

NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTIANITY (PART THREE)

Introduction

1. There are literally hundreds of different religious organisations claiming to be the church of Christ, and many have their own way of salvation, hierarchy and government, body of doctrine (usually contained in a creed book or manual), form of worship, and mission concept. Is it any wonder, then, that many people are confused? How can a sincere seeker find the truth? This series of lessons is intended as a guide to help the sincere seeker come to a knowledge of the truth.
2. The following is a brief review of the last two lessons:
 - a. We began by highlighting Jesus' intention to establish and build His church (Matthew 16:18). We then turned to the book of Acts where we saw the fulfilment of Jesus' promise: the apostles were immersed in the Holy Spirit, the gospel was preached, and believers were told what they must do to be saved (Acts 2:1-38). It was these saved ones that the Lord added to His church (Acts 2:47).
 - b. The first congregation of believers met daily for teaching and instruction (Acts 2:42, 46; 5:12), and on the first day of the week they partook of the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42; 20:7). But then there arose a great persecution against the church and Christians were scattered, initially, throughout Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1), which led to the establishment of new congregations (Acts 9:31). It is at this point that we expounded on the difference between establishing a new congregation and a new religious organisation. All the churches we read about in the New Testament were congregations of Christ's church, not different religious organisations or denominations. We then showed how (over hundreds of years) all the different religious organisations came into existence.
 - c. We then showed what a person must do to be saved or become a Christian, and we saw that one must hear the gospel, believe the gospel, repent of one's sins, confess that Jesus is Lord, and be immersed for the remission of sins. We established this by comparing Jesus' commission to the apostles (Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-18; Luke 24:46-49) with Luke's account of how three thousand people became Christians (Acts 2:1-41). These saved people did not *join* the church but were *added* to Christ's church by the Lord Himself (Acts 2:47).
3. So, we understand that Christ established only one religious organisation, we know what a person must do to become a Christian, and we know that saved persons are added to the church by the Lord Himself. Assuming, then, that a person has heard and obeyed the gospel and been added to the church by the Lord, he now wants to place his membership with a congregation that belongs to the Lord, as apposed to a congregation that belongs to a religious organisation established by a man.
 - a. So how does a person go about finding a congregation that belongs to the Lord?
 - b. How can a person tell the difference between a congregation that belongs to the Lord and one that belongs to a religious organisation established by a man?

The following points apply to a person that has become a Christian and is now seeking a church or congregation to attend.

I. FINDING A CONGREGATION OF CHRISTIANS

- A. The first step is to be very clear in your own mind what a person must do to become a Christian:
 1. One must first hear the gospel:
 - a. Jesus commanded the gospel to be preached in all the world (Mark 16:15).
 - b. It is the gospel that is the power of God to salvation (Romans 1:16) and one cannot be saved without hearing it (Romans 10:13-17).
 - c. The gospel is the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (1 Corinthians 15:1-4).

2. One must believe the gospel (Mark 16:15-16; Acts 16:31).
 3. One must repent of his sins (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 17:30; 26:19-20).
 4. One must confess that Jesus is Lord (Romans 10:8-10; cp. Acts 8:34-38).
 5. One must be immersed (baptised) for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; cp. 1 Peter 3:20-21). One must also be very clear about the purpose of baptism stated in these verses, it is “for the forgiveness of sins”, not “to show that your sins have been forgiven”.
- B. So a person must seek out a congregation that consists of those who have heard the gospel, believed the gospel, repented of their sins, confessed that Jesus is Lord, and have been baptised for the forgiveness of sins. Where will I find such a congregation?
1. It is very likely that the person who baptised you for the forgiveness of sins will be able to point you to such a congregation. Nevertheless, it doesn't hurt to ask someone in the congregation if they believe that one must hear, believe, repent, confess, and be baptised in order to become a Christian. If, for whatever reason, you have no one to guide you, then I suppose you could simply keep visiting congregations until you find one where other Christians meet, but there is an easier way: (i) those congregations that teach God's plan of salvation as revealed in the New Testament typically describe themselves as “A Church Of Christ”. So you can search through your phone book or Google it. Again, though, you ought to make enquiries and ensure they are Christians. (ii) If you have access to the Internet you can do some research of your own on the various religious organisations in order to find out their beliefs regarding the way of salvation. I would suggest by starting with the major ones (Catholic, Church of England, Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist).
 2. Questions that might spring to mind:
 - a. Now you might ask, “Doesn't everyone believe that a person must hear, believe, repent, confess, and be baptised to become a Christian?” The answer is “No, they don't”. Many religious organisations teach that one is saved by faith only and that simply saying a prayer of repentance and acknowledging Jesus as Lord is all one has to do to become a Christian. The following is typically taught by many religious organisations¹:

But how? How do I become a Christian?

