



Back to God Flour

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**WHO
THOUGHT
UP THE
CHURCH?**

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WHO THOUGHT UP THE CHURCH?

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. . . .
Luke 24:45

Perhaps you know certain individuals who have been exceptionally lucky and have hit on an idea that has really paid off for them. I know a couple of people who somehow have the knack of working together in business partnerships and who progressed from one business to another so that over the last several years they have succeeded in putting together one of the largest businesses around. They have both become multi-millionaires; and it all happened because they had one or two especially good ideas, they worked hard, and they were extremely successful.

And there are other successes, too, within my comparatively small circle of acquaintances. One man whom I visited the other day proudly showed me an impressive poultry business that he had developed over a rather short period of time. Another friend showed me acres and acres of potatoes that had become the backbone of a very successful business he was in. In each case these people had come up with one or two exceptionally good ideas that had enabled them to prosper remarkably. I give them credit. There are special people like this. You know them. I do. I try not to envy them.

But if there are exceptionally successful people with exceptionally successful businesses, I guess that we would have to say that there has never been a "business" more successful than the church. Now, when I call the church a "business," I am putting the word *business* in quotation marks, though there have been some who have been willing to call the church a business, pure and simple. One author writes a very cynical history of the church, purely in business terms; it's called *The Pearly Gates Syndicate*. When he examines the early church he describes the apostles as a board of directors and the prominent church leaders through the centuries as if they were presidents of large companies who really wanted nothing more than to develop wealth. Well, when I call the church a business, I don't mean that.

What I mean is that when we look around we would have to say that there is really no other institution, or business, in our society and world that has been more enduring than the church and that exerts a more pervasive influence. Think of it. Today many people who don't go to church at all are influenced by it nonetheless. They may reject its teachings, but even so, they reject *its* teachings—that is, they have been formed by their negative reaction to the church. And of course there are millions of people who feel that the church's teachings about many subjects that touch on personal morality are very likely more true than some of the teachings of the secular high priests and prophets.

Think, too, of the widespread influence of the Bible. It remains far and away the top best seller. Millions of people read it and think about it often. Why? Well, the church has always promoted the Bible, if not directly, at least indirectly—the church has always claimed that its teachings were for the most part drawn from this remarkable book. So the church is a worldwide presence and an extremely impressive influence.

And then, too, think about the way the church has endured through centuries and centuries. It is almost inconceivable that an institution that existed in the first century would still exist today. Moreover, just as people were willing then to identify themselves with the church and endure persecution and death because of it, so today Christian people are willing to risk their lives for Christ, who is the head of the church. Hasn't this ever struck you as strange? I would like to examine how this all came about. Who thought up the church? What were the exceptional and remarkable beginnings of this exceptional and remarkable institution? Where did it originate?

Well, in order to answer questions like these we have to go back to a unique period of time during which the foundations for the church were laid. Actually, it is possible to trace the church way back to the earliest human history: Abraham, often called the father of all believers, was a member of the church, and the people of Israel can be called the church of the Old Testament era. But the church as

we know it today, with its special book, with its holy sacraments, with its great ministry to all the world, the church filled with the Holy Spirit of Christ, received its shape and its characteristic structure at the beginning of our era; and this occurred during a unique time period that lasted for only 40 days.

I sometimes think that we don't talk about these special 40 days enough. As we think about what happened during them they will become more and more exciting for us. I am thinking of the 40 days between Jesus' resurrection and His ascension into heaven. Think about those days for just a moment.

Two great facts dominate this period of time: Jesus had risen from the dead, and He was still among His followers. There has never been a time like this, before or since. Before this 40-day period every day had been a time leading up to Jesus' great fight with Satan, and sin had a special influence during all those days. And every day since those 40 days, the victorious Jesus has been absent so far as His body is concerned, and believers have had to live by faith and not by sight. But during this 40-day period, the victorious Jesus was present among His followers. And it was during this remarkable time that Jesus laid the foundation of His church. The church, you see, is entirely different from any other so-called successful business or institution, and one of the great differences is expressed in this fact: The church was established by the resurrected Jesus during this unique time—the 40 days He was here, after He rose and before He ascended. If you wonder who thought up the church, the answer is that Jesus did, and He established it during a time that has never been duplicated.

Now when we think about what Jesus did during those forty days He remained with His followers, we should notice that Jesus was very deliberately concerned with creating conditions that would ultimately cause the establishment of His church as we know it today. I stress this because someone might think that perhaps after Jesus was gone some of His followers, thinking back on what He had said and done during those 40 days, might have said, "Say, let's start a church." No. During these 40 days Jesus

worked with His disciples who are clearly identified in the Bible as the foundation of the church. Jesus started the church Himself.

