

The Church

By Doug Hamilton

Defining the word: “church”

Definition of the word “Church” –*ekklesia*: ek –out / kaleo –called = the called out. It refers to the local assembly of believers as well as the redeemed of all the ages who follow Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord (Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary). It was used to describe the regular assembly of the whole body of free citizens of a community. This is how it is used in *Acts 19:39* “...it shall be settled in the lawful assembly.” When it was time for the free people of the city to meet, there would be a cry from the designated city herald, calling them out from their homes and businesses to the meeting.

The *church of Christ* are the called out people of Jesus. This is the thought communicated in *1 Peter 2:9*, “*But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God’s OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light...*”

Jesus was the first One to apply this name to His group of followers.

- Matthew 16:18, “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it.” Five facts were true concerning His church.
 1. Jesus said His “called out” ones would be established upon the basis that He is the Christ, the Son of the living God (John 2:19-22, Romans 1:4, Ephesians 2:19-20).
 2. At the time, Jesus said that His church “will” be built, meaning that it was not established at the time of His quotation. **It was set up on the Day of Pentecost** (Acts 1:4-8).
 3. Jesus said that it was “My church”, meaning that she is His possession (Rev 19:7, 21:9).
 4. Jesus said that not even Hades, the place of disembodied souls, would prevail against it, meaning that His death will not prevent the church from being brought forth (Acts 2:31; Revelation 1:17-18; Hebrews 2:14-15).
 5. It was not a man or a group of men that assigned this word “church” to describe the gathering of the people of God on this earth, but Jesus Himself (2Thessalonians 2:14; 1 Pet 2:9).

There is only one Church!

Do not be deceived by the many different signs in front of church buildings. There are not many churches in the eyes of Christ, but one universal church.

- Ephesians 4:4-6 {There is} one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. The church, the people of God, is the body of Christ. *Col 1:24* “...*His body, which is the church...*” (NKJ). Just as there is only one Jesus, there is only one church!
- She was “the church” that Paul admitted numerous times to have personally persecuted (Acts 8:1; 8:3; 1 Corinthians 15:9; Gal 1:13; Phil 3:6).
- She was “the church” that enjoyed peace from the persecutions in Acts 9:31.
- She was “the church” that Jesus gave Himself up for in Ephesians 5:25.

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- She was “the church” that Jesus shed His blood for in Acts 20:28.
- She is “the church” that Jesus is the head of in Colossians 1:18.
- She is “the church” that God’s manifold wisdom is known through in Ephesians 3:10.
- She is “the church” that is presented in all her glory to the Father by Jesus Christ Himself in Ephesians 5:27.

The church is not a building. It was a group of “called out people” established on the Day of Pentecost, based on the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus to bring glory to the Father. She was prophesied to be established way back in Jeremiah 31:31-34. “...for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.” The basis of the church would not be in ignorance, but in a doctrine defined by Jesus’ teachings. That is what prompted the Apostle Paul to teach the *same thing in every congregation* of the Lord’s church (1 Corinthians 4:17) and explicitly ban contrary teaching (1 Timothy 1:3).

Denominationalism

We often hear of Christian religious institutions self-identify as a Denomination. A denomination is defined as a group taking on a man-made identity in an attempt to identify from the teachings of another.

When accurately contemplating denominationalism, we are referring to that which is being sought to be set apart from the original pattern. The original can never be denominational because it is the pattern. To avoid denominationalism, we must simply follow the original pattern. A simple initial test of denominationalism would be in the name of the church.

What’s in a name?

There is something about the names applied to the first-century followers of Jesus. Their names were always descriptive to the people. For example, they were called...

- The Way in Acts 19:23 because they had found the “way” to God.
- The Disciples in Acts 6:1 because they followed Jesus’ teachings.
- The Brethren in Acts 15:36 because they were a family.
- The Saints in 2 Corinthians 13:13 because they were set-apart.
- The Royal Priesthood in 1 Peter 2:9 because they were in the King’s ministry.
- The Children of God in 1 John 3:1 because they had a Father in heaven.
- The Sons of God in Romans 8:14 because they took on the traits of God.

They were called many names in the first century according to the Bible, but it is in this last name for which I want to focus on, CHRISTIAN.

- Acts 11:26 “...and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.”
- Acts 26:28 And Agrippa {replied} to Paul, "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian."
- 1 Peter 4:16 “...but if anyone suffers as a Christian...”

