

*What the Bible
says about the*
Church of Christ

Dave Miller, Ph.D.



Apologetics Press, Inc.
230 Landmark Drive
Montgomery, Alabama 36117-2752

© Copyright 2007
ISBN: 978-1-60063-001-9

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations.

All Scripture quotations are from The New King James Version of the Bible, unless otherwise specified. Copyright © 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication

Dave Miller (1953 -)

What the Bible says about the Church of Christ/Dave Miller

Includes bibliographic references

ISBN: 978-1-60063-001-9

1. Comparative religion. 2. Christian theology. I. Title

280—dc22

2007929504

DEDICATION

To Deb—

whose positive influence on my
life has been inestimable, pro-
found, and eternal.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1	Foretold and Founded	5
	Genesis 3:15.	6
	Genesis 12:3	8
	Ephesians 3	9
	The Prophets	11
	Acts 2: The Hub of the Bible	12
Chapter 2	Doctrine/Creed	15
	Reference	17
Chapter 3	Entrance Requirements	19
	The Great Commission.	19
	Acts	19
	Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Colossae, and Beyond	22
	Hear, Believe, Repent, Confess, Be Baptized	23
	Summary	24
Chapter 4	Structure/Organization.	27
	Christ the Head.	27
	Elders.	28
	Deacons	29
	Preachers/Evangelists and Teachers	29
	Summary	30

Chapter 5	
	Names. 31
	Names for the Church. 31
	Names for the Members
	of the Church 34
	Summary. 35
Chapter 6	
	Worship 37
	Sunday. 37
	Lord's Supper 38
	Singing. 38
	Giving 39
	Prayer. 40
	Preaching, Teaching,
	Bible Reading. 40
	Summary. 41
Chapter 7	
	Work and Purpose 43
	Evangelism 43
	Edification 44
	Benevolence. 44
Chapter 8	
	Conclusion 47
Appendix A	
	New Testament Christianity vs.
	Denominationalism 49
	“One Body” = One Church. 52
	Pluralism: “Live and Let Live,”
	“I’m Okay, You’re Okay” 53
	Conclusion 55

	Reference	56
Appendix B	The Thief on the Cross	57
Appendix C	The Essentiality of Baptism	63
	The New Birth	63
	Is Baptism a Symbol?	68
	Romans 6:3-18	72
	Colossians 2:11-13	74
	1 Peter 3:20-22	76
	Summary	78
	Christ at the Door of Your Heart?	79
	Calling on the Lord	81
	References	89

Chapter 1

FORETOLD AND FOUNDED

If you were to open your Bible and begin reading, you would quickly come to understand how the Universe got here, including the Earth, and how we human beings came into existence. You would read about the first two human beings, Adam and Eve, and how they disobeyed God's directive to them, thereby introducing sin into the world. This circumstance becomes the central concern of the rest of the Bible: human sin and God's intention to atone for that sin so that humans can be reconciled to Him through the forgiveness of their sins.

Something had to be done about human sin. God loves people in spite of their sin. Neither His love nor His justice would let that be the end of the matter. Being perfect, holy, and unable to allow sin to go unresolved

(Habakkuk 1:13), God had already devised a wonderful plan to make it possible for Adam, Eve, and all people since them to be forgiven of sin. Consequently, the Old Testament is riddled with references to God's eternal and ultimate plan to redeem people from their disobedience to His will. It turns out that, due to the foreknowledge of God, this divine intention was formulated **in eternity** before the sin of Adam and Eve (Ephesians 3:9-11). God knew that humans would violate His will, so He pre-planned a means by which they could be forgiven if they would choose to do so. This plan entailed the sending of Himself, in the person of His Son, to be offered as a perfect sacrifice for human sin (Hebrews 9:26-28).

Genesis 3:15

Anticipation of this amazing plan of redemption is detected repeatedly in the Old Testament. Even on the occasion when sin first entered the world, God offered a glimpse of His intention in His remarks to the snake through whom Satan had worked his seductive ploy: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel" (Genesis 3:15). What did God mean by this statement?

He meant that trouble would always exist between Satan (including those who follow him), and those who follow God. From the Garden until now, Satan tries to get people to disobey God. The righteous people and the

unrighteous have always been at odds with each other. But God explained how He would handle this trouble: “He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.” He meant that even though Satan would do everything possible to get people to sin, and to stop God from saving people from their sin, God would still make a way for people to be forgiven. He would send Jesus to live a sinless life, and then to die for everybody’s sin.

When Jesus died on the cross, His horrible suffering constituted the “heel bruising” accomplished by Satan. But His death was the right sacrifice that would allow God to forgive sin without violating His nature. Christ’s death on the cross satisfied the justice and wrath of God, enabling Him to forgive the sinner. The cross amounted to the crushing of Satan’s head—in the sense that people do not have to be consigned to the final abode of Satan—hell. Now people can escape the power of Satan (Acts 26:18). The death of Jesus on the cross destroyed Satan’s efforts to prevent people from having access to forgiveness (Hebrews 2:14). People still have to exercise their free will and **choose** to follow God. They have to follow God’s Word in order to avoid sinning. But the atoning act of Jesus on the cross enabled God to frustrate the activity of Satan and to forgive those who choose to live life in harmony with His will.

Genesis 12:3

Another recorded mention of God's intention to redeem humans came when God spoke to a man named Abram who lived in Ur—a highly advanced civilization for its day. God made the following declaration to him: “Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3). God fulfilled the first two promises when He multiplied Abraham's offspring to form the nation of Israel (Deuteronomy 1:10; 26:5), and when He brought the descendents of Abraham, the Israelites, into the land of Canaan (Joshua 11:23). But the third promise (i.e., “in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed”) was fulfilled in the arrival of Jesus into the world, as Paul explained: “Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as of many, but as of one, ‘And to your Seed,’ who is Christ” (Galatians 3:16).

Predictions about the coming of Christ to Earth abound in the Old Testament. In fact, it has been estimated that there are over 300 distinct prophecies in the Old Testament that have been literally fulfilled in Christ. The fact that Jesus is God is so important to Christianity that to

reject it is to reject the whole Christian religion and to rob Christianity of its power. Most people in Christendom recognize this truth and acknowledge that without Christ, there is no Christianity.

What is so surprising is that Christendom has largely failed to see the comparable importance assigned by Scripture to **the church**. This failure has made itself visible in the very existence of multiple churches and different denominations—a circumstance in direct conflict with the will of Christ (see Appendix A). The majority view seems to be that one can embrace Christ before and without any connection to any church.

Ephesians 3

But as one goes through the Old Testament, one is struck with the fact that even as God predicted the coming Christ, He likewise offered glimpses of the kingdom of Christ—the church of Christ—and how it would be linked to Christ and His atoning work at the cross. Indeed, before Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden together; before the skies, seas, and land were populated by birds, fish, and animals; before the Sun, Moon, and stars were situated in the Universe; and before our planet Earth was but a dark, watery, formless mass—God purposed to bring into being **the church of Christ**.

Scripture describes this divine intention as “eternal.” Central to the great purposes of God from eternity has been **both** the sending of His Son **and** the creation of the

church of Christ—the blood-bought body of Jesus and living organism of the redeemed. Read Paul’s statement: “To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known **by the church** the manifold wisdom of God, according to **the eternal purpose** which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Ephesians 3:10-11, emp. added). It is difficult for human beings to understand “eternal.” There are times when the notion of “everlasting” is abbreviated—like Jonah 2:6 where Jonah said he was in the fish’s stomach “forever.” It must have seemed like it to him. So the word can be used in a limited way. In Philemon 15, Paul said that once Onesimus returned, he would be with Philemon *aionion*—“forever.” But the context limits the meaning to just until he dies.

But when we speak of deity or the church, we are talking about **everlasting, eternal, forever**. Hebrews 12:28 asserts confidently: “Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which...” will someday end? No! Rather, “a kingdom that is unshakable,” destined to be around forever—an **eternal** institution. No wonder Daniel was informed: “The saints of the most high shall take the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, even **forever and ever**” (Daniel 7:18, emp. added). With that grand purpose in mind, God gradually began predicting (through promise and prophecy) the eventual accomplishment of that purpose.

The Prophets

Some 750 years before Christ came to Earth, Isaiah announced the eventual establishment of the “Lord’s house” in the “last days” in Jerusalem (Isaiah 2:1-4). At about the same time, Micah preached basically the same message (Micah 4:1-3). Some 500 years before Christ, Daniel declared to a pagan king that during the days of the Roman kings, the God of heaven would set up a kingdom that would never be destroyed (Daniel 2:44). He also stated that the “Son of man” would pass through the clouds, come to the Ancient of Days, and be given an indestructible kingdom (Daniel 7:13-14). Thus, the church, which existed first in purpose in the mind of God, now existed in promise and prophecy in the utterances of His spokesmen.

With the appearance of John the Baptizer and Jesus on the Earth, the church of Christ entered a new phase of existence. Now, more than ever before, the kingdom was presented with a sense of immediacy, nearness, and urgent expectation. Now, God’s workers actively prepared for its immediate appearance. John exclaimed: “[T]he kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). Jesus echoed precisely the same point: “[T]he kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). As John made preparations for the Lord (Matthew 3:3), so the Lord made preparations for the kingdom. He announced His intention personally to establish His church (Matthew

16:18). He declared that it would occur during the lifetime of His earthly contemporaries, and that, in fact, some were standing in His presence who would not die before they would see the kingdom of God come with power (Mark 9:1). [NOTE: As it turned out, among the apostles, only Judas died before the kingdom came.]

Just prior to His departure from Earth, Jesus further noted that the apostles would be witnesses of His death and resurrection, and would preach repentance and remission of sins in His name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. He would even send the promise of the Father upon them, which would entail being “endued with power from on high” (Luke 24:46-49). This power was to be equated with Holy Spirit immersion (Acts 1:4-5,8).

