

# CHRIST'S GLORIOUS CHURCH



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# **SEARCH PROGRAMS**

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**Topics subject to change without notice**

## **OCTOBER 2 – THE CHURCH JESUS BUILT**

With so many churches in town, how do we know which one is what God wants? In this first lesson for this series, we're examining the church Jesus built as it is described in the Scriptures.

## **OCTOBER 9 – JUST A CHRISTIAN**

Did you know you can be a member of the church Jesus purchased with His own blood without belonging to any denomination? In this second lesson of this series we'll see how Christ prayed for all His people to be united.

## **OCTOBER 16 – THE CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Occasionally people ask me questions about the church of Christ. In this third lesson of this series, we going to explore the nature, the worship, and the organization of the church today as it fits the church described in the New Testament.

## **OCTOBER 23 – MEMBERSHIP IN THE CHURCH**

If you could be a child of God and a citizen in the kingdom of God, would you? In this fourth lesson of this series, we're exploring what it means to be a member of the church and how to become a member.

## **OCTOBER 30 – WHY I AM A MEMBER**

Becoming a member of the Lord's church requires commitment for a lifetime. In this last lesson of this series, we'll explore many reasons and values of living for the Lord and for being a member of His family, the church.

## The Church Jesus Built

With so many churches in town, how do we know which one is what God wants? Today we're examining the church Jesus built as it is described in the Scriptures. The Lord Jesus, in Matthew 23:34, promised to send forth prophets, wise men, and scribes, who would teach His will but suffer persecution. The Lord wasn't content for His Word merely to be spoken. He sent scribes to record His words for all time, and His teaching is found in the New Testament.

Occasionally someone asks me, "Well what does your church teach about...?," and he mentions a topic. They ask because they're curious and interested. I appreciate the question, but I must first explain. The church Jesus built doesn't have some board that directs official doctrine. It doesn't have a hierarchy of men with a humanly written church manual or creed. No, the Lord never instructed the church to make its own policy. Why? Because the only head of the church is Jesus Christ Himself. He said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). He instructed His apostles in verse 20 to make disciples and teach "them to observe all that I have commanded you." What He taught was for every age and the whole world.

The church Jesus built learns its doctrine from the Lord and the Scriptures. The church has no authority to develop doctrines. No human or group of humans can overrule, edit, or change what the Lord teaches. The church draws its beliefs and practices from the Lord and from the inspired teaching found in the Bible. So, when someone asks what the church teaches, I point them instead to what the Lord teaches in Scripture. The Lord Jesus said in John 12:48 that He will judge us by His words. If that's true—and it is, let's listen to Him.

Our reading today comes from gospel according to Matthew chapter 16:15-19 and Jesus is asking a question. "He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus said to him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven. I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.'"

If you open the yellow pages, there are numerous churches; and they have different names, beliefs, organizations, and practices. Since churches aren't all alike, it poses a problem to those who're searching for an authentic church that follows the Bible. Churches of today differ greatly from the church you read about in the New Testament. They differ in belief, practice, name, organization, worship, and even their source of authority.

The Lord Jesus never intended His church to be so divided or so mixed up with human ideas and ways. He wanted His people to be one and to follow Him. My heart longs to be a member of the church that Jesus built, the one He purchased with His own blood. That church belongs only to Jesus; the church is made up of people who belong to Him. Since we are His, we need to follow Him and Him alone. We must not be trapped by human beliefs or practices that ignore His teaching.

The word "church," (ekklesia) means "a called out assembly" (that is a group of people called together for a purpose). Christians have been called by the gospel to serve Jesus. When the New Testament uses the word church, it never refers to a building. There were no public church buildings for more than a hundred years after the church began. The word "church" refers to people. Acts 8:3 describes the church this way: "But Saul began ravaging the church,

entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.” The church in the first century was made up of men and women. The New Testament never speaks of little children as members of the church.

God calls people to be members of the church through preaching and teaching the gospel. Paul said to the church at Thessalonica, “But we should always give thanks to God for you, beloved brethren by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14). People enter the church when they hear the truth and put their faith in the Lord.

Sometimes the word “church” is used in a universal sense, speaking of every person who belongs to the Lord and has his name written in the Lamb’s book of life. For instance, Jesus said in Matthew 16:18 that He would build His church. In this sense, every person who is saved by the blood of Christ has been added to the church He built. The Bible says, “For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself *being* the Savior of the body” (Ephesians 5:23). The church is indeed made up of those whom Jesus has saved. The Lord has added every saved person to His church, that is His body.

Used in this universal sense, the word “church” never refers to some nebulous collection of denominations and sects. Rather it refers to those who have obeyed the Lord according to the teaching of Scripture. The church is not denominational or interdenominational; the church Jesus built is actually undenominational. The New Testament has no concept whatsoever of the denominationalism that’s prevalent in our world today. In the New Testament, the church was merely the church.

Sometimes the word “church” is used in reference to a local congregation as in 1 Corinthians 1:2, where Paul writes, “To the church of God that is in Corinth.” When Paul speaks of “churches,” that is in the plural, he’s not talking about different denominations with different doctrines and practices but rather different individual congregations in different locations. For instance, in Galatians 1:2 Paul wrote to the “churches of Galatia.” These were local congregations in the various cities of the province of Galatia. They believed the same gospel, they practiced the same things, and they fellowshiped each other as brethren in the universal church.

Sometimes the word “church” has reference to the assembly of a local congregation. That’s when they gather. Paul spoke of the Corinthians coming together as a church in 1 Corinthians 11:18. In 1 Corinthians 14:34 he said to the women that they are to “keep silent in the churches,” that is when the church is gathered, referring to the time when the church gathered as a congregation for worship. The very word “church” implies a calling together of people for a purpose. Being part of the church means one assembles together with other Christians and they do it for the purpose of worship.

The Lord Jesus is deeply tied to His church. Our relationship with Lord is always in the context of being part of His church. The Lord Jesus and His church are inseparable.

