

# The Church--Its Identity

by Benjamin Franklin

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*The true Church is founded on the truth concerning Jesus, that 'he is the Christ, the Son of the living God', and is established in Jerusalem in the time of the apostles.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 16:18, John 14:6, Acts 2:47, Acts 4:12, 1 Corinthians 1:10, 1 Corinthians 3:11, Ephesians 2:20, Colossians 1:18, 1 Timothy 3:15, 2 Timothy 3:16

**Topics:** "Church Identity", "Christian Community"

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## Description

Benjamin Franklin preaches about the true identity of the Church, emphasizing that the community referred to as 'my Church' by Jesus is often misunderstood and spoken against by those outside of it. He delves into the importance of being part of the body of Christ, highlighting that to be in the Church is to be in Christ, in a justified and pardoned state, enjoying the benefits of His sacrifice and presence. Franklin stresses the significance of being founded on the right foundation, established in the right place and time, and following the law given by Jesus, the head of the Church. He challenges the notion of successions in churches, advocating for a return to the original teachings, worship, and authority of Christ.

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## Transcript

"But we think it right to hear from you what you think: for, as it respects this sect, we know that it is every-where spoken against."--ACTS XXVIII: 22. (Anderson's Translation.)

HE Lord says, in Matt. xvi: 18, referring to the confession Peter had made: "On this rock I will build my Church." My work, in this discourse, will be to define and identify the community styled by the Savior "my Church." This is evidently the same community styled "this sect" in my text. The former is the Lord's way of speaking of the body in view, and the latter the way men, not in the community, and not understanding it, or its position, but owing it no ill-will, spoke of it. This language comes from "the chief men of the Jews," as we learn from verse seventeen. That which our Lord calls "my Church," they call "this sect." Those "chief men of the Jews" regarded the body, or Church, merely as a "sect," or faction, and certainly a very unpopular one, as it was "every-where spoken against."

This word "sect," is never used in a good sense in the New Testament; nor is the original word from which it comes. Hairesis, the original word from which we have "sect," occurs nine times in the New Testament, and is [341] translated "sect" five times, and "heresies" four times. We read of damnable heresies (2 Pet. ii: 1), and find heresies put down with "the works of the flesh" (Gal. v: 20); and find the statement added, verse twenty-one, "that those who practice such things (as heresies) shall not inherit the kingdom of God."

Heresy is ranked with "lewdness, uncleanness, wantonness, idolatry, sorcery," etc. In the speech of Tertullus, accusing Paul (Acts xxiv: 5), he charges him with being a ringleader of the "sect" of the Nazarenes. Verse fourteen, same chapter, we find Paul's reply, in which he says: "After the way which they call sect, so do I worship the God of my fathers." He does not admit that the body with which he was identified was a sect, but that it was called a sect. We can not, therefore, speak of a "Christian sect," or call the Church a sect, without as great an impropriety as to speak of a Christian heresy, or call the Church a heresy.

There is a community called, in the New Testament, "the kingdom of God" (John iii: 3); "the Church of the living God" (1 Tim. iii: 15); "one body" (Eph. iv: 4).

To be in this body, Church, or kingdom, is the same as to be "in Christ." It is to be in a justified state, or pardoned state. To enter into it, is to enter into a state of justification or pardon. In entering into that body, we come to the blood of Christ, which cleanses from all sin; to the Spirit and to the life of Christ, all of which are in the body. If we enjoy pardon, the benefits of the blood of Christ, the Holy Spirit, the life of Christ, we must be in the body. God and Christ dwell in the Church, which is the temple of God and the "pillar and support of the truth." To dwell with God and Christ, enjoy the cleansing of the blood of Christ, the remission of sins, the impartation of the Spirit of God, and the new life, we must [342] be in Christ, or in his body--the Church. To be out of the Church is to be separated from God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the blood of Christ, the life of Christ, and justification. It becomes a matter of momentous importance, then, to know that we are in Christ, or in the Church.

