

The Distinctive Nature Of The Church

The church revealed in the New Testament is distinctive because it belongs to Christ and is governed by His word. Its identity, doctrine, worship, organization, and terms of entrance were not left for men to determine according to personal preference. Our purpose should never be to appear different merely for the sake of being different, but to follow the pattern revealed in Scripture and allow God's word to determine what the church should be.

Introduction:

1. Jesus declared, "I will build my church" (**Matthew 16:18**). The church therefore occupies an important place in God's purpose and cannot properly be treated as an optional or insignificant part of Christianity. Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it (**Ephesians 5:25**), purchased it with His own blood (**Acts 20:28**), and is its Head (**Colossians 1:18**).
2. The religious world today contains many religious organizations differing in name, doctrine, worship, organization, and teaching concerning salvation. This raises an important question: Did Christ intend His followers to be divided into competing religious bodies, or does the New Testament reveal one church belonging to Him (**Ephesians 4:4-6**)?
3. Biblical distinctiveness does not mean believing that we are personally superior to others or attempting to be different merely for the sake of being different. Our responsibility is simply to follow the teaching of Christ. The important question must always be, "What saith the scripture?" (**Romans 4:3**).

1. Christ Built And Owns His Church:

- a. Jesus Promised To Build His Church (**Matthew 16:18**): Jesus told Peter, "upon this rock I will build my church." Christ did not promise to build many churches teaching different doctrines and following different practices. He spoke of "my church," identifying both its builder and its owner. The church therefore belongs to Christ rather than to any preacher, reformer, religious movement, or human organization. Since Christ built the church, we must look to Him rather than human tradition to determine what His church should be (**Matthew 16:18**; cp. **Hebrews 3:3-6**).
- b. Christ Purchased The Church With His Blood (**Acts 20:28**): Paul told the Ephesian elders to feed "the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." The value of the church is demonstrated by the price which was paid for it. Christ did not shed His blood for something unimportant or unnecessary. We sometimes hear people say that they want Christ but have little interest in the church, yet Christ cannot properly be separated from the people He purchased with His blood (**Acts 20:28**; **Ephesians 5:25**).
- c. Christ Is The Head Of His Church (**Colossians 1:18**): Paul declares that Christ "is the head of the body, the church." A body receives its direction from its head, and therefore the church must receive its direction from Christ. No preacher, council, convention, creed, or religious tradition has authority to change what Christ has revealed. If Christ is truly the Head, His word must govern what the church believes, teaches, and practices (**Ephesians 1:22-23**; **Colossians 1:18**).

2. The Church Is Distinctive In Its Unity:

- a. There Is One Body (**Ephesians 4:4-6**): Paul declares, "There is one body," and elsewhere identifies that body as the church (**Ephesians 1:22-23**). The one body appears alongside one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God. We would not argue that there are many equally acceptable Lords or many contradictory faiths; neither should we treat the one body as though it permits an unlimited number of religious bodies teaching different doctrines (**Ephesians 4:4-6**).
- b. Religious Division Was Condemned At Corinth (**1 Corinthians 1:10-13**): The Corinthians had begun dividing themselves according to their preferred teachers. Some said, "I am of Paul," others, "I of Apollos," and others, "I of Cephas." Paul did not approve these groups as different expressions of Christianity. Instead, he pleaded that "there be no divisions among you" and asked, "Is Christ divided?" If Christians were forbidden to divide themselves around inspired men such as Paul and Peter, we certainly have no authority to divide ourselves around uninspired men and religious movements which arose centuries later (**1 Corinthians 1:10-13**; **3:3-7**).

- c. Jesus Prayed For His Followers To Be One (**John 17:20–21**): Jesus prayed concerning those who would believe through the apostles' word, "that they all may be one." This unity was to be based upon truth, for Jesus had already prayed, "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth" (**John 17:17**). Genuine unity exists when people submit together to God's truth. The solution to religious division is therefore not to pretend that contradictory doctrines are equally acceptable, but for all of us to return to the teaching of Christ (**John 17:17, 20–21**).

