

The Church

"Thou art Peter; and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." -- Matthew 16:18

THERE are many churches, bearing a great variety of names, and holding to many shades of belief with respect to the teachings of Jesus and his apostles. When we consider these differences of viewpoint it is not out of order, we think, to inquire as to what the church really is, and what the divine purpose is concerning it. Is there any way of knowing which is the true church, or do all the denominational groups together make up the true church?

The word church does not appear in the Old Testament, and its first use in the New Testament was by Jesus when he told Peter that "the gates of hell" would not prevail against it. It is a translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means 'a calling out', or 'a selection'. Jesus said to his disciples, "I have chosen you out of the world." (John 15:19) Basically, then, the church is a company of people who, in accepting the invitation of Christ, have become separated from the world.

The church is not a building, although the word church is used to denote the place where a congregation meets. If the expression "meeting house" were more universally used to describe the gathering place of a congregation it might help to lessen some of the misunderstanding which prevails concerning the true significance of the word church itself.

In Jesus' ministry he used the word church only three times: once in his remark to Peter, and twice on another occasion when instructing his disciples in the proper procedure for dealing with misunderstandings which might arise among them. (Matthew 18:17) The next time the word appears is in Acts 2:47, following the account of the three thousand souls who accepted Christ as a result of Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost. It is a simple statement, saying merely that "the LORD added to the church daily such as should be saved."

In this simple statement of fact there is room for reflection. On the Day of Pentecost alone three thousand became identified with the 'Church', and thereafter there were daily additional converts, yet there is no record of any formal initiation services. All of these converts were Jewish people, and when, under the persuasive ministry of the apostle, they recognized that Jesus, whom their leaders had crucified, was the Messiah of promise, they believed on him and were baptized for the remission of their sins.

It was as simple as that! Later, as the number of the disciples increased, and they assembled for mutual edification, these groups of people were called 'churches'. In Acts 11:22 we read of "the church which was in Jerusalem." In Romans 16:5 Paul extends greetings to "the church that is in their house" -- that is, the house of Priscilla and Aquila.

From these texts we learn that in those early days of Christianity each group of believers, regardless of its size and location, was considered a church. And indeed it was a church, because each such assembly of believers was made up of those who, by the Gospel, had been called to separate themselves from the world and to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

These individual groups bore no denominational names, but were identified by their location, being spoken of as the church at Jerusalem, the church at Philippi, the church at Rome, or, as in some instance, the church that held its meetings in the home of one or another of the believers.

In Revelation, chapters two and three, seven churches are mentioned and identified by the cities in which they were located and the special messages sent to them. There is reason to believe that these seven churches are in a general way representative of all believers throughout the entire age -- which is another, a broader use of the word church as descriptive of all, in every place, whom the LORD looks upon as being "called out" from the world to serve him and his cause.

Jesus had in mind this broader, more general meaning of the word when he said to Peter that 'the gates of hell' would not prevail against the church. It is this application also that Paul makes when, in Ephesians 1:22,23, he speaks of Christ as being the "Head over all things to the church, which is his body." It is in this wise that Paul again writes about "the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." -- 1 Timothy 3:15

In 1 Corinthians 12:12,13, Paul elaborates on the thought of the church being the 'body' of Christ. He says, "As the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit."

How to Join

How does one join the church -- *the* church, that is, which was established by Jesus and the apostles? Acts 2:47 reads, "The LORD added to the church daily such as should be saved." This indicates that becoming a member of the LORD's church depends upon him. This, we believe, would be conceded by all Christian people. But just how does the LORD add members to his church, and what qualifications must one possess in order to be recognized by the LORD as belonging to his church?

Briefly, the Scriptures indicate the steps of approach to the church as being, first, a repentant recognition of the fact that we are members of a sin-cursed and dying race, and could therefore have no standing before the LORD in our own righteousness. (Mark 2:17; Acts 26:20) Next, the acceptance of Jesus Christ as our personal Redeemer and Savior, realizing that only through the merit of his shed blood can we be acceptable to God. -- Acts 13:38,39; 16:31; Romans 3:22; 5:1

Then, upon the basis of our confidence in the merit of the shed blood of the Redeemer, we are invited to present ourselves in unreserved devotion to do the will of God. We could speak of this as making a consecration of ourselves to God. And let us emphasize that this consecration is made to God, not to man, nor to an organization of men. -- Romans 12:1,2

The Scriptures are very explicit as to what this consecration will mean in our lives. Jesus said, "If any man will come after me [be my disciple], let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." (Matt 16:24) To deny self does not mean merely the giving up of some petty pleasure or satisfaction for a short period of time, or even for all time. It is, rather, just as the expression implies, a complete denial of self. It is the same word that is used concerning Peter's denial of Christ -- when he said that he did not know Jesus at all. So to deny self is to deny ourselves the right to recognize our own wills. We renounce our wills and accept instead the will of God as expressed through Christ and the Word.

