



**Front Cover**

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# **THE CHURCHES OF CHRIST ... WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?**

You've probably heard of churches of Christ. And, perhaps, you've asked, "Who are these people? What, if anything, distinguishes them from hundreds of other churches in the world?"

You may have wondered:

- "How many members do they have?"
- "What is their historical background?"
- "What is their message?"
- "What do they believe about the Bible?"
- "How are they governed?"
- "How do they worship?"
- "What is the basis of membership?"
- "Why do they emphasize baptism?"

Let us look at the answers to these questions.

## **How Many Members?**

Because of the structure of churches of Christ, membership statistics cannot be accurately assessed. The combined membership in the United States, Africa, and India is at least five million. Membership in the Caribbean Basin is around twenty thousand—Cuba has the most members; Jamaica is second.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, churches of Christ have grown rapidly in Eastern Europe. There has been an increase of mission activity in Western Europe as well.

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Missionaries are continuing to increase their activity in Central America, South America, and Asia. Works are ongoing in the Philippines, New Zealand, and Australia. Membership statistics for these areas are not available.

## **People of Restoration Spirit**

Members of churches of Christ are a people of restoration spirit—wanting to restore in our time the original New Testament church.

Dr. Hans Kung, a well-known European theologian, published a book a few years ago entitled *The Church*. Dr. Kung lamented the fact that the established church has lost its way, has become burdened with tradition, and has failed to be what Christ planned it should be.

The only answer, according to Dr. Kung, is to go back to the scriptures to see what the church was in its beginning, and then to recover the essence of the original church. This is what churches of Christ are asking you to consider.

In the latter part of the eighteenth century, men of different denominations studying independently of each other, in various parts of the world, began to ask:

Why not go back beyond denominationalism to the simplicity and purity of the first-century church?

Why not take the Bible alone and once again continue “steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine” (Acts 2:42)?

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Why not plant the same seed (the Word of God, Luke 8:11) that the first-century Christians planted, and be Christians only, as they were?

They were pleading with everyone to throw off denominationalism, to throw away human creeds, and to follow only the Bible

They taught that nothing should be required of people as acts of faith except that which is evident in the Scriptures.

They emphasized that going back to the Bible does not mean the establishment of another denomination, but rather a return to the original church.

Members of churches of Christ are enthusiastic about this approach. With the Bible as our only guide, we seek to find what the original church was like and restore it exactly.

We are saying that we do not have the right to ask for men's allegiance to a human organization, but only the right to call upon men to follow God's blueprint.

## **Not a Denomination**

For this reason, we are not interested in man-made creeds, but simply in the New Testament pattern. We do not conceive of ourselves as being a denomination—neither as Catholic, Protestant, nor Jewish—but simply as members of the church that Jesus established, the one for which he died. And that, incidentally, is why we wear his name.

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The term *church of Christ* is not used as a denominational designation, but rather as a descriptive term indicating that the church belongs to Christ.

We recognize our own personal shortcomings and weaknesses. That is all the more reason for wanting to follow carefully the all-sufficient and perfect plan God has for the church.

## Unity Based Upon the Bible

Since God has vested all authority in Christ (Matthew 28:18), and since Christ serves as God's spokesman today (Hebrews 1:1–2), it is only Christ who has the authority to say what the church is and what we should teach.

And, since only the New Testament sets forth Christ's instructions to His disciples, it alone must serve as the basis for all religious teaching and practice. This is fundamental with members of churches of Christ. We believe that teaching the New Testament without modification is the only way to lead men and women to become Christians.

Religious division is bad. Jesus prayed for unity (John 17:20–21). And, later, the apostle Paul begged those who were divided to unite in Christ (I Corinthians 1:10–13).

The only way to achieve unity is by a return to the Bible. Compromise cannot bring unity. Surely, no person or group of persons has the right to draw up a set of rules by which everyone must abide. But, it is altogether proper to say, "Let's unite by just following the Bible." This is fair. This is safe. This is right. This is pleasing to God.

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So, churches of Christ plead for religious unity based on the Bible. We believe that to subscribe to any creed other than the New Testament, to refuse to obey any New Testament command, or to follow any practice not sustained by the New

Testament is to add to or take from the teachings of God. Both additions and subtractions are condemned in the Bible (Galatians 1:6–9; Revelation 22:18–19).

This is the reason the New Testament is the only rule of faith and practice we have in churches of Christ.

## **Each Congregation Self–Governed**

Churches of Christ have no centralized, geographic headquarters. We have no earthly head or board that advises, rules, or in any way governs collective congregations. Each congregation is self–ruled and is independent of every other congregation. Thus, organized and governed according to the laws of the New Testament, the allegiance to Christ and His Word is the tie that binds the many congregations together.

There are no conventions, annual meetings, or official publications. Congregations often cooperate in supporting children's homes, homes for the elderly, mission work, and other ministries. However, participation is strictly voluntary on the part of each congregation. No person or group issues policies or makes decisions for other congregations.

When a congregation develops to the point that it has men who qualify as elders and deacons according to I Timothy 3 and Titus 1, then that congregation selects men to shepherd and serve it.

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## **Items of Worship**

Worship in churches of Christ centers in five items, the same as the first–century church. We believe the pattern is important. Jesus said, “God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). From this statement we learn three things:

1. Our worship must be directed to the right object: God.
2. Our worship must be prompted by the right spirit.
3. Our worship must be according to truth.

To worship God according to truth is to worship Him according to His Word, because His Word is truth (John 17:17). Therefore, we must not exclude any item found in His Word and we must not include any item not found in His Word. In

matters of religion, we are to walk by faith (II Corinthians 5:7). Since faith comes by hearing the Word of God (Romans 10:17), that which is not authorized by the Bible cannot be done by faith.

