The Establishment of the Church

By Jim Crouch

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“Every house is built by someone” (Hebrews 3:4). Have you ever wondered when the church, the Lord’s house, was built and how it began? The answer can be found in the Bible. The Scriptures teach that the church was first planned, then prophesied, then promised, and finally established.1

**The church planned**

Even before creation, God formed in His infinite mind a plan for our salvation. Several passages speak to this fact.

…who has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time (2 Timothy 1:9; see also 1 Peter 1:18-20; Titus 1:2; Ephesians 1:3-4; Revelation 13:8, etc.).

God’s plan for our salvation included the church. Paul said:

His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord (Ephesians 3:10-11).

The fact is the church was always a part of God’s plan for our salvation; it was not an afterthought or a backup plan. God receives glory through His church (Ephesians 3:21), and that was God’s design form the beginning.

**The church prophesied**

The church is an integral part of many significant prophecies. Centuries before the coming of Christ, the prophets pulled back the curtains of the future and revealed the coming kingdom. A good example is found in Isaiah 2:2-3:

In the last days the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.” The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem (see also Daniel 2).

In this prophecy, Isaiah says the Lord’s house (i.e., the church), would be established in the hills, on the mountain of the Lord (i.e., Jerusalem), during the last days, and all nations would stream to it. He says the “law of the Lord” would go forth from Jerusalem. Throughout the Old Testament, many prophecies provide insight into the Messiah and His kingdom.

**The church promised**

During His earthly ministry, Jesus himself made certain promises regarding the church and revealed some of the signs that would accompany its arrival.

**Mark 1:14-15**

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”

The nearness of the kingdom was the central message of John the Baptist (Matthew 3:2), of Jesus (Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:15), and of Jesus’ disciples (Luke 10:7-11). These passages show that, at the time of this preaching, the kingdom (i.e., the church) had not yet been established on the earth. The time of its coming was near but had not yet arrived.

**Matthew 16:13-19**

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” 14They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” 15“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” 16Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” 17Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. 18And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. 19I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will bebound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

At the time of this conversation, the church still had not been established – Jesus would build it in the future. He said He would build His church upon “this rock”, meaning Peter’s statement, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” This basic truth forms the foundation of the church. Further, Jesus said He would give the keys of the kingdom to Peter. Keys are used to open doors in order to gain access. Since Peter had the keys to the kingdom, the church would obviously be established during his lifetime.

**Mark 9:1 (cf. Luke 9:27)**

And he [Jesus] said to them, “I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power.”

At the time of this conversation, the kingdom (i.e., the church) still had not come; but Jesus said it would come within the lifetime of some of those who were hearing His voice. Further, Jesus said the kingdom would come “with power.”

**Luke24:44-49**

He [Jesus] said to them [the disciples], “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”45Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. 46He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48You are witnesses of these things. 49I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

This passage is significant because (1) Jesus instructs the apostles to preach a message of repentance and forgiveness of sins beginning at Jerusalem (remember, Isaiah said the word of the Lord would go forth from Jerusalem when the Lord’s house was established, Isaiah 2:3), and (2) Jesus tells the apostles to wait in the city until they received power from on high (remember, Jesus said the kingdom would come “with power”, Mark 9:1).

**Acts 1:4-8**

On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. 5For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”6Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”7He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 8But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

This passage, though similar to Luke 24:44-49, adds another important detail: the apostles would receive the power when the Holy Spirit came upon them. After receiving the power, they were to preach the message beginning in Jerusalem.

Let’s now review what we have learned from the scriptures so far regarding the establishment of the church.

* God planned the church before the beginning of time (Ephesians 3:10-11).
* God prophesied the Lord’s house would be established on the Lord’s mountain (Isaiah 2:2-3).
* God prophesied all nations would flow into the Lord’s house after its establishment (Isaiah 2:2-3).
* God prophesied the “law of the Lord” would proceed from Jerusalem when the Lord’s house was established (Isaiah 2:2-3).
* John the Baptist and Jesus both preached the kingdom was near (Matthew 3:2; Mark 1:15).
* Jesus said some who were hearing Him preach would not die before the kingdom would come (Mark 9:1).
* Jesus said the kingdom would come with power (Mark 9:1).
* Jesus promised to build His church and give the keys to the kingdom to Peter (Matthew 16:13-19).
* After receiving “power from on high,” the disciples were to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins, beginning in Jerusalem (Luke 24:44-49).
* The disciples would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them (Acts 1:4-8).
* After receiving the power from the Holy Spirit, the disciples were to be witnesses for Jesus, beginning in Jerusalem (Acts 1:4-8).