Now that the kingdom had existed in **purpose**, **promise**, and **prophecy**, as well as in **preparation**, the time had come for the church to come forth in **perfection**. After urging the apostles to “wait in Jerusalem,” Jesus ascended into a cloud and into heaven (Acts 1:9). The apostles returned to Jerusalem and for ten days awaited the fulfillment of the Savior’s words.

Acts 2: The Hub of the Bible

Then it happened. The year was approximately A.D. 30. The place was the city of Jerusalem (Acts 1:8,12,19)—just as Isaiah predicted (Isaiah 2:3). The time was the “last days” (Acts 2:16-17)—just as Isaiah predicted (Isaiah 2:2),

during the time of the Roman kings (specifically, Tiberius: Luke 1:3)—just as Daniel predicted (Daniel 2:44). With stunning splendor, after centuries of eager anticipation, God poured out His Spirit upon the Twelve on the first Pentecost after Christ's resurrection (Acts 2:2-4)—just as Joel predicted (Joel 2:28ff.). This miraculous outpouring enabled these one dozen “ambassadors” (2 Corinthians 5:20) to present a stirring defense of Christ's resurrection, convicting some in the audience with the guilt of the crucifixion. Peter then detailed the conditions of forgiveness and the terms of entrance into the kingdom of Christ (Acts 2:37-38)—just as Jesus predicted (Matthew 16:19; 18:18).

The church of Christ was now perfected into existence on the Earth—just as Jesus predicted (Matthew 16:18; Mark 9:1). She consisted of approximately 3,000 members—all of Jewish descent (Acts 2:41). From this moment forward, the kingdom of Christ on the Earth was a reality. From this point forward in the New Testament, the church/kingdom is always spoken of as being in existence (e.g., Acts 14:22; Romans 14:17). To its Jewish citizens were added the first Gentile converts, when those of the household of Cornelius obeyed the same terms of entrance that their Jewish counterparts had obeyed some ten to fifteen years earlier (Acts 10:47-48). By the cross, Christ had made “in Himself one new man from

the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body” (Ephesians 2:15-16).

In his great writing on the church of Christ, Paul in Ephesians insisted that the church of Christ is the body of Christ over which Jesus now reigns and rules from heaven (1:20-23). He further insisted that Jesus is the “head” of this body (1:22), and that “there is one body” (4:4). Yet Christendom has made mockery of these foundational premises of Christ’s religion by founding and fashioning many churches with differing names, creeds, and doctrines. Two points are clear: (1) if Christ approves of multiple churches, then being the Bridegroom (Mark 2:19-20), He is a polygamist; and (2) if “one church is as good as another,” and the church is so unimportant that mere human beings are permitted to found them, then the New Testament endorses a decapitated Gospel in which the head of the body (Christ) is disconnected from His body.

Churches of Christ are those who conform themselves to the teaching of the Bible regarding the founding of Christ’s church. If they are genuinely the church of Christ, they are indistinguishable from the church of the Bible.

Chapter 2

DOCTRINE/CREED

Faithful churches of Christ, like the church we read about in the New Testament, manifest a conspicuous absence of denominational trappings. New Testament churches of Christ have no official creeds, church manuals, or confessions of faith to which members must subscribe. There are no synods, councils, or governing bodies handing down official decrees to churches. The only authoritative document that governs belief and practice is the Bible. Once the New Testament was completely revealed by the Holy Spirit, the Bible became God's complete revelation to humans. Thus, the Bible presents itself as the inspired, inerrant, infallible Word of God—the only reliable and authoritative guide to get

humans from this life to heaven (1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 2:15; 2 Peter 3:16).

The 66 books of the Bible, written by some 40 men over a period of 1,600 years, are the product of the Holy Spirit, Who empowered the writers to pen only what God wanted written (2 Samuel 23:2; 1 Corinthians 2:9-13; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 1 Peter 1:10-12; 2 Peter 1:20-21). The Bible is thus verbally inspired of God, inerrant, and all-sufficient. [NOTE: For an excellent discussion of the inspiration of the Bible, see Butt, 2007.]

In order to understand God's Word, one must "rightly divide" it or "handle it aright" (2 Timothy 2:15). Churches of Christ recognize that it records three distinct periods of human history. The Patriarchal period extended from the Creation to the cross of Christ and was addressed to all people prior to Mt. Sinai, and only Gentiles from Mt. Sinai to the cross. The Mosaic period, on the other hand, refers to the period that began when God gave the Old Covenant (Law of Moses) to the nation of Israel at Mt. Sinai (about 1500 B.C.). This period of Bible history came to a close at the death of Christ when Jesus "nailed" the Old Law to the cross and took it out of the way (Colossians 2:14; Hebrews 9:15-17).

It would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to grasp many of the details of New Testament Christianity if a person does not understand these biblical distinctions. In any given passage, one must recognize who

is being addressed and which laws apply to whom. For example, mechanical instruments of music in worship are often defended on the grounds that “David used them.” But David was a Jew (neither a Gentile nor a Christian) who lived under the Law of Moses and was not subject to the regulations of the New Covenant of Christ. Another example is the failure to understand the importance of water baptism on the grounds that “the thief on the cross did not have to be baptized.” Yet, the thief also lived under a different law before Christ’s New Testament came into effect. He was not subject to the command to be baptized for the remission of sins (see Appendix B).

Faithful churches of Christ accept the Bible as their only guide in spiritual matters. Indeed, it is “the perfect law of liberty” (James 1:25) that contains “all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3). No additions are permissible (Galatians 1:6-9).

REFERENCE

Butt, Kyle (2007), *Behold the Word of God* (Montgomery, AL: Apologetics Press).

Chapter 3

ENTRANCE REQUIREMENTS

The entrance requirements for the church of Christ are unlike any other institution on Earth. Just before He left the planet, Christ Himself articulated them in what is often referred to as the “Great Commission”: Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:15-16, and Luke 24:46-47.

The Great Commission

Jesus lived prior to the establishment of His church and the Christian religion. Therefore, one must go to the book of Acts to see the outworking of Jesus’ instructions regarding how to enter the church of Christ.

Acts

As reported early in the book of Acts, the church had its beginning on the first Pentecost after Christ’s resur-

rection. Observe what people in the first century did to become a member of the church of Christ. In Acts 2, after listening to the preaching of the Gospel, the people were so convicted by the message that they were “cut to the heart” (Acts 2:37). They then asked the apostles what they needed to do. Peter responded: “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of your sins” (Acts 2:38). This was in fulfillment of Jesus’ own words in Mark 16:16: “He who believes and is baptized will be saved.”

The exact same procedure is depicted over and over again in Acts, earning for this inspired record the label—“the book of conversions.” Acts 8:12-13 records that “when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Simon himself believed and was baptized.” In the same chapter, Philip preached Jesus to the Ethiopian eunuch. After hearing Philip’s preaching about Jesus, they came to a body of water, and the eunuch said: “See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?” Philip said he could if he believed (Acts 8:36ff.).

In Acts 10, Cornelius heard the message, believed, and was baptized (vss. 47-48). In Acts 16, Lydia listened to the message, believed, and was baptized (vss. 14-15). In the same chapter, the Philippian jailer heard the Word of the Lord and was immediately baptized the same

hour of the night (vss. 33-34). In Acts 18:8, many of the Corinthians heard the Word, believed, and were baptized. In Acts 19:4-5, some of the citizens of Ephesus listened to Paul's preaching, believed, and were baptized. Paul, himself, in Acts chapters 9 and 22, heard the Word and was baptized to have his sins washed away (9:18; 22:16). The same "pattern" of conversion is repeated over and over again in Acts. Examine the following chart:

	Great Commission	Matthew 28:19-20	Mark 16:15-16	Luke 24:46-47	Romans 10:9
Acts	Believe	Repent	Confess	Baptized	Saved
2:37-38 Jews	pricked	repented		baptized	remission
8:12-13 Samaritans	believed			baptized	
8:36-39 Eunuch	believed		confessed	baptized	rejoiced
9:6,9,18; 22:16 Saul	trembled	sorrow	confessed	baptized	sins washed
10:43,48; 11:14,17-18 Cornelius	believed	repented		baptized	saved/life
16:14-15 Lydia	heart opened			baptized	faithful
16:31-34 Jailer	believed	washed stripes		baptized	rejoiced
17:12 Bereans	believed				
18:8 Corinthians	believed			baptized	saints 1 Cor. 1:2
19:2-5,18 Ephesians	believed	confessed evil deeds		baptized	in Christ Eph. 1:3

Notice that this chart pinpoints only the explicit indications of what first-century people did to be saved. By allowing the Bible to speak for itself unfettered by human theology, one can quickly surmise the divine entrance requirements of the church of Christ.

Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Colossae, and Beyond

The rest of the New Testament confirms these procedures for becoming a Christian. Everyone who became a Christian did so in precisely the same manner. Paul reminded Roman Christians that on the day they were baptized, they were baptized into Christ, into His death, and were made free from sin to live a new life: “[D]o you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3-4). He told the Corinthians that on the day they were baptized, they were baptized into the one body, which is the church of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13). He told the Galatians that when they were baptized, they were baptized into Christ, and thus “put on” Christ, that is, they were **clothed** with Him (3:27). He told the Colossians that it was at the point of baptism that their sins had been cut off as a sort of spiritual circumcision (2:11-12). Peter added his support to this

same understanding by declaring that one is **saved** at the moment of baptism, for it is at **that point** that the benefits of the **resurrection of Christ** are applied to the believer (1 Peter 3:21).

