

JUST WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

Jesus Christ said: "I will build my Church." What IS that Church-human organization, or spiritual organism? Of whom composed? How does one become a member? Does it have a divine Commission? - and if so, WHAT? - and HOW carried out? By organization, or by individuals acting independently?

by Herbert W. Armstrong

MANY ARE CONFUSED about the nature of the Church founded by Jesus Christ. How shall we know? WHO or WHAT is the AUTHORITY to give us the right answer?

It was Jesus Christ who said, "I will build my Church." He is the "WORD" of God (John 1:1-3) in person-the Spokesman. The Bible is the Word of God in writing-the Maker's Instruction Book for mankind. The Bible, therefore, is the Authority.

HOW One Becomes a Member

The first place the word "church" is used following the inception of that Church (Pentecost, 31 A.D.) is Acts 2:47: "And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." This immediately gives insight into the means by which one enters the Church as a member. *God adds* each one. It is God who *puts each one into* the Church as a member.

Again, For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body" (I Cor. 12:13). The word "baptized" means immersed-put into. So, again, it is GOD who *puts one into* His Church. And HOW? By His Spirit! When God bestows within one His Holy Spirit, that puts the believer into the Church.

So note it well! One cannot enter the true Church by putting himself in-by "joining. One may join a social club, a sports team, or a secular group-but NOT the Church of God. Incidentally, is it not significant that so many of this world's "churches" have become, virtually, just social clubs?

Notice, too, the Church is here referred to as "one body." In several passages the Church is referred to as "the body of Christ." I Corinthians 12:12 says: "For as the body is one, and hath many members...."

How is the Church "the Body of Christ"? Few understand.

Here is the explanation.

Jesus Started the Work of God

God sent Jesus into the world to start the Work of God. When Jesus was twelve years old, His parents, returning to Nazareth from attending the Passover at Jerusalem, discovered the child was

not among the company. Returning to Jerusalem, "they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions. And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers." And when His parents saw Him, "they were amazed: and his mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? . . . And he said unto them wist ye not that *I must be about my Father's business?*" (Luke 2:40-49.)

What was His father's business what is the Work of God? God sent His Son Jesus into the world in the human flesh as a Messenger with a Message. He was the Messenger of the Covenant~the NEW Covenant, as foretold in Malachi 3:1.

And what was that Message? John the Baptist was to prepare the way before Him (Mal. 3:1). Also His Message was a NEWS ANNOUNCEMENT of *advance* GOOD NEWS ("gospel" means good news) of the future.

So we read: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God; As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare the way before thee. . . Now, after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of THE Gf~?' {Mark - 1:1,2, 14).

How did Jesus start the Work of God?

- 1) By proclaiming the Good News of the coming KINGDOM OF GOD.
- 2) By calling and teaching His disciples the same Message.

Notice: "Then Jesus called his twelve disciples together, and gave them power and authority over all devils [demons], and to cure diseases. And he sent them to preach the kingdom of God (Luke 9:1-2).

The Divine Commission

What is the PURPOSE of the Church-its divine Commission? To proclaim this Gospel as a witness to the world. In other words, to carry on the WORK OF GOD, which Jesus, in person, started.

After His resurrection, He gave His disciples this Commission: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). The Commission to the Church, then, is to carry on the Father's business-to proclaim the Message of the NEW Covenant that God sent into the world by His Son and Messenger, Jesus.

Jesus gave His life for us, but He ROSE from the dead, and right now TODAY He is the living Jesus Christ. And His Commission for our day is: "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end [of this age] come (Matt. 24:14).

How the "Body of Christ"

The twelve disciples became the twelve original apostles. But *HOW* did they, with the other disciples, become "the BODY of Christ"?

While Jesus was starting the Work of God, He said, "I can of mine own self do nothing," and again, "The Son can do nothing of himself," and again, ". . . but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works."

It was the power of God's Holy Spirit, dwelling in His individual human body, doing THE WORK OF GOD.

Without this same Spirit dwelling in them, His disciples would be utterly impotent. The very night before His crucifixion He said to them: "As the branch [of a grapevine] cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.

