

“Incorporated By Covenant”

Introduction

In Zion Assembly Church of God, believers become members of the church by taking a church covenant. Members “agree to walk together as one body in the light of the gospel.” In today’s lesson, we will see that being incorporated by covenant is the practical basis and expression of being one body in Christ.

Key Verse

“They shall ask the way to Zion with their faces thitherward, saying, Come, and let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant that shall not be forgotten” (Je. 50:5).

Lesson Summary

The church is corporate in nature and function (1 Co. 12:12, 19-27; Ro. 12:4-5). God’s people are never called to be independent in the faith, but to be members one of another (Ro. 12:5). The apostle Paul illustrated this when he said, “And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you” (1 Co. 12:21). A body without eyes is blind; and a body without hands is impaired. Moreover, a body is more than only one, individual member (v. 17). All of the members are essential to the whole, functioning body. Thus, the church is not merely comprised of individual members, but is one body of Christ (vv 12, 20, 27). This explains the corporate nature of the church. Since the nature of the church is corporate, the church should seek to establish and fulfill its corporate nature and purpose. This explains why believers take a covenant to become members of Zion Assembly. The function of the covenant unites two or more people in a common purpose and goal. Covenanting together as one body establishes and expresses the unified spirit of the church – “Come, and let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant that shall not be forgotten” (Je. 50:5). Historically, God used covenants to establish his will and purpose for his people. The New Covenant or New Testament gives the terms of our relationship with God and one another. The church covenant, which we take to become members of the church, is a corporate commitment to walk together as one body according to the terms of the New Covenant. In fact, the church covenant serves as a verbal and corporate expression of the New Covenant written on the heart of each member (Je. 31:33; He. 8:10; 10:16). We see the pattern of covenanting at Mt. Sinai, when God gave his law to his people, and they responded, “All the words which the Lord hath said will we do” (Ex. 24:3-8). The words of the Old Covenant were binding, being established in blood (v. 8; He. 9:18-20). Also, we see the principle of covenant in the high-priestly prayer of Christ when he said, “I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world . . . and they have kept thy word. Now they have known that all things whatsoever thou hast given me are of thee. For I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received them . . . and they have believed” (Jn. 17:6-8). Christ established the words of the New Covenant in his own precious blood (Lu. 22:20). He committed the words of God to the apostles. They believed in Christ, received his words as the Word of God, and kept the Word. Moreover, the New Covenant/Testament saints “continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship;” and thus they continued in the covenant and teachings of Christ (Ac. 2:40-42).

Scripture Study

The corporate nature of the church – 1 Co. 12:12, 19-27; Ro. 12:4-5

The corporate function of the church covenant – Je. 50:5; Ex. 24:3-8; Jn. 17:6-8

Conclusion

The members of Zion Assembly consist of believers who have obligated themselves by covenant to walk together as one corporate body in the light of the gospel. The church covenant is the practical basis and expression of our unity in Christ. The local congregations of Zion Assembly are not independent fellowships, and the members of the church are not independent believers, for we take a verbal covenant to be one corporate body of Christ. We are many members, yet only one body – the church of God (1 Co. 12:20).



“A Theocracy – Part One”

Introduction

All nations require an orderly system of government in order to function. Various forms of government exist in the world today, for example: republican, democratic, monarchial, dictatorial, socialistic, and communistic. In contrast to these, as God's nation, the church has a special type of government – a theocratic form. Functioning as a theocracy, the church of God is God's government on earth.

Key Verse

“And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and ye shall be my people” (Le. 26:12).

Lesson Summary

On what basis can we declare that Zion Assembly Church of God is God's government on earth? While there are many earthly powers and authorities that God raises up and tears down, the church is God's nation under Christ's rule (Ro. 13:1; 1 Pe. 2:7-14). Though the members of the church submit to earthly powers “for the Lord's sake,” they ultimately live under a completely different kind of authority – under God's governance and rule (v. 13; Tit. 3:1). Christ is the head and authority of his church. The church, being God's nation under Christ's rule, is subject to him in all things (Ep. 5:24; 1 Pe. 3:22). In Exodus 19:5-6, the Lord established the principle by which his church would be a nation under his rule – “If ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.” Quoting these words of God which were given at Mt. Sinai, the apostle Peter lifted up these same principles of holiness and obedience for the church today (1 Pe. 2:9). Since the church of God is God's holy nation on earth, and since his nation is founded on Christ's government, Zion Assembly must walk by Christ's rule in accordance with his marvelous light in order to be his government on earth (Is. 9:6-7). Functioning as a theocracy, our obedience to the voice and words of God establishes the church as God's government (Le. 26:3, 12). As we walk in the ways of the Lord as his people, he walks among us as our God. Thus, theocracy (the rule of God) is all about hearing and obeying the voice of God (Mt. 17:1-8). In the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter needed to grasp that God's will for his church was hearing and following the voice of Christ, not the voice of man. When Israel desired a king to rule over them, the Lord told Samuel, “for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them” (1 Sa. 8:7). Their reason for asking for a king to rule over them (monarchy) was to be “like all the nations” (vv. 5, 20). However, God's church is not like the other nations of the world; his church hears and obeys his voice. As God's nation, as his peculiar people, the church of God functions as a theocracy. It is his unique government in the earth. What makes the church unique to all other nations is the fact that Christ rules in and through the church by his Holy Spirit and the Holy Scriptures. Thus, theocracy is God's rule among his people as opposed to any system and operation of humanly-devised government.

