

Fulton County Gospel News

Good News About Christ And His Church For All Of The World

“. . . Christ is the head of the church: and He is the Savior of the body.” - Ephesians 5:23

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WHY PERSIST IN CALLING THE CHURCH “THE CHURCH OF CHRIST”?

by Lee Moses

In this day and age, some might wonder why it is important to continue calling the church “the church of Christ.” The proliferation of manmade denominational designations is both a product of and contributing factor to commonly-held views that what one calls a church is either a matter of personal preference or irrelevant altogether. In recent years, there have been a few instances of former “churches of Christ” choosing to become known by another designation. There are some who insist that there is nothing wrong with changing the name, saying it is judgmental to insinuate otherwise. However, there are very valid and compelling reasons to persist in calling the church “the church of Christ.”

Not any name will do. Our family is expecting our third child this month, and we have been struggling with what name to give her. Although we have yet to see her face to face, we want to give her a name that will be appropriate, and one that she will be proud to wear. At this time, we especially appreciate the importance of a name, as do all parents at such a time.

Really, anybody who is honest will admit that names are important. Businesses try to develop a name that will be conducive to business. A restaurant called “Juicy Burger” will probably get more business than one called “Disgusting Burger.” Yet for some reason, many in the religious world downplay the importance of a name.

A preacher one time, in a revival, clapped his hands and shouted, “Thank God, there is nothing in a name! nothing in a name!” When an old woman in that audience, who had been Scripturally taught, jumped to her feet, clapped her

hands and shouted, “Glory to Beelzebub, the prince of devils,” the preacher and the congregation were shocked, and he immediately rebuked her for giving glory to Beelzebub. But she said, “You say there is nothing in a name. Glory to Beelzebub, the prince of devils.” The preacher’s mouth was closed.¹

We certainly do not condone giving glory to Beelzebub, but this story illustrates that names have meaning. Names are important to us, and that importance should not only be maintained in the religious realm, it should be heightened.

Names are likewise important to God. He changed Abram’s name to Abraham (Genesis 17:5), Sarai’s name to Sarah (verse 15), and Jacob’s name to Israel (32:28). Each of these given names signified the favor of God.

God specified the names to be given to Jesus (Matthew 1:21) and to John, the forerunner of Christ (Luke 1:13). Both Jesus’ and John’s parents understood that they were to name their sons as God had named them, not after their own will. John’s extended family thought the God-given name unreasonable, but John’s parents insisted (Luke 1:59-63). This is because not any name will do, and especially is this true when a God-given name is in question.

The name “church of Christ” is a Scriptural name. If God has provided names for the church, those names must be preferred over any manmade names. God condemns the spirit of division; particularly the spirit of division as manifested through manmade designations:

For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not

carnal, and walk as men? For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal? (1 Corinthians 3:3-4; compare with 1:10-13).

Since “*to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace*” (Romans 8:6); we must ensure that we are not calling ourselves “of Paul,” “of Apollos,” or “of Martin Luther.” We must concur with the words of Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon: “I look forward with pleasure to the day when there will not be a Baptist living. I hope they will soon be gone. I hope the Baptist name will soon perish; but let Christ’s name last forever.”² We must call ourselves after a spiritual, God-given name.

The Holy Spirit uses a few different names to refer to the church: simply “the church” (Matthew 18:17; Acts 2:47; Ephesians 3:21), “the church of God” (Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 15:9); “churches of Christ” (Romans 16:16), and “church of the firstborn” (Hebrews 12:23). Other words used for the church are “the body” (Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 1:22-23), “the kingdom” (Hebrews 12:28; Matthew 16:19), “God’s husbandry” (“God’s field,” New King James Version, 1 Corinthians 3:9), “God’s building” (1 Cor. 3:9) and “the flock” (1 Peter 5:3).

At this point we merely wish to note that “church of Christ” is among the several designations given by the Holy Spirit for the church. One might object, “Wait, I don’t read anything about a ‘church of Christ’! In Romans 16:16, I only read about ‘churches of Christ,’ in the plural.” But it takes singulars to make a plural—there cannot be **churches** of Christ without each of their being a church of Christ. If all of them are collectively called “the churches of Christ,” any one of them would have to be a “church of Christ.”

