

God Has Spoken
Tract Series

**WHAT IS THE CHURCH OF CHRIST
AND HOW DOES ONE
BECOME A MEMBER OF IT?**

A few years ago a well-known preacher in Texas made headlines among us by claiming that the church of Christ is “one big sick denomination.” A great deal has been written and spoken concerning the church’s relationship with other churches around us. Recently another preacher called upon all the churches of Christ to think of themselves as “the undenominational denomination.” How *should* we think of ourselves? What is the church of Christ, really?

The only proper source of answers to questions of religious truth is *the Bible* (John 17:17). We must look into *the Bible* to learn what the church is (I Corinthians 4:17; 7:17; 11:16; 14:33; 16:1). Though many try to define religious right by comparing one group with another, still the Bible teaches the wise that this is impossible (II Corinthians 10:12).

We would not know the term “church of Christ” if we had not learned it from the Bible (Romans 16:16). The same Bible that reveals to us the existence of the church describes for us its name, nature, origin, purpose, and creed.

THE NAME AND NATURE OF THE CHURCH

The church described in the Bible is called by various terms that show its nature. That nature of the church is one of peculiar relationship to the Lord. We find the church called the

“church of God” (I Corinthians 1:2),

“church of the firstborn” (Hebrews 12:23),

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds
(Hebrews 1:1-2)

“body of Christ” (Ephesians 1:22-23),
“bride” (i.e. of Christ, see Revelation 19:7; 21:2),
“house of God” (I Timothy 3:15), and
“kingdom” (Revelation 1:9).

Most often, though, it is simply called “the church” (Matthew 18:17 and at least 79 other times). Several local churches considered together are called “the churches of Christ” (Romans 16). The church is rightly called “the church of Christ” because it belongs to Him (Colossians 1:24); He called it His own (Matthew 16:18). He is the head of it (Ephesians 1:22; 5:23; Colossians 1:18), and it is subject to Him (Ephesians 5:24).

THE ORIGIN OF THE CHURCH

The details of the beginning of the church also show its peculiar relationship to God and to the savior Jesus Christ. First, Christ promised to build it (Matthew 16:18). He promised to build but *one*, and that *one* is described in the New Testament. No other church on earth today can rightly claim to have been built by Jesus: to do so would be to claim a deceiver for a founder, for they would claim that He build more than one while He promised to build but one. Secondly, his church was in existence as early as 50 days (the time from the Jewish Passover – Mark 14:1-15:27 – to their Pentecost – Leviticus 23:15-16) after his resurrection. On that day Peter preached the first gospel sermon (Acts 2:1-40) and people were added to the church (v. 47). They could hardly have been added to that which did not exist, therefore the Lord’s own church existed at that time. Not one of the other churches known on earth today, however, had yet come into existence at that time.

THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH

The Bible also defines the purpose of the church. No human statement of design or purpose will suffice for the church which is subject to Christ, for God has clearly revealed *His will* that the saved be edified (I Corinthians 14:5), and that they then, as the church, show unto the world the “manifold wisdom of God” (Ephesians 3:10), caring for the needy in the process (Acts 6:1-4; I Timothy 5:16; Galatians 6:10).

THE CREED OF THE CHURCH

A “creed” is “a brief statement of religious belief; confession of faith” (Webster). Practically every church known to man has its own peculiar creed. Some subscribe to one or more of several “universal” creeds, and by these creeds those churches are nominally linked together. Yet, as one

views modern religion as a whole, nothing is more evident than division. That division is caused, more than any other single factor, by beliefs and statements of beliefs that are peculiar to each “denomination.” The church which Jesus built is not a divided church (Ephesians 4:1-13). It has one “creed,” one “statement of religious belief; confession of faith.” That creed is Jesus Christ Himself: His identity as the Son of God (Acts 8:37). Upon this statement the church is built (Matthew 16:1-18). No other creed is found authorized for the church of the New Testament.

