

Why Am I a Member of the Church of Christ?

Before I answer this question, I would like to study three other questions. What is the church? Why are there so many churches today? Are all churches right?

What is the church?

I know from God's Word that the church is not a man-made organization. It was established by Christ Himself (Matthew 16:18). According to Ephesians 1:22-23 and Colossians 1:18, the church is the body of Christ. Romans 12:4-5 and Ephesians 5:30 explain that individual members make up the body of Christ. Ephesians 5:23 states that Christ is the Savior of the body and Acts 2:47 explains that the Lord added to the church those that were being saved. From these Scriptures, I know that **the church is the body of Christ made up of those individuals who are being saved**. I also know from Acts 20:28 and Ephesians 5:25 that Christ died for the church so I know that the church is extremely important to God and Christ and should be to me also because **being a member of Christ's church is the only vehicle to Heaven**. I have talked to many people who believe that they can get to Heaven their own way all by themselves and "going to church" is optional if you feel you need to fellowship with others of the same faith or you need spiritual uplifting or need to cleanse your conscience, etc. The church is not an optional spiritual social club. I will only get to Heaven God's way and He teaches that the church, and only the church, is going to Heaven (I Corinthians 15:24). Christ is going to present the church to God on Judgment Day. I must make sure and be in it.

Why are there so many churches today?

When I study the New Testament, I see only one church—Christ's church. Ephesians 4:4 states, "There is one body [church], and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." Today there are hundreds of differently named churches such as the Catholic church, the Baptist church, the Methodist church, the Presbyterian church, the Lutheran church just to name a few. The most popular explanation I hear from others as to why there are so many churches is that we cannot all interpret the Bible the same so different churches were established based on individual personal interpretations and as long as you are sincere, it does not matter which church you are a member of. Is this true?

If it is impossible for man to interpret God's Word the same in matters that are crucial to eternal salvation, then (1) God is the author of confusion despite the fact that I Corinthians 14:33 states that God is NOT the author of confusion; (2) God has given man an impossible command because the apostle Paul commanded the church in Corinth in I Corinthians 1:10 that there should be no divisions among them but that they should speak the same thing and be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment; and (3) Jesus' prayer to God was in vain when He prayed in John 17:20ff that His believers would be one as He and God were one. All churches today are most certainly not one. If they were, there would not be the hundreds of differently named churches. There are divisions. That is why a Methodist is not a member of the Baptist church. A Baptist is not a member of the Catholic church. A Catholic is not a member of the Presbyterian church, etc. The reason there are so many churches today is because they teach, believe, and practice different things, yet there is only one truth, so how can all be right? One church teaches its member they must be baptized to be saved while another teaches its members they do not need to be baptized to be saved? How can both be right?

Are all churches right?

Many believe that one church is as good as another as long as it teaches the fundamental truth as shown in John 3:16 which states that God loved the world so much that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes on Him should not perish but have everlasting life. How and when a church worships God; what a church teaches its members they need to do to be saved; and what is right and wrong are all matters of opinion and we can all do it differently as long as we are sincere. If all worship is acceptable to God as long as it is sincere, then why did Jesus say in Matthew 7:21 that not everyone who called Him "Lord, Lord" would enter into Heaven but only those who obeyed Him? He went on further to say that these religious people might argue that they had done many religious things in Jesus' name but Jesus would still reject them. Why? They were religious. They believed in God. They believed in Jesus. Why would they be lost? Because they did not obey Him—they did things their own way. There is such a thing as vain (or useless) worship. Jesus talked about vain worship in Matthew 6:7; Matthew 15:9; and Mark 7:7. James also talked about vain religion in James 1:26.

Also, if it does not matter what a church teaches, believes, and practices, then why did God provide us with a pattern and instructions in the New Testament? Why not just provide us with the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John which tell us about Jesus and then leave it up to us how to worship God and how to get to Heaven? Why give us the writings of Romans, I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I and II Thessalonians, I and II Timothy, etc.? These are all letters to the church teaching them how to be saved; how to live the Christian life; what is right and wrong; how to worship God; roles of men and women in the church and in the family; how and when to discipline church members, etc.

There were many warnings in the New Testament that apostasy (or straying from the truth) was going to happen. One such passage is I Timothy 4:1ff where Paul wrote to a young preacher Timothy about the coming apostasy. He wrote that in the last days, some would depart from the system of faith and teach all kinds of false doctrines such as forbidding marriage to some and commanding others to abstain from meats which God has given us to freely eat. Paul also reproved the church in Galatia when he wrote in Galatians 1:6-9 that he was amazed at how quickly they were listening to those who were perverting (or changing) the Word of God. He warned them that there was no other gospel of Christ and if anyone taught them anything other than what they had already preached to them, that person would be cursed. Even if an angel came and told them something different than what the apostles had taught, the angel would be cursed. He also told Timothy in II Timothy 4:2ff to preach the Word of God because the time would come when people would turn from the truth and not endure sound doctrine but would listen to teachers who appealed to their own lusts. Are these verses talking about those who worship false gods? No, he is talking about Christians who stray from the truth.