God loves and blesses the church

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P.O. Box 251
Mammoth Spring, AR 72554

Lee MosesEDITOR
Phone(870) 625-3217
E-Mailcocfcgn@centurytel.net
Websitewww.fultoncountygospelnews.org
Brian DixonWebmaster
E-Mailhalopages@yahoo.com

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(Romans 8:28-39; Ephesians 5:25; Revelation 3:9; et al.). As a church accurately identifies itself by a God-given designation, it signifies the favor of God; just as Abraham, Sarah, and Israel's new God-given names signified the favor of God.

The name "church of Christ" most clearly expresses the Biblical nature of the church. While there are numerous designations for the church in the New Testament, the principle of its being the church of Christ rings throughout. Looking to its impending establishment, Christ called it "*my church*" (Matthew 16:18). Although the words "church of Christ" are not explicitly stated in this passage, for us to refer to the church as did Christ we cannot call it "my church." Changing the first person "my" to the third person, as we must from our perspective, "my church" becomes "Christ's church" or "the church of Christ." The body, which is the church (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18, 24), the Holy Spirit calls "*the body of Christ*" (1 Corinthians 12:27; emphasis mine, LM).

While Scripture sometimes calls the

church "the church of God," it implies at the same time that it is the church of Christ: "*Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood*" (Acts 20:28; emphasis mine, LM). While it is called the church of God, obviously it was not God the Father Who purchased it with His own blood. It was specifically Christ Who purchased the church with His own blood (Ephesians 5:25; Revelation 1:5); thus, here "the church of God" means not "the church of the Father," but "the church of Christ."

"Church of the firstborn" or "church of the firstborn ones" alludes to the relationship those in the church have with Christ (Hebrews 12:23). He is truly the Firstborn with all the attendant blessings thereof (1:6; Psalm 89:27); however,

it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren" (Hebrews 2:10-11, emphases mine, LM).

All these children of God and brethren of Christ, those who compose the church, receive the blessings of the firstborn: "*And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ*" (Romans 8:17). This reference to "the church of the firstborn" underscores the church's relationship to Christ, the true Firstborn.

To the church at Colossae, Paul wrote that they were "*Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son*" (Colossians 1:12-13). Although Paul was previously discussing God the Father, he distinctly states that the church is "*the kingdom of his dear Son,*" Jesus Christ. He elsewhere avers that "*[Christ] must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy*

that shall be destroyed is death" (1 Corinthians 15:25-26). So until death is finally vanquished at the Great Resurrection, Christ is to reign over His kingdom, the church (verse 24).

In whatever figure is used for the church; whether kingdom, body, flock, or bride; Christ is portrayed as having the preeminent position: "*And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence*" (Colossians 1:18). If in **all things** Christ is to have the preeminence in His church, why would His name not be included in the name of the church?

As the New Testament refers to the church, it continually reinforces that it is the church of Christ. "Church of Jesus" or "church of Jesus Christ" might just as clearly express the Biblical nature of the church, but because "church of Christ" is found in the Bible, should it not be preferred?

Having one clear designation is expedient. In today's plurally religious world, how can one know with whom to worship as he is traveling or moving to a new location? How can those in the community know that we are distinct from the denominations in the community? While there are several Scriptural designations for the church, should all the different congregations of the Lord's church haphazardly use the different Scriptural names on their building signs and in their phone book entries? In one town, the faithful congregation might have its sign posted "Jonestown church of the firstborn"; and in the next town the faithful congregation would have posted "Church which is at Smithville." And their entries in the phone book would be different altogether. Although such might not necessarily be sinful, it would hardly be expedient (compare with 1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23; 14:40).

