

THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST

SPREADING THE SOUL-SAVING MESSAGE OF JESUS

“THE DISTINCTIVE NATURE OF THE CHURCH” [PART II]

Introduction by narrator accompanied by a cappella singing:

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

“I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:6-9).

Welcome to the Gospel of Christ. We are so happy that you are joining us as we continue our study of the distinctive nature of the church. In the previous lesson, we examined five of the numerous characteristics that set the Lord's church apart from all other religious groups. These characteristics are the identifying marks that we can see in the church of the first century. To be that same church today, we, too, must have these same characteristics. Christians 2,000 years ago are seen within the pages of the Bible as being blessed by God because they made sure not to go beyond what God had commanded them, or to fall short of what He required of them.

Let us begin today by noting that the church has only the Bible as its creed. During the time of the apostles, and, in fact, for several centuries following them, the Bible was the only creed—the only basis for doctrine—used by the church. Why should we today not use that same creed? Did you know that the Bible furnishes us completely unto every good work? In 2 Peter 1:3 we read, “His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue.” Notice the phrase, “all things that pertain to life and godliness.” Our physical needs and our spiritual needs are both met by God. In 2 Timothy 3:16-17 Paul said to Timothy, “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 Holy Spirit says that the Scriptures have been given to furnish us with correct doctrine—to the end that “every good work” can be completed. Are human creeds written so as to furnish man with the same thing? Of course they are! Then why pledge allegiance to a human creed that has been given for the very same purpose that God gave the Bible? The Bible is safe; human creeds are not. Even their adherents admit that they are fallible. Why be a follower of something that is of human origin, and that therefore is fallible, when you can be a follower of that which is divine in origin and infallible in nature? The following can be said only of the Bible.

“This book contains the mind of God, the state of man, the way of salvation, the doom of sinners, and the happiness of believers. Its histories are true, its doctrines are holy, its precepts are binding, and its decisions are immutable. Read it to be wise, believe it to be saved, and practice it to be holy. It contains light to direct you, food to support you, and comfort to cheer you. It is the traveler's map, the pilgrim's staff, the sailor's compass, the soldier's sword, and the Christian's charter. Here, Paradise is restored, Heaven is opened, and the gates of Hell are disclosed. Christ is its subject, our good its design, and the glory of God its end. It should fill the memory, rule the heart, and guide the feet.

Read it slowly, frequently, and prayerfully. It is a mine of wealth, a paradise of glory, and a river of pleasure. It is given to you in life, will be opened at the Judgment, and will be remembered forever. It involves the highest responsibility, rewards the greatest labor, and condemns all who trifle with its holy contents.”

Yes, those are man’s words. They cannot save—but they do point us to the Bible, which **can** save. Human creeds are revised every few years because of their imperfections—which places upon them the stigmas of weakness and imperfection. While human creeds become obsolete, and often are discarded for new ones, the Bible continues to live and function. The Gospel of Christ is perfect. In James 1:25 we read, “But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.” Notice that James refers to the Bible as “the perfect law of liberty.” It is perfect. And a curse of eternal destruction rests upon any person or group of people who would pervert it by adding to it or taking away from it. In Revelation 22:18-19 John wrote,

“For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.”

God’s Word is perfect, which is why He has never permitted man to tamper with it. Even in the time of Moses the Lord said, “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” (Deut. 4:2). Human creeds cannot be defended. The following is a quotation from the writings of Benjamin Franklin. Notice his wisdom on this subject.

“First, any creed containing **more than the Bible** is objectionable because it does contain more than the Bible. Second, any creed containing **less than the Bible** is objectionable because it does contain less than the Bible. Third, any creed **differing from the Bible** is objectionable because it does differ from the Bible. Fourth, any creed **precisely like the Bible** is useless **because we have the Bible.**”

That covers the whole matter thoroughly and completely. A creed must contain more or less than the Bible, differ from the Bible, or be precisely like it. No man will defend his creed on the ground that it contains more than the Bible. Nor will anyone defend a creed because it contains less than the Bible. A person certainly will not defend a creed because it is different from the Bible. And he will not defend a creed because it is precisely like the Bible. Thus, if a creed cannot be defended on some of these grounds, on what grounds **can** it be defended? There are **no grounds** on which it **can** be defended! Human creeds are divisive because they keep religious people separated into parties and sects. Each creed serves as a wall to enclose its own adherents, and to exclude all others. Such walls must tumble and fall before unity can become a reality. **All** of them must go! One particular denomination cannot expect all other denominations to cast aside their human creeds and to pledge support to yet another human creed. If people are planning to follow a human creed, then they will simply keep the one they already possess. However, once human creeds are abolished, denominational barriers will begin to weaken, and divided people will then be on the road to unity. There is no doubt that division is sinful. In 1 Corinthians 1:10 Paul wrote, “I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” Human creeds contribute to the sinful state of division, and therefore are sinful in and of themselves. Plus, those who support them share in the guilt of that sin. One characteristic of the church of Christ is that it has **no creed but the Bible.**

