

Which is the *Right* Church?

Today there are thousands of denominations and Churches. With all those Churches, how is one to know which one to attend? Many grew up in a Church or denomination and this question may have never crossed their mind. There are major divisions like Protestant and Catholic. There are divisions based on doctrinal differences. Some estimate there are at least 20,000 to 30,000 denominations today. It can be very difficult to sort through the many choices of Churches, especially if you are a new believer. Now there are Churches which say they are non-denominational. This does not mean that they have no specific doctrines and tenants, but that they do not fit into any of the traditional denominations. Who is right? We need to establish some basics in order to evaluate Churches. Some have never given two thoughts about the Church they attend. To them, they are right and nothing else needs to be said. Picking a Church is a *very* important decision. We should take some time to think about what is important before making such an important decision.

Most people start out with the Church or ministry with which they are most familiar. Maybe it was your mother or father's Church affiliation. Maybe you joined a Church that identifies with your idea of an ideal Church. This is usually the case when anyone begins to seek God. Many look to their culture and traditional biases to pick a Church. They feel comfortable in a Church in which they are accustomed and feel at home. Do not let tradition rule your spiritual life. What feels good may not be good. In fact, there are certain traditions which are counter to the word of God. Those involved in such traditions have assured themselves that their practices are honoring to God, but they have not consulted the testimony of God. Many are claiming to worship God and are simply worshipping tradition. Don't be surprised if the word of God rebukes and corrects you. Don't be more surprised if the word of God rebukes and corrects something you have been doing all your life.

There are some Churches where I believe you should simply stay away, because what is going on there is not Christian at all. Many cults are trying to attract new members and are saying anything to draw in converts. They may say all the Christian words and claim that the word of God is their standard, but have another agenda all together. They speak the words but hold different meanings for grace, salvation, faith, eternal life and saved in their hearts. Some Churches are simply destructive and simply should be avoided. There are some non-negotiable points on which you cannot compromise. I will offer some here.

Grace

This subject may be very broad, but I will do my best to be specific. Do not go join a Church if they do not understand salvation by grace. One obvious point to consider, you must understand salvation by grace before you can know the difference. If you are not sure about this point, you should take time to understand the message. I have written much on the subject and there are some recordings which can help you gain an understanding of this important subject at <http://wordistruth.com> Churches will mouth the words, but their heart is far from grace. If you listen carefully, you will be able to distinguish those who are wolves in sheep clothing. Salvation by grace is the only way anyone can be saved. Of all the religious and Church activity in which people are involved in this world, it all means *nothing* if that person is not saved. Of all the places Satan would attack the Church,

salvation is the first front. He seeks to twist and distort the message of salvation in order to keep those who reject the gospel in darkness (2Cor 4:4). Satan is busy working in every Church; we should be aware of how he attempts to distort the truth and avoid his wiles.

No Compromise

We must take a stand. If we know the truth of the gospel, we cannot allow Satan to water it down or minimize it. We must stand for the gospel, just as those who have come before us have done. They were willing to die for the faith and the message they leave for us is to “*contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints*” (Jude 3b). Many have not paid any attention to this responsibility and assume that their Church is immune to any attacks from the enemy. Let me tell you, every Church is under attack. Even if Satan cannot find a weakness in one area, he will do his best to sow discord in another area. He will do anything to discredit their witness. The Church must resist attack by following the word closely.

Ignorance is not bliss

I have talked with many over the years about the gospel. Some have been in their Churches for 10, 20, 30 or 40 years. What is interesting is that in many, it is not possible to hold a biblical conversation about the gospel. In many Churches, the gospel is not mentioned much at all. It is assumed that the gospel is understood by all and it does not need to be taught. Many Pastors can tell great stories, but have no knowledge themselves about the basic principles of the Gospel. The enemy is certainly behind this. If anyone should know the gospel, it is the Pastor. If the Pastor is ignorant, the congregation will also suffer from ignorance. If you think I am over-estimating this situation, then go to your Pastor and ask some key questions about salvation. Do not simply ask the “what” of salvation; also ask the “whys” of salvation.

When is grace no longer grace?

There is a point about grace that needs to be told. Many today are claiming that they are saved by grace. Well, not many are saying they are saved by works, but are they really saved by grace? We cannot declare anyone saved or not saved, that is God’s business. However, we can know what salvation by grace is according to the scriptures and know if we ourselves have complied with the most important condition- to believe.