It is not enough to know that we are in a Church, but we must know that we are in "the Church of the living God," "the kingdom of God," or "body of Christ." There is not a promise in any other institution or community, but this. The Lord has one Church, and we must not mistake something else for that Church. How can we know that we are members of the Church, unless we know what the Church is? If we do not know what the Church is, we do not know whether we are in the Church or not, whether we are in Christ or not, whether we are justified or not. If we intend to enjoy God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the blood of Christ, and, in one word, the salvation of God, in the kingdom or Church, we must be in that kingdom. To be in the kingdom or Church, we must know what it is. How shall we, then, identify the Church or kingdom of Christ? I lay down the following points for consideration:

- I. A body, or community, not built on the foundation which God laid, is not the community which the Lord calls "my Church."
- II. A community not founded and established in the right place, is not the Church of Christ.
- III. A community not founded at the right time, is not the kingdom of Christ.
- IV. No church can be the true Church not founded by the proper persons, Christ and the apostles.
- V. A kingdom, with any other law than the one given by the head of the Church, is not the kingdom of Christ. [343]
- VI. Any community labeled with a foreign name, or a name not found to designate the body of Christ, in the New Testament, is not the kingdom of God.

A failure at any one of these points is fatal to the claims of any body professing to be the body of Christ. It is due to the greater portion of the religious bodies of our day, called "churches," to state distinctly that

they do not claim to be the kingdom of God, or the body of Christ. Excepting a few, the balance only claim to be branches of the body, or Church of Christ. Where a church does not claim to be "the Church," but simply a branch of the Church, the members are only members of a branch, and the officers are only officers of a branch, and not members and officers of the body of Christ. These branches, and officers in them, are as separate and distinct from the kingdom of Christ and the officers in it, as Great Britain and Russia, and the officers of these respective governments. One of these branch communities does not respect the acts of another, or in any way regard them. These different branch communities are distinct, separate, and independent kingdoms, with different laws, officers, names, foundations, times, and places of origin. They are not built on the same foundation, did not originate at the same time and place, have not the same law and officers, nor the same ecclesiastical organization, and are, to all intents and purposes, independent and distinct communities. If one of them dies, there is no grief or lamentation among the others, in view of the loss, nor an effort to save another branch of the same church from dying. They are all willing it should die. They have not one particle of sympathy for it. If a new party attempts to rise, the parties in existence, instead of thanking God that another orthodox church has been born, taking it by the hand and raising [344] it up to manhood, and rejoicing in its appearance, turn their batteries on it from every quarter, denouncing it as a "damnable heresy," and do their utmost to destroy it. When they fall, and find that it will live in spite of all their denunciations and efforts to kill it, they turn round and recognize it as another "orthodox denomination." Not a new religious party ever came into existence on the face of the globe that was not denounced as a heresy, when it first made its appearance, and that was not fought and opposed while it was young and weak. But when a party becomes strong, influential, and popular, it becomes an orthodox branch of the church! Thus, all the parties now called "orthodox branches" were once styled "heresies;" and that, too, when they were better than they are now; but when they could fight their way, and live, in spite of the old ones, they ceased to be heresies, and became good orthodox branches!

I. We have said, that no party, or community not built on the foundation which the Lord laid in Zion, is "the Church of the living God." What, then, is the foundation of the true Church? The Lord inquired of the apostles, "Who say you that I am?" Peter replied: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." The Savior proceeded: "On this rock I will build my Church." On which rock? On this grand statement, which flesh and blood had not revealed, but which the Father in heaven had revealed, and which he compares to a rock--that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God"--"on this," says he, "I will found my Church." This is the great proposition of the Divine government. In it all the minor propositions are included. In it centers, and on it rests, the entire revelation from God to man. If this grand proposition concerning Jesus, that "he is the Christ, [345] the Son of the living God," is true, the entire Scriptures are true; for this being true, he knew all things, and his numerous quotations from Moses, the Psalms, and the Prophets, as the word of God, and the language of the Spirit of God, is an indorsement of all these writings. His calling the apostles, sending them and qualifying them, as well as endowing them with supernatural power, gave them an endorsement that no man can in honor evade. This grand proposition is the foundation of the Church, the faith, all true piety, and the hope of heaven. It is not a proposition concerning a theory, a speculation, or subtlety, but a proposition concerning a person, who was dead and is alive, and lives forever and ever. This proposition is of such momentous magnitude, if true, that we will be lost forever if we do not receive it. The Almighty Father will cast us off forever, as if we had rejected himself in person, if we reject this fundamental proposition concerning his Son. The moment we receive this proposition, we bind ourselves to receive all that Jesus taught, do all he commanded, and furthermore, we have a right to hope for all he has promised.