Scripture Study

God's nation under Christ's rule – Ro. 13:1; 1 Pe. 2:7-14; Ex. 19:5-6; 1 Pe. 3:22

Functioning as a theocracy – Le. 26:3, 12; Mt. 17:1-8; 1 Sa. 8:4-7, 20

Conclusion

As a theocracy, Zion Assembly Church of God functions as God's visible government on earth – a holy nation under the rule of Christ. Christ governs in and through the affairs of his church by the Spirit and the Scriptures. By his Word and Spirit, Christ reveals the will of God to the world through the church.



“A Theocracy – Part Two”

Introduction

Last week’s lesson established the principle of theocratic government as opposed to humanly-devised forms of government. But the question remains: How does theocracy work in the church? Today’s lesson will explain how Christ ordains and uses human instrumentality to bring about order and discipline in and through the church.

Key Verse

“Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you” (He. 13:17).

Lesson Summary

Since Christ ascended back to the Father and does not physically rule on the earth at this time, he presently rules in and through the church by his Word and Spirit. In practice, how does Christ do this? As God’s government on earth, the church carries out his order and discipline. The church binds and looses on earth what God already has bound and loosed in heaven (Mt. 16:19; 18:15-20). In other words, the church serves to carry out the will of God on earth (Mt. 7:21). Zion Assembly does not create the discipline and order by which God’s church is governed, but understanding the doctrines and principles of God’s Word on which his church is built, it carries them out under the leadership and direction of the Holy Ghost. From this perspective, Zion Assembly has been given “the keys of the kingdom,” the authority to bind and loose on earth what has been bound and loosed in heaven. Nevertheless, how does theocracy practically work in the church? Through whom does theocracy work in the church? Christ ordains and uses human instrumentality to bring about order and discipline in and through the church (1 Ti. 3:5). The church is not merely a mystical union of spirits, but a concrete, visible, and corporate body of believers – real members joined together by covenant. As such, Christ operates his government through divinely ordained members of his body (Ro. 12:4; 1 Co. 12:28-29; Ep. 4:11). While “the General Assembly is the highest tribunal of authority in the church for the interpretation of the Scriptures,” God also has divinely ordained ministries and offices within the church to proclaim and carry out his will on earth (Note: we will study about the General Assembly next month; see *Abstract of Faith*, “The Church,” p. 3). The Lord has placed “rulers” in the church to keep the order and discipline of God’s Word as interpreted by the General Assembly. For example, the church has overseers and bishops, pastors and deacons, and helps and governments which all operate within the overall government of the church (1 Ti. 3:1, 13; Ac. 6:3, 6; 20:17, 28; Ep. 4:11; 1 Co. 12:28). Although the church has rulers or positions of authority, theocracy is not autocratic (Mt. 20:25-28). Christ gives himself as the primary example of servant-leadership for the church. However, theocracy also is not democratic (He. 13:17). Those over us in the Lord have received divine authority; the members of the church should follow the example of leadership, as they follow Christ’s example (He. 13:7; 1 Co. 11:1).

Scripture Study

Functioning as God’s government on earth – Mt. 16:19; 18:15-20; 7:21

Theocracy by human instrumentality – Ro. 12:4; 1 Co. 12:28-29; Ep. 4:11; 1 Ti. 3:1, 5, 13; Ac. 6:3, 6; 20:17, 28; Mt. 20:25-28; He. 13:7, 17

Conclusion

Zion Assembly Church of God functions as God’s government on earth. Christ governs in and through human instruments who are set in divinely ordained ministries and offices in the church. In this way, God carries out the order and discipline of his government.



“Individual Interpretation”

Introduction

The success of the church and its mission depends on a right understanding of the Word of God. Thus, the church must embrace the great responsibility of Biblical interpretation. Where does interpretation begin? While the church, as a whole, must be employed in interpreting the Scriptures, this work begins with the individual members of the church. The success of the whole is therefore dependent on the diligence and commitment of the individuals.

Key Verse

“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Ti. 2:15).