And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.” Romans 11:6

Here the subject is election. God holds the sovereign right to elect some and not others. His choosing is here declared to be “*by grace.*” Grace totally excludes human works, merit and even demerit. Grace is undeserved.

¹⁰Not only that, but Rebecca’s children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. ¹¹Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God’s purpose in election might stand: ¹²not by works but by him who calls—she was told, “The older will serve the younger Rom 9:10-12.

Notice that the election, which is by grace, does not depend on human goodness or sinfulness. It depends simply on God's sovereign choice. If it is by grace, then it is no longer by works. Some would still ask, what does this mean? "*It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy*" (Rom 9:16). Since salvation is by grace, we need to pay careful attention to this principle or else we could be pursuing a salvation which is not based on grace, but works. We must further keep in mind that there is only *one way* of salvation and that it is "*by grace*" (Eph 2:6, 8). Many are saying they are saved, but the salvation of which they speak depends on them. It depends on their asking forgiveness, their keeping the law, their being good and avoiding the worst sins, their perseverance and dedication to some principles. I say it depends on them because if they did not do these things, they would think their salvation is in jeopardy. I have asked many if they are saved, and the response I get is, "well, I haven't been going to church lately, and I haven't been living up to what I know is right, but I plan to get more involved..." This and other responses like these are an indication that this person is depending on works for salvation. If they had a salvation by grace, they would know that it doesn't depend on them at all, but on God and His Christ.

Many might have the right answer to the question "are you saved?" They may have the right answer on their lips, but their hearts are far from salvation by grace. I could train a parrot to say they are saved by grace, but it does not mean that bird is saved. Now, as I said earlier, we cannot go out and save people. God saves. Our job as Ambassadors of Christ is to speak to them the words of life, the words of reconciliation. It is our job to reason from the scriptures with them, showing them Christ as the only hope of salvation for man, just as the Apostle Paul did in the early Church. So, we cannot fully know what is on a person's heart, but they are not responsible to us, but to God. Sometimes a person will expose their heart to us if we ask a few well placed questions. I'll get to those questions later, but even if they answer the questions in the right way, they could still be hiding behind some dependence on works for their salvation. We cannot know for sure, but we do not need to. The matter of their soul salvation is between them and God ultimately. If God allows me to share in the work of the gospel, what a privilege!

Revealing Questions

Asking questions does not always reveal what is in a person's heart. The person may simply refuse to answer our questions, and they are under no obligation to talk to us. While this is true, you may find that many are willing to engage you in this type of conversation. If they do, then you can ask them questions about where their dependence lies. Is their salvation dependent on them, or is it dependent on Christ and God. A question that reveals this is asking if they believe in eternal security. Some have coined the phrase, "once saved, *always* saved." I will not agree with everyone who believes in eternal security, but that is another story. However, if a person believes they can be lost for something they can do, or did not do, then their salvation is dependent on them, and not Christ. This means that they believe that in their minds, their salvation depends on their obedience or works. Salvation is by grace. It does not depend on works *at all*, not before salvation, *and not after*. "*He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit*" (Titus 3:5). Our salvation is not based on deeds done in righteousness, otherwise grace is no longer grace.

The only condition for salvation is to “*believe on the Lord Jesus Christ*”. If anyone has ever done this in their life, then they are saved, and they have “*eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life*” (John 5:24b). There is a moment of salvation, just as there is a moment of birth. The condition has definite results which follow and we must recognize that God saves us and removes us from any condemnation. He takes us out of death and into life. What did we do? We simply trusted the matter of our soul salvation to Jesus Christ. Everything else that happens is God’s business and performed by His power. To believe in Christ, this means that you depend on Christ. If you still feel that your salvation depends on you- in ANY way, then you have not believed in Christ and may not be saved at all. There is no need to worry, you can simply “*believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved*” (Acts 16:31).

Some will look at this statement agree, but they don’t go far enough. They agree that salvation is by grace and is received unearned, but what about those who are wicked, evil and utterly sinful? They are qualified for grace. Those who are keeping themselves respectable are really not qualified for grace. They suffer from the problem of self-righteousness. Jesus said he did not come for those who need no physician. Many who are working for their salvation are insulted when they are told that salvation is free. They think, “what about all that time I was obedient?” They reason that they have earned some favor with God. However, we should know that our salvation is not dependent on “*deeds done in righteousness...*” (Titus 3:5). We are not saved because of any righteousness we perform after salvation; we are saved by the perfect righteousness of Christ. This righteousness is credited as soon as we trust in Christ.

