



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Basic Bible Doctrine, Matthew 16:18

"The Church: Beginning, Calling, Destiny"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Tonight we are continuing our series of studies in basic Bible doctrine, and the subject is "The Church: Its Beginning, its Calling, and its Destiny." And as simply a beginning point for tonight, I'm going to read Matthew chapter 16, in verse 18, as our Scripture reading. Later we will refer to this verse, but at the moment I'd like to simply begin our study by reading it. The Lord Jesus, remember at Caesarea Philippi had asked the disciples, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" And they gave him a series of answers which individuals at the time had suggested. Some were saying that he was John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah, which are rather interesting answers in that they give us, no doubt, certain aspects of our Lord's ministry that impressed themselves upon those people. He must have been like Jeremiah, the weeping prophet. He must have been like Elijah, the prophet of fire. There must have been a note of judgment about him like John the Baptist. But then our Lord, as a good preacher, makes application. To them he said, "But whom say ye that I am?" And Simon Peter answered, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered and said unto him, and you see here an evidence of the fact that no truth comes to us apart from divine revelation, "Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father who is in heaven."

And then he adds these words, which are our text and our reading, "And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock," there has been a great deal of discussion over what this rock is. Some say the rock is Peter, "Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church." Others have said, "No, it's not Peter, but rather the statement itself, "upon this rock." That is, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." And then still others have said that, "No, it's not precisely that, but it's the Lord Jesus Christ himself, of whom Peter has spoken when he said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Later on in his first epistle, Peter refers to the Lord Jesus Christ, gathers some texts from the Old Testament that have to do with Jehovah or Yahweh as the rock, and applies them to Christ. And so we would say that if Peter was to give his own interpretation he would have said, no doubt, that the rock was Christ. "That thou art Peter, and upon this rock," that is Christ as the Messianic king. "Thou are the Christ, the Son of the living God. I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." Now, we're not interested so much in that "and upon this rock I will build my church," as simply the building of the church, because our subject is the church, its beginning, its calling, its destiny.

We frequently refer to the age in which we live as the church age. Now, the reason that we refer to it as the church age is because it is generally believed in most evangelical churches that the age of which we are a part is characterized, largely, by the fact that there is a church in existence, And that this church came into existence at a particular time, the Day of Pentecost. And since that age is still in progress of unfolding, it is called the Church Age.

Now, it is a peculiarly interesting age for us, because we do live in it. Until the present age, the age of the church, the Bible speaks primarily of two people, the Jews and the Gentiles. But now, as a result of the formation of the church, of both Jews and Gentiles, we have a third group. Now, this third group is referred to by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter 10, in verse 32, in a well known passage in which he says, "Give

none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Greeks, or the Gentiles, nor to the church of God." So, we have Jews, we have Greeks, and we have the church of God.

What is the church? When did it begin? What's its calling? What's its destiny? Well, that's what we want to talk about, very simply. We are talking about basic Bible doctrine. So let's consider now for a few moments the point, the inception of the church. There have been a number of views regarding the beginning of the church. Some traced the beginning of the church back to Adam, since Adam is the first believer in the Bible. And believing that the body of believers from the Book of Genesis, on through to the conclusion of God's program on earth, that there is one people of God, thus as a result, a natural inference, some have affirmed the church began with Adam since he was the first believer.

Now, of course, there is a sense in which the Bible does speak of one people of God. But that does not necessarily mean that there is not a proper distinction between Jews and Gentiles and the church of God. In one sense they may form one redeemed people, but at the same time there may be differences between them that are biblical differences. A simple analogy would be a man and a woman who have a family of several sons. They form one family, but nevertheless there are differences among the sons. So, this view that the church began with Adam has been propounded by some, but it has not been, at least among the great majority of biblical interpreters, followed.

