

WHAT IS THE CHURCH OF CHRIST?

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This question, or its modified form, "What are the churches of Christ?" is asked quite often by persons who have not had occasion to either hear or study the history and beliefs of this particular brotherhood of churches. Historically, churches of Christ share the same general background as the Disciples of Christ, or what is sometimes known as the Christian Church. In 1906 the federal census listed the two groups separately, and since that date each has gone its respective way, following their particular interpretations of those basic principles set forth in what is known as "The Restoration Movement."

The "Restoration Movement," as its leaders soon came to identify it, rooted in religious conditions prevailing on both sides of the Atlantic in the late 18th and early part of the 19th century. Protestantism, both in Europe and in America, at this time was strongly influenced and colored by Calvinism. Denominational bigotry, expressed in rigid creeds and intolerant attitudes of Christians toward various religious bodies, was

prevalent in Europe (especially in Great Britain) as well as the eastern half of the United States.

To ignore the European background of this "Restoration Movement" by referring to it as the most indigenous (that is, native) of all American churches evidences a historical unawareness of serious import.

Serious minded men on both sides of the Atlantic became deeply concerned about the divided conditions prevailing in the Christian world, and initiated efforts to unify all of God's people. The goal of these leaders was the unity of Christ's followers, and the method through which such unity would be achieved was the restoration of New Testament Christianity.

Perhaps the best known European leaders were the Haldane brothers, James and Robert, who rebelled against the rigid formalism and lack of evangelistic fervor characteristic of the Church of Scotland at that time.

Other Scots to take similar action were John Glas, Robert Sandeman, and Grenville Ewing. In a theological school organized by Ewing in Edin-

burgh, Alexander Campbell received his initial education and without doubt was influenced in his thinking by the leaders already mentioned.

In America, dissatisfaction was felt in various regions, with individual leaders striking out in their respective methods to unify God's people. James O'Kelly, on Christmas Day, 1793, officially severed all connections with the Methodist Episcopal Church, and called upon others to join with him in taking the Bible as their only authority and creed.

His energies were felt primarily in Virginia and North Carolina, where he reportedly led several thousand persons to accept the newly stated principles of New Testament Christianity.

These principles recognized the Lord Jesus Christ as the only Head of the Church; the name Christian to the exclusion of all party and sectarian names; the Bible, or Word of God, as the only adequate rule of faith and practice; Christian character as the basis of church fellowship; and the liberty of Christian conscience with private judgment as the privilege and duty of all.

In New England Elias Smith and Abner Jones were setting forth very similar "Restoration principles" to those advocated by the O'Kelly group. To the south in Tennessee and Kentucky, a Presbyterian preacher named Barton W. Stone was launching an evangelistic revival movement in 1801 with perhaps 30,000 persons in attendance.

Stone's thinking and preaching, however, involved him in difficulty with the Presbyterian Church, from which he withdrew to establish the Springfield Presbytery. Within three years he willed the demise of this organization in his now famous, "Last Will and Testament," a document calling for unity of God's people in the one Body of Christ.

From Ireland came Thomas Campbell in 1807, Seceder Presbyterian preacher, soon followed by the family, including his son Alexander, who was destined to become perhaps the most famous of the "Restorers." Thomas Campbell, sharing the similar disaffections which have been mentioned, soon found himself out of favor with his Presbytery.

Alexander, having now

joined his father in Pennsylvania, devoted himself to an intensive study of the Bible for several years, and emerged as the most powerful and influential leader of the movement. From New England, Virginia and North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Kentucky, these sectional efforts eventually gravitated together, and, finding much common ground, the combined "Restoration Movement" for New Testament Christianity was full-born.

About the middle of the 19th century this movement suffered a grievous hurt when it divided over the establishment of the American Christian Missionary Society in 1849, and the introduction of instrumental music into worship about a decade later. The churches holding firmly to the Restoration principle of "Where the Bible speaks, we speak; where the Bible is silent, we are silent" rejected both missionary society and the instrument; while other churches in the movement received both. The final result was the division between the churches of Christ and the Disciples, or Christian Church.