Now, I realize that by asking questions to the members of a Church you may not see what that Church teaches. However, if the Church is teaching salvation by grace, what the members believe is a reflection on the teaching present there. If members are sketchy about salvation by grace, then it is a reflection on the leadership. The result of little or no biblical teaching will be ignorance which leads to blindness. I have talked to some who had no idea about salvation by grace, but they assured me that their Pastor knew all about it. By listening to the Pastor preach, he contradicted salvation by grace as well. This is not a good place to be. I know some will find it tough to separate from these people. In many cases they are very likeable and charismatic, but we must stand on the truth of the gospel. I like Jesus’ approach to this type of situation.

¹²Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?" ¹³He replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. ¹⁴Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit." Matt 15: 12-14

If the Pastor of a Church does not understand salvation by grace, my suggestion to you is to leave. If the Pastor does not teach salvation by grace, *leave* that Church. The *only* way of salvation is by grace. If a Church is leading someone astray in this area, they have joined sides with the enemy. Sitting in a Church which is anti-grace should grieve us. As a Pastor, I must tell you to leave and don’t look back. But, what if you love that Church and the people in it? Maybe you were raised in that Church and most of your friends and relatives are there? I would say to you, talk to them and let them know why you are

leaving; you owe them an answer for the hope that is in you. Respectfully, let them know where you stand and why they are not meeting your spiritual needs. Do not condemn them, do not argue with them, and do not hate them. *“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”* (Eph 6:12).

Churches and the Law

Some Churches may talk about grace and salvation, but they are *not* teaching the Christian way of life which is by grace. *“For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace”* (Rom 6:14). Our way of life is not the law; we are free from the sin nature and serve God in a new way. Our life under grace is different from the life of the Israelite. Many are looking back to the law and borrowing features they like and teaching them as obligations to those under grace. Some examples would be Tithing, Sabbath observance and dietary laws. Some others are convinced that Christians today should keep some of the feast days such as the Passover and Feast of Tabernacles. They continue to look back, and this hinders them from seeing what is ahead. *“For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory”* (2Cor 3:10). They cannot see the surpassing glory because their focus is the former revelation to Israel. God has a purpose for Israel, and all the revelation given to them supports that purpose and for them. The revelation to them fits who they are and is related to their position and access to God. They were under the law, still in their sin nature. We are not under the law and dead to our sin nature (Rom 6:2). We can make many comparisons, because we are very different from the Israelites.

We must learn to live according to what God has made us. We are not Israel, we are the Church. Yet many Churches concentrate on the life of Israelites instead of teaching the dynamics of the surpassing life. The Old Testament is beneficial for us to learn, but it is not written to us. We could say then that the whole bible was written for us (*all scripture is God breathed and is profitable...*), but not all scripture is written to us (we must *rightly divide the word of truth*). Much can be learned of God from the Old Testament, for it is the same God of the New. One of the great blessings we have in the New Testament is the revelation of the deep things of God. If you desire to grow up in the spiritual life, you must have meat (Heb 5:14). No one can grow up on the milk of the word.

Many leave Churches because of personal conflicts with other believers. Their reason for leaving might be, they just don't like the Pastor, or they don't get along with the deacons, or the Church is not a friendly Church. Well, those reasons are really not very good reasons at all. There is no perfect Church. The next Church you go to may have those same potential problems the first one did. One thought to consider, maybe you are the problem, which means you will certainly have the same problems in any Church. Conflicts with other believers can exist in any Church. If you are looking for a perfect Church, then you are going to have to wait until the Church is caught up to meet the Lord in the air. Currently the Lord is working in the Church, *“to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless”* (Eph 5:27). While the Church is here and now, we need to have patience and understanding when it comes to other believers. And remember, you are not perfect so you are a part of the problem. When we come to Church, let us take our eyes off of other believers and focus them on the Lord and His word.

Supporting a Church

When you understand salvation by grace, you have an obligation to separate yourself from a Church who is teaching the false Gospel. I had this dilemma when I first understood the gospel. I loved the people in my Church and really did not want to leave. My thought was to just keep going there and maybe I could help them understand salvation by grace. This did not work. I only caused division in the Church and I was grieved. I finally left the Church. During this time, even though I was against that Church and seeking to bring about change, I still believed in the Church. I supported that Church with my time, energy and money. If a Church is teaching a (false) gospel that is not according to the true gospel, please read the next phrase carefully from Paul.

