

Searching for a Congregation

by Bill Crews

Well into His ministry, Jesus came with His disciples (the apostles) into an area near the great city of Caesarea Philippi (built by Herod Philip II and named for the emperor and himself). Jesus posed a question to His disciples: “Who do men say that the Son of man is?” (**Matthew 16:13**) “Son of man” is an expression that Jesus used of Himself many times. So the theme of the conversation has now become the identify of Jesus. Some of the apostles answered that some considered Him John the Baptist, and some Elijah, and some Jeremiah or one of the prophets – all complimentary answers, but all absolutely wrong. Jesus then said, “But who say ye that I am?” (**Matthew 16:15**) It was Simon Peter who then confessed the truth as to the identity of Jesus: “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (**Matthew 16:16**). Jesus then pronounced Peter blessed, confessed who Peter was, declared that the Father in heaven had revealed that truth to Peter, and announced that upon that rock (PETRA, the word for Peter is PETROS), the deity of Jesus, He would build His church (**1 Corinthians 3:10-11; Isaiah 28:16; 1 Peter 2:6-8**).

That church (EKKLESIA, called out, assembly) is also referred to as “the kingdom of heaven,” “the family or household of God,” “the building of God,” “the body of Christ,” etc. In **Mark 9:1** Jesus declared, “Verily I say unto you, there are some here of them that stand by, who shall in no wise taste of death till they see the kingdom of God come with power.” His church or kingdom had its beginning in the second chapter of Acts as about 3,000 individuals received the word preached by Peter and were baptized (**verse 41**) – thus Peter used “the keys of the kingdom of heaven” which were promised to Peter in **Matthew 16:17** (now read **Matthew 16:13-18**). **Acts 2:47** ends: “And the Lord **added to the church** daily those who were being saved.”

“The church” would include all the saved, all Christians throughout the world, but in the book of Acts Christians in various localities were formed into “churches,” or “congregations,” each organized and autonomous (see that in **Acts 8:2; 11:22, 26; 13:1; 14:23**; etc.).

God, being perfect (and omnipotent, and omniscient) has, in His word, given a perfect, or flawless, plan for “the church” and a perfect, or flawless plan for every local church, or congregation. But there are **no perfect or flawless church members, and no perfect or flawless congregations**. We should all, as individuals and as congregations strive for the perfection found in God’s plan for individuals and congregations. But we are all “works in progress.” In most congregations there are members of various ages and of various degrees of maturity. As long as the truth, all the truth, is being taught and efforts are put forth to abide by the truth, there is hope for spiritual growth.

Had any one of us lived back in the first century and found himself or herself looking for a perfect congregation, in the sense of flawless, he or she could not have found one. All were made up of people, and human beings, at their best, are not flawless. Every congregation had mature and immature Christians, and every congregation had problems to deal with – the devil saw to that. The Jerusalem church has been referred to as “the model church,” and in many ways it was. But every member was not what he or she should be (Ananias and Sapphira, **Acts 5**; some who had come from the sect of the Pharisees, **Acts 15**; those described in **Galatians 2:12**). The churches of Galatia had quickly moved to a perversion of the gospel, influenced by Judaizing teachers (**Galatians 1:6-7; 3:4; 4:8-11; 5:7**). The church in Thessalonica is highly commended in both epistles by Paul, but many had

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