The most major way we can stray from God's Word is to add to or take away from it. God told His people in Deuteronomy 4:2, "You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you." He also said in Deuteronomy 12:32, "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it." King Solomon wrote in Proverbs 30:5-6, "Every word of God is pure...Do not add to His words, lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar." God did not want the Israelites changing His Word and He does not want us to change His Word today. The apostle John also warned about adding to or taking away from God's Word in Revelation 22:18-19. So, according to these Scriptures, it is a direct violation of God's Law to add to or take away from God's Word but it was going to happen and many members of the church would be led astray from the truth.

I asked a friend of mine, who is a deacon in the Baptist church, why the Baptist church had deacons overseeing the church but had done away with the position of elders even though the New Testament pattern of the

church clearly shows that God wants elders and deacons in each congregation (I Timothy 3 and Titus 1). He told me that the Holy Spirit speaks to them today telling them they can change things in God's Word. In other words, the Holy Spirit allegedly speaking to people trumps the written Word of God we have today. The Catholic church believes this also. They believe the Pope can change God's Word. This is not what God's Word teaches. II Timothy 3:16-17 says that all Scripture is inspired of God and is to be used for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness so that the man of God can be complete and thoroughly equipped for every good work. If God's Word is not complete and not everything we need to know to be faithful Christians, how can this verse be true? In addition, Jude 3 says that the system of faith was delivered one time to Christians. Peter said in II Peter 1:3 that God had given them all things that pertain to life and godliness. So, how can we still be getting revelation from God? Even if the Holy Spirit was really speaking directly to us today what would He tell us that God had not already told us in His Word? And if the Holy Spirit told us something different than in God's Word, He would in direct violation of God's commands not to change His Word.

Does a claim to be the church that Christ established make it true? Jesus said in Matthew 7:21-23 that not everyone that claimed to be a follower of Christ and did things in His name (or authority) would be saved, but only those who obeyed God. Not all religious bodies that claim God and Jesus as His Son are pleasing to Him. All churches are not right with God. Revelation chapters 2-4 are letters to the seven churches in Asia. Regarding the church in Ephesus, Jesus warned them that He was going to come and remove His candlestick (or status as His church) if they did not repent of the fact that they had left their first love. Regarding the church in Laodicea, Jesus said that He knew that they were lukewarm for the truth and because of this lack of commitment to the truth; He was going to spew that church out of His mouth unless they repented. It certainly sounds like these two churches were in danger of losing their souls because they were not obeying the Word of God properly.

Why am I a member of the church of Christ?

I am a member of the church of Christ because it speaks where the Bible speaks and is silent where the Bible is silent. It does not add things to God's Word, nor does it take away from God's Word. It does not use man-made creeds or traditions as its doctrine. If creeds add to or take away from God's Word, they are wrong. If creeds do not add to or take away from God's Word, then they are not necessary because they are only repeating God's Word. Traditions can also be wrong if they are an addition to or a subtraction from God's Word. In Matthew 15:1ff, Jesus reproved some religious leaders for turning traditions into commandments of God. He said in verse 3, "Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?" In verse 6, He stated, "...you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition." Finally, in verse 9, Jesus said, "...in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."

The church of Christ has a Scriptural name (Romans 16:16). It shows ownership--that it is Christ's church. Some churches are named after men such as the Lutheran church named after Martin Luther. Martin Luther himself knew this was wrong and did not want a church named after him. The Episcopal church is named after an office of the church (elder/bishop). The church does not belong to the elders/bishops. The Presbyterian church is also named after the office of the elder/bishop. Whose church is it, Christ's or the elders? Sadly, just because a church building has the name "church of Christ" on it does not mean it is the church that Christ established. I have attended worship at several so-called "churches of Christ" where they do not teach, believe, and practice the truth, so the name alone does not make a church right.

