

190327-4 Doctrine Series, The Church, Her Constitution – CThurman

Articles 35 and 36 are those which touch on the topic of church constitution.

35. Churches: Their Constitution*

Jesus Christ has here on earth a manifestation of His spiritual kingdom in His churches, which He has purchased and redeemed to Himself as a peculiar inheritance. His churches are assemblies of visible saints, called and separated from the world by the word and Spirit of God, to the visible profession of faith of the gospel, being baptized into that faith, and joined to the Lord and each other in their respective churches, each mutually agreed in the practical enjoyment of the ordinances commanded by Christ their head and king. New churches are established when two or three scripturally baptized believers in Christ agree together to carry out the commandments of the LORD and to keep the ordinances as the LORD delivered them; there being no necessity for an ordained preacher or authority from another church to establish a church of the properly baptized believers.

Mt.11:11; 2Th.1:1; 1Co.1:2; Eph.1:1; Ro.1:7; Ac.19:8, 9, 26:18; 2Co.6:17; Re.18:4; Ac.2:37, 10:37; Ro.10:10; Mt.18:19, 20; Ac.2:42, 9:26; 1Pe.2:5.

**Formerly Article 33 of 1644 COF*

36. Churches: Their Blessing*

To these churches He has made His promises, delivered the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and gives the blessings of his presence, acceptation, love, and protection. Here are the fountains and springs of His heavenly graces flowing forth to refresh and strengthen them. The Lord's churches belong to him and are subject to his laws and commandments; religious institutions which do not have scriptural baptism cannot be the LORD's churches, therefore, they shall always be separate and distinct from these man-made organizations.

Mt.28:18-20; 1Co.11:24, 3:21; 2Co.6:18; Ro.9:4, 5; Ps.133:3; Ro.3:7, 10.

**Formerly Article 34 of 1644 COF*

First, what is a church? A church is a group of properly baptized believers that join themselves together to carry out the commandments of Jesus Christ. This

church, and every church that is organized according to the word of God, is proof positive that Jesus Christ brought in a new covenant. (He.8.6-13) Just a few hours before His crucifixion Christ instituted a new ordinance for His church. This ordinance is called the Lord's Supper. (1Co.11.20) While explaining to His disciples what the elements of the supper represented He said, *This cup is the New Testament (covenant) in my blood, which is shed for you.* He then commanded them all to drink of it. (Mt.26.27) In that evening this gathered church and every church since, remember the necessity of Christ's death for them so that they might come into the *fellowship* of the *new covenant*. That means they were no longer going to be under the old covenant, but subject to the new covenant and new commandments. But so that we have a proper understanding of the new covenant we need to consider to whom it applies. First it applies to Israel.

Jer 31:31 Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah ...

But because Israel rejected Christ only a remnant of them, called God's election of grace, are brought into this covenant. (Ro.11.1-5) In effect God sets aside dealing with national Israel, and begins to work with this remnant, which was gathered by Christ during His earthly ministry into His first church. This church, and all churches that follow afterwards, continues until the *fulness of the Gentiles become in*. (Ro.11.25)

Ro.11.7 What then? Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded ... v.8 unto this day.

These Gentiles are also called the elect of God. (Col.3.12) These Gentiles are they that are graft into the same covenant blessings with the elect remnant of Israel. (Ro.11.17)

Ro.11.11 I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy.

We know, both from the word of God and by history, that the first churches which were formed were only of Jewish members (Ac.11.19), but by the time of the end of the history recorded in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles the churches of

Christ predominately consist of Gentile members. While Israel has been temporarily set aside from the blessings of God, a body of baptized believers has been raised up to enjoy an everlasting relationship with the Lord. But we should not overlook the fact that one day Israel shall be grafted back into the covenant.

Of these churches the Lord Jesus gave promise to be with them until the end of the world. (Mt.28.20) The churches are the only God-ordained witness to Jesus Christ in the earth. The churches are the only entity which glorifies God through His only Son. (Ep.3.21) This little flock, despised, rejected, and persecuted throughout her history is a testament to the grace, faithfulness, and power of God working in corporately-identified, baptized-believers.

A Church is Local

I believe the Bible teaches that the church is only a local body of baptized believers. I do not believe in any notion of a universal church. It simply does not exist. There is no such thing as a universal house, a universal flock, or a universal body, or universal members to a human body; why should anyone think that a church is universal?

