

# **SURPRISING THINGS ABOUT THE CHURCH OF CHRIST**

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## **Introduction**

People who are not familiar with the church of Christ frequently express surprise upon learning of some point of doctrine or some practice that is peculiar to it. When we produce the Scriptural evidence to which a given doctrine or practice conforms to and which the Word of God demands, we often hear expressions such as, "I never heard that before," or "I didn't know that was in the Bible." These expressions of surprise simply emphasize how far from the New Testament pattern for the church most men have departed over the centuries, even those who claim to believe in the Bible as God's inspired Word. Let us now consider several of the things that continue to be sources of considerable surprise to those who are not members of the church of Christ.

### **Churches of Christ Employ Only Congregational Singing with No Mechanical Instrumental Accompaniment**

This fact is certainly one of the most surprising things to any first-time visitor to one of our assemblies. The religious experience of almost every Catholic and Protestant worshiper has involved the use of a piano, an organ, or other mechanical instruments, along with choirs and soloists. We can easily understand why these individuals are surprised since the use of instruments and extra-congregational singing is their normal and accepted practice.

Our surprised friends are entitled to an explanation, which we are pleased to provide. Why do we not use instruments? Is it because we simply do not like them? No, because actually many of us do like instruments, both to play them and to listen to others perform on them. Many of us have a piano and/or other instruments in our homes. Is it because we cannot afford them financially? No, because we could manage to purchase them in the same way that our buildings and furnishings are purchased. Do we simply not like to hear great soloists or choirs sing? No, because many of us are willing to pay considerable sums in order to purchase recordings or attend concerts of such performances. Do we merely want to be different from our religious neighbors for the sake of being different? No, this is not our motivation.

The simple answer as to why we do not use instruments and any sort of singing except congregational singing in worship to God is that the New Testament does not authorize their use. We seek to be simply the first century church in this century. In order to be such we dare not practice that which the church under the guidance of the inspired apostles refused or failed to practice. The New Testament authorizes congregational singing (as opposed to the singing of only one or a select few) when the church assembles to worship God. Likewise, the New Testament authorizes singing (as opposed to playing an instrument) in worship to God.

The apostle Paul wrote the following instruction on this subject: "Speaking one to another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord" (Eph. 5:19). In a parallel passage he wrote: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts unto God" (Col. 3:16). Please notice that this is activity in which all of the assembled worshipers are to be involved. Just as no one can do our praying, studying or giving for us, no one can do our singing for us. The command in these verses is to sing (not play). Further, the things to be accomplished in the singing ("speaking," "teaching," "admonishing") cannot be done by playing a senseless instrument.

The teaching of the entire New Testament is in harmony with that which is taught in the two verses cited above. There is no example of any church in apostolic times engaging in any kind of worship in song in their assemblies except that which involved the entire congregation. Further, there is no command or example of any of the apostles or any New Testament congregation employing a mechanical instrument (i.e., an "instrument" other than the human voice) in singing praises to God. Not only was this true of the church in the first century, but, as uninspired church historians abundantly document, this was true of the worship assemblies for several centuries afterward. It was only over extremely strong opposition that instruments finally began to be used, and that only after apostasy was already universal and rampant in almost every other area of doctrine and practice.

Since these things are true, it is evident that the burden of explanation and authorization is not upon the church of Christ for **not** using "special" singers and

musical instruments in worship, but upon those who do. If I were a member of a religious body that teaches the acceptability of these practices and engages in them, in light of the above information, I would be disillusioned and disappointed in my religious teachers. I would also feel that I had a right to demand to know upon what grounds such Scripturally unauthorized doctrines and practices were employed.

Without intending to sound boastful, self-righteous or arrogant, but simply to state a matter of fact, the practice of the church of Christ concerning worshiping God in song is authorized and exemplified in the New Testament. The practice of those who have introduced instruments and singing other than congregational singing into their worship is unauthorized (therefore forbidden) by the New Testament. Our practice is normal (by Scriptural standards); other practices are abnormal. It does not matter that the use of instruments and choirs is almost universal. Questions of doctrine and practice cannot be legitimately settled by majority opinion, unless we decide to cast aside all pretense of appealing to the New Testament as the standard. We plead with all men to simply follow the word of God in this regard.