Lesson Summary

The Bible is the foundation and authority for truth – the very fountain of the knowledge of God. Since the Bible is the foundation for knowing the truth, each member of the church has an individual obligation to study and interpret the Scriptures for himself/herself (2 Ti. 2:15). In other words, the members of the church must determine the truth individually. Why? Each one is accountable to God for himself/herself (Ro. 14:12; Mt. 18:23; Lu. 16:2). Moreover, while the church’s leadership is influential and instrumental in Biblical interpretation, they are not a substitute for individual accountability (2 Co. 13:5). In doctrine, four basic factors influence one’s understanding of the truth: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. This four-fold method of understanding truth is referred to as the *Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, named for John Wesley, the great eighteenth century revivalist and reformer. Knowing the truth comes through hearing the Word – “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Ro. 10:17). At the very moment an individual hears the Word, he/she begins the work of determining what it means. Faith is established on the basis of an individual’s hearing and interpreting the Word. When one hears and interprets the Scriptures correctly, the individual has understood the truth. Furthermore, one’s understanding of the Scriptures is shaped by tradition, reason, and experience. Biblical interpretation is influenced by Christian tradition – that is, orthodox theology, sound doctrine, and established Biblical practices, all of which have prepared the way for knowing the truth. When we interpret the Scriptures, Christian tradition impacts the way we understand the truth. Timothy was a prime example of a believer whose faith was deeply influenced by a traditional understanding of the Word of Truth (2 Ti. 1:5). His beliefs were built on the faith he was given by his grandmother and mother, Lois and Eunice (2 Ti. 3:13-15; Ac. 16:1-3). Moreover, we necessarily approach the Scriptures with reason. After all, the Word of God is logical and reasonable; it is the revelation of the mind of God (Jn. 1:1-2; 1 Co. 2:16). God created human beings as rational, thinking creatures with the ability to reason, which is one of the ways man reflects the image of God (Is. 1:18; Ro. 12:2). Thus, reason necessarily factors into interpretation. Finally, experience influences Biblical interpretation. Believers approach the Scriptures with knowledge shaped by experience(s). Not only do believers know God from the pages of his Word, but they also know God experientially (Ac. 1:8; 10:28-45). One’s experience in the Lord shapes how one understands the truth (Ro. 6:15-16). Thus, the Word explains one’s experience; but also one’s experience aids in understanding the truth.

Scripture Study

Biblical interpretation: An individual responsibility – 2 Ti. 2:15; Ro. 14:12; Mt. 18:23; Lu. 16:2; 2 Co. 13:5; Ro. 10:17

Interpretation by tradition – 2 Ti. 1:5; 3:13-15; Ac. 16:1-3

Interpretation by reason – Jn. 1:1-2; 1 Co. 2:16; Ro. 12:1-3

Interpretation by experience – Ac. 1:8; Ro. 6:15-16

Conclusion

Salvation is personal and individual. Each believer must know Christ for himself/herself. As such, the knowledge of God is built on a relationship between the individual believer and Jesus Christ. Clearly, the responsibility for Biblical interpretation starts with and falls upon the shoulders of each church member.



“Corporate Interpretation”

Introduction

Certainly, the Bible reveals only one standard of truth in Christ. As Christians and as members of God’s church, the Lord has called us into the one comprehensive revelation of truth. For this reason, the apostle Paul explained, “Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (Ep. 4:13). While Biblical interpretation begins as an individual endeavor, coming to the unity of the truth involves corporate interpretation and a common understanding.

Key Verse

“Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Co. 1:10).

Lesson Summary

God’s purpose in and through the church far exceeds the individuality of its members (1 Co. 12:14-17). He has designed the church so that no single member can function for the whole body (v. 19-22). Truly, we are many members yet one body, rather than many bodies with only one member. Moreover, God has set individual members (with their reason, experience, and tradition) in the one body to meet the needs of the whole church, as he sees fit (vv. 18-27). He has “tempered the body together” to form a mutual dependency and care among the members of the church (vv. 24-25). The Lord also has placed individuals in the body for leadership and service (v. 28; Ep. 4:11-13). These are not self-serving offices and functions, but they are put in the body for the health and benefit of the whole church. Again, in Paul’s writing to the church at Corinth, we learn that the church is not made up of autonomous believers, but rather of members bound together in Christ by love (1 Co. 13) and by covenant (1 Co. 11:23-34). Indeed, we are members one of another, and in love, we serve one another and submit one to another (Ga. 5:13; Ep. 5:21). As such, the church consists not of independent members, but of interdependent members. Thus, interpreting the Scriptures and coming to the unity of the truth involve the whole body, not the individual members independently. Although the Lord uses gifted and anointed individuals within the church to further its understanding of the Scriptures, interpreting the Bible is not reserved to one individual, nor is it limited to a few elite ministers or members. On the contrary, Biblical interpretation is the spiritual work of the whole church corporately. From this perspective, the apostle Paul compelled the church at Corinth to “speak the same thing,” to have “no divisions,” and to be “in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Co. 1:10). In fact, Paul qualified their call to corporate unity in the faith, saying, “be perfectly joined together.” In Matthew 18:15-20, the principle of corporate interpretation is established. Jesus taught that brothers, who are divided and cannot reconcile their differences individually, should seek judgment in the corporate context of the church (v. 17). When the church finds the mind of Christ, and reaches agreement in the Word and establishes his truth, their corporate determination is authoritative (vv. 18-20).