3. The Church Is Distinctive In Its Terms Of Entrance:

- a. The Gospel Must Be Believed And Obeyed (**Mark 16:15–16**): Jesus commanded the apostles to preach the gospel to every creature and declared, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." Faith is essential, for without faith it is impossible to please God (**Hebrews 11:6**), but biblical faith is not merely intellectual agreement. Saving faith responds obediently to what God has commanded (**John 8:24; Hebrews 5:8–9**).
- b. Repentance And Baptism Are Necessary (**Acts 2:38**): When the people on Pentecost asked, "What shall we do?" Peter commanded, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins." Those who gladly received his word were baptized, and about three thousand souls were added that day. The same connection between baptism and salvation is taught elsewhere in the New Testament (**Acts 2:38, 41; 22:16; Galatians 3:27; 1 Peter 3:21**).
- c. The Lord Adds The Saved To His Church (**Acts 2:47**): The converts on Pentecost did not obey the gospel and then choose which denomination they wished to join. Luke records that "the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." Becoming a Christian and becoming part of Christ's church were not two separate processes. Those who obeyed the gospel belonged to Christ and were therefore numbered among His people (**Acts 2:41, 47; 1 Corinthians 12:13**).

4. The Church Is Distinctive In Its Worship:

- a. Worship Must Be In Spirit And Truth (**John 4:23–24**): Jesus taught that true worshipers must worship the Father "in spirit and in truth." Sincerity is necessary, but sincerity alone cannot make worship acceptable. Jesus also warned against worship which is made vain by teaching "for doctrines the commandments of men." Acceptable worship must therefore come from sincere hearts and conform to what God has revealed (**Matthew 15:8–9; John 4:23–24**).
- b. The Early Christians Followed The Apostles' Teaching (**Acts 2:42**): Luke records that the disciples "continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." Christians assembled upon the first day of the week to break bread and were instructed to give as they had prospered. Their worship was governed by apostolic teaching rather than personal preference or human tradition (**Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:1–2**).
- c. Christians Were Commanded To Sing (**Ephesians 5:19**): Paul instructed Christians to speak to themselves "in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." He likewise instructed the Colossians to teach and admonish one another through singing. The important question concerning worship is not whether something is popular, enjoyable, impressive, or emotionally moving, but whether Christ has authorized it (**Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16–17**).

5. The Church Is Distinctive In Its Organization:

- a. Christ Is The Head Of The Church (**Ephesians 1:22–23**): Paul teaches that God placed all things under Christ's feet and "gave him to be the head over all things to the church." The New Testament reveals no earthly head or headquarters exercising authority over the universal church. Christ occupies that position Himself, and His authority cannot be delegated to a pope, president, synod, convention, council, or any other human institution (**Ephesians 1:22–23; Colossians 1:18**).
- b. Elders Were Appointed In Local Congregations (**Acts 14:23**): Paul and Barnabas "ordained them elders in every church." Elders were required to meet qualifications revealed by the Holy Spirit and were charged with overseeing the flock among them. The New Testament does not reveal elders governing networks of congregations or one congregation exercising authority over other congregations (**Acts 14:23; 1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9; 1 Peter 5:1–3**).

- c. The Organization Of The Church Is Simple: Christ is the Head, qualified elders oversee local congregations, deacons serve, evangelists preach the word, and every Christian has responsibilities within the body. This arrangement may appear simple when compared with elaborate denominational structures, but men do not improve God's arrangement by adding offices and organizations which He has not authorized (1 Timothy 3:1–13; 2 Timothy 4:1–5; Ephesians 4:11–16).