Another mark of the church that Jesus built is that the Lord's church is undenominational. In Ephesians 4:4-6 Paul wrote, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were 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." In verse four Paul said, "There is one body." We must understand that the one body of which he spoke is the church. In Ephesians 1:22-23 Paul wrote, "And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body." God put all things under Christ's feet, and gave Him to be Head of the church, which is the body of Christ. Compare denominational and undenominational Christianity. Denominational Christianity demands many bodies. We have seen, however, that Christ's church is composed of only one body. Denominational groups are all different, yet they all claim Christ as their Head. In nature, we would see that as some type of deformed beast that had one head but many bodies. Such things simply do not exist in nature. At best, they would be freaks. Every denomination was founded by a man (or men) using doctrines of men. However, the church of Christ is that which Jesus promised in Matthew 16:18 to build, and is based upon nothing more than the Word of God. Denominations have human leaders. But Jesus is the Head of His church (Eph. 1:22-23). Denominations frequently wear men's names. But Christians compose the one true church, which gives God the glory. In 1 Peter 4:16 Peter said, "If anyone suffers **as a Christian**, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter." Every denomination—although claiming Jesus as its Leader—teaches something different. The church for which Jesus died, however, should have the same doctrine today that it had 2,000 years ago.

In 1 Corinthians 1:10 Paul wrote, "I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment." I am repeating this for emphasis. Paul said, "Speak the same things, that there be no divisions among you." Denominations speak different things, and are by their very nature divided. The church has but one Gospel, but each denomination must follow a different so-called Gospel. I began this lesson by quoting Galatians 1:6-9, in which Paul said, "I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel." Are there "many gospels"? Paul said that there were, **but** that there was **only one true Gospel**. What about the others? Paul said of those "other gospels" that they **"are not another**, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ." The "other gospels" are perversions because there is only one Gospel. Paul said, "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed." Every denomination must have its own faith. One baptizes for one reason, while another baptizes for another. And there are even some that teach that baptism is not essential for salvation. Yet Ephesians 4:4-6 teaches us that there is "one faith" (which Romans 10:17 teaches that we obtain by hearing the Word of God) and that there is one baptism, which is essential for salvation. We could say so much more here, but we must move on to our next point.

Another characteristic of the church is that it has scriptural admission requirements. The Lord's church follows the biblical answer to the question, "What must I do to be saved?" Since the church was built by Jesus, belongs to Jesus, and has Jesus as its Head, should we not listen to what Jesus says a person must do in order to gain admission to His church? In John 14:6 Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." A person cannot go to God through Mohammad, Buda, Matthew Henry, Joseph Smith, or any other human. None of those men died for you. But Jesus did. And it is through Him and Him alone that we may go to the Father. In Matthew 10:32-33 Jesus said, "Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny

before My Father who is in heaven.” We must always be willing to confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. In Luke 13:3,5 we see Jesus saying, “I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” Jesus was explaining that in the world around Him there were catastrophes that were happening to people. The disciples were wondering what great sin in the lives of those people had caused such catastrophes. Jesus pointed out that it was not sin that caused buildings to collapse, or other such things to happen. Instead, it would be sin that would cause people to perish because they refused to repent. Repentance, of course, is a change of mind that brings about a change of life-style. It causes a person to change his mind about his formerly sinful practices, and to vow to try never to do those things again. Repentance is a change of life that helps a person move on to glory. In Mark 16:16 Jesus said, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” Baptism for the remission of sins is thus commanded by the Lord. It is at baptism that we come into contact with Christ’s blood. In John 14:15 Jesus said, “If you love Me, keep My commandments.” The passages that I have just quoted came directly from the lips of the Son of God. If we love Him and want to keep His commandments, then we need to do these things.

We see examples throughout the Book of Acts of people who did exactly what Jesus said that a person must do in order to be saved. In Acts 8:26ff., we see Philip being guided by an angel of the Lord into the area around Gaza. There, he was led to an Ethiopian who was the queen’s treasurer. Philip was invited into this man’s chariot, where the Ethiopian was reading a scroll of the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Philip picked up at that point and preached unto him Jesus. As they traveled, the Ethiopian asked the question recorded in Acts 8:36, “See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?” In the next verse Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” The Ethiopian then said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” Then we read in verses 38 and 39, “So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing.” In Acts 2:36, we also see that the Jews who had heard Peter preach were told, “Let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” Verse 37 then records, “When they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’” There is that question again. In Acts 2:38 Peter gives them the answer: “Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’” In Acts 2:40 we then read, “And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, ‘Be saved from this perverse generation.’” Verse 41 continues, “Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.” You will notice that no one had to “vote” to allow these people to enter Christ’s church. Nor was there any special ceremony in which these people had to participate in order to enter the church. We do see, however, in Acts 2:47, that “the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” Those who followed the Lord’s commands were added by the Lord to His church. Can it be **that** simple? Of course it can! Those today who understand that they are lost in sin, are willing to confess that Jesus is the Son of God, are willing to repent so that they turn away from sin and try to sin no more, and who will submit to being immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins, will be added to the church by the Lord. That is God’s plan for man. It is not a manmade doctrine.