Scripture Study

The interdependence of the members – 1 Co. 12:14-28; Ga. 5:13; Ep. 5:21

The principle of corporate interpretation – 1 Co. 1:10; Mt. 18:15-20

Conclusion

Being a corporate and universal church, Biblical interpretation is the spiritual work and responsibility of the whole body, collectively. Biblical interpretation and application of the Scriptures necessarily begin on an individual level, but the corporate agreement of the church is what establishes the truth among us (Ac. 16:4-5).



“The Highest Tribunal of Authority”

Introduction

What are the dangers of becoming too individualistic or too corporate in our interpretation of the Scriptures? If the church relies solely on individual interpretations of the Bible, then it will surely become splintered doctrinally and eventually those divisions will become visible. However, if it relies solely on corporate interpretation without the individual ministers and members searching the Scriptures for themselves and participating in the Assembly's decisions, then the saints run the risk of becoming complacent and falling away from the truth. Clearly, it takes both individual and corporate effort in order to establish the church in the unity of the faith.

Key Verse

“And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter” (Ac. 15:6).

Lesson Summary

Zion Assembly Church of God brings together the individual ministers and members to interpret the Bible and settle issues in the General Assembly. This is the highest tribunal of authority in the church for the interpretation of Scripture. Zion Assembly follows the model for decision-making principles and policies outlined in Acts 15:1-33. The “dissent and disputation” regarding circumcision in the New Testament church demonstrate the importance and gravity of Biblical interpretation in the church (vv. 1-2). From time to time, certain issues arise in the life of the church which need to be settled by the Word of God, not by human opinions and perspectives. In such cases, the church corporately reasons together and searches the Scriptures to find the mind and will of God. Maintaining the unity of the church requires a corporate hearing and resolution of critical issues that may tend to divide (Ac. 15:4-5). In the case of circumcision, Paul and Barnabas presented their testimony to the church, after which a group of believing Pharisees expressed their opposing concerns. Because of the controversy, the leadership of the church (apostles and elders) gathered together to consider and deliberate the matter with “the multitude” (vv. 6-18). Their assembly provided an orderly forum for discussing and debating the issue. For the good of the whole body, God sets gifted leaders in the church to direct and provide order in the decision-making process. In most cases, church leaders are suitably equipped to understand the particulars of the issues and to articulate clearly what is at stake (vv. 7, 12, 13). After pertinent testimonies and concerns are expressed, the deciding factor in all matters is the Holy Scriptures (vv. 15-18). When resolving discrepancies in Biblical interpretation among the members of the church, the goal is to reach unity in the truth. This basic principle is expressed in Acts 15 as “one accord” (v. 25; see also Ac. 1:14; 2:46; 4:24; 5:12; 8:6). What does this mean? Perhaps the best explanation is found in the context of the passage itself: “Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church” (v. 22). “One accord” means that the members of the church concur and agree together with the judgment of the leadership (vv. 22-27). When the leadership reaches a decision and the membership feels good about it, then the church can advance “with one accord” (v. 25). In other words, before the issue of circumcision had arisen, the church had agreement; then after the issue was settled, the church was able to continue in harmony and peace. Thus, they established the truth “with one accord.”

Scripture Study

The need for Biblical interpretation – Ac. 15:1-2

The importance of a corporate hearing – Ac. 15:4-5

The deliberation of the church – Ac. 15:6-18

The “one accord” principle – Ac. 15:22-27

Conclusion

The General Assembly is the highest tribunal of authority in the church for the interpretation of the Scriptures. Of course, when interpreting the Scriptures, the inspiration of the Holy Ghost is essential for coming into the unity of the truth. In our next lesson, we will address the “Spirit of Prophecy” and the role of the Holy Ghost in the General Assembly.



“The Spirit of Prophecy”

Introduction

Being founded on the Bible, the Word of God, our understanding of it is shaped by reason, experience, and tradition (See lesson on “Individual Interpretation,” December 6). Yet an even greater factor influences our understanding of the truth: the Holy Spirit. He is the one who guides and directs us through the complete process of interpreting the Scriptures. In today’s lesson, we will address the role of the Holy Ghost in the General Assembly.

Key Verse

“For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things” (Ac. 15:28).

