

The Difference Between the Lord's Church and the Religions of Men

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Introduction

Let us begin by defining some of the terms in this chapter's title:

- *The Lord's church:* By *the Lord*, I refer to the Lord Jesus Christ, Whom God the Father acknowledged as His beloved Son, in whom He is well pleased (Mat. 3:17; 17:5). By *church*, I refer to that which the Lord promised He would build, founded upon the bedrock fact that He was "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mat. 16:16-18). In the immediate context, He identified this church He would build as "the kingdom of heaven" (v. 19)
- *The religions of men:* This phrase acknowledges the obvious and indisputable fact that men have invented, established, and nourished various religious institutions. From ancient times, men—in their ignorance and superstition—have "sought out many inventions" in religion (Ecc. 7:29), producing a profusion of "homemade" religions. This plenitude includes not only the many pagan religions, which venerate their invented gods, but also embraces thousands of distinct religious bodies that claim at least some relationship to the Christ. In common parlance, they are what we know as "denominations." They view the church set forth in the New Testament as an invisible body of which all of the denominations are a part. Our study will mostly concentrate on these man-made religious bodies.
- *The difference between:* By this phrase the title affirms that the New Testament church and the religions of men—whether pagan or denominational—are distinct and different in fundamental ways. Moreover, it is possible for persons of normal intelligence to perceive this distinction. Further, not only is it **possible** to know the difference in these matters, it is **mandatory** for men to make this distinction if they would be saved at last.

Depending upon which Internet source one consults, he will find various figures for the number of distinct denominations in existence (e.g., 34,000, 38,000, 40,000). Space limitations obviously prevent notice of detailed differences between even a few of these religious bodies and the church the Lord built and owns. We must therefore deal with some broad principles that demonstrate this distinction. The failure to recognize the essentiality of these principles is at the basis of the very concept of denominationalism, whatever the specific brand. The minute peculiarities of the various denominations (including some that falsely wear the designation, *Church of Christ*) are but symptoms of this failure.

It is not in the purview of this chapter to set out the case for the fact that Jesus did build the church as He promised or the how and when of its beginning. I assume that the reader is sufficiently conversant with the Word of God to know this history. Further, it is not in the scope

of this discussion to set forth the case that the Lord and His apostles intended for the church as he established and propagated it through the Gospel to remain through the ages as it existed in its beginning. Suffice it to say that every exhortation to abide in the Truth and every warning against departing from it (of which the New Testament contains hundreds, either in explicit or implicit terms) is intended to keep the church uniform from its beginning “unto the end of the world” (Mat. 28:20).

The following principles distinguished the church in the first century from the religions then extant, consisting of Judaism and the paganism of Greece, Rome, Egypt, and other nations. These principles will maintain the church’s purity. As soon as men abandon any of these principles, they will cease to be the New Testament church. These same principles continue now and will continue to draw the differential line between the church of the Lord and all its counterfeits.

Respects the Absolute Authority of Jesus Christ

When the apostle Thomas exclaimed to Jesus, “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28), he employed the authoritative term, *Lord*, found almost 250 times in the New Testament in reference to the Christ. In each usage it is laden with the authority of a ruler, a master – one who is to be obeyed without question.

Jesus performed His “mighty works and wonders and signs” (Acts 2:22) not primarily to relieve human misery. John assigns the principal reason for writing his record of some of Jesus’ miraculous acts that were witnessed by and affected thousands of people:

Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name (John 20:30–31).

If merely the **record** of Jesus’ miracles was for the purpose of creating faith in His Divine Sonship (and, by implication, in His authority), then surely the very miracles themselves had the same primary purpose. Immediately before His ascension, Jesus claimed that His Father had given Him “all authority...in heaven and on earth” (Mat. 28:18).

A millennium before Jesus’ birth, David prophesied: “Jehovah saith unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, Until I make thine enemies thy footstool” (Psa. 110:1). On Pentecost, after quoting David’s prophecy, Peter applied its fulfillment to the Christ: “Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly, that God hath made him both **Lord** and Christ, this Jesus

whom ye crucified" (Acts 2:36, *emph. DM*). Jesus' ascension to glory and limitless dominion also fulfilled the prophetic vision Daniel saw five centuries before the fact:

I saw in the night-visions, and, behold, there came with the clouds of heaven one like unto a son of man, and he came even to the ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and languages should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed (Dan. 7:13-14).

