

# Identifying The New Testament Church

By Douglas W. Hill

**IDENTIFYING MARKS:** When you get paid for the work you do, would you like to receive "funny money"? Obviously not. Yet, some fake money looks almost exactly like the real thing. Some money looks so real that you have to know more about real money in order to identify the difference.

For example, real money is printed on paper that has red and blue fibers woven into it. There is also a watermark in real money, which you can only see when a light is behind the bill. A copier would not reproduce these details. In addition, there are "micro-printed" words on real money, which many do not even know are there. Yet all these (and other) details help to distinguish between a real and a fake bill. In this way, the value of real money is guarded and you will not be "paid" with worthless currency. Whether you receive real or fake money makes a difference!

In like manner, we can know what the original church was like and see if the "real thing" exists today. There are details about the original church that distinguish it from counterfeit ones. And when it comes to spiritual matters and salvation, do you want to be deceived? No way!

**ORIGINAL NAME:** What is in a name? A name carries meaning. Some names also carry authority. When someone says, "Stop in the name of the Law!"; we understand that this is an expression of authority.

No one can honestly deny the Father's relationship to the church. It is according to the Father's eternal plan (Eph.

3:10-11) and it glorifies Him (3:20-21). Yet, Jesus Christ is given preeminence (the "first place") by the Father in everything (Col. 1:18). Therefore, we are not surprised to find the church constantly described in connection with Jesus.

As Jesus said, "All authority has been given unto me in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18). And God exalted Jesus to His right hand, "Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every **name** that is **named**, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come" (Eph. 1:21). "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other **name** under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." (Acts 4:12) What name carries more meaning, more authority, and more power to save than Jesus' name? What name carries more glory and honor? Which name is exalted above Jesus the Christ of God?

So, when we speak of the kingdom, the church that belongs to Christ (Matt. 16:18-19); whose name should it wear? Shall we use the name of some man? Shall we glorify and exalt a particular doctrine or an organizational structure? Shall we name it after a place where Jesus lived or after a special day? Or shall we choose the name which God has chosen above all others?

Consider also, "the churches of **Christ** salute you" (Rom. 16:16). "Almost thou persuadest me to be a **Christian**." (Acts 26:28). "If ye are reproached for the **name of Christ**, blessed are ye; because the Spirit of Christ and the Spirit of God resteth upon you. For let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or an evil-doer, or as a meddler in other men's matters: but if a man suffer as a **Christian**, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God **in this name**." (1 Pet. 4:14-16) God's great wisdom

is made known through the church according to the eternal purpose which He purposed "in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 3:10-11).

But some will say "What of using 'church of God' as in 1 Cor. 1:2?" Jesus is God (Matt. 1:23; John 1:1; 8:24; etc.), so to whom does this refer? Consider also the prophecy of Isaiah 62:2, "...And thou shalt be called by a **new name**, which the mouth of Jehovah shall name." God's people were given a new name in Acts 11:26, "...And that the disciples were called **Christians** first in Antioch." The word "Christian" literally means "follower of **Christ**".

Friends, does it matter what name we use? Can we not at least agree to use only names that follow the Bible pattern? Indeed, how many different names exist today? Today we can find churches named after apostles, after Bethlehem, after Pentecost, after Nazareth, after the act of baptism, and on it goes! Friends, of all the names available - why not simply choose one we know is chosen by God? Why do men seek to make distinctions and invent different names? If only mankind would be content with what God has provided...

Now, is this the only thing needed to identify the original church? No. But it is one of the most obvious ones. A name is immediately seen and identified. A name says a great deal.

**ORIGINAL ORGANIZATION:** The Bible describes how Jesus is the "head over all things to the church, which is His body" (Eph. 1:22-23). Being "head" means He rules and commands His body. We must look to Him for all direction and instruction. Some disagree with this. I once asked two students of the same seminary, "Who is the head of the church?" One said "Jesus" and

the other said "Peter". Yet, according to nature and Scripture, one body properly has only one head (Acts 4:12; Eph. 1:22-23).

Next we see that Jesus' word reveals the original organization as local assemblies of Christians. Those who follow Him are seen gathering together to encourage one another and to worship the Lord (Acts 2:41, 46-47). We read that there are qualifications for two "offices" in the local church: elders and deacons (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9).

Elders are given "oversight" and therefore called "bishops" (also translated "overseers") in Acts 20:17, 28. They are also described as "shepherds" or "pastors" in that they "tend the flock" (Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:2). By this we see that the words elders, bishops and pastors are three ways of describing the same group of men. King Jesus has ordered that there be such men in every local congregation in order to rule, guide, protect and serve them according to God's will (Acts 14:23; Heb. 13:7, 17). They are appointed by the congregation (cp. Acts 6:1-6) and (if necessary) are removed by the congregation (1 Tim. 5:17-20). Elders do not choose new elders, the congregation does.

As we consider the oversight of bishops, we need to emphasize that they are limited by God's word to "the flock among them". Elders in one congregation have no rule or authority to decide matters in another congregation. Each local gathering of saints is to oversee its own people and work. Also, the Bible always shows a plurality of pastors in a local church (Acts 14:23; Phil. 1:1; etc.). Never do we read of one pastor over a congregation.

Next, deacons are literally "servants". In Acts 6 we see were such servants were appointed to serve the needy widows of the congregation in Jerusalem. Deacons do not

have oversight of the congregation. They do not oversee the elders. Rather, they are men specially appointed to serve the members of the congregation according to the scriptural judgments of the elders.