### **Churches of Christ Consult *Only the* New Testament for All Doctrine and Practice**

This statement means that we do not turn to the Old Testament to establish authority for what we preach and practice. To our friends in other religious bodies who acknowledge the Bible as the Word of God, this is almost always a source of great surprise. Most people assume that if one believes that God gave us the entire Bible, then all of it must presently be binding upon us. The teaching that we are not under the Ten Commandments (since they are in the old Testament) is especially surprising to some. Many have been taught from childhood in their Sunday schools and by their parents that they must keep the Ten Commandments and that if they do so, little more (if anything) is required to go to Heaven. Such folk have been taught by their teachers and preachers that they can with as much likelihood learn how to be saved from the book of Psalms as from the book of Acts.

In explanation of this matter, consider the following:

1. It does not follow that people in this age who believe that all of the Bible is **inspired** of God (which we most surely believe) are therefore **subject to** all of

the Bible. Even those who claim to so believe will discover, upon some reflection, that they really do not. For example, they have never thought of obeying God's command to Noah to build an ark (Gen. 6), His command to Abram to leave their homeland to wander wherever God would lead them (Gen. 12), or His commands to the Israelites to offer animal sacrifices (Lev. 4:20), all of which are in the old Testament. They are correct in not keeping these commands, but they are inconsistent to insist that men are subject to all of the Bible and then refuse or neglect to keep them.

2. Those who contend that we are under the old Testament today fail to see that it was temporary by design and that God never intended it to be permanent. God promised that He would replace the old covenant/law with a new covenant/law (Jer. 31:31–34; Heb. 8:8–13). Jesus came to fulfill the old law (Mat. 5:17–18) and He did so. Therefore, it was figuratively "nailed to the cross" when Christ was crucified (Col. 2:14). Christ took away the first (testament) that He might establish the second (Heb. 10:9), which is more excellent and contains better promises than the first—the Old Testament (Heb. 8:6).
3. In the very nature of the case men cannot be under two distinct systems of spiritual law simultaneously. As noticed in the Scriptures cited above, the Old Testament given by God through Moses and the New Testament given by God through Christ are two distinct bodies of spiritual law. There are things commanded and/or prohibited in the Old Testament which are not commanded and/or prohibited in the New Testament. To live in complete harmony with the Old Testament would put one in conflict with some things authorized in the New Testament (e.g., reliance upon animal sacrifice for atonement as opposed to the atoning sacrifice of Christ, clean and unclean animals for food, et al.).
4. One is not allowed to take a system of law piecemeal. If one point of the Old Testament is binding upon men today, then all of it is: "Yea, I testify again to every man that receiveth circumcision, that **he is a debtor to do the whole law**" (Gal. 5:3, emph. DM). The Galatian Christians were being falsely taught that they must keep the Old Testament command of circumcision to be saved. Paul warned that they could not consistently choose only this one command of the Old

Testament, but would be bound to keep all of it, if they chose to keep any of it. Whether it be circumcision, the sabbath law, the Ten Commandments, or whatever one presently would seek to keep from the Old Testament, he must understand that he thereby obligates himself to all of it—it is “all or nothing at all.”

Sometimes people ask, "If we are not under the Ten Commandments, does it not follow that we can lie, steal, murder, commit adultery, and do the other things that are forbidden in them and that we must worship on the seventh instead of the first day of the week?" No, not at all. Just as it was wrong for man to commit murder **before** the Ten Commandments were given (Gen. 4:9–12; 9:6), it is likewise wrong for the following reason to do such things even **after** they are no longer authoritative as a part of the Old Testament law: These commands from God concerning human behavior have been in existence as long as man has been on the earth, although God did not command them to be written down before the time of Moses.

