

A WORD ABOUT US: THE CHURCH OF CHRIST



Some Things You May Have Wondered About the Churches of Christ

Introduction

Acts 28 describes the arrival of the Apostle Paul in Rome as a prisoner bound over to the tribunal of Nero Caesar. Soon after his arrival, Paul called together the leading men among the Jews to explain the circumstances surrounding his imprisonment. They came together with some curiosity... They candidly told Paul that they had some questions about his religious beliefs because they had heard the faith which he preached "everywhere spoken against." (**Acts 28.22.**)

It was agreed to set a day for Paul to speak to them in an effort to answer their questions about Jesus Christ and His church. When the day came, the writer of Acts tells us that Paul "explain(ed) to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God and tr(ied) to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening." (**Acts 28.23.**)

In very much the same spirit of honest inquiry we approach the subject of this tract. It is our intention to attempt to answer questions about some of the things churches of Christ believe and practice religiously. Perhaps you, yourself, have wondered about some of the things practiced by churches of Christ... or perhaps you are unsure about the things which we teach and practice. Maybe you have wondered what distinguishes churches of Christ from the hundreds of other churches in the world.

Permit me, then, to attempt to explain "Some Things You May Have Wondered about Churches of Christ..."

With What Denomination Are You Associated?

It is our firm intention to be simply undenominational. We believe that it is possible to be simply a Christian - Christians only - without being a member of any denomination. We do not consider ourselves as being a denomination - neither Catholic or Protestant or Jewish! We simply want to be members of the church of the New Testament.

It is probable that most people misunderstand what we are trying to say when we use the words "churches of Christ." It is not our intention to use the term "church of Christ" as a denominational name or designation. The word "church" literally means "the called out" or "the assembly." It refers to a body of people. When we speak of the church of Christ, we are simply referring to that body of people who belongs to Christ. It is simply a descriptive term and not a denominational title.

By "church of Christ" we simply mean to refer to that body of people throughout the whole world who have submitted to the Lordship of Christ by obeying His commands and who are striving to live according to His teachings! It is our sincere aim not to perpetuate any denomination, but to restore the simple faith and worship of the New Testament church.

Wasn't the Church of Christ Started by Alexander Campbell?

The answer, of course, is an emphatic "No!" Remember that when we speak of the "church of Christ" we simply mean that group or body of people which belongs to Christ. When we speak in those terms, it is easy to see that the church was started by Christ. He promised to build it. (**Matthew 16.13-19.**) He gave Himself for it. (**Ephesians 5.25.**) He shed His blood to purchase it. (**Acts 20.28.**) He is the foundation under it. (**1 Corinthians 3.11.**) He is the head over it. (**Ephesians 1.22.**) It was His desire that His church remain pure, "Not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing..." (**Ephesians 5.27.**)

As long as men respected Christ's authority and followed the teachings of the New Testament, the church remained pure. But with passing centuries the church was corrupted: men would not endure sound doctrine (**2 Timothy 4.3**), and the church became buried under centuries of human tradition, religious division, and man-made doctrine. Shortly after the Revolutionary War in America, voices were heard calling for the "restoration of New Testament Christianity." This movement began to spread, one observer said, "like a prairie fire in dry stubble." Men from widely different denominational backgrounds began to plead for all Christians everywhere to be united on the basis of the Bible alone. They urged, "Where the scriptures speak, we speak!"

One early leader in the movement was James O'Kelly, a prominent Methodist preacher from North Carolina who established a congregation in 1793 which resolved to take the Bible as its only creed. In New England, two Baptist preachers by the name of Elias Smith and Abner Jones renounced "sectarian names and creeds" and began preaching New Testament Christianity about 1801. In the state of Kentucky, Barton W. Stone, a gifted Presbyterian preacher, called for the same thing. These movements began separately, without knowledge of one another, but soon they were working together in the same great cause.