The church of Christ recognizes Christ and ONLY Christ as being the head of the church as taught in Colossians 1:18, Ephesians 1:22-23; 5:23. It does not elevate any man to rule the church because God's Word does not

teach such. The only official “offices” of the church are elders and deacons as found in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Positions such as the pope, cardinals, archbishops, etc. as earthly leaders of the church simply are not found in God’s Word and are, therefore, a man-made tradition which is an addition to God’s Word. The New Testament church in the first century had elders in each congregation and each congregation was autonomous. There was no worldly headquarters. Eventually, man started appointing a head elder and, over time, these head elders were elevated to high positions such as archbishops and even a pope. This was not God’s plan for the organizational structure of the church at all and is a perfect example of how people would stray from the truth as Paul warned about. In addition, there is no such teaching in God’s Word of clergy and laity. Establishing priesthood in the church is in direct opposition to the New Testament. The purpose of having priesthood in the Old Testament was for men to act as mediators between God and man. The priests made animal sacrifices to God on behalf of themselves and the people to cover their sins every year. The entire book of Hebrews explains how when Christ died on the cross, He became our High Priest. I Peter 2:9 teaches that each and every Christian is a “priest” because we have direct access to God through Christ. We do not need an earthly mediator anymore. Priesthood is an attempt to hold to Old Testament Judaism. We are no longer under the Law of Moses. Remember traditions of men are wrong if they cannot be found in God’s Word or contradict God’s Word. So the church of Christ only has elders and deacons because those are the only offices God has authorized. As a side note, one of the qualifications to be an elder or a deacon is to be the husband of one wife (I Timothy 3 and Titus 1). A woman cannot meet this qualification. God has set forth certain roles for men and women in the church. So, a church that has female elders and/or deaconesses is ignoring the qualifications God has set forth in His Word. In addition, a church that has a female preacher is also ignoring God’s Word. Women are not to take leadership roles in worship (I Corinthians 14:34 and I Timothy 2:12). Women can run a company or a country, but they cannot run the church.

Members of the church of Christ become members by obeying the simple plan of salvation set forth in God’s Word:

1. Hear: Romans 10:17 teaches that faith comes by hearing the Word of God.
2. Believe: Mark 16:15-16 teaches that belief is necessary for salvation.
3. Repent of sins: Luke 13:3 teaches that one must repent of their sins (which means a change of mind which brings about a change in action).
4. Confess that Jesus is the Son of God: Romans 10:9-10 teaches that one must confess with the mouth that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.
5. Be baptized for the remission of sins: Acts 2:38 and 22:16 teaches that one must be baptized to wash away their sins. Sadly, many churches teach its members that one is saved before baptism and if they choose to be baptized, it is simply a show of faith—not to wash away their sins.
6. Live faithfully to God: Finally, Revelation 2:10 teaches that if one remains faithful even unto death, he will receive the crown of righteousness.

The gospel of Christ is simple and according to II Timothy 3:16-17 the Word of God is everything we need to be complete as Christians. The Bible is all I need. However, for example, as a non-Catholic, I would have to attend months of classes just to understand all the ceremonies and rites and sacraments and organizational structure and terminology. I do not know if an archbishop is above or below a cardinal and which one rules a diocese, etc. because **NONE** of this is in God’s Word. It is all man-made traditions from man-made creeds. In the New Testament, people were taught about Christ, believed, repented, confessed, were baptized, and as seen in Acts 2:47, the Lord (not the church) added them to the church as they were being saved. Some churches “vote” on potential members which they have no authority to do. As a matter of fact, in Acts 2, where the church was established in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost approximately 33 A.D., 3,000 people became Christians that very day they heard the gospel of Christ preached to them by the apostles. Christianity

is a simple religion and should not be complicated by rites and ceremonies and confirmations and sacraments that are not found in God's Word.

The church of Christ does not add to or take away from God's Word in its worship services to God. God is very specific in His Word how He wants to be worshiped by us. John 4:24 says that God is Spirit and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit (with the right attitude) and in truth (according to God's commandments John 17:17). Remember that if we add to or take away from God's Word in our worship we are disobeying God. The New Testament shows that the church met on the first day of the week (our Sunday) and did five things in worship to God: (1) prayed (Acts 2:42, I Thessalonians 5:17, 25), (2) sang (Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16), (3) partook the Lord's Supper (Acts 20:7), (4) gave (I Corinthians 16:1-2, II Corinthians 9:7) and (5) studied (Acts 2:42, Mark 16:15-16). Many churches do not partake of the Lord's Supper every first day of the week. Why not? The church in the New Testament did. Every week has a first day of the week. When the church meets on the first day of the week and does not partake of the Lord's Supper, are they obeying God in their worship? These churches probably expect their members to give money to the church every week but not remember that Christ died for all? The church of Christ is seen as very different because we do not use instrumental music in worship to God—as if we took it away. The fact is we did not take instruments out of our worship services. It was added by man about 400 years ago which means for the first 1600 years after the church was established; there was no instrumental music in worship to God. There is no command from God, no example of the New Testament church using them, and no inferences to make from the New Testament. Some will argue that instrumental music was used in the Old Testament. We do not live under the Old Testament. Why would a church add something to worship services because it was done in the Old Testament? It was not done in the New Testament. And we have to remember that if we add to God's Word, we are in direct violation of His command not to do so. God did not command or ask the church to play music to Him. He commanded us to sing with our hearts, therefore, the church of Christ sings—not sings and plays.

