

## CHURCH MANUAL.

### Chapter I.

#### NATURE OF A CHURCH.

The term *Church* occurs in the New Testament more than a hundred times. The word thus translated means congregation or assembly; but it does not indicate the purpose for which the congregation or assembly meets. Hence it is used, Acts xix. 32, 39, 41, and rendered *assembly*. In every other place in the New Testament it is translated *church*. In its application to the followers of Christ, it refers either to a particular congregation of saints, or to the redeemed in the aggregate. It is employed in the latter sense in Ephesians i. 22; iii. 21; v. 25, 27. Here we have the expressions, “Head over all things to the Church; “To him be glory in the Church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages world without end;” “Christ loved the Church and gave himself for it... that he might present it to himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.” In these passages, and a few more like them, it would be absurd to define the term Church as meaning a particular congregation of Christians, meeting in one place for the worship of God.

Our business, however, is with the other signification of the word church. In a large majority of instances it is used in the Scriptures to denote a local assembly, convened for religious purposes. Thus we read of “the church at Jerusalem,” “the church of God which is at Corinth,” “the church of the Thessalonians,” “the church of Ephesus,” “the church in Smyrna,” “the church in Pergamus,” etc., etc. Nor are we to suppose that it required a large number of

persons to constitute a church. Paul refers to Aquila and Priscilla and “the church that is in their house,” to Nymphas and “the church which is in his house,” and in his letter to Philemon he says, “to the church in thy house.” A congregation of saints, organized according to the New Testament, whether that congregation is large or small, is a church.

The inspired writers, as if to preclude the idea of a church commensurate with a province, a kingdom, or an empire, make use of the following forms of expression, “the *churches* of Galatia,” “the *churches* of Macedonia,” “the *churches* of Asia,” “the *churches* of Judea;” but they never say the *church* of Galatia, the *church* of Macedonia, etc. Wherever Christianity prevailed in apostolic times there was a plurality of churches.

In answer to the question, What is a church? It may be said: A church is a congregation of Christ’s baptized disciples, acknowledging him as their Head, relying on his atoning sacrifice for justification before God, and depending on the Holy Spirit for sanctification, united in the belief of the gospel, agreeing to maintain its ordinances and obey its precepts, meeting together for worship, and cooperating for the extension of Christ’s kingdom in the world. If any prefer an abridgment of the definition it may be given thus: A church is a congregation of Christ’s baptized disciples, united in the belief of what he has said, and covenanting to do what he has commanded.

If this be a correct description of a church of Christ, it is manifest that membership must be preceded by important qualifications. These qualifications may be considered as *moral* and *ceremonial*.

**MORAL.** – Among moral pre-requisites to church membership may be mentioned

*Repentance.* – John the Baptist, whose ministry was “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ,” preached, saying to the people, “Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” His

was the baptism of repentance. When John was cast into prison Jesus “came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye and believe the gospel.” When the apostles were sent forth they “preached” that men should repent.” The Lord Jesus after his resurrection said: “Thus it is written and thus it behooved Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations.” Peter on the day of Pentecost said, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins;” and Paul, who testified at Ephesus for three years “repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ,” proclaimed in Athens, “God commandeth all men every where to repent.” The New Testament is full of the doctrine of repentance. It is a doctrine of the gospel. The law knows nothing of it. The language of the law is, Do and live – not Repent, that you may be pardoned. Repentance involves such a change of mind in regard to sin as is indispensable to a proper appreciation of the blessings of the kingdom of Christ. Hence no impenitent sinner can constitutionally enter into the kingdom. There is no place more inappropriate for the impenitent than a church of Christ.

*Faith.* – This is another moral qualification for church membership. Great importance is in the Scriptures attached to faith in Christ, as will appear from the following passages: “He that believeth on him is not condemned.” “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life.” “These things are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and the believing ye may have life through his name. “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.” “By him all that believe are justified from all things.” “Whom God hath set forth as a propitiation through faith in his blood... that he might be just and the justifier of him that

believeth in Jesus.” “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

These passages, with many others, clearly show that in the economy of the gospel faith in Christ is recognized as an essential principle. Why is this? Not because faith is a meritorious exercise. There is, there can be, no merit in it. This is evident, because faith is a duty, and there can be no merit in the performance of a duty. But, while faith possesses no merit, it brings the soul into vital contact with the blood of atonement, which possesses infinite merit. It unites to Christ. Its province is to receive Christ, and with him all the blessings of the “new covenant.” Christ is emphatically the object of faith. The faith which avails to salvation has respect to him and embraces him.

