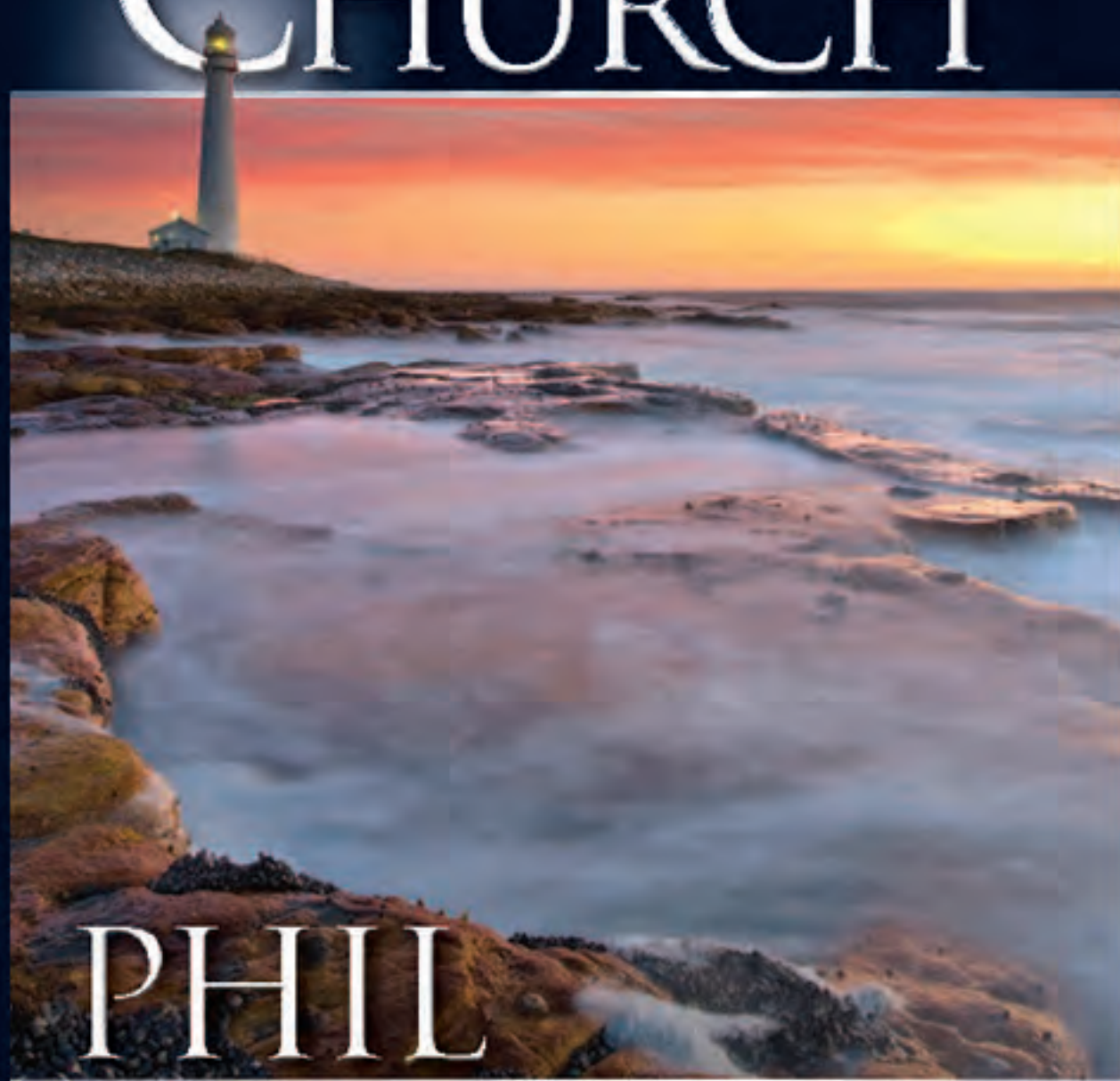


CHRIST'S GLORIOUS CHURCH



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SEARCH PROGRAMS

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Topics subject to change without notice

APRIL 7 – THE CHURCH JESUS BUILT

Jesus said, “Upon this rock I will build my church.” Jesus built His church, and it uniquely belongs to Him. Since He purchased it with His own blood, we should all be a part of it. We want nothing less.