The church of Christ only speaks as the oracles of God. Its doctrines (teachings) are in accordance with God's Word. Not all churches can honestly make this claim. Not all churches teach the truth. For a specific example, the Catholic church teaches the very thing that Paul warned Timothy about in I Timothy 4:1ff. It forbids its priests from marrying and commands its members to abstain from certain meats which God has given no New Testament command about. There are churches that teach that baptism is NOT necessary to be saved despite the fact that Jesus said in Mark 16:15-16 that he that believes and is baptized shall be saved but he that does not believe shall be damned. My grandparents love to listen to Billy Graham. However, Mr. Graham teaches that although baptism is important, it is not necessary. I am unsure how something can be important but not necessary. His only support for his belief was stating that the thief on the cross was not baptized but Jesus saved him. What he fails to realize is that Jesus had not died yet. Therefore, the New Testament was not in effect yet. The thief, therefore, lived under the Law of Moses and baptism was not a part of the Law of Moses. He is misleading millions of people who believe that their sins have been forgiven simply by believing—completely in contradiction to what God teaches in His Word. In addition, according to Romans 6:3 and Galatians 3:27, baptism is the only way we can get into Christ. The Mormons do not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He is just another prophet. They teach, believe, and practice this despite the fact that in John 8:24 Jesus said, "...for if ye believe not that I am He [the Son of God], ye shall die in your sins." The Catholic church teaches that there is a purgatory which Webster's Dictionary defines as, "according to Roman Catholic doctrine the souls of those who die in God's grace may make satisfaction for past sins and so become fit for heaven." In other words, hell is only temporary—just go serve some time there and then go on to heaven. The New Testament in countless passages teaches about eternal punishment. One of the most fearful Scriptures in the New Testament is II Thessalonians 1:7-9 which says that Jesus will come again with His angels in flaming fire taking vengeance on those that (1) do not know God and (2) do not obey the gospel of Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory

of His power. Hebrews 9:27 says that it is appointed unto man once to die and after this judgment. We have one opportunity here on this earth to obey God. That's it. The Catholic church also teaches that there are different categories of sin--mortal and venial sins. A mortal sin is defined as a sin such as murder that is deliberately committed and is of such serious consequence that it deprives the soul of God's grace. A venial sin is defined as a sin that is relatively slight or committed without full reflection or consent and does not deprive the soul of God's grace. This teaching cannot be found in God's Word. What God's Word does teach is that sin is the transgression of God's Law (1 John 3:4); our sins separate us from God (Isaiah 59:1-2); and that we have all sinned (Romans 3:23). To illustrate that sin is sin to God, regardless of what it is, we can read in Galatians 5:19-21 a list of "works of the flesh" which includes such sins as adultery, fornication, hatred, anger, envy, murders, and drunkenness and these shall not inherit the kingdom of God. Drunkenness, sex outside of marriage, and murder are all lumped together but the Catholic church would teach that murder will send you to hell but not fornication or drinking alcohol? In Revelation 21:8, the apostle John wrote that the fearful, unbelieving, murderers, and liars will be lost eternally. Lying and murdering are in the same list of sins but the Catholic church would teach that murder will send you to hell but lying will not and lying for a good reason is even acceptable? It is SIN (breaking God's Law) that separates us from God, not the TYPE of sin it is. There are many other doctrines that different churches teach that are not found in God's Word such as holy water, hallowing of priestly garments, lighting of candles, nuns, appointing saints, mass, absolution, hail Mary, rosary beads, celibacy of the priesthood, original sin and other teachings of Calvinism, infant baptism, selling of indulgences, confession of sins to a priest, transubstantiation, sprinkling for baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, miracles today, physical indwelling of the Holy Spirit, pre-millennialism, the Rapture, etc.

When it comes to our souls, we must stop and ask ourselves some important questions. Is the church that I am a member of the one that Christ died for? Does the church I am a member of have the correct organizational structure of ONLY elders and deacons? Does the church I am a member of use the Bible and ONLY the Bible? Does the church I am a member of teach ONLY doctrines found in God's Word? If I cannot answer yes to these questions, then I should ask myself if I am sure I am headed to Heaven. The church is the ONLY way to Heaven. If I am in man-made religious organization rather than the church that belongs to Christ, I am not headed to Heaven.