

THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST

SPREADING THE SOUL-SAVING MESSAGE OF JESUS

SOUL-SAVING LESSONS

“What Are the Differences Between the Church of Christ and Other Religions?” [Part 1]

Introduction by narrator accompanied by a cappella singing:

THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST. Spreading the soul-saving message of Jesus. And now, Ben Bailey.

Jesus said, “I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Mt. 16:18). Welcome to our study, “What Are the Differences?” Maybe someone has asked you before, “What is the difference between the church of Christ and other religious groups? What makes the church of Christ unique? Why should I want to become a part of the church of Christ?” A person needs to understand that Jesus built only one church. Ephesians 4:4 tells us that there is but “one body.” Ephesians 1:22-23 tells us that “the body” is “the church.” Plus, Jesus said, “I will build My church,” not “churches.” Jesus never intended for the multitude of religious groups that exist today to be “His church.” His church is singular and unique. But someone might ask, “What is it that makes the church stand out from other religious groups.” There are four things that I will mention in this lesson today to help us understand why the church of Christ is different or unique.

First, the structure of authority is different. By this, I mean the way that authority flows down to people in the church today. For example, in some religious groups there is a hierarchy. In Catholicism there is a pope, archbishops, an area diocese, and a local diocese. In other words, there is authority that flows down through a chain of men. Is that God’s structure of authority for the church today? Absolutely not! The Scripture says, “Call no man ‘father’” (Mt. 23:9). So how is the New Testament structure of authority different from what we see in various religious groups? There is no earthly headquarters on Earth today (in the United States of anywhere else) for the Lord’s church. Some people say that Rome is the headquarters of the church. Others say that Salt Lake City or Jerusalem is the headquarters. But for the church of which we read in the New Testament, its headquarters is in Heaven. In Hebrews 1:4 we see that Jesus is reigning at the right hand of the throne of God. He is the Head of the church (Eph. 1:22-23). Jesus clearly said in Matthew 16:19, “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” We do not have an earthly headquarters where people can go to ask, “Is this the headquarters of this religious group?” Our headquarters is in Heaven, emanating from the throne of God where all decisions have already been made. Notice Psalm 119:89, which teaches us that we do not look to some earthly head or synod: “Forever, O Lord, Your word is settled in heaven.” On religious matters, Heaven has already decided. Heaven is the headquarters because that is where God Himself resides, and because He has already decided all religious matters. Things are already settled. We do not need to vote. We do not need to get a group of “clerics” together to ask, “What are we going to believe regarding this or that?” God has already told us what we are to believe in His Word. Thus, we can know what God wants us to know. Isn’t it wonderful to know that the Bible contains everything we need, and that we can get from it all the teaching of God that we need to get to Heaven? In 2 Peter 1:3 we are told that God has given us “all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue.” Heaven is the church’s headquarters. Matters have already been decided. Thus, there is no need for a

convention. There is no need to vote on beliefs or policies. In the Lord's church, we are not going to say, "Here is our convention, and it here where we will vote on homosexuality or whether or not women should preach." There is no need for that. God has already decided those matters in His Word. In 2 Timothy 3:16-17 we are told that "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." The church derives its doctrines and "instruction in righteousness" from Scripture. Thus, the church does not need to have a synod to vote on anything. Hebrews 6:18 tells us that it is impossible for God to lie. Hebrews 4:12 tells us that the Word of God is "living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword." If Heaven is our headquarters, and if it is there that religious matters have already been settled, then we need to go to the Bible as our sole source of authority so that God can decide what we need to do.