Hear, Believe, Repent, Confess, Be Baptized

Notice from these Scriptures that in the first century, a person became a Christian in the same way and at the same moment that he became a member of the church of Christ. Upon hearing the gospel message of salvation and God's will for their life, first-century people who were receptive to the message were made aware of their horribly sinful condition. They recognized the purpose of Jesus' atoning sacrifice through His death upon the cross. This realization caused them to believe (have faith) in God, in Jesus as the Son of God, and in the New Testament expression of the will of God. After all, "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17). This belief/faith then lead those individuals to repent of their sins. Jesus Himself had stated: "[B]ut unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3,5). These now penitent believers were then required to confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Lord, the Son of God. Paul insisted: "[I]f you **confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus** and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and **with the mouth confession is made unto salvation**"

(Romans 10:9-10, emp. added). Then these now penitent, confessing believers were baptized—immersed in water (see Appendix C)—with the understanding that the blood of Christ was contacted in the act of baptism, and that as they rose from the waters of baptism, they were forgiven of sin and added to the church by Christ (cf. Hebrews 10:22). Peter had announced on the day of Pentecost: “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38). These first-century people did not become Christians and then “join the church of their choice.” When they were baptized for the remission of sins, they were **simultaneously** added to the church of Christ by Jesus Himself (cf. Acts 2:41, KJV; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 5:26). Believe, repent, confess, and be immersed—simple!

Summary

So much diversity and widespread misconception exists. Most religious groups teach salvation is solely by faith, without any further acts of obedience. They say that all you have to do is “accept Jesus as your savior,” which means saying, “I believe in Jesus Christ, I accept Him into my heart as my personal savior.” Denominationalism teaches that **at that moment** the person is forgiven of sin and he becomes a Christian. While the New Testament certainly teaches that a non-Christian must **believe**, as noted above, it also teaches the ne-

cessity of repentance, confession, and baptism. In fact, the apostle Paul stated that his sins were washed away and he “called on the name of the Lord” **in the act of baptism** (Acts 22:16; see Appendix C). Most people in the religious world believe that a person is forgiven of sins **before** being immersed. But, once again, that is a departure from New Testament teaching. The church of Christ practices the entrance requirements set forth in the New Testament.

Chapter 4

STRUCTURE/ORGANIZATION

The organizational structure of the church of Christ comes from the arrangement given in the New Testament. Each local congregation is independent and autonomous. There is no hierarchy or denominational headquarters. Churches of Christ have no synods, councils, or conventions that establish policy or provide governing guidelines. Every single local congregation is self-governing and completely autonomous.

Christ the Head

The first century New Testament churches were organized first and foremost with Jesus as the head (Colossians 1:18). After all, He stated that He would build **His** church (Matthew 16:18). So the church belongs to Him, and only He has the right to structure the church.

Only He has the right to function as head. Churches of Christ recognize that no human may rightly substitute for Christ and act as head of the church on Earth.

Elders

Under the authority of Christ as the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4), a qualified group of men serves as the earthly overseers or managers of the local congregation (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). Three terms are used in the New Testament to identify and describe these men and their role. One of the terms is typically translated into English as elder or presbyter. The second term is translated pastor or shepherd. [NOTE: The name “pastor” did not refer to a preacher in the New Testament, but to an elder.] The third term is translated as bishop or overseer. All three terms are used interchangeably (Acts 20:17,28; Titus 1:5,7; 1 Peter 5:1-4). They refer to a single “office,” position, or function (1 Timothy 3:1). Elders’ authority extends only to the congregation where they are members. A **plurality** of elders is necessary for each single congregation—in harmony with New Testament practice (e.g., Acts 14:23; 20:17; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:5). These men function as the overseeing authorities in the local church. As the overseers of the congregation, they “admonish” (1 Thessalonians 5:12), “take care of” (1 Timothy 3:5), “rule over” (Hebrews 13:7), “watch for souls” (Hebrews 13:17), and “feed” or “shepherd” the membership (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2).

Deacons

Working under the oversight of the elders, another group of men serve as deacons. Like the elders, they too must meet the qualifications laid out in Scripture (1 Timothy 3:8-13). Whereas the elders are the spiritual overseers of the souls of the members of the local congregation, the deacons are assigned responsibilities and tasks that involve serving the needs of the congregation (cf. Acts 6:1-6). Their assigned areas of work and ministry enable the shepherds to concentrate on the spiritual condition of the members.

Preachers/Evangelists and Teachers

In addition to the elders and deacons (Philippians 1:1), churches of Christ have preachers or evangelists who proclaim the Gospel, the good news (Ephesians 4:11; 2 Timothy 4:5; James 3:1). They have the responsibility to declare the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27)—teaching and preaching Christian doctrine to non-Christian and Christian alike. They serve under the authority of the elders. They are joined by other members of the local congregation, both men and women, who act as Bible class teachers, also instructing members in the faith. Female Bible teachers teach women and children (Titus 2:4). All of the members participate together in the work and worship of the church in an effort to glorify God in their lives.

Summary

Many changes have been made since the first century in church government and organization. Faithful churches of Christ avoid the ecclesiastical hierarchy and denominational trappings typical of many churches. In summary, in accordance with the simple structure of Christ's church according to the New Testament, churches of Christ have elders who shepherd the flock, deacons who minister to the congregation, preachers and evangelists who preach the Gospel, Bible class teachers, and all other members of the local congregation who work and worship under the oversight of the elders. Who are the churches of Christ? They are **those churches that follow this simple New Testament format.**

Chapter 5

NAMES

As one takes Bible in hand and reads about the church of the New Testament, the terminology used to refer to Christ's church becomes readily apparent. Churches of Christ endeavor to conform themselves to this scriptural terminology. They attempt to confine themselves to the names and designations that have been given by Christ through the Holy Spirit. Even the name "churches of Christ" (Romans 16:16) is the result of this intention to "call Bible things by Bible names," as well as to "speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent."

Names for the Church

Churches of Christ have insisted through the years that the designation "church of Christ" is not a formal or

official designation (like “Baptist Church” or “Methodist Church”). It is not a denominational identifier. Rather, it is to be understood in the same way that the New Testament uses several other expressions to refer to the collective group of Christians: “church of God” (1 Corinthians 1:2), “church of the living God” (1 Timothy 3:15), “the temple of God” (1 Corinthians 3:16), “body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12), “the church” (Acts 8:1—the most prominent expression), “the kingdom” (Matthew 16:19), “the kingdom of God” (Mark 9:1; John 3:5), “the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3), “the kingdom of His dear Son” (Colossians 1:13). “Churches of Christ” (Romans 16:16) is simply a plural form of the singular concept.

In the New Testament, these expressions are not intended to be formal denominational titles. Rather, they are **descriptions**. Churches of Christ have so intended their use of the name “church of Christ.” They have insisted that any of the above expressions are scriptural and may be used. In contrast, the New Testament grants no sanction to refer to the church of the New Testament as the Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Lutheran, or Pentecostal church. These are **manmade** designations that spotlight mere humans or favorite doctrines, rather than giving honor to the Founder and Owner of the church.

Since Jesus promised to build **His** church (Matthew 16:18), and since He paid for His church with His **own** blood (Acts 20:28), and since He is the **head** of that body (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18), then the church belongs to **Him** and wears **His** name (even as individuals who are saved bear the name “**Christian**”). Even the designation “church of God” refers to God the Son. Jesus is now reigning and ruling over His kingdom, the church (Acts 2:30,33; Ephesians 1:22). He will turn the kingdom over to His Father when He returns at the end of time (1 Corinthians 15:24). Until then, the church is unquestionably intended in the New Testament to be associated in name with Christ. Hence, “churches of Christ” is simply the most expedient way to emphasize to the world that the church is Christ’s, she belongs to Him, she is **Christ’s** church, i.e., the church of Christ. Thus, she wears the name of her Head, Owner, and Savior—Christ (Daniel 7:14; Ephesians 4:12; Revelation 11:15).

No wonder Paul wrote in his remarks to the church at Ephesus:

- “to Him be glory **in the church** by Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 3:21)
- “as **the church** is subject to Christ” (Ephesians 5:24)
- “just as Christ also loved **the church** and gave Himself **for her**, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the

word, that He might present her to Himself a **glorious church**" (Ephesians 5:25-27)

These verses clarify forcefully the relationship that exists between Christ and the church. The church (the bride) is to wear the name of the bridegroom (Jesus), even as women today take the name of their husband when they marry. But Jesus has only one bride—not multiple ones as existing today in the denominational world. Interestingly, many churches of Christ over the years have placed on their church building sign, "The Church of Christ Meets Here," in order to emphasize to the public that the **people**, not the building, make up the church, which, in turn, **belongs to Christ**.

Names for the Members of the Church

The same may be said with regard to the names that God wants individual members of the church to wear. In Isaiah 62:2, the prophet foretold that God, with His own mouth, would give a name to His people. We find the fulfillment of that prophecy in Acts 11:26. **The name** that God wants individual members of His church to wear is the name "Christian" (Acts 26:29; 1 Peter 4:16). Again, this name is the name that indicates that one belongs to Christ. Beyond this central name, the New Testament uses several secondary names to describe Christians. Romans 1:7 uses the term "saints," while Acts 5:14 uses the term "believer." Other passages refer to "disciples" (Acts 20:7), which means "learners," "saints"

(1 Corinthians 1:2), “brothers” (1 Corinthians 15:1), “sons of God” (Romans 8:14), “children of God” (1 John 3:1), and “priests” (1 Peter 2:9). These are **scriptural** names. Churches of Christ use all of them, though priority is given to the name Christian.

Churches of Christ have also avoided using many of the religious titles that are commonly used in Christendom. The denominational concept of a **clergy** is foreign to the New Testament. Preachers in the New Testament were merely Christians who prepared themselves to preach. They were not set apart as a special class of religious people. They did not receive special titles like “reverend” or “pastor” or “father” (Matthew 23:9). The term “pastor” is used in the New Testament to refer to one who has been appointed to serve as an elder or shepherd along with other men. This office was distinct from the role of the preacher. Churches of Christ have sought to avoid using names that are manmade, or that serve only to cultivate the praise of men, when, in fact, all praise belongs to God (Luke 4:8).