In his remarkable "resurrection chapter," Paul stated: "For he [the Christ] must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be abolished is death" (1 Cor. 15:25-26). When He ascended on High, He presented to the Father His Calvary blood through which He "made purification of sins," whereupon He "sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb. 1:3). He thereby became "The blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords" (1 Tim. 6:15).

While His authority is universal, it particularly applies to His church. Paul wrote of the incomparable power God gave His Son...

... when he raised him from the dead, and made him to sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule, and authority, and power, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: and he put all things in subjection under his feet, and gave him to be head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all (Eph. 1:20-23).

As its builder and owner (He purchased it with the awful price of His blood [Acts 20:28]), He has absolute authority over the church. Since His ascension and heavenly enthronement, He has reigned over His kingdom, which, as earlier noted, is a figure for His church (Mat. 16:18-19; Heb. 12:23, 28; et al.). This authority means that Jesus, the Christ, alone has the right to determine every feature and facet of the church.

Recognition of and reverence for Jesus' absolute authority is patently absent in the religions of men, including the denominations that are filled with professed believers in Him. They will all give lip service to this authority, but when their unauthorized practices and false doctrines are challenged, they will revert to their threadbare slogans: "Doctrine doesn't matter," "We can't all agree," "All of the churches get their doctrines from the Bible," "We're all going to Heaven; we're just taking different roads," or the real clincher, "It makes no difference what one believes as long as he's sincere" (a precursor to postmodernism). All such banalities are but advertisements of failure to bow in submission to the Lord they profess to believe in and serve. That same Lord they confess, but refuse to obey, made the fate of all mere "verbal disciples"

unmistakably clear: “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Mat 7:21). On another occasion, He asked the piercing question: “And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46).

Failure to honor or rebellion against the authority of the Christ is the fundamental difference between the Lord’s faithful church and every other religious body, including apostate “Churches of Christ.” It is for lack of this crucial commitment to the authority of the Christ that men go astray into their endless varieties of religion. This fact is no less true of errant brethren who have led hundreds of congregations into quasi-, if not full, denominational status. Some of them have strayed through outright rebellion, though others, while apparently desiring to submit to the authority of Christ, are totally clueless concerning the way to ascertain scriptural authority for any given practice. All such have abandoned the apostolic precept that will keep the Lord’s church just that—the Lord’s church: “And whatsoever ye do, in word or in deed, do all in the name [i.e., by the authority, DM] of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:17).

Recognizes that the Christ Exercises His Authority Only Through the New Testament

Those who truly honor the absolute authority of Jesus Christ understand that he exercises this authority through His inspired Word, and through no other medium. The Lord’s church has continued to exist since its inception only because godly men and women have sought New Testament authority for all that they do—and from no additional source. This fact explains why they—and no others—are the Lord’s church. When the Lord referred to those who refused to do “the things which I say” (Luke 6:46), He indicated that He exercises His authority through the words He spoke while on earth.

The Father decreed that the authority of His Son should be exercised through His words, when at the Transfiguration scene He thundered from Heaven, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him” (Mat. 17:5b). The Hebrews writer declared that God’s Son is His spokesman for all remaining time: “God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son...” (Heb. 1:1-2).

While both the Old Testament and the New Testament are God’s inspired revelation, the authority of the Old Testament ceased with the death of Christ, whereupon He symbolically

“nailed” it to His cross (Col. 2:14). Those who try to combine parts of the Old Testament with the New Testament produce man-made churches. God no more gave the law of Moses to govern men **since** the cross than He gave the law of Christ to govern men **before** the cross.

Our Lord returned to His Father two millennia ago, so we shall never hear the powerful and gracious words as they fell from His human lips. However, in God’s perfect providence, He arranged for a written record of those very words to be preserved. On the matchless authority of Jesus, those words—collectively called “the gospel” – are to be proclaimed “even unto the end of the world” (Mat. 28:18–20; Mark 16:15–16). The stress on the authority of His Word is unmistakable when He says, “If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments” (John 14:15) and “He that loveth me not keepeth not my words (v. 24a). His words will be the standard of Judgment at last for all those who have lived since the cross: “He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my sayings, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I spake, the same shall judge him in the last day” (John 12:48).