How many churches have we in this generation that are built on this foundation, or that will receive a person on this foundation? I regret to know that many of them openly declare this not sufficient. They maintain that we must have something more. In doing this, they do not honor our most gracious and adorable Lord, but dishonor him. Is there one church in the world that ignores all articles of religion, written out by uninspired men, in receiving the sinner, and that receives him on the confession, that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God?" There is one Church that does this. This Church is built on this great truth, and receives every [346] person that comes on this foundation-truth, to the initiating rite of the New Institution; and it will receive him on nothing else. Those received on this foundation, and united in one body, are on the rock--the sure foundation. Those built on any other foundation, or not on this foundation, can not claim to be the Church of the living God, the body, or kingdom of Christ. The Romish Church is not built on the truth that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God"--the rock--but on "the lie" that Peter is the rock. The central idea, or foundation-thought, in the Episcopal Church, is its form of church government. Its very name originated in this peculiar form of government. This is a side foundation, or another foundation, and not the one which the Lord laid. Not being built on the true foundation--the one which God laid--it is not the building of God, not the temple of God.

The fundamental, or central, idea in Methodism, or in the Methodist body, is method. It took its name from the idea of method. It is founded on the idea of method. There is nothing religious, spiritual, or celestial in method. There are as many methods of doing evil as of doing good. Still, this is the central idea of the largest Protestant party in the world. This is not only another, but almost no foundation. No wonder that a people should be dividing every few years, with a central idea so feeble in its attractive powers. The Presbyterian body has for its central, or fundamental idea, the Presbyterial form of church government, or the idea of governing by a presbytery. This is, so far as it is a foundation at all, another foundation, and not the one which God laid. The body, or building on it, is not on the true foundation, and not the building of God. The central idea in the Baptist body is baptism. The body takes its name from the initiatory rite of the [347] kingdom, and not from the head over all, blessed forever and ever. It is founded on an ordinance, and not on the truth concerning him who authorized the ordinance. This is another foundation. So on, the whole round of sectarian establishments. Not one of them is founded on the true foundation--the truth--concerning Jesus, that "he is the Christ, the Son of the living God." Not one of them has confidence enough in our Lord to make the truth concerning him its central idea, its foundation. Not one of them is willing to identify itself with our Lord, commit itself to him as its teacher, leader, and head, and, binding itself to his holy law, declare itself for him, and all he taught.

II. A community not founded or established in the right place is not the true Church. I am rejoiced that I need no special effort to show the place where the true Church was founded. All agree that in Jerusalem was the place. The Lord said it behooved the Messiah to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day; and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem. It would be easy to refer to the prophets, and to many portions of the New Testament, and show, beyond all reasonable doubt, that the true Church was founded in Jerusalem. But, as all parties admit this, I shall not occupy my limited space in arraying the proof.

If my hearers desire to know whether the body with which they stand identified is the true Church, let them inquire where it was founded. If it was founded in Jerusalem, it may be the true Church; but if it was not founded in Jerusalem, it is most conclusive evidence that it is not the true Church. No matter how many good people there are in it, nor how many good things are taught and done [348] in it, it is not the true Church. One clear difference between a counterfeit and genuine note detects the one that is counterfeit,

especially so clear a difference as a difference in the place of location. A difference, then, between any body of people and the body of Christ so striking, as originating in Rome, and originating in Jerusalem, or the difference between being founded in Rome, and being founded in Jerusalem, proves that which was founded in Rome, London, or Geneva, to be counterfeit. The Church of Christ was first planted in Jerusalem, and all churches first planted or founded anywhere else are certainly spurious. They are not genuine. Nor is it any matter how many points of resemblance there may be between the genuine and the counterfeit, they are not the same; but the counterfeit is only the more dangerous, and likely to deceive. When trying them, to determine which is the true or the genuine Church, look for this mark on it: "In Jerusalem."