Faith in Christ – the faith which instrumentally achieves the sinner’s justification before God – is an essential qualification for church membership. No unbeliever has the shadow of a claim to citizenship in the kingdom of Christ. The formal mention of regeneration as a prerequisite to church membership has been omitted, because it necessarily coexists with repentance and faith. Every penitent believer is a regenerate person. Regeneration is the spiritual process by which we become new creatures in Christ – are born again – born of the Spirit – born of God – quickened together with Christ – renewed after the image of God, etc., &c. “Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus,” is the language of Paul to the Galatians; and the beloved disciple says, “Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ, is born of God.” If faith therefore, as we have seen, is a qualification for church membership, regeneration must be also; for it is so inseparable from faith, that every one who believes in Christ is born of God. And it follows, that if faith is a prerequisite to baptism, regeneration is likewise. This being the case, regeneration does not occur in baptism.

Let it never be forgotten that the only suitable materials of which to construct a church of Christ, so far as spiritual qualifications are concerned, are regenerate, penitent, believing persons. To make use of other materials is to subvert the fundamental principles of church organization. It is to destroy the kingdom of Christ; for how can there be a kingdom without subjects – such subjects as the King requires?

It is a regulation of the Head of the Church that his spiritual subjects be organized into visible, local communities. We read therefore, in the New Testament, of churches – another name for these communities. There are frequent references to local congregations. These congregations had a regular, visible organization; and there must have been some visible act of initiation into them. What was it? This leads to a consideration of

2. *The ceremonial qualification for church membership.* This qualification is baptism. There can, according to the Scriptures, be no visible church without baptism. And observance of this ordinance is the believer's first public act of obedience to Christ. Regeneration, repentance, and faith are private matters between God and the soul. They involve internal piety, but of this piety there must be an external manifestation. This manifestation is made in baptism. The penitent, regenerate believer is baptized into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. There is a visible, symbolic expression of a new relationship to the three persons of the Godhead – a relationship entered into in repentance, faith, and regeneration. We are said to be baptized into the death of Christ. We profess our reliance on his death for salvation; and we emblematically declare that as he died *for* sin, so we have died *to* sin, and have risen from our death in trespasses and sins to newness of life. We solemnly commemorate the burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and are ourselves symbolically buried to the world. In baptism our sins are *declaratively* remitted – *formally* washed away. Washing in water frees the body

from literal impurity. Baptism is a *symbolic* release of the soul from the defilement of sin. There is an *actual*, a *real* remission of sins when we believe in Christ – there is a *declarative, formal, symbolic* remission in baptism.

That the views, now presented, of the moral and ceremonial qualifications for church membership are in accordance with the New Testament will be seen by referring to the commission of Christ, as understood and executed by the apostles, on the day of Pentecost. The commission said, “Go, teach [make disciples of] all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you.” A great awakening took place under Peter’s preaching, and repenting thousands accepted salvation through Christ. It is added, “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.” Subsequently it is said, “The Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.” The converts to the faith were first baptized and then added to the church. This shows baptism to be prerequisite to church membership. It was so regarded at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, when the Apostles began to act under the commission of their risen Lord; and it is morally certain it was so regarded wherever they established churches. And as churches in all ages must be formed after the apostolic model, it follows that where penitent, regenerate, baptized believers in Christ are found, there are Scriptural materials for a church. Such persons having first given themselves to the Lord, and then to one another, in solemn covenant, agreeing to make the will of Christ as expressed in his word their rule of action, are, in the New Testament sense of the term, a *church*. Whether they are many or few in number, they are a church. But in the absence of penitent, regenerate, baptized believers in Christ, there cannot be a New Testament church.

## CONSTITUTION OF CHURCHES

When the interests of Christ's kingdom require the formation of a new church the customary mode of procedure is about this: Brethren and sisters obtain letters of dismissal from the church or churches to which they belong, for the purpose of entering into the new organization. It is well for this purpose to be stated in the letters. When they meet together at the appointed time, a Moderator and Clerk, *pro tem.* are appointed. The meeting is opened with devotional exercises. Sometimes a sermon is preached, especially when it is not intended to have recognition services at some future day. Reading the Scriptures and prayer should be considered indispensable. This being done, the letters of dismissal are read, and the parties concerned resolve by solemn vote to consider themselves an independent church. What is called a church covenant is adopted, as also Articles of Faith. These Articles of Faith are not intended as, in any sense, a substitute for the Word of God; but only as an expression of the views of the constituent members as to the prominent teaching of the Scriptures. It is very important to the peace, efficiency and usefulness of a church that there be among its members substantial harmony of sentiment as to what the Bible teaches. Differences of opinion on little matters, so regarded, have sometimes illustrated the truth of the inspired exclamation, "Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!" It would have saved hundreds of churches a great deal of trouble, if they had remembered, at the right time, that neither two nor any other number, can walk together, except they be agreed. Ordinarily, a church at the time of its constitution, selects a name by which it is to be designated, and appoints its officers. This, however, is not indispensable. It is sometimes best, for prudential reasons, to defer the election of officers.