First, we must realize the Lord built His church. Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, “I will build my church.” The Lord’s church can never belong to men. People are not the builder of the church, they are what is built. They are the stones in the building. First Peter 2:4-5 says, “As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious,” He said, “you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Our task is to function as living stones in what the Lord has built.

Second, Jesus purchased the church. The apostle Paul told the elders of the church at Ephesus, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). Jesus didn’t purchase the church with gold or silver but with His own blood. Jesus must love and treasure the church beyond measure to sacrifice Himself for it. You may not think much of the church, but Jesus laid down His life so that He might purchase it.

Third, the Lord is the head of His church. Ephesians 1:22–23 says God “put all things in subjection under His [that is Jesus’] feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.” God likens the relationship of Jesus to the church like a head to the body. The two are inseparable. Jesus instructs and works through His body, the church, in this world today. All authority resides in Him, that is Jesus, as the head. If He’s to work in your life and mine, that means we must listen to Him and obey Him.

Fourth, the church is the bride of Christ. Ephesians 5:25–27 says, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.” The relationship of Christ to His church is like that of a husband to his wife. Notice Jesus has but one wife. He has only one church.

This passage teaches just how much Jesus cherishes the church and how He has made the church holy and blameless by the washing of water with the word, that’s baptism by the way. No husband would tolerate someone abusing or slandering his wife, and neither will the Lord Jesus tolerate someone slandering or abusing His church.

The Scriptures describe the church Jesus built as a family with God as our Father, and Jesus as our Lord and older brother, and us as brothers and sisters. Paul wrote to Timothy, “I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; but in case I am delayed,” I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household (or the family) of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:14–15). A household in Biblical times was a family living together, loving and supporting one another, the older taking care and training the younger in the ways of the Lord.

The Scriptures also describe the church as a kingdom. The Lord’s church is not a democracy; people can’t vote on Jesus or on His teaching. Jesus is already the only King and Lord of His church. Only He can make laws for the church.

In Acts 20:28 the Bible says Jesus purchased the church with His blood, but in Revelation 5:9-10 the Lord purchased people to be a kingdom. According to the New American Standard and other versions. Paul said in Colossians 1:13-14 that God “rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” The church is the kingdom of God on earth today. If you wish to go to God’s heavenly kingdom, you must enter God’s earthly kingdom, the church. We enter that kingdom by being born of water and the Spirit according John 3:5. That new birth takes place when people who believe and love the Lord repent of their sins and are baptized into Christ Jesus.

The Scriptures also describe the church as God’s dwelling place, the temple of God. The apostle Paul told the church at Ephesus, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom

the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:19–22). God dwells in His people, and He expects them to be holy servants.

In the New Testament Christians were merely “Christians.” God didn’t approve of divisions among them. He never suggested or permitted man-made names, creeds, practices, or even a hierarchy. They simply followed the Lord and held fast to the teaching. Christians simply lived holy lives; they worshiped according to the teaching of Christ, and served the Lord by preaching the truth and being zealous for good deeds. God’s people love the Lord and love each other. They share the gospel, help the needy, and follow Jesus Christ. They have strong faith and will not give in to the devil or to the world.

What was true in the first century is also true today. You can be a member of the church Jesus built by reading and following the Lord's instructions in the New Testament. If you follow Christ, you’ll reject every man-made belief and practice. Jesus said His true disciples would stay in His teaching. This is how He distinguishes the true disciples from other people. He said, “If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:31–32). Truth and freedom aren’t found in the traditions or commandments of men. They aren’t found in religious groups established by men. If you want the blessing of the Lord, come to the Lord. Follow the Lord’s way found in Scripture.

The Lord Jesus said, “He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day” (John 12:48). It just makes sense to do God's will and follow the Bible in everything we teach or do. Being in the church Jesus built means giving up every man-made doctrine, idea, practice, name, or organization. It means carefully obeying what Jesus commands. The church of Christ, the church Jesus purchased with His own blood, is God’s idea; and God invites you to be a member of it. The church always has an open door—there’s room for you in God’s family. Why not come to the Lord? Do it today.

To be in the church Jesus built is a great privilege! It means His blood purchased you, and you belong to Him. It means that He has saved you and made you one of His family. It means every promise and blessing given in Scripture is a promise you can claim! We can be true and authentic Christians only by returning to the Lord and His teaching. First John 2:5–6 says, “whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.” If you love the Lord, walk in His commandments.

I hope your heart longs to hear His voice and serve the Lord. Put the Lord and His ways first in your heart and life. I hope your heart aches to be right with the Lord. First Thessalonians 5:21–22 says, “But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil.” Turn away from man-made religion, which has empty promises, and come back to God. God’s ways are always right.

You can’t join the church Jesus built; the Lord must add you to it. If you’ll hear the gospel, believe with all your heart, turn away from sin, and out of love confess Jesus as the Christ, then you’re ready to take the step where the Lord adds you to His church. That step is baptism, an immersion in water in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. It’s simple! So do what Peter told the people to do at the beginning, “repent, and be baptized” (Acts 2:38). Just as the Lord added the people in those days according to Acts 2:41 and 47, He will add you to His church.

## Just a Christian

Did you know you that you can be a member of the church that Jesus purchased with His own blood without belonging to any denomination? Today we're going to explore how you can be just a Christian, just a member of the Lord's church. The Bible is God's wonderful message of faith, truth, hope, and love. God gave us His Word to teach us, to encourage us, to comfort us, to reprove us, and to give us eternal life. John 20:30-31 says, "Now Jesus did many other signs (miracles) in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." The more we study the Bible, the stronger our faith becomes; and that faith leads to life in his name.

If I told you that I just bought a car, you'd ask, "What kind of car did you get?" It's pretty difficult to talk about cars these days without talking about some kind of car. We want to know the make and the model. Is it a hybrid or an SUV? What color is it? If I said, "It's just a car!" we'd have no concept of that; but you know the very first car was simply a car, an automobile. It was the one and only automobile.