And what is the divine will for those who, responding to Jesus' invitation, deny self? It is expressed in his further invitation, "Take up the cross, and follow me." Jesus used the symbolism of cross-bearing to denote going into death. When Jesus gave this invitation he was himself

laying down his life in sacrifice. His sacrifice was completed at Calvary when he cried, "It is finished." -- John 19:30

These who accept Christ's invitation to take up their cross and follow him, likewise lay down their lives in sacrificial service. They are not all literally crucified, although in the beginning of the age some were. Many suffered martyrdom in other ways. In the case of every follower of the Master, the will to serve and to suffer regardless of the consequences must and will be present.

Following in the footsteps of Jesus is described by Paul as being "planted together [united] in the likeness of his death." (Romans 6:5) Before we came to Christ we were 'dead' in trespasses and sin. But through obedient faith in the merit of his shed blood we are released from Adamic condemnation. Yet we die, not as sinners, however, but as joint-sacrificers with Jesus. Paul expressed the thought when he wrote, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, your reasonable service." -- Romans 12:1

Baptized Into Christ

In Romans 6:3, Paul wrote: "Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." The baptism here referred to is not in water, but into Christ, and into his death.

The word baptism in the New Testament is translated from a Greek word meaning 'to bury' or 'submerge'. Our baptism into Christ is the burial of our will into his will. It is a death baptism because it is the divine will that we die with him.

In Revelation 20:4 this thought is symbolized by the use of the word "beheaded." Here we read of those who are "beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the Word of God." This does not refer to a literal beheading, but to the renouncing of our will, as represented by the head, and accepting Christ as our Head.

Paul elaborates further on this point, saying, "By one Spirit are we all baptized into one body." (1 Corinthians 12:13) It is by the influence of the Holy Spirit, through the Word of truth, that we are drawn to the LORD, and led by his love to present ourselves in full consecration to him. Since this consecration means the renouncing of our own wills and accepting the will of God in Christ, he thus becomes our Head, and we become members of the church, which is his body.

Thus we see how it is that God, by the power of his Spirit, adds members to the church of Christ. Our part in it as individuals is to yield to the influence of his Spirit, and take the steps which the divine Word indicates; that is, the steps of repentance, acceptance of Christ, and the presenting of ourselves in full consecration to do the LORD's will.

Can we know, after taking these steps, whether or not the LORD has accepted us, and does actually recognize us as probationary members of the church, the body of Christ? We believe so. Paul said, in a text already quoted, that having been "buried [united] with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." (Romans 6:4) Are we joyfully walking in 'newness of life'?

Paul also wrote, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." (2 Corinthians 5:17) Have the 'old things' belonging to the

times past of our lives passed away, in the sense that they hold no real attraction for us? Do we find our greatest joys in the new things of the LORD -- our new vocation of divine service; our new hopes, new aims, new ambitions?

Having taken this step of full consecration to the LORD, our former friends and relatives may fail to understand us; in some cases they may even persecute us. But in any event, they will not find in us the same degree of companionship, for they will not be in harmony with our new way of life. Not that we will love them any less, nor cease to do all we can for them, but simply that the ways of the world and the ways of the consecrated people of God are far apart. Are we having this experience?

Paul again wrote, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him." Then he adds, "But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God." -- 1 Corinthians 1:9,10

Is the LORD leading us day by day into a deeper appreciation of the marvelous truths contained in his Word? Are the 'deep things' of his Word pertaining to our calling in Christ Jesus more clearly understood as we seek to know and to do his will? If so, we have this additional evidence that he has accepted us and is leading us in the path of righteousness.

Jesus himself gives us a very definite assurance of our standing before the LORD. First he declares that no man can come unto him unless drawn by his Heavenly Father. (John 6:44) Then he tells us that those who do come to him he "will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37) What further assurance do we need than this?

