

churches of Christ: Who Are We?

The following information is from a tract written by Joe R. Barnett entitled: "The Churches of Christ... Who are these people?"

You have probably heard of churches of Christ. And perhaps you've asked, "Who are these people? What - if anything - distinguishes them from the hundreds of other churches in the world?"

You may have wondered:

- "What is their historical background?"
- "How many members do they have?"
- "What is their message?"
- "How are they governed?"
- "How do they worship?"
- "What do they believe about the Bible?"

How Many Members?

Worldwide there are some 20,000 congregations of churches of Christ with a total of 2 1/2 to 3 million individual members. There are small congregations, consisting of just a few members--and large ones made up of several thousand members.

The greatest concentration of numerical strength in churches of Christ is in the southern United States where, for instance, there are about 40,000 members in some 135 congregations in Nashville, Tennessee. Or, in Dallas, Texas, where there are approximately 36,000 members in 69 congregations. In such states as Tennessee, Texas, Oklahoma, Alabama, Kentucky--and others--there is a church of Christ in practically every town, no matter how large or small.

While the number of congregations and members is not so numerous in other places, there are churches of Christ in every state in the United States and in 109 other countries.

People of Restoration Spirit

Members of churches of Christ are a people of restoration spirit--wanting to restore in our time the original New Testament church.

Dr. Hans Kung, a well-known European theologian, published a book a few years ago entitled, *The Church*. Dr. Kung lamented the fact that the established church has lost its way; has become burdened down with tradition; has failed to be what Christ planned it should be.

The only answer, according to Dr. Kung, is to go back to the scriptures to see what the church was in its beginning, and then to recover in the twentieth century the essence of the original church. This is what churches of Christ are seeking to do.

In the latter part of the 18th century, men of different denominations, studying independently of each other, in various parts of the world, began to ask:

- Why not go back beyond denominationalism to the simplicity and purity of the first-century church?
- Why not take the Bible alone and once again continue "steadfastly in the apostles' teaching..." (Acts 2:42)?
- Why not plant the same seed (the Word of God, Luke 8:11), that first century Christians planted, and be Christians only, as they were?

They were pleading with everyone to throw off denominationalism, to throw away human creeds, and to follow only the Bible. They taught that nothing should be required of people as acts of faith except that which is evident in the scriptures.

They emphasized that going back to the Bible does not mean the establishment of another denomination, but rather a return to the original church.

Members of churches of Christ are enthusiastic about this approach. With the Bible as our only guide we seek to find what the original church was like and restore it exactly.

We do not see this as arrogance, but the very opposite. We are saying that we do not have the right to ask for men's allegiance to a human organization--but only the right to call upon men to follow God's blueprint.

Not A Denomination

For this reason, we are not interested in man-made creeds, but simply in the New Testament pattern. We do not conceive of ourselves as being a denomination --nor as Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish -- but simply as members of the church which Jesus established and for which he died.

And that, incidentally, is why we wear his name. The term "church of Christ" is not used as a denominational designation, but rather as a descriptive term indicating that the church belongs to Christ.

We recognize our own personal shortcomings and weaknesses--and this is all the more reason for wanting to carefully follow the all-sufficient and perfect plan God has for the church.

Unity Based Upon The Bible

Since God has vested "all authority" in Christ (Matthew 28:18), and since he serves as God's spokesman today (Hebrews 1:1,2), it is our conviction that only Christ has the authority to say what the church is and what we should teach.

And since only the New Testament sets forth Christ's instructions to his disciples, it alone must serve as the basis for all religious teaching and practice. This is fundamental with members of churches of Christ. We believe that teaching the New Testament without modification is the only way to lead men and women to become Christians.

We believe religious division is bad. Jesus prayed for unity (John 17). And later, the apostle Paul begged those who were divided to unite in Christ (1 Corinthians 1).