But by what name should faithful congregations call themselves? Should they each simply call themselves "church"? There are so many religions that call themselves "Church," that name by itself communicates very little. What about "church of God"? Although the name is Scriptural in itself, the designation suggests to most the manmade Pentecostal denomination, thus might not

be the best designation to place upon our buildings. But what about “church of Christ”? This name has successfully signified for years a people known for demanding a “thus saith the Lord” for all they do. Faithful saints associate this designation with other faithful saints. Admittedly, the name alone does not give us all the information one needs to know whether a congregation is faithful or not, but it serves to expedite the Christian’s need to assemble with the saints wherever he might be (Hebrews 10:25).

While having one clear designation for the church is expedient, it should be noted that expedience never absolves us of our responsibility to “speak as the oracles of God.” We should never use the term “church of Christ” in any denominational sense, because the Bible never does. We should not use it adjectivally or individually (e.g., “he’s church of Christ”; “she’s a church of Christ”); nor should we use it **exclusively**. The Bible refers to the church with multiple designations, and we should continue to refer to the church with multiple Scriptural designations. But at times it is expedient that there be one clear designation for the church—and there is no designation which more clearly states of which church one is speaking than “the church of Christ.”

Changing the name has clear implications. It was noted earlier that calling the church primarily by a Scriptural designation other than “church of Christ” is not necessarily sinful. If a man living in a tribe in Africa were to acquire a Bible, learn and obey the truth, convert his fellow tribesmen, and refer to their congregation as “the church of the first-born,” there would not be a thing wrong with that. However, when a church that for years has been known as a “church of Christ” decides to drop “of Christ” and become merely “church,” the scenario is entirely different. There are clear implications revealed by such a name change, as such a name change is not made without motivation.

Such a name change implies that a congregation desires to move themselves into an alternate fellowship than that historically enjoyed by faithful congregations known primarily as “churches of Christ.” It is not difficult to see why this

is so. In every instance of such name change of which this writer is aware, the name change has been preceded by colossal departures from Scriptural doctrine and practice. In this respect the name change is positive—it reflects the fact that a congregation has ceased to be a true church of Christ (compare with 1 John 2:19; Revelation 2:5).

A defense used by name changers indicates they are seeking a drawing power outside of Christ. One church said part of their goal was

To reach more souls for Christ.

While we deeply appreciate our heritage in the Churches of Christ [sic], we recognize the hindrance the name creates for some. A common comment from new members is this: “We would have come sooner, but we had to get over the name of the church.” This is a barrier that need not be.

So apparently the name change is helping their numbers to inflate. But if, as these folk allege, the name of Christ hindered some from coming, it was obviously not Christ that drew them there once the name of Christ was dropped. Christ said that **He** was to be the drawing power: “*And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me*” (John 12:32). And if Christ did not draw them there, is it Christ that keeps them there? Do any of these “new members” actually **belong** to Christ? As Peter urged under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, “*Neither is there salvation in any other (name than Jesus Christ, LM): for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12). While they claim to seek “to reach more souls for Christ,” they are apparently only claiming bodies for their own building.

Ultimately, the name-changers demonstrate that they are ashamed of the name of Christ. One church that dropped “of Christ” defended their actions, “New Testament churches employed a variety of names, never clustering under a common banner other than Jesus Christ.” If this were truly their concern, the logical response would not be to cluster under a **private** banner—**without** the

name of Jesus Christ. Their desire is clearly to separate themselves from faithful congregations who are grateful to God for the privilege of wearing the name of Christ. They acknowledge that they are motivated by how the outside world perceives the name “church of Christ.” Instead of pleading with them as did Peter of the necessity of the name of Christ, they kowtow to their worldly wishes. But Christ warned, “*Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels*” (Mark 8:38).

While the designation “church of Christ” is not to be used exclusively, it is worthwhile to persist in calling the church for which Christ died “the church of Christ.”

¹ C. C. Crawford, *Sermon Outlines on the Restoration Plea* (Murfreesboro, TN: DeHoff Publications, 1956), p. 103; quoted by Stephen Law, “The Church Triumphant: Must It Wear a Scriptural Name?” in *The Church Triumphant*, ed. Bobby Liddell (Pensacola, FL: Bellview church of Christ, 1991), p. 131.

² Quoted by Crawford, pp. 102-103; Law, p. 135.