Beyond this we do not see any earthly organization in the Bible. Elders are always in local churches, never over more. This direct and simple organization avoids the pitfalls of bureaucracy and the entanglements of hierarchies. Also it restricts the influence of individuals who would gain control of larger and larger numbers of people for their own purposes. There is no "council of churches" or "inter-church organization" revealed in the Bible. There were no state, national or international societies. God's plan is very straight forward and simple.

As long as these local churches remained true to the word of Christ, then they were known as "churches of Christ" (Rom. 16:16). But as they departed from the truth that Jesus revealed in His word, then they had their "candlestick" removed (Rev. 2:5). Such churches were no longer counted faithful by Christ, nor did He claim them as His anymore.

While it is essential to honor Jesus and His will by taking a Scriptural name and by following His organization, these are not the only traits we should look for.

Having examined two identifying marks, we (Lord willing) will examine more next week.

**ORIGINAL MISSION:** Another identifying mark of the original church is the mission or work that they do. The church is to be "the pillar and support of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). Its efforts are to center upon teaching the truth to sinners (Phil. 4:16-17) and to edify

the saints (Eph. 4:15-16). This can be done by supporting Elders in the local work (1 Tim. 5:17-18) and by supporting preachers (1 Cor. 9:14). Preachers are simply faithful men who regularly work in proclaiming the word of God to others (1 Tim. 4:16; 2 Tim. 1:2).

There is another area that the church is authorized to work in, but only in a limited sense. Examples of the original church show that benevolence from the church treasury to needy saints is authorized by Jesus under special circumstances. As individuals, Christians are to do what they can to help all needy people, Christians and non-Christians (Gal. 6:10; James 1:27). Yet the church is limited to helping those who are already Christians, and then only ones who have no other way of obtaining help. In this manner the "church is not burdened" (1 Tim. 5:4, 16), yet those saints who truly need help will receive it.

The original church was not involved in social, political, or recreational activities. In the only place that overtly speaks of a common meal being connected with the church, Paul condemns it, saying: "If any man is hungry, let him eat at home; that your coming together be not unto judgment" (1 Cor. 11:34). The home is the place to feed the belly; the church is to feed the spirit.

This is why it is not proper for the church to sponsor or host meals, boating trips, roller-skating parties, costume parties, festivals, or such like. The church has a spiritual purpose and mission. God designed it for His purposes, not so that we may fill our stomachs and entertain ourselves. The church is a spiritual institution and is to focus on and fulfill its spiritual mission. Friends, let the home be the home and let the church be the church.

**ORIGINAL WORSHIP:** Another identifying mark of the original church is in the simple way that they worshipped. They studied God's word together, financially supported the work together, broke the bread of the Lord's Supper together, and prayed together (Acts 2:42; Phil. 4:15-18; 1 Cor. 11:23-26). We also read that saints gathered together to sing spiritual songs to one another and to God (Col. 3:16).

Interestingly, we do not read of the original church using musical instruments. Many are accustomed to and prefer instruments today, explaining how it helps them worship and sing with more enthusiasm. But the question is not whether we like it, but whether King Jesus is pleased by them. Converts to Christ from Judaism were familiar with instruments in worship (cp. Psalm 150), yet even among Jewish converts we do not read of one case where they used them in worship as Christians. If King Jesus wanted them, then He would have told us (Rev. 22:18-19; Deut. 4:2).

**ORIGINAL TERMS OF ENTRANCE:** The original church taught a very simple way of entering the saved relationship with Christ. Peter said to those who believed, "repent ye, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins" (Acts 2:38). Many deny this plain statement and try to explain it away, yet this is exactly what Peter said. No amount of wiggling will erase the passage.

Note what is connected to this. Those who were baptized were at the same time "added **unto them**" (Acts 2:41). And "The Lord added **to them** day by day those that were being **saved**" (Acts 2:47). The Lord placed these baptized believers together as He saved them. Compare now

Ephesians 5:23, "Christ also is the head of the church, the Savior of the body." Notice the parallel statements: (1) Christ is the head and the Savior, (2) of His body, the church. Thus, when (by faith) we are baptized He saves us and adds us to His church.

These simple conditions of salvation, as ordered by Christ through His word, are not difficult to understand. The only difficulty is in whether we have faith enough to do what King Jesus directs. Friend, do you have that kind of faith?

**WHO DOES THIS TODAY?** As we look at these details we now have a much clearer understanding of what the church was like in the New Testament. As we look at the many, many different churches today we can note that some will have local organization, some follow the simple pattern of worship, some keep to the simple pattern of work, etc. But we need to recall that it is not enough to just do **some** of what King Jesus said. We are not truly following Jesus if we approach His word like a buffet counter. So, does anyone today do ALL these things together - like the original church did in the New Testament times? Yes.

Friends, I am happy to say that there are people today who wear a name that is Scriptural, who are content to have only a local organization, who preserve the original spiritual mission of the church, who worship the original way, and who uphold the original terms of entrance we read of in the Bible. Who are these people? We are the North Sparta church of Christ.

We look to Jesus as our Head and our Savior. We invite you to visit and see the word of God in action. You will be warmly received.

## CONCLUSION

The word of God through Jesus Christ is loved and practiced today. It directs us in knowing the truth and in being set free from sin (John 8:31-32). It unites us on the basis of what pleases God (John 17:17-23), not based upon what pleases men. It affects our attitudes and behaviors, making us treat others better and more lovingly. Friends, will you not come and investigate? Do you long to be a part of something great and worthwhile? Then come, learn more of Jesus and His blood bought church (Matt. 16:18; Acts 20:28). Come be a partaker of grace and salvation. Enjoy the forgiveness of sins and the assurance of heaven.

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**"And [God] hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man." (John 5:27)**