Lesson Summary

As we have already seen, one of the primary purposes of the General Assembly is Biblical interpretation. The goal of the church is always to conclude the General Assemblies after the example and model we see in Acts 15:28: “For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us.” Throughout the meeting, the delegation of the Assembly depends on and expects the Holy Ghost to work through individual members. As individual members interpret and expound the Scriptures under the anointing of the Holy Ghost, God uses them to illuminate the truth for the whole body. In this way, God is still speaking today to the church through the gift of prophecy (1 Co. 12:4, 7, 10; 13:2; 14:1-5). Unlike speaking in tongues, prophecy is for the edification and encouragement of the corporate body, not merely for the individual. However, when tongues are interpreted, they serve the same purpose as prophetic utterance (1 Co. 14:5, 12-13). Either way, God expounds his Word to the church through individuals who are exercised by the Holy Ghost to speak the will and Word of God to his people (vv. 3-5). The dynamic of the Holy Ghost in Biblical interpretation makes Zion Assembly somewhat unique in its understanding of the Scriptures. Historically, we have relied on the inspiration and illumination of the Holy Ghost through anointed preaching, ecstatic utterances, and even the interpretation of tongues in order to come to the knowledge of the truth (Mk. 13:11; Jn. 16:13-14; Ac. 2:4; Ep. 6:18-19). With openness toward the intervention of the Holy Ghost comes the danger of false prophets and deceptive spirits. Of course, any kind of prophetic utterance must always agree with the written Word. Otherwise, it is not a word from the Lord. The written Word and the voice of the Spirit always agree. Thus, the gift of prophecy submits to the written “commandments of the Lord” (1 Co. 14:36-37). Another safeguard in this approach to Biblical interpretation is the submission of the prophetic ministry to the whole church (1 Co. 14:29-33). Individual members are subject to the whole body, for we are members one of another (Ro. 12:5). We should therefore submit one to another (Ep. 5:21; 1 Pe. 5:5). We should never elevate an individual member to the place of being “the prophet” for the whole church. In other words, though the Spirit uses certain members repeatedly, God can speak through any member of the body as he sees fit (1 Co. 12:18). Truly, “in the multitude of counsellors there is safety” (Pr. 11:14; 24:6).

Scripture Study

Interpretation by the Spirit – Ac. 15:28; 1 Co. 12:4, 7, 10; 13:2; 14:1-5, 12-13

The principle of submission – 1 Co. 14:29-33, 36-37; Ro. 12:5; Ep. 5:21; 1 Pe. 5:5; 1 Co. 12:18; Pr. 11:14; 24:6

Conclusion

In the General Assembly, the Lord declares his Word to the corporate body through individual members who are exercised by the Holy Spirit to speak the words and will of God to his people. The individual aspects of Biblical interpretation take on a corporate aspect as the members discern the Spirit and Word of Truth, and submit to one another.



“Christ and the Church”

Introduction

Today’s lesson raises an essential question: “What is the message of the church?” The answer is simple. Foundationally, our message is Christ. The apostle Paul declared, “For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Co. 2:2). Indeed, he is our message. He is the focal point of our salvation. Although Paul emphasized Christ as the central message of the church, we nevertheless preach Christ and the church. In this lesson, we will see that our message centers on the relationship between Christ and his church.

Key Verse

“This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church” (Ep. 5:32).

Lesson Summary

Can we rightly preach “the church” without preaching Christ? Of course not! We can become so preoccupied with the doctrine of the church that we lose sight of the centrality of Jesus Christ, the head of the church (Col. 1:17-19). But doing this actually distorts and weakens the message of the church (v. 17). To proclaim the doctrine of the church without proclaiming Christ destroys the very life and vitality of the church (vv. 18-19). As the head, Christ necessarily has the preeminence. Without his fullness, we cannot be fulfilled (v. 19). Without him, we have no salvation (Ep. 5:23). Without Christ’s fullness, we cannot be perfected. Without him, the church has no authority (Ep. 1:19-22). Without Christ, we lack what we need to properly function as his body (Col. 2:19; Ep. 4:15-16). On the flip side, can we preach Christ completely without preaching the church? Again, the answer is no. Why not? The apostle Paul explained that the body, the church, is the fullness and fulfillment of Christ (Ep. 1:23). God’s presence inhabits the whole creation, but by his Spirit he dwells most fully and completely in the church through Christ. What else could contain the fullness of his glory, but “the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood” (Ac. 20:28)? When Paul explained the right relationship of husbands to their wives, he instructed husbands to love their wives after the pattern of Christ and the church. Christ “loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Ep. 5:25). Therefore, the church, the body of Christ, is the primary object of Christ’s great love. In other words, when he died for sinners, he died to purchase a church (a bride) for himself. Thus, the focus of Christ’s mission in the world finds an ultimate fullness and completion in the church. Certainly, he is establishing the rule and reign of his kingdom, but he accomplishes that goal in fullness through building his church (Mt. 16:18; Ac. 2:47; Ep. 2:19-22). Until Christ comes again, he will continue to build his church, and she will continue to become all he desires her to be.

Scripture Study

The church without Christ? – Col. 1:17-19; Ep. 5:23; 1:19-22; Col. 2:19; Ep. 4:15-16

Christ without the church? – Ep. 1:23; Ac. 20:28; Ep. 5:25; Mt. 16:18; Ac. 2:47; Ep. 2:19-22

Conclusion

To preach the church without Christ is no message at all; and to preach Christ without the church is only half of the message. Our message in Zion Assembly Church of God centers on the relationship between Christ and his church. We are dedicated to proclaiming this truth to the whole world.



