

Before the beginning of time . . . God had a plan. In Ephesians 3:4-11, the apostle Paul stated that this plan was God's "eternal purpose." He said that God's plan was a "mystery which for ages has been hidden in God." This eternal plan allowed people from every nation of the world to be included in the blessings of Christ. And, Paul said that this great wisdom of God was finally made known through the church (Ephesians 3:10). Hence, the inspired apostle claimed that "the church" had been a part of God's great plan from the beginning of creation.

Contrary to popular opinion, the word "Church" does not refer to a "Building" (at least not in New Testament usage). It refers to a "People." When the apostle Peter wrote a letter to members of the church in the first century, he said, "You once were not a people, but now you are the people of God . . ." (I Peter 2:10). Peter told "the church," to whom he wrote, that they were "the people of God." God has a people who belong to Him. They are His people. They are His possession. They are His personal property. They have been "bought with a price," as Paul stated in I Corinthians 6:20. The New Testament clearly teaches that the church was purchased with the blood of Christ (Acts 20:28; I Peter 1:18-19). You see, "the Church" is a collection of people from all around the world who belong to God. They are "The People of God" because He purchased them with the precious blood of Christ.

Well, exactly who is included in this group we call "The People of God"? Of course, we would have to include the apostles of Christ as being among the first. But who else? After Peter and the apostles had preached a stirring sermon in Acts 2, many people responded to their invitation of salvation. In Acts 2:41 we read, "So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls." To that tiny group of 12, 3000 souls were added in one day's time. Verse 47 continues: "And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved." "The People of God" is a collection of those who have been "saved." Membership in the Lord's church is not determined by popular vote. Only those who have been baptized into Christ and have been "saved" from their sinful condition are included in the group, and these are added only by the Lord Himself.

We can discover even more about the identity of "the church" from a simple word study. The English word "Church" comes from the Greek word "Ekklesia." In the Greek, this word has two parts. It has a prefix (EK) which means "out," and a root word (KLESIA) which means "the called." Hence, the word "church" literally means - "The Called Out." It is a collection of people who have been called "out of darkness" and into God's marvelous light (I Peter 2:9). Paul said that God has "saved us, and called us with a holy calling" (II Timothy 1:9). Peter described God as "the Holy One who called you" in I Peter 1:15. You might be wondering exactly how it is that God called us. It was through the gospel, Paul explained in II Thessalonians 2:14. It's a simple matter of hearing & learning the Word of God ... then responding in obedience to His message ... just as Jesus taught in John 6:44-45. Those who are in "the church" are the ones who have heard and learned the word of God and have responded in obedience to "His Call." Thus, they are "the called out" - "the ekklesia" - "the church."

New Testament writers taught that "The Church" is a collection of people from all around the world who have heard and learned the Word of God and have been called out of the darkness of sin and ignorance; they have been saved from their sins by virtue of baptism into Christ; they have been purchased by the blood of Christ, and thus, are "The People of God" because they belong to Him. To have a people like this was the eternal purpose of God.

In the next few "Bible Talks," we shall see how the New Testament describes this collection of people. We need to learn what "The People of God" are supposed to do. We need to see what God intended for His church to be like.

1. Read Ephesians 3:4-11.
How would you summarize the "mysterious, eternal purpose of God" described by Paul?

Has this great plan finally become a reality? (Ephesians 2:11-14)

If so, where was it revealed? (Ephesians 2:16; 1:22-23; 3:10)

2. What descriptive title does Peter assign the church in I Peter 2:10?
Why does he use a term of possession to describe them? (I Corinthians 6:20)

What price was paid to "purchase" the church? (Acts 20:28; I Peter 1:18-19)

3. In Acts 2:47, the church is seen to be a collection of people who have been _____.
According to this verse, who has authority to add one to this group?

4. The Greek word EKKLESIA literally means _____.

Whose "call" has been heard by "the church"? (II Timothy 1:9; I Peter 1:15)

Where may this "call" be heard? (II Thessalonians 2:14)

In John 6:44-45, how does Jesus explain this process?

Seeing that we are "called out of darkness" (I Peter 2:10), what images does this evoke?
John 3:19-21 John 11:9-10 John 12:35-36

Into what have we been "called"?

I Corinthians 1:9

Colossians 3:15

I Peter 5:10

We have been "called" to be what?

I John 3:1

I Corinthians 1:2

5. From the things you have studied, how would you describe "The Church"?