Jesus also exercises His authority through the words of other selected and qualified men, principally His apostles. To these men He promised that, upon His return to the Father, He would send to them the Holy Spirit Who would “guide you into all the Truth” (John 16:13). Through these men and a very few other first-century saints the Lord revealed the fullness of His will. These men first “**spake** from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21, emph. DM), then **wrote** the revealed Word that comprises the New Testament. That which Paul wrote is therefore as authoritative as the words that our Lord spoke, for the Lord is speaking through him. Paul reminded the Corinthians: “If any man thinketh himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him take knowledge of the things which I write unto you, that they are the commandment of the Lord” (1 Cor. 14:37). So it is with all of the New Testament writers – their words are the will of the Christ, through which He exercises His authority.

The exertion of His authority through the New Testament alone excludes all extra-Biblical sources. The revelation of His will was completed when John laid down his pen on Patmos. The Holy Spirit has not revealed any additional Truth since. All of the denominations that claim affinity with Christ claim to honor the Bible. However, they all accept other authorities in addition to the Bible. It is these additional authorities that make them distinct denominations, built by men, rather than by the Savior of men. The following few examples illustrate the way varied sources of authority produce the thousands of varied religious bodies:

- **The Roman Catholic Church** relies upon the “traditions of the fathers” plus the “ex cathedra” rulings of the councils and popes.
- **The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints** has its *Book of Mormon* (which it claims is “Another Testament of Jesus Christ”), *Pearl of Great Price*, *Doctrine and Covenants*, plus its President and apostles.
- **The United Methodist Church** has its *Book of Discipline*, plus its annual conferences.
- **The Presbyterian Church USA** has its *Constitution* (containing ten historical creedal statements, the backbone of which is the 1647 Scottish *Westminster Confession of Faith*) plus its annual synods.
- **Baptist Churches** have their *Baptist Standard Manual*, by Edward Thurston Hiscox, plus their annual conventions.

Every attempt to make the Lord share some of His absolute authority – executed solely through the New Testament – with any other authority source will invariably result in a church of a man or men rather than the church of Christ. Herein lies a principal difference between the Lord’s church and all the religious orders of men.

Recognizes that Obedience to the New Testament Plan of Salvation Is the Only Means of Becoming a Member of the Lord’s Church

Inspiration inseparably intertwines salvation and the church Jesus built. He began adding those who are saved to His church on Pentecost and has not ceased doing so “day by day” (Acts 2:47). His church is His “depository” of saved people. He will save “the body” (Eph. 5:23), which is His church (1:22-23). At His coming, He will “deliver up the kingdom [His church, DM] to God” (1 Cor. 15:24; cf. Mat. 16:18-19; Heb. 12:23, 28). Men are redeemed/forgiven of sins/saved by the blood of Christ (Eph. 1:7), which explains Paul’s declaration that the Lord “purchased” the church with His blood (Acts 20:28). If Christ will save only His church and if He adds one to His church only at the point at which one is saved – forgiven of his sins by the blood of Christ – then the most profound and far-reaching question of all time is, “What must I do to be saved?”

Directly contradicting the foregoing Scriptural evidence is a fundamental misconception held by most, if not all, Protestant denominations: Salvation and church membership are entirely separate matters, realized at separate times and upon separate actions. One is saved at point “A”; he becomes a member of a church – if he chooses to do so – at point “B.” The Roman Catholic and Mormon Churches (and perhaps others) correctly teach that salvation and church

membership are inseparable, however they both corrupt this Scriptural Truth by their numerous and egregious errors concerning both the church and the plan of salvation.

Now, back to that day when those first saved ones were added to the church: What did those sinners do so that Luke, the inspired historian, might call them “saved”? Having learned this, we shall at the same moment learn the means of their becoming members of the Lord’s church. We shall also at once learn what men must do—from that time forward—to be saved and to be added to the church, for that same Pentecost gospel is to be preached and practiced “unto the end of the world” (Mat. 28:20). The Lord’s “day-by-day” adding will not cease until time is no more (Acts 2:41, 47).

The thrust of the first part of Peter’s sermon on Pentecost was aimed at convincing unbelieving Jews (many of whom had cried for Jesus’ crucifixion fifty days earlier) that “God hath made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom ye crucified” (Acts 2:36). The powerful application of prophecy and eye-witness testimony stirred heartfelt conviction in some, causing them to interrupt Peter with the question, “Brethren, what shall we do?” (This is obviously an elliptical statement, which, if fully stated, would have been, “What shall we do to be forgiven of this heinous sin?”) Their question was tantamount to a confession of their faith in the One Peter had set before them as “both Lord and Christ” (infidels do not ask what they should do to be saved).