When you speak of being a member of a church, the first thing people ask is, "What kind of church is it?" They want to know if we go to a community church or a denomination. The idea of being just a Christian and simply being a member of the Lord's church, the church Jesus built, is foreign to the thinking of most people. But as you read the New Testament, the church is simply "the church." There was no kind of church.... Did you know you could be a member of that original church? That you can be a Christian, just a Christian!

Our reading today comes from Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians, chapter 1 verses 10 to 13. "Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, 'I am of Paul,' and 'I of Apollos,' and 'I of Cephas,' and 'I of Christ.' Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" Here is a serious problem in this church and Paul is trying to deal with it. When people speak of the church they attend, they usually classify themselves as denominational or nondenominational. There are many kinds of community churches and denominations. Various denominations developed when religious people began holding to their own opinions about God's teaching to the point they refused to work with others. They began spreading their peculiar doctrines or practices. In time they needed a name to represent them. This name became a sort of brand or trademark for that particular kind of church. It became a denomination.

Taking up a brand name implies a division. A denomination is actually a "named division." The divided church at Corinth had members lining up behind individuals and separating themselves by following this name or that. Some followed Paul and said "I am of Paul," some Apollos, and some Peter. Paul was horrified! He said in 1 Corinthians 1:13, "Is Christ divided? Of course the answer is no! "Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" The answer to these questions is no. No, Christ isn't divided! No, Paul wasn't crucified for you! No, you weren't baptized in the name of Paul!

Many denominations ask their members to go beyond faith in Christ and vow to follow the denominational bylaws or official statements. They follow their brand of Christianity; this commitment to their doctrines and practices define them as a certain kind of Christian. Isn't this exactly the kind of division Paul was speaking against? After many generations have passed with

a certain “brand name” Christianity, people have become so satisfied and settled in their ways, that they never dreamed the Lord disapproves of such divisions.

Have you ever broken a favorite dish? When it happened, you probably groaned and wished you could put it back together in its pure and original state. Our religious world is spiritually broken. We need to leave this broken condition and go back to the original church, the one that’s found in the New Testament. We seek to bring back the pure and unbroken church, as God intended, by returning to the truth and the ideals that are found in the New Testament.

In the early 1800s, people who loved God grew weary of the fighting and division among Christian denominations. They believed the Lord wanted His people to be united. They realized all of the bad-mouthing and exclusiveness of the denominations actually shamed the name of the Lord. Their constant conflicts and divisive ways caused people to fall away from Christ in disbelief.

The Lord Jesus prayed, “I do not ask for these only,” speaking of the Apostles “but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me” (John 17:20-23).

The early church believed the division and animosity came from people holding to human opinions, creeds, councils, human practices, and names. They believed the only way they could have togetherness and unity was to unite on what the Lord taught.

Many Christians left Europe to find religious peace in America but they found the same conflicts here. They wanted something better—they wanted a pure and true Christianity free from the stains of human opinions. They believed, “If we abandon the human and we concentrate on what is truly divine, we can unite.” This unity could only come from following the truth in God’s Word. This meant they had to cast off everything human and denominational and return to the Christianity found in the New Testament, a Christianity that knew nothing of denominationalism.

They rejected human opinions and human innovations, since these things do not find their authority in God’s word but in men. They believed that “nothing ought to be forced upon Christians as articles of faith; nor required of them as terms of communion; but what is expressly taught, and enjoined upon them, in the word of God.” They said, “We speak where the Bible speaks, and we are silent where the Bible is silent.” They wanted unity in essentials, freedom in matters of opinion, and love in all things. They wanted a pure and true faith in Christ alone found in New Testament as their only source of their faith and practice.

Sadly sometimes people leave the pure, inspired teaching of God and pursue what they want. The New Testament predicted that Christians would fall away from the truth of the gospel into error and false religion. God knew the hearts of men would often follow their own paths.

Paul told the elders of the church at Ephesus, “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:29-30). Paul, by inspiration, realized that when you twist the teaching, you cause people to fall away from the truth and from God.

Paul warned Timothy, “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence

from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth” (1 Timothy 4:1-3). The devil is a deceiver; he intends to lead people to believe false teachings and lies about certain practices being God’s will. He doesn’t care who he hurts by deceiving people.

Paul knew Christians would be weak like ancient Israel and would wander away from God’s teaching. He knew they would rather believe a comforting lie than to hold to the gospel truth. Inspired of God, he predicted, “the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths” (2 Timothy 4:3-4). Once a lie gets perpetuated, later generations become convinced that this falsehood is true; they don’t know they’ve been deceived. Many people are that way today.

Many today want salvation, but they don’t want to take up a cross to follow Jesus. They want a Savior, but not a Lord. They’re comfortable believing a lie and will actually oppose the truth at times. They’re so settled in what they believe that they don’t want to hear it could actually be wrong. For instance, early church history confirms that Christians wandered away from the teaching and practices found in the New Testament. The New Testament, for instance, says nothing about holy water, nothing about lent, penance, infant baptism, intercession of the saints, sprinkling for baptism, sacrifice of the mass, celibacy of priests, purgatory, priestly absolution, a pope, instrumental music in Christian worship, salvation by faith only, or the doctrine of “once saved, always saved.”

Century by century believers moved farther away from the simplicity of New Testament Christianity. They no longer followed God’s pattern for the church in the New Testament but became something different. If we’re to please God, we must return to what God willed in the New Testament. Returning is necessary because repentance is necessary. One cannot remain in error and still please God.

James 5:19-20 says, “My brothers, even if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.” By ceasing to follow manmade doctrines and practices, the church could restore the doctrine, worship and organization of the New Testament church.

Our intent is to follow the teaching and the ideals of the New Testament. The Lord Jesus built His church before any denomination existed. We want to be in His church, the church that was purchased with His blood. His church is not denominational, inter-denominational, or even non-denominational. The church Jesus built was undenominational. It was pre, that is, before there were any denominations. Jesus would never approve of unifying the truth with error, because Jesus wants the church to remain holy and pure.

Churches of Christ strive to “do Bible things in Bible ways and call Bible things by Bible names.” They believe they must “discard from their faith and their practice everything that isn’t authorized by the New Testament of the Lord and Savior, and to believe and practice whatever is there enjoined, or instructed.”

