

Who are the churches of Christ and what do they believe in?

By: Batsell Barrett Baxter

What is the distinctive plea of the church of Christ?

It is primarily a plea for religious unity based upon the Bible. In a divided religious world it is believed that the Bible is the only possible common denominator upon which most, if not all, of the God-fearing people of the land can unite. This is an appeal to go back to the Bible. It is a plea to speak where the Bible speak and to remain silent where the Bible is silent in all matters that pertain to religion. It further emphasizes that in everything religious there must be a "Thus saith the Lord" for all that is done. The objective is religious unity of all believers in Christ. The basis is the New Testament. The method is the restoration of New Testament Christianity.

The Historical background of the Restoration Movement

One of the earliest advocates of the return to New Testament Christianity, as a means of achieving unity of all believers in Christ, was James O'Kelly of the Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1793 he withdrew from the Baltimore conference of his church and called upon others to join him in taking the Bible as the only creed. His influence was largely felt in Virginia and North Carolina where history records that some seven thousand communicants followed his leadership toward a return to primitive New Testament Christianity.

In 1802 a similar movement among the Baptists in New England was led by Abner Jones and Elias Smith. They were concerned about "denominational names and creeds" and decided to wear only the name Christian, taking Bible as their only guide. In 1804, in the western frontier state of Kentucky, Barton W. Stone and several other Presbyterian preachers took similar action declaring that they would take the Bible as the "only sure guide to heaven." Thomas Campbell, and his illustrious son, Alexander Campbell, took similar steps in the year 1809 in what is now the state of West Virginia. They contended that nothing should be bound upon Christians as a matter of doctrine which is not as old as the New Testament. Although these four movements were completely independent in their beginnings eventually they became one strong restoration movement because of their common purpose and plea. These men did not advocate the starting of a new church, but rather a return to Christ's church as described in the Bible.

Members of the church of Christ do not conceive of themselves as a new church started near the beginning of the 19th century. Rather, the whole movement is designed to reproduce in contemporary times the church originally established on Pentecost, A.D. 30. The strength of the appeal lies in the restoration of Christ's original church.

How many churches of Christ are there?

The most recent dependable estimate lists more than 15,000 individual churches of Christ. The "Christian Herald," a general religious publication which presents statistics concerning all the churches, estimates that the total membership of the churches of Christ is now 5,000,000. Membership of the church is heaviest in the southern states of the United States, particularly Tennessee and Texas, though congregations exist in each of the fifty states and in more than eighty foreign countries. Missionary

expansion has been most extensive since the second World War in Europe, Asia and Africa. More than 450 full time workers are supported in foreign countries.

How are the churches organizationally connected?

Following the plan of organization found in the New Testament, churches of Christ are autonomous. Their common faith in the Bible and adherence to its teachings are the chief ties which bind them together. There is no central headquarters of the church, and no organization superior to the elders of each local congregation. Congregations do cooperate voluntarily in supporting the orphans and the aged, in preaching the gospel in new fields, and in other similar works.

Members of the church of Christ conduct forty colleges and secondary schools, as well as seventy-five orphanages and homes for the aged. There are approximately 40 magazines and other periodicals published by individual members of the church. A nationwide radio and television program, known as "The Herald of Truth" is sponsored by the Highland Avenue church in Abilene, Texas. Much of its annual budget of \$1,200,000 is contributed on a free-will basis by other churches of Christ. The radio program is currently heard on more than 800 radio stations, while the television program is now appearing on more than 150 stations. Another extensive radio effort known as "World Radio" owns a network of 28 stations in Brazil alone, and is operating effectively in the United States and a number of other foreign countries, and is being produced in 14 languages. An extensive advertising program in leading national magazines began in November 1955.

There are no conventions, annual meetings, or official publications. The "tie that binds" is a common loyalty to the principles of the restoration of New Testament Christianity.

How are the churches of Christ governed?

In each congregation, which has existed long enough to become fully organized, there is a plurality of elders or presbyters who serve as the governing body. These men are selected by the local congregations on the basis of qualifications set down in the scriptures ([1Ti 3:1-8](#)). Serving under the elders are deacons, teachers, and evangelists or ministers. The latter do not have the authority equal to or superior to the elders. The elders are shepherds or overseers who serve under the headship of Christ according to the New Testament, which is a kind of constitution. There is no earthly authority superior to the elders of the local church.

What does the church of Christ believe about the Bible?

The original autographs of the sixty six books which make up the Bible are considered to have been divinely inspired, by which it is meant that they are infallible and authoritative. Reference to the scriptures is made in settling every religious question. A pronouncement from the scripture is considered the final word. The basic textbook of the church and the basis for all preaching is the Bible.

Do members of the churches of Christ believe in the virgin birth?

Yes. The statement in [Isa 7:14](#) is taken as a prophecy of the virgin birth of Christ. New Testament passages such as [Mat 1:20](#), 25, are accepted at face value as declarations of the virgin birth. Christ is accepted as the only begotten Son of God, uniting in his person perfect divinity and perfect manhood.

Does the church of Christ believe in predestination?

Only in the sense that God predestines the righteous to be eternally saved and the unrighteous to be eternally lost. The statement of the apostle Peter, "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons, but in every nation he that feareth him and worketh righteousness is acceptable unto him" ([Act 10:34-35](#).) is taken as an evidence that God did not predestine individuals to be eternally saved or lost, but that each man determines his own destiny.