I am the vine, ye are the branches... without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:4, 5). It is sap flowing from the vine into the branch that produces grapes. It is the Spirit of God and of the living Christ, flowing into the collective Body that is the Church that produces results.

After His resurrection, just before ascending to God's throne in heaven, Jesus commanded these apostles: that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father . . ." -that is, for the Holy Spirit, the same power that did the Work of God in Jesus' human body.

On the day of Pentecost, 31 A.D., this POWER of God did come and enter into the COLLECTIVE BODY-the Church-that now was to carry on the Work of God.

The Head of God's Church

When Jesus ascended to the throne of God (the Father of the divine creating-ruling-governing Family) in heaven, He became the Head of the Church. Notice Eph. 1:22, 23: "And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, which is his body."

The CHURCH is composed of those who are the begotten CHILDREN OF GOD-of the FATHER of the divine Family. One becomes a begotten SON of God upon receiving within him the Holy Spirit of God.

This Spirit comes from the very Person of God-it is, first of all, the impregnating LIFE of God-divine, eternal, ever-living LIFE. As the physical sperm cell from the body of a human father begets a human embryo that develops into a fetus and later is born a human child, so the Spirit of God begets us into a state by which we are called, even now in this life, sons of God (I John 3:2).

Of What Composed

And thus it is that the CHURCH is composed of those who are the children of God. That is why the CHURCH is the Church of GOD, even as the Old Testament Church was called "the congregation of Israel"-the human children of Israel.

That is why, also, one CANNOT PUT HIMSELF into the Church by "deciding to JOIN." When he becomes a son of GOD, by having and being led by the Spirit of God (Rom. 8:14), then God has PUT HIM INTO the Church by begetting him as a son of God.

"Joining" a group that calls itself a church-having one's name on the membership roll of some group calling itself a church-does not make one in true fact a member of THE Church Jesus founded. Here is positive proof: "But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his" (Romans 8:9).

I have shown that it is the living Christ who puts members into His Church-and it is done BY the Holy Spirit. Notice, now, the conditions for receiving God's Spirit-Acts 2:38: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." This is speaking of being baptized in water-after which they shall receive the Holy Spirit, which, in turn, baptizes-puts them into-the Church.

Those who were so baptized on that day of Pentecost did receive God's Holy Spirit, and DID thereupon become the Church, and TO THEM, God "added to the church daily" (Acts 2:47).

The FOUNDATION of the Church

Notice, now, the FOUNDATION upon which the Church is built. To the converts at Ephesus, who had been Gentiles, Paul was inspired to write: "Now therefore, ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens [of a GOVERNMENT] with the saints, and of the household [FAMILY] of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone" (Eph. 2:19-20).

Thus you see how the one and only true CHURCH is NOT an ORGANIZATION OF MEN, but a SPIRITUAL ORGANISM. Yet that fact does not preclude organization.

Is the Church Organized?

But did Christ, the HEAD of the Church, ORGANIZE that Church? Does it have a definite form of organization?

Indeed He did-and indeed it has!

First of all, the true Church of God is a spiritual organism. It is NOT a human organization. This spiritual organism is the "Body of Christ" existing for the PURPOSE of carrying on THE WORK OF GOD.

The resurrected, eternally living Jesus Christ is the HEAD of the Church. The very fact the Church has a Head implies organization. The living Christ directs, leads, inspires, and blesses the Church in doing God's Work.

But it is a BIG, WORLDWIDE WORK. If every individual in it goes out alone, independently, trying to carry out the entire divine Commission in whatever way he sees fit, we shall have confusion, a house divided against itself.

Even Nature Is Organized.

God is CREATOR. Everything God has created in nature is ORGANIZED. Take a sturdy, beautiful

oak tree. It has a root system in the ground. It has a main trunk. It has major branches joining to that trunk, smaller branches joined to them, still smaller branches joined to each minor branch, and finally the twigs joined to the smallest branches. But they are all joined together as a system.

Jesus used the example of the vine.

He is the Vine. . . we the branches. Unless we are joined systematically to the Vine, we can produce NOTHING. In a grape vine, there is ORDER-SYSTEM-Organization.

