

# THE “CHURCHES OF CHRIST”<sup>1</sup>

*Romans 16:16* “The churches of Christ greet you.”

For those unfamiliar with churches of Christ, this brief overview is presented to declare some fundamental convictions and their applications regarding the church’s original establishment, name, organization and government, membership requirements, worship practices, fellowship, and Christian living. Inasmuch as churches of Christ have no earthly headquarters, no one speaks officially for the churches. The thoughts presented here are those generally believed among brethren.

## BASIC CONCEPTS:

- I. ***The Bible is the inspired, inerrant word of God***, authored by God through his prophets and apostles (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21).
  - A. Therefore, all scripture is in harmony with all other scripture, for God is true. Since scripture cannot contradict itself, all passages that appear contradictory, such as Acts 9:7 and Acts 22:9, must be interpreted in such a way as to harmonize. Obscure passages must be interpreted in the light of passages whose meanings are clear, such as 1 John 3:9 and 1 John 1:8, 10.
  - B. Therefore, the general conclusions of modern classical liberalism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (which holds that the Bible is the product of man’s genius and work, and that the theologies of the New Testament writers are often opposed to one another) cannot be correct.
  
- II. ***The New Testament is our only religious authority today***.
  - A. The Old Covenant predicted a New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34). The Old Testament prepared man for the coming of Christ (Galatians 3:24). The Old Covenant was nailed to the cross with Christ’s death (Ephesians 2:14-15; Colossians 2:14), and the New Testament (or Covenant) replaced the Old (Hebrews 8:18).
  - B. The New Covenant must not be altered (Galatians 1:8-9; 2 John 9). The New Testament is final and complete (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:3; Jude 3). The New Testament declared that prophecy would cease (1 Corinthians 13:8-10). The New Testament can be understood without additional revelation (Ephesians 5:17; 1 Corinthians 1:10). Therefore, all so-called new or modern revelations must be rejected.
  
- III. ***The New Testament constitutes a pattern*** for the church and for all things pertaining to life and godliness.
  - A. All rational men are capable of understanding the scriptures (Ephesians 5:17), and agreeing upon the New Testament pattern (1 Corinthians 1:10) set forth by prophets and apostles (provided the scriptures are approached with the same convictions and the same methodologies). Practical observation demonstrates that men can recognize a pattern in various areas of life, and live by it. If so in other areas, then also in religion.

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- B. Neither additions to, nor subtractions from, the New Testament pattern is permissible for "whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Romans 14:23).

**IV. *Restoration of the New Testament order of things should be sought today.***

- A. The apostles taught that apostasy would come (2 Timothy 3:1-5; 4:3-4; 2 Thessalonians 2:3; 2 Peter 2:21, etc.)
- B. Apostasy would never be total nor universal, however. The church would always exist (Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 3:21; Daniel 2:44; Hebrews 12:28; 1 Peter 1:25).
- C. Restoration is achieved by finding the original pattern, then following it rather than by accepting so called additional revelations.

**V. *Unity of all believers in faith and practice will result*** whenever everyone follows the New Testament pattern.

- A. Therefore we make a distinctive plea for all to go back to the word of God to restore the pattern of New Testament Christianity.
- B. We seek restoration of the church of the New Testament times, not reformation of existing denominational churches.

**APPLICATION OF THESE CONCEPTS:**

**I. *Establishment of the church -***

- A. The church was established by Jesus Christ (Matthew 16:18). Any church that claims to have been established by any other person than Christ is not the church of the New Testament.
- B. The church was established in Jerusalem (Acts 2). Any church that claims to have been established in any other place than Jerusalem is not the church of the New Testament.
- C. The church was established on the first Pentecost following Christ's resurrection (Acts 2:1-4). Any church that claims to have been established at any other time is not the church of the New Testament.

**II. *Names of the church -***

- A. All terms referring to the church in the New Testament are descriptive and possessive in nature. There are no formal titles of the church, *per se*, in the New Testament.
- B. There are many terms or expressions designating the church in the New Testament. Some of these are "church of the Lord" (Acts 20:28), "churches of Christ" (Romans 16:16), "the body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:27), "the house of God" (1 Timothy 3:15), "the church of God" (Galatians 1:13), "the church of the firstborn" (Hebrews 12:23).
- C. Any designation given to the church today should give honor to Christ, as all we do should be done in his name (Colossians 3:16-17). Any church designated by any other term(s) than those found in the New Testament is not the church of the New Testament.

**III. *Organization and government of the church -***

- A. Jesus Christ is the head of the church (Colossians 1:18), and the New Testament constitutes our present source of reference authority in all matters pertaining to church life and government.
- B. There is no church hierarchy, no district bishops, no church headquarters, etc., inasmuch as there are no denominational organizational structures in New Testament churches.