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This was a prominent name used in the first-century by both the saved and the unsaved to describe the followers of Jesus. Tacitus, a first-century Roman historian, once wrote, “Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace.” Without Christ, there could not be Christians, for they bear His name in theirs.

- Acts 4:12, "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved."
- Phil 2:9, Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name..."

The same thing is important in the name of the group as a whole, for they should also try to bear the name of the founder. This is further proven in the scripture. Churches in the first-century did not bear the name of men or human institutions, but was Christo-centric in their terminology. She was called the *body of Christ* in Ephesians 4:12, the *bride of Christ* in Rev 21:9, the *church of God* in Acts 20:28, the *churches of God* in 1 Corinthians 11:16, the *church of the Living God* in 1 Timothy 3:15, the *church of the Firstborn* in Hebrews 12:23 and the *churches of Christ* in Romans 16:16.

She was not referred to as St. Matthew's, St Mark's, St. Peter's, St. Paul's, St. Mary's, St. Joseph's, St. Theresa or by any other human being. In the Bible there is no Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Baptist, Catholic or Evangelical, but only names centering on the Christ.

The First-century Congregations were Autonomous.

The basic dictionary definition of *autonomy* is a self-governing community. In the case of the church community, it refers to being self-governed from those among the local church family or immediate group. There is a definite pattern of autonomy in the first-century church.

There was autonomy in leadership.

- Acts 14:23, "...they had appointed elders for them in every church..."
- 1 Peter 5:1, "the elders among you..."
- Acts 20:28; "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock..."
- Philippians 1:1, "...to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons..."
- Acts 20:17, "...he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church."
- Titus 1:5, "For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you..."
- James 5:14, "...call for the elders of the church..."

There is not a precedent in the New Testament that assigns leadership of a congregation to one man nor a group of congregations by one group of men. There is not one example in the Bible of a pope, a prophet, a presbytery, a general assembly, a council or a board heading up a group of churches. The pattern of autonomy is confirmed in the NT. We are to "*hold the pattern of sound words which thou hast heard from...*" said Paul in 2 Timothy 1:13.

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- In autonomous congregations, the people choose their own leaders, their elders, their deacons, their evangelists, their teachers. They are not waiting for the main office at the centralized location to send someone down to tell them what they must do.
- In autonomous congregations, the people are responsible for generating the funds for their projects, rather than waiting for someone at the main office to make a decision as to whether or not it is right (Philippians 4:15-16; 2 Corinthians 8:1-5, 9:5; Romans 15:26; 1 Corinthians 16:3-4).
- In autonomous congregations, the people are responsible to the scriptures and making sure that they are being followed, rather than waiting for a politically-correct, worldly-desensitized oligarchy at the head office to render their final decision (1 Corinthians 5:1-2; Titus 3:10-11; James 5:19-20).
- In autonomous congregations, the people are left with Bible in hand to solve pressing matters of the souls, rather than waiting for an edict to be passed down from someone they have never met, telling them what to think contrary to the word of God (Matthew 18:15-19; Romans 16:7).
- In autonomous congregations, the consistency among the churches is higher because the Bible is the creed and not a series of man-made mottos orchestrated from closed meetings in distant cities (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Peter 5:2)

Closing Story:

Years ago, my oldest daughter and I made a trip to Alabama. We decided to take many of the backroads of the State, wanting to see some of the culture. We passed by many churches which had the names of the apostles in them, including Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Thomas, Peter and Paul. Religion is taken very seriously in the South.

In one of the small communities we passed through, we came to a church with the most descriptive sign I have ever encountered. It was actually a Bible verse, 1 Timothy 3:15, incorporated. The name of the church was "*The House of God Which is the Church of the*

Living God the Pillar and Ground of the Truth Without Controversy, Inc." Its founder was Mary L. Tate. They had a Chief Bishop, a State Bishop, a Presiding Elder and a Pastor.

What is wrong with this picture? 1) The name of the church is to be scriptural, not an actual scripture. 2) The founder of the church is Jesus, not a human being. 3) The bishop, elder and pastor are all referring to the same thing, not different roles. 4) There is not a "state bishop" overlooking the affairs of a region of churches, but each congregation should strive to have their own eldership.

Application:

We need to always keep in mind that the Christ's church is the unique organization of people. They are unique in their name, their autonomy, their doctrine and their purpose. When we deviate from that principle, then we ultimately pay a steep price of denominationalism.