## RECOGNITION OF CHURCHES.

The same importance is not to be attached to the recognition as to the constitution of a church. It is not necessary to the validity of a church organization. Still, the advantages resulting from a suitable recognition should not be lightly esteemed. It adds much to the influence of a new church to be cordially endorsed and welcomed into the sisterhood of churches. This is usually done by a council of recognition, composed of ministers and others from churches in the vicinity. Sometimes councils examine very closely the facts connected with the formation of new churches, Articles of Faith, etc.; but generally are so well satisfied as to make no special investigation. Recognition services usually embrace Reading the Scriptures, Prayer, Sermon, giving the Hand of Fellowship, and a Charge to the Church.

## HOW MEMBERS ARE RECEIVED.

There are two ways of receiving members into a church.

*1. By Experience and Baptism.* *2. By Letters of Dismissal* from sister churches. In accordance with the first way, persons wishing to unite with a church give an account of the dealings of God with their souls, and state the “reason of the hope that is in them;” whereupon if, in the judgment of the church they “have passed from death unto life,” they are by vote of the church recognized as candidates for baptism, with the understanding that when baptized they will be entitled to all the rights and privileges of membership. Great care should be exercised in receiving members. Many churches err at this point. They do not observe the requisite caution; for they receive persons who give, to say the least, very imperfect evidence of piety. There is much danger of this, especially in times of religious excitement. Pastors should positively assure themselves that those who are received for baptism have felt themselves to be guilty, ruined, helpless sinners, justly condemned by God’s holy law; and under a sense of their lost condition

have trusted in Christ for salvation. After baptism – usually at the first celebration of the Lord’s Supper – it is the general, and should be the universal custom for the pastor to give the hand of fellowship to the newly baptized, in token of their having been received into full membership. This affords the pastor a suitable opportunity of saying something as to the import and obligations of the Christian profession.

The other way of becoming members of a church is by presenting the Letters of Dismission from sister churches. These letters affording satisfactory proof of their Christian character and standing, the applicants for membership are received and the hand of fellowship given, as in the former case. It is proper to say that by *sister* churches are meant churches of similar faith and order. Hence no Baptist church can receive and recognize, as a passport to membership, a letter from any Pedobaptist organization. There is such a lack of similar faith and order as to render this utterly inadmissible. It sometimes happens that persons who have been baptized where there is no church, and persons who, owing to the extinction of the church to which they belonged, or to other circumstances, find themselves without regular Letters of Dismission, wish to enjoy the privileges of membership. In such cases it is only necessary for the church applied to, to be satisfied of the worthiness of the applicants, and they are received.

#### HOW MEMBERSHIP CEASES.

Membership in a church terminates in three ways.

1. *By Death.* – The dead can have no place in any earthly congregation of the saints.
2. *By Exclusion.* – A church has the right, according to the Scriptures, and is under obligation to exclude from its fellowship any member who holds heretical doctrines, or lives inconsistently with the Christian profession. More will be said on this subject in the Chapter on Discipline.

3. *By Dismission.* – Letters of Dismission are granted to members who apply for them, provided they are in good standing. The fact that disciplinary proceedings have not been instituted against a member is generally to be taken as an evidence of good standing; and, therefore, of a right to a letter of dismission. There are, however, some exceptional cases. A member who asks for a letter of dismission with the purpose of evading church discipline, because he has reason to expect it, has no right to a letter. Such a case must be investigated. The general rule would be to grant a letter to the member who asks for it, provided he would not be subject to discipline, if he did not ask for it. The time at which a dismissed member ceases to be a member depends on the church that grants the letter. Some churches consider the connection as terminated as soon as a letter is granted. The great majority of churches, however, and very properly, regard dismissed members as under their jurisdiction until they are received into other churches. Some churches have a way of getting clear of members by a process which is called “*dropping.*” This is considered less disgraceful than exclusion, and is resorted to chiefly in the case of members who for a long time, willingly absent themselves from the meetings of the church, or have gone, the church knows not where. The *dropping* process is unnecessary. It differs but little from exclusion – not at all in its effects. That is to say, the *dropped* as well as the *excluded* are no longer church members. It may be said, too, that members who habitually stay away from the house of God deserve *exclusion*, as do those who, not prizing church privileges as they ought, emigrate to other places without asking for Letters of Dismission.