“Unity of Believers”

Introduction

In the Gospel of John chapter seventeen, Jesus prayed to the Father, saying, “And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are” (Jn. 17:11). The will of God in Christ is unmistakably clear: “that they may be one, as we are.” The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one. God’s will is for the union of all who believe in Jesus Christ. This perfect union will come through obedience to his Word, which we will discuss in another lesson. In this lesson we simply want to establish God’s desire for the outward and inward unity of his people.

Key Verse

“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity” (Ps. 133:1)!

Lesson Summary

The principle of Christian unity is explicit in the Scriptures. Through his precious blood, Christ provided the basis for the unity of all believers (Ep. 2:13-18). Thus, God’s church is a church for all nations, races, and peoples. Jesus explicitly stated the principle of oneness when he said, “And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd” (Jn. 10:16). All true believers, those who walk in the Spirit of God, have spiritual unity in Christ. They are all citizens of the same kingdom. Therefore, the church should never violate the unity for which Christ died, but should seek “to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” But there is also an outward and corporate union that God desires for his people. There is but “one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in the one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (Ep. 4:3-6). In fact, his sheep will hear his voice and follow him. Where is Christ leading his sheep? He is leading them into one fold, into one church. In fact, “the mystery of his will” is that God will “gather together in one all things in Christ” (Ep. 1:8-11). Oneness in Christ is essential to the vision and purpose of Zion Assembly Church of God. Therefore, we take the Scriptures seriously, calling us to love one another, to prefer one another, and to submit one to another (Ro. 12:10; Ep. 5:21). In addition to spiritual unity, Christ has called us to unity in the truth. In John chapter seventeen, Jesus’ prayer for the unity of all believers hinges on believers being sanctified through the Word of truth (Jn. 17:17-23). Otherwise, they cannot come into the unity for which Christ prayed (1 Co. 1:10-13; 3:3). Full unity comes through believing and submitting to God’s truth. His truth unites. True unity is indeed unity in the truth. Furthermore, Christ’s truth is not divided because Christ himself is not divided (1 Co. 1:13). Yet today, Christianity is filled with division and disunity. Nevertheless Christ prayed “that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (Jn. 17:21). While we are committed to spiritual unity in Christ, we also know that complete and practical unity is only possible through uniting in the truth (Ac. 2:40-47). For this reason, Zion Assembly is dedicated to preaching and teaching “all the counsel of God” (Ac. 20:27). When we come together in the Spirit and in the truth, we experience a greater and fuller unity in Christ (Ps. 133:1-3; Ep. 4:13-16).

Scripture Study

Unity in the Spirit – Jn. 10:16; Jn. 17:11; Ep. 2:13-18; Ep. 4:3-6; Ep. 1:8-11

Unity in the truth – Jn. 17:17-23; 1 Co. 1:10-13; Ac. 2:40-47

Conclusion

Until he comes again, Christ is building his church, and the church is becoming all that Christ desires her to be. God’s will through the ministry of the church is to unite all believers in the Spirit and truth in Christ Jesus. Zion Assembly Church of God is committed to this principle and vision of oneness in Christ.



“A Glorious and Perfect Church”

Introduction

The Scriptures speak of God’s church in terms of being perfected and made glorious (Ep. 4:13; 5:27). “Perfect” means “arriving at the ultimate goal.” Perfection also has to do with reaching one’s fullness in Christ, becoming all that God would have one to become. It indicates “full maturity.” *Glorious*, as it is used here, is closely aligned to perfect. Glorious refers to the state of the church when it reaches its perfection. When perfected by Christ, the glory of God will be fully manifested in the church. She will bring honor and praise to Christ at his coming, and he will to her.

Key Verse

“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” (Ep. 5:27).

Lesson Summary

Perfection is Christ’s goal for the church. The Bible speaks of the perfecting of the church, individually and corporately (Ep. 4:13-15; Col. 1:28; He. 6:1-3). While spiritual perfection is an individual goal (Col. 1:28), the apostle Paul also wrote in corporate terms (Ep. 4:13-14). He means corporate perfection because he refers to Christ as the head of the church, and then speaks in terms of the “whole body” being connected to him (Ep. 4:15-16). Moreover, the Scriptures teach perfection as a futuristic accomplishment for the church, something yet to be attained (Ep. 4:13; He. 6:1). Even when speaking of himself, Paul was anticipating his own perfection or completion in Christ (Ph. 3:12). The mature (“perfect”) Christian is always striving for a greater perfection and completion in Christ (Ph. 3:14-15). As long as we live in these mortal bodies, we should ever strive to be more and more like Jesus. Hence, perfection is both a qualitative and quantitative pursuit: qualitative in that we should always and earnestly desire God’s perfections (Mt. 5:48); and quantitative in that we are ever seeking to add members to the body to be perfected (Jn. 10:16). Clearly, there will be no perfection until all of the sheep are brought into the fold. Certainly, the church corporately will never reach perfection without the individual perfecting of its members. The glory of the church will be fully manifested in its perfected state. Christ will come for a glorious church because “his wife hath made herself ready” (Re. 19:7). The church will be made ready or prepared for Christ’s coming through “the washing of water by the word” (Ep. 5:26; 2 Ti. 3:16-17). It will be a glorious church at his coming because the Lord will glorify his house by his own Word (Is. 60:7). The church of God will be a glorious church because Christ already has put his glory within the church (Jn. 17:22-23). In other words, he has already given to the church what it needs to be a perfect and glorious house (that is, the glory of the Holy Spirit). He will come for a church made glorious in holiness by his Word and Spirit (Ep. 5:26-27; 2 Pe. 3:14; Ro. 8:29-30). Christ will bring his church to its spiritual fulfillment and ultimate completion: a glorious and perfect church.

