

WHEN WAS THE CHURCH FOUNDED?

By Dennis Corkery

Various theories have emerged, attempting to answer this question concerning the church's beginning. In one sense, the church originated in the councils and decrees of God before time began. However, this discussion will consider the church's founding within the parameters of human history. At what specific point in time was the functional church constituted? Some identify her beginning with the calling of Abraham; others have proposed her beginning at the founding of Israel under Moses, others during the ministry of John the Baptist or Christ.

Matthew 16:18

The first mention of the word church (*ekklesia*) in the New Testament is in the Gospel of Matthew. "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." (cf. Matthew 16:18). There is no specific mention of the church in Mark, Luke, or John. The words "I will build" are translated from the Greek word *oikodomēsō*. This verb is in the future tense indicating future action. Therefore according to the Lord himself, the church would be established at a time yet future. This rules out the possibility of the church existing in the Old Testament or during the ministry of John the Baptist, or at any time previous to this statement.

Ephesians 3:4,5

Perhaps the most important concept we must grasp to pinpoint the time

of the Church's inauguration is Paul's description of her as a mystery (cf. Ephesians 5:32; Colossians 1:26,27). He writes, "How that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets." (cf. Ephesians 3:4,5). The English word translated "mystery" in verse 4 is from the Greek *mustérion*. In Paul's usage, a mystery is something in the eternal councils of God unknown and unknowable but presently revealed by the Holy Spirit.

The word "ages" in verse 5 (NKJV) (*geneais*) might better be translated as "generations" (as in most English versions). Paul's premise is straightforward; the church is an assembly unknown in former generations until revealed to the apostles and prophets. Those who argue for the church's founding at some point in the Old Testament will point to this reference to prophets, theorizing it could refer to Old Testament prophets. Old Testament prophets lived in past generations, making this suggestion impossible. Paul emphasized the mystery of the church was unknown in past generations, so the prophets identified here must have been contemporaries with Paul. The beginning of the church age could not have preceded the ministry of the apostles according to the scriptures.

Ephesians 2:19-22

"Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone."(cf. Ephesians 2:19-20).

Paul, in this passage, draws a comparison between the body of Christ and the Old Testament Temple. The similarity between the two is that

God designed the church to be a His dwelling place, as was the Temple. The Solomonic temple was founded under the Mosaic Law, while the church was founded upon the gospel of grace, marking an important difference. Under the Mosaic dispensation, the law excluded Gentiles from Temple rituals and privileges reserved exclusively for the nation of Israel. The present dispensation has erased all distinctions between Jews and Gentiles (Galatians 3:28).

To further our discussion, the crucial point we must notice is that God has established the church upon a foundation entirely distinct from Israel under Moses. The church has been "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone." (cf. Ephesians 2: 20). This fact precludes any suggestion that the church was founded prior to the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ and the establishment of the apostolic ministry. Christ is the cornerstone in the sense that the church could not exist without the gospel of Jesus Christ. The apostles and prophets compose the church's foundation in that the doctrines concerning Christ committed to them by revelation form the substance of the church's faith.

1 Corinthians 12:13

"For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit."

Identifying the body of Christ as an assembly of believers baptized by the Holy Spirit helps us to nail down the exact time of the church's founding. The word baptize (*baptizó*) means to immerse or submerge. In the New Testament, it may refer either to water baptism or the baptism of the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist made this distinction by instructing his disciples to anticipate spiritual baptism saying, "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy

Spirit and fire." (cf. Matthew 3:11). Notice the word "baptize" is used twice in this verse. In reference to John the Baptist, it is in the present tense (*baptizō*); in regards to Jesus, the usage is future tense (*baptisei*). By noting the words of John distinguishing his present baptism from the future spiritual baptism of Christ, we can confidently conclude that the founding of the church must have been subsequent to the ministry of John. Paul's statement, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body," adds certainty to this conclusion. If the baptism of the Spirit was yet future to the ministry of John and if all in the body of Christ have received this baptism, then it must be that the church did not exist prior to John's ministry. Therefore the commencement of spirit baptism and the church's founding must have occurred simultaneously.

Jesus helps us zero in on our target. He directed His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the baptism of the Holy Spirit, saying, "For John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." (cf. Acts 1:5). A few days following this statement, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples on the day of Pentecost, and the church was born. If anyone still doubts that the church's founding was on the day of Pentecost, Peter helps our case. He explained how the Gentiles in Joppa received the Spirit saying, "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning." (cf. Acts 11:15). He refers, of course, to the beginning of the church at Pentecost. From the biblical citations and analysis provided, we must recognize that the church was not in existence before Pentecost and could not have come into existence after Pentecost.

Bibliography

1. Dr. Harold Wilmington, Wilmington's Guide to the Bible; 30th Anniversary Edition, (Tyndale House Publishing 2011)
2. Norman Geisler, Systematic Theology Vol. 4, (Bethany House, 2005)
3. Biblehub.com