

HUGH'S NEWS AND VIEWS

A CHRISTIAN, BUT NOT A MEMBER OF THE CHURCH OF CHRIST?

Is it possible for one to be a Christian (what some often speak of as a Christ follower), and not be a member of His spiritual body, the church? Most people would say no, if one is a Christian that person is also a part of the universal spiritual body of Christ. At the same time, many people would say that one can be a Christian without being a member of the church of Christ, or, as they would likely write it, the Church of Christ, or the Church of Christ church or the Church of Christ denomination. This indicates that in the minds of many people two different things are under consideration when one speaks of “the one universal spiritual body of Christ” and when one speaks of “the church of Christ.” In the case of the latter, they are thinking of and viewing the church of Christ as a denomination, only a *part* of the much larger universal spiritual body of Christ. But is this in fact the biblical concept of the church of Christ? Is this the view of biblically informed members of the church of Christ? Let us study and think together on this vital question. Please note that the title of our essay is not an affirmation, but a question.

Christ established His church (Matthew 16:18). He purchased it with His blood (Acts 20:28). It is His spiritual body (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18). There is but one body (Ephesians 4:4; I Corinthians 12:20, 27), therefore, there is only one true church. In New Testament times, when people heard the message of Christ, believed it, turned from their sins in true repentance, and were baptized for the remission of their sins, they were saved and added to the one church (Acts 2:47). While they had human weaknesses and sinned, and while the church in New Testament times faced both internal and external problems, still all Christians were members of just the one church. Christ prayed for all of His followers to be one (John 17:20-21). When parties began to arise in the church at Corinth, Paul severely rebuked the congregation and urged the members to “all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (I Corinthians 1:10). Those who caused divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine of Christ were to be marked (noted) and avoided (Romans 16:17). Those who preached a “different gospel” were under heaven’s anathema (Galatians 1:6-9). Those who went beyond the doctrine of Christ did not have God (II John 9). Those who would add to or take from the word of God would experience severe and eternal consequences (Revelation 22:18-19). (Yes, I know the context has reference to the book of Revelation, but the principle extends to all of God’s revelation to mankind [Deuteronomy 4:2; Proverbs 30:6; I Corinthians 4:6]).

The one spiritual body of Christ in New Testament times was not divided into a multiplicity of denominations. Denominationalism did not arise until many years after the close of the New Testament, and came about as a result of men corrupting the original doctrine and practice of the church as set forth in the New Testament. In this connection, the following passages need to be carefully read and thoughtfully considered: Matthew 7:15; Matthew 7:21-23; Matthew 15:8-9; Acts 20:28-30; II Thessalonians 2:3-11; I Timothy 4:1-5; II Timothy 4:1-5; I John 4:1). In short, denominationalism (both Catholic and Protestant) is a perversion of original, apostolic Christianity, and as such, it is severely condemned by the word of God.

But, what happened in the first century of Christianity is still happening today. When people today hear the message of Christ, believe it, turn from their sins in true repentance, and are baptized for the remission of their sins, they are saved and added to the one church of which we read in the New Testament, the church Christ established, the one He purchased with His

blood, the one of which He is the head, the one of which He is the Savior (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38; Acts 2:41-42, 47). This is precisely what members of the church of Christ have done down through the ages since the first century and are still doing here in the 21st century—nothing more, less, or else! The seed is the word of God (Luke 8:11), and still produces today what it produced in the first century—Christians only, Christians without denominational membership or affiliation.

If one has not obeyed the gospel plan of salvation, that person has not been saved and added to the one church. One may very well comply with the conditions for being a member of a denomination (the Catholic, the Baptist, the Methodist, the Lutheran, the Nazarene, the Episcopal, the Disciples, a Community church, etc.) and still not obey the gospel. In such a case, one has met the conditions for membership in a particular denomination but that person has not obeyed the gospel, been saved from his/her sins, and added to the one church of the Lord.

If one only says the so-called “Sinner’s Prayer” that person has not been saved and added to the Lord’s church (Matthew 7:21; Hebrews 5:8-9). If one has only had water sprinkled or poured on him/her, that person has not been scripturally baptized, and therefore has not been saved and added to the one church (Matthew 3:16; Acts 8:38-39; Romans 6:3-4). If a person was not baptized “for [in order to] the remission of sins” (or some biblically synonymous reason) but baptized only to “join the church,” that person has not been saved and added to the one body (church) of Christ (Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; Galatians 3:27; I Peter 3:21). (We must remember that God does not lie; it is impossible for Him to do so [Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18]). In other words, one may have become a member of a denomination, and still not have obeyed the gospel of Christ, been saved from sin, and added to the one church that Christ established!

Sadly, with the passing of time, many who obey the gospel and are added to the one church remain untaught (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 2:42), fail to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ (II Peter 3:18), buy into the religious pluralism of the age, come to believe there is nothing wrong with denominationalism, defend denominationalism, and come to view the church of Christ as just another denomination. When this happens, these people become easy targets to leave the church and join a denomination. This is happening on an increasing level today, and some preachers, elders, and congregations have bought into this kind of unbiblical thinking about the church. In so doing, they have become traitors to the cause of New Testament Christianity, every bit as much as Judas Iscariot betrayed the Lord Jesus Christ!

Some schools, colleges, and universities associated with the churches of Christ now proclaim the church of Christ “a denomination among denominations.” A Bible professor at one large university has said that many of the professors no longer hold to exclusive “Church of Christ-isms.” Such an expression itself manifests a rank denominational view of the church and is a repudiation of New Testament Christianity. This same university now has a Center in which it trains Baptist preachers, instructing them in Baptist history and Baptist polity, and helping them find Baptist pulpits! Faithful Christians resist such perversions of the “one faith” (Ephesians 4:5) and speak out against it. Baptist doctrine and practice and Bible doctrine and practice stand in stark contrast on a number of points, and no person or institution can maintain the slightest degree of integrity and teach and/or defend both. This university (and others like it) has betrayed the very principles upon which it was founded and has become a disgrace to the cause of Christ and undenominational Christianity!

When one talks about being a Christian (a Christ follower) but not a member of the church of Christ, he and I have two entirely different things in mind by the term “church of Christ.” We are not at all on the same page, and until we get on the same page, effective communication between us will not be possible. Most seriously, when one speaks of being a Christian but not a member of the church of Christ he is at odds with the New Testament concept of the church, and has instead bought into a denominational view of the church. In this case, he is at odds with the Lord Himself—terribly so!

I have not the slightest hesitation in affirming that one can be a Christian without being a member of any denomination. But in making such a declaration I am not saying that one can be a Christian and not be a member of the blood-bought church of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. A denomination and the church of Christ are two entirely different things! All who have obeyed the pure gospel of Christ and been saved from their sins have been added to the one church by the Lord Himself (Acts 2:47). All who have not obeyed the gospel and been saved from their sins are not members of that one church, even though they may be members of a denomination. All truly saved people, all who have become Christians (according to the New Testament definition of such) are members of the church of Christ! Those who have left the church, thinking it to be a denomination, and have joined, what to them, is “another denomination” to keep peace in the family or because it better “suits” them or meets their “felt needs,” need to do some deep, serious Bible study, some sober, biblical thinking, and some deep, sober soul-searching!

Rather than being a straying sheep, one needs to stay where the Lord puts a person when he/she is saved from sin by obedience to the gospel (Acts 2:47). Instead of joining a denomination, one needs to obey the gospel, be saved, and added to the one church that Christ established and the only one of which He is the Savior (Ephesians 5:23).

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