Scripture Study

A perfected church – Mt. 5:48; Ep. 4:13-16; Ph. 3:12, 14-15; Col. 1:28; He. 6:1-3

A church glorious in holiness – Is. 60:7; Jn. 17:22-23; Ep. 5:26-27; 2 Ti. 3:16-17; 2 Pe. 3:14; Ro. 8:29-30

Conclusion

Sometimes we look at the church and see one which is anything but perfect and glorious. Nevertheless, when the apostle Paul wrote about the church, he was anticipating that which was yet to come. He was explaining God’s ultimate will for the church. We should remember that our present conditions never alter the final outcome which God’s Word destines for the church. She will be perfect and glorious in Christ at his coming.



“Rapture of the Church”

Introduction

Ultimately, God will bring his church to perfection and completion in Christ. The church will be a glorious house. Why will the Lord accomplish this in his church? He will do this in order to receive her to himself into everlasting peace and joy (Ep. 5:27; 1 Th. 4:17). His bride will be adorned in righteousness and holiness (Re. 19:7-9). The church will experience the rapture: being “caught up” together with all of the saints to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

Key Verse

“Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord” (1 Th. 4:17).

Lesson Summary

At the time of the rapture when Jesus comes again, the dead in Christ will experience the resurrection of life (Jn. 5:28-29). We get a glimpse of this miraculous event in Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones (Ez. 37:5-6, 12). In his vision, Ezekiel witnessed a foreshadowing of the power of the resurrection. The apostle Paul explained how the miracle of the resurrection will occur. The dead in Christ will be raised by the Spirit who indwells every born again believer (Ro. 8:11). In the same way the Holy Spirit raised Christ from the dead, he will “quicken” the dead in Christ when Jesus comes. Clearly, the rapture of the church is prefaced by an orderly sequence of events (1 Th. 4:16). First of all, the Lord will descend personally. Jesus emphatically declared that he will be the one to come again and receive us to him (Jn. 14:3). However, this descent is not Christ’s return to the earth. In fact, when he descends, the church and the saints will rise to meet him *in the air* (1 Th. 4:17). At the time of the rapture, Christ’s coming will deliver the saints from God’s wrath (1 Th. 5:1-11). When later he returns to rule and reign on the earth, he will come with the raptured saints to execute judgment (Jude 14-15). Christ’s descent will be accompanied with a shout, the voice of the archangel, and the trump of God. The rapture of the church will be a magnificent event, a prelude to the Second Coming of the Lord. Moreover, the dead in Christ will be raised incorruptible (1 Th. 4:14-16; 1 Co. 15:52). And finally, the living saints will experience the rapture (1 Th. 4:17). In the rapture, the living saints are changed (1 Co. 15:51; Mt. 17:1-2). This will happen instantaneously (1 Co. 15:52). Mortal man must “put on immortality” (v. 53). The living saints will exchange their vile bodies for a glorious body (Ph. 3:21; 1 Jn. 3:2). In addition to being changed, the saints will be “caught up together with” the resurrected saints (1 Th. 4:17). The word “rapture” originates in the Latin language. It describes the dynamic experience of being “caught up.” The rapture is illustrated in the teachings of Christ when Jesus explained how “one shall be *taken*, and the other left” (Mt. 24:40-41). Again, he taught this same idea in the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25. The five wise virgins went with the bridegroom into the marriage (or marriage feast), but the door was shut to the foolish and unprepared virgins (vv. 10-13).

Scripture Study

The dead in Christ are raised – Jn. 5:28-29; 14:3; Ez. 37:5-6, 12; Ro. 8:11; 1 Th. 4:14-16; Jude 14-15
Changed and caught up – 1 Co. 15:51-53; 1 Th. 4:17-18; Ph. 3:21; 1 Jn. 3:2; Mt. 24:36-44; 25:10-13

Conclusion

The first resurrection will be a glorious time, when the church is both raptured and enraptured by the Holy Spirit. The dead in Christ will be raised first, and then the living saints will be changed and caught up.



“What is Conviction?”

Introduction

Today’s lesson introduces a subject seldom preached in the pulpit. It is a topic often taken for granted when addressing salvation – presumed, but at times absent from a sinner’s experience. A perfect understanding of conviction is certainly not required to experience this work of grace (for even a child can experience conviction). Nevertheless, grasping a right understanding of this doctrine helps us to embrace and proclaim how the Spirit works to bring about salvation. So, what is conviction?