III. A community not founded at the right time is not the kingdom of God, or body of Christ. This test is a severe one. It is unambiguous. The community which the Lord calls "my Church" (Matt. xvi: 18), was certainly not built when he said: "On this rock I will build my Church." He alluded to what he intended to do in the future, and not to what he had done in the past, when he said, "I will build my Church." He taught his disciples to pray, "Thy kingdom come;" but certainly did not teach them thus to pray after the kingdom had come." "There be some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the kingdom of God come with power." Many Scriptures like these show that the kingdom had not yet come, or that the Church was not yet established. In the apostolic letters, we find numerous references to the Church, kingdom, body, house of God, temple of [349] God, etc., as then in existence, showing that the Church, or kingdom, was established. This, then, proves that it was founded in the time of the apostles. This is sufficient for my purpose now. The true Church was, then, founded in the time of the apostles. This is a mark of the genuine Church not to be found on any counterfeit in the world. A community not founded in the time of the apostles, is not the one which the Lord called "my Church," or is not the Church of the living God. I care not where the history of a community of people may lead us. If it lead not to the time of the apostles, it does not lead us to the founding of that body, purchased and cleansed by the blood of Christ.

When did the Church of Rome originate? It did not originate in a day or a year, but gradually subverted the apostles' teaching, and, in centuries, inaugurated full-grown Popery. But there is not a trace of a Pope or Universal Father, to say nothing of Vicegerent of Christ, or Lord God, the Pope, nor Popery, in the history of the first three centuries of the Christian era. Popery was inaugurated too late, by at least three centuries, to be the true or genuine Church. It is one of the basest and most impudent counterfeits ever imposed on the credulity of man. If Popery was born too late, or is too young to be the true Church, what shall be said of those communities born in the past three centuries? They are all too young by largely more than a thousand years. No church that came into existence since the death of the apostles can be the Church of the living God.

IV. No church can be the true Church that was not founded by Christ and the apostles. Churches founded by other persons, or originating with other persons, are simply not the Church of Christ. All books, all parties, [350] and all men agree that Christ and the apostles founded the community called "the body of Christ--the "one body" of Paul. What shall we say, then, of a church that traces its history to George Fox, and finds not a trace of its existence beyond him. There never was a Quaker before George Fox, nor a Quaker Church. The history of the world does not refer to the existence of a Lutheran or a Lutheran Church before Martin Luther lived. The Lutheran Church originated with Luther. The body of Christ existed from the apostolic day till the time of Luther, before there was any Lutheran Church. The Presbyterian Church originated with John Calvin. Before the time of Calvin there never was a Presbyterian, nor a Presbyterian Church. The Church, or body of Christ, existed from the time of the apostles till the time of

Calvin, and consequently could not have been established by Calvin. Presbyterianism was, therefore, born many long centuries too late to lay any claims to Christianity. It may have incorporated some Christianity in it, but it is still carefully and very justly labeled "Presbyterianism." The Methodist Church originated with John Wesley. Before the time of Wesley there never was a Methodist Church or a Methodist. But the Church of Christ existed from the time of the apostles till the time of Wesley. Hence, Methodism originated with the wrong person to be the Church of Christ. The body of Christ originated with Christ and his apostles, and not with Wesley. Any body or community that did not originate with Christ and the apostles, but with some more modern person or persons, is manifestly not the body of Christ.

V. A kingdom or community, with any other law than the one given by the Lord, the great Head of the Church, is manifestly not the kingdom of Christ. The law of the [351] great King is clearly laid down in the Bible. The Bible contains the constitution and law of the King for his kingdom. This was the only law ever authorized by the great King and Head of the Church, or adopted, approved, and practiced under in the time of the apostles. Any church or body of people, who have substituted any other law, no matter how many resemblances there may be between it and the law of God, is not the body of Christ. He never authorized a living man even to alter his law, add any thing to it, or take any thing from it, to say nothing of substituting another law for it. It may be replied that these other laws are like the law of God, or taken from it. This, these parties do not believe themselves. A Presbyterian does not believe that the Methodist "Book of Discipline" is of Divine authority; has no regard for it; and probably never reads it. A Methodist does not believe that the Presbyterian Confession of Faith is of Divine authority, and has no regard for it. There is not a party in the world that has any regard for the Presbyterian Confession of Faith, except the Presbyterian party. The same is true of the creed of every other party in the world. But all good people have respect for the law of God. The law of God is supreme, and those loyal to it, united under it, and keeping it, are his people--the body of Christ. But those formed into parties, under other laws, are new settlements not indorsed by our King.

