

# **The church of Christ and its Relationship to Denominations**

## *Basics of the church of Christ – Sermon Number One*

### ◆ Perceptions of the church of Christ...

It is of interest to see how the church of Christ is perceived. The following is taken from Frank S. Mead's book, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* (Abingdon Press).

*Because this is not a denomination but a fellowship with no central headquarters, record keeping is very difficult. Recent efforts show the membership to be about 1,400,000 in nearly 13,000 churches.*

*A distinctive plea for unity – a unity that is Bible-based – lies at the heart of the Churches of Christ. It is believed that the Bible is “the beginning place,” in and through which God-fearing people can achieve spiritual oneness – to “speak where the Bible speaks and to be silent where the Bible is silent” in all matters pertaining to faith and morals. Consequently, members recognize no other written creed or confession of faith. In all religious matters, there must be a “thus said the Lord.”*

*The churches are related to the restoration movement – the work and thinking of James O’Kelly in Virginia, Abner Jones and Elias Smith in New England, and Barton Stone in Kentucky, and Thomas and Alexander Campbell in West Virginia (see CHRISTIAN CHURCH [DISCIPLES OF CHRIST]). These four movements, all once completely independent, eventually became one strong religious stream because of their common purpose and plea.*

*The leaders among the Churches of Christ in the nineteenth century were more conservative than their counterparts among the Disciples of Christ. Stressing a strict adherence to the New Testament pattern of worship and church organization, they refused to join any intercongregational organization such as a missionary society. Worship was simple, and they opposed the addition of instrumental music on the grounds that the New Testament did not authorize it and that the early church did not use it.*

*Today one of the outstanding features of Churches of Christ is their acceptance of the Bible as a true and completely adequate revelation. This basic concept has resulted in such practices as a weekly observance of the Lords’ Supper, baptism by immersion, a cappella singing, a vigorous prayer life, support of church needs through voluntary giving, and a program of preaching and teaching the Bible.*

Generally speaking, Mr. Mead's assessment and summary of the church of Christ seems to be satisfactory. Later in his book, however, Mr. Mead includes additional, inappropriate material regarding the church of Christ and in doing so, incorrectly identifies what the church of Christ is really about. As such, it is vital that we examine the church of Christ by searching the scriptures. This, we will later do.

◆ The Nature of Denominations...

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines a denomination as, "a religious organization uniting local congregations in a single legal and administrative body." The term denominations, nor the concept, however, are found in the scriptures. It is a term used to describe the many different churches which exist.

Prior to a brief discussion of major denominations in the United States, however, it seems appropriate to make the following observation. Many believe and teach that The Roman Catholic Church is the "mother" of all churches and from it have come the many denominations which exist today. According to the website, <http://www.catholicism.about.com/>,

*Catholicism is the only Christian religion that started during Christ's time. All other Christian religions stemmed from it. The name "the catholic church" first started in the year 107 when Ignatius of Antioch used the title to describe Jesus' church. The term was old even then so it was probably known in the apostle's time.*

It will be shown that this self-assessment of The Roman Catholic religion is flawed.

In the 1,000 years that followed the close of the New Testament, The Roman Catholic Church gained great power and notoriety. After that point, various churches were started. Listed below are some of the more major denominations along with the years in which they were founded.

- ⇒ 1517 – The Lutheran Church
- ⇒ 1534 – The Anglican/ Episcopal Church
- ⇒ 1560 – The Presbyterian Church
- ⇒ 1610 – The Baptist Church
- ⇒ 1739 – The Methodist Church
- ⇒ 1830 – The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormon)
- ⇒ 1832 – The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
- ⇒ 1880 – The Church of God

◆ The Biblical Perspective...

To appropriately understand the church of Christ and its relationship to the many denominations, one must examine the scriptures and let those scriptures have the final word. A firm reliance on the bedrock principle of the necessity of Biblical authority stated below will help all who desire to know the truth to focus their attention solely on the scriptures:

*One must consider the following key passages: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work (II Timothy 3:16-17) and "If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God" (I Peter 4:11). Upon the consideration of these passages, it should be clear, that in all matters of church organization, church doctrine and church practice, there must remain a firm reliance upon the Bible and it alone.*

⇒ The Old Testament and the Church

The word "church" is never used in the Old Testament. Yet, a careful study of the Old Testament scriptures leads one to conclude that the prophets of old understood that a great *institution*, planned by God, was forthcoming. Consider the following passage from the Prophet Isaiah:

*Now it shall come to pass in the latter days  
That the mountain of the LORD's house  
Shall be established on the top of the mountains,  
And shall be exalted above the hills;  
And all nations shall flow to it.  
Many people shall come and say,  
"Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
To the house of the God of Jacob;  
He will teach us His ways,  
And we shall walk in His paths."  
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,  
And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.  
(Isaiah 2:2-3)*

The prophet here highlights at least two things about the future of "the Lord's house," which, from an examination of I Timothy 3:15, is a synonym for the church. First, that

“all nations shall flow to it.” And second, that this event would occur in Jerusalem. One looks to the writings of Isaiah and asks, “What is the prophet talking about?”

