

Identifying The Lord's Church

Introduction. There are many religious bodies today, but we ought to know which one is real or true. Some thank God for division, but the prayer of Jesus is a prayer for unity based upon truth that makes us free (John 17:21; 1 Corinthians 1:10; John 8:32). I have even seen churches with the motto, "Agree to disagree, unite to serve." But we cannot have unity in diversity. We can only have unity by having the same mind (Philippians 2:2; 3:16).

Some consider differing denominations to be the different branches that Jesus spoke of in John 15. But this is not correct for that illustration would demand a tree which bears all different kinds of fruit. Not only is this impossible based upon natural laws but it is also impossible because the context says that individuals are the branches (John 15:5).

We are not on a hunt for a church "close" or "just about like" the church of the New Testament; we are looking for the church itself. To have Heaven's sustained approval, a group of Christians must attempt to conform to those particular qualities that characterized the church as it functioned under the guiding hand of the inspired leaders of the first century.

I. ***It Must Wear The Proper Name***

- A. If you are looking for John Smith, if you have found John Jones, you have found the wrong person.
- B. The Bible gives the proper names for the church (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Hebrews 12:23). Why would men set aside that name, and designate themselves by human heroes, e.g., Lutheran? Or name themselves after some form of organization, e.g., Presbyterian? Or adopt titles according to some individual point of doctrine they espouse, e.g., Baptist? There is no scriptural basis for this common practice. There is no solitary, exclusive name for the church. But whatever you call it, you need to call it what it is, and not what it is not.
- C. If you find another "John Smith," he will have different characteristics from the one you were looking for. The same is true with the church. The church is not a Pentecostal church just because it was established on the day of Pentecost. The church is not a Baptist church just because it advocates baptism. The church is not a Congregational church just because it is organized congregationally. The church is the church of God (1 Corinthians 1:2), because God planned it and the church is the church of Christ because He shed His blood for it (Acts 20:28).

II. ***It Must Embrace The Proper Birthplace***

- A. Jesus was to be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). If we were to hear of a Christ born in another place, he would be an impostor.
- B. Jerusalem was the birthplace of the church (Zechariah 1:16; Isaiah 2:2-3; Luke 24:46-47; Acts 1:12-14; 2:1).
- C. If one finds a religious body established in China, India, Germany, America, or Medina, you have found the wrong one.

III. ***It Must Embody The Proper Age***

- A. If you knew that John Smith were 40 years old, and you found one that was 20 years old, you have found the wrong one.
- B. As a man or woman's age is reckoned from birth, so the age of the church is reckoned from its establishment (Matthew 16:18; Mark 9:1).
- C. If a church or religious body is founded in the days of Abraham, John the Baptist, or Charles Russell, it is the wrong one.

IV. ***It Must Contain The Proper Founder***

- A. Jesus Christ is the one who built the church (Matthew 16:18). He is the head of the church (Ephesians 1:22-23).
- B. One that is founded by John Calvin, John Wesley, John Smith, or Mohammed are counterfeits.

V. ***It Must Incorporate The Proper Law***

- A. The law of the United States is our Constitution. But the law governing the church is the Bible, the word of God (2 Timothy 3:16-17).
- B. The Confession of Faith, the Articles of Religion, the Book of Mormon, the Koran, or other assorted disciplines, church manuals, or creeds are wrong laws.

VI. ***It Must Support The Proper Organization***

- A. The Lord's church is overseen via elders (Acts 14:23; 20:17, 28; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:6-9) with deacons aiding in the physical work. There are no Popes, Archbishops, presidents, boards of directors, conferences, etc. in the Bible.
- B. Likewise, all the work given to the church to perform is performed by the church. There were no physical organizations or groups in the first century needed to perform any of the work assigned to the church. They work that was assigned included teaching the lost (1 Thessalonians 1:8), strengthening the saints (Acts 11:22-23), and helping poor Christians (Acts 4:32-35).

- C. There was no such thing, in the first century, as a bishop who presided over a number of churches. There was no such officer, in the first century, as a cardinal over churches of the various nations. There was no such creature, in Bible times, as the Papa, the Pope, of all churches. Rather, congregations were organized on a local level, with a plurality of elders, who guided them in matters of human judgment (Hebrews 13:17).
- D. In the New Testament, the elders as referred to as "pastors", not the preacher (Ephesians 4:11). The work they did was shepherding or pastoring (1 Peter 5:2). The apostle Paul never called himself a "pastor", but did call himself a "preacher" twice in his letters (1 Timothy 2:7; 2 Timothy 1:11).

VII. ***It Must Encourage The Proper Form Of Worship***

- A. Disciples engaged in prayer (Acts 2:42), singing (Ephesians 5:19), partaking of the Lord's Supper (Acts 20:7), studying the scriptures (Acts 20:7), and contributing of their means (1 Corinthians 16:1-2).
- B. Things such as instrumental music, partaking of the Lord's Supper once a month, parties and recreational activities, and raising money by car washes and rummage sales were completely foreign to the Lord's church in the Bible.

VIII. ***It Must Allow The Proper Terms Of Entrance***

- A. Once one has manifested faith (John 8:24; Hebrews 11:6), repentance (Luke 13:3; Acts 17:30), confession of Jesus (Matthew 10:32; Romans 10:10), and been baptized for the remission of sins (John 3:3, 5; 1 Peter 3:21), God says they are added to the church (Acts 2:47).
- B. If this is so, then one cannot "join" a church or be "voted" into it. Likewise, one cannot become a member of the Lord's church by simply having faith, repenting, being baptized, or confessing the name of Jesus without doing all the others.

Conclusion. A man sees a truck with the logo "UPS" travel into a tunnel. That same man will see the truck emerge from the tunnel with the same logo affixed to its side. The church went into the wilderness bearing all the marks referred to and it must come out the same way. Is the religious organization of which you are a member deficient in the elements we have just surveyed? If it is, you ought to leave it, and find the group that replicates the Bible pattern. There always will be weaknesses in the human elements of the church; but there is a divine ideal, and towards that one must strive.

Would you think about this very seriously? And if you have not obeyed the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, do so with all dispatch? As soon as you have reached a firm conviction about your spiritual state, and have an understanding about what the Scriptures teach, do not hesitate -- obey the truth. You can then know, with confidence, that you are a genuine Christian. You will be a member of the church that is found in the New Testament -- one that cannot be wrong, because it has the divinely-prescribed identifying traits.