MEMBERSHIP IN THE CHURCH

When the church began and the apostles preached the gospel to the world, “the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:47). From this inspired statement at least three truths are understood, the first of which is that *entrance into the church is not by man’s “joining”* (as is customary in most churches of the world today), but by the Lord’s adding. No one ever became a member of the Lord’s church by any other means than by being added to it by the Lord Himself. No authority from the Lord has made or allowed any changes to that pattern.

The second truth is that *only the Lord Himself may determine who is to be a member* of the church, and may add such souls to the church. It is, after all, *His* church (Matthew 16:18). No committee, council, synod or diocese – no pastor, priest, bishop or pope – can decide who is a worthy candidate for membership, and expect the Lord to make them members of His church.

The third truth we see in Acts 2:47 is that a person *must be saved before he can be added* to the Lord’s church by the Lord. It has long been preached that a person may become a member of a church, and then at some later time be saved, but for much, much longer it has been preached that salvation precedes church membership.

If the Lord requires one to be saved before being added to the Lord’s church, how does the Lord determine who is saved? Some churches will listen to a “testimony” and vote on whether it qualifies as salvation. Some accept confession of sins as evidence of salvation, others a prayer, and still others the application of water to a person’s head. What did the Lord accept when His apostles preached?

Peter first preached the gospel of the crucified and resurrected Jesus, as Jesus had promised that he would (Matt. 16:19). In preaching, he

convicted the people of their sins (Acts 2:14-36). They interrupted to ask for salvation from those sins: “Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, men and brethren, what shall we do?” (Verse 37). “Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (verse 38).

This is the answer we should expect. Jesus Himself had earlier commissioned all the apostles: “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned” (Mark 16:15-16). He had promised them that the Father would send to them the Holy Spirit, “the Spirit of Truth” (John 14:16-17), and said, “when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak” (16:13). When the apostles preached, they preached “not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth” (I Corinthians 2:13).

From Jerusalem and Judea, the disciples of Jesus went (as was prophesied, Acts 1:8) to Samaria to preach. “When they believed ... they were baptized, both men and women” (Acts 8:12). One of them is named individually: “Then Simon himself believed also: and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip” (verse 13).

An angel sent Philip out to a desert road, where the Holy Spirit told him to approach a man reading the Bible (Acts 8:26-29). “Philip ... preached unto him Jesus. And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him” (8:35-38).

Saul, an enemy of Christ, heard the gospel preached (Acts 9:6), was told that baptism was the means to cleansing from his sin (22:16), and in obedience to the instruction (26:19) was baptized (9:18).

A Roman soldier named Cornelius, with his household and neighbors, when they heard, believed and were commanded to be baptized (Acts 10:33-48).

Going on throughout the Roman Empire, Jesus' apostles and disciples crossed into Europe, where Paul met a merchant woman named Lydia in Philippi. When she heard the gospel, "she attended unto the things which were spoken ... and ... was baptized" (Acts 16:13-15).

Imprisoned by jealous opponents of their doctrine, Paul and Silas impressed even their jailor. He "came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas, and brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:28-29). Here is the point at which could expect to find a listing of the modern answers that are given to this very question. Preachers today would give various conflicting answers. Some would even advise the jailor to follow the plan he liked best, only to be sincere in doing so. What "must" one do to be saved? The answer given by those whom Jesus approved and chose to preach (Acts 9:10-17; 13:2) was, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ," upon which they immediately taught him the facts he needed to believe. His consistent response was that "he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized" (16:30-34).

Paul went on to preach Christ in Corinth. "And many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized" (Acts 18:8).

It is no wonder, then, that we read in the Bible that "salvation is in Christ Jesus" (II Timothy 2:10), and that we are "baptized into Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27).

Don't be a *divided* Christian. Be just a *Christian*: simply a member of the same church the first Christians knew. Believing the same doctrine they did, obeying the same gospel and following the same practices will certainly make us what they were and put us into the same church.

-A. L. Parr



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