

Identifying the Church of the New Testament

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

The following material is the transcription of a lecture presented to a group of interested Bible students. The style is, therefore, more spoken than written. It is not burdened with technical argument or documentation.

Several months ago, the nation's news programs were dominated by the story concerning the young woman from California who worked as a congressional aide, and who mysteriously disappeared. Over and over again, her physical description was published — height, hair color, eye color, and distinguishing characteristics. By virtue of that detailed description, there was hope that if someone should see her, she could be identified and brought home to her worried family.

Every day in our lives we encounter occasions in which we have to identify certain objects. If we go to the supermarket to shop, and we return to the parking lot, we have to identify the particular vehicle that belongs to us. If a mother's child becomes separated from her in a large crowd, she can provide an identifying description to those who may be able to locate that child.

Perhaps the most important application of that principle is this: Is it essential that we be able to identify the church of the New Testament — the one that God planned, and the one that Jesus purchased by the shedding of his blood? Is it important that one be able to identify **that** spiritual body? Can it be found in today's world?

Tragically, many sincere religious people operate on the premise that it really doesn't make any difference what church one belongs to, so long as it is under the general umbrella of "Christendom." But is that a valid premise upon which to operate?

If the church is something important in the mind of God — and **it is**, the Bible indicates it was a part of the divine plan from eternity (Eph. 3:10-11), and because Christ shed his blood to buy it (Acts 20:28) — then surely it is important enough to need appropriate identification. One doesn't just flip through the yellow pages of the telephone book, or he doesn't just drive up and down the shady lanes of our communities, looking for a commodious church. Rather, the conscientious person wants to know, intellectually and biblically: "What **is** the church of the Bible? Where is it? Am I a member of it, or am I not?"

Let me give you another illustration, which I think will help put this matter into focus. Suppose one is asked to identify a mammal. What is a mammal? Well, you might consult several dictionaries. You might look at a more general dictionary, or you might want to reference a science dictionary. The definitions will be the same generally, with perhaps with a greater degree of detail in the scientific work.

Here is an abbreviated definition of a mammal. A mammal is a creature characterized by certain traits. It has hair. It is warm-blooded. And mammals nurse their young. The English word "mammal" derives from a Latin word, **mamma**, which is the term for breast, having to do with the suckling of the offspring.

A dog is a mammal. A dog has hair, is warm-blooded, and suckles its young. A cat is a mammal. Human beings are mammals — according to this definition. A whale is a mammal, having all three of these characteristics. But a bird is not a mammal. Though a bird is warm-blooded, it does not have hair, and it does not nurse its young. A caterpillar is not a mammal. A caterpillar has hair, but does not nurse its young. A mammal has **all** the previously mentioned traits.

Here is the point of the analogy. There are many churches in our community which have **some** of the traits of the New Testament church. But just as a mammal is not a mammal unless it has **all** of the qualities that are mammalian, just so, a church is not the church of the Bible unless it consists of folks who have done precisely what God requires in becoming a Christian.

Moreover, to have Heaven's **sustained approval**, a group of Christians must attempt to conform to those particular qualities that characterized the church as it functioned under the guiding hand of the inspired leaders of the first century.

Obviously, we don't have the time to develop this theme at great length in this limited presentation, but let us at least survey the matter briefly. I want you to think very seriously; I want you to look into your heart, look into your life, look into your personal history, your experiences — and answer this question: “Am I a member of **Christ's** church? Or am I simply a member of **a** church?”

When Was the Church Established?

First of all, I would raise this issue. When was the church of Christ established? It was established 50 days after the death of Jesus. The record of this is found in the second chapter of the book of Acts. The time is specifically identified as the day of Pentecost. The power of the Holy Spirit was poured out supernaturally upon the apostles, and for the very first time in all of history, they began to proclaim the basic facts of the gospel message, namely that:

1. Jesus had been crucified for the sins of humanity,
2. He had been buried in a tomb.
3. But on the third day, he arose from that tomb, and then, forty days later, ascended back into heaven to be at the right hand of God.