⁶I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— ⁷which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. ⁸But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! ⁹As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! Galatians 1:6-9

From the warning, we should understand that there is such a thing as a perverted gospel. This gospel is certainly not good news and we are warned to stand back and let them be eternally condemned. Under no circumstances are we to join with them, fellowship with them, or even socialize with them. We are not to devote time to their ministries, give our money to support them and certainly not encourage others to listen to them. We are not to compromise with a perverted gospel, but depart from it. The greatest thing we can do for those under a perverted gospel is to leave that ministry. Our absence is a testimony to the fact that we reject false teachings. If they are teaching a perverted gospel, they have joined sides with the enemy. We are not to support them, but stand against them. But remember, it is not the people we are against, it is the false teaching they promote. Just as Paul repeated the warning, I wouldn't mind repeating this paragraph again. Instead of repeating it, I would ask you to read it again to be sure you are not supporting a false ministry. Most importantly, you cannot detect a false ministry until you know the gospel.

The airwaves are filled with false teachers with perverted gospels. Many believers are doing the unthinkable- supporting these ministries! The only way these ministries can stay on the air is through the continued support of those who believe in them. Many are being entertained when they go to Church. To them, the gospel is not as important as their entertainment. Many don't care *what* the minister says, they are concerned with *how* they say it. Church has become a time where people come to see what they can get from God. They want riches and all their bills paid. They want God to bless them with healing some disease or malady they have. Some are just there to find a mate. Some come because they like the music and enjoy the praise; again, they have the entertainment motive. In all these motives and more, many are going to Church faithfully and not getting the most important thing- the word! With all the focus and emphasis on self, many never look away from themselves and focus on God. Let us look at Paul's motivation.

⁷But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Phil 3:7-11

Notice Paul's great focus in this passage. His attention is not on himself, it is on Christ. Many people want to serve God, claim to love God and praise Him with much energy. However, they will *not* allow God to change their thinking. They will not submit their thoughts, ideas, opinions and beliefs to God for Him to teach, correct, rebuke and train them. Jesus said it best, "*These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me*" (Matt 15:8). We can do all those things and still resist God in our hearts. We must submit to the Lord and allow Him to teach and lead us into all truth. The Church you attend should support this and not be a distraction.

Tradition vs. Essentials

Many view Church from a traditional viewpoint. Their definition of praise, worship, Church, Pastor, Elder, Deacon and Choir have meanings which their *traditions* have defined. For instance, a person may think they are not having Church if there is no choir. Or, another may seek a more liturgical service and not feel satisfied at a less structured worship service. If these traditional norms are not satisfied, they do not feel as though they have been to Church. Many will look to their surroundings and expect that a Church will look a certain way. Some look to feelings and emotion to determine if the Church is right for them. I could go on and on describing what people expect to see in a Church, but we should note that likes and dislikes are diverse. Music is very important to many, and they come be entertained and dance. Praise services abound in many Churches where people raise their hands and shout "hallelujah" and sing songs. Then, some Churches are very quiet and controlled. No noise is tolerated and everything is perfectly timed. All of these styles and modes exist in Churches and there are too many more to mention here. Some of these forms of worship I would reject and are not what I would consider worship. However, my rejection may be based on my particular religious training and culture. It is like asking what type of music a person likes. Music tastes vary widely depending on many factors and there are generally no right or wrong music choices, there are simply preferences.

We need to be sure that we get what God considers essential for a Church, and then allow that to be the goal in searching for the *right* Church. Once we find out what is essential, we can determine if some of those religious and cultural preferences are helpful or hindrances to what God's purposes are in worship. One thing to consider is that the early Church did not have many of the features today's Churches have. For one reason, the early Church was persecuted. The Church was essentially underground, so there would not have

been mega-Churches with signs and billboards. Believers met in the houses of other believers. Even though this was the case, the Church grew tremendously. There was no choir, everyone sang. There was no organ, piano, pulpit or pews. There were no gymnasiums or swimming pools. They did not boast of 40 different ministries. The Church was simply a classroom for believers to come and learn about the Christian way of life.

