

## WHAT IS THE ONE TRUE CHURCH?

*“Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us...” — John 17:20, 21*

It is often asked, *“What is the right denomination?”* There are hundreds, if not thousands of denominations all claiming to be this *one true church*, but does God recognize any of these as His representative on earth? This subject should be approached prayerfully and honestly. If there was but *one church* in the beginning, established by our Lord, there should be but the *one church* in the end — the church triumphant in glory. Colossians 3:4

The word *church* was first used in the New Testament and is a translation of the Greek word *ekklēsia*, which means a *calling out*. Jesus said to his disciples, *“I have chosen you out of the world.”* (John 15:19) The true church is a company of believers who, in accepting the invitation of Christ, have become *sanctified* or separated from the world, worldly pursuits and worldly organizations.

Those of the early church bore no denominational names, but were simply identified by their location. *“Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, ...sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints...”* (1 Corinthians 1:2) These *sanctified* individuals in various communities *set themselves apart from the world* and *dedicate* their lives to God through the merit of His Son. Thus, the true church is not a place to *go to*, nor is it a denomination to *belong to*. The church is the gathering of sincere believers. Paul emphasized this when he confirmed that Jesus’ followers were baptized only *into Christ* and not into an earthly organization. There is but one baptism, and that is *into Christ*. Thus, it is a misconception that one *joins* or is baptized into a particular church denomination. Ephesians 4:4-6; Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:3, 4

### The Early Church, A Template

When Christ established the early church through the Apostles, there were no complex ceremonies, no large structures, no soaring columns made of marble, no choir lofts and costly statues. There were only small gatherings in humble homes where his followers met together to study his words and the inspired words of his Apostles. Their example of the *“simplicity that is in Christ”* was meant to be a template or pattern for future gatherings of the church to follow throughout the Christian Age. 2 Corinthians 11:2, 3



In its simplicity, the small gatherings of the early church were primarily composed of two elements: 1) the congregation — those who had dedicated their lives to do the will of their Father in heaven, following in Jesus’ footsteps; and, 2) the undershepherds — men who were voted upon by the congregation to serve the spiritual needs of the church: *“...they had ordained them elders in every church...”* (Acts 14:23) At the present time this word *ordain* is generally used in reference to a ceremony of installation by a religious sect, but this is not the

significance of the Greek word *cheirotoneo*. Rather, it means *to elect by stretching out the hand*. (See also 2 Corinthians 8:19) Thus, the church was to vote for *servants* possessing the qualities of faithfulness, humility, diligence, good behavior, patience, etc. (1 Timothy 3:1-7) Since they were selected by the congregation this would work as a check and balance intended to prevent the development of an overpowering clergy class.

For a time, the church remained independent of any sectarian ties. Soon, however, some of Christ’s followers began to group together by the name of their teachers rather than by their locations. We see this recorded in the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. *“For it hath been declared unto me of you... that there are contentions among you... every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?”* (1 Corinthians 1:11-13) Paul was warning the brethren not to become sectarian, but to remain free from the bondage which would develop as a result of forming under any other cause than that of the unity developed by the mind of Christ. *“Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory... Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus...”* Philippians 2:3-5

### “Is Christ Divided?”

The Apostle Paul continually warned that ambitious men would arise within the church seeking to draw away disciples after themselves. *“For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to*

draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears." (Acts 20:29-31) These grievous wolves brought in strife, and the small gatherings began to divide into factions. Paul called this condition carnal-mindedness. "For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?" (1 Corinthians 3:3) This spirit of strife was certainly a test upon the early church, for Paul concluded that those who would be approved of God would remain free from such worldly behavior. "When ye come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it. For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you." (1 Corinthians 11:18, 19) Thus, God permitted the various divisions to take place, to develop the character of the faithful — those who would stand up for truth and righteousness against invading false teachings and practices.

### Rules and Rituals Replaced Principles

In time, to hold these various factions together, rules, rituals and mandatory holy days began to take place. The Apostle Paul criticized these as mere forms of godliness: "Why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, touch not; taste not; handle not... after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a show [appearance only] of wisdom..." (Colossians 2:20-23; 2 Timothy 3:5) Paul further spoke of these unnecessary rules as being doctrines of demons: "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats..." 1 Timothy 4:1-3

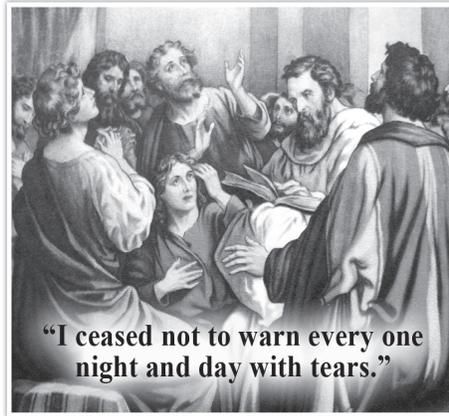
Because of these doctrines of demons, which were already arising, Paul devoted much of his teaching in the early church to the freedom that is in Christ. "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage." (Galatians 5:1) "One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind." Romans 14:5