It was sinful for Cain to kill Abel, but not because it was prohibited in the Ten Commandments (which were not given until many centuries later). Likewise, murder is still sinful for all men, not because it was proscribed in the Ten Commandments, but **because it is likewise forbidden in the New Testament**. The same is true of all of the other commandments of the Ten Commandments, except the commandment to keep the sabbath, which is replaced in the New Testament by worship on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:1–2).

If all of these things are so concerning the Old Testament, some might be thinking, "What purpose does it have for men today?" This is an excellent question. **First**, through its many promises, prophecies and types God was preparing men for the coming of Christ and the establishment of His church/kingdom. The apostle Paul had this in mind when he said of the Old Testament, "So that the law is become our tutor to bring us unto Christ..." (Gal. 3:24). **Second**, the Old Testament provides the historical record of God's dealings with men from the beginning and therefore helps us understand His nature, which does not change (Jam. 1:17).

**Third**, without the Old Testament as a setting and background, it would be impossible to understand large portions of the New Testament. The books of Matthew, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews especially relate to the Old Testament and most of

the material of these books is incomprehensible without a knowledge of the Old Testament.

Most certainly, we need to study and understand the invaluable material in the Old Testament. Thus Paul wrote concerning the Old Testament:

For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that through patience and through comfort of the scriptures we might have hope (Rom. 15:4).

Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted..... Now these things happened unto them by way of example; and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages are come (1 Cor. 10:6, 11).

The Old Testament is inspired in the very same way that the New Testament is. However, men grievously err and produce unending confusion when they seek authority for any religious practice or doctrine from the Old Testament since its authority was taken away with the death of Christ. Again, most Bible-believers are greatly surprised that this is so, but it is, nevertheless.

### **Churches of Christ Do Not Teach or Practice "Tithing"**

A "tithe" is ten percent and to "tithe" in the religious context means to give ten percent of one's income to a religious organization. Most people in the Protestant denominations have been taught that it is their obligation to tithe. Because the emphasis on tithing is so great and so constant in Protestant denominationalism, most people are greatly surprised to learn that tithing is neither taught nor practiced in the church of Christ.

Admittedly, tithing is commanded and otherwise referred to numerous times in the Bible, in most cases, in the Old Testament. The first reference to tithing is the occasion in which Abram voluntarily paid tithes to Melchizedek of Jerusalem (Gen. 14:20; Heb. 7:4). Numerous laws requiring the payment of tithes to God were common to the law of Moses. The New Testament refers to tithes and tithing in six passages, but in each case that which is referred to is the practice or command recorded in the Old Testament. In other words, there is neither example nor command for tithing under the New Testament. Since tithing was a part of Old Testament command and practice and

the authority of the Old Testament was taken away with the death of Christ (Col. 2:14, as cited above), there is now no Scriptural authority for tithing. It is because we rely only upon the New Testament for our religious authority (as previously discussed) that we do not teach or practice tithing.

This being the case, one may wonder if this means that there is no responsibility to give to the work of the Lord under the New Testament. Most certainly, there is. The New Testament teaches that each Christian is to give "as he may prosper" on each first day of the week (1 Cor. 16:2). The Christian is to purpose (or plan) how much he will give to the Lord's work and then give it cheerfully and bountifully (2 Cor. 9:6–7). Since the New Testament is ". . . a better covenant, which hath been enacted upon better promises" (Heb. 8:7), it should follow that those who live under this superior law of Christ should want (and feel obligated) to give more of their money than those who lived under the inferior law of Moses.

There is simply no set amount or percentage of one's income that a Christian is **commanded** to give. Christ has placed us on the "honor system" in our giving, but has commanded us to "lay up treasures in Heaven" by generously giving that which we have to the greatest cause on earth (Matt. 6:19–21; 1 Tim. 6:17–19). Where Christians give of their money each Sunday, guided by these principles, adequate funds to do the work of God on earth will be supplied.