Peter’s inspired answer is crucial, completing Heaven’s universal, age-enduring plan whereby alien sinners may be forgiven, redeemed, and saved: “Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of yours sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). He continued preaching and exhorting “with many other words” (v. 40), at the conclusion of which, “They then that received his word were baptized: and there were added unto them in that day about three thousand souls” (v. 41). Luke then states that “the Lord added to them [“the church,” KJV] day by day those that were saved” (v. 47). Let us analyze and summarize:

1. Peter commanded confessing believers to repent (i.e., turn in mind and deed) of their sins.
2. Peter told confessing, penitent believers to be baptized (i.e., immersed in water).
3. Peter explicitly stated the end of their baptism: “unto the remission of your sins” —he obviously thought it necessary for them to understand its purpose, as we also must.
4. Peter issued these commands, not upon his own authority, but “in the name [i.e., by the authority, DM] of Jesus Christ” (cf. Mat. 28:18–20; Mark 16:15–16; Luke 24:47).

5. Those who have receptive hearts to Scriptural teaching do not argue the necessity of baptism; those who argue the necessity of baptism do not have receptive hearts (Acts 2:41).
6. *Remission of sins* is interchangeable with *salvation*; when Peter told them the way to receive remission of sins, he told them the way to be saved.
7. When the 3,000 obeyed the commands of Christ, including baptism, they were thereby saved by the sin-sacrifice of blood He shed on Calvary and offered in the heavenly Holy of Holies (Acts 22:16; Rev. 1:5; 7:14; Heb. 1:3; 9:12-14).
8. When the Lord saved them, He simultaneously added them to His church (Acts 2: 41, 47), and He will continue to do so until He returns to take His faithful ones home.

Standing in stark contrast with the foregoing information are the answers that men in their man-made churches have been giving to this question for centuries. Common answers include such things as “Pray the sinner’s prayer,” “Invite Jesus into your heart,” and “If you believe in Jesus, He will save you.”

With few exceptions, Protestantism subscribes to Martin Luther’s sixteenth century *sola fide* (solely by faith) dictum: One is saved by faith alone – at the time he intellectually accepts the truth that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God. This dogma rules out any human “works” or actions whatsoever (with the necessity of baptism as its specific target). The sinner, thus pronounced “saved,” may or may not be admitted for church membership upon profession of his faith, depending on the denomination.

This *faith-only/no-works* doctrine not only contradicts Scripture; it is also self-contradictory. How shall others know one believes in Christ without the “work” of confessing “with the mouth,” which is an entirely separate operation (“work”) from believing “with the heart” (Rom. 10:9-10)? For that matter, Jesus said that belief in Him is “the **work** of [i.e., ordained by, DM] God” (John 6:28-29). If salvation is apart from any and all human activity, faith itself is thereby eliminated.

Ironically, the denominations separate salvation from church membership, which is correct with regard to all of **their** churches. One who obeys the Lord’s plan of salvation will never be in a denomination unless he joins one through apostasy. Since God and His Son had no part in building the institutions of men, there is no salvation in any of them. Jesus left no doubt about it: “Every plant which my heavenly Father planted not, shall be rooted up” (Mat. 15:13).

Simply put, one cannot be saved without being a member of the church of Christ, and one cannot be a member of the church of Christ without being saved. The only means of being

saved is by obedience to the plan of salvation first heralded in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, which all of the denominations despise and disallow. Thus not only **may** men be members of the church of Christ to be saved at last, **they must be**, for *membership in the Lord's church* and *those who are saved* are simply two ways of describing one outcome: the company of those who have been reconciled to God through His Son. Herein lies a clear distinction between the church Jesus built and all of the religions and churches men have founded. Woe be unto the person who would dare blur this distinction, as so many, even among those claiming to be the Lord's people, have done and are doing.

**Recognizes that the Lord's Church Possesses Unique Characteristics
by Which It May Be Identified**

Every religion or denomination of men has its peculiar characteristics that make it distinct and distinguishable from all others. These include such things as their organizational structures, worship practices, and membership requirements. One of the most of obvious of these is the name a group chooses, which may relate to a founder (Lutheran), a practice (Baptist), a type of polity (Presbyterian, Episcopal), an event (Pentecostal), a place (Church of England), or others.