Yes, our rejoicing in the spiritual things of the new way of life in which we are walking; our loss of interest in the former things of the flesh and the world; a measure of misunderstanding, and perhaps even of persecution, from the world; our increasing appreciation of spiritual things, particularly as they pertain to our heavenly calling -- all these are evidences that our consecration has been accepted by the LORD, and that we have actually been 'baptized' into 'the church', the body of Christ.

Water Baptism

The question of water baptism naturally arises, and properly so, for Jesus himself was baptized -- buried -- in water, and we are to follow in his steps. What is the purpose of water baptism? John baptized for the remission of sin, and could not understand why Jesus requested baptism, for he knew that Jesus was not a sinner, but rather, that he was the Holy and Just One.

But Jesus was not baptized for the remission of sin. In asking John to baptize him he simply said, "Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness." (Matthew 3:15) It is Jesus' example that we follow in our water baptism. To him it was a symbol of his covenant to die, and of his hope to be raised from the dead.

And how aptly water immersion pictures these two thoughts! When one is lowered into the water by the immerser, he becomes helpless in his hands, and would remain buried, as in death, except as raised up out of the water. So in our consecration we give ourselves up to die with Christ, inspired by the promises of God that we will be raised up in the resurrection, even as Jesus was, to be associated with him in the great future work of his kingdom.

Water baptism, then, is a beautiful symbol of our true baptism into Christ. Is it essential? Not in the sense that it is a saving ordinance. But since those who are properly eligible for water immersion have renounced their own wills, and have covenanted to do the LORD's will, they will recognize that this is part of the LORD's will for them, and will gladly comply. Any other attitude would indicate something less than an all-consuming love for will of God.

Church Organization

The Scriptures do not indicate that the various groups of called out ones in those early years of Christianity had any elaborate organizational arrangements, nor does the Bible teach that this was God's design for the church as a whole. However, the disciples at that time were not without some organization. Their meetings were not without order, and various privileges of service were assigned to different ones according to their several abilities.

In the Early Church organization, Jesus was universally recognized as the Head. This was in keeping with Jesus' own instructions to his disciples when he said, "One is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren." (Matthew 23:8) Paul wrote, "Christ is the Head of the church: and he is the Savior of the body." (Ephesians 5:23) In 1 Corinthians 11:3 he presents the same thought, saying that "the Head of every man is Christ; ... and the Head of Christ is God." Jesus is not only the Head of his church -- he is also its foundation. "For other foundation can no man lay," wrote Paul, "than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 3:11) In Ephesians 2:19,20 the church is referred to as "the household of God," and is declared to be "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone."

The Apostle Peter wrote, "Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded." (1 Peter 2:6) Peter's affirmation that Jesus is the chief cornerstone in Zion, the church, is specially noteworthy in view of the misunderstanding which has been attached to Jesus' statement, "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church." -- Matthew 16:18

This assertion has been misconstrued to mean that Peter was to be the 'rock' upon which the church of Christ would be built. But this interpretation is at once seen to be in error when we discover that Jesus used two different Greek words in making the statement. When he said "Thou art *Peter*," the Greek word translated Peter is *petros*, meaning 'a piece of rock'. But when he said, "Upon this *rock* I will build my church" he used the Greek word *petra*, meaning a 'mass of rock', such as a boulder.

Peter had just said to Jesus, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:16) Jesus was pleased with this confession. We might paraphrase his reply to Peter in order to get its meaning a little clearer: "Peter, your name means that you are a small piece of rock, a pebble, as it were, but by comparison with the meaning of your name, the great fact of my Messiahship, and that I am the Son of God, is as a great mass of rock, a great boulder, and the church will be built upon me as its foundation."

Twelve Apostles

In the divine arrangement the entire church, from Pentecost to the end of the age, was to be served by twelve apostles specially appointed by God. It was in keeping with this that Jesus chose just twelve men to be associated with him during his ministry in order that they might receive personal training from him. These were Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon, and Judas. -- Matthew 10:2-4

Judas, as we know, proved unfaithful, and the Scriptures indicate that Paul was chosen by the LORD to take his place. Acts 1:23-26 informs us of an effort by the remaining eleven to make a choice of one to take Judas' place. They decided upon Matthias. However, this action was taken before they received the Holy Spirit, and there is no evidence that the LORD honored their choice. Matthias' name does not appear after this.