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WHAT OUR RELIGIONS ARE

THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

EDITOR'S NOTE—The very nature of Christianity as viewed by churches of Christ makes it impossible for one individual member to speak officially for these churches throughout the world. The answers suggested in this article, therefore, are those of Dr. Jones as a minister of Christ and a Christian educator. He feels, however, that the general beliefs and practices set forth in this article are shared by the mainstream of Christian leaders within the brotherhood of churches of Christ.

By DR. JOSEPH F. JONES

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About the author: Dr. Joseph F. Jones, author of this article, is minister of Northwest Church of Christ, Detroit, and professor of Bible and church history at Michigan Christian College. He has served in the ministry of churches of Christ for 22 years, and engaged in extensive evangelistic travels in both United States and Canada. Dr. Jones formerly served as a dean at Oklahoma Christian College, and head of the division of social sciences. His academic and theological education includes graduate degrees from Pepperdine College, University of Michigan, and the Oklahoma State University, from which he earned the doctorate, with additional studies at Vanderbilt University and Butler University. He is well-known among churches of Christ as a writer, lecturer, and Christian educator.

What is the status of churches of Christ today?

Churches of Christ in the United States today constitute a brotherhood of 2,300,000 members, in approximately 19,000 congregations, and are served by perhaps more than 8,000 ministers.

In metropolitan Detroit alone there are more than 60 churches of Christ, with a membership exceeding 11,000. These churches maintain a wholesome congregational autonomy, working harmoniously in fellowship projects too extensive for one church; but without any attempted control from any "national headquarters."

How are the individual members and churches designated?

The terms "church of Christ" or "churches of Christ" are not used in a denominational sense. Grammatically, they describe the church as the possession of Christ; they are of, or belonging to, the Lord. Nor is the term "church of Christ" an exclusive expression to designate the church. Various descriptive words or expressions indicate the nature of the church, such as "the body of Christ," "the family of God," "the church of God." Sometimes the church is designated in reference to its membership as "the church of the firstborn," or the "churches of all the saints." But in reality the New Testament church has no name. It is simply "the church."

Individual members of the church, likewise, are variously designated in terms of their relationship to God, Christ, one another, or self. As learners of Christ's teaching, they are disciples; in view of their cleansing in conversion, they are designated as saints; since they are related to other Christians, they are "brothers, or sisters, in Christ." In their special relationship to Jesus Christ, members of the church are known as "Christians;" and being in the family of God, they are His children—sons and daughters of the Father. It is significant that in the New Testament such terms or words referring to individual members are not proper titles denoting some special office in the church, but rather descriptive of the Christian's nature.

What do churches of Christ believe about religious authority?

Churches of Christ exalt (or desire to) Jesus as the Lord of life. He is the ultimate in the progressive and historical revelation of God's will. Of Himself He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no man comes to the Father, but by Me." (John 14:6) As the risen Lord, He claimed all authority (power) to rule life, command the church, and to reveal the Will of God. (Matt. 28:18-20)

The affirmation of Jesus' ultimate authority points churches of Christ to His living and written Word, known as the Bible. In the Sacred Scriptures, containing both Old and New Testaments, God's will is made known. While the entire Bible is viewed as Divinely revealed and God-breathed (inspired) through chosen men, the New Testament is seen as the source which exalts Jesus as the fulfillment of God's purposes and promises in the Old Testament. Hence, for the Christian the New Testament is singularly authoritative in conversion and Christian life.

While attitudes toward various translations of the Bible vary throughout the brotherhood, the prevailing view seems to be a wholesome acceptance of the results of Biblical research in an effort to arrive at the purest text possible of the original Hebrew and Greek Scriptures. Such a view does not appear to be inconsistent with belief in the doctrine of full inspiration claimed in the Scriptures themselves. (II Tim. 3:16-17)

What general view is taken toward miracles?