What is true regarding these traits of identity for the institutions of men is no less true of the church Jesus built. It is utter folly to deny this premise. In the face of liberals who have expressed remorse that they ever emphasized these marks, I stress the necessity of never ceasing to do so. Only by recognizing what they are can one distinguish the Divine institution from the plethora of human counterfeits. This distinction is the very thing the liberals despise, for it hinders their goal of carrying the church into the fullness of the denominational maelstrom. They neither believe in the necessity nor the possibility of maintaining the church in its primitive purity.

One can as well identify and locate a stolen car without knowing such things as its make, color, body style, model year, and license number as to identify and find the church of Christ without knowing its unique characteristics. The New Testament writers reveal these in the Acts and the epistles that follow.

Our Lord "built" His church according to His own infallible plan, which flowed from the "eternal purpose" of Deity (Eph. 3:10-11; cf. John 18:36). God gave Moses a blueprint for the tabernacle in the wilderness, strictly enjoining him to "make all things according to the pattern" (Exo. 25:40; Acts 7:44; Heb. 8:5). Just so, the Lord, through the Holy Spirit, gave His

apostles His pattern for the greater institution (Heb. 8:6), His church, to which they faithfully adhered.

By studying the direct statements, accounts of action, and implications of the New Testament writers, we can know these marks of distinction. Through the providentially preserved written records of these inspired men we learn the way people enter the church (per our prior discussion of the plan of salvation). We also learn of its organizational structure, its worship activities, the way it finances its work, and the designations used in reference to it.

The church exists in both a universal and in a local sense, as determined by context. All of the churches of Christ in various localities all over the world compose the “universal” church. The Lord thus referred to the universal church in His promise to build it (Mat. 16:18). The Bible frequently mentions local churches (e.g., Jerusalem [Acts 11:22], Antioch [v. 26], Ephesus [20:17], Corinth [1 Cor. 1:2], et al.). At times we read of the churches in a geographical area (e.g., “the churches of Galatia” [1 Cor. 16:1; Gal. 1:2]; “the churches of Asia” [1 Cor. 16:19; Rev. 1:4]; et al.).

Scripture reveals no church polity relating to the church universal, such as would provide for a superstructure of universal headquarters, officers, or assemblies. Rather, all “government/structure/organization” is at the local-church level. Each church has its own plurality of elders/bishops/pastors when men therein meet the Holy Spirit’s qualifications. These men are charged to rule and lead the church so that it remains faithful to its Head (Acts 14:21–23; 20:28; Phi. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1–7; 5:17; Tit. 1:5–9; Heb. 13:17). No local eldership or church has any authority over any other eldership or church. To assist the elders and serve the church, each church appoints deacons, who must also meet Scriptural qualifications (Phi. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8–13).

1. The church’s specified day of assembly is the first day of the week, the day the Lord arose from the dead (John 20:1; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:1–2; Heb. 10:25).
2. The Lord’s day assembly is characterized by specified and/or exemplified worship activities, including eating the Lord’s supper (unleavened bread and fruit of the vine) as a memorial to the slain body and shed blood of Jesus for our sin-offering (Mat. 26:26–28; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:17–34). Worship also includes praying to the Father in Jesus’ name and singing hymns of worship and exhortation (1 Cor. 14:15; Eph. 5:19–20; Col. 3:16). In these assemblies a free will offering, according to one’s income, is collected to finance the work of each local congregation (1 Cor. 16:1–2), and a man, so appointed and prepared, delivers a message from God’s Word (Acts 20:7).

3. The church of Christ has only one way to acquire the funds necessary to execute the will of its Founder. Paul set forth this means in his apostolic order to the Corinthians: “Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I gave order to the churches of Galatia, so also do ye. Upon the first [on every first, *Young’s Literal Translation of the Bible*] day of the week let each one of you lay by him in store, as he may prosper, that no collections be made when I come” (1 Cor. 16:1–2). We note that this command is not limited merely to Corinth, but it had already been delivered to the Galatian churches. The universality of this practice (and those previously noted) is certified by Paul’s earlier statements to the Corinthians, reminding them that he delivered the same doctrine “everywhere in every church” (1 Cor. 4:17; cf. 7:17; 14:33). We note also that such collections are never solicited from any but members of the churches.
4. The New Testament does not specify an exclusive “name” for the church. The most frequent term used in reference to the church is just that: “the church,” for there was only one. No one in the first century asked “Which church?” – made necessary only by the emergence of the babel of denominationalism.