The word *apostle* simply means 'one who is sent', or a 'delegate', an ambassador of the Gospel. From this broad standpoint every Christian is an apostle, for we are all ambassadors of Christ. In fact, the word is used in the Bible with reference to others than the twelve apostles, but this does not mean that they occupied the same high position of authority in the church as that given by divine appointment to those specially chosen by the LORD.

In John 17:12 Jesus refers to these divine appointees as those whom his Heavenly Father had given him. These special apostles did not select each other for the position, so they had no authority to select Matthias to take the place of Judas. Just as the LORD had selected the others, so in his own time and way he selected Paul, and gave him authority as one of the twelve apostles.

These twelve were more than just preachers of the Gospel. They were miraculously inspired by the Holy Spirit, which enabled them to speak and write the truths of the Gospel with authority and accuracy. Their word was, and is, law to every Christian. It is because of this authoritative position which they occupy in the organization of the church that the completed church -- likened to a city -- is shown to have twelve foundation stones and in these stones are written the names of "the twelve apostles of the Lamb." -- Revelation 21:14

Other Servants

In Ephesians 4:11 the Apostle Paul informs us that the LORD provided for other servants in the church; that, in addition to apostles, he arranged for prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Peter speaks of the Old Testament writers as God's "holy prophets." (2 Peter 3:2) These wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit; so the Christian takes their word, even as that of the apostles, as authoritative. (2 Peter 1:21) But when Paul speaks of 'prophets' as servants in the church, he uses the term in a much broader sense, applying it to public expounders of the Gospel.

These prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, are all essential servants in the church, but not inspired as were the twelve apostles. Nor are they appointed in the same miraculous way as were the apostles; Paul instructed Titus to 'ordain' elders in every city. -- Titus 1:5

The expression in the New Testament, 'laying on of hands', is, according to the Greek text, more properly the stretching forth of the hand, as in voting. The clear implication is that by apostolic authority the lesser servants of the church were to be appointed, or elected, by the congregation which they were to serve.

Thus, while Jesus is the Head over the whole church, from Pentecost throughout the entire age, all the other servants were to be chosen by the brethren themselves, as they were needed, and as there were opportunities to serve.

The scriptural term, 'elder', applies generally to all who serve the church along spiritual lines. A pastor, a teacher, an evangelist, or a prophet would come under the general designation of 'elder'. The Greek word *presbuteros*, from which it is translated, signifies one who is mature. In the

church it would describe one who is recognized as being sound in the faith and spiritually mature in experience.

The word 'bishop' is also used in the New Testament, and applied to servants elected by the church. The Greek word *episkopos*, from which it is translated, means 'superintendent' or 'overseer'. All elders are properly, according to opportunity and ability, overseers in the church; for it is their duty to watch over the flock of God and care for their needs, particularly along spiritual lines.

The word 'deacon' appears a few times in connection with the arrangements of the Early Church. It is a translation of a Greek word, *diakonos*, which means to 'run errands' or give assistance. The indications are that deacons were appointed to help with the material arrangements of the church. The first of these to be appointed were in the church at Jerusalem. See Acts 6:2-4.

The scriptural qualifications for those who can properly be elected by a congregation to serve as elders, or bishops, and deacons are set forth by Paul in 1 Timothy 3:1-13. In these qualifications, the expression, 'apt to teach' implies a proper understanding of the truth of the divine plan as taught in the Bible. Any group of consecrated brethren, large or small, which has brethren who meet these qualifications is authorized by the Scriptures to elect them to these services. When this is done, these appointments are recognized by the LORD.

The Scriptures make it clear that no group of Christians needs to look to a parent church for authority to elect servants, hold meetings, and carry on the work of the LORD in its community. Nor do congregations need to be large in order to exercise their liberty along these lines. The Biblical record is that many of the churches, or groups of Christians, in apostolic times were organized in the homes of believers, who held their regular meetings in these homes.

The same thing is being done today. And now, as in the past, the LORD is richly blessing those who find others with whom they can cooperate as a group -- or, within the scriptural meaning, a church. These can elect their own servants by the simple method of stretching forth the hand. No membership roll is needed, nor is such authorized by the Scriptures.