Among the leadership in churches of Christ exists the conviction that belief in the concept of the supernatural is neither unreasonable nor unscientific; but conforms perfectly with the nature of God as set forth in Scripture. Hence, miracles are viewed as related to the nature and purposes of God in His world, for His children.

Concerning such miracles as the Virgin Birth and Res-

urrection of Jesus, churches of Christ view them as essential in the total revelation of God's redemptive plan. In the Virgin Birth, God is believed to have become incarnate; in the Resurrection His plans for human redemption are fully vindicated. Churches of Christ understand the Resurrection to have constituted the very essence of apostolic preaching and early Christian faith. (I Cor. 15:1-4; I Pet. 1:3)

The fundamental question is not whether one or two miracles could or did happen, but whether the God portrayed in Scripture chose to use such means for the revealing of His will; and further, whether the historical documents which testify to these miracles are trustworthy. Churches of Christ believe the Old and New Testament documents to be fully reliable under the canons of historic criticism.

What about the nature of God?

Historically, churches of Christ have discouraged authoritative creedal statements as essential to Christian membership. Such statements about any fundamental doctrine are not found; but there is general agreement, for example, that the God of revelation is personal, all-wise and knowing, all-powerful to execute His ultimate purposes. In essence He is love, creative and forgiving. He is Lord of nations, the church, the individual. Making such a God knowledgeable to the nations affords much of the dynamic

for evangelism among churches of Christ.

What is believed about the nature of Christ?

Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary, conceived of the Holy Spirit, is believed the incarnation of God. He was God in the flesh; hence, the idea and word of incarnation, which literally means, "God become flesh." Churches of Christ accept the testimony of the Gospel of John, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father." (John 1:14)

What is believed about the Holy Spirit?

That the Scriptures teach the unity of the one God, as well as the three persons, of the Godhead (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) churches of Christ accept.

While some individual scholars within the brotherhood may pursue the theological implications of this doctrine, little attention is given to the mystery of the Trinity in ordinary preaching and teaching.

Within the last few decades, however, more attention has been given to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as taught in Scripture. Many now understand and teach the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as the life-giving source in conversion and the church (I Cor. 12:12-13); and belief in the "indwelling of the Spirit" is commonly held by most of the ministers in the church.

What is believed about the nature and organization of the church?

The reality and nature of the church are presented in various ways in New Testament teaching. The church is the Body of Christ, composed of Christians who are members of it by virtue of their surrender in faith and baptism. (I Cor. 12:12-13) The church is the covenant people of God, the true Israel of God, according to Paul's language, (Gal. 6:15, 16). The church is pictured in Scripture as the Family of God, the Fellowship of the Saints, and as the sphere in which God's Reign (Kingdom) is presently being worked out. (Col. 1:13) In essence, the church is a living, Spirit-filled, Divine-human organism; it is not an organization.

For the effective realization of its purposes, however, God set organizational structure within the church. Churches of Christ believe the New Testament teaches that the Apostolic Church was congregationally oriented. Each congregation had its own body of elders who exercised full oversight and pastoral care of the members. In the early church, "elders", "pastors", and "bishops" were different terms applied to the same office, only expressing varying functions of that office. Assisting the elders was a body of special servants known as "deacons". Preachers, evangelists, or ministers of the Word of God, served as heralds of Christ to proclaim the good news of salvation; sometimes they traveled; sometimes they worked in local communities. Churches of Christ today follow this same

apostolic pattern of church organization for the effective realization of the church's mission.

What about the worship in churches of Christ?

Worship is the response of the creature to his Creator. In public worship the congregation seeks to sense the presence of God, to adore and praise Him who alone is praiseworthy. The worship might be characterized as God-centered, reverent, simple in form, and personal.

Through hymns and spiritual songs the congregation praises God, teaches, admonishes, and encourages in Christian faith. The singing in churches of Christ is without instrumental accompaniment, in consistent respect for New Testament silence about such music in Christian worship.

The Lord's Supper is observed every Lord's Day, in following the example of the Apostolic church.