Summary

New Testament truth on the matter of names is simple. Contrary to that New Testament pattern, many churches and individuals have taken the name of a man or a particular doctrine and applied that name to themselves—names that are conspicuously absent from the New Testament. Surely, God is not pleased with man-

made names. Surely, God will not sanction or extend His grace to groups and individuals who have chosen to stray from His will and His pattern for religion. Those who formulate for themselves their own religions, their own churches, and their own names, surely displease God since He has already given the names He expects the church to use. Indeed, down through the annals of human history, the Bible records that God has never accepted human invention in religion (Matthew 15:9).

So who are the churches of Christ? They are **those churches that wear the name of Christ**—individually and collectively. As the apostle Peter stated: “Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is **no other name** under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12, emp. added). “If any man suffers as a **Christian**, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God **in this name**” (1 Peter 4:16, emp. added).

Chapter 6

WORSHIP

Churches of Christ seek to worship God in harmony with the worship specifications given in the New Testament. Even as God has always explained to humans throughout Bible history how they are to worship Him (e.g., Genesis 4:3-5), so the New Testament provides specific instructions that indicate how God wants to be worshipped in the Christian age.

Sunday

In the first century, Christians met for worship on the first day of the week—Sunday. Sunday is pinpointed in New Testament Christianity as the special day on which Christians gather together to worship God (Acts 20:7). Christians are required by God to attend these worship assemblies on a regular basis, since the Bible teaches

the necessity of assembling with other Christians for mutual edification (Hebrews 10:25). Jesus referred to the church when He said, “Seek first the kingdom of God” (Matthew 6:33). Putting the church first in life necessarily entails regularly meeting with fellow Christians for worship on Sunday.

Lord’s Supper

In harmony with New Testament practice, churches of Christ observe the Lord’s Supper, also called “communion” (1 Corinthians 10:16). In keeping with Acts 2:42 and 20:7, as well as 1 Corinthians 11:20-34 and 16:1-3, the Lord’s Supper is observed **every first day of the week**. This observance is in keeping with Jesus’ own instructions (Matthew 26:26-29), and thus consists of every Christian partaking of both the fruit of the vine (grape juice) and unleavened bread. These symbols represent the shed blood and crucified body of Christ. Christians sit quietly and meditate on the sacrifice of Christ.

Singing

In the realm of music, churches of Christ follow the expressed directives of the New Testament. Ephesians 5:19 reads: “[S]peaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.” Colossians 3:16 states: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and

spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” New Testament instructions for musical worship are that simple and unencumbered. There is no authority in the New Testament for playing musical instruments in worship to God—which would constitute a manmade addition to pure, spiritual worship. Nor does the New Testament give authority for performance groups like choirs and praise teams. The music in the New Testament is very clearly **congregational, vocal singing**. Churches of Christ endeavor to conform themselves to this simple specification.

Giving

In addition, every first day of the week churches of Christ contribute a percentage of their income to a general treasury so that the church may carry on its work. Paul instructed the church at Corinth: “Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come” (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). Whereas tithing is an Old Testament command given to the Jews (e.g., Malachi 3:8), a requirement not directed to Christians in the New Testament, churches of Christ encourage each other simply to give liberally, in keeping with New Testament injunction: “But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully

will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:6-7). The collected funds are then used to carry on the work of the local church.

Prayer

Churches of Christ also give serious attention to prayer. The New Testament has much to say about prayer in the life of the faithful Christian (e.g., Ephesians 6:18; Philip-
pians 4:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; James 5:13). Even as the early church gave herself continually to prayer, churches of Christ include this feature of worship in their worship assemblies (Acts 2:42; 1 Timothy 2:1-8).

Preaching, Teaching, Bible Reading

A final avenue of worship through which churches of Christ approach God in their corporate assemblies is through preaching, teaching, Bible study, and Scripture reading. When the church listens to and contemplates the meaning of the Scriptures, he or she is receiving direct information from God. Christians honor God when they are receptive to His admonitions issued through His Word. Consequently, a preacher will typically preach a gospel sermon to the congregation at some point in the service. A designated member may read a passage from the Bible to the entire assembly (1 Timothy 4:13).

In these ways, Christians worship God by encountering Him in His Word.

Summary

Luke summarized the worship of the first church of Christ in these words: “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). Churches of Christ endeavor to emulate these avenues of worship in their own assemblies, by continuing in the apostles’ doctrine (teaching, preaching, and examining doctrinal truth), fellowship (weekly contributions to the work of the church), the breaking of bread (the Lord’s Supper), and in prayers. As noted above, they also engage in congregational singing at every service. The public worship assemblies of faithful churches of Christ employ these five acts of worship—without modification or human addition.

The worship of churches of Christ is extremely simple and unpretentious—free from the hype and glitter that bored humans frequently fabricate. Faithful churches of Christ have restored simple New Testament worship in their congregations. They meet together every first day of the week and commune together around the Lord’s Table; they sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs together; they contribute a percentage of their income to carry on the work of the church; they pray together; and they study the Word of God together.

Chapter 7

WORK AND PURPOSE

Churches of Christ recognize that the unique mission of the church is to bring glory to God (1 Corinthians 6:20). Peter explained: “If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, **that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ**, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1 Peter 4:11, emp. added). This task is accomplished through essentially three avenues of activity.

Evangelism

First, churches of Christ place a high priority on spreading the Gospel of Christ to the human race (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:46-47; Acts 8:4; Romans 10:14; Philippians 2:15-16; Hebrews 5:12-

14). This prime directive stems from the fact that, as noted earlier, after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, He issued to His apostles what some have called the "Great Commission." The apostles, and by implication all Christians since, are to go into the whole world and preach the Gospel to every creature (Mark 16:16). This objective is accomplished in many ways. Some churches support fulltime missionaries in foreign fields. Others harness mass media by producing television and radio programs, Internet Web sites, newspaper advertisements, or mass mail outs. Some go door-to-door and speak with their neighbors.

Edification

Second, churches of Christ try to keep their members faithful (Romans 14:19; 15:1-3; Ephesians 4:12; Jude 20-24). Edification, which refers to building up the body of Christ, is generally accomplished by providing members with a strong program of Bible study. Bible classes, with teachers for all age groups, are typically held on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights. Other forms of encouragement to sustain members spiritually include gospel meetings, seminars, retreats, lectureships, and other means of strengthening the saints.

Benevolence

Third, churches of Christ seek to manifest a benevolent spirit to society. Assistance is given to the poor and those

who are struggling with the physical necessities of life (Matthew 25:31-46; Galatians 6:10; James 2:1-17). Even as Jesus placed a high priority on being compassionate towards the needy, so faithful churches of Christ strive to assist their fellowman with their basic needs.

These three avenues serve to summarize the basic work of the church. In short, churches of Christ attempt to achieve complete conformity to the will of Christ (Matthew 22:37-38; 2 Corinthians 5:9; 10:5; Ecclesiastes 12:13).

Chapter 8

CONCLUSION

Churches of Christ today possess as a conscious, deliberate intention to be reproductions of the church of Christ that is described in the New Testament. Members of churches of Christ are certainly not perfect. As in the first century, churches of Christ are composed of imperfect people. But the superstructure of the New Testament church has been set in place. Therefore, it is possible for anyone to be **simply a Christian**—a member of the church we read about in the New Testament—**the church of Christ**.

That's not to say that all groups who wear the name "church of Christ" are following the New Testament portrait of the church. A church may have a scriptural name without engaging in scriptural worship. Some churches

of Christ have followed the road to apostasy by restructuring the church and making unscriptural changes. Such churches cannot be endorsed, even though they continue to wear the name “church of Christ.”

Nevertheless, every reader of this book can be a member of the New Testament church. You do not have to settle for a manmade denomination. Study for yourself what the **New Testament** says about the church of Christ. If you conform yourself to the teaching of the New Testament by obeying the gospel plan of salvation, then you, too, can be simply a member of the church of Christ.

Appendix A

NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTIANITY VS. DENOMINATIONALISM

What is a “denomination”? Does God approve of denominations? These extremely significant and critical questions deserve answers from the Word of God.

When we go to the New Testament and examine God’s Word with a view toward ascertaining what His will is with regard to religion, we find that there is a clearly defined system of religion—**God’s** religion—in the New Testament. It is the religion of Christ that has come to be called Christianity. We also find that Satan does everything he can to blur the distinctions that God wants observed. We should not be surprised at that. Think about the great hoaxes that have been perpetrated upon mankind. For instance, the doctrine of evolution

is almost universally believed by the scientific elite of many societies. So it is with many political, philosophical, and religious systems of thought like Communism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Those who have examined the evidence—objective truth—on these matters know that those systems of thought simply are not true. Yet large numbers of people adhere to them.

In 2 Corinthians 2:11, Paul spoke about the fact that Satan endeavors to take advantage of people. He said that we should not let Satan take advantage of us, “for we are not ignorant of his devices.” The word “devices” means “schemes.” We must be aware of the fact that Satan uses deceitful, deceptive ploys in an effort to trick people to get them to believe and practice various things that simply are not true. In a similar statement, Paul used the phrase “wiles of the devil” (Ephesians 6:11). Most people are oblivious to this fact. Many people do not even believe that Satan exists—any more than they believe that God exists. Yet if the New Testament is true, it is clear there is a Satan, and he will do all he can to fool, trick, and deceive people. He wants to obscure distinctions that God wants observed—distinctions that are scriptural and biblical.

It is clear that this is the case with **denominationalism**. Consider the following dictionary definitions (*American...*, 2000, p. 485). The term “denominate” means “to give a name to; designate.” “Denomination” is “[a] large group

of religious congregations united under a common faith and name and organized under a single administrative and legal hierarchy; a name or designation, especially for a class or group.” “Denominator” refers to “[t]he expression written below the line in a common fraction that indicates the number of parts into which one whole is divided.” “Denominationalism” is “[t]he tendency to separate into religious denominations; sectarianism.” Think about these meanings for just a moment. The very word “denomination” refers to a named or designated division. Denominationalism occurs when religious people and groups divide and segregate themselves on the basis of different designations or church affiliations and different doctrines.