It may also be surprising to many to learn that the **only** means of raising money engaged in by the church of Christ in order to do its work is "free-will" giving. There is no other plan provided or authorized in the New Testament for raising the funds necessary for the work of the church. The New Testament authorizes no "quota-setting" or religious "taxation." Whether through ignorance of or disrespect for the teaching of Christ on this subject, most of those who profess to believe the Bible have long since abandoned what the New Testament teaches about giving our money. We appeal to all men to be content with Christ's plan for giving as He has established it in the New Testament.

## **Churches of Christ Are Not in the Money-Making, Money-Raising Business**

Television, radio, and the mail carry numerous appeals from religious groups which brazenly ask for money. Not only is the ordinary citizen accustomed to such appeals, but he is also accustomed to seeing churches sponsor raffles, carnivals, bingo games, garage sales, lotteries, and such like to raise money. Many people are also aware that some religious groups are owners of profitable commercial businesses from which they derive large profits.

True churches of Christ do not engage in any such efforts to raise money. We do not even solicit money from the general public on our radio and television programs or through print media. Some who learn this fact are both surprised and baffled. They want to know such things as why we do not raise money as other religious groups do and how we are able to do the amount of work we do without using the usual methods. These are good questions that deserve an answer.

The New Testament presents a simple, effective plan for financing the work the Lord has given the church to do. As previously indicated, each member is commanded to give generously according to the level of his or her prosperity each Sunday (1 Cor. 16:2; 2 Cor. 9:7). All other methods of raising money for the work of the church besides free-will offerings are totally unauthorized by Christ. In fact, all other methods are **unnecessary** when members give according to the Lord's instructions. It is a slap in the face of God to adopt other methods of raising money. It suggests that He did not plan well enough in this respect and we must help Him out of this "predicament" through our own "wisdom." Only when men adopt the philosophy that the end justifies the means will they so corrupt the plan of God.

## **Churches of Christ Partake of the Lord's Supper Every First Day of the Week and Only on the First Day of the Week**

This fact is surprising to those who visit our worship assemblies or with whom we study because most of them are familiar with other intervals of observance. Most Protestant churches observe their version of the Lord's supper on a monthly or quarterly basis plus some other special occasions. Although the Roman Catholic Church has mass (its corrupt version of the Lord's Supper) every Sunday, it also celebrates the mass daily and on other "special" occasions (e. g., weddings and funerals). Often these

special occasions involve some other day besides the first day of the week. With this sort of background it is understandable that most people are surprised that, in the churches of Christ, we observe the Lord's supper each first day of the week and never on any other day of the week.

As in the other previously discussed items which provoke surprise, so in this: We thus observe the Lord's supper because the New Testament authorizes such and because it does not authorize its observance at any other interval or on any other day of the week. The church in the city of Troas assembled to partake of the Lord's supper on the first day of the week, at which time the apostle Paul preached to them (Acts 20:7). Although he was hurrying to Jerusalem in order to be there by the day of Pentecost (v. 16), he delayed his departure an entire week in order to be able to meet with and partake of the Lord's supper with the brethren in the Lord's day assembly (Acts 20:6). If they **could** have Scripturally partaken of the Lord's supper on Monday (the day of Paul's arrival) or some other day before Sunday, they **would** have, so that Paul could have been on his way several days sooner.

The Corinthian church met every first day of the week (1 Cor. 16:2), and one thing they did in that assembly was to partake of the Lord's supper (11:20–29). Moreover, this was the universal practice in the early church, for Paul taught the same things "everywhere in every church" (4:17). Early uninspired church historians testify that it was the consistent practice of the church to partake of the Lord's supper each first day of the week from apostolic times until apostasy caused variations to creep in. Also, until apostasy occurred, the Lord's supper was never taken on any other day except the first day of each week.

In defense of observing the Lord's supper at less frequent intervals than each Lord's day, some argue that a weekly observance makes the supper "too common" and that it loses its meaning and becomes mere meaningless ritual. Admittedly, we must not let the Lord's supper (or any other act of worship) become merely a ritual in which we only "go through the motions." To please God we must worship Him "in spirit [with one's spirit or mind involved, thus sincerely] and truth [according to truth]" (John 4:24). The Word of God constitutes the Truth in religion (17:17), and for all who have lived since the cross, the New Testament of Christ particularly is that body of Truth.

