

Non-Negotiable: The Singularity of the Church

Hiram Kemp
April 2, 2019



We have all heard the statement, “It is not *what* you say but *how* you say it.” The truth of this statement is especially important when it comes to the topic of the singularity of the church. I have been asked several times, “Must one be a member of the church of Christ to go to heaven?” If by that statement one has a denominational view of the church in mind, then the answer is *no*. However, if by church of Christ the questioner means the New Testament church established by Jesus in the first century, then the answer is unequivocally *yes*.

In a world of religious pluralism, it is hard for some to understand how the Bible can teach that there is only *one* church. If you ride down any street in America, you are likely to see a variety of denominations—all claiming to serve the same Lord and lead individuals to the same heaven even though they often teach contradictory things. Denominationalism implies that truth is either unknowable or unimportant. However, Jesus says both of these conclusions are false (John 8:31-32). Scripture demonstrates that everyone who is saved

must also be a member of the body of Christ, of which there is only one. So clearly is this taught in the New Testament that, if we were to compile a list of non-negotiable tenants of the faith, the singularity of the church must be near the top of the list.

The Answer to Jesus' Prayer

Before Jesus went to the cross, He prayed that all of His disciples would be united based on the apostles teaching (John 17:20-21). This shows us a few things. First, our Lord wanted Christians to be united, and that unity be based on the truth taught by His apostles (John 14:15, 15:14; cf. 1 Cor. 14:37). Secondly, Jesus thought that unity like this was possible. Sometimes people laugh at the idea of only one church as if it were an impossibility. Yet, Jesus did not think this idea was so far-fetched. Though men have written creeds and polluted the religious world with man-made doctrines, Jesus's prayer can still be answered if we discard any belief system that isn't the apostles' doctrine.

There are so many things in life that are beyond our individual skill set, but we can be the answer to Jesus' prayer by being members of the church for which He prayed. Jesus promised to build the church and was willing to shed His blood to purchase her (Matt. 16:18-19; Acts 20:28). When Jesus returns, He is coming back to present the church to Himself without any spot or blemish (Eph. 5:25-27). The church is often referred to as the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 21:2). Jesus is no polygamist; He only has one bride, and we should seek to the one He recognizes.

What the Apostles Taught About the One Church

The apostles carried out this prayer of Jesus. When individuals obeyed the gospel in the first century, they simultaneously became members of the church (Acts 2:47). No one went "church shopping" in the first century; when you became a Christian, God put you in the church of *His* choice (1 Cor. 12:18). Think about it—how could a person unable to save himself be left with the decision of picking his own church? There was only *one* church to become a part of in the first century—denominationalism was virtually unknown.

Paul taught the body was the church, and there was *only one* body (Eph. 1:22-23, 4:4). Part of God's plan that was being revealed was that he was saving both Jew and Gentile in the same church. Denominationalism, on the other hand, attempts to undo the marvelous plan of God (Eph. 2:14-16). Though made up of a variety of members in the first century, the body of Christ remained singular (Rom. 12:4; 1 Cor. 12:20). When Christians within congregations were experiencing division, they were commanded to speak the same thing and be united (1 Cor. 1:10). Every Christian in the first century was a member of the church

of Christ.

To say that *all saved people* in the first century were members of the church of Christ is not an arrogant statement—it is just a matter of fact. We must not read our times back into the New Testament; we should read the New Testament back into our times and conform to what it teaches. No one could read the New Testament unbiasedly and come away with the idea that what Jesus prayed for and what the apostles taught is the prevalence of denominationalism that we see today. We must continue to preach and teach that Jesus only has one church, and when people become Christians the way the Bible says they become members of that one church (Acts 2:41). We must never apologize for the simple teaching of the New Testament.

Answer Common Objections

“Isn’t the church of Christ a denomination that is a part of the Stone-Campbell Movement?”

No. Unfortunately, even a few who pretend to espouse New Testament Christianity teach this error by claiming that churches of Christ owe their existence to Barton W. Stone and Alexander/Thomas Campbell. In reality, Stone and the Campbells were not the only ones who were seeking to go back to the New Testament—there were others before them. Additionally, there were many already doing so who were unaffiliated with these early preachers. Furthermore, the seed of the kingdom is the word of God (Luke 8:11). Whenever men and women take the Word of God and practice its truth on any subject, they are not originating truth, but merely upholding what God has already declared to be true (Jn. 17:17).

“Are you saying all of these other churches are wrong?”

Truth does not abide with the majority nor the minority. Truth is still reality, regardless of how many people happen to believe it or disbelieve it. We can take the word of God and determine whether or not a church is “of Christ” based on what it practices and teaches. If it is the case that the majority of those professing to be part of the one church of the New Testament fail to align with the New Testament pattern, then the majority must be wrong. This is just objective truth. We must kindly yet unapologetically stand for truth no matter who disagrees (Prov. 23:23; Mt. 7:13-14).

“Is the church really that important? Isn’t it all about Jesus?”

Yes, it *is* all about Jesus, and yes, the church *is* that important. The church shows the world the manifold wisdom of God (Eph. 3:10-11). The church upholds God's truth (1 Tim. 3:15). The church was worth the blood of Jesus (Acts 20:28). Jesus is exalted in the church and thus to minimize the church is to minimize Christ (Eph. 3:21). The church is not some afterthought in the mind of God, but it was in His mind from eternity and should likewise be on your mind until you reach eternity (2 Tim. 1:9).

“How can one identify the church of Christ on earth?”

There is no exhaustive checklist provided in the New Testament, but we can study the New Testament and note some things that are clear indicators of the New Testament church. The church of Christ will identify herself with a description that honors Christ and not some man or other religious movement (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Cor. 1:12-13). The church of Christ will be known for the love the members have for each other (John 13:34-35), worship that is in spirit and in truth (John 4:24), scriptural organization (1 Tim. 3), teaching the truth concerning salvation (Acts 2:37-41), and a sincere pursuit of godly living (Tit. 2:11-14). Again, this list is hardly exhaustive, but it is a good starting point.

There is a temptation to cease affirming the singularity of the church. Humans make up the church and are imperfect and often stumble. Even so, Christ—who died for the church—is perfect. Jesus prayed that we might all be united and He said that if we were, it would lead others to believe. The apostles taught that there is only one church and all saved people are in that one body. We do not have to start a new church (we may need to disband a few). We just need to humbly open the pages of the New Testament and then align with those Christians who are reflecting what we find on its pages (Jude 3).

Do not apologize for being a member of the church of Christ. Do not speak of the church in denominational terms. Jesus is coming back for His bride one day, and may we look forward to that day with great joy.