There are some who have traced the beginning of the church to Abel, believe it or not. And there is a large following for tracing the beginning of the church to Abraham, because it is to Abraham that the Abrahamic promises were given, and these are the fundamental promises of the Bible. And so, it would be natural for some to contend that Abraham is really the father of the church, as well as the father of the Gentiles. Then we know that in our present age, the church age, some have contended that John the Baptist is the first member of the church, and that the church began with John the Baptist and his ministry. This is rather common, in this part of the country, among Baptists who like to

think that John the Baptist may well have been the first member of the church. But most of the biblical interpreters, if they have not contended that the church began on the day of Pentecost, have at least, even if they held that the church began with Adam or with Abraham, have admitted that a tremendous change took place on the day of Pentecost. And I think that's a weakness of the view that the church began with Abraham or the church began with Adam. They have to acknowledge that something unusual happened on the Day of Pentecost that has made the church different.

Let me illustrate, Augustus Hopkins Strong is one of the leading Baptist theologians. He has written a theology which is basically a Christian theology. Many very useful things in Strong's theology; I read it. I tell theological students to read it, too. Read the small print in it, there are a lot of very interesting illustrations for preachers in it. It's a very helpful theology. But there are certain things about his theology that are not to be followed, like the theologies of anyone.

Now, Professor Strong, after he has set forth the fact that the church began with Abraham or Adam, that is that the church was in existence before the time of our Lord, has gone on to admit that there was a tremendous change that took place in the church on the day of Pentecost. So, in effect, what it comes down to is that while the church may have begun, for him, in Old Testament times, practically speaking, it has taken on a new face on the day of Pentecost.

Now, what I would like to do is suggest to you that the church began on the day of Pentecost, and I would like to, from the Scriptures, tell you why I think the church began on the day of Pentecost. And first, I would like for you to turn with me to Ephesians chapter 1, verse 22 and 23, for here the apostle tells us what the church is. And it is important for us to understand what the church is, as we think about when the church had its beginning. Now, in verse 22 and 23 of Ephesians chapter 1, the Apostle Paul writes, "And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church." Now notice the following clause, "Which is his body, the fullness of

him that filleth all in all." Now, I think it is very plain from this passage that the church is the body of Christ; "The church, which is his body."

Now, the natural question that one would ask is, if the church is the body of Christ, how do we get into the body of Christ? Well, let's turn over to 1 Corinthians chapter 12, verse 12 and verse 13. For here we are told how we obtain entrance into the church. Now, once we have learned that, then we can ask a further question, well then, when did this activity of bringing a person into this body begin? But now, the church is his body, we read in 1 Corinthians 12, verse 12 and verse 13, "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit." Notice particularly the opening of verse 13, "For by one spirit," or in one Spirit we may render it, "were we all baptized into one body." Now, it is clear that this body is the body of Christ, or the church. And he says that we are baptized into it, in one Spirit, or by one Spirit. It doesn't really make a bit of difference, ultimately, whether we say we are baptized in one Spirit by Christ, or whether we are baptized by one Spirit into this body. We enter the body of Christ through the baptism in the Spirit, or by the Spirit.

Now, we ask ourselves, when did the baptism of the Holy Spirit take place? Now, before we do that. Let's just think of our verse in Matthew chapter 16, in verse 18. In that verse, remember, the Lord Jesus had said, "Upon this rock I will build my church." Now, if the church had been already in existence, you would have expected the Lord Jesus to say, "Upon this rock, I will continue building my church." Or "I am building my church." But he says, "Upon this rock I will build my church." Now, it seems plain, from that statement in Matthew chapter 16, verse 18, that the church is future, from the time of the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. "Upon this rock I will build my church." Now, that is confirmed by the fact that the term church only occurs two other times in all of the synoptic gospels. The other two times are in Matthew chapter 18, in one verse in which

the Lord Jesus refers to discipline in this church; that is the church of the future. The amazing absence of the term church in the synoptic gospels is accounted for, very simply, by the fact that the church was not in existence yet. He says, "I will build my church." The term is absent except for three times in the Gospel of Matthew. In one case, it's a clear prophecy. The passage in chapter 18 is to be interpreted in the light of chapter 16, a reference to a future church.

Now, we also have a statement in John chapter 7, we might look at just to make our study complete. John chapter 7, verse 37 through verse 39, here we have the great prophecy concerning the Holy Spirit's coming, and we read in verse 37, "In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the Scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water." But John adds, "This spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified."

