

THE SEARCH FOR GENUINE CHRISTIANITY - #2

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There are many modern pictures of Christianity that exist in the minds of religious adherents. All of these claim to be genuinely “of Christ” but they radically differ from one another. In initiating a search for what is genuine, perhaps one should begin by laying out his own definition of Christianity. While I find no specific biblical statement of its meaning, I believe the following gives a biblical understanding: Christianity is the religion of Christ, consisting of saved people following the teachings of Christ, whose aim is to be transformed into the likeness of Christ.

There are three parts to this definition which may help us to see what is and is not essential to our picture of Christianity.

1. It is the religion of Christ. Jesus, Himself said, “*I will build My church...*” (Matt. 16:18). The concept of church implies an assembled people who are designated as belonging to Christ. Wherever there are assembled people, there must be some sort of “system” involved in accomplishing things. Christ’s view of “church” involved a fellowship or brotherhood who would be recognized by God as His people. Since Jesus brought us teachings from the Father (Jn. 7:16,17), these become directions we must all follow in our relationship with Him. To know that there is a system of beliefs and practices of Christ’s assembled people, we need only hear, for example, our Lord’s instructions on how the church must deal with those in sin (see Matt. 18:15f.). Jesus laid these out for us prior to building His church. Little more needs to be said here since it is almost a “given” that Christianity is the religion of Jesus.

2. Consisting of saved people who follow the teachings of Christ. Although the idea of Christianity implies the concept of salvation, I include the word “saved” to describe those genuinely of the Lord. Here, I am not speaking of those who merely “claim” to follow the teachings, but those who are actually following what the Lord requires. This implies that Christians are people who want the truth brought by Jesus. They thirst for righteousness (Matt. 5:6) and have a longing for the Word of God (1 Pet. 2:2,3). Since they want to follow Jesus, they are willing to listen to anyone who claims to have truth from Christ. Yet, they are like the Bereans in that they feel the need to “*examine*” everything that is taught to see if they are true to the Scriptures (Acts 17:11).

Genuine Christians are not interested in religion, or church, for the sake of religion. They want only the religion of Christ. The Bible gives numerous examples of religious people who did not practice God’s true religion: Jesus mentions those who would claim on the last day to have done many religious things in His name, but were lost (Matt. 7:21-23). Paul speaks of his own desire to be “*found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith...*” (Phil. 3:9). Even the Israelites of old were not pleasing to God by merely being religious or practicing religion (Isa. 1:4-15).

Genuine Christians, then are those who search for truth and strive to practice it. They are not to be found among those who merely choose some church with which to join up.

3. Whose aim is to be transformed into the likeness of Christ. This is the ultimate earthly goal of the genuine follower of Jesus. This implies, of course, that people in the religion of Jesus will be imperfect. Yet, they are ever changing as they move toward the perfection of Christ.

Paul indicated that even he was not at the spiritual level of relationship with Christ that he desired, so he keeps pressing on toward it (Phil. 3:12). Christianity involves its proponents in a growing process of developing and maturing into the likeness of Christ (Eph. 4:14-16; Heb. 5:11-12; Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18).

This definition moves us toward a consideration of what is essential to Christianity. My own inherited picture of the church does not include many things you might see in other pictures claiming genuineness. The denominational world offers hundreds of views of Christ’s church with hundreds of doctrines and practices that are foreign to my own understanding. If their pictures are Christ originals, then mine must be a forgery

since mine does not include much of what is seen in the denominations.

All of the various beliefs and practices should be tested for genuineness, but before we move into that tedious work, let's step back and look at the broader picture. Since all denominations claim to be genuinely Christian and preach that they will enjoy eternal fellowship with God, let us ask the question, "Is this claim true?" If we put this religious boast into the form of an equation, it would look like this:

Denominationalism = Christianity

For this to be true, both sides of the equation would have to be equal. Yet, we may easily disprove this claim by noting two interesting expressions from the denominational world:

1. *"Join the church of your choice."* This use of the term, "church," does not mean different congregations of the same belief, but rather different pictures of the church, each having its own particular beliefs and practices. This is certainly not the claim of Scripture which teaches only one church.

What would be required for one to "join" one of the denominations? Would any denomination accept anyone into their membership who did not first claim to be a Christian? Obviously, not. Thus, one would first have to be a Christian in order to get into a denomination. Therefore, you may experience Christianity without a denominational affiliation. The denominational philosophy admits this. Even the denominational appeal is for people to first become a Christian and then to decide, on their own, which church they wish to join. The equation, then is false. Christianity and denominationalism are not the same.

2. *"There are Christians in all denominations."* This also says that denominationalism is not equal to Christianity. It openly claims that there are some within all the different religions who are genuinely Christian and some who are not. Thus, we must conclude that denominationalism as a system is not equal with true Christianity.

Now comes a more difficult equation to examine:

Church of Christ = Christianity

Are these equal? The answer depends on what one means by the expression, "Church of Christ."