Sectarian systems bind their congregations together by implying that salvation is obtained through acceptance and adherence to such teachings (creeds and rules) of their organization. If any in the congregation question the doctrine or authority of their particular denomination, they are often labeled as *heretics* — *opponents of God*. Groups which leave no room for dialog or for impartial investigation on Bible topics are not following the Apostle's admonitions. All Christians should be free to examine and discuss their church teachings to be certain that these doctrines can be fully defended by Scripture and are honoring to God. 2 Timothy 2:15

### "The Head of the Church is Christ"

Christ alone must be recognized as our Savior and the head of the church. "Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular." (1 Corinthians 12:27) This illustration of the head and body of Christ is brought out beautifully in 1 Corinthians 11:3: "I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God."

As the head does the thinking for the entire body, so it will be in the one true church. The church, as members of Christ's body should strive to develop unity by learning the *mind of Christ*. In so doing, the church, the *body members*, will have a mutual love and concern for one another. "One is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren." (Matthew 23:8) No individual is to have greater prominence in the *body* that he might lord it over the flock. (1 Peter 5:3) There will be no class distinction in the one true church as between clergy and laity. There will be teachers and pastors, but these will be *servants* of the flock, not masters, for we have but one master and example—Christ. "Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you." (John



"I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears."

13:13-15) Christ's example was that of a lowly shepherd, and, although he had every right to do so, he did not demand high honors or to be robed in velvet and driven around in splendid carriages, or to live in a royal palace. No, his example was that of a servant, washing the feet of his disciples. Matthew 11:29

In another beautiful illustration, Christ is pictured as the bridegroom and the church as his beloved bride. "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing..."

(Ephesians 5:25, 26) This illustration declares the one true church espoused to one husband, which is Christ. (2 Corinthians 11:2) The church has vowed to her Lord that she will remain free from spiritual harlotry. She will not become joined to the world, worldly institutions or the governments of this world. Thus, Jesus was universally recognized as the *head* of the early church.

Following Jesus in honor were the twelve faithful Apostles who were given special authority to speak and write under inspiration of God's Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul confirmed that the Lord provided other servants in the church, as well, who would be given special guidance to assist their fellow body members. "And he gave some, Apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ..." (Ephesians 4:11-12) Liberty was granted to each group to determine for themselves the best arrangement regarding who would be their under-shepherds. All were to be governed by love and respect for each other, working as a family. Romans 12:10; Hebrews 10:23-25; Titus 1:5; 1 Timothy 3:1-7

### "Beware the Leaven of the Pharisees" Matthew 16:6-12

Our Lord warned of the prideful spirit (leaven) of the Pharisees. "They bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, and love... to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi. But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren. And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. Neither be ye called masters:

for one is your Master, even Christ. But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant.” (Matthew 23:4-11) The true church has joyfully obeyed this warning of Jesus.

Over the past nineteen centuries, the spirit of leaven has brought about high sectarian walls with brazen gates of worldliness. How must these proud systems with clashing creeds appear to the Almighty? Why did He permit the church to be ensnared by such unholy forms of religion?

The true church, though tested, remained faithful, even though for centuries she was held in bondage by the erroneous teachings of the great false system. The revelation given to the Apostle John called this system *Babylon the Great, the Mother of harlots*, while the true church was called a *chaste virgin espoused to her bridegroom*. (Revelation 17:5; 2 Corinthians 11:2) *Babylon* signifies confusion. The Church of Rome took away the words of Christ and the Apostles from the Lord’s people and replaced these with creeds, ceremonies and traditions. But in the midst of the confusion, the *little flock* of Christ remained faithful, and these were often persecuted as they demonstrated their loyalty to the bits of truth that they revered. These truths were to them the voice of their shepherd, assuring them that he would *never leave them nor forsake them*. “*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life...*” Hebrews 13:5; John 10:27, 28



### “Come Out from Among Them”

“*What agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you...*” 2 Corinthians 6:16, 17

The time has come that those who belong to this chaste virgin class should all be *one in true unity* — should no longer be separated into sects and parties by creedal fences. Revelation 18:23 states of the sectarian systems that “*the light of a candle shall shine no more at all in thee; and the voice of the bridegroom and of the bride shall be heard no more at all in thee...*” We are living in the *time of the end* when the false religious systems have been judged, and it is now time to “*Come out of her, My people, that ye be not partakers of her sins and that ye receive not of her plagues.*” (Revelation 18:4) These plagues are troubles upon the false church, and are intended to drive out any of those remaining who are sincere, but too afraid to leave. The saintly should unite in heart on the principles and doctrines of God’s Word alone, and should now enjoy the liberty wherewith Christ has made them free from all human bondage and sectarianism.