The Early Church's Essentials

The early Church was successful; and this is evidenced by her continued existence today. The early Church certainly had its problems and we can read about them in the pages of scripture. However, they did pass on the faith to us. The early Church established the word, and that is what transforms lives. They were made up of every class, the rich, poor, Jew and Gentile, slaves and free (1Cor 12:13). People from all walks of life came together for the one purpose of growing “*in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*” (2Pet 3:18a). They sang together “*psalms and hymns and spiritual songs*” to the Lord (Eph 5:19). They devoted themselves “*to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching*” (1Tim 4:13). They worshiped through giving, “*Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver*” (2Cor 9:7). They were not to be disorderly, “*For God is not a God of disorder but of peace*” (1Cor 14:33). And finally, they were admonished to “*Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction* (2Tim 4:2).

Humility & Worship

The essentials of the Church had to be present in every generation. We all need an attitude check when we look at what is or is not a good Church. The two key factors in a Church are humility and worship. Humility is essential because it opens the heart to God. It says that the believer is not in charge, but Christ is Lord. Humility is the believer's ability to submit to God and His authority over their lives. Humility *considers* God, respects and honors God for who He is. Humility makes possible our submissiveness to the teaching of God. As new believers coming out of darkness, they really have everything to learn about the light. Humility causes us to sit at the feet of Jesus and eagerly learn from Him who is meek and humble.

After we grow up a bit in the Christian life, we realize that God is the ultimate teacher. He uses everything in life to show us the reality of His truth. We can even learn in defeat and failure. What we realize is that God was there all the time. As unbelievers, we were steeped in arrogance until God caught up with us and we trusted Christ for our soul salvation. We still have much arrogance to discard at this point; this is what hinders us from growing in grace. Many will look into the heavens and say, “God if you're there, give me a sign!” God was always there, but lo and behold, the problem is with us. God has been speaking, but we have *not* been listening. The most exciting thing in this life is hearing God in the midst of this dark, dreary and prideful world. The world appeals to our arrogance, but humility allows us to hear from God.

Worship is the other essential. This word will trigger whatever memories your culture or tradition have taught you over the years. Please consider another definition of the word. Worship is our response to God, once we have been taught of the Spirit. God has revealed

Himself to you, now what do you think about God? Worship is an expression of the spirit of man to God in appreciation for all that He is and has done. True worship comes from a heart that recognizes God. Therefore, the prerequisite for worship would logically be, coming to a knowledge of God. Unbelievers cannot and do not worship God. Now, if you look around the world, people are worshipping in all the religions. However, if one is not saved by grace, they do not know God. No amount of religious activity can pass for worship. Jesus said in Matthew, that their worship was in vain, even though they would honor Him with their lips (Matt 15:8, 9). True worship begins in the heart of a believer saved by grace.

Worship is our response to God. Just as there are many personalities, there will be many *ways* these personalities respond to God in worship. In some churches, they will tell you how to respond to God in worship. They have defined worship for you and will judge you according to the standards they have set. If we have an appreciation for God in our heart, worship should be a natural result. You do not have to manufacture worship; it flows from a heart that is thankful and eager to be in the presence of God. God defines true worship for us in the following passage:

²³Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." (John 4:23, 24).

Jesus gives us some great guidance in what we need for true worship. One thing that stands out is the Father looks for worshippers, but not just any, only those who worship in a certain way.

In Spirit

For anyone to worship God, who is spirit, they must also be a spiritual being. Everyone in Adam is born spiritually dead (1Cor 15:22), and is incapable of worshipping in spirit. This is why Jesus said to Nicodemus, "*you must be born again...*" Many are seeking to worship God, but are ignoring this first step. If we are not born again, saved by the grace of God, we have no spiritual life. If there is no spiritual life in the worshipper, all their worship, prayers, giving, service and sacrifices are in vain. When we go to a church, we should go because we seek to worship God. We do not go to church to socialize or show off our attire. When you come to church, you should have worship on your mind. You must also understand that God is not discernable through our senses; therefore if we are to worship this invisible God, we will need to have the spiritual world opened to us. We can only do this by being born again. Many are serving God from the standpoint of their senses. This is why they need to have certain things in place for them to *feel* like they are in church and worshipping.