We deny that, in and of itself, the frequency of any act of worship contributes to ritualism. If weekly observance of the Lord's supper makes it "too common," then why would this not be true of singing songs of praise or praying (both of which are engaged in **several** times each Lord's day in most religious bodies)? The same would apply to the collection of money and the preaching each Lord's day. Besides, if once a week would make the Lord's supper "too common" for some, could it not be argued with as much validity that once a month or once a quarter might make it "too common" for others? This "defense" of an unscriptural practice proves more, far more, than its users are willing to uphold, and an argument which proves too much (as this one does) proves nothing. Additionally, it is ridiculous to imply (as this "defense" does) that the observance of the Lord's supper under apostolic institution and approval was flawed so as to contribute to cold ritualism.

Some will continue to be surprised that the time of observance of the Lord's supper is only on the first day of the week and every first day of the week, but only because men have so long and so extensively perverted the Scriptural plan that the perversion has become the norm. Those who are sincerely interested in pleasing the Savior in whose memory the Lord's supper is to be observed (Luke 22:19–20) will want to observe the supper at the time authorized in the New Testament, and only at that time. Such devout souls will not want to continue in an unscriptural practice upon learning better.

### **Churches of Christ Use No "Creed Book" or "Manual" Other Than the New Testament Itself**

Those millions of individuals who claim to accept the Bible as the Word of God in some degree are divided into thousands of sects. The numerous creed books which are counted precious by the respective religious bodies constitute the primary source (and major cause of perpetuation) of these divisions. These books bear such names as *The Catechism*, *The Discipline*, *The Book of Common Prayer*, *The Confession of Faith*, *The Standard Manual*, *The Augsburg Confession*, *The Book of Mormon*, *Science and Health With Key To the Scriptures*, and many others. In each case, these documents specify the peculiar beliefs to which respective religious groups subscribe which make them distinctive from all others. These books are considered authoritative for the doctrine and

practice of their respective denominations. The creed books are of such long tradition that most men take them for granted as necessary. This being so, many are surprised to learn that any religious body in modern times uses only the Bible, and the New Testament in particular, for its standard of faith and practice.

Even a marginal acquaintance with the Bible should be sufficient to inform one that this is the only course acceptable to God and His Son. Jesus taught, "If ye abide in my word, then are ye truly my disciples; and ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31–32). The word (teaching, doctrine) of Christ (not that of the pope, the church councils, latter day "prophets," or the creed books) will be the standard of judgment for all of those who have lived since Calvary (John 12:48).

The Scriptures (not the creedal interpretations of them) make one wise unto salvation and are sufficient for all religious and moral doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction, making one who follows them complete in the sight of God (2 Tim. 3:15–17). Paul did not command preachers to preach the creeds and doctrines of men, but to "preach the word" (2 Tim. 4:2). We are warned "not to go beyond the things which are written" (1 Cor. 4:6). The creed books are a repository of human doctrine and tradition in religion. To rely upon such in religion makes the Word of God void and one's worship vain (Mat. 15:6, 9). In defense of the creed books it is sometimes argued that they are only a statement of the doctrines of the Bible. If this were so, all of those who follow the various creed books would subscribe to the same beliefs and practices regardless of which creed they followed. The very fact that "Creed A" produces a church with certain beliefs and practices and "Creed B" produces a church with certain beliefs and practices differing from those which follow other creeds shows the fallacy of this assertion. Actually, the very purpose of the various creeds is to produce and perpetuate varying religious bodies. For those who sincerely take the Bible alone as their "creed book," there is no place for any human "creed book." If a creed book says more than the Bible it says too much. If a creed book says less than the Bible it says too little. If a creed book says only what the Bible says it is unnecessary because we have the Bible.