Have you gone to the New Testament and read Jesus’ prayer for unity in John chapter 17? There He prayed **against** religious division, and prayed to God that believers in Christ would be unified! Paul made the same point to the church of Christ in Corinth: “I beseech you brothers by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that you all speak the same thing and that there be no divisions among you” (1 Corinthians 1:10). Here is a passage that says denominations are not even to exist! “Let there be no divisions among you.” If a denomination is a “designated division,” then denominationalism is clearly unscriptural! It is against the will of Christ. The passage

continues, “but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.”

I assure you, I have nothing against any particular religious group. I have no biases or prejudices against any one church or denomination. But we must go to Scripture and be objective in our appraisal of New Testament truth. It is clear when we go to the Bible that denominationalism, though viewed innocently by millions of people worldwide, is an approach to religion that is out of harmony with New Testament teaching. **God does not want denominations to exist.** He wants all of us to understand His will in the New Testament, and then to bring our lives into conformity and our spirits into submission to that will.

“One Body” = One Church

In Ephesians 1:22-23, the body of Christ is referred to as the church, and later we are told that there is only one (4:4). Those two passages alone should cause us to recognize that the existence of denominations is out of harmony with God’s will. Ephesians 4:4 says there is one body. That body is the church of our Lord. He established it; He built it; He purchased it with His own blood (Acts 20: 28). If there is only one church, God is not pleased with the division, the named designations, of competing churches with various names, doctrines, and practices.

In 1 Timothy 3:15, Paul wrote to Timothy that he might know how to conduct himself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God. Most people just do not realize that New Testament truth is that simple, that plain, and that uncomplicated. The denominationalism that has gripped western civilization is so entrenched and so entangled in the minds of people that they seem to be unable to detach themselves from it, and to go back to the New Testament to get a clear conception of the New Testament church. They seem unable or unwilling to embrace pure New Testament teaching and to repudiate all denominationalism.

Pluralism: “Live and Let Live,” “I’m Okay, You’re Okay”

Our society says, “People ought to be free to believe what they want. Don’t be judgmental. You don’t have any right to say they are wrong.” But such propaganda is unbiblical. **God** has a right. He is the Creator, and He said in His Word that we must know His truth, we must be right about that truth, and we must obey that truth (Hebrews 5:9). Jesus said, “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15). He also said, “[Y]ou shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). Paul spoke about the time when people would refuse to hear healthy teaching (2 Timothy 4:3). But God wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4).

The Scriptures make clear that God never has and never will sanction the present blurring of the distinction between the New Testament church and the manmade, counterfeit churches that exist in abundance. Many seem oblivious to the fact that no denominations can be found in the Bible. They appear unaware of the fact that the Bible describes a single church—Christ’s church.

The only hope of any individual is to be in the one true church living faithfully in accordance with God’s desires. The New Testament teaches that we must stay with **God’s** words. We are not free to deviate, or to believe and practice whatever **we** choose (2 John 9; 1 Corinthians 4:6; Galatians 1:8). In the final analysis, denominationalism is what results when humans assert their own religious inclinations, formulate their own religious doctrines, and originate their own churches. Solomon’s words ought to cause every single person to refrain from affiliation with denominationalism: “Every word of God is pure. He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him. Do not add to His words lest He reprove you and you be found a liar” (Proverbs 30:5-6).

The truth continues to be that denominations are manmade divisions, unmitigated departures from the faith. Denominationalism is about the best thing Satan has come up with to subvert the truth of the Bible and to bring otherwise religious people under his influence. The world religions, as well as those who embrace hu-

manistic philosophies like atheism, by definition, have rejected the one true God and have capitulated to Satan. So where do you suppose Satan is going to focus the brunt of his assault upon the Earth? The more he is able to muddy the waters and to obscure the certainty of the truth, the more chance he has of luring people into his clutches.

CONCLUSION

If one could be just a Christian in the first century without being affiliated with any denomination, then one can be simply a New Testament Christian today. If denominations were not created by God, but have, in fact, come into existence **since** the first century, then to participate in and support denominations is to promote that which God did not create. It is to give sanction to mere manmade invention, and to tamper with the divine system originated by God and Christ. It is to subject oneself to the eventual wrath of God, for Jesus Himself declared: "Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted" (Matthew 15:13).

If we would truly fathom that the church of Christ is distinctive, exclusive, and unique; if we would truly view fraternization with the denominations as traitorous; if we would love the genuine body of Christ with the same fervency and jealousy with which Jesus loves her; then we would be in a position to proclaim with Paul: "Unto

Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end” (Ephesians 3:21).

REFERENCE

American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (2000), (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin), fourth edition.

Appendix B

THE THIEF ON THE CROSS

Legion are those who dismiss water baptism as pre-requisite to salvation on the grounds that “the thief on the cross was not baptized.” The thought is that since the thief was suspended on the cross when Jesus said to him, “Today you will be with Me in paradise” (Luke 23:43), he was being pronounced as saved by Christ without being required to be baptized. As one well-known preacher put it, “There was no water within 10 miles of the cross.” Please give consideration to two important observations.

First, the thief may well have been baptized **prior** to being placed on the cross. Considerable scriptural evidence points to this conclusion (Matthew 3:5-6; Mark 1:4-5; Luke 3:21; 7:29-30). If he was, in fact, baptized, he

would have been baptized with the baptism administered by John the Baptizer. John's baptism was temporary (i.e., in force only during his personal ministry, terminating at the death of Christ). However, even John's baptism was "for the remission of sins" (Mark 1:4) and, hence, essential for salvation for those to whom it was addressed. John's baptism, like the one administered by Jesus while He was on Earth (John 3:22,26; 4:1-2), was unique and temporary. It was addressed **only** to Jews, and only to the Jews who populated the vicinity of **Jerusalem and Judea**. It was designed to prepare the **Jewish** people for the arrival of the Messiah. But John's baptism must not be confused with **New Testament** baptism that is addressed to everybody, and that did not take effect until **after** the cross of Christ. If the thief was a Jew, and if he already had submitted to John's baptism, there would have been no need for him to be re-baptized. He simply would have needed to repent of his post-baptism thievery and acknowledge his sins—which the text plainly indicates that he did.

Second, and most important, the real issue pertains to an extremely crucial feature of Bible interpretation. This hermeneutical feature is so critical that, if a person does not grasp it, his effort to sort out Bible teaching, in order to arrive at correct conclusions, will be inevitably hampered. This principle was spotlighted by Paul when he wrote to Timothy and told him he must "rightly divide the word

of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). In other words, if one simply takes the entire Bible—all 66 books—and treats them as if everything that is said applies directly and equally to everyone, his effort to be in harmony with God’s Word will be hopeless and futile. For example, if a person turned to Genesis 6 and read where God instructed Noah to build a boat, if he did not study enough to determine whether such instruction applied to himself, he would end up building his **own** boat—the entire time thinking that God wanted him to do so! The Bible is literally filled with commands, instructions, and requirements that were **not intended to be duplicated** by people living today. Does God forbid you and me from eating a certain fruit (Genesis 2:17; 3:3)? Are we to refrain from boiling a baby goat in its mother’s milk (Exodus 23:19)? Does God want you and me to offer our son as a burnt offering (Genesis 22:2)? Are we commanded to load up and leave our homeland (Genesis 12:1)? Moving to the New Testament, does God want you to sell everything you have and give it to the poor (Matthew 19:21)? Does God expect you to leave everything, quit your job, and devote yourself full time to spiritual pursuits (Matthew 4:20; 19:27; Mark 10:28; Luke 5:28)? Does God intend for you to “desire spiritual gifts” (1 Corinthians 14:1), i.e., seek to possess miraculous abilities? The point is that the entire Bible applies to the entire human race. However, careful and diligent study is necessary to determine **how**

it applies. We must understand the biblical distinction between the application of the **principles** of the Bible and the **specific details**.

Here, then, is the central point as it pertains to the relevance of the thief on the cross: Beginning at Creation, all humans were amenable to the laws of God that were given to them at that time. Bible students typically call this period of time the Patriarchal Dispensation. During this period, which lasted from Creation to the cross, non-Jews were subject to a body of legislation passed down by God through the fathers of family clans (cf. Hebrews 1:1). In approximately 1500 B.C., God removed the genetic descendants of Abraham from Egyptian bondage, took them out into the Sinai desert, and gave them their own law code (the Law of Moses). Jews were subject to that body of legal information from that time until it, too, was terminated at the cross of Christ. The following passages substantiate these assertions: Matthew 27:51; Romans 2:12-16; Galatians 3:7-29; Ephesians 2:11-22; Colossians 2:11-17. The book of Hebrews addresses this subject extensively. To get to the heart of the matter quickly, read especially Hebrews 9:15-17. When one "correctly handles the Word of truth," one sees that the Bible teaches that when Christ died on the cross, Patriarchal and Mosaic law came to an end. At that point, all humans on the planet became amenable to **the law of Christ** (cf. Galatians 6:2). The law of Christ consists strictly of information

that is intended to be in effect **after** the death of Christ. It includes **some** of the things that Jesus and His disciples taught while He was still on Earth. But as regards the **specifics** of salvation, one must go to Acts 2 and the rest of the New Testament (especially the book of Acts) in order to determine what one must do today to be saved. Beginning in Acts 2, the new covenant of Christ took effect, and every single individual who responded correctly to the preaching of the Gospel was **baptized in water in order to be forgiven of sin by the blood of Christ**. Recall the chart on page 21. Every detail of an individual's conversion is not always mentioned, but a perusal of the book of Acts demonstrates decisively that water immersion was a **prerequisite** to forgiveness, along with faith, repentance, and confession of the deity of Christ (Acts 2:38,41; 8:12,13,16,36-38; 9:18; 10:47-48; 16:15,33; 18:8; 19:5; 22:16).