6. The Church Is Distinctive In Its Authority:

- a. All Authority Belongs To Christ (Matthew 28:18): Jesus declared, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.” Since Christ possesses all authority, men have no right to establish their own religious laws or alter His teaching. The question governing the church must never simply be, “Do we like it?” “Does it work?” or “What does everyone else do?” The proper question is whether Christ has authorized it (Matthew 28:18–20; Colossians 3:17).
- b. We Must Abide In The Doctrine Of Christ (2 John 1:9): John warns that the person who does not abide in the doctrine of Christ “hath not God.” Human traditions may be old, widely accepted, and sincerely practiced, but age, popularity, and sincerity cannot give them divine authority. Jesus warned that human tradition can actually cause men to reject the commandment of God (Mark 7:7–9; 2 John 1:9).
- c. We Must Speak As The Oracles Of God (1 Peter 4:11): Peter instructs, “If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God.” The church does not possess authority to invent doctrine; its responsibility is to teach faithfully what God has revealed. Paul likewise commanded Timothy to “preach the word.” Our own beliefs and practices must therefore continually be examined by the same biblical standard which we apply to everyone else (Acts 17:11; 2 Timothy 4:2; 1 Peter 4:11).

7. The Church Must Remain Distinctive:

- a. Distinctiveness Must Never Become Arrogance (2 Timothy 2:24–25): Standing firmly for truth does not give us permission to become harsh, insulting, or self-righteous. Paul taught that the servant of the Lord must be gentle, patient, and able to teach, “in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves.” We can expose error without ridiculing those who have accepted it, and we can defend truth without behaving as though we are personally superior. Our purpose must always be to bring people to Christ rather than merely to win an argument (Ephesians 4:15; 2 Timothy 2:24–25).
- b. Every Generation Must Be Taught (Judges 2:10): One of the greatest dangers facing the church is assuming that the next generation will automatically understand why we believe and practice certain things. A young Christian who knows only, “This is what our congregation does,” may have little defence when someone asks why. Each generation must learn from Scripture why there is one body, why baptism is connected with salvation, why worship requires divine authority, and why the church is organized as the New Testament teaches (Judges 2:10; 2 Timothy 3:14–17).
- c. We Must Preach The Whole Counsel Of God (Acts 20:20, 27): Paul reminded the Ephesian elders that he had “kept back nothing that was profitable” and had declared “all the counsel of God.” We should preach practical lessons about marriage, family, discouragement, patience, love, and Christian living, but these subjects must not replace teaching concerning the church, salvation, worship, biblical authority, and religious error. Faithful preaching must be broad enough to teach everything God has revealed and courageous enough to address subjects which distinguish New Testament Christianity from popular religion (Acts 20:20, 27; 2 Timothy 4:1–4).

Conclusion:

1. The distinctive nature of the church does not come from deliberately trying to be different. It comes from allowing the New Testament to determine what we believe and practice. If following Scripture makes us similar to others in some areas, there is no reason to invent differences. If following Scripture makes us different, there is no authority to remove those differences merely to fit in (Colossians 3:17; 1 Peter 4:11).
2. Christ built the church, purchased it with His blood, and rules it as its Head. The church therefore belongs to Him, and He alone possesses the authority to determine its doctrine, worship, organization, and terms of entrance (Matthew 16:18; Acts 20:28; Colossians 1:18).

3. Our responsibility is not to preserve a religious tradition simply because it is ours, nor to defend a familiar label. Our responsibility is to return continually to the New Testament and ask, "What saith the scripture?" (**Romans 4:3**). The safest place for the church in every generation is exactly where Christ intended it to be — under His authority and within His word.