### **Churches of Christ Do Not Refer to Preachers as "Reverend" or "Pastor"**

Those who simply preach the Gospel in the church of Christ are frequently addressed by one or both of these terms. When such a one kindly points out that he is

neither, it almost always elicits surprise. *Reverend* and *pastor* have been used interchangeably with *preacher* for so long that it is generally accepted without question. Most people have no concept concerning the way these terms are used in the New Testament, and they are surprised upon learning.

*Pastor* is a New Testament term which means "shepherd." It is used interchangeably with *elder* and *bishop* (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Pet 5:1–2; note: *feed* or *tend* in these passages is from the verb form of the noun translated "pastor" in Eph. 4:11). "Evangelists" (preachers) are referred to distinctly from "pastors" (Eph. 4:11). The New Testament pattern of organization for the church calls for a plurality of "pastors" (i.e., elders, bishops) in each local church, and their qualifications are found in 1 Timothy 3 and in Titus 1. These men have the oversight of their respective congregations and are charged with keeping them faithful to the Word of Christ (Tit. 1:9–14; Heb. 13:17).

A preacher may serve as one of the pastors if he meets the Scriptural qualifications and is so appointed by a New Testament church. Such was the case with Peter, who addresses elders as "a fellow-elder" (1 Pet. 5:1). However, one is not a pastor merely because he is a preacher, but he is such only when he is appointed by his congregation to be one of its elders or bishops. Thus to use *pastor* interchangeably with *preacher* is a classic example of the unscriptural use of a Scriptural term.

*Reverend* means "one to be revered or feared." This term appears only once in the Bible (Psa. 111:9, KJV), and it is applied in this one instance to the name of God. Ought we to apply a term to mere men which the inspired writer applied only to God? Besides the foregoing consideration, Jesus strictly proscribed the application of religious titles to men so as to elevate them above their brethren: "But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your teacher, and all ye are brethren. And call no man your father on the earth: for one is your Father, even he who is in heaven. Neither be ye called masters: for one is your master, even the Christ" (Mat. 23:8–10). This passage forbids both the use of religious titles for oneself and the use of such titles when addressing others. Many of the titles worn by religious leaders are barely short of blasphemous (e.g., "His Holiness," "Vicar of Christ," "Worshipful Master," "Monsignor," etc.). Let us honor the Word of God in the way we address religious leaders, even if they are offended because we refuse to address them in some way forbidden by the Lord.

## **Churches of Christ Have No Centralized Earthly Headquarters**

Men often inquire about the location of the headquarters of the church of Christ and are amazed to learn that there is no hierarchy or central governing office. Because it has been their heritage for many centuries to be regulated by their pope from the Vatican, Roman Catholics cannot understand how a religious body can exist without a seat of power upon the earth. Likewise, practically all of the Protestant denominations, sects, and cults have their respective headquarters with a central seat of government by which said denominations are controlled.

By its very nature, the church of Christ has never had and will never have an earthly headquarters. There is only one head of the church of Christ—Christ Himself (Eph. 1:22–23; Col. 1:18). Christ, the head of His church, is in Heaven (Acts 2:32–33; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:34, et al.). The headquarters of any institution must be where the head is and since Christ, the head, is in Heaven, so is the headquarters of His church. He made no provisions for a living, perpetual vicar, as the Roman pope claims to be.

The Son of God did invest authority in various matters to two groups of men, respectively. First, He chose the apostles, whom He sent forth (the meaning of *apostle*) to be His ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20). An ambassador has the power to act and speak on behalf of the one he represents, as if that one were acting and speaking. Thus, the apostles had the power to "bind" and "loose" the will of God even as Christ bound and loosed it upon men (Mat. 16:19). This they were able to do by means of inspiration from the Holy Spirit who guided them into all truth (John 16:13).

The apostles were equipped by the Holy Spirit and authorized by Christ to bring the church into existence and personally nurture it until the will of Christ was completely revealed and recorded (1 Cor. 13:8–12). Through the New Testament Scriptures the church is to maintain its purity and identity under Christ its head.