The thief was not subject to the New Testament command to be baptized into Christ's death (Romans 6:3-4), just as Moses, Abraham, and David were not amenable to it. They all lived **prior** to the cross under different law codes. They could not have been baptized into Christ's death—**because He had not yet died!** The establishment of the church of Christ and the launching of the Christian religion did not occur until **after** Christ's death, on the day of Pentecost in the year A.D. 30 in the city of Jerusalem (Acts 2). An honest and accurate appraisal of

the biblical data forces us to conclude that the thief on the cross is not an appropriate example of how people are to be saved this side of the cross.

Appendix C

THE ESSENTIALITY OF BAPTISM

Several aspects of the New Testament as it relates to baptism merit special consideration in this book. Why? Because it constitutes a fundamental difference between the churches of Christ and the denominational world at large.

The New Birth

A major cleavage within Christendom pertains to **when** the new birth occurs. Most of Christendom maintains that a person is born again, and thus has sin washed away by the blood of Christ, when that person “accepts Jesus Christ as his personal savior.” By this expression it is meant that a person must mentally/orally decide to embrace Christ as the Lord of his life. Hence, the new birth is seen simply as a determination of the will—a mo-

ment in time when the person accepts Christ in his mind and couples that decision with an oral confession.

The passage in the New Testament that alludes specifically to being born again pertains to a conversation that Jesus had with a high-ranking Jewish official:

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is **born again**, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, **unless one is born of water and the Spirit**, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be **born again**.'" (John 3:1-7, emp. added).

In an effort to avoid identifying "water" (vs. 5) as water baptism, many within Christendom in the last half century have proposed a variety of novel interpretations. For example, some have proposed that "water" is a reference to the Holy Spirit. While it is certainly true that John uses the word water symbolically to represent the Spirit later in his book (7:38-39), that fact had to be explained by the inspired writer. However, in chapter three the normal, literal meaning is clearly in view, not only because water

baptism throughout the New Testament is consistently associated with the salvation event (e.g., Acts 2:38; 8:12-13,36-38; 9:18; 10:47-48; 16:15,33; 18:8; 19:5; 22:16; Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:12; Hebrews 10:22; 1 Peter 3:21), but even in this context, 18 verses later, the term clearly has a literal meaning: “Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much **water** there” (John 3:23). Additionally, if water in John 3:5 is an allusion to the Holy Spirit, the result would be nonsensical: “unless one is born of the Spirit and the Spirit.”

Another quibble offered in an effort to avoid the clear import of John 3:5 is that “water” is a symbol for the blood of Jesus. Of course, no rationale exists for making such a connection. Elsewhere John refers explicitly to water and blood, but clearly distinguishes them from each other in their import (1 John 5:6).

Perhaps the most popular notion, advanced only in recent years, is that water is a reference to the “water,” i.e., amniotic fluid, that accompanies the physical birth of a child. However, this novel concept likewise fails to fit the context of Jesus’ remarks. In fact, Nicodemus thought Jesus was referring to physical birth (“mother’s womb”). But Jesus corrected his misconception and contrasted such thinking with the intended meaning of “water and Spirit.” Indeed, Jesus would not have told Nicodemus that he needed to be born physically (“water”). He would

not have included the act of physical birth in His listing of prerequisites to entering the kingdom. That would make Jesus say that before a person can enter the kingdom he or she must first be a person! What would be the point of stating such a thing? Perhaps to make certain that everyone knows that **non**-humans, or perhaps animals, cannot enter the kingdom?! Later in the same chapter, did John baptize near Salim “because there was much amniotic fluid there” (vs. 23)?

If one cares to consult the rest of the New Testament in order to allow the Bible to be its own best interpreter, and in order to allow the Bible to harmonize with itself, additional passages shed light on the meaning of John 3:5. According to the rest of the New Testament, spiritual **conception** occurs when the Gospel (i.e., the seed of the Holy Spirit—Luke 8:11) is implanted in the human heart/mind (James 1:18; 1 Corinthians 4:15; Ephesians 6:17; 1 Peter 1:23). The Word of God, in turn, generates penitent faith in the human heart (Romans 10:17) that leads the individual to obey the Gospel by being baptized in water (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Hebrews 10:22). The resulting condition of the individual is that he or she is now a child of God, a citizen of the kingdom, and member of the church of Christ (Matthew 28:19-20; Galatians 3:26-27; Romans 6:4).

Additional verses in the New Testament clarify and cinch this meaning of John 3:5, pinpointing the meaning

of the “new birth,” while also allowing us to understand the activity of the Holy Spirit in the act of conversion. Consider the following chart (Jackson, 1988):

John 3:5	Spirit	Water	Kingdom
1 Corinthians 12:13	Spirit	Baptized	Body
Ephesians 5:26	Word	Washing/Water	Cleansed Church
Titus 3:5	Renewal of Spirit	Washing of Regeneration	Saved by Mercy

These verses demonstrate that God achieves conversion through the gospel message authored by the Holy Spirit. When a person comes to an understanding (Acts 8:30) of the gospel message, his penitent faith leads him to submit to water immersion for the remission of sins (Acts 8:36,38; 10:47). The result of his obedient response to the Gospel is that he is saved and cleansed from past sin and instantaneously placed into the kingdom of Christ.

Notice that submission to the divine plan of salvation does not mean that humans save themselves by effecting their own salvation. Their obedience does not earn or merit their forgiveness. Rather, the terms or conditions of salvation are stipulated **by God**—not by humans—and are a manifestation of **His** mercy! When people submit to the terms of entrance into the kingdom of Christ, they are saved by the blood of Jesus and the grace of God—not their own effort! Water immersion is not to be viewed as a “work of righteousness which

we have done” (Titus 3:5). When we submit to baptism, we are being saved by “the kindness and love of God our Savior” (Titus 3:4). We are being saved “according to His mercy” (Titus 3:5).

Is Baptism a Symbol?

The design of water baptism in the New Testament is unquestionably to allow for the sinner’s sins to be removed by the blood of Jesus. This purpose is variously described as “to be saved” (Mark 16:16), “for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38), to “put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27), to “enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5), to “wash away your sins” (Acts 22:16), to place one “into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13) and “into Christ” (Romans 6:3). These are parallel expressions that pinpoint the same design.

In an effort to avoid the clear import of such verses, some theologians have concocted the notion that water baptism is a **post**-salvation action that **follows** the forgiveness of sins. Christendom, almost in its entirety, insists that remission of sin is imparted to the sinner at the very moment the sinner “believes” (i.e., accepts Jesus as personal Savior). This reception of Christ is an internal, mostly intellectual/mental decision in which the individual makes a genuine commitment to receive Jesus as Lord.

In his book *How To Be Born Again*, Billy Graham articulated the viewpoint espoused by the bulk of Christendom: “All you have to do to be born again is to repent

of your sins and believe in the Lord Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior” (1977, p. 156). He stated further: “Faith is trust, an act of commitment, in which I open the door of my heart to Him” (p. 160); “It means a single, individual relinquishment of mind and heart toward the one person, Jesus Christ” (p. 161); “Conversion occurs when we repent and place our faith in Christ” (p. 162). Near the close of his book, Graham summarized the prevailing view of when forgiveness occurs:

Make it happen **now**. ...If you are willing to repent for your sins and to receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you can do it now. At this moment you can either bow your head or get on your knees and say this little prayer which I have used with thousands of persons on every continent: O God, I acknowledge that I have sinned against You. I am sorry for my sins. I am willing to turn from my sins. I openly receive and acknowledge Jesus Christ as my Savior. I confess Him as Lord. From this moment on I want to live for Him and serve Him. In Jesus’ name. Amen. ...If you are willing to make this decision and have received Jesus Christ as your own Lord and Savior, then you have become a child of God in whom Jesus Christ dwells. ...You are born again (pp. 168-169, emp. in orig.).

Mr. Graham leaves no doubt as to his view of when forgiveness of sins occurs, and that it occurs before and without water baptism.

Another popular Christian writer, Max Lucado, expressed the same viewpoint in his book, *He Did This Just for You*:

Would you let him save you? This is the most important decision you will ever make. Why don't you give your heart to him right now? **Admit** your need. **Agree** with his work. **Accept** his gift. Go to God in prayer and tell him, *I am a sinner in need of grace. I believe that Jesus died for me on the cross. I accept your offer of salvation.* It's a simple prayer with eternal results (2000, p. 50, italics and emp. in orig.).

Lucado then followed this statement with a “response page” that provided the reader with the opportunity to make the decision that he (Lucado) had just advocated. The page, titled “Your Response,” includes the statement, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of the Living God. I want him to be the Lord of my life,” and is followed by two blank lines, one for the reader to sign his or her name, and the other to record the date (p. 51).

These two widely recognized figures are sufficient to establish the point: most within Christendom believe that salvation occurs **prior** to water baptism. The Protestant world has insisted that water baptism is a secondary and subsequent action to salvation. But if this is the case, what then is the purpose of baptism? Various religionists have maintained that it serves as “an outward sign of an inward grace.” That is, since a person already has received the saving grace of God by which sins have

been cleansed, baptism serves the purpose of providing an **outward** demonstration or public declaration that the person has already been saved. The claim is that baptism is a **symbol**—a visible expression of the forgiveness already received at the point of faith.

Perhaps the reader would be shocked to find that the Bible nowhere articulates this unbiblical—albeit provocative—concept. It is the figment of someone’s vivid imagination that has been taken up and repeated so often that it “sounds biblical,” even when it is not. When Ananias prodded Paul to “arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 22:16), he said nothing about an alleged **symbolic** (versus actual) cleansing or **post**-forgiveness washing. He uttered not one word that would lead the unbiased reader to even remotely conclude that Paul’s sins were washed away **before** he was baptized in water.