- C. All congregations in the New Testament are self-governing, i.e., independent, self-ruling. They voluntarily cooperate and assist one another.
- D. Each congregation, when fully organized, is governed by elders (Acts 20:17; 1 Peter 5:1) who are also called "bishops" (1 Timothy 3:1-2), "overseers" (Acts 20:28), "pastors" or "shepherds" (Ephesians 4:11), and "rulers" (Hebrews 13:7, 17).
- E. Working under the guidance of elders, New Testament churches had special servants called "deacons" whose work was to attend to the needy (1 Timothy 3:8-13; Acts 6:1-6).
- F. Evangelists (or ministers) preach the word.
  - 1. Preachers are not called "pastors" since that term is applied to elders who are "shepherds" (Ephesians 4:11).
  - 2. Preachers are not titled "Reverend" since the New Testament does not authorize the use of titles by anyone.
  - 3. There is no special class of "clergy" distinct from "laity" in the New Testament. All believers and disciples are priests (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 1:6; 5:10).
- G. There are no living apostles or prophets in the church today since apostles were to have been eye witnesses of Jesus in the flesh (Acts 1:21-22) and prophecy was to cease (1 Corinthians 13:8-10).

#### IV. *Worship of the church* -

- A. Regarding the manner of worship, "God is a spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). To worship him in ways he has not authorized is vain worship (Matthew 15:9; Mark 7:7). We must worship with the spirit "and with the understanding also" (1 Corinthians 14:15). All things must be done decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40).
- B. Regarding the activities of worship, the church in New Testament times was taught to worship in five distinct ways:
  - 1. Teaching and preaching (Acts 2:42; 20:7).
  - 2. Praying (Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 14:15; 1 Thessalonians 5:17).
  - 3. Giving (1 Corinthians 16:1-2; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15).
    - a. We do not tithe, as tithing was a part of the Old Testament, which was cancelled, and the New Testament does not specify that we should tithe.
    - b. We do not charge dues of any amount to our members, as the New Testament does not require it. Rather, the New Testament teaches that we should give . . .
      - 1) "as we have prospered" (1 Corinthians 16:2).
      - 2) "as each has made up his mind" (2 Corinthians 9:6).
      - 3) "cheerfully, not reluctantly" (2 Corinthians 9:6-7).
      - 4) "liberally" (Romans 12:8; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15).
    - c. However, since we live under a perfect covenant, whereas an imperfect covenant required a tenth, should we not give more than they who lived under the imperfect covenant?
    - d. We take up collections only on the first day of each week, according to apostolic teaching (1 Corinthians 16:1-2).
  - 4. Singing
    - a. We practice congregational singing. The New Testament teaches that we should . . .
      - 1) "sing with the spirit" (1 Corinthians 14:15).
      - 2) "sing with the understanding" (1 Corinthians 14:15).

- 3) "teach and admonish one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).
- 4) "make melody in your heart to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:19).
- b. We do not use mechanical instruments of music inasmuch as all New Testament passages on music in the church speak only of singing.
5. Communion at the Lord's Supper
  - a. This is a memorial feast inaugurated by Jesus Christ (Matthew 26:26-28), observed in memory of Christ's death (1 Corinthians 11:24-25), and looking forward to Christ's return (1 Corinthians 11:26).
  - b. This memorial feast is observed on the first day of each week, for such was the practice of the church in the New Testament (Acts 20:7).
  - c. This feast consists of two parts, the eating of the bread, and the drinking of the fruit of the vine, each preceded by a prayer of thanksgiving, for in that fashion was it instituted.
  - d. Only members of the church should partake, for they who eat must do so in a worthy manner, discerning the Lord's body (1 Corinthians 11:27-29). No one will forbid another from partaking, however, for "each must examine himself" (1 Corinthians 11:28).
- C. All disciples of the Lord should assemble themselves together with brethren on the first day of the week (according to Hebrews 10:25; Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2). To intentionally absent oneself from worship, unless providentially hindered, may well be indicative of a spirit of rebellion against the Lord.
- D. Women do not lead the congregation in public worship because 1 Corinthians 14:33-36 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12 explicitly forbid it.
- E. Because we believe the New Testament does not furnish a pattern for certain practices currently existing among some religious groups, we abstain from such things as . . .
  1. Speaking in tongues –
    - Although this was practiced in the early church (1 Corinthians 14:6-19), it was misused, and Paul predicted its use would pass away (1 Corinthians 13:8).
  2. Washing of disciples' feet –
    - Although Jesus did wash his disciples feet to teach them humility, the New Testament gives no indication that he intended this practice to be a regular part of church worship. Moreover, there are in the New Testament no instances of such a practice in the churches.
  3. Recitation of the Lord's prayer –
    - At the disciples request, Jesus gave a model prayer to them for their instruction on how to pray (Luke 11:1-4). There is no indication in the New Testament, however, that Jesus intended them to recite the prayer together in worship, nor have we any record of the church in the New Testament doing so.
  4. Temple works –
    - a. God dwells not in temples made with men's hands (Acts 7:48-49; 17:24; Hebrews 9:24), but Christians are the temples within which he dwells (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:19-20; 2 Corinthians 6:16).
    - b. Since "in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven" (Matthew 22:30), then temple marriage sealings for eternity, either for self or by proxy for others, are invalid.