Now, the fact that the Holy Spirit has not yet been given is confirmation of the fact that the ministries that he performs are not yet being performed. And one of those ministries is baptism into the one body. So then, the church is the body of Christ, we enter it through the baptism of the Holy Spirit, or by Christ in the Spirit. The church is future from the time of the ministry of our Lord. The Holy Spirit is not yet doing his baptizing ministry. It should be plain to us that the church is not yet in existence during the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ on the earth.

Now, if that is true, then the church did not begin with Adam, the church did not begin with Abraham, the church did not begin with Abel, as someone has suggested. It must be a future entity. Well, let's turn over now to Acts chapter 1, in verse 5, seeking to be more plainly taught by the Holy Spirit as to the precise time when baptism into the one body began as a ministry. Verse 5 of Acts chapter 1, this is in our Lord's post

resurrection ministry. We read that he said, "For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

Now, notice again the tense, "you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." So, even after the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, in that period of time when he was carrying on his post-resurrection ministry, the baptizing work of Christ in the Spirit is not yet taking place. He says, John baptized with water, you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit." Now, he has added an interesting little phrase. He has said, "Not many days hence." So, he's letting us know that we are approaching the time when those ministries and prophecies shall come to pass.

So, we naturally turn over to chapter 2, verse 1 through verse 4 where we have reference to the day of Pentecost, and the coming of the Holy Spirit. One might think, "Well, surely it is here that the prophecy, 'You shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days hence' must be fulfilled." For this is not many days hence. Well, we read, and I'll read verses 1 through 4, "And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place." Incidentally, remember this is fulfillment of prophecy. I said, I think, in our last study that if the apostles had been down on Beersheba's street at Abe's place playing pool, the Holy Spirit would still have come, because it was the fulfillment of prophecy. They would have missed out on the experience, but he was coming at a precise time and place. "And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."

Now, the tendency of Bible interpreters is simply to say, there the Holy Spirit has come. And here, John chapter 7 is fulfilled, Acts chapter 1, verse 5 is fulfilled. Those references to the coming ministry of our Lord in the Spirit, in the 3rd chapter of Matthew and other places all find their fulfillment here. But then there may be someone who

looks carefully at the words of Scripture and notices that in verse 4, we do not read, "And they were all baptized with the Holy Spirit." We rather read that they were filled with the Holy Spirit. And since there is some difference between the baptizing ministry of the Spirit and the filling ministry of the Spirit, can it be that the baptizing ministry of the Holy Spirit did not really take place here? Well now, of course, normally we would say that since that other prophecy said "not many days hence," and this is "not many days hence," and there is no other reference in the whole of the Book of Acts to any comparable time, we would normally say, yes that must have taken place here. But we still would be looking for the word "baptized with the Holy Spirit" as a reference to that which happened on the day of Pentecost.

Well, fortunately in the Book of Acts we do have this, but it comes much later. It's in Acts chapter 11, now remember in the mean time a number of things have taken place, and one of the great things is Peter's preaching in the house of Cornelius. There the Gentiles had responded and had received the Holy Spirit before they were baptized, an indication of the fact that baptism is an expression of our faith, which we already have, and not the means by which we are saved. Now, Peter comes back to Jerusalem after that great experience, and he's recounting what happened in Cornelius' house, because it's amazing. It's just like a missionary coming home and telling us what happened.

Now, if you were in our meeting Sunday night as we observed the Lord's Supper, we had a couple of missionaries here who gave us some word concerning their work. David Penney was here. He's labored off and on for a number of years in Tunisia. He reported on the difficulty of the work there and what they were anticipating doing. And then Bill Wallatarski [phonetic spelling], who was here in the earlier days of Believers Chapel and took a very active part in it, has for many years. I remember Bill particularly, because he was baptized in my swimming pool. That was one of those unusual experiences we had in the early days of Believers Chapel. He stood up in our meeting one night after the meeting had come to an end, and said he felt very convicted. He was

a Baptist, but he felt very convicted about being baptized since he was saved. He wanted to be baptized.

