

Are You Looking for a Church?

by

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Whenever a poll is taken on the religious beliefs of people today, it usually shows that a good number of them are not members of any particular group. They may be looking for a church, but most of them are in a state of confusion because of the great number of churches they see around them. Are you in that group of people? Are you looking for a church? Are you trying to find a place where you can serve God and at the same time feel the love of God in your heart?

You may have heard of a book entitled Handbook of Denominations. This book lists a total of 239 distinct religious groups in the United States today. The problem is that life is just not long enough for a person to visit all 239 groups. And really, this book doesn't tell the whole story, because many of these denominations have had splits and divisions, and frequently one group is not even in fellowship with another group in the same denomination. So, the number 239 is really a very low estimate.

A more complete listing of denominations was published several years ago in a major magazine. This list contained the names of over 1200 different denominations in the U.S. It included all the standard Protestant and Catholic churches, but it also listed such groups as the Free Thinkers of America, the Psychedelic Venus Church, the I Am Movement (with eleven subdivisions), the Church of Satan, and even the Kennedy Worshipers. The list was very detailed, but it was also very depressing. How could

anybody ever possibly go through those 1200 churches and decide which one to attend?

Ninety People Baptized

Rather than throw up your hands in despair, please listen to a story that has helped many people looking for a church. This story goes back 150 to 200 years ago, when it was told on the American frontier by the preachers of that day.

The story takes place in a little town where there were 90 people searching for the truth about the Christian faith. They were eager to learn all they could about the Bible. They happened to hear of a preacher who was going to be visiting a larger town near them, so all 90 of them rode in their wagons to hear him.

The preacher used *Acts 2* as his text that day, and based on that passage, all 90 obeyed the gospel by following the words of the Apostle Peter:

Acts 2:38 – Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

These 90 individuals repented of their sins and were baptized and thus became saved people.

They all returned home thrilled over their new lives in Christ. But back in their little town, they had to choose which church to attend. Thirty people from their group joined the Baptist Church in that town, and the second 30 joined the Methodist Church. But the remaining 30 were not sure what to do. Which church should they join?

While you are thinking about that question, please consider a passage from the New Testament which these 30 baptized believers had been studying:

1 Corinthians 1:12-13 - ...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?

These 30 baptized believers studied this passage and decided not to join any denomination, but to start meeting together themselves in this small town. What church were they members of at that point?

First Major Decision: A Name

These 30 followers of Christ who were meeting together had to decide on something important. What would they call themselves?

Some suggested that they name themselves after a great religious leader. One person knew about the life of Menno Simons and suggested that they call themselves Mennonites. Someone else pointed out that Martin Luther was a great man and had done much good in his life, so they could call themselves Lutherans. But when they began investigating the life of Luther, they found that he had made this statement:

"I pray you leave my name alone, and do not call yourselves Lutherans, but Christians. How does it befit me, a miserable bag of dust and ashes, to give my name to the children of Christ? Cease, my dear friends to cling to these party names and distinctions...and let us all call ourselves only Christians, after Him from whom our doctrine comes" (The Life of Luther, p. 265).

"Well," said one of the believers, "if Luther begged people not to call themselves Lutherans, then we should honor his request."

One person in the group had an idea of calling themselves after some kind of procedure. They planned on doing things in an organized way using methods, so why not call themselves Methodists? Another suggested that since they all believed in baptism, they should call themselves Baptists. Still another person in the group said that they wanted to be united as brothers, so they should call themselves United Brethren.

As a last resort, someone suggested that they look in the Bible and see what the First Century disciples called themselves. They started reading the New Testament, and before long one person found this verse in the book of *Acts* and read it to the group:

Acts 11:26 - ...the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.

Another read further in the New Testament and found this passage:

Acts 26:28 – And Agrippa replied to Paul, "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian."

Still another read to the group this Scripture from the book of *1 Peter*:

1 Peter 4:16 - ...if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God.

That settled it for these 30 baptized believers – they would just call themselves Christians!

