

623 What is the “church of Christ”?

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God’s Answers to Life’s Questions

You’ll find hundreds of churches of Christ throughout middle Tennessee and Kentucky. Some are large, some are small, some in the country, some in the city. There are some things all of them have in common. They all believe and love the Lord Jesus Christ. They are autonomous congregations, that is, each one of these churches directs its own business. You see, churches of Christ do not have a headquarters anywhere, except with the Lord in heaven. I hope you’ll visit one of the local congregations and find out for yourself what these churches are like. You’ll see that are filled with people just like you, who love the Lord.

As I mentioned, sometime ago, a man on television was asked about the church of Christ. He described them as a cult-like group, legalistic in their doctrine. This man was not only ill-informed, he was also somewhat biased against the church. He didn’t know enough about the church of Christ to be an expert witness. But I wonder how many people listening to his message got the wrong impression as well. For this reason, we wanted to tell people just who and what the church of our Lord is and why everyone should become a member of it.

First, I want to talk about what the church is not. Let me say first: the Church of Christ is not a cult. According to Merriam-Webster, a cult is a religious group, usually devoted to a leader, who claims to have received some special revelation beyond that found in the Scriptures. Cults often have a different view of God or Jesus than that found in the Bible. They often have their own sources of authority in addition to the Bible and use techniques to control or manipulate their followers. I have been a member of the church of Christ for more than 40 years, and I can assure you that the churches of Christ are nothing like a cult.

Second, the church of Christ is not a sect. Again, Webster defines a sect as “a dissenting or schismatic religious body; *especially*: one regarded as extreme or heretical, a religious denomination.” A sectarian is an adherent of a sect; a narrow or bigoted person. Churches of Christ are open to all people who are willing to believe and obey the gospel. They hold Christ and Christ alone as the head of the church. They have no divisive creeds but follow the New Testament as their sole guide to faith and practice. Far from being schismatic and divisive, churches of Christ call Christians to unite together under the truth of the gospel. For many years we’ve been calling people to come back to the Bible and the Bible alone. We are not interested in binding human opinions on anyone but rather to believe and practice only those things clearly taught in the New Testament.

Third, the Church is not a denomination. Webster defines a denomination as a religious organization uniting local congregations in a single legal and administrative body. As we mentioned churches of Christ are autonomous. Each congregation has its own leaders, consisting of elders, deacons, and preachers, just as they did in the New Testament. The church Jesus purchased with His own blood is not denominational. It is not devoted to denominational principles or interests; the emphasizing of denominational differences to the point of being narrowly exclusive. The primary interest of churches of Christ is that of following the teaching of the New Testament. Churches of Christ are not inter-denominational. Being inter-denominational means freely approving of and including many denominations. Nor are churches of Christ non-denominational. A non-denominational church is not aligned with any denomination but has does not disapprove of them either.

Actually churches of Christ are “undenominational” and anti-denominational. The church of the first century knew nothing about denominations. There weren’t any in those days. The New Testament actually disapproves of the division denominationalism causes. In 1

Corinthians 1:10-13, Paul said, “Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe’s *people*, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, “I am of Paul,” and “I of Apollos,” and “I of Cephas,” and “I of Christ.” Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” Here was a church caught up in division over the preachers who had influenced them. Paul rebukes them for this division and points them back to the Lord Jesus Christ. That is where we too should keep our focus.

The church of Christ is not man-made; it is God’s idea. Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, “I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.” The church of Christ is not a human denomination; its congregations are part of that blood-bought, Divinely-built body of believers. They belong to the Lord; they are congregations of the Lord’s church. The church of Christ is not a cultural product of the American frontier of the 19th century. We are sometimes called churches of the “Restoration Movement,” but this always leaves the wrong impression. We are not a church because of the restoration movement. We are a church because of the power of God. Unless we have a relationship with God, we cannot consider ourselves a church at all. Luke 8:11 reminds us that “the seed is the word of God.” That is what makes Christians and that is what makes churches. It is the gospel that saves us and adds us to the Lord’s church. It is the gospel that causes us to be born again. Only God has the power to add to His church, and He adds those who have obeyed the gospel. The Restoration movement pointed back to the Scriptures. They believed that only God’s word could direct them—and they were right!

Restoration leaders saw the religious world around them filled with bitter wrangling between the denominations; they believed that Jesus’ prayer for unity meant they needed to get along. They believed the way to find the unity for which Jesus prayed was through giving up what was human and just going back to the Word of God. They said, “Let us cast aside all human creeds, human opinions, human practices and only believe and practice what we can see clearly taught in Scripture.” They said, “Let us call Bible things by Bible names and do Bible things in Bible ways.” They said, “Where the Bible speaks, we speak; and where the Bible is silent, we are silent.”