And Mr. Prier said, "Why, Bill we'd be happy to baptize you." Well, we were meeting in the Betty Hoffman School, and there was no baptistery nearby, so he said, "We'll arrange for you to be baptized." He said, "Well, I want to be baptized tonight." [Laughter] Mr. Prier was, he didn't have a real quick word, an answer to that. [Laughter] He said, "Well Bill, we don't have any baptistery." And he said, "But one of the elders has a body of water in his back yard." [Laughter] And he referred to me. [Laughter] This was in our meeting on Sunday night, and so, well I didn't know what to say. Howard looked at me, and he said, "Well, what do we do now?" [Laughter] I said, "Well, I don't know. I thought I had built that pool to swim in, but I'd just as soon use it for baptisms as swimming." And so we said okay.

So we concluded the meeting. We invited everybody to come back to the baptismal service. They all came out to my house went out in the back yard and there we sang some hymns, and we baptized Bill Wallatarski in that swimming pool. Several of the people came up and said, "That was the most meaningful baptism I've ever attended;" the reason being that Bill was so earnest about wanting to be baptized, and wanting to be baptized now, just as the Bible said. That swimming pool is a shrine out on Bonaire now, [laughter] and you can go out and pay a quarter and see it if you want to, I'm sure. [Laughter]

Well now, in the meetings of the church it's very interesting to hear the reports of the things the Lord is doing, and so Peter is telling here the things that happened when he preached the gospel in Cornelius' house. And we read in verse 15, he said, "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them, as on us at the beginning." Now, notice "as on us at the beginning." To what does that refer? Well, that can only refer to the Day of Pentecost. That was when the Holy Spirit fell on us. Then Peter says, "Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be

baptized with the Holy Spirit. Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God?"

So, Peter here identifies what happened in the beginning, on the day of Pentecost, with the fulfillment of the Scripture, "John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit." So then, if the body of Christ is the church, or the church is the body of Christ, and if one enters the body of Christ by the baptism of the Holy Spirit, we learn from these passages that the church was future, that the baptism of the Holy Spirit occurred for the first time on the Day of Pentecost, therefore the church began on the Day of Pentecost.

Now, you would expect if this is true, for it to be represented in the terminology of the New Testament. What do we read? Well, we read in Acts chapter 2, verse 47, "Praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." Now, that's the first mention of the term church in the Authorized Version of the New Testament. But you probably have another version, you have the New American Standard Bible, and you will notice the term church is not there, but rather they were "added to the Lord," rather than added to the church. So, that's not the first occurrence of the word "church" in the Book of Acts. But turn over to Acts chapter 5, in verse 11, we read there, "And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things." That is the first reference to the term church in the New Testament. That is the first unquestioned reference to the term "church." We read in chapter 8, verse 1, "And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles."

Now, I think we can say from what we have looked at here, that the church is composed of those who've been baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ. That takes place the moment we believe in the Lord Jesus. That body of people began to be formed on the Day of Pentecost, for it was then that the Holy Spirit came and began his

baptizing ministry. We should expect this in the light of the fact the term church is absent from the synoptic gospels. In the Book of Acts, from chapter 5 on, we frequently have reference to the term "church." It has come into existence by virtue of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. So, to answer the question then, when did the church begin? The church began on the day of Pentecost. The relationship that exists in the one body today, in which Jew and Gentile are bound together, fellow heirs of the promises of God. That relationship, in the church, of redeemed people began on the day of Pentecost.

Now, let's consider the question of the character of the church. And I'd like for you to turn to Acts chapter 15, in verse 14 for just a moment. Acts chapter 15, and verse 14, we have part of the message that James gave at the so-called Jerusalem conference, after the arguing had taken place, the argumentation had taken place, he stood up and said, 'Men and brethren, hearken unto me: Simeon,' that's a reference to Peter, "Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name." The church is a people for his name. Now, the make up of the church, according to New Testament teaching is two-fold. That is, there is such a thing as a local church, and then there is such a thing as a universal church, or an invisible church. I like the term "universal," I think that's a little better.