In the Lord's church, each congregation is autonomous and self governed. That is, each congregation has elders who are the spiritual leaders. Christ is the Head of the church. In matters of doctrine, He and God have already decided. But in regard to putting things into practice and making sure that people follow the Word and spread the Gospel, each congregation is autonomous. In Acts 14:23 we see that elders were appointed in every city. In Acts 20 we see that elders were appointed in every congregation. In Acts 20:28, Paul spoke to the elders of the congregation in Ephesus in order to tell them to take heed, teach, lead, and be shepherds of the flock of God, of which they had been made overseers. The responsibility of elders in each congregation was to be leaders and overseers so that they could watch for people's souls. There was not to be a pope or any other single man who was to lead a congregation. That happened once in the Bible. In 3 John 9 Diotrophes tried to be the pope. John said that he was trying to have the preeminence, which belongs to Christ alone. Elders in each congregation govern and help people put the principles of Christ to work in their lives. Jesus is still the Head of the church today. He said, "I will build My church." It belongs to Jesus. And He alone is the Builder. In 1 Corinthians 3:11 we read, "No other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ." Jesus is the Foundation. Ephesians 2:20 tells us that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, with Jesus being the chief cornerstone. The church belongs to Him. In Acts 20:28 we are taught that Jesus purchased the church with His own precious blood. He died for the church. He paid the ultimate price (Eph. 5:25). Colossians 1:18 tells us that Christ is "the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence." As Head of the church, Jesus tells us what to do—and we are to follow His lead. He has "all authority." In Matthew 28:18 Jesus said, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth." There are no men today who have the authority to establish doctrine, or who have the right to name a church after themselves. They did not die for the church. They are not the head of it. They are not the founder. Jesus Christ is. Thus, our structure of authority is different. We look to God (Who reigns from Heaven), and to His Word (which has already been settled in Heaven). We follow the principles of Jesus, Who is the Head of the church.

Second, not only is the structure of authority different. The source of authority in the Lord's church also is different. For example, in the church of Christ you will find no creed books or manuals about what the church believes or practices. There is no *Book of Discipline*, *Catechism*, or creed book that says, "If you are a member of the church of Christ, this is what you are supposed to believe." The Bible is what we follow. In 1 John 5:13-16 we are taught that to put the teachings of God into human books is not right. If we do such things, we transgress God's will. In 1 Peter 4:11 we are told to "speak as the oracles of God." What God has said in His Word is what we are supposed to say. In Psalm 119:160 the Scripture says that the entirety of God's Word is truth. We do not have a creed book to

which we can go and say, “For teaching on ‘faith,’ turn to page 323 to see what we are to believe.” Instead, we ask, “What do the Scriptures teach, and what does God tell us in His Word that He wants us to believe?” The church looks to the Bible (God’s Word) for all of its beliefs and practices. There are two important questions that I want you to remember. First, in Jeremiah 37:17 an evil king asked a wonderful question: “Is there any word from the Lord?” In the Lord’s church, that is what we ask today. We do not ask, “What did religious leaders 500 years ago teach?” We do not ask, “What did the ‘church fathers’ teach?” We do not ask, “What did Dr. So-and-So teach?” We ask, “Is there any word from the Lord?” Second, in Romans 4:3 we read, “What does the Scripture say?” We are not to ask what a creed book says. Nor are we to ask what the “pastor” (which is not a biblical term for a preacher to begin with) say?” We are to ask, “What does the Scripture say? In Matthew 7:21 Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.” A person cannot know and do the will of God without the Bible. We cannot know and do God’s will without following the teaching of the Bible. Psalm 119:9-11 tells us,

“How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word. With my whole heart I have sought You; Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments! Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You!”

God’s Word is to be hidden in our hearts so that we will not sin against Him. We can know that the Bible is our only source for religious information. In John 8:32 Jesus said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” In John 2:5, Mary (Jesus’ mother) gave some wonderful advice to some servants then, as well as to us today. Jesus was about to perform His very first miracle. The wedding feast had run out of grape juice. Mary asked Jesus to provide additional grape juice. At first He was hesitant, but He agreed to do it. Mary then turned to the servants and said, “What He tells you to do, do it.” Can you find any greater advice concerning the source of our authority than that? Whatever Jesus tells us to do, we are to do it. Christians should strive to do only those things that are authorized by God. What do we mean when we say that “the Bible is our only source of authority?” In Colossians 3:17 we read, “Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.” The sole source of authority for what we say and do must be the Word of God. It is that Word that will judge us on the last day. Jesus said in John 12:48, “He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day.” We must not go beyond that which is written (1 Cor. 4:6). The reason is because it is the Gospel that is God’s power unto salvation (Rom. 1:16). The Word of God is “able to make one wise unto salvation” (Jas. 1:21). We are told to study the Word, to preach the Word, and to live the Word in our lives. But we are never told to put man’s opinions and ideas above God’s Word. Thus, our source of authority in the church of Christ is different than it is for other religious groups. We believe that the Bible only makes Christians only, and the only Christians. A person cannot be a child of God if he does not take the Bible and do only what it says so that he is following God’s will. That is the only way a person can become a Christian—by following the New Testament.