You may recall, if you are familiar with the Gospel of Matthew, that at one time Jesus and His disciple Peter had a conversation during which Peter is called the person upon whom the church would be built. The conversation, recorded in Matthew 16, went something like this. Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. In response, Jesus said to Peter, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church" (v. 18).

Peter frequently appears in the Bible as the representative of all of the disciples, who later were called apostles. So Peter is, we may say, the great representative apostle, and when Jesus said that He was going to build His church on Peter He was really saying that He was going to build His church on the apostles. This is clear from several sentences in the book of Revelation that picture the church, the New Jerusalem, coming down from the sky. The city is described as being built on twelve foundations and as having inscribed on each foundation a name of one of the apostles (Revelation 21:14). So the apostles were the foundation on which Jesus built His church, and during the 40 days between His resurrection and His ascension, Jesus spent most of His time working with these men.

As Jesus worked with these men He was obviously working with men who were to have great formative influence in the church. But now we must be careful. For it is possible to think of the apostles as the foundation of the church in the wrong way. We are apt to think that there was something about them personally that qualified them to have a special role within the church's life. We are apt to think that they were especially saintly. That is not so. As a matter of fact, Peter, who often represented the apostles, was very unexemplary on many occasions. The apostles were qualified to be the foundation of the church, not because of their splendid characters, but because of what Jesus did with them and to them during that remarkable 40-day period. Look at what happened. Luke 24 provides us with this information:

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high" (vv. 45-49).

We began by wondering about the church, about how it began. There are so many successful businesses around and so many successful institutions, but the church dominates everything. It is older than any government, it is more all-pervasive than any business. People have been willing to die for it throughout the centuries, and they still are—where did such a thing as the church come from? Well, it came from this very special time, when Jesus worked with His disciples who later became apostles. He worked with them, and one of the things He did was open their minds.

The beginning of the church, then, can be traced back not only to a special time but also to a special illumination by Jesus Christ as He changed the closed minds of these ordinary men. Once again I want to stress that the apostles were ordinary men by nature. But God used them as special instruments of His revelation by opening their minds. The church is rooted in a special revealing work of God. If you wonder why the church is different from other businesses and/or institutions here is one of the basic reasons: God has given a special revelation of Himself to especially chosen people, and the splendid knowledge that they have communicated is the knowledge of God, which is the center of the church's life.

I must stress this. For there are some today who feel that religion in any form is the result of a certain natural religious ability that men possess. There are some who say that the development of religion is nothing more than a normal development of the evolutionary process. Just as man once became a tool-making animal, one day he became a religion-making animal as well. There is nothing mysterious and

strange about religion—it's part of the natural evolutionary process. And there are others who say that religion is made up of the finest products of human rationality. Man is a thinker, and when man thinks especially fine and noble thoughts, these thoughts can become the foundation of a religious system. There are many religions these days that invite ordinary people to have religious experiences as they cultivate mental states in which they will think purely and exaltedly.

Well, the Christian religion and the church of the Lord Jesus Christ did not get its start when a couple of religious geniuses sat down and cross-fertilized one another's religious imaginations. The Christian religion was born when Jesus Christ tore the dark curtains away from the minds of His disciples and enabled them to become the channels through whom God's own truth would come into the world. The Bible is very candid about the inability of ordinary human beings to understand the true things of God all by themselves. The Bible says that natural man does not understand the things of the Spirit of God. Not until God comes with His special power is it possible for natural man to see the truth of God. And this happened in a special way when Jesus, during that 40-day period, opened the minds of His apostles.

But now we must notice something striking here. The Bible is very clear that the church as we know it today had its beginning in a special illumination that Jesus gave His disciples who later became apostles. In a sense I guess we might expect something like this. This is the way some other religions claim they have started. But there is something very specific about the illumination that the disciples received which we must notice carefully. They did not become shining lights from whom the wisdom of God would flow forth throughout the rest of the years of their lives. No. They received their illumination with reference to a very special book. The Bible says that Jesus opened their minds so that they would understand the Scriptures.

There you have it. This is what makes Christianity different from all the other religions. This is what makes the church different. Jesus, during that

remarkable 40-day period, tied the Christian religion down to the Scriptures—to the Bible.