This desire to restore New Testament Christianity grew out of a conviction that the Bible is the complete and final authority. The scripture is sufficient to teach us all we need to know for eternal life and godliness. Just as a seed will produce only after its own kind, so the seed of God’s word will produce the same Christianity today it did in the first century. The Lord Jesus said in Luke 8:11 that the seed of the kingdom is the word. The Bible gives us all of God’s revealed, his whole revealed will, for life and godliness. Jesus promised His apostles that they

would be guided into all the truth (John 16:12-13). If men go beyond this Word and preach other things they will not only lose their relationship with God (2 John 9), they will also produce a different product than the church Jesus built. Who would want that?

Some believe the primary goal of restoration is to unite all churches. They believe Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17 means that all churches should embrace one another on the basis of the most fundamental things. In their minds there are very few essentials. Some feel as long as a person believes in and loves Jesus that he's right with God. They seem to ignore everything else that Jesus said and embrace only what He said about unity.

Before Jesus prayed for unity in John 17:20-23, He first prayed for His followers to be sanctified or "set apart" in the truth (John 17:17). We can't have unity without the truth. We can't blend truth with all kinds of error and still have unity. Christians are to buy the truth and not sell it (Proverbs 23:23). Jesus said, "If you continue in My word, *then* you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32).

Christ didn't pray for a unity that sacrifices or compromises the truth. Actually, it's our faith in the revealed truth that unites us. Christian unity is not ecumenism, where groups unite but maintain conflicting and contradictory beliefs and practices. Uniting with those who teach or worship in error sells out the truth for compromise. To be faithful and true to the Lord, Christians cannot ignore or tolerate error like the ancient churches at Pergamum or Thyatira did. Jesus called them to repentance, and He calls us to repentance as well.

Why are we talking about this? Because our love for God and the souls of men means speaking out against error and speaking for the truth. Loving the Lord means loving the truth that He taught and loving what is written in the New Testament. Let me ask you, "Isn't the church of our Lord, purchased by the blood of Jesus, given to the world through His inspired apostles and prophets, isn't it good enough? How could we dare to change it or think we could improve on it? We can't! That's why we must leave everything that violates the will of God and return to the pure teaching. We must remain in God's Word.

God expects His people to leave sin when they learn the truth. Repentance leaves what is wrong and does what is right. When the church at Pergamum in Revelation 2 strayed by holding to the false teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans, Jesus sternly warned them to "repent therefore or else I am coming to you quickly." In the same chapter, Jesus also warned the church at Thyatira not to "tolerate" the false prophetess Jezebel or her teachings but to repent. When people believe or practice something false, God expects them to repent.

Calling people back to the truth is to save their souls. We must get right with God. This is true, whether we make our plea to an individual, to a group of individuals, or to a church. To follow Christ, we need to put away what comes from man and follow what comes from God.

Love the Lord, get right with God, and get involved in the Lord's church. Place your faith in Jesus as the Christ; repent of every sin; confess Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God; and out of love be baptized into Christ. Peter told the people at Pentecost in Acts 2:38, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Both repentance and baptism are necessary. The New Revised Standard Version says of Acts 2:38, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Many have come to believe falsely that baptism is unnecessary, but more than a dozen recent translations show one must be baptized to receive forgiveness. Won't you be baptized today?

## The church of Christ

Occasionally people ask me questions about the church. Many years ago, I actually became a member of the church that Jesus built, the one you can read about in the New Testament. We search the Scriptures, because we know God has revealed the truth in them. God's Word is pure and holy; it never teaches anything but what is good and acceptable and perfect. When we follow God's Word, we show Him our love and our loyalty. The more we study His Word, the more we love Him. The more we love Him, the more we want to give our hearts to Him. When we obey Him from the heart, the Lord is pleased.

The church Jesus built, the one you read about in the New Testament, came to earth in identifiable, local congregations. They were like families in various locations, meeting each first day of the week to worship. They ate their meals together, they took care of their needy, and they served the Lord. Acts 2:42 says, "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." To be the church Jesus built today, congregations must seek to follow the examples of what God desires. We can know what God instructs by examining the New Testament.

The Lord's teaching was not merely for the first century; He gave it for all time. That teaching is preserved for us in written form in the New Testament, so that people in every age might know God's will. What God desired in the first century, He desires today. If the Lord gave us this model in the Word, shouldn't we follow it? Jesus said, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?" (Luke 6:46). Because we call Jesus our Lord, we follow Him and we obey His words.

Our scripture reading today comes from Paul's epistle to the Ephesians 4:1-6. "Therefore, I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all."

As members of the Lord's church, our heart's desire is to believe in and to obey the Lord Jesus. We don't want to add to His words or take away from them. We want to believe and practice everything He taught and nothing else. When we became Christians, we recognized Jesus Christ as our only Lord. Colossians 3:17 says, "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." We must act in His name and by His authority, because we belong to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Some encyclopedias say the church of Christ began in America in the early 1800s with men such as Thomas and Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone; but Campbell and Stone cannot establish something that's already been established. I've never claimed membership in any church but the church that Jesus established at Pentecost in 30 A.D. I wasn't baptized in the name of Campbell or Stone. Neither of them was crucified for me. In fact, I didn't even know about them until years after I was baptized. I believe in the Lord Jesus and was baptized in His name. I've taken up my cross to follow Jesus. He is my Lord and the only head of His church. Churches of Christ look to Him alone as our Savior and Lord.

Today there are more than 12,000 local churches of Christ across the United States. Like the churches of the New Testament, these congregations look to Jesus as their Lord and Savior. They don't have bylaws or a manual that they use in addition to the New Testament. They don't

have a headquarters or an organization that's over the local congregations. They don't meet annually to make official statements of the church or to make binding theological decisions. While these congregations recognize one another as brethren, they are autonomous, that is self-ruling. Each congregations has its own leaders made up of elders and deacons, who follow the Bible in their teaching and practice.