**The church present**

With the foregoing information in mind, we can ascertain the time of the church’s establishment. Luke, the writer of Acts, provides the details.

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. 5Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. 7Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? 8Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? (Acts 2:1-8).

The events of Acts 2 occur on Pentecost day, the first day of an Israelite festival celebrating the ripening of the grain crops. The time is a little more than a month after Jesus’ resurrection and about ten days after His ascension to heaven.

While the disciples were together, the Holy Spirit filled each of them; and they received the power to speak in tongues, that is, foreign languages. Jews from throughout the Roman world were present on this occasion and marveled at the divine sign they were witnessing. Note the place is right (in Jerusalem, on the mountain of the Lord’s house), the time is right (near to the days of John the Baptist and within the lifetime of those who heard Jesus teach), and the sign is right (the apostles have received power from the Holy Spirit). Jesus said, “After you receive the power from the Holy Spirit, be my witnesses beginning in Jerusalem (Acts 1:8) and preach the message of repentance and the forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47). They did as Jesus instructed.

[Peter speaking] “Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him” (Acts 2:22-24).

The crowd that witnessed the disciples speak in foreign languages wondered about the meaning of this sign. Peter explained to them it was a fulfillment of a prophecy found in Joel (2:14-21). He then began preaching and testifying concerning Jesus. Verses 22-24 (above) give us a synopsis of Peter’s sermon: he preached concerning Jesus’ miraculous signs and how these signs gave divine credence to Him and His message; he preached concerning Jesus’ crucifixion and how His death was a part of God’s plan; and he preached concerning Jesus’ resurrection. These points form the heart of the gospel (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:1-4).

In the remainder of his sermon (vv.25-36), Peter proves Jesus’ resurrection was planned by God and prophesied by David. Peter concluded his sermon with these stirring words: “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” The next passage begins with Peter’s concluding words and shows the crowd’s reaction to the sermon.

[Peter preaching] “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”37When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”38Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”40With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” 41Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. (Acts 2:36-41).

Jesus had given the keys of the kingdom to Peter, who opened its doors by preaching this first message of salvation and inviting people to enter. Peter preached the very message Jesus had instructed – repentance and forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47). All those who received Peter’s message were baptized (v.41), i.e., they repented and were baptized for the forgiveness of sins (v.38). Through baptism, they entered into the kingdom. Jesus told Nicodemus, “I will tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5). Paul told the Corinthians, “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13). The body of Christ is His church (Ephesians 1:22-23).

**Conclusion**

The evidence shows that the church, the kingdom of God on earth, was established on Pentecost day about the year AD 30 when the disciples received power from on high as they were filled with the Holy Spirit. In keeping with prophecy, the church was established in Jerusalem at a time when all nations were gathered. In keeping with prophecy and Jesus’ instruction, the law of the Lord then went forth from Jerusalem, and this law included the preaching of repentance and remission of sins. And in keeping with Jesus’ promise, Peter was given the keys to the kingdom – it was his privilege to preach the first sermon about Jesus and to invite people to become members of His church through repentance and baptism.

As further evidence that the church was established with the events recorded in Acts 2, the church is always spoken of as an existing institution from this point forward in the New Testament. Writers never speak of the church as something yet to be established after this point (Acts 5:11, 8:1-3, 14:23; 1 Corinthians 1:2, 12:27; Colossians 1:12-13; Hebrews 12:28; Revelation 1:9, etc.).

Footnote

1 The New Testament uses several different terms to describe the institution Jesus established in the first century: the church, the kingdom, the body, the temple of God, the household of God, among others. These terms will appear in the passages of scripture we will consider in this article.