Maybe this doesn't impress you all that much. But think about it for just a minute. Here is the resurrected Jesus instructing His disciples. Can you think of anyone more qualified than Jesus? Can you think of anyone with more authority than Jesus had? Jesus could say anything and do anything, and everyone would have to accept it. But what does the resurrected Jesus do during these 40 days? He uses a text-book! He makes the Scriptures the basis of His instruction.

It is as if a great poet would come and would read from an ancient poet when you expected him to read his own poetry. It is as if a victorious general would come and tell you about Napoleon's military genius rather than about his own great battles. But now look at Jesus, the great resurrected Savior, as He stands before His disciples. He has a book in His hand. And He's reading from Isaiah, and from the other prophets, and from the Psalms; and He is patiently showing His disciples that all these Scriptures point forward to Him, and to His death and His resurrection.

It was during this 40-day period, then, that Jesus Christ displayed the tremendous power His written Word was going to have in the lives of His people throughout the years ahead. Jesus showed that all the sacred Scriptures which the Jewish people had revered throughout the centuries were to become the foundation of the church of Jesus. And now we know, too, as we look back, that this binding of the church to the Old Testament was part of an event that was to result in the production of a new set of books which, with the Old Testament, were to become the complete Scripture for the people of God. For the apostles became the foundation of the church most of all in terms of the fact that it was their message that became the substance of the books that we now call the New Testament part of the Bible.

The men who gathered with Jesus during the 40 days were writers. Some of them actually did the writing: Peter, for example, and Matthew, and John. Some provided the material that formed the basis for

books that were written by others; I think of the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Mark which were not written directly by an apostle but which contain the apostolic message. I think of the fascinating book called The Acts of the Apostles which relates in such detail the work of those who had had special contact with Jesus. Among them later was that great apostle Paul who had his own 40-day experience when Jesus met him on the road to Damascus and later instructed him in the desert of Arabia. The religion of the Lord Jesus Christ was to become the religion of the glorious book. Part of that book was interpreted there during that extraordinary 40-day period Jesus spent with His disciples, and part of it was built on Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as this was faithfully recorded and explained by these especially enlightened men.

Now do you see that if you are wondering about the church, where it got started and who thought it up, the answer is that the church as we know it today was started right there by the Lord Jesus Christ, when He qualified His apostles to work and to become the foundation of the church. In the book of Ephesians the church is described as built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets with Jesus Christ as the great cornerstone (2:20). And it is significant that both the apostles and the prophets were writers. Their written words became the foundation of the church throughout the centuries. Elsewhere the Bible states that no other foundation can anyone lay than that which has been laid, and that foundation is Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 3:11). Indeed. The message which the apostles laid down is the great foundation: the message about Jesus and His great salvation.

No wonder there is nothing now nor has there ever been anything as wonderful and as glorious and as powerful as the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. And you know, one of the things that Jesus made clear to these apostles during that 40-day period is that the glorious gospel message contained in both the Old and New Testament is for everyone. Jesus told them that the gospel of salvation based on His finished work had to be brought to the entire world. Repen-

tance and forgiveness of sins must be told to everyone, and everyone must be invited to take their place within this glorious church.

Wouldn't you like to be a part of the church of Jesus Christ? Think of where it got its start—there during that remarkable 40-day period when the resurrected Jesus was with His disciples. That such an event ever happened is incredibly glorious. But it did happen. And the true church of Jesus which is founded entirely on the Word of the living Christ continues to this present day.

You can find one in your neighborhood, I'm sure. You will recognize it by the fact that it is bound, tied to, the Bible. It is an institution that considers nothing more important than the great book that Jesus took in His hand and explained centuries ago.

The church goes back to the resurrected Jesus teaching His disciples. No wonder it's indestructible. If you are not a part of it, you should be.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, even though you're absent now, we know that we can still pray to you, and you are still with us through the power of your Holy Spirit. We ask you now to open our minds, too, so that we may understand the sacred Scriptures. Make the Bible the center of our lives so that by means of it we may understand you better.

Lord, may many today turn to your church and benefit from the gospel that is celebrated within it. Now that we have been reminded of its exceptional and blessed origin, may we eagerly participate in its life and drink deeply of the good grace of salvation that's found within it. May we rejoice that in Jesus' cross there is hope for our salvation.

Blessed Jesus, we pray that the day may come soon when you will come back and we will have the opportunity to be with you just as your disciples were with you centuries ago. We thank you for that meeting, and we believe that because of it we now have received your church, continued for us in this day.

Hear us because of Calvary. Amen.

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