The grammar that the Holy Spirit selected by which to express Himself is very often a key to allowing the Bible to interpret itself. In Acts 22:16, the grammar militates against the denominational interpretation that so often is imposed on Paul’s baptism. The Holy Spirit utilized two participles and two verbs in verse 16 that clarify His intended meaning:

- *anastas* is an aorist **active participle**: “having arisen” or “rising”
- *baptisai* is an aorist **middle imperative verb**: “get yourself baptized”
- *apolousai* is also an aorist **middle imperative verb**: “get your sins washed away”
- *epikalesamenos* is an aorist **middle participle**: “you will have been calling”

An adverbial participle is a participle that is used as an adverb to modify the verb. “Calling” is an adverbial participle of manner. It shows the **manner** in which the main verbs are accomplished. The verbs (“baptized” and “wash away sins”)—joined by the coordinate conjunction “and” (*kai*)—are “causative middles” (Robertson, 1934, p. 808) in the aorist tense, and so relate to the aorist middle of the participle that follows (“calling”). Hence, a literal translation would be: “Having arisen, get yourself baptized and get your sins washed away, and you will have been calling on the name of the Lord.” In other words, Ananias was telling Paul that the way to accomplish “calling on the Lord” was to be baptized and have his sins washed away.

But doesn't the Bible teach that baptism is, in fact, a **symbol**? Doesn't baptism have “symbolic” significance? Yes, the Bible assigns symbolic significance to baptism in regard to at least three distinct features.

Romans 6:3-18

In a context dealing with the power of the Gospel to counteract sin (5:20), Paul addressed the potential misconception that some may form in thinking that the continued indulgence in sin might be justified in order to allow grace to flourish (6:1). When the Romans became Christians, they died to sin (vs. 2). Thus, they should no more have continued a sinful lifestyle, than a physically deceased person could continue living physically. In

arguing his point, Paul informed the Romans that water baptism symbolizes the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. He used the term “likeness” (and later “form”) to pinpoint this symbolism:

Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin (Romans 6:3-8).

When the believing, penitent non-Christian allows him or herself to be lowered into the watery grave of baptism, a parallel to Christ’s redemptive work is taking place. Baptism is into Christ’s **death** because that is where He shed His blood on our behalf. The atoning activity of Christ was achieved in His death, burial, and resurrection. Consequently, the alien sinner taps into that redemptive power in the act of water immersion. The “newness of life” **follows**—not precedes—baptism (vs. 6). The “old man of sin,” the “body of sin,” is eliminated in the waters of baptism. Being immersed in water—“buried in baptism” (vs. 4)—is equivalent to “you

obeyed from the heart that **form** of doctrine to which you were delivered” (vs. 17). Only **then**, i.e., in the act of emulating Jesus’ atonement in the waters of baptism, is one “set free from sin” (vs. 18). To summarize, notice that seven significant achievements occur at the point of water immersion: (1) baptized into Christ; (2) baptized into Christ’s death; (3) newness of life; (4) united in His death; (5) old man/body of sin crucified/done away; (6) no longer slaves of sin; and (7) freed from sin.

Colossians 2:11-13

A second depiction of baptism as a symbol is seen in Paul’s identification of a link between baptism and the Old Testament practice of circumcision. God introduced the rite of circumcision into His covenant relationship with Abraham (Genesis 17:10ff.). This surgical procedure was strictly a **physical** feature of the Abrahamic covenant sustained by God with the **physical** descendants of Abraham, i.e., the Israelites. In this sense, it did not pertain ultimately to one’s **spiritual** standing with God (1 Corinthians 7:19). In contrasting and comparing Christianity with various unacceptable religions and philosophies, Paul used the physical rite of Jewish circumcision as a parallel to water baptism:

In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him

through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses (Colossians 2:11-14).

One must be very careful to allow the text to express itself with regard to the intended symbolism, refraining from drawing unintended points of comparison. The point that Paul was making is the idea that as skin was cut off in the act of circumcision, so sins are cut off at baptism—**skin vs. sin!**

Paul underscored this meaning by alluding to the fact that baptism in water involves a burial followed by a resurrection—being “raised” (vs. 12). Twelve verses later, he again referred to this rising from the waters of baptism: “If then you were **raised** with Christ...” (3:1, emp. added). The conclusion is unmistakable: being buried/lowered into the waters of baptism, and then being raised from those waters, is the point at which sin is removed from the sinner—in the same way that flesh was removed from the body in the act of circumcision.

In fact, Paul presented precisely the same case to the Colossians that he presented to the Romans. Note carefully the points of comparison in the following chart:

Romans 6	Colossians 2/3
“we died” (6:2)	(3:3) “you died”
“we died with Christ” (6:8)	(2:20) “you died with Christ”
“buried with Him/baptism” (6:4)	(2:12) “buried with Him/baptism”
“Christ raised from dead” (6:4)	(2:12) “raised Him from dead”
“Walk in newness of life” (6:4)	(3:1) “Seek things above”
“be dead to sin” (6:11)	(3:5) “put to death your members”
“live any longer in it” (6:2)	(3:7) “when you lived in them”

Both passages teach that people are dead in sin and lost until they access the benefits of the death of Christ by being buried in water baptism. At that point, a person becomes dead to sin in the mind of God. Coming up out of the waters of baptism is a type of resurrection that signals a change in the way that person now lives life.

1 Peter 3:20-22

Peter added a third instance of baptism’s symbolic value.

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience

toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him (1 Peter 3:18-22).

Peter made a powerful point of comparison. The antediluvian people had the opportunity to hear God's will for their lives. Noah preached to them (2 Peter 2:5), perhaps for over a century (Genesis 6:3). But the day came when God brought the Flood waters upon the Earth, drowning the entire human population with the exception of only eight individuals. Peter noted that those eight people were "saved by (i.e., *dia*—**through**) water," i.e., through the medium of water. In other words, God used water as the dividing line between the lost and the saved. The water was the medium that separated the eight members of Noah's family from the rest of humanity. He then compared—not the ark—but those Flood waters with the water of baptism. The water of baptism is the dividing line that God has designated to distinguish between the lost person and the saved person.

But does that mean that H₂O is the **cleansing agent**? Of course not. Such a conclusion is unwarranted, and would certainly contradict other clear biblical testimony. Salvation is dependent upon and accomplished by means of the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross—His death, burial, and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). Likewise, immersion must be preceded by faith, repentance, and confession of the deity of Christ. But

Peter included this very point in his discussion. When one removes the parenthetical material from the verse, the interplay between baptism and Christ's redemptive activity is clearly seen: "There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." "Resurrection" is the figure of speech known as synecdoche in which the part is put in place of the whole. "Resurrection" includes the entire atoning event of Jesus—death, burial, and resurrection. Hence, Peter attributed one's salvation to Christ's work on the cross—but the application of this salvific achievement to the sinner occurs **at the point of baptism**.

Summary

The Bible is its own best interpreter. It teaches that baptism is, indeed, a symbol. **But what does baptism symbolize?** It symbolizes: (1) Christ's death, burial, and resurrection; (2) the act of "cutting off" in circumcision; and (3) the waters of the Flood. How could anyone get out of this that **baptism symbolizes past forgiveness** that was achieved **prior** to being immersed? The honest exegete is forced to conclude that the Bible nowhere expounds such a notion. The symbolism associated with water baptism further verifies the essentiality of immersion as a mandatory prerequisite to forgiveness. We dare not go beyond what is written (1 Corinthians 4:6), since it is by Jesus' words that we will be judged (John 12:48).

Christ at the Door of Your Heart?

One of the most familiar expressions uttered within Christendom is: “Christ stands at the door of your heart.” Many have been the preachers who have urged their hearers to “invite Jesus into their hearts” in order to be forgiven of sin and made a Christian. Someone said if you repeat a statement enough times, people will come to accept it on the basis of sheer repetition and familiarity. The admonition that “Christ stands at the door of your heart” has been repeated so frequently that, for many, to question it is unthinkable. One would think that since this approach to salvation is so widespread, and the expression is so predominant, that surely the statement can be found in Scripture—even if only in so many words. How disturbing to realize that **the statement is not found in Scripture** and that the Bible simply does not teach this doctrine!

The phraseology is reminiscent of Revelation 3:20—the passage usually quoted to support the idea of Christ standing at the door of one’s heart. But observe the context. Revelation chapters two and three consist of seven specific mini-letters directed to the seven churches of Christ in Asia Minor near the end of the first century. At the outset, one must recognize that Revelation 3:20 is addressed to **Christians**—not non-Christians on the verge of conversion.

Second, the verse is found among Christ's remarks to the church in Laodicea. Jesus made clear that the church had moved into an unfaithful condition. They were **lost**. They were unacceptable to God since they were "lukewarm" (3:16). They had become unsaved since their spiritual condition was "wretched and miserable and poor" (3:17). Thus, in a very real sense, Jesus had abandoned them by removing His presence from their midst. Now He was on the outside looking in. He still wanted to be among them, but the decision was up to them. They had to recognize His absence, hear Him knocking for admission, and open the door—all of which is figurative language to say that they must **repent** (3:19). They would have to return to the obedient lifestyle so essential to receiving God's favor (John 14:21,23).

This means that Revelation 3:20 **in no way** supports the idea that non-Christians merely have to "open the door of their heart" and "invite Jesus in" with the assurance that the moment they mentally/verbally do so, Jesus will come into their heart and they will be simultaneously saved from all past sin and counted as Christians! The **context** of Revelation 3:20 shows that Jesus was **seeking readmission into an apostate church**.

"But doesn't the Bible teach that Christ does come into a person's heart?" Yes. But not the way the religious world suggests. Ephesians 3:17 states that Christ dwells in the heart **through** faith. Faith can be acquired only

by hearing biblical truth (Romans 10:17). When that biblical truth is **obeyed**, the individual is “saved by faith” (Hebrews 5:9; James 2:22; 1 Peter 1:22; et al.). So Christ enters our lives when we “draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of **faith**, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience [i.e., when we **repent** of our sins] and our bodies washed with pure water [i.e., when we are **baptized** in water]” (Hebrews 10:22). Here is the New Testament (i.e., non-denominational) way to accept Christ.