That the early church met every first day of the week for the "breaking of bread" is evident in both the New Testament documents and the Church Fathers'. In meaning, the Supper is viewed as a memorial feast, in remembrance of Jesus' death and resurrection; it is a communion or fellowship, a sharing in His redemptive suffering on the cross; it is also interpreted as a proclamation, a living sermon. "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (I Cor. 11:26)

Prayers are a vital and predominant element in the worship of churches of Christ. They are led by any Christian man of faith and godly conduct. The public reading of the Bible is, likewise, a regular element in the worship of most churches of Christ, although this may be done as a separate expression of worship, or incorporated by the minister in presentation of his sermon.

Preaching is a significant part of the total public service also. Although churches of Christ have no arbitrary standards of formal academic and theological training for their ministers (preachers), such men are usually very well trained in the knowledge of God's word.

Churches of Christ are supported primarily by contributions made on the Lord's Day. While tithing is not taught as a New Testament requirement, many members of these churches give with liberality and generosity which exceeds the tithe.

What do churches of Christ teach about Christian unity?

Jesus prayed that His disciples might "all be one". The apostles taught that Christians should be of one mind and heart, and that divisions among Christians are sinful. The Apostolic Church enjoyed a sense of unity, at least in its early stages, for Luke writes that the multitude of "those who believed were of one heart and soul." (Acts 4:32) Such unity is seen as the result of continuing "steadfastly in the apostles' teaching," in exalting Christ's Person and authority in the church.

Churches of Christ believe that this is the road to true ecumenicity. Not an amalgamation of church organizations, nor a surrender of one denomination to another, is the secret to unity; but a mutual surrender of all who claim themselves as followers of Jesus to His ultimate authority. These churches be-

lieve that the individual need be neither Protestant, Catholic, nor Jew; but simply Christian. The church corporately need not identify herself with one single personality of Christian history, great though that person's contribution might have been; nor with one specific doctrinal emphasis, whether it be baptism, a given form of church government, or a quality of Christian conduct. Churches of Christ humbly appeal for the removal of barriers of all kinds which have tended to divide God's people.

Christians can be one in their commitment to Christ, enjoy freedom in Christ to pursue truth, and can exercise brotherly love in all relationships. This ideal of unity in purpose and spirit, with individual liberty in Christ, and love in all things is an aspiration of churches of Christ. Toward its more perfect realization they daily strive.

What about the nature of man?

Man is viewed as the creature of God, endowed with rational will and moral capacity. In the exercise of his natural propensities man failed God, violated God's will for him. Sin is thus a failure to be all that God wills for the creature; it is man's failure to realize his potential from creation. The Bible teaches that, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God". (Rom. 3:23). In his sinful predicament man needs God's intervention to save. No man can save himself. Man has the potential from creation, however, to become either saint or sinner.

What do churches of Christ teach about salvation?

Since man was (is) incapable of redeeming himself from moral and spiritual wretchedness, it required the initiative of God to provide for his salvation. This the Bible affirms as the heart of the gospel. Salvation is by the grace of God through faith. (Eph. 2:8) Grace is the undeserved goodness of God extended toward unworthy man. Regardless of what man may be asked to do in response to this grace, no man can merit salvation. No man can live beyond God's expectations and thus accumulate a goodness of which others may draw. The idea of a treasury of merit is foreign to New Testament teaching.

Faith in God is essential in coming to God and pleasing Him. But before this faith can be effective in salvation it must turn toward God in genuine sorrow and determination to change. Such a change of mind in sorrow and new resolve is repentance, demanded by Jesus Himself. "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." When the sinner truly turns toward God in repentance, he then accepts through faith (personal trust) the sacrifice of Jesus for his sins. (Acts 20:21)

Personal trust in the Savior is embodied in the act of baptism. "For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." (Gal. 3:26-27) Baptism symbolizes the believer's death to sin and his resurrection into the newness of life. (Rom. 6:4-5) Baptism reenacts Jesus' own death, burial, and resurrection, and serves to identify the penitent believer with his Lord. Essential to such newness of life are repentance and baptism which the Apostle Peter demanded on Pentecost, "for

the remission of sins." (Acts 2:38)

Since faith is viewed as a rational act, repentance as a conscious turning away from sin and toward God, and baptism as the total surrender of the penitent believer to his Lord, only persons of responsible age are seen as proper subjects for conversion and church membership.