This will be a difficult test upon the Lord’s people as they try to break free from the bondage of error and denominationalism. But, this is the very test needed to prove themselves “*more than conquerors,*” for only such will constitute the members of the *bride of Christ*. In the past, this confession often required courage sufficient to endure cruel persecutions. Today, however, there is no fear of being thrown to the lions or burned at the stake for confession of one’s faith. Still, the Scriptures are clear, “*All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.*” (2 Timothy 3:12) Yes,

the perilous times for the Christian today take on a more subtle character. The faithful are marked as extremist if they insist on weeding out tradition, errors and human philosophies from their worship. They are told that these doctrines and practices have always been, and they are better off just accepting what the clergy presents. Most will succumb to this argument and conform to church creeds and society’s relative view of morality. But the true church will reexamine the doctrines and stand up for principle in the face of persecution no matter what form this may take. They will be committed to truth and righteousness, because Jesus, their *head, loved righteousness and hated iniquity*. Hebrews 1:9

The one true church of Christ, inspired by the true faith, the true doctrines of the Bible, will be bound together by the cords of love “*that they all may be one.*” (John 17:21) The true church will need

no binding rules to make them one in spirit and doctrine, for, as the Master said, “*Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.*” The secret of this true union is that each faithful member of the church is fully devoted (consecrated) to God and His service. These are begotten of the Holy Spirit and desire to develop an understanding of His righteous will and Word. But, those thus willing to come out of and separate themselves from the popular sects, the Master declares, will be just a *little flock* in comparison to the great majority who boast the large numbers of their sects. And, that *little flock* will be shining lights

in the world. There is but one *flock*, and it is scattered everywhere, yet, “*The Lord knoweth them that are His*” and will *gather them together to Himself*. Luke 12:32; 2 Timothy 2:19; Malachi 3:17

### Where Eagles are Gathered

If called to *come out* of sectarian bondage, where are we to go? The one true church has always been wherever *two or more are gathered together in Jesus’ name*. (Matthew 18:20) And, today, even where there is just one, there can be fellowship with others via mail, phone or Internet studies. As we draw closer to the Father, He will draw closer to us and lead us by His Holy Spirit to others of like and precious faith. “*For wheresoever the carcass is [the truth of Jesus’ precious sacrifice], there will the eagles be gathered together.*” (Matthew 24:28) We do not read, gather together unto Calvin, Luther, Wesley, Paul, Apollos or Peter, but rather, we remember the divine call, “*Gather my saints together unto me; those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice.*” (Psalm 50:5) These are not gathered for any other purpose than to share in their love of God, His Son, His truth and His Children. Stepping out on faith that “*God shall supply all your need, according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus,*” each one of God’s children is to take individual responsibility, praying for His guidance. “*Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.*” Philippians 2:12; 4:19

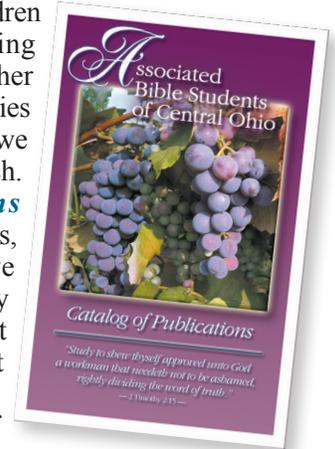
Trusting that God will guide us to others of like, precious faith, let us continue to study His Word, “*Till we all come in the unity of the faith... That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness... But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together... maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.*” Ephesians 4:13-16



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Congregations of Bible students throughout the world have been enjoying the *freedom that is in Christ* together since the 1870s. We have no organization beyond our small congregations, which are independently structured from one another, and yet cooperative in our search for and promotion of God's truth. Our meetings are patterned after the early church and consist of prayer, praise and diligent Bible study to learn through these the truth of God's Word. We preach not ourselves but Christ. We substantiate nothing except by God's Word. We make no laws, formulate no creed, deprive no sheep of his full liberty in Christ; but merely on every question quote the Word of the Lord, through the Apostles and prophets. We boast nothing, claim nothing of ourselves. We are content to voluntarily serve the Lord and His flock to the best of our ability — exacting no tithes, no "honor of men," no confession of authority, no compensation; hoping merely for the love of the Lord and of all those who are His children and have His Spirit. So far from forming or desiring to form a new sect, we ignore all sectarian systems and their claimed authority; we recognize only the "one Lord, one faith and one baptism" of the Scriptures, and we fellowship as *brethren* every person who confesses faith in the "redemption through the blood of Christ." We recognize as the *true church* all who profess a full consecration to the Lord, His will and His service — wherever they may be. Ephesians 4:3-6; 2 Timothy 2:15; Colossians 1:14; Hebrews 12:23

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