Should you visit one of these congregations on a Sunday morning, you'll find a warm welcome. Churches of Christ are spiritual families who come together in a common faith, hope, and love. They're brothers and sisters to one another, and there is room in their hearts for someone new. They care about your soul, your well-being, and your family. Churches of Christ generally have Bible classes for all ages on Sunday mornings. These classes study the Bible closely to learn the truth about God and how we should serve Him.

Churches of Christ gather each Lord's day, which is the first day of the week or Sunday, to worship the Lord. They look to the Scriptures to see how God wants them to worship. They pattern their worship today after the examples and instructions given in the New Testament.

Worship is a time to draw near to God and to express our love, our praise, and our thanksgiving to God. Worshiping God reminds us of how holy God is and how we stand in need of His grace and forgiveness. Worship is a time of humility and reverence toward God.

Christian worship to the Lord consists first of prayers. First Timothy 2:1-2 says, "First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity." As Christians, we pray for those in need. We thank God for all His blessings and for peace. We pray for strength, courage, and comfort. We even pray for our enemies. We pray especially that God will open up a door for the Word, so that men may learn the will of God.

During worship we enjoy the reading of Scripture. Paul told Timothy, "Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching" (1 Timothy 4:13). Scripture nourishes our hearts and it builds us up. Paul told the elders of the church at Ephesus, "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32). God's Word builds us up and gives us our inheritance. We need God's Word in our lives every day.

Churches of Christ sing from their hearts because they want to praise God and edify one another. Ephesians 5:18-19 says, "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord." Colossians 3:16 says, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God."

The music in Christian worship in the New Testament was by means of vocal singing, and every member of the congregation participated. The New Testament gives no example or instruction for Christians to worship with instruments of music. We seek to follow the New Testament teaching in all things, so we simply sing. We know this pleases God, because the early church didn't use instruments of music in worship for many, many centuries. Since our worship is to glorify God, our desire is to please Him by following His instructions in the New Testament for Christian worship. Hebrews 13:15 says, "Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name."

Each Lord's Day, the first day of the week, we commune together in the Lord's Supper. Paul

said, "For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' And in the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). The Lord's Supper is a simple memorial meal, and every member of the church partakes. Christians remember the body and the blood of Jesus that was sacrificed for them so that they might have the forgiveness of their sins.

Each first day of the week, Christians also contribute to the Lord for the work of the church. They believe 2 Corinthians 9:6-7 where Paul said, "Now this I say, that he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." Churches of Christ do not send out bills or they don't expect a tithe or ten percent. They urge members to give cheerfully as they have been prospered and as they purpose in their hearts.

During worship a preacher or minister will preach the Word of God to build up and encourage brethren to live faithful and holy lives, to know the Lord and His truth, and to keep on doing good and reaching out to others with the gospel. Paul urged Timothy to "preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction" (2 Timothy 4:2). Preachers have the responsibility of persuading the lost to come to Jesus and of strengthening the brethren. They must teach the whole counsel of God, and that means they must speak against what is false and immoral. They must call men to repent of their sins and to follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

The church is a family made up of brothers and sisters. In fact, 1 Peter 2:17 tells us to "love the brotherhood." No one is above or better than anyone else. Each member of the body is loved and valued. The Lord Jesus said to the apostles, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:25-28).

The church Jesus built wasn't divided into clergy and laity. Each congregation had its own leadership, and no leader held power over several congregations, that didn't happen. The idea of an archbishop or a hierarchy over many congregations is absolutely foreign to the New Testament. It was a development brought about by men over the centuries. In the New Testament a plurality of elders or shepherds oversaw the work of each congregation. They didn't have a single bishop over the elders in a local church. When Diotrophes, in the little book of Third John, put himself first and tried to run the church, the apostle John rebuked him.

The Lord Jesus refused to let His followers to assume a title that put them above others as some of the Jews did. Jesus said, "But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Matthew 23:8-12). For this reason, ministers and others in the church of Christ refuse to be called "Reverend" or "Father," they're not going to take that title.

In the Lord's church every member is called a "saint"; there isn't any special class of saints above other Christians. Paul wrote, "To the church of God which is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours" (1 Corinthians 1:2). Every person washed in the blood of Jesus and sanctified by the Spirit is a saint.

In the Lord's church every member is also a priest. The apostle Peter said to the whole church, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). Israel may have had a special tribe of priests, the tribe of Levi, but the church doesn't have a tribe of priests! According to 1 Peter 2:5, every Christian is a priest offering up "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Every Christian has the task as a priest to serve God, to worship, and to teach others about God.

While the church Jesus built, the church of Christ, is not a denomination or a sect, you can find it today in identifiable congregations. You can be a member of the Lord's church! The same seed that made members of the church in the first century is what makes members of the church today. What seed is that? It's the Word of God. First Peter 1:23 says that Christians are "born again, not of a perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God." If you have the same seed, you have the same church. If you change the seed by mixing it in with human traditions and doctrines, you have something different. I don't want something different. I want to stay with God's Word and I want the church to remain pure by following what is written in the Word of God.

The Lord Jesus said, at the close of the Sermon on the Mount, "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain fell, the floods came, the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, the floods came, the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it" (Matthew 7:24-27).

My friend, you're building your religious house; and what you build will determine your destiny. Be wise and build your house on the rock. How? By hearing the words of Jesus and doing them. Go to the New Testament, all of it, to find everything that Jesus taught. Don't build your house on human traditions or doctrines and then expect to have a firm foundation. Go to the Bible alone to find the rock. In churches of Christ, it's our passion to listen to the Lord's words found in the New Testament and simply obey them. We don't want to add to them or take anything from them.

Become a Christian by putting your faith in the Lord and obeying Him. If you love Him, turn away from every sin and serve Him; confess Him as the Christ, the Son of the living God; and be baptized, immersed in water, in His name for the forgiveness of your sins. Romans 6:3-7 says when we're baptized into Christ, we're baptized into His death. Baptism unites us with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. When we're united with Christ, God sets us free from sin, we become children of God and we become members of the Lord's church. Churches of Christ, today, are simply made up of people who trust and obey the Lord according to His teaching.