Generally, we have pointed to Romans 16:16 (*"...the churches of Christ salute you"*) to substantiate the genuineness of the name, "Church of Christ." Yet, does this passage proclaim the modern use of this expression? How would a Baptist, or Methodist, or a Catholic understand this verse? Would they see our peculiar fellowship here? I can assure you that they see themselves in this expression. Every denomination sees itself as a church that belongs to Christ. They see our use of "Church of Christ" as a name for our religion, just as "Baptist," or "Methodist" or "Presbyterian" are names for other denominations. The modern religious world would accept the above equation only as they would accept any particular denomination as being genuinely Christian. They would also include the "Church of Christ" as one choice among many that a Christian might join.

Certainly, the denominational perspective is not biblical. One may find within Scripture two distinct concepts of the church that belongs to Christ: one is that of a universal people of God (see, for example, Matt. 16:18; Eph. 1:22; Col. 1:18; Heb. 12:23) and the other is of a local congregation (see also, 1 Cor. 11:18; 14:19,23,34; Rom. 16:5; 1 Thess. 1:1; etc.). Both may be correctly described as a church of Christ, but they are not exactly the same concept.

In the universal church, all are genuinely saved, but this is not necessarily true on the local level (Rev. 2:14-16). In the universal church one is automatically added to the number of saved when he becomes a Christian but this may not be the case in the local congregation. A man may actually become a genuine Christian, but then (in ignorance) join himself to a denomination or the local congregation may find difficulty in accepting a convert into its fellowship (see Acts 9:26,27).

The expression, "church of Christ," is really not a name for God's people, but rather a description. The term, "church," merely refers to God's assembled people. There are many descriptive phrases that are attached to this term (besides "of Christ") in order to help us further define some specific aspect of this assembly. For example: *"church of the Thessalonians"* (1 Thess. 1:1) defines a particular location of the assembled people of God; *"church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven"* (Heb. 12:23) refers to all the people God is assembling for eternity; and *"churches of the Gentiles"* (Rom. 16:4) describes an ethnic group or race as a part of God's assembled people.

Given all the descriptions found in Scripture for God's people, one wonders why we have exclusively

used "church of Christ" as a name to identify us. While some have argued that it is biblical (by showing that "Methodist," "Lutheran," "Baptist," etc. are not biblical names), I would suggest that the practice of taking a biblical description and making a name out of it would also suffer under the same kind of scrutiny. So, why have we chosen to incorporate a name of identification? Perhaps, there are three primary reasons:

1. We desire to distinguish ourselves from other so-called Christian religions in the modern world. Yet, in opposing the denominations, have we used their means of identification by denominating ourselves as "Church of Christ?"

2. We have a desire to make it easy for those within our fellowship to find us when relocating. It is very simple for a vacationing brother to merely check the yellow pages under "churches" and find us listed by the name "Church of Christ."

3. It simplifies our existence and work in the modern world. The offerings we give to the Lord are easily collected into a bank account by means of a name for the account. Our modern practice of writing checks, communication by means of written mail, and relationship with state and federal government is simplified when we have an official name.

While these reasons may justify to our own satisfaction as to why we have named the church, are they sufficient to make it a requirement? In other words, is it essential to our picture of Christianity that we wear the name, "Church of Christ?" I cannot find such authority in Scripture.

A real problem in the use of a name is in our becoming more like the denominations and less like the New Testament church. The modern world speaks of "Church of Christ" Christians, just as it speaks of "Methodist" Christians or "Baptist" Christians. One becomes a Christian by following the teachings given by Christ, and not by following the teachings of a particular denomination. Paul wrote to the Romans: "you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed" (Rom. 6:17). The word, "form" here (*tupos*) has the sense of a "mold" (see TDNT, Vol. viii, p. 248). A mold of teaching represents what forms us into what we become. In reality, there are as many molds as there are denominations. Baptist doctrine is the mold of the Baptist church. When a convert is cast in this mold, he comes out looking Baptist. The same mold cannot be used to produce both Baptists and Lutherans. Each denomination preaches its own doctrines... each has its own mold. The Catholics are not trying to make Methodists, so they preach only Catholic doctrines in order to just produce Catholics.

In order for there to be "Church of Christ" Christians, there would have to be a "Church of Christ mold." We deny that such exists and do not want to be considered as merely one among many other denominations. The only true "form of teaching" is what the apostles preached. Here is the mold that makes genuine Christians. If everyone followed apostolic doctrine, they would all look alike and would be numbered among the saved in the universal church of our Lord. Apostolic doctrine cannot make both Catholics and Presbyterians. The New Testament mold produces only Christians.

I believe the above equation can only be true in the universal sense of the the expression, "church of Christ." The Lord's church and genuine Christianity are the same. Yet, it should be the goal of every local congregation of Christians to be genuinely "of Christ." In our search, we will be looking for those things that are essential to accomplishing this that we might measure up to the ideal picture painted by the Lord.