One of the most gifted speakers and writers in the early days of this movement was Alexander Campbell who had emigrated to America from Scotland in 1809. Alexander, like his father Thomas, had been raised in the Presbyterian church and had prepared for the Presbyterian ministry. But both men, studying independently, came to the shared conclusion that they would work together to restore New Testament Christianity. Because of his unusual ability and because he was the friend of Presidents, Senators, and Congressmen, Alexander Campbell became extremely well-known. Some critics began to label those who were working for a return to New Testament Christianity "Campbellites" as a term of derision. Campbell was called the founder of the church of Christ. In reality, he was only one of thousands who were working for a return to New Testament Christianity. Long before he left Scotland in 1809, thousands of men and women in America were already calling themselves simply "Christians" and a number of congregations had been organized simply as "churches of Christ."

While I admire and respect Alexander Campbell as a student of the Bible (as I do Martin Luther, John Wesley, and Ulrich Zwingli) I owe no religious allegiance to him or any other man! We plead for men and women to go back to Christ! Back to the Bible! Back to the First Century church! We believe that we can restore the New Testament church if we will believe what early Christians believed, obey what they obeyed, and observe what they observed!

How are Churches of Christ Organized?

We believe in the simplicity of New Testament Christianity; we believe that congregations today should be organized just as they were in the 1st Century. Churches of Christ have none of the trappings of modern-day religious bureaucracies... there are no governing boards... no district, regional, national, or international headquarters. Each congregation is independent and autonomous. The only tie that binds congregations together is a common allegiance to Christ and the Bible.

Each local congregation is governed locally by a plurality of Elders, in keeping with the New Testament pattern. (**Acts 20.17,28.**) These men are chosen by the congregation on the basis of qualifications for office given in **1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1**. In New Testament times, these men were also called Bishops (Overseers) and Pastors (Shepherds). (**1 Peter 5.1-4; Philippians 1.1; Ephesians 4.11.**) Serving under the Elders are deacons, who are chosen by the congregation on the basis of requirements of **1 Timothy 3**. The word "deacon" means servant, and theirs is a ministry of service. Congregations are also served by evangelists or preachers who are charged with the responsibility of "preaching the Word." (**2 Timothy 4.2**)

We believe that no one outside the congregation has any right to direct the affairs of the congregation: There are no conventions, no associations no annual meetings, no official publications... No person or group issues policies or makes decisions for other congregations!

There are about 20,000 congregations of churches of Christ throughout the world with a total of 2 1/2 to 3 million members. There are about 15,000 congregations in America and congregations are found in more than 100 countries... but the only tie that binds these congregations together is that of a shared faith and loyalty to the same Lord!

Why Do Preachers of Churches of Christ Object to Being Called "Reverend" or "Pastors"?

In New Testament times, the word "Pastor" was a synonym for Elder. It was used this way by both Peter (**1 Peter 5.1-2**) and Paul (**Acts 20**). It comes from a Greek word, POIMEN, meaning "to shepherd." Biblically, the shepherds of the flock are the Bishops or Elders - not the Preacher! There was never one, single pastor in any congregation - always a plurality of Pastors. Some preachers are also Pastors or Elders; Peter was. (**1 Peter 5.1.**) Most are not. We wish to call Bible things by Bible names.

We reject the use of Reverend because we believe it is the kind of religious title forbidden by Christ in **Matthew 23.8-12** when He said we were to call no man "Rabbi" or "Father" or "Master" in a religious sense. The word "Reverend" is used only once in the Bible (KJV) in **Psalms 111.9**, and there it is used in connection with God! The word refers to something which is to be held in reverence! It is inappropriate to apply it to men.

We respectfully decline to be called either "Pastor" or "Reverend" because of our commitment to follow the New Testament not only in the deeds we practice, but also in the words we speak.

Why Do Churches of Christ Not Use Instruments in Worship?

This is often misunderstood... some are surprised to discover that we don't use them... others are confused as to our reasons for not doing so. It is not because of a lack of interest in music or because we feel that musical instruments are wicked in and of themselves. Rather, it is because of our concern for doing in worship only what the New Testament specifically allows.