Receiving God's gift of salvation is not complicated. The response to God's call is explained in these simple steps found in God's Word:

- 1) **Admit** you are a sinner and turn away from your sin. Acts 3:19 says: “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord”. **Repent** literally means “a change of mind that results in a change of action.” To repent, then, means to admit you are a sinner. You change your mind to agree with God that you are a sinner. The resulting “change in action” is, of course, the turning away from sin.
- 2) **Believe** Jesus Christ died on the cross to save you from your sins and give you eternal life. John 3:16 says: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life”. Believing in Jesus is also a part of repenting. You change your mind from unbelief to belief, which results in a change of action.
- 3) **Come** to him by faith. In John 14:6 Jesus said: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me”. Faith in Jesus Christ is a change of mind that results in a change of action - coming to him.
- 4) You may **pray** a simple prayer to God. You may want to make your response to God a prayer. Prayer is simply communicating with God. Pray using your own words. There is no special formula. Just pray from your heart to God, and believe that he has saved you. If you feel lost and just don't know what to pray, here's a prayer of salvation you can pray.

Dear Lord, I admit that I am a sinner. I have done many things that don't please you. I have lived my life for myself. I am sorry and I repent. I ask you to forgive me. I believe that you died on the cross for me, to save me. You did what I could not do for myself. I come to you now and ask you to take control of my life, I give it to you. Help me to live every day in a way that pleases you. I love you, Lord, and I thank you that I will spend all eternity with you. Amen.

¹ The typical example here is presented by Mary Fairchild - see <http://christianity.about.com/od/newchristians/p/becomechristian.htm>

- 5) Now, **don't doubt**. Salvation is by grace, through faith. There's nothing you did, or ever can do, to deserve it. It's a free gift from God. All you have to do is receive it! Ephesians 2:8 says: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God".
- 6) **Tell someone** about your decision. Romans 10:9-10 says, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved".

- b. A similar question one might ask is, "Doesn't every religious organisation believe that one must be baptised for the remission of sins?" Again, the answer is "No, they don't". You can see from the example above that being baptised doesn't feature at all! The following is what is typically taught about baptism by many religious organisations: "Salvation is solely a gift given to people whose faith rests in the grace of God to forgive their sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus. For example, when the Philippian jailer asked what was required of him to be saved, Paul did not mention baptism but simply said, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus.' Likewise, the thief who died on the cross next to Jesus was promised by our Lord that 'today you will be with me in Paradise,' though he had not been baptized. Someone can be unbaptized and yet be a Christian who is destined for heaven"².

Who Is A Christian?

Anyone can claim to be a Christian but a claim doesn't mean it is so, does it?

A Christian is one who has become so by hearing and believing the gospel, repenting of their sins, confessing Jesus as Lord, and who has been baptised for the forgiveness of sins.

A search for a congregation that belongs to the Lord begins with a search for a group of people who became Christians in the same way you did.

II. FINDING A CONGREGATION THAT WORSHIPS ACCORDING TO THE PATTERN

- A. We will now assume that you have been successful in finding a congregation of Christians (i.e., a congregation made up of those who heard and believed the gospel, repented, confessed Jesus as Lord, and were baptised for the remission of sins). Does that mean the search is over? No!
 - 1. We said in part one (and again in the introduction) that religious organisations have the own headquarters, hierarchies, governments, doctrines, form of worship, and mission concepts. So now we have to ask, "Does any of this matter? Are we free to have any kind of hierarchal arrangement that suits us? Can we just choose to believe any body of doctrine regardless of whether those doctrines contradict what is taught in the Bible? Are we free to worship God in any form that suits us? Can we decide what work the church is to do?"
 - 2. It's either yes or no:
 - a. If we say, "No, none of that matters", then it means that we can establish an earthly headquarters if we want, we can have any kind of hierarchy we desire: Bishops, elders, priests, vicars, etc, we can believe any doctrine that tickles our ears, worship in any form and style that is pleasing to us, and (as a church) do any kind of works we deem to be good.
 - b. If we say yes...but hold on! It's so much that we *might* say yes, because we actually demonstrated that the answer is yes. How so? Consider: haven't you come this far because of your love of truth and your desire to practice simple New Testament Christianity?
- B. It does matter how a local church is organised, what doctrine it teaches, how it worships, and what work it does, but before we consider such these things further, **it must demonstrated from the scriptures that it does matter.**

Does it matter how a local church is organised, what doctrine it teaches, how it worships, and what work it does? Yes, but it **must demonstrated from the scriptures that it does matter.**

² <http://marshill.com/2011/03/21/what-does-baptism-mean-and-other-questions>

Conclusion

1. Once a person has obeyed the gospel, finding a congregation at which to worship is not really that difficult.
 - a. Keep in mind what you did to become a Christian (heard and obeyed the gospel).
 - b. Ask the person who baptised you to recommend a congregation or search for yourself using the phone book or the Internet. Typically, congregations of Christians (i.e., those who have heard and obeyed the gospel) are listed under “Church of Christ”.
2. Having found a congregation of Christians, you might think the search is over, but this is not the case. It is essential to ensure that its organisation, teaching, worship, and work is according to the New Testament pattern. Someone might ask, do these things really matter? Yes, they do, and your search for truth has demonstrated that they do. However, if these things do matter, then it must be demonstrated from the scriptures. This will be the subject of the next lesson.

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