## Membership in the Church

If you could be a child of God and a citizen of the kingdom of God, would you? Today, we're exploring what it means to be a member of the Lord's church. Romans 15:4 says, "whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." The Bible gives us hope on every page. Scripture reveals God's plan to bless and redeem man from His weaknesses and sins. The Scripture teaches us how to live so that we may be free from the trapping of sin and find a home with God in heaven.

Many people today say, "Jesus, yes; but the church, no." About 80 percent of Americans believe you can be a "good Christian" without ever being a member of any church. Many want to be Christians but not members of any "organized religion." Some people have decided to become Christians "at large" or to establish small "house churches"; but they hold the organized church today in contempt. Can a Christian please the Lord Jesus and refuse to be a part of the church He built? Is attending church and being a church member optional?

Some quit worshipping at church because they had a bad experience, and we're sorry for that. Some leave the church because they have sinned and are ashamed. Some stopped going because they disagree with some teaching of the church. Many in our culture think churches are too "judgmental" and they've quit because they don't want to hear about sin. Others have simply gotten too busy for God and don't have time to worship. I hope you will put God first, and I want us to explore the value of the church that Jesus built and purchased. It was His church and He built it for a reason, and you'll be blessed to be a member.

Our reading today comes from Romans 12:4-8. "For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness."

I hear people speak about "being the church," and they have an important message. We must be the body of Christ in the world today. The notion that we can "be the church" but not be a part of any local congregation, however, is an unscriptural idea. God expects His people to assemble with one another for worship and ministry. The Hebrew writer said, "and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:24-25). In the New Testament, when a Christian quit assembling with the church, he was falling away from God. He was leaving the faith. He was hurting himself and hurting the church by returning to the world.

Jesus built the church to bless us. Solomon said, "Iron sharpens iron, So one man sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17). People in the church make each other stronger, better, and more faithful and committed. Each Christian needs the example of love and faith that his brothers and sisters give him. Each Christian needs to so live and so love that he provides an example of commitment to the cause of Christ. Saying, "I love Christ, but I won't go to church," sends a mixed signal. It says, "I love God, but I'll choose which commands I'll obey and which I won't." This person isn't really obeying God but is obeying himself and his own wishes. Jackie and I

engraved some words of Scripture in our wedding rings. Solomon said in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, "Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. If either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there's not another to lift him up. Furthermore, if two lie down together they can keep warm, but how can one be warm *alone*? And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three *strands* is not quickly torn apart." God knew His people needed the strength and love that each one could give the other to grow and to remain strong in faith. Two are better than one, because they have each other.

Where would we be without Bible teachers and godly examples? If you have children, don't cheat them out of a spiritual education. It is an absolute shame that nearly 40 percent of the young people in America grow up without any spiritual guidance. They need the help of God to face the temptations and pitfalls of life. Your children's spiritual education isn't complete if it lacks a study of the Bible. You can educate their minds in science and history and all the other things, but if you fail to educate their souls, you haven't prepared them for the day when Jesus comes again. They won't know Him but will it be like the five foolish virgins who didn't have oil for the lamps and found themselves shut out of the kingdom.

Someone converted you to Christ, and they were likely faithful church members. They not only taught you the gospel but also taught you about the church. Bible stories are not myths or legends; they are historical accounts of God's interaction with man. The Bible helps us to make sense of where we came from, why we're here, and what will happen to us after we die. We need this spiritual education.

The church is God's kingdom in this life, and heaven is God's kingdom in the next life. We enter the church here so that we may enter the kingdom of heaven in the days to come. Philippians 3:20-21 says, "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself." People who have the hope of heaven want to live for the Lord.

First John 3:1-4 says, "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world doesn't know us, because it didn't know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, that we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness." Church helps us focus on the things that matter and to keep ourselves ready for the return of our Lord Jesus.

We ask, "What was the church like in the New Testament?" The word "church" refers to an assembly, a congregation, that was called together for a specific purpose. After Paul had established several congregations on his first missionary journey, he returned to those congregations, strengthening and encouraging them. Acts 14:23 says, "When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." Later, in Philippians 1:1, Paul wrote, "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers (that is, elders) and deacons." Did you notice that all the members were called "saints" and that's not a special class? There are no "super-saints" in the Lord's church; everyone is important and loved.

New Testament churches were organized with established leaders. They were visible

congregations, meeting at set times and in set locations. Paul mentions many of the members of the church at Philippi or Rome or Corinth by name. Sometimes churches met in a family's house. But in those days a large house could hold a congregation. In some cases, congregations met outside or in caves. At that time, the church was often persecuted and considered illegal. The earliest church buildings date about 250 A.D. Although they could not openly show themselves, churches assembled to worship and to encourage each other.

In the early church God gave leaders, "for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-13). God knew that His people needed training and equipping to do the work that He called them to do: to take the gospel to the whole world, and to build up the church, and to render help to those who are in need. Salvation is never without obligation. To be a member of the church means I'm responsible to the Lord and to my brethren. The Lord Jesus said, "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:27). When you become a Christian, the Lord adds you to His church. From that day forward, you're God's servant and you belong to Christ. You're not your own. Since you belong to Christ, you must consider how your life reflects on Christ and on his church.

Second Timothy 2:19 says, "Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, 'the Lord knows those who are His,' and, 'Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness.'" People who live for the Lord should live so as to bring glory and honor to the name of Christ. Sadly, some Christians by their ugly language and wicked behavior bring shame on the Lord, and they bring shame on His church. When you become a Christian, you decide to live the moral life that Jesus Christ teaches. That means that you must leave sin behind. Paul asked, "Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" (Romans 6:1-2).

We're obligated to leave sin, but we're also obligated to support the church, and to do that by our gifts and also by our attendance. As we mentioned Hebrews 10:24-25 says, "let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as the habit of some is, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near." When we get involved in the worship of the church, we influence others to get involved. By attending worship we get to know our brothers and sisters, and we can encourage them to stay faithful to the Lord, and we can stimulate them to love God, and we can stimulate them to be kind and serve others.