We realize that mechanical instruments of music were a part of Old Testament worship. But we also note that animal sacrifice, incense, and a priesthood were connected with Old Testament Worship. When Christ took the old law out of the way by nailing it to His cross, those things were also taken away. (**Romans 7.4.**) Today we are to be guided by the New Covenant - the New Testament; and the New Testament is silent regarding instrumental music in worship! If we were to use it, we would do so without New Testament authority!

There are eight passages in the New Testament which have to do with music in worship: **Matthew 26.30; Acts 16.25; Romans 15.9; 1 Corinthians 14.15; Ephesians 5.19; Colossians 3.16; Hebrews 2.12; and James 5.13.** In each case, it is singing which is specifically mentioned! **1 Corinthians 4.6** warns us not to do more than the scriptures allow: "That in us you might learn not to go beyond the things which are written."

History confirms that it was NOT the practice of the New Testament church to use instruments of music. Early Christian writers were unanimous in condemning instrumental music in worship. Modern historians uniformly agree that the music of the early church was purely vocal. The first recorded use of an organ in Christian worship did not come until the time of Pope Vitalian in 670 AD; its use did not become widespread until the Middle Ages!

It is interesting to note that the word "acappella" used today to indicate unaccompanied singing comes from a Latin phrase meaning "in the manner or style of the church." To sing acapella was to sing as they did in church - without instrumental music!

Great Reformers and religious thinkers in the past have repeatedly called for the church to be purged of the innovation of Instrumental Music. Martin Luther called instrumental music "an ensign of Baal." John Calvin insisted that "Musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting of lamps, and the restoration of other shadows of the law... Men who are fond of outward pomp may delight in their noise but the simplicity God recommends to us by the Apostles is far more pleasing to him." John Knox called for the church to be purified of what he called "a popish corruption" and urged the restoration of "the plain singing of psalms unaccompanied by instrumental music."

Charles Spurgeon urged that all organ pipes in church buildings ~be compactly filled with concrete." Adam Clarke in his classic Commentary speaks movingly of his own opposition to it and describes the opposition of his friend and teacher, John Wesley, who urged that instruments of music neither be seen or heard in Methodist churches. (Vol. 4, p. 684.) All the great reformers were agreed: Returning to Biblical Christianity meant rejecting instrumental music! We fear that to add instrumental music to what God has called for would be to go beyond what the scriptures allow. "And that if anyone goeth onward and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, he hath not the Father nor the Son." (**2 John 9.**) So we are content to simply sing!

Why Do Churches of Christ Place Such Emphasis on Baptism?

Because we believe that the New Testament places great emphasis upon it! Baptism is mentioned more than 100 times in the New Testament. The New Testament teaches that Baptism is an act which is essential to salvation. (**Mark 16.16; Acts 2.38; Acts 22.16.**) It enables one to enter the kingdom. (**John 3.5.**) It is for remission of sins. (**Acts 2.38.**) **It saves.** (**1 Peter 3.21.**) It washes away sins. (**Acts 22.16.**) It puts us into the church. (**1 Corinthians 12.13.**)

In **Romans 6.3-4**, it is said that Baptism puts us **(1) Into Christ; (2) Into His death; and (3) Into a death to sin.** Baptism does not save in and of itself; it is not an ordinance of the church. But it is an act of obedience by which we come into contact with the saving blood of Christ and surrender to God's grace!

Conclusion

When John Q. Adams was President of the United States (1825-1829), he stood before Congress one afternoon and said: "I hold in my hand a bushel basket from the state of North Carolina and one from New York. One contains 68 more cubic inches than the other." He picked up a pair of two-pound weights, one from Maine and one from Carolina and said, "There are ounces of difference between them." He urged the adoption of a system for the regulation of weights and measures and that afternoon the motion was made and passed creating a Bureau of Weights and Measures. That is what this is about: the need for a standard in religion!

It is our conviction that the Bible is God's only recognized standard and that we must speak the "oracles of God." (**1 Pet 4:11**)

Let's take the Bible as our only authority, adding and subtracting nothing!