

The Church At Jerusalem

Introduction. I can remember “playing church” when I was young. We pretended to sing, preach, take the Lord’s supper, and baptize people. That was fun in childhood, but the real church is far more complicated, and far more glorious too.

The church in Jerusalem was unique in several ways. It was the first church of Christ in the world. During its history it was under the personal guidance and supervision of the apostles. It therefore became a model for all future ages. It was established and flourished in the very heart of Pharisaic Judaism, the first bitter foe of the church, and it was unique in heroism under persecution and in evangelistic zeal. The church of Jerusalem was a great church in several respects, and it is a worthy pattern for us to study today.

I. *Its Origin*

- A. Numerous promises were made in the New Testament about the coming church (Matthew 16:18; Luke 24:45-49; John 20:22-23; Acts 1:1-8). These promises were all fulfilled in Acts 2:1-36.
- B. Peter’s sermon is recorded because the keys to the kingdom of heaven had been given to him. This was the authority to state the terms of pardon under the New Covenant and to open the door of the church.
- C. At the close of his sermon, 3,000 people were convicted of sin; they asked what to do to be saved, and were told by Peter. They obeyed immediately and became the first members of the church of Christ.

II. *Its Membership*

- A. Belief (Acts 2:37; cf. John 8:24; Hebrews 11:6).
- B. Repentance (Acts 2:38; cf. Luke 13:3, 5; Acts 3:19).
- C. Baptism (Acts 2:38).
 1. The ones who received the word were baptized (Acts 2:41). The word must be received into an honest and good heart capable of believing before it will be obeyed (Luke 8:15).
 2. Were they immersed? They were because no other action was known as baptism in the New Testament except immersion (Romans 6:3-6; Colossians 2:12).

III. *Its Worship*

- A. The apostles’ teaching.
 1. This was inspired and authoritative (John 20:22-23; Acts 2:4). As the apostles were there in person, their teaching was oral.
 2. Today we have the apostles’ teaching embodied in the New Testament in written form. It is a sufficient book of discipline for

every local congregation (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Human creeds and interpretations are unnecessary and divisive.

B. Fellowship.

1. In 2 Corinthians 8:4, this word is to refer to the fellowship in ministering to the saints (cf. Romans 15:26; 2 Corinthians 9:13; Philippians 1:5; Hebrews 13:16).
2. This specific fellowship referred to the contribution and distribution of earthly goods (Acts 2:44-45). Offering of one's substance was a voluntary, though essential, part of worship (2 Corinthians 9:6-7).

C. The breaking of bread.

1. This was the Lord's supper, the communion of the body and blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16).
2. The words of Jesus were fulfilled on Pentecost (Matthew 26:29; Mark 14:25).

D. Prayer.

1. Prayer has been, from the very beginning, an essential part of church worship (Acts 12:5, 12; 1 Corinthians 14:14-15; 1 Thessalonians 5:17).
2. Christ taught His disciples, in anticipation of their life in the kingdom, how to pray (Matthew 6:9-13).

E. Praising God.

1. This "sacrifice" can be accomplished in several ways (Hebrews 13:15).
2. One of the ways is singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Hebrews 2:12).

IV. ***Its Congregational Life***

A. Its rapid growth.

1. By the time of Acts 4:4, the number of men had increased to 5,000. This number grew by thousands and thousands as the days passed (5:14).
2. There is little doubt that all Jerusalem was visiting the empty tomb of Christ, which was convincing evidence of Peter's message in Acts 2:32, 36.
3. The apostles' message was accompanied and established by supernatural demonstrations (Acts 2:43; 4:12-16). These miracles proved the divine authority of the message and messengers (Hebrews 2:4).

B. Its marvelous unity.

1. They were of one heart and one mind (Acts 4:32).
2. Disunity is the greatest obstacle to the onward march of the gospel (Philippians 1:27; 2:2; 3:16-17).

- C. Its wondrous liberality.
 - 1. This church was composed of Jews from all parts of the world who were in Jerusalem temporarily. When obeying the gospel message, they did not want to return to their homes immediately, but stayed to enjoy their newfound fellowship.
 - 2. This created an urgent need of support. To meet this, the brethren sold their possessions and brought the money to the apostles for proper distribution as each brother or sister had need (Acts 2:44-45).
 - 3. This manifestation of liberality was purely voluntary. It was the natural outpouring of love in their hearts for their brethren.
- D. Its aggressiveness.
 - 1. Persecution only served to intensify evangelistic zeal (Acts 4:1-22; 5:17-42; 8:1-3).
 - 2. When the church was scattered by Saul's vicious attacks, the disciples went everywhere preaching the word. They really were "on fire for Christ."

V. ***Its Problems***

- A. The problem of hypocrisy (Acts 5:1-11).
 - 1. The Jerusalem church was made up of human material, and this human element soon manifested itself.
 - 2. Ananias and Sapphira attempted to present the appearance of having acted in harmony with the rest of the brethren. In so doing, they told a lie.
- B. The problem of the daily ministrations (Acts 6:1-7).
 - 1. The majority of the members of this church were Jews. Some, however, were Grecian Jews, or Jews born abroad. Between these two classes there was alienation and jealousy.
 - 2. The congregation selected seven men who took care of the Hellenistic widows. This was an excellent example of how congregations can take care of problems.
- C. The problem of racial prejudice (Acts 11:1-18).
 - 1. As great as this church was, it was hampered from the very outset by racial and religious prejudices.
 - 2. With Cornelius, God showed Peter that He had granted to the Gentiles repentance unto life. The middle wall of partition was broken down (Ephesians 2:14-16).
- D. The problem of circumcision (Acts 15:1-5).
 - 1. This was a doctrinal issue. Circumcision had been a religious ordinance among the Jews for more than 1,300 years. It would be natural, then, for the Jewish disciples to conclude that circumcision should precede baptism as a condition of salvation.

2. Peter argued that the Gentiles had been granted the privileges of the New Covenant on the same terms as the Jews. It was decided that circumcision was not one of the requirements of the gospel, but that it had been taken away along with the remainder of the Mosaic Law (Colossians 2:14).

Conclusion. "Playing church" was fun as a kid, but for all of us, being a part of this local body is quite serious business. How do we measure up? Are we like them?

The time finally came for this marvelous and historic congregation to close its career. It had set an example in everything for all time to come. Like thousands of other congregations have done, it passed from the stage of history. The rebellious Jews stirred up an insurrection against Rome. The armies which had conquered the world were defied by a handful of fanatics. As the Roman army surrounded the doomed city, the disciples, in obedience to the Lord's command spoken before His death, made a swift flight and the Jerusalem church is heard from no more. If it did indeed die, it died as it had lived -- in obedience to the Lord.

I pray that God will grant the likeness of this church thousands of times over on the surface of the earth. When this happens, the knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the seas (Habakkuk 2:14).