There is not much information in the Scriptures to indicate the nature of the meetings held by the various groups in the Early Church. Certainly the apostles, and others, on occasions, gave discourses. But profitable meetings can be held even though there may be no one qualified to preach a sermon. Meetings for Bible study in which all present have an opportunity to express their thoughts or ask questions are very helpful. An elder, if one has been elected, should serve to keep the study orderly. Prayer and testimony meetings are also spiritually profitable to those who are seriously endeavoring to know and do God's will.

The Dawn Bible Students Association, East Rutherford, New Jersey, will gladly render any assistance possible to those who may need help in establishing meetings of this sort. We may even know of others in your area who would rejoice to participate in such an arrangement.

The Mission of the Church

The present mission of the church is the perfecting of the saints for a future work of service, to develop in herself the graces of Christian character, and to be God's witness to the world concerning Christ's kingdom of blessing now so near. And there is also a glorious future work for which the church is now being prepared!

Jesus said to Peter, "Upon this rock I will build my church." (Matthew 16:18) That which is 'built', in due time reaches completion. It is not God's design that the 'building' of the church shall go on forever. It is not a case of all who will ever obtain salvation through Christ becoming members of the church. The very meaning of the word, 'a calling out', is contrary to this concept of God's purpose through the church. The church is called out from the world. It is not God's plan to bring the world into the church.

"Thou art the Christ," Peter testified, "the Son of the living God." This expression identified Jesus with the messianic promises of the Old Testament, and indicates that Peter properly recognized in Jesus the one whom God had sent to fulfill those promises. In order to see clearly the full divine purpose through the church, it is essential to keep in mind the Old Testament promises concerning Christ; for the church is called out from the world to be associated with him in the fulfillment of those promises.

God said to Abraham, "In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed." (Gen 12:3; 22:18) In Galatians 3:16 Paul informs us that this 'seed' of promise is Christ. But Paul gives us additional information concerning the seed of promise. In verses 27 and 29 we read, "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ, ... and if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." Here is unmistakable proof that those who, through full consecration to do God's will, become members of the church, which is the body of Christ, are part of the promised seed through which all the families of the earth are to be blessed.

This means that instead of the fullness of God's purpose toward the children of men being represented in the establishing of the church, it is only the beginning of his plan to bless mankind. In James 1:18 we are told that the church is a "kind of firstfruits" of God's creatures. This expression is also used in Revelation 14:4 and applied to those who are associated with the "Lamb" on the symbolic Mount Zion.

In the 15th chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul points out very clearly that the hope of life for both the church and the world depends upon the resurrection of the dead. "If there be no resurrection of the dead," he argues, "then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished." (vss. 13,18) But he gives us assurance of the resurrection, saying, "As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive." -- vs. 22

Then Paul shows that there is to be a definite order, or sequence, in the resurrection: "every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming." (vs. 23) The firstfruits here referred to include the church, for as James explains, we are a "kind of firstfruits [unto God] of his creatures."

But "afterward" (1 Corinthians 15:23) others are to be resurrected. Who are these? Paul explains that they are those who, "are Christ's at his coming." This is a faulty translation; a proper translation of the Greek text would be, "those who *become* Christ's *during his presence*." This is a reference to the thousand years of his kingdom, when Christ and his church will reign for the purpose of destroying sin and death, and giving all an opportunity to accept the gift of life provided by his shed blood. This is shown by Paul's further statement, which immediately follows:

"Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father, when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death." (vss.

24-26) Yes, this is the great, the ultimate, purpose of God to be accomplished through Christ and the church -- the 'afterward' blessing to reach all mankind when the building of the church shall have been completed.

Heavenly and Earthly

In his lesson on the resurrection Paul reveals that some are to receive heavenly bodies, and some human, or earthly bodies, the determining factor in each case being the sort of seed, or "bare grain," that is sown. -- vss. 37,39

To those who, through full consecration to do God's will, are buried with Christ in sacrificial death, and throughout the remaining years of their natural lives "walk in newness of life," there will be given a celestial, or a heavenly body. They are prepared for this during their earthly pilgrimage by continuing to "set their affections on things above." Their hopes are *heavenly*. Through faith they are seated together with Christ "in heavenly places," while still here on earth pursuing their heavenly goal; therefore, they are made spiritual seed. In the resurrection, these will receive a heavenly body as a reward.