A Second Decision: Which Creed to Use

After these believers decided to call themselves Christians, their next decision was what they would use as their authority. In other words, when they had a disagreement, how would it be resolved? What would they teach their children when they wanted to learn about the Christian faith, and what would they memorize and teach to others?

These 30 Christians began examining various creeds. There was the Discipline of the Methodist Church and the Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church. There was the Longer Catechism of Luther. There were other creeds, such as the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Augsburg Confession, and the Apostles' Creed.

But these Christians remembered that their first big decision was made by going to the Bible. So they decided once again to go to God's word and search for an answer to their question about creeds. One member of the group began reading in the Old Testament and found this passage:

Deuteronomy 4:2 – You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the

commandments of the Lord your God which I command you.

Another one found this Scripture:

Proverbs 30:6 – Do not add to His words lest He reprove you, and you be proved a liar.

And another Christian in the group found this passage:

Jude 3 - ...I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.

Others found such passages as *Galatians 1:6-9* and *Revelation 22:18-19*, which both emphasize that we are not to add or subtract anything from God's word.

These 30 Christians then had a great idea. Why not use just the Bible as their only creed? Why not make the Bible their only guide book? If they had a disagreement on a religious matter, they would settle it by going to the Scriptures, and whatever the Bible said, that is what they would do to the best of their ability.

This group of 30 baptized believers had now made two major decisions: to call themselves Christians and to take the Bible as their only creed and guide.

The Third Decision: Organization

As these 30 Christians met, they began to see the need to organize the congregation. There were many systems to choose from. Some religious groups had developed synods. Others had a diocese system with the members broken up according to

geographical areas. Other groups had annual conventions at which time they elected officers and made rules, according to the votes of the delegates. One large religious group had a priest over each local congregation; he answered to a regional archbishop, who eventually answered to a world-wide leader of the church.

One of the most popular forms of organization for the churches was to have a “pastor” system. A man was chosen to be the minister for the congregation; he was given the title “Reverend” or “Father,” and he basically became the head of the congregation.

But just as these Christians had answered their questions in the past by going to the Scriptures, so also this time they decided to go back to the Bible and see if there were any passages that talked about church government.

They found two passages of this subject: *1 Timothy 3* and *Titus 1*. In these Scriptures they saw that the local congregation was to have overseers (elders or bishops, as they are called in other Scriptures). To assist the elders, men known as deacons were also to be appointed (*1 Timothy 3:8-13*). These 30 Christians could see that there was to be no control over the local congregation from the outside; each congregation was to be self-governing.

But who was to be the head of the church? Someone remembered that in *Ephesians 1:22* God said that Christ was going to be the head of His own church. So there was to be no earthly ruler over the church, only elders overseeing each congregation, assisted by deacons and the other members.

These people therefore called themselves Christians, took only the Bible as their

creed, and organized themselves with elders and deacons, recognizing that Christ was the only head of the church.

What Church Were These Christians Members Of?

This brings us to the entire purpose of this tract. It is to ask one question. What denomination were these Christians members of? Let us consider some related questions. What denomination was the Apostle Peter a member of? Was he a Presbyterian? Was he a Baptist? What about the Apostle Paul? Was he a Methodist? Was he Lutheran? Peter and Paul would not have understood these questions. It would have been like asking them if they were Democrats or Republicans. Peter and Paul and the other Christians in the first century were not members of any denomination, but they were members of the church that Jesus established.

Acts 8:3 – But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.

Which church was being persecuted? Was it the Catholic Church? The first century Christians had never heard of the Catholic Church. Was it the Lutheran Church? Martin Luther was not even born until over 1400 years later. Was it any of the 1200 different denominations in the world today?

The truth is that there was only one church in the First Century – it was the kingdom of Christ, the church of Christ.

Someone will say, “Ah...I see where you are going, but what you are about to tell me is impossible – there is no way we can go

back and be members of the original church that Christ built – it is just impossible.” To such a person we must say in love: “Friend, not only is it possible, but we are doing it! Here in this country and in many other countries around the world, we are doing it.”