VI. Any community labeled with some foreign name, or some name unknown to the New Covenant, must be a new and strange body. There can be no use in a new name for the old body or community. There must be a new idea, or something different from the old community, to create the necessity for a new name. If we have nothing they did not have in apostolic times, we need no other [352] names than they had. If we have the kingdom of God, the Church of God, the body of Christ, and nothing else, there is no need of calling it any thing else. But the truth is, new names come from new ideas, and are intended to express something new. A man may read of the Church of God, the body of Christ, the kingdom of God, etc., for a month, and it never suggests a Methodist Church, a Presbyterian Church, or a Baptist Church, unless in contrast. He knows that he is not reading about these latter bodies, as they were not in existence at the time of the writing. The new and foreign name shows that it does not refer to the body of Christ, but something else.

Now, there are so many notions about succession of churches, preachers, officers, ordinations, ordinances, and the like, that I know that many will inquire for a succession in some of these respects. It will, therefore be necessary to make a few observations touching this subject:

1. The attempts at making out a succession of Popes on the part of Romanists--the wicked Popes through which their pretended succession runs, and the successions attempted to be shown in the Greek and Episcopal churches, are sufficient to cover the face of a man of conscience and sense with utter shame and confusion. If there is no grace to be found unless these successions, or any one of them, can be made out, the world is lost. But I am thankful that the New Testament knows as little of any of these

successions, or any necessity for them, as it does of a Romish, Greek, or Episcopal Church.

The Church of Christ is not built on a succession of any kind, Romish, Greek, or Episcopal, but on the truth concerning Jesus, that "he is the Christ, the Son of the living God." The souls of the saints rest not on the difficult and doubtful task of making out successions of any kind. [353] They turn their hearts to the truth concerning our Lord, which he compares to a rock, on which he said, "I will build my Church." They find the Church built on that great foundation-truth, and it receives all its members on that truth, as it did at the beginning, in the right place, in Jerusalem; at the right time, on Pentecost; originating with the right persons, Christ and the apostles; having the right law, the law of God; and with the right name, the body of Christ, the kingdom or Church of God, with the original worship and all things as they were at the first.

Having come into the school of Christ, they are now his disciples, learners, pupils, and he is their Teacher. They are so busily engaged in the lessons given them by their Great Teacher, and so enraptured with them, that they have no time for examining musty records about successions of churches, men, or ordinances. They depend not on succession, but fellowship with the Father, and his Son Jesus the Christ. They listen to no unregenerated men, prating about a succession which never was, and never can be made out, but to the law of their glorious King.

If these successionists ask where the Church was in the dark ages, tell them you know not; that the Lord took care of it, and you are thankful to know that it is here still, full of life, power, and determination, and destined to do a greater work than ever before. Tell them, that, with God's blessing, we intend to restore the sure foundation which the Lord laid, and build on, sweeping away every thing in the way of the work; that we intend to reinstate the authority--the supreme authority of our only Potentate, Jesus the Messiah, head over all, blessed forever and ever, and sweep from earth all opposing authority of men; that we intend to restore the law of God to the people of this generation, reinstate it fully, where the clergy had set it aside by the [354] doctrines and commandments of men, at the same time sweeping away all creeds, confessions of faith, disciplines, etc., in the way of the full and free administration of the law of God. Tell them that we intend a complete restoration of the faith, practice, worship, and all things as they were at the first.

Here is clear and definite work. That body, which the Lord called "my Church," which was "every-where spoken against," in the time of Paul, is here, alive, standing on the old foundation, with the same head, creed, or law, and the same name; nor does it fail to be "every-where spoken against" still; nor is it a matter of importance whether it can trace a succession back through the dark ages or not; it is here and alive, and as determined as ever to live and maintain its rights. If it was dead, during the dark ages, God has raised it from the dead, and breathed new life into it. What we want now, is to know who its friends are? We want to see every man who intends to stand for the Head of the Church, the foundation, the apostles' teaching, and all things as they were at the first, to stand out on one side. If there are those who do not intend to stand to this, we want them to stand on the other side. We desire to know who is on the Lord's side, and who is not; who is for us, and who is against us; who is loyal, and who sympathizes with the enemy.

We are occupying the most responsible position of any body of people on the earth. We are bound to the Lord Jesus, in the new and everlasting covenant, sealed by the blood of Jesus, and confirmed by the oath of the Almighty, as well as by all the veracity and honor there is in us, to be true to this great work. Let us, then, make a glorious record, one that we shall be happy to [355] contemplate at death, and that shall be a credit to us in the day of judgment.

To the King eternal, immortal, and invisible, the only-wise God our Savior, be glory and dominion, majesty and power, forever and ever. [356]

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