From the foregoing information it is obvious that Jesus Christ gave the apostles authority to legislate in spiritual matters under the infallible guidance of the Holy Spirit. No other group of men were ever given such authority by Christ, and despite the claims of Roman Catholics, Mormons, and other religious groups, the Scriptures make no provision for the perpetuation of the apostolic office. The apostles Jesus selected and trained, later augmented by Saul of Tarsus upon his conversion, gave the world all of

the spiritual laws and principles it will ever need (John 16:13; Acts 20:32; Gal. 1:8–9; 2 Tim. 3:16–17; Rev. 22:18–19). The very apostles whom Christ chose and endowed with legislative authority are still legislating through the New Testament of Christ and will continue to do so until time is no more.

Second, Christ gave to the elders/bishops/pastors in local churches the responsibility to keep those respective churches pure, in harmony with the written Word (Tit. 1:9–14). They were also given the authority necessary to carry out this responsibility. They are to watch for enemies of the truth (Acts 20:28–31), rule and teach (1 Tim. 5:17), and stop the mouths of deceivers (Tit. 1:10–11; cf. Heb. 13:17). They have no authority to make new or additional spiritual laws, but to insure that those under their care live in harmony with the complete body of spiritual law already in existence. Since their work is one of overseeing, superintending and providing spiritual instruction and leadership, they have both the responsibility and authority to make decisions on matters that are optional in the local church (e. g., what time to meet, where to meet, who will preach and teach, how the money will be spent, etc.). Thus congregational members are commanded to obey and submit to their elders in such matters (Heb. 13:17). While elders do indeed have the aforementioned authority, they do not constitute a hierarchy or a law-making body of any sort.

It is at the point of local church government that the earliest apostasies began to occur in the second century. Systems of religious hierarchy developed as men who were among the local church elderships sought and seized unscriptural authority, first over a single church, then over several. The end of this development was the claim of one "bishop" to have universal authority and thus the papacy was born in the seventh century. With the establishment of the papacy, the phenomenon of centralized church government reached its apex. Such centralized authority whether in Catholic or Protestant churches, has long been the norm. However, we have seen from Scripture that the church of Christ is governed not by edicts and laws formulated by men, but by Christ Himself as He rules men through His inspired Word. **Indeed, there is no need for an earthly head or headquarters when men have the proper respect for the New Testament.**

## **Men Cannot "Join" the Church of Christ**

"Joining a church" is the common way of expressing the way one becomes a member of a religious body. This expression is so common it is taken for granted as correct. Therefore, when one learns that one does not "join" the Lord's church, it is often a source of surprise. The phrase, *joining a church*, represents a concept that places all religious groups on equal ground, making one as good (or not good) as the next. It suggests that one may simply choose among them, as he would a civic club. This concept is valid only when the religious groups being considered are of human origin and perpetuation.

Both the terminology and concept involved in "joining a church" are foreign to the New Testament. The New Testament church is not one among many religious groups that are acceptable to God, but it is the **one** body of Christ (Eph. 1:22–23; 4:5). When one obeys Christ by confessing his faith in Christ, repenting of his sins, and being baptized into Christ in order to receive remission of his sins, the Lord then **adds him to His church** (Acts 2:37–47). Men are added to the church of Christ when and because they are saved from the guilt of their past sins (Acts 2:41, 47). The church is simply the depository of God's saved, redeemed people.

Becoming a member of the church of Christ is not a matter of comparing several religious groups, deciding which one is preferred, and then applying for membership or "joining up." Rather, it is a matter of obeying the Gospel plan of salvation, which culminates in baptism unto forgiveness of sins, at which time the Lord adds one to His church because he is saved. This is the only means of entering the church that Christ built (Mat. 16:18) and which He will save eternally (Eph. 5:23).

## **One Can Be Baptized into Christ at any Time**

This fact is surprising to people because they are accustomed to seeing baptism administered only at a special "baptismal service," if indeed at all. The special "baptismal service" grew out of the false concept that one is pardoned from his sins the moment he intellectually acknowledges that Jesus Christ is the Son of God ("faith only salvation"), which amounts to a denial that baptism is a condition of forgiveness or salvation. Those who teach the doctrine of salvation by faith alone see no need for immediate baptism of the sinner who desires salvation or pardon. Consequently, the

usual practice of such teachers/preachers is to pronounce the sinner "saved" when he confesses his faith in Christ and then announce that there will be a special "baptismal service" sometime (perhaps several days) later.