What is the relationship between the individual Christian and the church?

Churches of Christ believe that the New Testament relates the individual Christian and the church in an inseparable manner. The modern notion that one can be saved and "join the denomination of his choice" is foreign to Apostolic teaching. That which saved persons on the day of Pentecost also made them members of the Body of Christ. "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." (Acts 2:47) Believers are baptized into Christ (Gal. 3:27); but they are also baptized into the Body of Christ, I Cor. 12:13) which is the church (Col. 1:17). When one is in Christ, he is in the church.

What is believed about Christian life?

Churches of Christ accept the goal of Christian living as Christ-likeness, or Christian maturity. The development of the total person into the image of the Christ is the goal toward which the churches' educational ministry points. (Eph. 4:11-13) Thus Christian behavior has as both its goal and standard the "mind of Christ." Such an aspiration cannot be realized through mere good habits or religious exercises, but must rely upon the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). The Christian shares with the Apostle Paul the assurance of Divine strength: "I can do all things in him who strengthens me." (Phil. 4:13)

Do churches of Christ believe in heaven and hell?

Definitely so. The term "heaven," embodies the reality of overcoming death and indescribable assurance of life with God. The term "hell" portrays the destiny of those who wilfully set themselves against God and his Kingdom.

Christian faith in life beyond death is more than belief in immortality of the soul. Christian revelation teaches the resurrection and transformation of the body; and this is the essence of the Apostle's sublime passage on death and victory in 1 Corinthians 15. How this new body will be made or what its nature will be, is not told. It is simply affirmed that since "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God," that there will be a new body, a transformed spiritual body.

The idea of annihilation after death is a denial of both the nature of man from creation and the plain affirmation of Biblical teaching.

How do churches of Christ look upon evangelism?

Churches of Christ see the evangelism of the world as their major task. They seek to recapture the burning zeal of the early Christians, who "went about preaching the word." (Acts 8:4).

A sense of urgency undergirds much of the preaching in the churches of Christ, as non-Christians are urged to repent and accept Jesus as Christ and Savior. Sin is seen as real, damaging and defacing potential sons of God. Men are lost and need to accept God's grace in Jesus Christ.

With these basic convictions it is understandable that churches of Christ are often characterized by a wholesome aggressiveness in personal evangelism, pulpit proclamation, radio and television efforts, and metropolitan campaigns to win the unsaved to Christ.

What is the foreign missionary program of churches of Christ?

Working without any organization higher than the local congregation, churches of Christ have, nevertheless, cooperated in launching a dynamic foreign evangelism program within the past two decades. At present there are approximately 250 American missionaries in 80 countries around the world.

What emphasis is placed upon Christian education?

While the term "Christian education" has generally been associated with the formal academic institution in the brotherhood, it is now being related more extensively to the educational programs of local congregations. Churches are increasingly aware of their role as God's educational agency "for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ..." (Eph. 4:12-13).

With the new vision of the Christian education function before the churches, several significant advances in total church life have come. Many congregations have either added, enlarged, or otherwise improved their physical facilities, with educational purposes in mind.

Supplementing the educational work of the local churches and the Christian family are approximately 20 institutions of higher learning. Several of these colleges now offer graduate work in various fields, with special interest in the graduate degrees available in religion.

Sharing the educational mission of the church also are a large number of religious publications, individually or corporately owned. While providing some educational contribution to the total church program, they perhaps serve most effectively as brotherhood news media. They also reflect sectional interests within the church, current trends in which the entire brotherhood may have concern, and stimulate local churches in national or foreign mission needs and programs.

What about the churches' concern for social problems?