The universal church teaching diminishes the importance of a real membership in a real church, with real officers, in a real place. It diminishes accountability to the Lord in both its members and the church. (Cfr. Re.1.11, 2.20; chs. 2-3, Christ walks in and judges all of the churches, not as one, but as independent, individual bodies.)

A church is *located* in a place or identified with the place where it is. Many seem to think that the church of Jesus' day is how all churches at all times operate. In the day of our Lord's earthly ministry we know that wherever He was there was His church. Wherever He went through the land of Israel His church was with Him. However, as soon as Christ was received into glory the place where the church was is the place where the members are. The church was local in the days of our Lord Jesus: it was where He was. And it is local today: it is where the members are. Shortly after the Lord's ascension into glory the first church became known as the church of Jerusalem. (Acts 5.11, *and great fear came upon all the church*; 8.1, *there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem*; 11.22, *Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem ...*)

Ac2.41 Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.

42 ¶ And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.

43 And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles.

44 And all that believed were together, and had all things common;

45 And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.

46 And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart,

47 Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.

Since a church is local it can become relocated. Obviously members of a church can relocate.

Ac 11:19 Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only.

But churches can also relocate. The church which was of the house of Aquila and Prisca was wherever they went. Who would deny that they were a church? Paul called them a church.

The house church of Aquila & Prisca in Rome:

Ro.16.33 Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus:

4 Who have for my life laid down their own necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles.

5 Likewise greet the church that is in their house. Salute my wellbeloved Epænetus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia unto Christ.

The house church of Aquila & Prisca in Ephesus:

1Co 16:19 The churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their house.

A church is only local.

Only Baptized Believers Were Received into Church Membership

The first members that our Lord Jesus Christ received into His church were those that had been baptized by John. John the Baptist commanded men and women to repent and be baptized because their sins were forgiven.

Mt.31 ¶ In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea,

2 And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

3 For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

4 And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey.

5 Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan,

6 And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.

The baptism of John prepared a people for the Lord's coming. When our Lord began His earthly ministry the first members He called as His disciples were only these that had received baptism at the hands of John the Baptist. There are in the Scriptures the accounts of the calling of Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip & Nathaniel. Many misread these accounts as if these were the times when they repented and received forgiveness of sins, but that is not correct. These men had confessed their sins and received Biblical baptism some time ago at the hands of John. So, when Christ called these men He called them into discipleship and they became as a result the first members of the Lord's church.

First Christ called many disciples to follow Him, of whom were: Mt.4.18-22; Mk.1.16-60; Lk.5.3-11; Peter, Andrew, James, and John; Lk.5.10, 11, Jn.1.35-50, Andrew, Peter, Philip, Nathaniel.

Once these men came into Christ's church then he appointed them to the apostolic office.

Lk.6.12 ¶ And it came to pass in those days, that he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God.

13 And when it was day, he called unto him his disciples: and of them he chose twelve, whom also he named apostles ...

(Mk.3.9, 13, 14; and Lk.6.12, 13 is very clear on these distinctions)

What is a church but an organized body of baptized believers whose desire it is to follow after Christ and obey His commandments? Members organized into a church have as their goal, above everything else, to evangelize, baptize, and to stand for the faith once delivered to the saints.

Mt.28.19 Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:

20 Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

A church of Jesus Christ cannot be constituted of unbaptized believers. A church is not an accidental gathering of believers. Gathering a large group of believers, into one place, whether or not they are baptized, without the intent of organizing into a church, are not a church. For example, believers attending a *Christian concert* do not constitute a church body; not temporarily or mystically. For believers to gather in a bowling alley, or to a picnic area, or at a movie theater doesn't make a church. There must be intent. Churches are constituted when there is purpose of heart to be joined together around Christ.

Lu 5:11 And when they had brought their ships to land, they forsook all, and followed him.

1Co 16:15 I beseech you, brethren, (ye know the house of Stephanas, that it is the firstfruits of Achaia, and that they have addicted themselves to the ministry of the saints,)

*they have addicted, ἔταξαν, 3ppl. aor. ind. act. of τάσσω, KJV, appointed, set, ordained, determined, addicted; **these had set themselves to the ministry of the saints.***

Of the Antioch church

Acts 11.21 And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord.

22 Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem: and they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch.

23 Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose (Gr. prosthesis, that part which a member would fill up and which the body should have) of heart they would cleave (abide near) unto the Lord. (that's what a church is)

Churches are made up of those who *forsake* all to follow Christ. The doctrine of Christ through His church governs the lives of her members. Every member has a personal interest in the things of their church. They are committed to hearing the same things, speaking the same things, doing the same things *together, corporately.*

Thinking , saying, and doing the same things as a church:

Ro.15.5 ¶ Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus:

6 That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2Co 13:11 Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.