The New Testament record of conversions is vastly different from the practice just described. **First**, while the New Testament most definitely teaches that men are saved by faith or belief (e.g., John 3:16; 8:24; Acts 16:31; Rom. 3:28; 5:1; et al.), there is no such thing as "faith **only** salvation" taught in the New Testament. Contrariwise, the New Testament clearly states that men are justified (saved) by works (of obedience to the will of Christ) and **not** by faith alone (Jam. 2:24; cf. Mat. 7:21–23; Rom. 1:5; 6:17–18; 2 The. 1:8; Heb. 5:8–9; 1 Pet. 1:22; et al.). **Second**, the New Testament teaches that baptism is necessary to salvation (Mark 16:16) and is a condition for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38). One does not have his sins washed away (in the blood of Christ, Rev. 1:5; 7:14) until he is baptized (Acts 22:16). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that when men were taught what to do to be saved in the days of the apostles, those who readily received that message were baptized immediately. Consider the following illustrations:

- On Pentecost sinners were told to repent and be baptized in order to receive remission of sins, and about 3,000 were baptized that very day (Acts 2:38, 41).
- When the Ethiopian learned what to do to be saved he requested to be baptized immediately and Philip, the evangelist and his teacher, complied (Acts 8:36–38).
- Cornelius and his household were baptized immediately upon learning they needed to do so (Acts 10:47–48).
- The jailor at Philippi and his household were baptized immediately, the same hour of the night (although it was past midnight), upon learning that they must do so in order to be saved (Acts 16:33; cf. v. 25).
- Ananias did not tell Saul of Tarsus he was already forgiven of his sins and that he should wait until the church in Damascus could plan a special "baptismal service" so that he might be baptized as a "sign" of his salvation. Rather, Ananias said to Saul, "And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins..." (Acts 22:16), which, of course, the sincere Saul did.

It is evident that absolutely no time was lost and no delays were allowed in baptizing penitent sinners in the New Testament conversions. Why was this the case? The simple answer is that the inspired Gospel preachers taught men that baptism (preceded by confession of one's faith in Christ and repentance) was part of man's necessary response to God's gracious offer of forgiveness through the blood of His Son. Sinners were made to understand that they were still in the guilt of their sins until they had been baptized. No wonder God's preachers then urged sinners to be baptized without delay and no wonder anxious and sincere sinners did not hesitate to be baptized.

The plan of God has not changed since Pentecost and it will not until the end of the world (Mat. 28:18–20). Men must still be baptized in order to be saved, regardless of the popularity of the doctrines of men that deny this truth. Therefore, when one learns what to do to be saved and desires to do it, he may be (indeed, he **should** be) baptized as soon as possible, regardless of the day or hour. In our congregational assemblies, we always urge any non-members who are present in to be baptized before that assembly is dismissed, but one does not have to wait until the church is assembled to be saved and become a Christian.

### **Conclusion**

To the one reading these words, if you have not obeyed the Gospel plan of salvation, we lovingly urge you to seek out a faithful Christian who can help you do so immediately. When, upon coming to believe in Jesus as the Christ, God's Son, upon turning from any and all sins and errors in repentance, and upon confessing your faith in Christ in the presence of others, you then are baptized for forgiveness of your sins, the Lord will forgive you of your sins. Because you are no longer counted guilty of those sins (i.e., you are "saved"), He will add you to His church (Acts 2:38, 41, 47). If you will serve Him faithfully (1 Cor. 15:58), He will save you eternally with Him and all of the redeemed in Heaven at last (1 Cor. 15:24; Eph. 5:23).

*[Note: I wrote this MS from outlines of a two-part series of sermons, preached from the pulpit of the Pearl Street Church of Christ, Denton, Texas, on November 23, 1986.]*