In Truth

Once we are saved, we now have the opportunity of worshipping God. However, Jesus gives us another essential in worship- truth. The worshipper must have true knowledge of God. True knowledge of God is the reality of who God is. If worship is going to be meaningful and not simply a religious exercise, we must have accurate knowledge of the true God. The Father wants worshippers who know Him. Can you imagine someone

giving you praises for something you said and have done, and you did not say or do the things they claim? God expects that you know Him before you can be impressed to worship Him. If you are worshipping a god who is not the true God, that is idolatry. In the passage where Jesus speaks to a Samaritan woman at the well we see an example of worshipping God but disregarding truth. Jesus says to the woman, “*You Samaritans worship what you do not know...*” (John 4:22a). God will only receive worship from believers who know Him and appreciate Him for who and what He is.

We cannot be liberal when it comes to truth. Can you imagine having the opportunity to speak at a prestigious event? You are the main speaker. Just before you speak, someone introduces you to the audience. However, just about everything they say about you is wrong! You did not graduate from that college, you do not have this or that degree, and your family’s names are not the names he mentioned. You were not born where he said you were born. In fact, you might think to yourself, “Who is this guy talking about?” I bet when you finally stand before the podium, your first order of business will be to correct the false ideas presented and set the record straight. God would have it no different. God has spoken through His word, but many will overlook it and cling to the false ideas planted in their hearts from culture, tradition and the enemy. Remember, humility listens to God. And, God does reveal Himself through His word, “*thy word is truth*” (John 17:17b). When we worship God, we need accurate knowledge of God, which *only* comes from His own revelation of Himself, found in the word.

We may be trying to find the *right* Church for many years. One thing we must consider, that maybe we are not *right* ourselves! The focus here has been on the Church, their character and teachings, but we want to turn it on ourselves for a moment. If we are not thinking correctly, we could be in the right Church and would not know it at all. The Father seeks the right worshippers as we have seen. Just as we have conditions, we must respect God’s conditions. True worship will happen when we find the *right* Church and the Father finds the *right* worshippers.

Church Ordinances

In your search for a Church, you may find that some Churches have adopted different ordinances. We should state here briefly what ordinances should be included in the Church. There are two that have survived and one is optional. They are the Lords Table (Communion) and Baptism (water). Considering the Lord’s Table, we are commanded to take part of this ritual in memory of our Lord Jesus Christ. He Himself instituted this and it was passed down to us by the Apostles. Paul says, “*For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread...*” (1Cor 11:23). How often should we do it? It does not say, but does say that as often as you do it, you remember Christ and commemorate His sacrificial death (1Cor 11:25, 26). When should we stop doing it? Not until the Lord Jesus comes back, so until He comes, we continue to partake of this ritual (1Cor 11:26). Is Communion restricted to some? Yes, the only condition is that a person be a believer. This is not for unbelievers. Church membership is not a requirement. Some Churches may restrict Communion based on Church membership. I do not find this anywhere in the word. There is a warning for believers who do partake. Please read it for yourself in 1Cor 11:29-32.

Baptism

Water baptism was used in the early Church. Many Churches have continued to baptize even today. This has been a source of great confusion and debate. It was also found to be confusing and a source of arrogance and fighting in the early Church (see 1Cor 1:12-18). It was such a problem for these Corinthians that Paul said, “*I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized into my name*” (1Cor 1:14, 15). With this example in the bible, we would think that this problem was nipped in the bud. Conversely, it is even worse in our day. Instead of division and factions within the Church, there are denominations, totally autonomous and separate from one another. The divisions between them go beyond baptism, although it is still a major point of contention among many. Many argue about which mode, sprinkling or immersion. They also argue about infant baptism and just what it accomplishes for the individual. Some go so far as saying that it is essential for salvation and believe in baptismal regeneration. I can think of a major denomination which believes that unless you are baptized in water, you cannot be saved. This sounds much like the same problems that existed in the early Corinthian Church. We need to understand and place baptism where it actually belongs.

First, water baptism is not a part of salvation. An unbeliever can be saved completely and never be baptized. The thief on the cross with Christ is always given as an example for this thought. I would agree, and not limit it to his experience, but there are many throughout the ages who have complied with the one condition to “*believe on the Lord Jesus Christ*” and they were eternally saved. We should approach this using a statement from the Apostle Paul.

³Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called— ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. Eph 4:3-6.

This passage is for the purpose of encouraging unity in the body of Christ. We need this unity today just as they did in the early Church. There are some unifying features which we can all find common ground in our faith. The one we will focus on is “*one baptism*”. If there is only one baptism, then is it immersion, sprinkling or just what is it? This baptism is none of that at all. It is the most important baptism that everyone who is in the body of Christ experiences- the baptism of the Spirit. Water baptism divides, where baptism by the Holy Spirit unites.