The local church, now, the local church is a reference to the body of believers who physically meet regularly in a certain place under the discipline of elders to hear the word of God, to worship together, to observe the ordinances. In 1 Corinthians chapter 1, in verse 1, Paul writes, "Paul called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, unto the church of God which is at Corinth." Now, that's the term church in its local sense. Now, I want you to notice one or two things that are important. The church is not a building. When we look at Believers Chapel, we should not say, "That is a church," if we are looking at the building. It's not a church. We could say, "That's a church building in the sense that that's a building where the church meets." As a matter of fact, we have no historical reference to a church building in the Christian

age until the 3rd century. In other words, the early church believers met largely in homes. And that was carried out for a considerable period of time.

Now, the Bible doesn't say the church has to meet in homes. There are some people who have reasoned from that, that therefore, you ought to have house churches instead of churches that meet in a building. The Bible doesn't either approve or disapprove. But historically, the church, in the nature of the case, met in homes. In fact, the Apostle Paul refers to the church in Philemon's house. And if we use the term church as we do today, of a church building, Philemon must have had a rather lavish home in which you could put a church inside of it. Not many of us have homes like that. But when he said the church which is in Philemon's house, he was speaking about the body of believers who meet there. So, the church is not a building.

The church is not a denomination. We read the Presbyterian church when we read the newspapers, or the Lutheran church, or the Baptist church, or the independent churches, but the Bible does not use the term church in the sense of a denomination. That's a use that is not supported by Scripture. In fact, the Scriptures seem to be opposed to that, for the Scriptures speak preeminently of believers formed into one body, not different bodies, but one body. So, it seems to me, and I say this with a great deal of love and affection for others who disagree, that the idea of a denomination is itself opposed to the idea of the one body of believers. But then there are some things that are worse than that that are transpiring in the churches these days. And that is not one thing that I would want to make a plank to constantly harp upon.

When we look at the New Testament, we also notice that the term church is never used of a national body, such as the Anglican church or the Church of Scotland. The Anglican church is an Episcopalian body. The Church of Scotland is a Presbyterian body. The Bible doesn't use the term in that sense. There is no church in the Bible named after a man, so we do not have churches named after men. Now, I have a lot of friends who meet in churches that are named after individuals, but from the standpoint of the Bible,

there is not justification for that. In fact, in the Bible in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and chapter 3, there seems to be a studied attempt on the part of the Apostle Paul to get the believers to quit thinking about "I am of Apollos. I am of Peter. I am of Paul." And also, for those who say I don't follow men, I follow Christ, and thus become themselves somewhat sectarian in their own exclusiveness. There is no church after a man's name, so in the New Testament when we read of the church which is at Corinth, we are referring to a group of people who meet at Corinth.

The Church of Christ, in my opinion, has some doctrinal aberrations that are not Christian. The one thing that they do have that's right, and I've mentioned this before, I think just recently here in one of the studies, is that they frequently put on the outside, out in their church yards where they have their name put, if you read carefully many of them will say, "The Church of Christ meets here." Now, they have caught the force of the New Testament that a building is not a church, a church building is only the place where the church, the body of believers meet. Believers Chapel is not here. Believers Chapel is a body of believers who live all over this community, but on Sundays and on Tuesday nights they meet here, and other times too.

Now, the term church is also used in the sense of the church universal. That is all believers form this one body, no matter where they may be living at the time. Now, we have instance of that in 1 Corinthians chapter 12, verse 13, where Paul said, "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body." So, whether we are living in Dallas, or whether we are living in Denver, or whether we're living in Atlanta, or whether we're living in Zurich or wherever we may be living on the face of the earth, if we are a believer in Jesus Christ and have been baptized into that one body, we form part of the church, the church universal.

Now, some people have spoken of the church universal really as the church invisible. There is a sense in which that is true. That is, if we contemplate this body of believers in the sense that we don't see them all, but they are really very visible. And

they just happen to live in different spots. I think it is better to speak of the church universal. There is a sense in which we could speak of the church invisible, in which we include all of those who have preceded us since the Day of Pentecost, some of whom are now in heaven. Vance Abner once said, "I believe in the invisible church, I do. But I do not believe in that kind of an invisible church that makes itself invisible on Sunday morning when the visible church is supposed to be meeting." [Laughter] We're not talking about that, of course. So, the term church then is used of the local church, it's used of the universal body of believers.