Third, the name (or description) of the church is different. Here is what I mean by that. I am not talking about official titles. A name is simply a description of one’s character—of who a person is or to whom a person belongs. The terms “church of Christ” and “church of God” are not official titles. They are descriptions of ownership, and are biblical in nature. They teach us about to whom the church belongs, as well as to whom the church’s allegiance must belong. The name “church of Christ” is a biblical name. In Romans 16:16 Paul said, “Greet one another with a holy kiss. The churches of Christ greet you.” In 2 Corinthians 1:2 Paul wrote “to the church of God, which is at Corinth.” There are biblical names and

descriptions in the Scripture that always give honor and allegiance to Jesus and to God. It is the church itself that belongs to Jesus Christ. Notice again what Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, which makes the church unique. We want to honor God even in the way in which we describe ourselves. “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” Question: Whose church did Jesus say He would build? Did He say He would build John Wesley’s church or John Calvin’s church or John Knox’s church or anyone else’s church? He said, “I will build My church.” If Jesus built His church, then we need to describe ourselves the way the Bible does—as “the church of God,” “the church of Christ,” or “the church that the Lord purchased.” Acts 20:28 tells us that Jesus purchased the church with His own precious blood. Who paid the price? Did some man 1500 years ago pay the price for the church? No, when Jesus hung and died on the cross, it was His blood that purchased the church. He paid the price, and He is the one Who purchased the church. The church belongs to Jesus Christ. It cannot belong to any human name, human method, human government, or human organization. Did you know that denominationalism is against the will of God? In 1 Corinthians 1:11-13 Paul spoke about the problem of division (denominationalism) in the first century. He said,

“It has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe’s household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, ‘I am of Paul,’ or ‘I am of Apollos,’ or ‘I am of Cephas,’ or ‘I am of Christ.’ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?”

What is Paul’s point? His point was, “Let there be no divisions among you” (vs. 10). If it was not right for those Christians to say, “I am of Paul” or “I am of Cephas” or “I am of Apollos,” then how can it be right today for us to call ourselves by the names of men, or to name the church after other humans? The description we give must be a biblical description. The “church of God,” the “church of the Lord,” the “church of Christ,” the “temple of God” (1 Tim. 3:15), or the “church of the firstborn” (Heb. 12:28) are all biblical descriptions or names that show us to whom the church belongs. The church is to be different in its description or its name.

Finally, the church also is different in its plea for unity. So many people in our world today say, “Choose the church of your choice, and everything will be OK.” Some say, “There are many roads that lead to Heaven. This simply means that we are all on different paths going to the same place.” That is not God’s plea in the New Testament. And it definitely is not the plea of the New Testament church. The Bible clearly teaches that there is only one church. This is foreign to what a lot of people believe. But ask yourself (as we consider the following passages): “Does the Scripture teach that there is only one church?” Let’s begin with what Jesus said in Matthew 16:18—“Upon this rock I will build My church....” From that verse, how many churches did Jesus say that He would build? There is one rock—Jesus Christ, and there is one church. Is that the case throughout the New Testament? Yes, it is. In Ephesians 1:22-23 the Bible says, “Jesus is the head of the body, which is the church.” The body is the church. “Body” and “church” are synonyms. “Jesus is the head of the body, which is the church.” How many bodies are there? If you look at “the seven ones” found in Ephesians 4:4, you will see that there is “one body.” If “the body is the church,” and if there is “one body,” then how many churches are there? Just one! That is why Paul said, “Let there be no divisions among you.” This is something taught throughout the Scriptures. In 1 Corinthians 12:13 we are taught, “By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.” How many bodies? One body; one church. God always has wanted His people to be united. “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!” (Psa. 133:1). I want you to see the plea of Jesus in the New Testament concerning this. In John 17:20-21 Jesus said,

“I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.”

How many did Jesus say—3, 4, 5, 3,000? No, He prayed that they all “may be one.” Today, does it look like people who claim to be Christians are “all one”? Absolutely not! Jesus never intended it for be the way it is. The Bible teaches that the road to Heaven is exclusive. In John 14:6 Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” If we get to Heaven only through Christ, and if Jesus built only church, then there is only one road to Heaven. That is exactly what Jesus said in Matthew 7:13-14 as He talked about religious people.

“Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

Did Jesus say, “Everybody is going to Heaven”? No. He said that the way to Heaven is difficult, narrow, restrictive, and exclusive. Only those who get on that road are going to be right with God. How we today need to make sure that we do not listen to men, but that instead we come to the Bible as our only source for learning about the church of the New Testament. In Exodus 23:2 there is a grave warning: “Do not follow a multitude to do evil.” We must never do what we do because “the multitude” thinks it is right. In Ephesians 3:4 we learn that we must read and understand God’s will. Then we must endeavor to “keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace, the Gospel.” Men and women today are brought back together with God by being reconciled in one body and one church (Eph. 2:16).

I want to ask you today: Are you a part of the church of which you read in the New Testament? Are you a part of the church that has the right structure, whose headquarters is in Heaven, whose laws have already been decided by God, whose principles are found in the Bible, and of which Jesus is the only Head? Do you have the right source of authority? Do you place the Bible as the only source from God? Do you put it as the only guide regarding how to be saved, how to worship, and how to live the Christian life? Are you making sure that you wear the write name that contains the right description? If you are a part of a religious group whose name you cannot find in the Bible, how can you do that by God’s authority? If you cannot open your Bible and find the name of the religious group of which you are a part, then are you doing what you are doing by God’s authority? Absolutely not! If it is not in the Bible, you can be guaranteed that is not “of God” and is not according to His will. Does the church to which you belong have the right plea for unity? Do you strive to have the oneness for which Jesus prayed and died while He was on this Earth? Are you striving to be one, based upon the teaching of Jesus Christ?

If you are not a member of the New Testament church, you can become one today by obeying the Gospel of Jesus Christ and by doing what God wants you to do. Have you heard the Word of God? Romans 10:17 says, “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” Have you believed that Jesus is God’s Son? Jesus Himself said, “If you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins” (Jn. 8:24). Have you repented of past sin in your life and turned to God? The Scriptures teach that we must “repent and turn again, that our sins may be blotted out so that seasons of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19). Have you made the good confession, like the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 when he said, “I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God”? Romans 10:10 teaches that we must make the good confession with our mouths in order to be saved. Have you been baptized (immersed in water) for the forgiveness of your sins? We are baptized “into the one body” (1 Cor. 12:13). Jesus said, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mk. 16:16). The Scriptures

teach that baptism “does now also [not alone, but combined with hearing, believing, repenting, and confessing] save us” (1 Pet. 3:21). If the Bible says that baptism saves us, why would you want to be a part of any group which teaches that baptism is not essential? Jesus taught that it is essential when He said, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” Jesus taught that baptism is something that a person must do in order to be a part of His kingdom on Earth and to ultimately be a part of God’s kingdom in Heaven. In John 3:5 Jesus said, “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” So I want to ask you today if you are sure you are a part of the church of which you read in the Bible. Are you sure you are right with God? If not, I plead with you—in view of how wonderful Heaven will be, and how horrible Hell will be—to make sure today that you are right with God so that you can go to Heaven before it’s too late.

Narrator accompanied by a cappella singing:

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STUDY QUESTIONS FOR “WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE CHURCH OF CHRIST AND OTHER RELIGIONS?” [PART 1]

1. According to Jesus' statement in Matthew 16:18, how many churches did He say He would establish?
2. According to Ephesians 1:22-23, what is another term used for “church”?
3. According to Ephesians 4:4, how many “bodies” are there?
4. According to In Matthew 16:19, from where does this head govern His church?
5. What piece of information does Acts 20:28 contain that shows how important Christ is to the church?
6. Where, according to Psalm 119:89, has God's Word been “forever settled”?
7. What important information does 2 Timothy 3:16-17 contain which shows us that God's Word is adequate as our sole source of authority in religion?
8. What, according to Psalm 119:105, are we to use to “light our way” in religious matters?
9. In 1 Corinthians 4:6, what did Paul instruct Christians **not** to do?
10. What important point did Christ make in Matthew 7:21?
11. According to Matthew 28:18, where does “all authority” reside in religious matters?
12. What important question is asked in Jeremiah 37:17?
13. What important question is asked in Romans 4:3?
14. What important point is made in Colossians 3:17?
15. According to James 1:21, what does the Word of God do for us?
16. In 1 Corinthians 1:11-13, what problem was the apostle Paul addressing (in order to correct it)?
17. What did the psalmist say in Psalm 133:1?
18. For what did Jesus pray in John 17:20-21?
19. What did Paul say in 1 Corinthians 1:10 about religious division?
20. What did Jesus say in Matthew 7:13-14 about the road to Heaven?
21. In what four ways (discussed in this lesson) is the church of the New Testament different from religious groups today?