We believe the only way to achieve unity is by a return to the Bible. Compromise cannot bring unity. And surely no person, nor group of persons, has the right to draw up a set of rules by which everyone must abide. But it is altogether proper to say, "Let's unite by just following the Bible." This is fair. This is safe. This is right.

So churches of Christ plead for religious unity based upon the Bible. We believe that to subscribe to any creed other than the New Testament, to refuse to obey any New Testament command, or to follow any practice not sustained by the New Testament is to add to or take away from the teachings of God. And both additions and subtractions are condemned in the Bible (Galatians 1:6-9; Revelation 22:18,19).

This is the reason the New Testament is the only rule of faith and practice we have in churches of Christ.

Each Congregation Self-Governed

Churches of Christ have none of the trappings of modern-day organizational bureaucracy. There are no governing boards--neither district, regional, national nor international--no earthly headquarters and no man-designed organization.

Each congregation is autonomous (self-ruled) and is independent of every other congregation. The only tie which binds the many congregations together is a common allegiance to Christ and the Bible.

There are no conventions, annual meetings, nor official publications. Congregations do cooperate in supporting children's homes, homes for the elderly, mission work, etc. However, participation is strictly voluntary on the part of each congregation and no person nor group issues policies or makes decisions for other congregations.

Each congregation is governed locally by a plurality of elders selected from among the members. These are men who meet the specific qualifications for this office given in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

There are also deacons in each congregation. These must meet the biblical qualifications of 1 Timothy 3.

Items of Worship

Worship in churches of Christ centers in five items, the same as in the first-century church. We believe the pattern is important. Jesus said, "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). From this statement we learn three things:

- Our worship must be directed to the right object ... God;
- It must be prompted by the right spirit;
- It must be according to truth. To worship God according to truth is to worship him according to his Word, because his Word is truth (John 17:17). Therefore, we must not exclude any item found in his Word, and we must not include any item not found in his Word.

In matters of religion we are to walk by faith (2 Corinthians 5:7). Since faith comes by hearing the Word of God (Romans 10:17), anything not authorized by the Bible cannot be done by faith ... and whatever is not of faith is sin (Romans 14:23).

The five items of worship observed by the first-century church were singing, praying, preaching, giving, and eating the Lord's Supper.

If you are acquainted with churches of Christ, you are probably aware that in two of these items our practice is different from that of most religious groups. So permit me to focus on these two, and state our reasons for what we do.

A Cappella Singing

One of the things people most frequently notice about churches of Christ is that we sing without the use of mechanical instruments of music -- a cappella singing is the only music used in our worship.

Simply stated, here is the reason: we are seeking to worship according to the instructions of the New Testament. The New Testament leaves instrumental music out, therefore, we believe it right and safe to leave it out, too. If we used the mechanical instrument we would have to do so without New Testament authority.

There are only 8 verses in the New Testament on the subject of music in worship. Here they are:

- "And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives" (Matthew 26:30).
- " about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God ..." (Acts 16:25).
- "Therefore I will praise Thee among the Gentiles, and sing to thy name" (Romans 15:9).
- ". . . I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also" (1 Corinthians 14:15).
- ". . . be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart" (Ephesians 5:18,19).
- "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Colossians 3:16).
- "I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto Thee" (Hebrews 2:12).
- "Is any one among you suffering? Let him pray. Is any cheerful? Let him sing praise" (James 5:13). The mechanical instrument of music is conspicuously absent in these passages.

Historically, the first appearance of instrumental music in church worship was not until the sixth century A.D., and there was no general practicing of it until after the eighth century. Instrumental music was strongly opposed by such religious leaders as John Calvin, John Wesley and Charles Spurgeon because of its absence in the New Testament.

Weekly Observance of The Lord's Supper

Another place where you may have noticed a difference between churches of Christ and other religious groups is in the Lord's Supper. This memorial supper was inaugurated by Jesus on the night of his betrayal (Matthew 26:26-28). It is observed by Christians in memory of the Lord's death (1 Corinthians 11:24,25). The emblems - unleavened bread and fruit of the vine - symbolize the body and blood of Jesus (1 Corinthians 10:16).