Peter, the leading spokesman on that occasion, suggested that those who were assembled in the city, the Jews, were responsible for having put Christ to death and, therefore, they were guilty of sin. He said to them:

“Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

Luke, the writer who recorded the events, said they who gladly received Peter's words were baptized, and there were added together, that day, about 3,000 people.

From that time on, in the book of Acts, we read that the church is in existence. Prior to that time, all references to the church are in the future tense. Jesus, for example, had said in Matthew 16:18, “I **will build** my church.” That was about six months before he died. But from Acts 2 onward, the church is in existence.

And so, we conclude that the church was established at that time. The year is approximately A.D. 30. The day was Sunday. The method by which they constituted the church was submission to the gospel message. Those who attempt to become Christians **in any other fashion** are not members of Christ's spiritual body.

Now, what about the church of which you are a member? Was your church established in the city of Rome, several centuries after the New Testament was completed? Was your church set up in London, in the 1600's or 1700's? If so, it is not the church of the New Testament. The church of Jesus Christ traces its origin to the events recorded in Acts 2 — twenty centuries ago.

What About Organization?

Let me ask you this. What was the pattern of church organization, as we read of such in the New Testament? Well, the issue is rather simple.

First, Christ is the head of the church. He is “the head of the body, the church” (Col 1:18). The church of the New Testament had no **earthly** head — some person allegedly governing by the authority of Christ. Rather, Jesus is the only head of the church (Eph. 1:22-23).

Second, in New Testament times, within local congregations, there were men known as elders. They were also called shepherds, pastors, or bishops (Acts 20:17,28; 1 Tim. 3:1ff; Tit. 1:5ff). They supervised the **expediency** elements of the local congregation.

There was no such thing, in the first century, as a bishop who presided over a number of churches. There was no such officer, in the first century, as a cardinal over churches of the various nations. There was no such creature, in Bible times, as the **Papa**, the Pope, of all churches. Rather, congregations were organized on a local level, with a plurality of

men (the elders), who guided them in matters of human judgment (Heb. 13:17).

Does your church have a single pastor with a board of deacons that governs the local congregation? If so, you are in a church that is not organized after the Bible pattern. Is your church subject to a “bishop” who exercises authority over a conglomerate of congregations? There is a fundamental flaw in that system.

What About Worship?

Then there is the matter of worship. What is the worship procedure in the church of which you are a member? A survey of the New Testament record reveals that several different acts were engaged in whenever the church met on the Lord’s day to worship God.

The Lord’s Supper

We are told, for example, that the early Christians assembled themselves together on the first day of the week — and **every** Lord’s day (see 1 Cor. 16:2 — NASB) — for the purpose of partaking of the communion Supper. This involved eating the bread and drinking the fruit of the vine (Mt. 26:26ff; Acts 20:7).

This is what Jesus himself had commissioned on that evening when he celebrated the Passover and then, subsequent to that feast, instituted the Lord’s Supper. He took bread, broke it, and said, “eat this in memory of my body.” He gave them a cup of the fruit of the vine, and said, “divide this among yourselves and drink it, this is [i.e., represents] my blood.”

Is that what your church family does? Does it meet **each** Lord’s day for the purpose of observing the communion? Or are you identified with a group that observes the Lord’s Supper quarterly, or semi-annually, or even only yearly? Or perhaps at some other random time? If so, I must tell you with compassion and kindness, that such does not conform to the biblical pattern relative to the observance of the communion.

Prayer

The Lord taught his disciples to pray to God, i.e., to deity (cf. Matt. 6:5ff). After his ascension, they continued in this practice of speaking only to the Lord (Acts 2:42).

Does your church offer prayers to those other than God, such as idols, or to Mary, or “the saints”? If so, those prayers are ineffective. Christ’s church prays as he instructed.

Preaching the Word

On the Lord’s Day, there was also the practice of preaching the word of God. In Acts 20:7ff, when the disciples came together on the first day of the week, Paul also taught the brethren, and continued his communication for a considerable time (cf. Acts 2:42).

Singing

In addition to the teaching program, the early church engaged in singing as a form of worship. Ephesians 5:19 underscores the corporate nature of the musical portion of church worship (cf. Col. 3:16). The inspired apostle wrote these words: “Speaking one to another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your hearts unto the Lord.” Singing is an expression of praise in which every Christian within the congregation should engage.