Php 1:27 Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel ...

Only Biblically baptized believers can properly make up the membership of the Lord's churches.

How to Constitute a Church

No properly instructed Christian would argue against the word of God which tells us that Jesus Christ is the supreme authority of the churches.

Eph 5:23 For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body.

However, there is division about what this means. There are churches, probably most of the churches that we are familiar with, which teach that in order to have a properly constituted church there must be either a convening a presbytery of elders of the churches, and/or the approval of a *mother church*. Though there are no examples, no patterns of this sort to be found anywhere in the word of God yet this practice continues as if all true church organization solely depended upon this procedure.

To be clear, I do not deny that churches are organized under this man-made procedure, but the division which this has caused among the saints is unfortunate.

In Acts 13.1-4 there were certain prophets and teachers of the church at Antioch that had been serving the Lord and fasting together. To these the Lord made known that He had separated Barnabas and Saul for the work that HE HAD CALLED THEM TO. (v.2) The Scripture continues by saying that these same persons sent them away. (v.3) To what extent the Antioch church was involved in this matter is simply unrevealed. But Barnabas and Saul went out as the Lord commanded them and preached the gospel everywhere they went, and souls turned in faith to Jesus Christ, receiving believer's baptism. What more do we know as we continue to read in this text? We know that a number of churches were organized among the Gentiles. Barnabas and Saul did not see chapels or missions organized. They saw the Lord work in the hearts of these Gentiles so that they desire to join together in the work of Christ where they were. Yes, they were so unlearned to the truths of God's word. They didn't even have a NT! But every one of these were as much a true church of Jesus Christ as any that were living in the land of Palestine. Then as Barnabas and Saul began to retrace their steps back to Antioch they revisited those same churches and ordained them elders.

Ac 14:23 And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.

Full-fledge churches! There was no stipulation that the organization of these churches was contingent upon the Antioch church's approval. These believing Gentile-brethren were not baptized and received into the Antioch church. And what do we see that Barnabas and Saul did when they came back to Antioch? They rehearsed to the church what *THE LORD* had done among the Gentiles. Barnabas and Saul didn't share this with the church of Antioch with the hopes that they would sanction and organize the Gentiles into churches. That was already done. Barnabas and Saul shared these things with the Antioch church because they knew that the Antioch church would rejoice with them about what the Lord had done among the Gentiles. It is a matter of fact that Barnabas and Saul shared the Gentiles' conversion to Christ with many of the churches that were in Palestine.

cf. Acts 14.27, with the Antioch church; 15.3, *through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren; 12, and in Jerusalem*

These Gentiles churches were organized without preconditions of other churches. They weren't hoping that some church, a mile down the road, 50 miles, or 1,000 miles away, or on another continent would give their blessing to grant them standing as a *church*. There is no pattern set forth in the word of God so that one church might think that churches are organized in this way. One will search in vain to find any Scripture which says that one church ever organized another church. Those who do such things usurp the Lord's authority.

When we add procedure to the word of God we make things more complicated than they ought to be. How do we account for the organization of the churches in Syria and Cilicia? Barnabas and Saul had not yet gone this direction yet. Where did these church comes from.

Ac 15:41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches.

Well, these churches, if we allow the word of God to speak freely, were the result of baptize believers, who were members of the Jerusalem church, and scattered

because of persecution, knew to organize where they were. It is that simple. And many a church has been organized like this ever since.

Ac.11.19 ¶ Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only.

20 And some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, which, when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus.

21 And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord.

22 Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem: and they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch.

25 Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul:

26 And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.

How many does it take to organize a church? The Bible says that all it takes is two or three baptized disciples and Christ would meet with them.

Mt 18:20 For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

If that is not what this Scripture means then we are left to speculation. Men do like to speculate. But the simple truth is, when two or three baptized believers are gathered together in the name of Christ, by His authority, BY HIS AUTHORITY, He is in among them.

Mt 28:18 And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.

Our Lord Jesus didn't say that *all power is given unto me*, and I give it to you. NO, He said all power is given unto me, *Go ye therefore ...*

Christ is the only Head of His church. He alone organizes His church. (Mt.18.20) He alone preserves His church. (Mt.16.18) And He alone determines whether a church continues as His church. (Re.2.5) No creature in heaven or on earth, no

organization of any kind can usurp Christ's authority over His church. I am quite thankful that these things are not given into the hand of men, even well-meaning men.