What are the characteristics of the church of Christ, the people for his name that the Holy Spirit is calling out at the present time? If you were to look at the church of the apostles on the one hand and then look at the modern church, and you could get them all on your television screen, a divided screen, and you would have on one side the church of the apostles, and you would have over here the church of the followers of the apostles today, what would you see? Well, you would see a great stress on the grace of God in this body, and you would see over here remnants of legalism that have intruded themselves into the church in many ways. I'm speaking of the professing church. Over here, you see every believer a priest of God, and the men all active in the meetings of the local church, and certain gifted men, who have gifts of utterance, standing on their feet and giving forth the word of God in teaching. Over here, you would see a division in the body. You would see ministers, certain men who have certain responsibilities that set them off from the others, and then you would have laity, and the responsibility resting in a small body, and the others there to listen.

On the one hand, over here you would see Christians giving in grace, giving as God has prospered them. Over here, you would see that the Old Testament practice of the tithe has intruded itself, again, into the Christian church, and legalism in that way has found its way back into the Christian church. You would also, if you were able to count the monies that were given, would probably find that over here, they were giving much

more generously and lavishly per person, than they are over here, because grace giving is always more significant giving. And then over here, you would find them meeting wherever they gather together in a place, a very humble place like a home.

But over here, you would find them perspiring and working hard in order to construct great structures, beautiful, imposing, impressive. Over here, you would find them observing the Lord's Supper every Sunday. You would find them meeting on the Lord's Day, and in an open meeting observing the Lord's Supper. It says, "On the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread." Not primarily to hear a sermon, though of course that's proper, perfectly all right, but preeminently to break bread. They were baptizing, and they were sitting at the Lord's Table. But over here, well, we have rituals and sermons. And then in some of the professing Christian churches, we have incense and different kinds of clothes and candles, and the various other types of things that we have brought back into the Christian church, but really were things that have been brought back into the Christian church from the Levitical cultists. The reason, incidentally, that ministers wear different kinds of clothes in some communions, is because in the Old Testament the priests wore different kinds of clothes, and so those practices have come back into Christianity.

Now, as far as the mission of the church is concerned, its mission is an extensive one, in that they have been given the ministry to from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, they are to go to the uttermost parts of the earth. They are to witness, not to concern themselves primarily with social reform, but with witness, with evangelism, with the edification of those who are brought to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. That's their extensive mission. G. Campbell Morgan used to like to say, "We are not to catch the spirit of the age, we are to correct the spirit of the age. The church is like salt in the midst of the world." Vernon McGee likes to say that "Israel was never told to plant flowers in the wilderness as they went through; they were to go on to the land." And so the church is to be extensively involved in propagating itself through the preaching of the word. That's what we want to

do. That's why in Believers Chapel, in our simple, little limited ministry, we are interested in, through the tape ministry, seeing that the testimony expands; through the radio ministry, likewise; through the ministry to the children and other ministries outside of our regular meetings, seeking to see the gospel go forth. That's what we ought to be involved in.

But intensively, too, we have a mission. The church has a mission to itself, and this is a mission, of course, that is the product of the Holy Spirit who indwells us. But you'll notice in Acts chapter 2, verse 42, when the church was formed on the day of Pentecost, that the historian Luke writes, "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." Now, many people looking at that text in the English version said, they continued steadfastly in four things; doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers. And so they are inclined to think that what this means is that we should continue in biblical doctrine, and then in fellowship. We should have a lot of meetings in which we get together, and pat each other on the back, and have a good time. Church socials, church functions; it's amazing what people can get out of the Bible by not carefully studying it.

Now, if you will look at this in the original text, you will see that what he means by fellowship is explained in the words that follow. And the construction in the Greek text bears this out. He does not speak of four things, he speaks of three things. He says, "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine, and in the fellowship of breaking of bread, and prayers." That's the fellowship. It's the fellowship of the breaking of bread and prayers. And in the Greek text it's very plain by the construction that Luke uses. There are three things that the church intensively, within itself, is involved in; first and foremost, doctrine, the apostles teaching. That is supremely important. "They continue steadfastly in doctrine."