THINGS STRANGE TO GOD

by Joe W. Nichols

According to Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, the word “**strange**” carries the idea of alien, foreign, and stranger. It is applied to doctrine, opinion, tongues, land, people and flesh.

As Bible students, we are familiar with Nadab and Abihu who “*offered strange fire before the Lord, which He commanded them not*” (Leviticus 10:1). God had forbade the offering of “strange” incense, burnt offerings, meal offerings, and drink offerings in the tabernacle worship (Exodus 30:9-10). God had also specified that “*fire from off the altar*” was to be used in the offering of incense (Leviticus 16:12).

A parallelism could be drawn in

applying the plight of Nadab and Abihu to those in “Christianity” who offer “**strange music**” to the Lord. There are two distinctive kinds of music: the kind made with instruments (Psalm 150), and the kind that is made with the human heart (Ephesians 5:19). During the early restoration movement in the United States (ca. 1800), in restoring New Testament purity to worship, the use of instruments in Christian worship was rejected as unscriptural. From the inception of the church until the sixth century, the church had worshipped a cappella. Digression after the sixth century had brought in the use of instruments that remained until the restoration movement (ca. 1800). However, the census of churches in 1906 listed a distinction between the churches of Christ and the Disciples of Christ (the digressive group). The bringing in again of instruments into Christian worship was the major issue of division—the culprit being the re-introduction of “strange music” into worship. In the parallelism drawn, what difference would there be in offering “strange fire” in worship and in offering “strange music?” Since the one is unacceptable to God and condemned, most assuredly the other is also.

Jude, the brother of the Lord, in his short epistle concerned himself in exhorting brethren to “*contend earnestly for the faith*” (Verse 3). In his dealing with “*lasciviousness*” (Verse 4), he mentions those who give “*themselves over to fornication and gone after strange flesh*” (Verse 7). In his condemnation of sexual immorality, he specifically notes those who practice homosexuality (“*gone after strange flesh*”). Paul in his list of sins of the flesh also denotes the same in the words “*abusers of themselves with mankind*” (1 Corinthians 6:9; translated “homosexuals” in the New American Standard Version).

When we group together “**strange fire,**” “**strange music,**” and “**strange flesh,**” they differ only in that they are different ways of practicing unrighteousness before God (1 Corinthians 6:9). According to Paul, the Corinthians made a decision to put away such spiritual abuses—“*and such were some of you:*

but ye were washed, but ye were sanctified, but ye were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of God” (1 Corinthians 6:11; emphasis mine, JN). However, according to the apostle Peter, some would choose to “*turn back*” to “*wallowing in the mire*” rather than to practice righteousness through “*the holy commandments delivered unto them*” (2 Peter 2:21-22).

Things that are strange to God are things that show contempt for God. One can only know God and love God, and love his brethren, through keeping the commandments of God (1 John 2:3,5; 5:2). Moreover, when one loves God by keeping His commandments, he is loved of God (John 14:21,23).

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GOD’S PLAN OF SALVATION

1. Hearing the word of God (Romans 10:17; Acts 16:32).
2. Believing what is taught (Mark 16:16; Hebrews 11:6).
3. Repentance (Acts 2:38; Luke 13:3; Acts 17:30).
4. Confession (Romans 10:9, 10; Acts 8:37).
5. Baptism (Acts 2:38; Mark 16:16; I Peter 3:21; Romans 6:3, 4).
6. After the above five steps, faithful Christian Living (I Peter 2:11, 12; Revelation 2:10).

THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

1. The Bible is its only guide (Romans 1:16; I Thess. 2:13).
2. Wears a Biblical Name (Romans 16:16).
3. Established at the right place (Isaiah 2:2, 3; Acts 2).
4. Established at the right time (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2).
5. Established on the right person (Matthew 16:18; Acts 2:36).
6. Saved are in it (Ephesians 5:23; Acts 2:47).
7. Its members are enrolled in heaven (Hebrews 12:23).
8. Membership in it is obtained by obedience to God’s commands including baptism (Acts 2:41-47; I Corinthians 12:13).

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