However, the vast majority of people are not interested in spiritual things. This does not mean that they are necessarily wicked. Most of them are not. They love the good things of the earth because they were created human, earthly beings, and God does not condemn them for their lack of aspiration to heavenly things. It is in the very nature of things that these are earthly seed, and as a result will be raised from the dead as human beings.

But speaking of *'the'* resurrection of the church, described in Revelation 20:6 as the "first resurrection," Paul explains, "It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: it is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: it is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body." -- 1 Corinthians 15:42-44

To this Paul adds, "There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body." In other words, he would have us understand that in describing the change of nature to be experienced by those who participate in the first resurrection, he is not implying that these are the only ones to be raised from the dead, for all mankind are to be resurrected, only they are to receive natural bodies.

Paul continues his lesson, saying, "The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second man is the Lord from heaven. As is the earthy [those who die with human hopes and desires], such are they also that are earthy [in the resurrection]: and as is the heavenly [those who now set their affections on heavenly things], such are they also that are heavenly [in the resurrection]." -- vss 47-49

Paul concludes this lesson on the resurrection, saying, "For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall he brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" -- vss. 53-55

Thus in a few words Paul presents both the hope of the church and the hope of the world. The resurrection hope of the church is "glory, honor, and immortality." (Romans 2:7) No human being possesses immortality by nature. It is a reward given to those who faithfully follow in the footsteps of Christ onto death. In Revelation, 2:10 we read, "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."

The call and preparation of these for the fruition of this glorious hope in "the first resurrection" has been the work of God through the Holy Spirit during the present age. But Paul explains that "when" this is accomplished, and the last member of the body of Christ has entered into glory, "then" will be the time for the fulfillment of those glorious promises of the Old Testament concerning the destruction of death -- O death, where is thy sting! O grave, where is thy victory!

This is a quotation from Isaiah 25:8, and Hosea 13:14. Both texts assure us of the divine purpose to destroy man's great enemy, Death, and the grave -- or *sheol*, as it is in the Old Testament, and *hades*, in the New -- the Hebrew and Greek words for 'hell', respectively. It was this same glorious consummation of the divine purpose toward the human race that Jesus referred to when he said that the gates of hell would not prevail against the church.

What a wonderful assurance! Throughout the reign of sin and death, hell, which is the grave or tomb, has continued to claim its victims. But in Revelation 1:18 Jesus tells us that he has the "keys" of hell. He purchased these keys -- that is, the right to unlock hell's gates -- by his own death as man's Redeemer. When his church is completely built, she will be associated with him in bestowing the promised blessings of life upon all mankind.

The fact that meanwhile so many millions continue to go into death, into the Bible hell, will not deprive them of these blessings. The gates of hell did not prevail against Christ and they will not prevail against his church; for by divine power they will be, swung wide open and all Death's prisoners released!

This, then, is to be the future work of the church. And what a glorious work it will be! What an incentive it should be now to prove faithful to the LORD. Perhaps you are just learning of this glorious purpose of God through Christ and the church. If this knowledge has reached you prior to becoming a Christian, we suggest that you consider well the steps of repentance, belief, and consecration as we have scripturally outlined them; and trusting in the strength of the LORD, and in appreciation of abundant grace, devote yourself to him and his cause.

There is no greater peace or joy that anyone can experience than that which results from being at-one with the LORD, and in living a life of full devotion to him. There are trials, yes, but as Paul reminds us, these are in reality "light afflictions," lasting but for a "moment" when compared with the eternal "weight" of glory which the LORD has promised. -- 2 Corinthians 4:17,18

It is surely a blessed privilege to be among the 'called out' ones -- the church -- at the present time, for surely the LORD is blessing his people, especially in revealing to them the beauties of his plan of salvation. And how thankful we are that through Christ and his church the whole world is yet to have an opportunity to rejoice in the blessings the LORD has designed for them -- blessings of "restitution," as Peter described them, "which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began." -- Acts 3:19-21

In view of God's harmonious and loving plan of salvation for both the church and the world, some of the beauties of which have already been revealed to us through his Word, we can well understand the great Apostle Paul's feelings when he wrote:

"O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out [completely]! For who hath known the mind of the LORD? Or who hath been his counselor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be

recompensed unto him again! For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory forever. Amen!" -- Romans 11:33-36