Applications:

1. **Examine Everything By Scripture:** We must be willing to examine our own beliefs and practices just as carefully as we examine those of others. Something is not right merely because we have always done it, nor wrong merely because others do it. Our standard must remain the word of God (**Acts 17:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:21**).
2. **Know Why You Believe What You Believe:** Every Christian should be able to explain from Scripture why the church worships, teaches, and is organized as it is. Convictions which rest only upon tradition are easily abandoned, but convictions established from God's word can withstand challenge (**1 Peter 3:15; 2 Timothy 3:14–17**).
3. **Stand For Truth With The Right Spirit:** We must never be ashamed of biblical truth simply because it is unpopular, but neither should we present it arrogantly or harshly. We should speak "the truth in love," remembering that our purpose is to help people come to Christ and obey His word (**Ephesians 4:15; 2 Timothy 2:24–25**).

Questions:

1. What does Jesus' statement concerning His church teach us about its builder and owner (**Matthew 16:18**)?
2. How does Paul demonstrate the unity which God intended for His people (**Ephesians 4:4–6**)?
3. How did Paul respond when the Corinthians began dividing themselves according to their preferred teachers (**1 Corinthians 1:10–13**)?
4. What were the people on Pentecost told to do in order to receive the remission of their sins (**Acts 2:38**)?
5. What did Jesus teach concerning the kind of worship which the Father seeks (**John 4:23–24**)?
6. How were local congregations organized under the direction of Christ (**Acts 14:23; 1 Timothy 3:1–13**)?
7. What attitude should Christians have when correcting those who are in error (**2 Timothy 2:24–25**)?

Summary:

The church revealed in the New Testament is distinctive because it belongs to Christ. He built it, purchased it with His blood, and serves as its Head. Its identity therefore cannot properly be determined by human tradition, religious leaders, councils, creeds, or personal preference.

Christ intended His people to be united in one body under His authority. Those who obeyed the gospel were added to His people, worship was governed by divine truth, local congregations were organized according to the apostolic pattern, and the teaching of Christ provided the standard by which faith and practice were determined.

The church must remain distinctive without becoming arrogant or contentious. Every generation needs to learn not only what Christians believe and practice but why. Our aim is neither to preserve tradition for its own sake nor to manufacture differences from others, but simply to be what Christ intended His people to be.

Questions & Answers:

1. What does Jesus' statement concerning His church teach us about its builder and owner (**Matthew 16:18**)?

Answer: Jesus identified Himself as the builder and spoke of the church as “my church.” The church therefore belongs to Christ rather than to any human founder, religious movement, or organization (**Matthew 16:18**).

2. How does Paul demonstrate the unity which God intended for His people (**Ephesians 4:4–6**)?

Answer: Paul identifies one body alongside one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God. Since the body is the church, Christians are to be united as one body under Christ (**Ephesians 1:22–23; 4:4–6**).

3. How did Paul respond when the Corinthians began dividing themselves according to their preferred teachers (**1 Corinthians 1:10–13**)?

Answer: Paul condemned their divisions and pleaded with them to be united in the same mind and judgment. He challenged their party spirit by asking, “Is Christ divided?” (**1 Corinthians 1:10–13**).

4. What were the people on Pentecost told to do in order to receive the remission of their sins (**Acts 2:38**)?

Answer: Peter commanded them to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins. Those who gladly received his word were baptized (**Acts 2:38, 41**).

5. What did Jesus teach concerning the kind of worship which the Father seeks (**John 4:23–24**)?

Answer: Jesus taught that true worshipers must worship the Father “in spirit and in truth.” Acceptable worship therefore requires both the proper attitude and conformity to God's truth (**John 4:23–24**).

6. How were local congregations organized under the direction of Christ (**Acts 14:23; 1 Timothy 3:1–13**)?

Answer: Qualified elders were appointed to oversee local congregations, deacons served according to divinely revealed qualifications, evangelists preached the word, and Christians served within the body under the authority of Christ (**Acts 14:23; 1 Timothy 3:1–13; 2 Timothy 4:1–5**).

7. What attitude should Christians have when correcting those who are in error (**2 Timothy 2:24–25**)?

Answer: Christians should correct error with gentleness, patience, and meekness rather than becoming quarrelsome, insulting, or self-righteous (**2 Timothy 2:24–25**).