¹²The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. ¹³For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. 1Cor 12:12, 13

It is interesting that when Paul felt the need to stress unity that he says “*one baptism*”. This is what unites every believer, no matter what they were as unbelievers. This passage

says that we were “*all baptized by the Spirit into one body*”. This baptism unites instead of divides. This baptism joins people together from all walks of life, race and social status and makes of them “*members together of one body*” (Eph 3:6b). This baptism does not focus on what we do, but what God has done in us. This baptism unites Jews and Gentiles, totally divergent groups into one body. Therefore the “*one baptism*” can be none other than the baptism of the Spirit, not water baptism. Any other attempt to promote water baptism over this would only create division, not unity. Romans chapter 6 goes into detail regarding the baptism of the Spirit and its results.

Which baptism is most important?

In Acts chapter 10, Peter is given a vision from God. As the story goes, God was urging Peter to go to the Gentiles and give them the gospel. Peter goes to the house of a Gentile and begins to speak the word to them.

⁴⁴While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. ⁴⁵The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. ⁴⁶For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Acts 10: 44-46.

The passage says that the Holy Spirit came on those who heard the message. Now, the Jews who also came with Peter were amazed at this. They understood that the gift of the Holy Spirit has been given to the Gentiles also. Later when Peter was explaining this to other Jews in Acts chapter 11, Peter puts two and two together.

¹⁵"As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. ¹⁶Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'
¹⁷So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?" Acts 10: 15: 17

Notice these Gentiles received the baptism of the Spirit, just as the Jews had in Acts chapter 2. Also, there is a contrast between John's baptism with water and a greater baptism promised by our Lord. We should focus our attention on this *greater* baptism of the Spirit. Paul says there was “*one baptism*”, but there are two in Acts chapter 10. Just after they were baptized with the Spirit, “*Then Peter said, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have."*” (Acts 10:47). There are two baptisms here, but only one is truly significant, only one saves and joins the person to the body of Christ. Therefore, the only essential baptism is the baptism of the Spirit. Water baptism cannot add to the salvation work of God. Water baptism cannot create unity in the body of Christ. However, water baptism can teach new believers who do not understand Spirit baptism what God has done in them. Baptism teaches believers, it does not save unbelievers.

Is Baptism Optional?

Baptism was certainly a part of the early Church. I believe baptism points us to what God has done in us by the baptism of the Spirit. I believe that baptism is a teaching aid to

reveal the spiritual reality of the one who is now “*in Christ*”. We now have the finished revelation of God, the completed canon of scripture to teach us the spiritual realities of the baptism of the Spirit, which is after all the “*one baptism*”. Paul seems to go in another direction altogether. “*For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power*” (1Cor 1:17). Christ did not send Paul to baptize with water? This is the testimony of Paul. Well then, what is more important than that? Preaching the gospel! Therefore, I conclude from this that baptism is optional. It can still be used as a training aid for believers, and there is no harm in water baptism if this is understood.

Many would object to my stance that baptism is optional. I understand that, and I would simply say go ahead and be baptized. As long as one understands that baptism adds *nothing* to salvation by grace. Salvation is free from works, even the ritual works of baptism, keeping the law or any other human obligation. Salvation is not a mystery and is revealed in the scriptures in great detail. The question must be asked to those who insist on baptism, “What happens if one is *not* baptized?” Some would answer this question by saying that person would not be saved. Others will say that the person is involved in sin. Water baptism is not an issue in salvation. And, if I were to reference the Apostle Paul’s statement about baptism, he was not the one involved in sin when he said that God did not send him to baptize, but the Corinthians were carnal (1Cor 3:1-3) and emphasizing the wrong things such as water baptism. Preaching the gospel is more important than baptism. With all the trouble water baptism caused, Paul said he was “*thankful*” that he did not baptize any of them, with a few exceptions. Instead of the body of Christ learning from their troubles, they have duplicated them. The same situation exists today when baptism is the subject. I say with Paul, that my focus will be on preaching the gospel. I refuse to be a part of the division. I have asked many if they are saved, and the answer that comes back is, “Oh, I have been baptized.” In this answer, they have associated baptism with salvation which is wrong. Instead of the work of God and Jesus Christ, the person is more occupied with what *he* has done.

