

The Church in the ETERNAL LIFE

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In the preceding articles we have considered some crucial facets of the eternal life revealed in God's Word, including the nature of eternal life and its relation to salvation and the Christian life. In this article we wish to consider another crucial facet, namely the eternal life in its intrinsic relation to the church and to the corporate living of all those who have received eternal life and are thus members of the church. As we will see, the New Testament revelation concerning the church and the corporate living of its members is tightly interwoven with the revelation of the divine, eternal life of God—so much so that we cannot properly apprehend the revelation of the church and its living apart from the corresponding revelation of God's eternal life. The church is an organic entity constituted with the eternal life, and the church life—as the corporate living of this organic entity—is altogether according to the eternal life. (By *organic* we mean something of or related to the divine life.) Further, we cannot properly apprehend the purpose of the eternal life revealed in the New Testament if we neglect the church, for the eternal life that the believers have received is for the church as the corporate manifestation of God's life.

Whereas the preceding article focused on the individual, or personal, aspect of the Christian life, this article will focus on the corporate aspect of the Christian life, the church life. The contours and characteristics of this church life are revealed in detail throughout the New Testament, especially in Acts and the Epistles. Acts 2, for instance, describes the beginning of the church life as a life in which the believers “continued steadfastly in the teaching and the fellowship of the apostles, in the breaking of bread and the prayers,” “had all things common,” and were “continuing steadfastly with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house” (Acts 2:42, 44, 46). More details concerning the church life are revealed in the Epistles, most of which are addressed to the believers meeting as the church in a particular city (e.g., Rome, Corinth).

Romans 12—16, for example, offers a robust description of the church life as a corporate living of the believers that encompasses a wide range of matters, such as serving the Lord, walking becomingly, bearing the weaknesses of others, and even greeting the saints (Rom. 12:11; 13:13; 15:1; 16:3-16). These matters are not limited to the meetings of the church, though such meetings are surely integral to the church life. They are, rather, part of the broader fabric of the believers' corporate living as those who are “one Body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Rom. 12:5).

In what follows we consider the corporate living, or church life, of the believers in its intrinsic relation to the eternal life. We begin by considering the nature of the church as an organic entity constituted with the eternal life of God. This seems to us like a natural place to begin, for we cannot apprehend what the New Testament reveals concerning the church life if we neglect what it reveals concerning the church itself. Following this, we consider the church's organic growth and building up in the eternal life, which correspond with its organic nature. This consideration flows into a consideration of the believers' functioning in the church as the organic function of the eternal life. Finally, we look at Paul's Epistles to Timothy and Titus, in which we see in illustration the vital role of the eternal life in the organic constitution, growth, building, and function of the church.

The Church as an Organic Entity Constituted with the Eternal Life

According to the revelation in the New Testament, the church is an organic entity constituted with the divine, eternal life of God. This organic view of the church permeates the writings not only of Paul but of Peter and John as well. The apostle Paul speaks of the church as an organic building throughout his Epistles: the church