Calling on the Lord

Considering how many people within “Christendom” teach that an individual can be saved merely by professing a belief in Christ, it is not surprising that skeptics claim that the Bible contradicts itself in this regard. Although Peter and Paul declared, “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21; Romans 10:13; cf. Joel 2:32), skeptics quickly remind their readers that Jesus once stated: “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21; cf. Luke 6:46). Allegedly, Matthew 7:21 clashes with such passages as Acts 2:21 and Romans 10:13 (see Morgan, 2003; Wells, 2001). Since many professed Christians seem to equate “calling on the name of the Lord” with the idea of saying to Jesus, “Lord, I receive You,” Bible critics feel even more justified in their pronouncement

of “conflicting testimonies.” How can certain professed followers of Christ claim that they were saved by simply “calling out to Christ,” when Christ Himself proclaimed that a mere calling upon Him would not save a person?

The key to understanding correctly the phrase “calling on the name of the Lord” is to recognize that more is involved in this action than a mere verbal petition directed toward God. The “call” mentioned in Acts 2:21, Romans 10:13, and Acts 22:16 (where Paul was “calling on the name of the Lord”), is not equated with the “call” (“Lord, Lord”) Jesus spoke of in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:21).

First, it is appropriate to mention that even in modern times, to “call on” someone frequently means more than simply making a request for something. When a doctor goes to the hospital to “call on” some of his patients, he does not merely walk into the room and say, “I just wanted to come by and say, ‘Hello.’ I wish you the best. Now pay me.” On the contrary, he involves himself in a service. He examines the patient, listens to the patient’s concerns, gives further instructions regarding the patient’s hopeful recovery, and then oftentimes prescribes medication. All of these elements may be involved in a doctor “calling upon” a patient. In the mid-twentieth century, it was common for young men to “call on” young ladies. Again, this expression meant something different than just “making a request” (Brown, 1976, p. 5).

Second, when an individual takes the time to study how the expression “calling on God” is used throughout Scripture, the only reasonable conclusion to draw is that, just as similar phrases sometimes have a deeper meaning in modern America, the expression “calling on God” often had a deeper meaning in Bible times. Take, for instance, Paul’s statement recorded in Acts 25:11: “I appeal unto Caesar.” The word “appeal” (*epikaloumai*) is the same word translated “call” (or “calling”) in Acts 2:21, 22:16, and Romans 10:13. But, Paul was not simply saying, “I’m calling on Caesar to save me.” As James Bales noted:

Paul, in appealing to Caesar, was claiming the right of a Roman citizen to have his case judged by Caesar. He was asking that his case be transferred to Caesar’s court and that Caesar hear and pass judgment on his case. In so doing, he indicated that he was resting his case on Caesar’s judgment. In order for this to be done Paul had to submit to whatever was necessary in order for his case to be brought before Caesar. He had to submit to the Roman soldiers who conveyed him to Rome. He had to submit to whatever formalities or procedure Caesar demanded of those who came before him. All of this was involved in his appeal to Caesar (1960, pp. 81-82, emp. added).

Paul’s “calling” to Caesar involved his submission to him. “That, in a nutshell,” wrote T. Pierce Brown, “is what ‘calling on the Lord’ involves”—obedience (1976, p. 5). It is not a mere verbal recognition of God, or a verbal

petition to Him. Those whom Paul (before his conversion to Christ) sought to bind in Damascus—Christians who were described as people “who call on Your [Jehovah’s] name”—were not people who only prayed to God, but those who were serving the Lord, and who, by their obedience, were submitting themselves to His authority (cf. Matthew 28:18). Interestingly, Zephaniah 3:9 links one’s “calling” with his “service”: “For then I will restore to the peoples a pure language, that they all may call on the name of the Lord, to serve Him with one accord” (emp. added). When a person submits to the will of God, he accurately can be described as “calling on the Lord.” Acts 2:21 and Romans 10:13 (among other passages) do not contradict Matthew 7:21, because to “call on the Lord” entails more than just pleading for salvation; it involves submitting to God’s will. According to Colossians 3:17, every single act a Christian performs (in word or deed) should be carried out by Christ’s authority. For a non-Christian receiving salvation, this is no different. In order to obtain salvation, a person must submit to the Lord’s authority. This is what the passages in Acts 2:21 and Romans 10:13 are teaching; it is up to us to go elsewhere in the New Testament to learn **how** to call upon the name of the Lord.

After Peter quoted the prophecy of Joel and told those in Jerusalem on Pentecost that “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21), he told

them how to go about “calling on the name of the Lord.” The people in the audience in Acts 2 did not understand Peter’s quotation of Joel to mean that an alien sinner must pray to God for salvation. [Their question in Acts 2:37 (“Men and brethren, what shall we do?”) indicates such.] Furthermore, when Peter responded to their question and told them what to do to be saved, he did not say, “I’ve already told you what to do. You can be saved by petitioning God for salvation through prayer. Just call on His name.” On the contrary, Peter had to explain to them what it meant to “call on the name of the Lord.” Instead of repeating this statement when the crowd sought further guidance from the apostles, Peter commanded them, saying, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (2:38). Notice the parallel:

Acts 2:21 = Acts 2:38

Acts 2:21	Whoever	calls	on the name	of the Lord	shall be saved
Acts 2:38	every one of you	repent and be baptized	in the name	of Jesus Christ	for the remission of sins

Peter’s non-Christian listeners learned that “calling on the name of the Lord for salvation” was equal to obeying the Gospel, which approximately 3,000 did that very day by repenting of their sins and being baptized into Christ (2:38,41).

But what about Romans 10:13? What is the “call” mentioned in this verse? Notice Romans 10:11-15:

For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!” (emp. added).

Although this passage does not define precisely what is meant by one “calling on the name of the Lord,” it does indicate that an alien sinner cannot “call” until after he has heard the Word of God and believed it. Such was meant by Paul’s rhetorical questions: “How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?” Paul’s statements in this passage are consistent with Peter’s proclamations in Acts 2. It was only after the crowd on Pentecost believed in the resurrected Christ Whom Peter preached (as is evident by their being “cut to the heart” and their subsequent question, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?”) that Peter told them how to call on the name of the Lord and be saved (2:38).

Perhaps the clearest description of what it means for an alien sinner to “call on the name of the Lord” is found in Acts 22. As the apostle Paul addressed the mob in Jerusalem, he spoke of his encounter with the Lord, Whom he asked, “What shall I do?” (22:10; cf. 9:6). The answer Jesus gave Him at that time was not “call on the name of the Lord.” Instead, Jesus instructed him to “arise and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all things which are appointed for you to do” (22:10). Paul (or Saul—Acts 13:9) demonstrated his belief in Jesus as he went into the city and waited for further instructions. In Acts 9, we learn that during the next three days, while waiting to meet with Ananias, Paul fasted and prayed (vss. 9,11). Although some today might consider what Paul was doing at this point as “calling on the name of the Lord,” Ananias, God’s chosen messenger to Paul, did not think so. He did not tell Paul, “I see you have already called on God. Your sins are forgiven.” After three days of fasting and praying, Paul still was lost in his sins. Even though he obviously believed at this point, and had prayed to God, he had yet to “call on the name of the Lord” for salvation. When Ananias finally came to Paul, he told him: “Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (22:16). Ananias knew that Paul had not yet “called on the name of the Lord,” just as Peter knew that those on Pentecost had not done so before his command to “repent and

be baptized.” Thus, Ananias instructed Paul to “be baptized, and wash away your sins.” The participle phrase, “calling on the name of the Lord,” describes what Paul was doing when he was baptized for the remission of his sins. Every non-Christian who desires to “call on the name of the Lord” to be saved, does so, not simply by saying, “Lord, Lord” (cf. Matthew 7:21), or just by wording a prayer to God (e.g., Paul—Acts 9; 22; cf. Romans 10:13-14), but by obeying God’s instructions to “repent and be baptized...in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins” (Acts 2:38).

This is not to say that repentance and baptism have always been (or are always today) synonymous with “calling on the name of the Lord.” Abraham was not baptized when he “called upon the name of the Lord” (Genesis 12:8; cf. 4:26), because baptism was not demanded of God before New Testament times. And, as I mentioned earlier, when the New Testament describes people who were already Christians as “calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 9:14,21; 1 Corinthians 1:2), it certainly does not mean that Christians continually were being baptized for the remission of their sins after having been baptized to become a Christian (cf. 1 John 1:5-10). Depending on when and where the phrase is used, “calling on the name of the Lord” includes: (1) obedience to the gospel plan of salvation; (2) worshiping God; and (3) faithful service to the Lord (Bates, 1979, p. 5). However, it never is used

in the sense that all the alien sinner must do in order to be saved is to cry out and say, "Lord, Lord, save me."

Thus, the skeptic's allegation that Matthew 7:21 contradicts Acts 2:21 and Romans 10:13 is unsubstantiated. And, the professed Christian who teaches that all one must do to be saved is just say the sinner's prayer, is in error.

REFERENCES

- Bales, James (1960), *The Hub of the Bible—Or—Acts Two Analyzed* (Shreveport, LA: Lambert).
- Bates, Bobby (1979), "Whosoever Shall Call Upon the Name of the Lord Shall be Saved," *Firm Foundation*, 96:5, March 20.
- Brown, T. Pierce (1976), "Calling on His Name," *Firm Foundation*, 93:5, July 20.
- Graham, Billy (1977), *How to Be Born Again* (Waco, TX: Word Books).
- Jackson, Wayne (1988), "The New Birth: What is It?" *Christian Courier*, 24/4:14.
- Lucado, Max (2000), *He Did This Just for You* (Nashville, TN: Word).
- Morgan, Donald (2003), "Biblical Inconsistencies," [On-line], URL: http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/donald_morgan/inconsistencies.shtml.
- Robertson, A.T. (1934), *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman).
- Wells, Steve (2001), *Skeptic's Annotated Bible*, [On-line], URL: <http://www.Skepticsannotatedbible.com>.