Did you ever notice that when Paul says, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and it is profitable for" what? Doctrine; doctrine is preeminent in the church. That

is why we try to make it preeminent here. "They continued steadfastly in doctrine, and in the fellowship of the breaking of bread and prayers." No greater Christian fellowship can possibly be experienced upon the face of the earth than gathering with believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, who know what it is to have been redeemed from the despair of a lost condition before the Lord God, to gather and worship and praise, and give honor and glory to the Lamb of God who loved us and loosed us from our sins. What greater fellowship can there possibly be than that?

It's impossible to find any fellowship that's like that. Go to as many banquets as you want to, as far as I'm concerned. But I, personally, prefer the fellowship of the saints of God at the table of the Lord. The fellowship in prayers, of fellow believers who know what it is to be redeemed and who want to make the center of their conversation and their talk the ministry of Jesus Christ to us, that to me is the fellowship. I think that the apostles would agree. In fact, I think I heard a faint amen from Paul right then, [Laughter] but I guess it was not. [Laughter] I'm getting close, but I guess that was a mistake.

Now, the message of the church is very plain. The apostle said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." It's just as simple as that. Now, I would like to say just a word about the destiny of the church in the remaining moments that we have. We have about ten. There are two ways in which we can look at the destiny of the church. We can look at the destiny of the local church, and we can look at the destiny of the universal church. So, we can look at the destiny of the church in these two ways. Now, if we look at it from the standpoint of the local church, what does the future hold for the local church according to Scripture? Well, the Apostle Paul has something to say about this in 2 Timothy chapter 3, verse 1 through verse 8. Let me read these verse, he says,

"This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents,

unthankful, unholy, Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, Traitors, heady, high-minded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away. (That's biblical separation.) For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with various lusts, Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. Now as Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the faith."

Now, it is clear then, if this is the future of the local church, then the future of the local church is apostasy and wrath. Now, the Bible, I think, speaks very plainly to this end. In other words, the Bible says in a number of places, that characteristic of the last days will be apostasy from the truth that the apostles proclaimed in their doctrine. If we had time, we could look at 2 Peter chapter 2, verse 1 through verse 3, where it is revealed that the apostasy will be doctrinal apostasy. They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming?" There will be mockers. They will be walking after their own lusts, so they are morally apostate, but they will also speak of doctrinal things that indicate that they have wandered from the faith in that way as well. And Paul, in 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 says that "they may expect everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, when the Lord Jesus Christ returns to the earth." So, the destiny of the church, so far as the local church is concerned is ultimately apostasy, and divine wrath, and eternal punishment. That is what the New Testament sets forth concerning the local church.

One of the reasons for this is simply that we have abandoned the faith. Horatius Bonar once said, "I looked for the church, and found it in the world. I looked for the world, and I found it in the church." And so, as time has gone by, in many cases, the world and the church have become mingled, so that they are really the same. The only difference between the world and the church is that possibly we can say, in many of our

professing Christian churches, the class of people is a little better class in the church than out of it, but they both are parts of the world.

Now, not everybody in the local church, of course, is going to be apostate and face the wrath of God. The Bible speaks of individuals who are going to be caught up to meet the Lord in the air, and so far as the universal church is concerned, composed of those who truly believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, their destiny is rapture. Now, we read in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, verse 13 through verse 18, of this rapture of the saints. It's amazing to me that some people can deny the rapture of the saints by saying the term "rapture" is not found in the Bible. I've actually heard several people make that statement recently, not here in the Chapel, but in other places. The rapture is not taught, because where is the term "rapture" in the Bible? Well, the term "rapture" is not in the Authorized Version of the New Testament, but we read in verse 17, "Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them." That's what rapture means, to be caught up together with them. The term rapture is from the Latin word, rapio, and that word means to catch or seize. It's the word from which rape comes. It's the word from which rapture comes in the sense that when I listen to Handel's Messiah, I am caught up in almost spiritual rapture, taken up by the beauty of that piece of music.