Since the Christ built His church, it follows that *the church of Christ* would serve as a Scriptural and logical description of and designation for it. However, Paul’s statement to the Romans, “All the churches of Christ salute you,” takes us beyond implication (Rom. 16:16b). “**Churches** of Christ” cannot exist apart from the individual “church of Christ” in various locations. Other designations in Scripture include “the church of God” (1 Cor. 1:2; et al.) and “the church of the living God” (1 Tim. 3:15). These are likewise warranted because the Father and the Son are one (John 17:9–10). All of these terms are therefore authorized to designate the church.

5. However, to avoid confusing the Lord’s church with denominations that have chosen such names as “the Church of God,” “the Churches of God,” and “the Church of the Living God,” expediency dictates consistent use of *churches of Christ* in reference to the Lord’s church. Please observe that merely affixing a Scriptural designation to a religious body (e.g., *Church of God* or *Church of Christ*) does not thereby imply that it is a Scriptural body. One may put lipstick on a pig, but it remains no less a pig.

Men, not content to submit to the authority of Christ, have altered and adulterated His church in every one of its identifying characteristics. Their very concept of the church is a disgrace. As earlier noted, to them, “the church of Christ” is the “invisible church” that encompasses the thousands of bodies professing belief in Christ in any degree, regardless of variegation. They have invented acts and implements of worship in a thousand ways. They have substituted ecclesiastical hierarchies and headquarters for the Savior’s simple blueprint. The churches of men are often little more than business enterprises, raising revenues by whatever means works (raffles, parking lot sales, fairs, merchandise sales, solicitation from non-

members, et al.). The variety of names that human religious orders have had to invent to distance themselves from all others is nothing short of amazing.

The unique marks of identity for the church, discernable in the New Testament, set it apart from all of the innovations of men. If these peculiar characteristics, set forth and practiced under apostolic tutelage, are unimportant, why did Divine Providence preserve the record of them? If these details concerning the identity of the church are unimportant, why is the church itself important at all?

Recognizes that the Foremost Task of the Church Is Spiritual in Nature

The church Jesus built and died for is a spiritual institution. He so stated explicitly to Pontius Pilate:

Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence" (John 18:36).

Jesus did not establish a political, philosophical, commercial, recreational, benevolent, entertainment, or social institution, but a spiritual one. The work of any institution proceeds from its nature, that is, the "kind" of institution it is. All this, if we had nothing more, tells us that the work of the church pertains to **spiritual** matters and aims.

Jesus had one all-consuming passion and work to accomplish in coming to our earth— "For the Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). These words are but a rewording of "the Bible in miniature" we so well know: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Paul understood fully the work His Lord came to accomplish: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15). All of His work had this singularly spiritual aim.

Some might ask, "But what about all His works of compassion to relieve suffering?" None other ever possessed so much compassion for human woes as our Lord had. While He relieved untold physical and emotional misery through His miracles, signs, and wonders, these ills did not compel His earthly sojourn; they might even be termed "incidental" to His **real** work. He had been doing these merciful acts (including raising the dead) for centuries through some of the prophets. He could have continued doing such through His apostles and other New Testament saints without setting foot on earth. No, He came to accomplish a spiritual work beyond the ability of man nor angel.

His wonders and signs had a far deeper and more far-reaching end than relief of physical suffering, as welcome as that was to its recipients. John states it plainly (as noted near the beginning of this chapter): “Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but **these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name**” (John 20:30–31; emph. DM). I re-emphasize: If the purpose of John’s **record** of Jesus’ signs was in order to prove His Sonship, how much more must this have been the purpose of the **signs themselves**? Thus His marvelous miraculous displays were principally aimed at proving that He was Who He claimed to be and that He could therefore do what He promised He could/would do. Jesus came to relieve all mankind of the worst malady and handicap of all—sin, with all of its terrible consequences in this life and its unutterable consequence in eternity. This stated purpose of His miraculous activity further underscores the fact that Jesus’ work was spiritual in nature.