Objections That People Raise

But people will begin to protest and make objections to the concept of being just a member of the church of Christ that was established in the First Century.

The first objection is this: “How do you know that this is exactly the same church that Jesus established in the New Testament?”

We might illustrate it this way. Suppose that a person has the instruction booklet that came with a beautiful chess set. This booklet contains all the rules for playing the game of chess. Suppose someone destroyed all the chess boards and chess sets in the entire world, and let us say that no one played chess for a thousand years. Could the game of chess ever possibly be restored? The answer is yes – as long as someone had a copy of the booklet listing the rules. This booklet could be taken out, reprinted, and translated into current languages, and the game could be restored.

In the same way, we have the Bible, God’s word. Regardless of what may have happened over the past centuries, as long as we have the “rulebook,” then the Lord’s church can be restored. We follow the Bible by calling ourselves Christians, by deciding that the Bible will be our only authority, by organizing our congregations according to the pattern set forth in the Scriptures, and by following the Bible on all other points to the

best of our ability. When we do all these things, we will be the body of Christ in our various locations. To some, it may sound as if we are arrogant in saying this, but our confidence in the Bible gives us this boldness!

There is a second objection that some people raise: “Where has the church of Christ been all these centuries? Why am I just hearing of the church of Christ for the first time?”

Based on what the Scriptures say about the church, we must believe that faithful Christians somewhere have had a Scriptural worship service every Sunday since the Day of Pentecost (*Acts 2*) when the church was established.

The exciting thing is that our missionaries have gone into other parts of the world and have discovered people meeting and worshipping just as we are doing here in this country. These are people who have had absolutely no contact with the movement in the United States to restore New Testament Christianity.

Perhaps the best example of this occurred at the New York World’s Fair in 1964. The churches of Christ had an exhibit there, and on the evening of August 19, 1964, a man named Juan Monroy walked up to the exhibit. He immediately began to ask questions about the Bible and what we believe and practice. He talked with the Christians in the exhibit until it closed at 10:00 p.m., and then they went to an apartment of one of the members of the church and talked all night long. Juan Monroy was thrilled at what he had learned; he was from Spain and was working with about 20 congregations of Christians in that country. They called themselves simply Christians, they practiced baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and they worshipped as

the First Century church did. They had no knowledge of the Lord's church in the United States, because at that time our missionaries were not being allowed into Spain.

Not only has this happened in Spain, but in other countries around the world, we have discovered people meeting and worshipping just as we are and in accordance with the simple commands of the New Testament. We see, therefore, that it is possible to take just the Bible, follow it, and become New Testament Christians.

Any group that does that will be a part of the church of Christ that was established by the Lord Himself in the First Century.

A Lesson from a Little Boy

You may be interested in hearing the story of a little boy who was getting ready for church one Sunday morning. The boy's parents were divided religiously. His father went to one denomination, and his mother went to another. So the parents had worked out a compromise: the boy went with his father one week and with his mother the next week. Finally, one Sunday morning, the boy said to his parents, "Doesn't God always do everything best?" They both answered yes – that God always did everything in the best way possible. "Well," said the boy, "why didn't He make just one church, so that we could all go to church together?" What a wise little boy that was!

The truth is that God did indeed make only one church, and it is God's church. We are

urging people to become members of that one church – the church of Christ. We are urging people to look back through the centuries before the Reformation, before the Middle Ages, and even before the Dark Ages. We are urging people to go all the way back to the First Century and become members of the church that Christians were members of then.

We are urging people to get out of the confusion of the denominations and become a part of the eternal kingdom of Christ. This is a thrilling concept, and we ask you to consider it carefully.

We encourage you to locate the church of Christ in your community and find out how great it is to throw off the traditions and shackles of men's doctrines and to breathe once again the clean, pure air of New Testament Christianity! Find out how great it is not to be a member of any denomination, but to simply be a Christian, a member of the Lord's church.

Are you looking for a church? Would you like to become a member of the body of Christ today?

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