- c. Although 1 Corinthians 15:29 speaks about baptism for the dead, it does not indicate that the living may be baptized in behalf of those already dead. On the contrary, the New Testament teaches that after death comes judgment (Hebrews 9:27), and that there is no further opportunity for repentance (John 8:24; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Revelation 20:12-15; Luke 16:19-30).

**V. *Mission (or purpose) of the church* -**

- A. The church consists of those who have been saved (Acts 2:47). Salvation produces joy, thanksgiving and praise (Acts 2:46-47; 13:52; 1 Peter 1:8). These attitudes under gird all that Christians do in the church.
- B. The church meets together in fellowship for worship (Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17; Hebrews 10:25; Matthew 18:20).
- C. The church goes forth to preach and teach the gospel.
1. To share the good news with those who have never heard it (Acts 8:4).
  2. To edify its members (Matthew 28:20; Ephesians 4:12-13; 1 Corinthians 14:26).
- D. The church cares for the needy.
1. Because it has received God's care (1 John 4:11; 2 Corinthians 8:1-5).
  2. Because this is pure and undefiled religion (James 1:27).
- E. The business of the church is to change the lives of people (Romans 12:1-2; 1 John 2:15-17; Matthew 5:13-17). When sinners become saints, social justice, racial equality, and economic prosperity generally follow in a free society. Since the New Testament provides no pattern for cooperate church involvement in civil affairs, we have no political lobby to promote legislative action.

**VI. *Church membership* -**

- A. "Church membership" is not a New Testament expression, although the New Testament does speak about members of the body of Christ (Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31), which is the church (Colossians 1:18).
- B. The New Testament equates being saved and becoming a member of the church. Therefore a proper question is "What must I do to be saved?" There are four necessities:
1. Faith (Mark 16:16; Hebrews 11:6; Romans 10:10). Faith and belief are essentially the same, just different forms of expression for the same idea.
  2. Repentance (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 17:30). Repentance is a change of mind that produces a change of conduct.
  3. Confession (Acts 8:37; Romans 10:9-10; Matthew 12:32). This is an acknowledgment of belief that Jesus is the Christ.
  4. Baptism (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16)
    - a. Scriptural baptism is by immersion in water, like a burial (Acts 8:35-39; Romans 6:3-4; Colossians 2:12).
    - b. Infants are not to be baptized because . . .
      - 1) They do not qualify since they cannot believe, repent, or confess.
      - 2) They cannot benefit since they cannot become disciples, begin new lives, nor obtain a good conscience toward God (1 Peter 3:21).
      - 3) They have no need of salvation since they do not inherit sin and are innocent.

**VII. *Christian fellowship* -**

- A. Fellowship belongs to those who qualify, to those who . . .
  - 1. Agree together with God (1 John 1:6-7; 2 Corinthians 6:14, 17; Amos 3:3)
  - 2. Have been born into the kingdom of God (John 3:5; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 1:23)
  - 3. Obey God's commandments (James 1:22; Mark 7:7; Matthew 7:21).
  - 4. Have the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9)
  - 5. Teach the truth of God (Galatians 1:8-9; 1 Corinthians 16:22; Revelation 2:14-16; 18:4)
- B. Fellowship is exercised in . . .
  - 1. Worship (2 Corinthians 13:14; 1 Corinthians 10:16, 18)
  - 2. Evangelization (Galatians 2:9; Philemon 17)
  - 3. Edification (Acts 2:42)
  - 4. Benevolence (Romans 5:26; 2 Corinthians 9:18)
- C. Fellowship is a sharing together of believers in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:9; 1 John 1:3; 1:8, 10)
  - 1. In social exclusiveness from worldliness and immorality.
  - 2. In social inclusiveness in unity of mind and purpose of life.

**VIII. *Christian character, growth and faithfulness* -**

- A. Character produced by the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).
- B. Increasing virtues of the Christian life are faith, courage, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly kindness, love (2 Peter 1:5-8).
- C. Although Christians are saved from past sins, all must continue in faith or they will be lost eternally (1 Corinthians 9:27; Galatians 5:4; Hebrews 3:12; 6:1-4).

***Conclusion:***

- 1. Test your religious beliefs by these basic concepts and their applications.
  - a. The pattern of the church is given in the New Testament.
  - b. The New Testament is the only authoritative foundation that will stand the test of eternity.
- 2. Examine the scriptures to see if these things are so.
  - a. Be like the noble Bereans (Acts 17:11).
  - b. "Prove all things, hold fast to that which is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21).
- 3. "Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts; and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asks you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear" (1 Peter 3:15).