God also expects His people to financially support the work of the church. Paul said, "Now this I say, that he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed" (2 Corinthians 9:6-8).

As Christians, we have an obligation to one another. Titus 3:14 says, "Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, so that they will not be unfruitful." First John 3:17-18 says, "But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with just word or with tongue, but love in deed and in truth." We show love for God by caring for

others and helping them.

My friend, the best thing you can do to bless another's life is to teach him about the Lord. The primary work of the church is to preach the gospel to every creature. People need more than physical food; they need the Word of God to live spiritually. The Lord Jesus said, "It is written, that 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God'" (Matthew 4:4). First Corinthians 15:58 says, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord."

Someone says, "Well Phil, we went to church but we had a bad experience at church, and we won't be going back." My friend, I'm sorry that you had that bad experience, but was it the whole church or was it just an individual that hurt you? The Bible teaches that when a fellow Christian sins against you, you go to that person privately and you talk to him, trying to restore the relationship (Matthew 18:15). Many times people, rather than following the instructions of the Lord, just simply quit and separate themselves from other godly people that they really need in their lives. Don't quit the church over some rude brother or sister. Talk to that person and work it out.

I became a Christian because of Jesus. He's my Lord and Savior. I gave myself to Him. I want to go to heaven and live with Him forever. My pride isn't as important as going to heaven. So...I won't let anything, or anyone come between my God and me. There will always be rude, selfish, and immature people; but if the Lord was gracious enough to forgive me, I ought to be gracious enough to forgive those who sin against me. I don't want to risk my soul because I couldn't get along with a brother or sister in the church. I'd rather forgive and be forgiven than to hold a grudge and lose my soul. Wouldn't you?

Some say they want to follow Jesus but have no use for the church; but if we enter into a relationship with the Lord, we must also embrace the Lord's family. The Bible calls the church the household or family of God in 1 Timothy 3:15. The church is not only God's family but also His creation. The Lord Jesus said, "I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). He loved the church so much that He purchased it with His own blood (Acts 20:28). We cannot and must not set the church aside so quickly. To reject the church is to reject Jesus Christ Himself.

We all realize the church is made up of fallible people, and sometimes they fail to measure up to the will of God. But before we give up on the church, let's remember that we all, both you and me, "have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). We all stand in need of God's grace. I don't know any perfect Christians, but I do know forgiven brothers and sisters in the church who seek to live righteously, and they grieve when they sin. Amazingly, God's gracious love moves our hearts to walk in the light and to be in His family. And so, we invite you to join us in serving the Lord as a member of His family, the church.

To become a Christian and to be added by the Lord to His church, believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Repent of your sins, every one of them and turn your heart to the Lord. Confess the Lord Jesus before others and be baptized into Christ. Baptism is an immersion in water. When you're baptized into Christ, Romans 6:3 says you're baptized into His death. Verse 6 says that in baptism we are crucified with Christ "in order that our body of sin might be done away with." In baptism we're buried with Christ and we're raised to walk in newness of life. We're born again. When you're baptized, the Lord Jesus will add you to His church, His family. I tell you nothing, nothing, nothing is more important.

## Why I Am a Member

If I ask you to do something really important, I should have a reason. Today I want to tell you why I am a member of the church of Christ. Proverbs 30:5 says, “Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.” This Bible is certainly true, because God is true and trustworthy. I’ve spent my whole adult life studying the word of God, and I’ve found it to prove true in every instance. You never have to doubt God’s Word because God’s character, God’s honesty, God’s integrity, and God’s wisdom are abundantly found in the words that He gave us.

Following Christ means becoming a member of the church that He built. You’ll never make a more important decision than the one to follow the Lord Jesus. Following Him brings great blessing, but it also has great challenges. We must deny ourselves; have you ever denied yourself anything? We must take up our crosses daily and follow Him; are you willing? We must offer our bodies a living sacrifice. We must love the Lord more than anything else; do you? When I ask you to become a member of the Lord’s church, I’m challenging you to put God first in everything and give Him your utmost loyalty and service.

I realize how serious this challenge is, so I’m prepared to also tell you why I’ve chosen to follow Jesus and to become a member of His church. To follow Jesus means being involved in His church, that is His family, His kingdom, and His vineyard. You can’t separate the church from Jesus or Jesus from the church. To embrace one is to embrace the other. There is no other way.

Our reading today comes from the book of Acts 2:38-41. “Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.’ And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, ‘Be saved from this perverse generation!’ So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.”

People ask, “Why are you asking us to be members of the church of Christ?” I’d like to give you five reasons, reasons that matter!

First, I’m a member because Jesus loves the church and died for the church. His attitude should shape our attitudes. Ephesians 5:25-30 says, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body.”

The New Testament describes the church as God’s family. First Timothy 3:15 says, “but in case I’m delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.” Jesus Himself looks at the church as His own family. The Lord Jesus asked, “‘Who are My mother and My brothers?’ And looking about at those who were sitting around Him, He said, ‘Behold My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is My brother

and sister and mother” (Mark 3:33-35). Jesus regards the church as His family. I want to be in that family.

Second, I'm a member of the church of Christ, because Jesus is my Lord and I serve Him. Only Jesus has the words of eternal life. Only Jesus will judge me on the last day. Only Jesus can be my Savior. Only Jesus can forgive my sins. If I want Jesus to be my Savior, I must also accept Him as my Lord. I must follow Him. How can I think that I'm following Him, when I'm not willing to be part of the church that He built and purchased with His own blood? The Lord Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; and no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6). The only way to the Father, to heaven, is through Jesus Christ. Acts 4:12 says, "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." We must follow Him.

The Lord expects His people to be wise and loving. According to Matthew 7:24 a wise person is one who hears His words and does them, that is the words. The foolish person hears the words but does not do them. I want the Lord Jesus to count me as wise! The idea that we can do as we please and not do what the Lord says and yet still be thought of as a faithful Christian is mistaken. Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter" (Matthew 7:21). Again He asked, "Why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46). If the congregation that you attend isn't following the words of the Lord, my friend you're putting your soul at risk.

