—hopefully objective observers—discuss the issue.
  - 3) If this second attempt does not accomplish the needed reconciliation, the issue should be taken to the entire church. Always, such matters should be handled in the best possible way to lead to repentance and reconciliation. The goal is to promote salvation. (Galatians 6:1)

What a world of gossip would be prevented if every man would remember that those who tell him the faults of others will as freely publish his faults at a favorable opportunity. **We should endeavor to think well of all men, especially our brethren, until compelled to think otherwise.** We should not hastily credit evil reports. These are often the result of envy or misunderstanding, or they may proceed from exaggeration or a partial disclosure of facts. (*5Testimonies* 58.2) [Bold type is added.]

19. Consider these two challenging situations: 1) How should we deal with a kind, accepting,

and apparently loving fellow church member who is in error regarding doctrine? What is the best approach to such a person? 2) How should we deal with a person who appears to have the right theology but acts in harsh, judgmental, and unloving ways toward other members?

20. We should always keep in mind the influence our actions are having upon nonmembers looking at the church. Jesus forgave even the men who were crucifying Him. (Luke 23:34) Could we possibly have any reason for withholding forgiveness from fellow church members?
21. Could you define the difference between *unity* and *uniformity*? What are the dangers of uniformity?
22. Careful research in a number of different settings has demonstrated that people who join a Christian church will remain as faithful members if they experience at least two of the following three points: 1) They really believe that the doctrines which the church holds represent the teachings of the Bible. 2) They experience the fellowship of a relatively small group of fellow members to whom they feel some commitment. And 3) They enter into the overall church program and participate in one way or another. If a person has at least two of the above three things present, s/he will almost always remain a committed church member. How well are we doing at fostering these three points?
23. What is the relationship between on the one hand the emotional aspects of church life involving fellowship, Christian love, and feelings of belonging and on other hand, the ethical aspects of church membership involving church doctrines, biblical truth, and living according to Christian standards and principles?
24. Christ's mission to this earth was for the purpose of reestablishing the broken relationship between erring human beings and our loving heavenly Father. We need to become so committed to the truth as revealed in Scripture so that even the Devil, appearing in human form but saying he is God, cannot deceive us and lead us astray. (Matthew 24:4-5, 11, 23-25) Our faith must be based on the solid evidences of God's word. Consider the following words regarding the final moments before Jesus died.

Amid the awful darkness, apparently forsaken of God, Christ had drained the last dregs in the cup of human woe. In those dreadful hours **He had relied upon the evidence of His Father's acceptance heretofore given Him.** He was acquainted with the character of His Father; He understood His justice, His mercy, and His great love. **By faith He rested in Him whom it had ever been His joy to obey.** And as in submission He committed Himself to God, the sense of the loss of His Father's favor was withdrawn. By faith, Christ was victor. (*Desire of Ages* 756.3.) [Bold type is added.]

25. If we had that kind of a faith relationship with God, couldn't we overcome all obstacles to unity? Shouldn't we try it?

© 2014, Kenneth Hart, MD, MA, MPH. Permission is hereby granted for any noncommercial use of these materials. Free distribution of all or of a portion of this material such as to a Bible study class is encouraged. [Info@theox.org](mailto:Info@theox.org)

Last Modified: July 5, 2014

C:\WP\SSTG-Hart\Teachings of Jesus\SS-8-Teachings of Jesus-2014\_08\_23-Fin+.wpd