Further, ought not the work of His spiritual body coincide with the work of His physical body? We should not then be surprised that the principal work Jesus gave His church to do is to save the lost, or at least make available to them that which will save. Through His thrice-stated charge to the apostles, He set forth the work of His church:

Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world (Mat. 28:19–20).

And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned (Mark 16:15–16).

And he said unto them, Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer, and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name unto all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem (Luke 24:46–47).

Significantly, as earlier emphasized, in Matthew’s account of the Master’s commission He extended its terms beyond the apostles’ generation, “even unto the end of the world” (28:20). As long as the world stands and as long as the church exists among men, just so long will the work of the church be to do its utmost to save sinful men by declaring to them the gospel, “the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16). Paul fully understood this was to be the perpetual, all-consuming task of the church. With his Roman execution in sight, he instructed Timothy: “And the things which thou hast heard from me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2).

None of the foregoing is to deny that the church of the Lord has the responsibility to compassionately help the helpless as she has opportunity and ability. The numerous New Testament examples of and injunctions concerning the kindness and benevolence that should characterize churches of Christ are summed up in Paul's words to the Galatian churches: "So then, as we have opportunity, let us work that which is good toward all men, and especially toward them that are of the household of the faith" (Gal. 6:10). Even such acts of benevolence, especially extended to the unredeemed, should have a spiritual motive behind them, as expressed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: "Even so let your light shine before men; that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Mat. 5:16).

Nor does the principal work of the church disavow its need to strengthen and edify itself. What Paul wrote to the Thessalonian church he doubtless taught the other churches as he circulated among them: "Wherefore exhort one another, and build each other up, even as also ye do" (1 The. 5:11). We know that he did so admonish the church in Rome: "So then let us follow after things which make for peace, and things whereby we may edify one another" (Rom. 14:19). Again, the edification is not from selfish motivation, but that we might "be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2).

When one observes the chief work and emphasis of the denominations generally, the contrast with the Lord's mandate for His church is staggering. The reasons for the existence of many of them spring from their adoption of the humanistic "social gospel" that centers chiefly on man's life in time far more than in eternity, on the body rather than the soul. Some churches have become little more than fronts for left-wing political causes. Some are outspoken defenders of sodomy and abortion. Their ideas of "church work" are such things as operating soup kitchens and hospitals. The Bible to them is little more than a religious relic to display on the altars of their "sanctuaries."

Even those denominations that are generally more zealous, evangelistic, and "soul-conscious" do their work in vain, for they refuse to tell sinners the way to be saved. Jesus' description of the scribes and Pharisees well fits them: "Ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he is become so, ye make him twofold more a son of hell than yourselves" (Mat. 23:15).

We cannot help but observe that over the past few decades hundreds of local churches of Christ have veered to one degree or another from the work the Lord assigned to them. Symptoms include spending vast sums to build gymnasiums, initiating programs and

“ministries” (and hiring “ministers”) to meet every “felt need,” and offering classes in such subjects as weight loss, improving nutrition, how to “ask someone out,” meal planning, clothes shopping on a budget, and on and on the list goes.

If the Lord’s church fails to make preaching the saving gospel to a lost world its priority, it will not be preached, and (for the extant generation) the pre-incarnate Word may as well have stayed in Heaven. Obviously, the denominations will not do so, for they do not know what the gospel is. May His faithful churches redouble their efforts to “go...into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15). The primacy of this work of getting the unadulterated gospel into the world to the extent of each church’s abilities and opportunities represents a major contrast between the church of the Lord and all of the religious institutions men have originated.

Conclusion

In an age when “do your own thing” and “have it your way” in religion are running amok, it is impossible to overemphasize the necessity of seeing the beautiful simplicity of the church as Jesus built it. Once one catches the picture of the original, he will see just as clearly the striking contrast between the New Testament institution and the utter shambles men have made in their sacrilegious attempts to improve upon it. He will also understand that neither he (nor anyone else who has lived since the cross) can be saved apart from it.

One cannot remain faithful to the Christ apart from understanding these fundamental differences between the Lord’s church and the religions of men.

[**Note:** I wrote this MS for and presented an oral digest of it at the Contending for the Faith Lectureship, conducted by the Spring Church of Christ, Spring, Texas, February 19–23, 2014. It was published in the book of the lectures, *What Must a Christian Do to Remain Faithful to Christ?* ed. David P. Brown (Contending for the Faith: Spring, TX)].

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