Another distinctive characteristic of the Lord’s church is that it is scriptural in its worship. God has knowledge of our worship, and is present with us as we worship Him. When we worship God, He takes notice of our actions. In Matthew 18:20 Jesus said, “Where two or

three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.” When we worship God, we come into His presence. Look at the reaction of God’s people as they enter into His presence. In Exodus 3 Moses viewed the burning bush, and decided to take a closer look. Verses 4-5 tells us that “when the Lord saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ Then He said, ‘Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.’” Moses was told to approach God in a reverent manner. The reaction of Joshua in the presence of the Lord can be seen in Joshua 5:14-15. Joshua had led the Israelites across the Jordan River, and as they were making preparations to conquer the land of Canaan, an angel appeared to Joshua and identified himself as “Commander of the army of the Lord.” We see Joshua falling on his face to the earth, and saying to the angel, “What does my Lord say to his servant?” We then read, “The Commander of the Lord’s army said to Joshua, ‘Take your sandal off your foot, for the place where you stand is holy.’ And Joshua did so.” Old Testament saints were to worship God in reverent fear. In Psalm 89:7 we read, “God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be held in reverence by all those around Him.” In Habakkuk 2:20 we read, “The Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him.”

We also learn a great deal from John when he was called into the presence of the Lord. We read in Revelation 1:17, “When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, ‘Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last.’” What does all of this teach us? It teaches us that when we come together to worship God, we are coming into the presence of God. And, being in God’s presence, we should have an attitude of reverence toward Him. How we act in the presence of God determines whether or not our worship is pleasing to Him. Also, when we are in worship we are to do only those things that God’s Word authorizes. We must not turn to man’s words or doctrines to determine what we are to do in worship. Instead, we are to turn to God’s Word. There are five distinct acts of worship that we can identify in the New Testament. Since we already have an extensive study on worship available, I will simply mention those five acts here briefly. If you would like additional information on worship, you can find it online at www.thegospelofchrist.com, or by contacting us by phone or e-mail to ask us for the CDs or DVDs of the worship series. Contact information will be provided at the close of this program. The acts of worship are prayer, singing, giving, partaking of the Lord’s Supper, and teaching. Two of these—the Lord’s Supper and giving—are to be given only on Sunday.

The final point in this two-part series (in which we are examining the distinctive nature of the church) is that the church is what will be delivered up to God on the Day of Judgment. When Jesus’ Second Coming occurs, it will bring to an end both this world and time itself. There was some confusion about this in the city of Thessalonica, which caused the apostle Paul to write to the Christians the following in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17.

“The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Thus we shall always be with the Lord.”

Notice that there is nothing in this verse which teaches that Jesus will ever set foot on Earth again. Rather, we will meet Him “in the air.” Peter taught, in fact, that the Earth will end at this time. In 2 Peter 3:10 he wrote, “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up.” At that time, we will stand in judgment, as Matthew 25:31-34 tells us.

“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’”

I don't know about you, but I certainly want to be included among that group of people who goes to Heaven. Join us next time as we continue to proclaim the Gospel of Christ.

Narrator accompanied by a cappella singing:

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STUDY QUESTIONS FOR “THE DISTINCTIVE NATURE OF THE CHURCH” [PART II]

1. According to Paul’s comments in Galatians 1:6, to what were some first-century Christians being drawn?
2. In Galatians 1:8, Paul said that if an apostle, or anyone else, offered up a “different gospel,” that person was accursed. Who was the “someone else” whom Paul mentioned?
3. According to 2 Peter 1:3, what does God’s Word provide for us?
4. According to 2 Timothy 3:16-17, for what three things is God’s Word useful?
5. James said (Jas. 1:25) that those who obey a certain law will be blessed. What is that law, and where is it found?
6. What acts do Deuteronomy 4:2 and Revelation 22:18-19 prohibit and condemn?
7. In 1 Corinthians 1:10 what did the apostle Paul encourage Christians to do?
8. In 1 Corinthians 1:10, what did the apostle Paul condemn?
9. Who, according to Matthew 16:18, built the church?
10. According to passages such as Acts 11:26 and 1 Peter 4:16, what name are Christ’s disciples supposed to wear?
11. According to Ephesians 4:4 there is one body. According to Ephesians 1:22-23, what is that one body?
12. According to Colossians 1:18, who is the head of the church?
13. According to Ephesians 1:22-23, how many heads does the church have?
14. According to John 14:6, what is the only way to approach God?
15. What do Exodus 3:4-5 and Joshua 5:14-15 teach us about how we are to worship God?
16. What does Psalm 89:7 tell us about how we are to worship God?
17. Of the five acts of worship authorized in the New Testament, which two may be carried out only on Sunday (the first day of the week)?
18. In Jesus’ comments in Matthew 25:31-34, who are the “goats”?
19. In Jesus’ comments in Matthew 25:31-34, who are the “sheep”?
20. From Paul’s comments in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, describe what will happen to members of Christ’s church (dead or alive) at Christ’s Second Coming.