

How Does One Enter The Church?

Bible Answers About The Church

In prophesying of the establishment of the church, Isaiah said, "Now it will come about that in the last days, the mountain of the house of the LORD will be established as the chief of the mountains, and will be raised above the hills; and all the nations will stream to it" (Isa 2:2 NAS). The last statement in this verse indicates two very important things about membership in the church. First, citizenship in the kingdom would be available to all races and nationalities. This would be in obvious contrast to the exclusively nationalistic religion of the Jews of the Old Testament. Second, the statement implies that citizenship in the kingdom of God, which is the church (Matt. 16:13-18; Col. 1:13), would be greatly desired. The very next verse in the second chapter of Isaiah reads: "And 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; that He may teach us concerning His ways, and that we may walk in His paths.' For the law will go forth from Zion, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (Isa 2:3 NAS).

The church is a divine institution and not a human production. It is not to be confused with human denominations. Therefore, it should be obvious that the church cannot be entered by humanly devised methods! For example, one can become a member of a human organization or denomination by simply "joining" it. But entering the church of Christ involves radical changes in the heart and life of an individual.

Such radical changes are involved in becoming a member of the Lord's church that the Savior likened it to being "born anew." He said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3 NAS). In other words, just as we became members of our human families by a fleshly birth, so we become members of the family of God by experiencing a new, spiritual birth. None of us thinks in terms of having "joined" our earthly families; therefore, we should not speak of "joining" the church, the family of God. One must be born into it! At such a time as one is born anew, and therefore saved from his sins, the Lord adds that person to the church (Acts 2:47 KJV).

Since the Lord made it clear that being "born anew" was a necessary prerequisite to membership in the church, let us examine the nature of this spiritual rebirth more closely. Jesus announced that a new birth would be necessary in order for one to enter the kingdom when He told Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, "Except one be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus was puzzled by Jesus' statement and asked, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" Jesus replied to these questions by saying, "Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (Jno. 3:3-5 RSV). Now notice exactly what was said, in this conversation: (1) One must be born anew before he can enter the kingdom; (2) this new birth is not physical, but spiritual; and (3) This spiritual birth

involves two elements – “water and the Spirit.” What is the significance of “water” and “the Spirit” in this connection?

Some have contended that the word “water” was used in a figurative sense in this text, but why should anyone assume that? There is nothing in the text to cause one to think that it is figurative. Besides, what would the word “water” refer to if it were figurative? It is much more reasonable to take the word at its face value. And if one does that, to what could it possibly refer other than baptism? Baptism is the only act or duty related to the Christian religion which in any way involves water.

The “Spirit” involved in the new birth is undoubtedly the Holy Spirit, the Third person in the Godhead. But what does the Holy Spirit do in the process of salvation and entrance into the church? Does He call one miraculously and give him a mysterious sign of salvation and acceptance into the kingdom? Not at all. The New Testament makes it very clear that the power of the Holy Spirit in conversion is exercised in only one way. He acts only through the Word of God to convict and convert sinners. Notice three passages to confirm this: “for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, {that is,} through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Pet 1:23 NAS). “In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we might be, as it were, the first fruits among His creatures” (James 1:18 NAS). “For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet {you would} not {have} many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel” (1 Cor 4:15 NAS).

Notice how perfectly logical this explanation is. Every birth involves a begetting and a coming forth, and so it is with the new birth which is necessary for entrance into the family of God. The Holy Spirit, by means of the word of truth, begets. Then, after a time, the actual coming forth takes place when one who has heard and believed the Word of God actually obeys that word in being baptized! The second chapter of Acts gives us an illustration of this truth. Peter and the other apostles spoke as they were guided by the Holy Spirit. The multitude heard their message; many believed it and 3000 were baptized! They were saved! (Acts 2:38; 41). They were added to the church (Acts 2:47 KJV).

Another verse that teaches that same truth as Jno. 3:3-5, is 1 Cor. 12:13. “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (NAS). Notice that Paul is dealing with the matter of entrance “into one body,” which body is the church. He points out that it is “in one Spirit” that men are “baptized into one body.” This does not mean that men must receive the baptismal measure of the Holy Spirit in order to enter the body, for not all of the Corinthian Christians had received such a baptism. The baptism must therefore be immersion in water, the only other type of baptism associated with the New Testament church. But what is the relationship of the Holy Spirit to this immersion in water? Exactly the same as His relationship to the new birth. He instructs and guides men, through the Word of God, so as to cause them to submit to immersion in water. Paul confirms this when he said, “For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal 3:26-27 KJV). We enter the church in the same way one puts on Christ. When we have heard, believed and are baptized in obedience to the instructions of the Holy Spirit we enter the church (Cf. Acts 18:8).

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