

Disciples Establish the Church

By Mr. Marvin Kamps

Recently we were reminded of what is implied in being a disciple of Jesus Christ. We saw that Jesus commanded His apostles to make disciples of all nations. It was pointed out that a disciple of Christ Jesus is governed by the truths of the Word of God. The Bible governs and directs our spiritual life in all areas of life. To be a disciple is to be a follower of Christ Jesus and to be, consequently, captive to the Word of God. This truth is the central element of discipleship in Christ Jesus.

A disciple of Christ is thankfully obedient unto the Master.

It is our purpose in this article to show the relationship that exists between Christian discipleship and the institution of the church. But before we discuss that relationship we should briefly review the concept of the institution of the church.

The Bible uses the term “church” in at least two different senses. In Eph. 1:22 we read: “And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church.” The term “church” in this text refers to the organism of the church. Of the church in this sense we speak when we confess that we believe that there is one “holy catholic church.” However, the Bible uses the term “church” also with respect to the institution of the church in the world. Of this we read in Rev. 1:11 where Christ commands John to write “unto the seven churches which are in Asia.” These seven distinct institutions of the church were seven imperfect manifestations of that one body of Christ, which we call the holy catholic church. It is concerning the institution of the church that we write at this time.

What is the essence of the institution of the church in the world? The institution of the church is the gathering of believers in any one locality under the office of Christ Jesus, that is, under the ministry of the Word, the rule of elders and the ministry of mercy vested in deacons. If believers do not gather under the office of Christ, they do not in such gatherings manifest the church. Only when believers gather under the threefold office of Christ do they constitute the institution of the church.

There are several aspects of this truth to which we call your attention. The church is instituted by God through Christ. The offices of elder, deacon and minister of the gospel are exclusively Christ’s office. To be an officebearer is to speak and act in Christ’s name. Christ Jesus calls, sends, and ordains men as His officebearers in His church through whom He performs His work as the almighty shepherd. Officebearers are only instruments.

The only authority that an officebearer in the church possesses is the authority of the Word of God. If an officebearer fails to bring the Word he has no authority. Disciples follow only the Word of God. It is only by that Word that Christ governs them. If the Word is not brought then Christ is not brought to the people.

The instituted church is the manifestation of Christ’s body in the world. The one threefold office is Christ’s. The Word is His. The work is His. The authority is His. All the blessings of heaven are of Him. But Christ is pleased to exercise His Lordship through men whom He calls to occupy the office of minister of the Word, elder and deacon.

We would ask you to read in this connection Eph. 4:11, Acts 6:1-7 and Acts 14:23. These passages and many others show plainly that God is pleased to bless His Church through the labors of officebearers who reflect the one office of Christ by bringing His Word in His name.

Once again, therefore, wherever disciples are gathered under the threefold office of Christ, there is to be found the institution of the church... whether or not she be gathered in a barn, house, or beautiful church edifice.

How is that instituted church formed? By whom? These questions bring to our attention our original purpose to show the relationship between Christian discipleship and the institution of the church. That relationship is one of

cause and effect. Disciples, believers governed only by the Word of God, desire to have the Word preached faithfully to them, long to be governed by that Word of Christ through the labors of the elders and they will to show the love and mercy of Jesus Christ through the ministry of deacons. Further, these disciples are one in faith or doctrine and would manifest their unity through the establishment of the church. Doctrinal unity is the unity of the church and the basis for the fellowship of the saints.

The book of Acts records for us the establishment of the institution of the church in the world as the result of the missionary labors of the apostles. At Thessalonica the gentile Christians established the institution of the church under the leadership of Paul and Barnabas. This same event repeatedly occurred in other cities. What we should note is that disciples of Christ gather as the church in distinction to and in separation from all those who refuse to hear the Word of Christ.

The establishment of the institution of the church arises initially as the result of missionary preaching but it can also be the result of reformation through secession. Disciples follow Christ alone. The institution of the church arises initially or anew because Christian disciples in faith refuse to follow all but Christ. They would obey only the Word. Disciples are inseparably joined to Christ. Thus they and their children gather under the threefold office of Christ to hear His Word, obey the Word and worship Him as the revelation of the invisible God.

Believers, therefore, are committed to establish and maintain the church as faithful to God's Word. What great blessings are ours through faithful labors of officebearers in the church! Who can fully appreciate these blessings brought to God's people through faithful preaching and Christian discipline? God's people, disciples of Christ, are spiritually nourished, guided and directed throughout their whole earthly pilgrimage to the glory of heaven. Always the spiritual means to feed and direct the disciple must be the faithful preaching of the Word of God.

Disciples of Christ understand this truth and, therefore, are determined to maintain the church faithful to the Word. Christian discipleship and the institution of the church are inseparable spiritual realities. Remember this truth: to embrace the faithful preaching of the Word is to embrace Christ.