Now, in the Latin version of this particular text, the term rapiemur is used, from rapio, which means "to be raptured." That's where the term came. So, the English term is not there, but the rapture is here. It means to be caught up. The Greek word, harpazo, means the same thing. Caught up, "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." The apostle is speaking here of believers, for he says in verse 13,

"I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus, will God bring with him. For this we

say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not precede them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: 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. Wherefore comfort one another with these words."

The apostle says very simply, that there is a time coming when those who have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, are going to be caught up to meet him in the air. Those who have died, and whose bodies have been placed in the grave, their spirits will come with him; the Lord will bring them with him. And then for those of us who are alive on the earth, who still are in this body, what will transpire is simply this, the Lord will come with the spirits of those who have already died, he will, by virtue of his mighty power, raise the bodies of those saints whose spirits are with him. Those spirits will rejoin their bodies, except their bodies will be transformed into bodies of glory and beauty, resurrection bodies, we who are alive and remain in these vessels that we are walking around in, which are being daily more and more corrupt, "we shall be changed in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye, and we shall be caught up together with them." They shall be raised first; we shall join them in the air, the living changed with bodies of glory. We shall meet them, and meet the Lord, so that the whole body as one body meets him in the air. What a magnificent hope Christians have, believers. "Wherefore comfort one another with these words."

Now, I know that someone will say at this point, "Well, when is that going to take place?" Well, I wish I knew when it was going to take place. And some will say, "Is this going to take place before the tribulation?" Well, I must say only what I think, as far as I can tell, this is not an easy question to settle, as far as I can tell, there are legitimate difficulties with the theory that the next great event for the church is the rapture. And at

the same time there are legitimate difficulties with those who say that the church is going to go through the tribulation and then be raptured, meet the Lord in the air, and come back immediately with him to the earth. There are certainly difficulties with that theory.

As far as I can tell, Revelation chapter 3:10 does give some hope of the rapture preceding the tribulation, and I'm inclined to hold that view. "Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth." We don't have time to enter into a lengthy exposition and exegesis of this text, but I think there is legitimate reason for saying that this text gives hope of a pre-tribulation rapture. There are other factors in the Book of Revelation that suggest that as well. So, I like to, as far as I'm concerned, I think the next great event is the rapture of the church. I am looking for the Lord Jesus Christ to come again at any moment. I am not looking for the tribulation. I am not looking for the anti-Christ. I am really looking for the Lord Jesus Christ. But I think we must remember there are good believers, some believers better than I, who hold other views.

Recently in Dallas, I attended the meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis, and there I had an opportunity to talk with Dr. Stan Gundry who is with Zondervan now. He's been a teacher for many years at Moody Bible Institute, at Trinity Seminary, and the brother of Bob Gundry who has written, probably the most significant book on the post-tribulation rapture. Stan Gundry is a very wise man. I said, "By the way, Stan, what is your view?" In the light of Bob, who is a very close friend of mine. And I said, "What's your view of the rapture, in the light of the fact that Bob has written this book on the post-trib rapture." He said, "Well, I still hold to the pre-trib rapture in spite of what my brother has written in his book." He said, "As far as I'm concerned, I feel that my difficulties are less than their difficulties, and so I still hold to a pre-trib rapture." Well, I wouldn't argue exactly as Stan, but I personally feel that we have legitimate hope for believing that the next great event is the coming of the Lord Jesus in

the air, and that we may legitimately hope to meet him there. I hope it is soon, but no man knows when. And if there should be a different arrangement of events, I give all of my good friends who hold other views the permission to say, "I told you so," [Laughter] as we go up, whenever that is. [Laughter] Providing they give me the privilege to say the same.

Well, our time is up, let's close with a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for the privilege and opportunity to consider the church, one of the great manifestations of the constant working of the Holy Spirit in the present age. Oh God, we do pray that we may fulfill our place within that body, for each of us, every individual here has an important place that only they can perform in that body. May we all minister so that the body may reach the perfect man for Jesus' sake amen...

[RECORDING ENDS ABRUPTLY]