One more thing about water baptism

I must say that when we put baptism in its proper perspective, it is teaching us what happened to us on the inside by God. Many who are being baptized have no idea about the baptism of the Spirit. The very thing it should teach is not being taught! Instead, many are depending on baptism as if it saves them, or it is their ticket to heaven. If it is used this way, it is not demonstrating the spiritual reality it is designed to teach. It has therefore become a ritual without the reality. It would be better if the person would simply learn the truth from the scriptures. There is nothing wrong with baptism; the problem today is the same problem which existed in the early Church. I am not against water baptism, but I am against it being used as a source of boasting and arrogance.

In Conclusion

If you are a new believer and looking for the *right* Church, I believe God will guide you as you pray and ask Him to lead you in this area. I would leave you with two passages. The first is the need to have faith in God. “*And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those*

who earnestly seek him” (Heb 11:6). God is invisible and we must seek Him by faith. We can know that those who earnestly seek Him will be rewarded by finding Him. The second passage is about guidance. “*But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth...*” (John 16:13a). We must trust that as we hunger to know Him, that He will lead us into all truth. I believe that those who want to know God will know Him. God is not hiding from us; we have been hiding from God since Adam hid in the garden. We cannot neglect the word of God which is the ultimate revelation of God to man. We must remember to confess our sins before we approach God (1John 1:9) and He promises to give us wisdom when we simply ask for it (James 1:5). There are so many Churches with false motives out there, things are really tough. Satan is really busy causing confusion in the world. But, I believe that for the person who is seeking earnestly to know God, He will bring them into all truth. I was involved in a false Church and he saved me and brought me! I can tell you of many others who have been delivered from false Churches and false doctrines. Thanks be to the Lord!

I will close with some FAQs I have heard over the years concerning Church.

What if I am in the wrong Church? There are no worries unless you are in a Church that does not teach, but only encourages emotions and social life with other believers. You must think in terms of spiritual growth. Do not be afraid to leave a Church if you are not being fed. You do not owe any Church allegiance if they are not providing for your spiritual needs. Keep an attitude of seeking to know God, as long as you are hungering and thirsting, God will provide the nourishment and lead you to a Church where you can grow up.

What if I learn things which are not correct? God will use those experiences to personally teach you the truth. Always maintain an attitude of submission to God and His word. This will keep you from becoming stuck in the mud of false doctrine. Keep an attitude of humility, allowing God to correct you if He sees fit.

What will happen if I leave my Church? Never assume that any one person, Church or organization has all the truth. Never assume that salvation can only be found through some particular denomination or organization. Leaving a Church or denomination will never cause you to leave Christ or your salvation, no matter what the Church says. Some organizations will want to hold on to you so tight they may resort to these types of warnings. Finally, relax and learn about your new life in Christ, for you are in good hands.

What happens if I don't like the people in my Church? Do not allow conflicts with other believers to distract you from what is most important, getting to know God. If the distraction is too great, you will naturally be repelled. It is the responsibility of the Pastor and leaders of the Church to provide an atmosphere of respect and learning. The Pastor should be on guard to minimize distractions and create an environment which fosters growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord.

I find many today are looking for that *right* Church. In this discourse, my hope was to provide some guidance in finding that Church. There are so many voices out there today. Some Churches have become a business and the way it is run, it is strictly business. Money is very important to them and everything has a price. We must try to keep in mind

why we want go to a Church in the first place and what is important to God. We must remember that it is Christ's Church and He is Lord. The Church should represent Him on the earth. Finally, we should remember that the Church is not a brick and mortar building, it is made up of believers. We *are* the Church! God cannot be found dwelling in a building however beautiful it may be. God dwells in us! Do you want to worship God? First, you should desire to know God. Learn what is so special about Him. Seek to understand Him and His ways. Learn to lean on Him and depend on His wisdom to direct your path.

Once you know Him, you will love Him and worshipping Him in the *right* Church will be the most natural response. As you grow in grace, you will have the desire to worship through the ministry of the word, through praise and singing, through giving of yourselves and your resources, through fellowshiping with other believers and encouraging one another. We should want to spend time with other believers. They are the *only* ones on earth who can identify with our pilgrimage. They are the only ones who can understand our trials and tribulations. Believers are the ones who will pray for us, love us and care for us. We are members together of the same body. This is not limited to believers in our local Church; it includes every believer in the world.

¹⁹Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, ²⁰built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²²And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. Eph 2: 19-22

In Christ,
Pastor Douglas E. Presley
06/24/06