Why does the church of Christ baptize only by immersion?

The word baptize comes from the Greek word "baptizo" and literally means, "to dip, to immerse, to plunge." In addition to the literal meaning of the word, immersion is practiced because it was the practice of the church in apostolic times. Still further, only immersion conforms to the description of baptisms as given by the apostle Paul in [Rom 6:3-5](#) where he speaks of it as a burial and resurrection.

Is infant baptism practiced?

No. Only those who have reached the "age of accountability" are accepted for baptisms. It is pointed out that the examples given in the New Testament are always of those who have heard the gospel preached and have believed it. Faith must always precede baptism, so only those old enough to understand and believe the gospel are considered fit subjects for baptism.

Do ministers of the church hear confession?

No. Ministers or evangelists of the church have no special prerogatives. They do not wear the title of Reverend or Father, but are addressed simply by the term Brother as are all other men of the church. Along with elders and others they do counsel and advise those seeking help.

Are prayers addressed to the saints?

No. God the Father is considered the only one to whom the prayers may be addressed. It is further understood that Christ stands in a mediatorial position between God and man ([Heb 7:25](#)). All prayers are therefore offered through Christ, or in the name of Christ ([Joh 16:23-26](#)).

How often is the Lord's supper eaten?

It is expected that every member of the church will assemble for worship on each Lord's day. A central part of the worship is the eating of the Lord's supper ([Act 20:7](#)). Unless providentially hindered, each member considers this weekly appointment as binding. In many instances, as in the case of illness, the Lord's supper is carried to those who are hindered from attending the worship.

What kind of music is used in the worship?

As a result of the distinctive plea of the church - a return to New Testament Faith and practice - acappella singing is the only music used in the worship. This singing, unaccompanied by mechanical instruments of music, conforms to the music used in the apostolic church and for several centuries thereafter ([Eph 5:19](#)). It is felt that there is no authority for engaging in acts of worship not found in the New Testament. This principle eliminates the use of instrumental music, along with the use of candles, incense, and other similar elements.

Does the church of Christ believe in heaven and hell?

Yes. The statement of Christ in Matthew 25, and elsewhere, are taken at face value. It is believed that after death each man must come before God in judgment and that he will be judged according to the deeds done while he lived ([Heb 9:27](#)). After judgment is pronounced he will spend eternity either in heaven or hell.

Does the church of Christ believe in purgatory?

No. The absence of any reference in the scriptures to the temporary place of punishment from which the soul will eventually be released into heaven prevents the acceptance of the doctrine of purgatory.

By what means does the church secure financial support?

Each first day of the week the members of the church "lay by in store as they have been prospered" ([1Co 16:2](#)). The amount of any individual gift is generally known only to the one who gave it and to the Lord. This free-will offering is the only call which the church makes. NO assessments or other levies are made. No money-making activities, such as bazaars or suppers, are engaged in. A total of approximately \$200,000,000 is given on this basis each year.

Does the church of Christ have a creed?

No. At least, there is no creed in the usual sense of the word. The belief of the church is stated fully and completely in the Bible. There is no other manual or discipline to which the members of the church of Christ give their allegiance. The Bible is considered as the only infallible guide to heaven.

How does one become a member of the church of Christ?

In the salvation of man's soul there are 2 necessary parts: God's part and man's part. God's part is the big part, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, that no man should glory" ([Eph 2:8-9](#)). The love which God felt for man led him to send Christ into the world to redeem man. The life and teaching of Jesus, the sacrifice on the cross, and the proclaiming of the gospel to men constitute God's part in salvation.

Though God's part is the big part, man's part is also necessary if man is to reach heaven. Man must comply with the conditions of pardon which the Lord has announced. Man's part can clearly be set forth in the following steps:

Hear the Gospel. "How shall they call on him whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe him whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?" ([Rom 10:14](#)).

Believe. "And without faith it is impossible to be well pleasing unto him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek after him" ([Heb 11:6](#)).

Repent of past sins. "The times of ignorance therefore God overlooked; but now he commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent" ([Act 17:30](#)).

Confess Jesus as Lord. "Behold here is water; What doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, if thou believest with all thy heart thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" ([Act 8:36-37](#)).

Be baptized for the remission of sins. "And Peter said unto them, Repent ye, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" ([Act 2:38](#)).

Live a Christian life. "Ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that ye may show forth the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" ([1Pe 2:9](#)).

OPEN INVITATION

Now that you are aware of a church in the 20th century which is built according to the blue prints of Christ's original church, why not become a member of it? In becoming a member of it, you will be called upon to do nothing which you cannot read in the New Testament. You will then live and worship just as the apostle-guided Christians of the first century did.

Not only is this return to New Testament Christianity a wonderful basis upon which all believers in Christ can unite, it is absolutely solid ground. If we do just what our Lord commanded we know that our salvation is certain. Come with us as we go back to the Bible, back to Christ and his church!

If you need help in locating a congregation of the churches of Christ nearest to you, please e-mail us at garcia@church-of-christ.org, and we will be more than happy to help you find one. No one from the church will call without your consent. Please come by and visit us soon. We care about you and your family.

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