⇒ The New Testament and the Church

A careful study of Acts 2 seems to shed light on the preceding question. In Acts 2, the writer records that on the Day of Pentecost, “there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5). The two key concepts addressed in Isaiah 2:2-3 are mentioned here, leading us to conclude that Pentecost is the fulfillment of the prophecy.

As the Apostle Peter begins this first gospel sermon after the death, burial, resurrection and ascension of the Christ, he refers back to the writings of yet another prophet – Joel. In Joel’s writing, one finds the pleasant words that are the hallmark of the New Testament plan – “whoever calls on the name of the Lord Shall be saved” (Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21).

In Acts 2, the church was born – for the first time, “the Lord added to the church” (Acts 2:47). One needs to ask two questions at this point. First, how many churches were there at this beginning? And second, was there a plan, or even approval for denominations which would be different from that one church? Answering the first question should be simple – there was only one church. This should come as no surprise. Before His death, our Lord said, “I will build My church” (Matthew 16:18).

Secondly, there was no plan for any denomination. Less than 30 years later, Paul would write that, “there is one body,” a term synonymous with the church, of which Jesus was the head (Ephesians 4:4; Colossians 1:18). That one church which was established in 33 A.D. was apparently meant to be the only church that would ever exist. Thus, any church that is not patterned after *that* church of the New Testament is displeasing to God and in violation of His word.

It should be clear to all persons that the Old Testament spoke of the church coming *into* existence and the New Testament spoke of the church as being *in* existence. In each of the scriptures wherein the church is discussed, there is never any mention of denominations. In fact, the only time we see the term “churches” used (plural, that is) is when the writer is discussing multiple, local congregations (Acts 15:41; Romans 16:16).

◆ The Appropriate Conclusion...

If the Bible speaks of one church and 2000 years later multiple churches exist, what are we to do? We must first conclude that even today, there can only be *one* church – and that church must be founded by Jesus and must conduct itself in the way that the church 2000 years ago conducted itself.

Churches that can trace their beginnings to a time *after* 33 A.D. or to a place other than Jerusalem cannot be the church. Churches whose founders are men and women besides Jesus Christ can not be a part of His body. And, in respect to the claim of The Roman Catholic Church, it was not at the beginning – only *Christ's* church was at the beginning and it is the only one that matters.

Furthermore, churches that identify themselves according to a doctrine or even a person besides Christ are not giving glory to one whose blood was shed so that *the* church could be purchased (Acts 20:28). Picking a name for a church should not be a task that involves great creativity on our part. We should name the church for what it is – of and to the glory of Christ.

The church of Christ seeks to be this church – the one that belongs to Christ and models the New Testament plan without change or modification. If the only authority for what we do as a church is found within the Holy Scriptures, then we must conclude that there can only be that one church which belongs to Christ and is described by Him and those inspired men who wrote the Bible.

As each person conducts his life, he must ask of himself where he is in relation to the only church discussed in the Bible. If he finds himself to be a participant in a church whose foundation is not in the Bible, he owes it to himself to change his church affiliation and repent of going against the New Testament pattern.

◆ The church of Christ and its Relationship to Denominations...

With these things said, one must admit that there really is no relationship between the church of Christ and denominations. The church of Christ is actually *not* a denomination, but rather a fulfillment of the New Testament plan. Members of the church of Christ seek not to be a church designed in the minds of men, but in the mind of God. True believers of the New Testament are members of the church of Christ, because God adds such believers to His church (Acts 2:47).

Certainly, one could be identified with a church that does not wear the specific name, “church of Christ” and be a faithful servant of God. A notable example of this would be one who would argue that he is a member of the “church of God.” All rational persons would argue that being faithful to God involves being a part of His church. The unfortunate problem is that those who wear the name, “church of God” in modern times are not really members of the Lord’s church – they have instead subscribed to the doctrines that form the foundation of the denomination that was founded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and calls itself, “the church of God.”

Furthermore, just because a person identifies himself with a “church of Christ” does not mean that he is actually a member of *the* church of Christ as was outlined by the Savior Himself. Again, it is unfortunate that many places that wear the name, “the church of Christ” are not actually in agreement with the scriptures. To actually be a member of the church of Christ as it was planned in the scriptures, one must be obedient to those things written in the scriptures.

Thus, to be secure in our relationship with God, we must be obedient to His commands, follow His plan, and be a member of the church which was purchased and built by His son. Let it be the determination of all people to not be a member of a denomination or pledge allegiance to a man-made doctrine, but to be members of the church of Christ, depending solely on the Bible, and in doing so, render full obedience to our Father in heaven.