The whole WORK OF GOD functions toward the restoration of what has been taken away from the earth-the GOVERNMENT OF GOD. The Kingdom of God IS that government. That government is an ORGANIZED government.

God's form of government is government from the top down. God the Father is the extreme top. Under Him is the living Christ, administering God's Government as God directs.

Government in the Church.

And Jesus has set ORGANIZATION-government-order-in the Church, under Him. God compares this organized Body of Christ to a BUILDING:

"Now therefore ye . . . are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit" (Eph. 2:19- 22).

The living Christ, Head of the Church, has PUT the various administrators, officers, and members into the Church AS HE HIMSELF CHOSE. Not as a man chooses for himself.

Administrators AS GOD CHOSE.

"And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers "-WHY? For what PURPOSE?

"For the perfecting of the saints, for the WORK of the ministry, for the edifying of the BODY OF CHRIST: till we all come in the UNITY of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. . . speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: from whom the WHOLE BODY FITLY JOINED TOGETHER AND COMPACTED by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of EVERY PART [each individual member], maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love" (Eph. 4:11- 16).

Christ has, indeed, ORGANIZED HIS CHURCH, SO FITLY joined together as a physical building put together with the precision of every part of the most expert craftsmen.

He chose the chief administrators, UNDER HIM. God's government IS government FROM THE TOP DOWN.

All do not have the same office. And God has given various members In His Church special TALENTS, as gifts by and through His Spirit, and aptitudes, each for his part as CHRIST has chosen, in the ORGANIZED EFFORT of carrying on Christ's WORK.

God gives these special talents, aptitudes for certain phases of administration in His Work, as HE wills, but also according to each one's natural aptitudes.

Notice the parables of the pounds and of the talents.

First, the parable of the talents. "For the kingdom of heaven [Matthew uses the term Kingdom of heaven, while Mark, Luke and John all use the term Kingdom of God. They are the same. Not a kingdom IN heaven, but "OF"-denoting ownership] is as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability" (Matt. 25:14-15).

Notice, there was something given to each. The parable pictures Jesus, of course, going to heaven to be coronated as King of kings and Lord of lords, after which He will return to RULE the earth, administering the Government of God over all nations. His own servants are His converted children of God-His Body, the Church. What He is giving them is spiritual gifts to equip each for his Individual part in GOD'S WORK.

But notice, please, He gave these additional spiritual goods, gifts, or tools, "to every man according to his several ability"-that is, according to his natural physical aptitudes or abilities. On His return as World Ruler, He called each servant to accounting as to HOW WELL each had done with what Christ had given him to do with.

By comparison of this parable with that of the pounds in Luke 19:11-27, you will see that God judges us according to how well we do in proportion to what we have to do with. These servants were to "occupy" or carry on the Work till He returns.

Special Spiritual Gifts

Now notice more about the spiritual GIFTS God gives those in His Body, doing HIS WORK, in I Corinthians 12: "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I would not have you ignorant."

Yet most people are in total ignorance of these gifts and their meaning and uses. Continue: "Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all" (verses 4-6). It is the same God WORKING in the "Body of Christ"-the Church. HE does the Work of God, by the one Spirit of God, IN the collective Body called out of the world as His instrument doing His Work.

Notice carefully, in this Work of God, which He WORKS in us by His Spirit, there are different gifts, BECAUSE there are various and different administrations, in administering God's Work-different offices-different kinds of jobs. There are various and different OPERATIONS in carrying on the Work. These require various and different aptitudes and abilities in various and different

members in the Body.

GOD Chooses Each Member's Job.

We do not all do the same job!

These special spiritual gifts are given "to profit withal." That is, to profit THE WORK-not the individual.

These gifts are aptitudes, or spiritual "tools" to use in doing the Work-not ornaments to embellish the person, as some have seemed to think-bragging about the least of the gifts.

God Himself decides which gifts to give each member: "But all these [gifts] worketh that one and the self-same Spirit, dividing to every man severally as HE will" (verse 11).