Churches of Christ are different from many in that we observe the Lord's Supper on the first day of every week. Again, our reason centers in our determination to follow the teaching of the New Testament. It says, describing the practice of the first-century church, "And upon the first day of the week . . . the disciples came together to break bread ..." (Acts 20:7).

Some have objected that the text does not specify the first day of every week. This is true--just as the command to observe the Sabbath did not specify every Sabbath. The command was simply, "remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8). The Jews understood that to mean every Sabbath. It seems to us that by the same reasoning "the first day of the week" means the first day of every week.

Again, we know from such respected historians as Neander and Eusebius that Christians in those early centuries took the Lord's Supper every Sunday.

Terms of Membership

Perhaps you are wondering, "How does one become a member of the church of Christ?" What are the terms of membership?

Churches of Christ do not speak of membership in terms of some formula which must be followed for approved acceptance into the church. The New Testament gives certain steps which were taken by people in that day to become Christians. When a person became a Christian he automatically was a member of the church.

The same is true of churches of Christ today. There is no separate set of rules or ceremonies which one must follow to be inducted into the church. When one becomes a Christian he, at the same time, becomes a member of the church. No further steps are required to qualify for church membership.

On the first day of the church's existence those who repented and were baptized were saved (Acts 2:38). And from that day forward all those who were saved were added to the church (Acts 2:47). According to this verse (Acts 2:47) it was God who did the adding. Therefore, in seeking to follow this pattern, we neither vote people into the church nor force them through a required series of studies. We have no right to demand anything beyond their obedient submission to the Savior.

The conditions of pardon which are taught in the New Testament are:

- One must hear the gospel, for "faith comes by hearing the word of God" (Romans 10:17).
- One must believe, for "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11:6).
- One must repent of past sins, for God "commands all men, every- where to repent" (Acts 17:30).
- One must confess Jesus as Lord, for he said, "He that confesses me before men, him will I also confess before my father who is in heaven" (Matthew 10:32).
- And one must be baptized for the remission of sins, for Peter said, "Repent, and be baptized every- one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins ..." (Acts 2:38).

Emphasis on Baptism

Churches of Christ have a reputation for placing much stress on the need for baptism. However, we do not emphasize baptism as a "church ordinance," but as a command of Christ. The New Testament teaches baptism as an act which is essential to salvation (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16).

We do not practice infant baptism because New Testament baptism is only for sinners who turn to the Lord in belief and penitence. An infant has no sin to repent of, and cannot qualify as a believer.

The only form of baptism we practice in churches of Christ is immersion. The Greek word from which the word baptize comes means "to dip, to immerse, to sub-merge, to plunge." And the Scriptures always point to baptism as a burial (Acts 8:35-39; Romans 6:3,4; Colossians 2:12).

Baptism is extremely important because the New Testament sets forth the following purposes for it:

- It is to enter the kingdom (John 3:5).
- It is to contact Christ's blood (Romans 6:3,4).
- It is to get into Christ (Galatians 3:27).
- It is for salvation (Mark 16:16; 1 Peter 3:21).
- It is for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38).
- It is to wash away sins (Acts 22:16).
- It is to get into the church (1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 1:23).

Since Christ died for the sins of the whole world and the invitation to share in his saving grace is open to everyone (Acts 10:34,35; Revelation 22:17), we do not believe that anyone is predestined for salvation or condemnation. Some will choose to come to Christ in faith and obedience and will be saved. Others will reject his plea and be condemned (Mark 16:16). These will not be lost because they were marked for condemnation, but because that's the path they chose.

Wherever you are at this moment, we hope you will decide to accept the salvation offered by Christ - that you will offer yourself in obedient faith and become a member of his church.