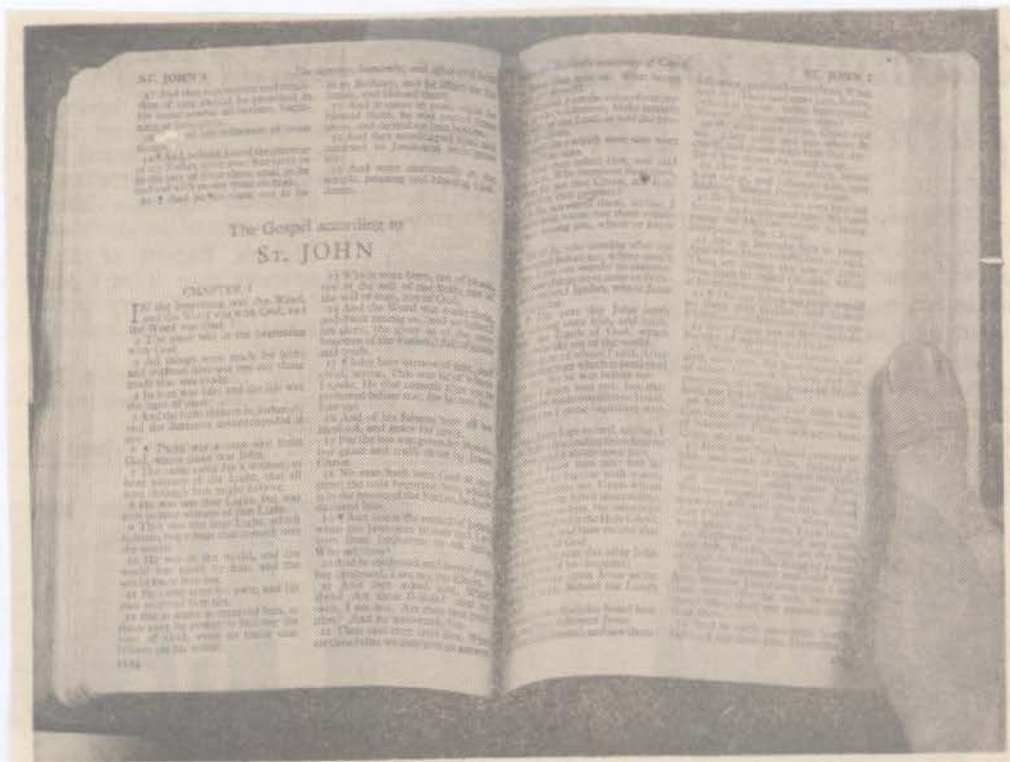
The strong emphasis on congregational autonomy among the churches obviously implies that there are no general authoritative church policies relating to social ills. This does not imply, however, a lack of concern or action on the part of churches in making the gospel relevant to society's needs and problems. For instance, while there is no "brotherhood policy" on racial questions, emphasis is placed on the Christian principles of oneness in Christ, equality before God, and the immorality of discrimination on the basis of color, race or social status. Church legislation does not appear to be the Biblical approach to such ills; but rather a vigorous and courageous ministry of Christian education, implemented in practical ways.

This approach is now being effected in many areas of the brotherhood, with churches making no discrimination on such superficial grounds as race or color, but rather emphasizing that membership can only be based upon an obedient recognition of Jesus Christ as Lord. (Gal. 3:28)

In such areas as divorce and remarriage, and birth control the same basic approach is followed. No "church policies" or legislation can be made. Accepting the Will of God as revealed finally in His Son and found in the Sacred Scriptures, individual Christians are encouraged to pursue their own study of truth and to relate it, accordingly, to life.

It is true, however, that the membership of the churches largely looks to the well-trained ministers and elders for specific guidance in these areas.

The churches of Christ desire to be "a people for God's own possession." They seek to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ in the church, in personal conduct, and in all human relationships. They will to make Him known among the nations as the source and secret of peace and good will on earth.



Christ, revealed in and through the Sacred Scriptures, is the final authority for Christians. Churches of Christ exalt this authority, appealing for a resurgence of the open Bible wherein God's will may be known.