Continue: "For the body [of Christ-the Church] is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body?" (Verses 14-15.)

If one young man has been given special aptitude for a certain more or less routine office job that is actually a big help in the whole organized Work, he is doing HIS PART in the Work. But is each one free to decide whether he will be the apostle, or the pastor, or a teacher, or a routine office worker making it possible for them to do their jobs?

Here is your answer: "But now hath GOD set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased HIM" (verse 18).

But what if one is placed, by those God has set over him, in an office that this individual considers very unimportant, not honorable enough to suit his vanity?

Here's the answer: "Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem [to us] to be more feeble, are necessary: and those members of the body, which we think to be less honorable, upon these we bestow more abundant honor, and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness... but GOD hath tempered the body together . . . THAT THERE SHOULD BE NO SCHISM [division] IN THE BODY. . . Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular. And GOD hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healing, helps, governments, diversities of languages. Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles? . . . but covet earnestly the best gifts . . ." (verses 22-31).

We might mention at this point that in local churches during the first century, local elders were ordained. It is evident that some of these were ministers-that is, preachers-and some evidently were not preachers, but merely leaders or teachers.

New Testament Officials in Order of Rank

In the New Testament there are three terms used for preachers or ministers-elders, bishops, overseers. All three mean the same. Yet some elders were apostles or evangelists, but most elders were NOT apostles or evangelists.

Putting all New Testament passages together, the ADMINISTRATIVE offices, in order of rank and authority under Christ, were: 1st, apostles; 2nd, evangelists (in the New Testament, prophets did not have administrative offices, but, prior to completion of writing the New Testament, prophets received direct communication or instruction from God, which they in turn communicated to apostles).

Today God's instruction to the Church is complete, in the written Scriptures); pastors; preaching elders; and local non-preaching elders and teachers. There also were deacons and deaconesses, appointed to take care of physical duties.

Now I have shown that the true Church of God is NOT a human organization or corporation, but a spiritual organism, composed of all who have and are being led by the Holy Spirit of God abiding in them. Yet the Church is ORGANIZED.

Is It Wrong to Incorporate?

What about incorporating according to the civil laws of man? The answer is: God instructs His Church to be subject to the powers of man's government over him.

When-in our time-the Work of God was small there was no need of being incorporated. This Work was NOT incorporated until it became necessary in order to deal with the world in carrying out the Commission to go to the world with Christ's Gospel. The Work has grown worldwide and very large, and human governmental laws would not allow it to function without incorporating.

But is the corporation the Church?

IT IS NOT! The Church existed as a spiritual organism, organized as CHRIST organized it (NOT organized on any human plan), and it carried on the SAME Work of God, with the SAME divinely directed organization BEFORE it incorporated as it does today. It is organized according to GOD'S pattern, not man's legal corporate pattern.

Now some questions naturally emerge.

Can one who does not know of the true organized Body doing God's Work, and therefore is outside of it, be a member of the true Church which Christ built? The answer is yes-for it is possible for one to have truly repented, believed, and received God's Spirit-and be following that Spirit as far as he sees and understands-who does not know of the organized Work Christ is using today. But surely God's Spirit in him would lead one, in due time, into his part in the organized Body the living Christ is directing.

Is it possible that one who has joined a sect, church, or denomination NOT doing God's Work, might be truly converted, and led by God's Spirit in him? The answer is YES-I have known of a few. But in every case, either they came INTO the organized spiritual organism Christ is using in the real Work of God-or, when their eyes were opened to further light and truth, they rejected it and LOST the Spirit of God. And this was amply demonstrated by the fruits.

If other questions present themselves to readers, we shall be glad to answer privately if you will write them.

Through His Holy Spirit God gives His children "light"-TRUTH-to walk in the light, "lest darkness come upon you.

I have not been called to sit in judgment of others, but to follow Christ as He leads and directs, and witness to the true light. Hundreds of millions have now HEARD, SEEN, or READ. Jesus said that His sheep do hear and RECOGNIZE His voice and His truth, and that they will follow Him!

Every year, now, added thousands are hearing, RECOGNIZING His truth, and following Him where He is working!