



## WHAT SHALL WE CALL THE CHURCH?

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We sometimes hear it said that, “it doesn’t matter in what church one has his membership, just so long as he is sincere in his faith in Christ.” For hundreds of years the world has known churches that have names which cannot be found in the Bible. In more recent years some churches that were formerly known by biblical names have given those up for designations expressive of a more modern religious character. Others are adamant that only those names found in the New Testament are appropriate. Does it make a difference what the church is named? If the selection of names is important in the church, then what name(s) should be chosen? Perhaps the more pertinent question is the more immediate: does the name of the church in which I have membership please God, displease Him, or stand with Him as a matter of no relevance? We read in Matthew 16:18 that Jesus Christ told the apostle Peter, “I will build My church, and the gates of hades shall not prevail against it.” We read in Acts chapter 2 that the church in fact had been built, as we conclude from the statement that “the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (verse 47). From these references we learn not only that Jesus built His own church, but also that it was called “my church” and “the church.” Was this church ever given a more specific name?

### WHY IS A NAME NEEDED?

In the world today we see distinct names given to churches – as to all people, places and things – by which one is distinguished one from another. The name “church” itself is distinctive. It was the name chosen by Jesus to distinguish His followers from the rest of the world. Jesus didn’t speak English. The English word “church” translates a word meaning “the called out” or “the called together.” It identifies those called out of worldly sin into the righteousness of God (see II Corinthians 6:17-18). It identifies those called together into fellowship, service and worship of God (see I Corinthians 11:20 and 14:23). The word “church” then distinguishes between groups of people. It identifies the body of Christians, as opposed to those who are not Christians.

We see that in the Bible the term most often employed to speak of Christians is simply “the church.” John “wrote unto the church” (III John 9). James mentioned “the elders of the church” (James 5:14). Paul wrote of the days in which he had been “persecuting the church” (Philippians 3:6). The question “which church?” isn’t addressed. They were not concerned with distinguishing one church from another. The word “church” distinguishes Christians from non-Christians.

### HOW DID THEY DISTINGUISH BETWEEN CHURCHES?

There were times, however, in which the apostles and others in their day found it necessary to distinguish between churches. A very interesting picture begins to present itself to our minds when we read through their writings to see how they did so. Notice as a small example how Paul referred to one church while writing to another. He wrote, “to the church of God which is at Corinth” (I Corinthians 1:2), “to the churches of Galatia” (Galatians 1:1), to the church of the Thessalonians” (I Thessalonians 1:1). Churches were distinguished by geographical location. There was no need to distinguish one church from another according to doctrine or practice, for they all followed the one doctrine (Acts 2:42) and practice (II Thessalonians 3:6) taught by the apostles.

### IS THE BIBLE OUR RULE BOOK?

May churches today have Disciplines, Manuals, Creed Books, Prayer Books, Catechisms or other such literature by which they both govern themselves and distinguish themselves from other religious organizations. In spite of this, most churches say that the Bible is given by God as the revelation of truth and authority. There is in this situation a logical contradiction, for the Bible condemned all such books long before any of them was

written. Will we follow the Bible, or the distinctive rule book(s) of a particular denomination? We can't have it both ways.

By inspiration of God, Peter wrote that "His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue" (II Peter 1:3). God had already given in the days of Peter everything that the church needed to achieve life and godliness. Why then would anyone think that we need more rule books today? Why would anyone teach a doctrine or require a practice that is not found in the Book by which God long ago gave us "knowledge of Him who called us"? More importantly, how can anyone argue that life and godliness are achieved in whole or in part by anything that is not written in the Book? The gospel is God's only power to save man (Romans 1:16). The gospel "was once for all delivered" in the days of the apostles (Jude 3), was written by inspired writers (I Corinthians 2:11-13) and cannot be changed by anyone today, or in any other age.

There is not a single word in all the Bible that authorizes even the existence of a single denomination of those hundreds that proliferate in the world today. The church that Jesus built is large enough to hold all the saved, is true enough to save all it holds, is old enough to have included the all apostles in its membership, and is relevant enough today to meet the needs of every soul now living. No other church is needed, justified or authorized.

The church which Jesus promised to build is described also as His body (Ephesians 1:22-23), His bride (Revelation 21:2) and His Kingdom (Matthew 16:18-19). Since it is His, and since He, by His resurrection, is "the firstborn from the dead" (Colossians 1:18) it is called the general assembly and church of the firstborn (Hebrews 12:23). The same church is spoken of as the house of God (I Timothy 3:15), the church of the Living God (same verse), the church of God (I Corinthians 1:2), and the kingdom of God (II Thessalonians 1:1-6). Since it was built by Jesus (Matthew 16:18), preaches His name (Acts 5:42), is headed by Jesus (Ephesians 1:22-23), and saved by Jesus (Ephesians 5:23), the church is rightly referred to as the church of Christ. Having visited several of the churches on his journey, Paul wrote of them to the church in Rome thus: "the churches of Christ greet you" (Romans 16:16).

#### ONE IS ENOUGH

Some argue that Paul, in using the plural term in Romans 16 ("churches"), was speaking of the denominations as we now them today. Even the average member of most denominations knows that this is impossible. In becoming a member of the Methodist Church many years ago I was required to study the history of the church. We were taught the names of people and places, and also the dates, connected with the beginnings of the Methodist Church. Even as a child of 12 years I knew that the Methodist Church started more than a millennium and a half after the death of the apostle Paul. All other denominations originated similarly far too late to be included in anything that Paul taught or God approved.

To the contrary, Paul's epistle to the Romans clearly shows that he had in mind those various local assemblies among which he had recently traveled (read Romans 15:19 through 16:2). In everyone of them he preached the same doctrine (15:19-20). Paul knew, and taught everywhere, that there is only one God, that Jesus is His only-begotten Son, that Jesus built only one church and that all the saved are added to it by the Lord Himself, and that all who are in that one church have one common faith. The many faiths in the many religious bodies of the world today are false faiths, as Paul made clear to all when he wrote in Ephesians 4:4-6, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in our all."

#### CONCLUSION: COME OUT FROM AMONG THEM

Paul told the Corinthians to "come out from among them and be separate" (II Corinthians 6:17). He told the same people that division according to the teachings of man is sinful and must be stopped (I Corinthians

1:10-13): “Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe’s household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, ‘I am of Paul,’ or ‘I am of Apollos,’ or ‘I am of Cephas,’ or ‘I am of Christ.’ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?”

In the same way people today contend for divisive names which glorify human founders, doctrines, practices, or organizations instead of the only Name worthy of such glory. According to His own word, Jesus did not build any such church, does not add His people to any such church, and will not save any such church. Are you in a church that Jesus didn’t build and will not save? In most cases you don’t have to go any further than the name of the church to begin your study. If you find yourself in a church that is not Christ’s, “come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord.”

*for Confirming the Churches*  
strengthening smaller churches in difficult situations