The Lord Jesus expects His people to obey Him as Lord! Jesus said, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" (John 14:15). Obedience is how we love the Lord Jesus! Jesus obeyed His Father out of love and He wants us to obey out of love too! The Lord Jesus explained, "Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love" (John 15:9-10). I want to abide in God's love and favor. To do that means I must follow the example of the Lord Jesus by keeping His commandments.

This is why, in churches of Christ, we immerse penitent believers for the forgiveness of their sins, just like we read in Acts 2:38, and we do this rather than sprinkle infants who don't even know what's happening. This is why, in churches of Christ, we sing a cappella as a congregation rather than have choirs and use instruments of music. This is why we, as churches of Christ, have a plurality of elders as our leaders rather than a pastor system or a single bishop. This is why we, as churches of Christ, observe the Lord's Supper each Lord's Day. This is why we give cheerfully and freely as we've been prospered. This is why we go into all the world with the pure gospel that's in the Word of God and we teach people all that the Lord has commanded us. This is why, in churches of Christ, we help the needy, live godly lives, tell the truth, and love all people. This is why we cannot pretend sin is okay, why we say false doctrine is not as good as the truth, why we say that repentance is necessary, and why we say that morality doesn't depend on the situation but depends on what God has said.

Third, I'm a member of the church of Christ because the Lord adds the saved to His church. I love the church; it's filled with people who love the Lord and love and care for each other. I want to be around people who have strong faith and strong love for God. When

people obey the gospel and are saved, the Lord adds them to the church. Acts 2:41 says, "So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls." Verse 47 says, "And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved." The phrase "their number" is a reference to the "church."

The Lord knew that we would need a family on earth to help us, to teach us, and to keep us strong in the faith. Paul said, "And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another" (Romans 15:14). We need the strength of each other's faith to keep us spiritually involved. We also need each other when we fall and fail. Galatians 6:1-2 says, "Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, you restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ." We need to do that.

The love of Christ and the grace of God makes us all better. Worshipping at church with other saints, and fellowshiping with brothers and sisters, and having Bible study, all of this enriches our lives and shapes us into people who live godly lives and love each other. We need each other. First Peter 2:9-10 describes who we are as Christians and members of the church, and I want to be around people like that. He says, "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; for you were once not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." The church provides the basis for the world to know the Lord and to know the gospel message of salvation. We need the church.

Fourth, I'm a member because being "in Christ" means being in His body, the church. Galatians 3:26-27 says, "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." When I was baptized into Christ, I entered into a relationship with Him that I didn't have before. God counted me as His child and made me an heir of eternal life along with His Son Jesus. As a child of God, born again in baptism, I was privileged to enter the kingdom of God. The Lord Jesus told Nicodemus, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). What is this birth of water and spirit? It's baptism. What is the kingdom of God? It's the church, the body of Christ! First Corinthians 12:13 says, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit."

The Scriptures clearly teach that baptism is the time that we enter the body of Christ. We know the body of Christ is the church, because the apostle Paul said in Ephesians 1:22-23, "And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all."

To be a child of God, to be in the body of Christ, means the Lord added me to His church. If I'm not in the church, I'm not "in Christ." If I'm not "in Christ," I have no promise and no hope. Ephesians 2:12 describes the condition of people who are not Christians, "remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world." Separate from Christ, excluded, strangers to promise, having no hope and without God! There is a big huge difference between being "in Christ" and being "outside of Christ."

According to Ephesians 2:1, those who are outside of Christ are dead in their trespasses and sins.

Ephesians 2:19 describes what it means to be “in Christ”: “So then you’re no longer strangers and aliens, but you’re fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household.” If you are in Christ and His church, you’re in God’s family, a fellow citizen with the saints! God doesn’t exclude you as a stranger or alien anymore! Oh, I love the promise of Ephesians 1:3, which says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.” We have hope in Christ! We have promise in Christ! I don’t want anyone to miss out on these blessings. That’s why I want you to become a member of the Lord’s church.

Fifth, I’m a member of the church of Christ because membership means being a citizen of heaven. If I want to go to the heavenly kingdom, I must enter God’s earthly kingdom, the church. Philippians 3:20-21 says, “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.” Consider what a blessing it is to be a citizen of heaven!

More than anything, I want to go to heaven. First Peter 1:3-5 says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” Yes, I want to go to heaven! The way to heaven is through Jesus Christ and the church that He built and purchased with His own blood!

The grace of God matters! I wouldn’t want to live one day outside the grace of God, not even one hour, not one minute, and not even one second without the promises of God! I know that to abide in His grace and love I must be a member of His family, the church. I wish everyone were a member of the church that Jesus built. I wish everyone were willing to deny themselves and to take up their crosses daily and follow Christ. I want everyone to know the Lord and to place their trust in Him. Please don’t think you can please the Lord Jesus and at the same time reject His church. You can’t have one without the other.

When you give your heart and your life to Christ in obedience to the gospel, the Lord will add you to His church. That’s the only way that you can enter the Lord’s church; the Lord must add you. He will add you when you place your trust in Him, firmly believing in Him and His teaching. Believing the gospel means believing in His death on the cross, His burial, and His resurrection. It means believing that you’re accountable to Him and that He will one day come again from heaven to judge the world. Your faith in Christ means you must change your heart to turn away from sin and turn to righteousness; that’s repentance. It means you’ll have to deny yourself so you can take up your cross daily to follow Jesus.

When faith, and love, and repentance unite, it will move you to confess Jesus Christ as the Son of God and to be baptized into Christ. When you’re baptized the Lord will wash away your sins, He’ll cause you to be born again, and add you to His church. You’ll enter the kingdom of heaven and clothe yourself with Christ. God will consider you as one of His children. Baptism is the time that God acts upon you and makes you one of His own. Oh, I hope and pray that you will be baptized and become a member of the Lord’s church today.