Key Verse

“And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner” (Lu. 18:13).

Lesson Summary

How does conviction cause an individual to feel? The experience of conviction can be described as being pricked or pierced in the heart (Ac. 2:37). In Acts 2, Peter preached a dynamic message of Christ crucified and resurrected (vv. 31-36). After hearing the Word of God, something changed in those that heard him. They no longer felt good about themselves. When they heard the Word of God, they became convicted, “pricked in their heart” like a sharp object stabbing them. In other words, conviction hurts; it’s unpleasant and discomforting. A primary aspect of conviction is the recognition of personal sinfulness. In Luke 18:9-14, Jesus taught a parable about pride and self-righteousness. In this parable, he described two people: a Pharisee (or religious leader) who saw himself as righteous and a publican (or tax collector) who saw himself as a sinner. In the experience of conviction, an individual sees himself/herself as a sinner, as sinful. The publican stood alone to himself with his head bowed, beating himself in the chest, and pleading for God’s mercy. The publican’s response to God demonstrates true conviction. Moreover, when David committed adultery with Bathsheba, after receiving a rebuke from the Lord, he saw himself under God’s judgment, needing his mercy (2 Sam. 12:1-16; Ps. 51:1-4). Because God is just, he judges sin. When sinners are convicted, they see themselves as already condemned by God (Jn. 3:18-19). Finally, in conviction the spiritual light of the soul is turned on, and the soul is illuminated. The conversion of the apostle Paul demonstrates this idea in a literal way (Ac. 9:1-6). While on his way to persecute the church, a light from heaven shined on Paul, and the voice of God spoke to him. Paul fell to the earth and trembled in astonishment. His experience illustrates how God reveals our sin to us. No one can hide from God (He. 4:13; Ps. 139:7).

Scripture Study

Being pricked in the heart – Ac. 2:31-37

Recognizing personal sinfulness – Lu. 18:9-14

Seeing oneself under the judgment of God – Ps. 51:1-4; Jn. 3:18-19

Illuminating the sinful soul – Ac. 9:1-6; He. 4:13; Ps. 139:7

Conclusion

We cannot overemphasize that salvation by God’s grace begins with true conviction. The idea of salvation itself presupposes the recognition of the need to be saved. In conviction, an individual recognizes that he/she is a sinner and needs to be saved from this condition. But, how does God bring about this understanding within us? The next lesson will begin to answer this important question.



“The Basis of Conviction”

Introduction

The basis of conviction begins with a simple question. How do we define the word *holy*? Another way of asking the question is: How do we understand or comprehend the meaning of *holy*? Apart from the context of God himself, defining *holy* is impossible. Holy is only understood when identified with the nature, character, and attributes of God in comparison and contrast with sinful humanity. In this lesson, the student will see that conviction begins with God’s holiness.

Key Verse

“Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy” (1 Pe. 1:16).

Lesson Summary

When Isaiah saw a vision of God, he heard the seraphim crying one to another, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory” (Is. 6:3). In Revelation 4:8, when John witnessed a similar vision of God, the Bible says, “And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.” These visions given by the Spirit to his holy prophets, spanning both old and new covenants, declare God with a holy trio: “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts” and “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty.” Eternal God, the Word in the beginning, the Creator of the universe and all that exists, is holy, holy, holy (Ge. 1:1; Jn. 1:1). However, fallen humanity is not holy. When King David examined his own heart, he saw within himself the sinful condition of fallen man (Ps. 51:5). The apostle Paul identified an unholy nature in humanity with its propensity to change, even to reject, the glory of God (Ro. 1:22-25). In Romans 3:10-23, he elaborated further on humanity’s unholy condition before the Lord, saying, “There is none righteous, no, not one” (v. 10). Moreover, in 1 Peter 1:16, the apostle emphasized God’s call and expectation for us, declaring, “Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy.” This contrast between holy God and unholy humanity and God’s expectation for us to be holy makes conviction possible. In Luke 5:1-11, we see how Peter experienced conviction based on God’s holiness: “When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus knees, saying, Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (v. 8). When John saw Christ in his glory, the Bible states, “And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead” (Re. 1:17). When he caught a glimpse of God’s holiness, he fell down before Jesus Christ like a dead man. In John we see the righteous response of a man who comes face to face with holy God – he is completely humbled in the presence of the Lord. Without a doubt, humanity at its spiritual best can never stand equal to holy God – every knee will bow (Ph. 2:10).

Scripture Study

God is holy – Is. 6:3; Re. 4:8;

Humanity is not holy – Ps. 51:5; Ro. 1:22-25, 3:10-23

Seeing ourselves in relationship to God – 1 Pe.1:16; Re. 1:17; Ph. 2:10; Lu. 5:1-11

Conclusion

Conviction builds on the foundation of God’s holiness. God is holy, but fallen humanity is not. This distinction (or contrast) between holy God and sinful humanity is the basis for true conviction.