They basically did what Hezekiah and Josiah did in the Old Testament. They returned to the Word of God. They decided to cast off everything that was of human origin and to be simple Christians who followed only the teaching of the New Testament. They believed that they needed to go back to the Bible and to hang on to its teaching. Paul said in 2 Thess. 2:15, “So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word *of mouth* or by letter from us.” That’s what churches of Christ determined to do. Hold fast to what was from God. Paul told Timothy in 1 Tim. 1:3-4, “As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus so that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines, nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than *furthering* the administration of God which is by faith.” They did not want to get involved in human speculations or opinions but only to practice what they saw clearly taught in the New Testament.

Paul later told Timothy in 2 Tim. 1:13, “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” And that’s what churches of Christ seek to do today: to follow the pattern of healthy teaching found in God’s word. John said in 2 John 9, “Anyone who goes too far and does not

abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son." Because we want to stay with the Lord, we continue to follow His teaching. Now, we need to explore what the church of Christ is. The word "church," (ekklesia) means "called out" (a group of people called together for a purpose). Christians have been called by the gospel to serve Jesus. Again, let me emphasize that Jesus built the church and purchased the church. It is his plan to call people together by telling them the good news of His death, burial, and resurrection. The church is made up of people who obeyed the gospel and are saved by Jesus. In Acts 2:41, Luke wrote, "So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls." In verse 47 he said, "And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved." If we ask who are those who are added, we find first they were the baptized and second they were the saved. What makes people saved is what adds them to the church. When a person believes the preaching, repents of his sins, and is baptized, he is saved and added to the church. The church is made up of saved people. If you are saved, God has added you to His church. Paul said in Eph. 5:23, "For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself *being* the Savior of the body." The body, the church, is made up of the saved. To be saved is to be in that body. One cannot separate the two concepts: being saved and being added to the church.

There are some word pictures describing the church in the New Testament. First, the church is a family, a household. Paul said in 1 Tim 3:14-15, "I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; but in case I am delayed, *I write* so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth." The church is God's family, filled with love and expecting to spend an eternity together. As the household of God, one of the functions of the church is to be the pillar and support of the truth. The idea of having a church which is more interested in pleasing the people of the community rather than following the teaching of God comes from some other source than the New Testament. In the Bible God is to have first place in everything, and the truth is to be preached, even when people don't like it.

Another picture of the church is as a government, more specifically as a kingdom. Jesus said in Matt 16:18-19, "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." Now Jesus would not build one thing and give Peter keys to another. My friend, the church is the kingdom. In Colossians 1:13-14 Paul said, "For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." So Paul believed he was in the kingdom. In Acts 20:28 Paul said Jesus purchased the church with His blood, and in Revelation 5:9-10 Jesus purchased the kingdom with His blood. My friend, you can't spend the same dollar twice: Jesus bought the church which is the kingdom with His blood!

A third picture of the church in the New Testament is as a body. Paul said in Eph 1:22-23, "And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all." Just as a human body only has one head, so the church has only one head—Jesus! We would consider a body with two heads or a head with two bodies to be freakish. The idea that someone here on earth (in addition to Jesus in heaven) can be the head of the church denies Scripture. The church of the New Testament has no earthly head or headquarters; the church belongs to Jesus in heaven. Jesus said, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:20). Jesus could not have more authority on earth if He were present with us today. He already has ALL authority. God made Him head over all things to the church, and that hasn't changed in 2000 years. As the body of Christ, each member is expected to live in such a way as to serve the head. We are to live such a life that we honor the Lord Jesus with our lives and our service.

The fourth picture of the church is as a dwelling place, it is a temple of God. Paul said in 1 Cor. 3:16-17, "Do you not know that you are a temple of God and *that* the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are." The church not an optional matter if one is to serve the Lord Jesus. Many people think you can be a good Christian and not be a member of any church; but such a view is an insult to God. The Lord considers the church as holy; it is His temple today. We should treasure the church, because the Lord treasures it. Of all the places God could dwell, the place He chooses is with His people, the church. If you want to be close to God, you must be part of His family, His kingdom, His body, and His temple—and that is the church!

New Testament Christians were merely "Christians." There were no man-made names, creeds, practices, or organizations among them. You can practice the same thing by reading and following the Lord's instructions in the Bible, the word of Christ and avoid any man-made beliefs or practices. Jesus said in John 12:48, "He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day." The real test of what is a true church is God's word, not the opinions of men. It just makes sense to do God's will and follow the Bible in all we teach and do. This means giving up every man-made doctrine, idea, practice, name, or organization. It means observing all things that Jesus commands. To become a member of the Lord's church, you must believe with all your heart that Jesus is the Christ, repent of your sins, confess Jesus as the Christ and Lord, and be baptized in water for the forgiveness of your sins. When you have done that the Lord will add you to His church. I hope and pray you'll do that today. I became a Christian 45 years ago when as one who believed the gospel I was baptized (immersed in water) into Christ. I have never regretted being a member of the church of Christ. The best people I know have been members of the church. They have blessed my life richly, and they will bless yours. Start going to church or go back to church if you aren't going now. The Lord is calling for you.

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