Does the church with which you are identified come together, and, in addition to singing, have musical accompaniment with humanly manufactured instruments? Such a practice is unknown to the New Testament record.

“Oh,” but someone objects, “musical instruments are mentioned in the Old Testament!” Yes, they are, but the Old Testament reflected a very elementary scheme of things, a **carnal** system (see Heb. 9:10). The Old Testament contained the offerings of bloody sacrifices. The Old Testament had the burning of incense. The Old Testament had a physical, tribal priesthood through whom the rank and file of the people approached God. But that carnal system was laid aside, as the writer of Hebrews argues, in chapter nine of that document. The Old Testament regime was superseded by a **spiritual** system.

Here is a point that is without controversy, historically speaking. Churches identified with Christianity never used instruments of music in their worship for at least **six hundred years** after the establishment of the church. Instruments were introduced only when certain sects were significantly down the road of apostasy, digressing from the pristine New Testament plan.

Giving

The early church, on the first day of every week, contributed into the common congregational treasury, that the Lord's work might be expediently financed (1 Cor. 16:1-2). The modern practice of engaging in business enterprises to underwrite the work of the church was not a part of the original pattern of church economics.

So it was, then, that the primitive church observed the Lord's Supper, prayer, singing, teaching, and the weekly contribution.

Does the church of which you are a member practice these items — as per the New Testament pattern? If not, then it does not conform to the New Testament mold; it does not fit the ideal of the early church, as such existed under the supervision of the apostles of Christ.

Don't you want to be affiliated with the church of the Bible? Is it not possible today to be a part of the original church without any affiliation with a church organism that has adopted merely **some** of the elements of Christianity?

Does a Name Matter?

What was the first century church called? How were the early disciples designated?

There were several appellations employed to describe the first-century believers, e.g., disciples, saints, brethren, etc. But beginning in Acts 11, the early disciples were formally called Christians — first at Antioch of Syria (Acts 11:26; cf. 26:28; 1 Pet. 4:16).

And interestingly enough, the word "called" in Acts 11:26 is a very special word that has to do only with a **divine** sort of calling. It is a calling that issues from God as its source. They were **divinely called** "Christians."

Why would men set aside that name, and designate themselves by human heroes (e.g., Lutheran)? Or name themselves after some form of organization, (e.g., Presbyterian)? Or adopt titles according to some individual point of doctrine they espouse, (e.g., Baptist)? There is no scriptural basis for this common practice.

Tell me please, why are those who profess allegiance to Jesus Christ dissatisfied with simply wearing the name "Christian"? Why are they not known as just "churches of Christ" (Rom. 16:16) or "churches of God" (1 Cor. 1:2) — either appellation being entirely scriptural. There is no solitary, **exclusive** name for the church. But whatever you call it, you need to call it what it **is**, and not what it is **not**.

The church is not a Pentecostal church just because it was established on the day of Pentecost. The church is not a Baptist church just because it advocates baptism. The church is not a Congregational church just because it is organized congregationally. The church is the church of God (1 Cor. 1:2), because God planned it.

Congregations are the churches of Christ (Rom. 16:16), because Christ gave his life in order to bring them into existence. The New Testament indicates that we ought to speak as the oracles of God (1 Pet. 4:11), which means we ought to express biblical concepts with biblical terms whenever possible.

What about the Plan of Salvation?

Finally, I would ask you this question: "What does your church teach in terms of how to become a Christian?" I can tell you this, if it does not teach exactly what the Bible teaches, there is no way it can be identified as a church of the New Testament.

The apostles and other inspired teachers of the first century, as they went forth proclaiming the basic facts of the gospel, first of all instilled within people the need to believe basic facts concerning Jesus Christ. Jesus himself said in John 8:24, "Unless you believe that I am he, you will die in your sins," and he also affirmed that if one dies in sin, he cannot join the Lord ultimately (Jn. 8:21). That is plain enough.