The five items of worship observed by the first-century church were singing, praying, preaching, giving, and eating the Lord's Supper.

If you are acquainted with churches of Christ, you are probably aware that in two of these items our practice is different from that of most religions groups. Permit me to focus on these two items and to state our reasons for what we do.

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### **A Cappella Singing**

One of the things people most frequently notice about churches of Christ is that we sing without the use of mechanical music—a cappella singing is the only music we use in our worship

Here is the reason: We are seeking to worship according to the instructions of the New Testament. The New Testament leaves instrumental music out; therefore, we believe it is right and safe to leave it out, too. If we used the mechanical instrument, we would have to do it without New Testament authority. There are only eight verses in the New Testament on the subject of music in worship. Here they are:

“And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives” (Matthew 26:30).

“But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God” (Acts 16:25).

“For this reason I will confess to You among the Gentiles, and sing to Your name” (Romans 15:9).

“I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding” (I Corinthians 14:15).

“Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord (Ephesians 5:19).

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Colossians 3:16).

“I will declare Your name to My brethren, in the midst of the assembly I will sing praise to You” (Hebrews 2:12)

“Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms” (James 5:13).

The mechanical instrument of music is conspicuously absent in these passages.

Historically, the first appearance of instrumental music in church worship was not until the sixth century of the Christian era, and there was no general practicing of it until after the eighth century. Instrumental music was strongly opposed by such religious leaders as John Calvin, John Wesley, and Charles Spurgeon because of its absence in the New Testament.

## **Weekly Observance of the Lord's Supper**

Another difference you may have noticed between churches of Christ and other religious groups is the Lord's Supper. Jesus inaugurated this memorial supper on the night of His betrayal (Matthew 26:16–28). It is observed by Christians in

memory of the Lord's death (I Corinthians 11:24–25). The emblems—unleavened bread and fruit of the vine— symbolize the body and blood of Jesus (I Corinthians 10:16).

Churches of Christ are different from many in that we observe the Lord's supper on the first day of the every week. Again, our reason centers in our determination to follow the teaching of the New Testament. It says, describing the practice of the first-century church: “Now on the first day of the week ... the disciples came together to break bread” (Acts 20:7).

Some have objected that the text does not specify the first day of every week. This is true, just as the command to observe the Sabbath did not specify every

Sabbath. The command was simply, "Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8). The Jews understood that to mean every Sabbath. It seems to us that by the same reasoning "the first day of the week" means the first day of every week. Again, we know from such respected historians as Neander and Eusebius that Christians in those early centuries took the Lord's Supper every Sunday.

## **Terms of Membership**

Perhaps you are wondering, "How does one become a member of the church of Christ? What are the terms of membership?"

Churches of Christ do not speak of membership in terms of some formula that must be followed for approved acceptance into the church. The New Testament gives certain steps that

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were taken by people in the first century to become Christians. When a person became a Christian, he automatically became a member of the church.

The same is true of churches of Christ today. There is no separate set of rules or ceremonies one must follow to be inducted into the church. When a person becomes a Christian he becomes a member of the church. No further steps are required to qualify for church membership. Each person is simply asked to consider what the Bible teaches and obediently submit to the commands of the Savior.

On the first day of the church's existence, those who repented and were baptized were saved (Acts 2:38). From that day forward all those who were saved were added to the church (Acts 2:47). According to this verse, it was God who did the adding. Therefore, in seeking to follow a pattern, we neither vote people into the church, nor force them through a required series of studies. We have no right to demand anything beyond their obedient submission to the Savior.

The conditions of pardon which are taught in the New Testament are:

1. One must hear the gospel, for "faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17).
2. One must believe, for "without faith it is impossible to please Him" (Hebrews 11:6).

3. One must turn from sin and turn to God, for God "commands all men everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30).

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4. One must confess Jesus as the Son of God, for He said, "Whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 10:32).
5. And one must be baptized for the remission of sins, for Peter said, "Repent and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38).

## Emphasis on Baptism

Churches of Christ have a reputation for placing much stress on the need for baptism. However, we do not emphasize baptism as a church ordinance, but as a command of Christ. The New Testament teaches baptism as an act that is essential to salvation (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16).

We do not practice infant baptism because New Testament baptism is for sinners who turn to the Lord in belief and penitence. An infant has no sin to repent of, and cannot qualify as a believer.

The only form of baptism we practice in churches of Christ is immersion. The Greek word, from which the word *baptize* comes, means "to dip, to immerse, to submerge, to plunge." The Scriptures always point to baptism as a burial (Acts 8:35-39; Romans 6:3-4; Colossians 2:12).

Baptism is extremely important because the New Testament sets forth the following purposes for it:

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1. It is to enter the kingdom (John 3:5).
2. It is to contact Christ' blood (Romans 6:3-4).
3. It is to get into Christ (Galatians 3:27).
4. It is for salvation (Mark 16:16; I Peter 3:21).
5. It is for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38).

6. It is to wash away sins (Acts 22:16).

7. It is to get into the church (I Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 1:23).

Since Christ died for the sins of the whole world and the invitation to share in His saving grace is open to everyone (Acts 10:34–35; Revelation 22:17), we do not believe that anyone is predestined for salvation or condemnation. Some will choose to come to Christ in faith and obedience and will be saved. Others will reject His plea and be condemned (Mark 16:16). These will not be lost because they were marked for condemnation, but because that's the path they chose.

Wherever you are at this moment, we hope you will decide to accept the salvation offered by Christ, that you will offer yourself in obedient faith, and become a member of His church.



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