There is a church called the Universalist Unitarian Church. It claims to be a “Christian” church, but I must tell you this. You do not have to believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God to be a member of it. You do not have to believe that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary. You don’t have to believe that he performed the miracles attributed to him in the New Testament record. You do not have to believe that he was raised from the dead.

How in the world could that be a New Testament church? It could not be.

In the first century, believers, who had arrived at that state of spiritual and intellectual development, were required to turn away from their sins in repentance.

On Pentecost, those who believed the gospel message, cried out to Peter and the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?”

Peter responded, first of all, that they needed to repent. Repentance is a change of your mind, a change of your attitude, which subsequently results in a change of your conduct (2 Cor. 7:10). It demands that whatever you are doing that is sinful, you must try to stop that, turn around, and reform your life.

Any church that teaches that your personal life need not be altered, so long as you go through a ritual to obtain “absolution,” thus suggesting that you may continue to pursue your sinful lifestyle, cannot be the church of the New Testament. The church of the Bible demands reformation, a change of one’s life.

In the first century, those who were candidates for becoming Christians had to acknowledge their faith before their peers. They confessed that they believed that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, or they indicated their faith in some fashion (Rom. 10:9-10; 1 Tim. 6:13). When one entertains a fatally flawed faith, he cannot be acknowledged as a Christian.

Moreover, in the first century, those who had been instructed in the faith were to consummate the previous steps of obedience by being buried in water, formally called baptism, for the forgiveness of their sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16).

Some people think that it is not very important to understand the purpose of baptism. As long as you understand that it involves going under the water, that would be sufficient. Many churches don’t even believe that. Tragically, many of our religious neighbors, whom we admire for so many noble traits, practice the sprinkling of water upon babies. There are two mistakes in that procedure.

First, baptism means immersion (Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12), it is not sprinkling.

Second, babies do not need baptism for forgiveness of sins, because they are pure, not having reached a level of personal accountability (Gen. 8:21; Mt. 18:1ff).

Do you belong to a church that baptizes infants? Then you are not a part of the New Testament church. Do you belong to a body of people that sprinkles water when a candidate requests baptism? That’s not the Bible church. Do you belong to an organism that teaches that you are saved at the point of faith and therefore, you need only be baptized to show that you are **already** a child of God? My ancestors believed and taught those ideas. But they were wrong about such matters.

The Bible teaches that one is to be immersed “for” the forgiveness of sins. If one does not need to understand the **purpose** of the ordinance, why is it stated in the passage? The apostle could simply have said, “repent ye and be baptized.” That would have settled that issue. The purpose then would be irrelevant. But no, the apostle admonished: “Repent and be baptized **for** the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). As Ananias told Saul of Tarsus, in Acts 22:16, “Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the Lord’s name.”

A Concluding Appeal

Is the religious organization of which you are a member deficient in the elements we have just surveyed? If it is, you ought to leave it, and find the group that replicates the Bible pattern. There always will be weaknesses in the **human** elements of the church; but there is a **divine ideal**, and towards that one must strive.

Would you think about this very seriously? And if you have not obeyed the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, do so with all dispatch? As soon as you've reached a firm conviction about your spiritual state, and have an understanding about what the Scriptures teach, do not hesitate — obey the truth.

You can then know, with confidence, that you are a genuine Christian. You will be a member of the church that is found in the New Testament — one that cannot be wrong, because it has the divinely-prescribed identifying traits.

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Scripture References

Ephesians 3:10-11; Acts 20:28; Acts 2:38; Matthew 16:18; Acts 2; 1 Thessalonians 5; Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 1:22-23; Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Timothy 3:1; Titus 1:5; Hebrews 13:17; Matthew 26:26; Acts 20:7; Matthew 6:5; Acts 2:42; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 9:10; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2; Acts 11; Acts 11:26; 1 Peter 4:16; Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Peter 4:11; John 8:24; John 8:21; 2 Corinthians 7:10; Romans 10:9-10; 1 Timothy 6:13; Acts 2:38, 22:16; Romans 6:3-4; Colossians 2:12; Genesis 8:21; Matthew 18:1; Acts 22:16

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Fortify Your Faith
P.O. Box 11746
Jackson, Tennessee 38308
Phone: (731) 256-7280 – Fax: (731) 256-5152

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