APRIL 14 – JUST A CHRISTIAN

Did you know that you can be a Christian involved in a church without being a member of any denomination? Being a member of the church like the Christians in the first century is possible. You can be just a Christian.

APRIL 21 – THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

If I visit a church of Christ, what can I expect to find there? What do they believe? How do they worship? How are they organized? Who are the churches of Christ, and why should I want to be a member?

APRIL 28 – A MEMBER OF THE BODY

How does one become a member of the body of Christ, the church? Is church membership necessary to please God and be saved? What are my responsibilities as a member of the church Jesus built?

"The Church Jesus Built"

With so many churches that are so different, how can we know which God really wants? Today we're examining the church that Jesus built as it's described in the Scriptures. The Lord Jesus in Matthew 23:34 promised to send forth prophets, wise men, and scribes, who would teach His will but would suffer persecution. The Lord wasn't content for His Word merely to be spoken. He sent scribes to record His words for all time, and His teaching is found in the New Testament.

Occasionally someone asks me, "What does your church teach about...?" and then he mentions a topic. They ask because they're curious and interested; and I appreciate the question, but I must first explain something. The church Jesus built doesn't have a board that dictates official doctrine. It doesn't have a hierarchy of men with a humanly written church manual or creed. The Lord never instructed the church to make its own policy or doctrine. The only head of the church is Jesus Christ Himself; and He said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). He instructed His apostles in verse 20 to make disciples and teach "them to observe all that I have commanded you." What He taught was for every age and the whole world.

The church that Jesus built learns its doctrine from the Lord Himself and the Scriptures. The church has no authority to develop doctrines. No human or group of humans can overrule, edit, or change what the Lord teaches. The church draws its beliefs and practices from the Lord and the inspired teaching found in Scripture. When someone asks what does the church teach, I point them instead to what the Lord teaches in Scripture. The Lord Jesus said that he will judge us by His words (John 12:48). If that's true – and it is, let's listen to Him.

Our reading today comes from the Gospel According to Matthew 16:15-19. "Jesus said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus said to him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.'" Let's pray together. Father, we are grateful that Your Son Jesus built a church of which we can be a part. And, Father, help us to love You and to serve You. In Jesus' name, Amen!

If you open the yellow pages, there are churches everywhere; and they have different names, beliefs, organizations, and practices. Since churches aren't all alike, it poses a problem to those who are searching for an authentic church that follows the Bible. Churches of today differ greatly from the church that you read about in the New Testament. They differ in belief, practice, name, organization, worship, and their source of authority.

The Lord Jesus never designed His church to be so divided or so mixed up with human ideas and ways. He wanted His people to be one and to follow Him. My heart longs to be a member of the church Jesus built, the one He purchased with His own blood. The church belongs only to Jesus; and the church is made up of people who belong to Jesus. Since we are His, we need to follow Him and Him alone. We must not be trapped by human beliefs or practices that ignore His teaching.

The word "church," (ekklesia) means "a called out assembly" (that is, a group of people who have been called together for a purpose). Christians have been called by the gospel to serve Jesus. When the New Testament uses the word church, it never refers to a building. There were no public church buildings for more than a hundred years after the church began. The word "church" refers to people. Acts 8:3 describes the church this way, "But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison." The church in

the first century was made up of men and women. The New Testament never speaks of little children as members of the church.

God calls people to be members of the church through preaching and teaching the gospel. Paul said to the church at Thessalonica, "But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by God, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14). People enter the church when they hear the truth and they put their faith in the Lord.

Sometimes the word "church" is used in a universal sense, speaking of every person who belongs to the Lord and has his name written in the Lamb's book of life. For instance, Jesus said that He would build His church (Matthew 16:18). In this sense, every person who is saved by the blood of Christ has been added to the church that He built. The Bible says, "For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body" (Ephesians 5:23). The church is indeed made up of those whom Jesus has saved. The Lord has added every saved person to His church, His body.

Used in this universal sense, the word "church" never refers to some nebulous collection of denominations and sects. Rather it refers to those who have obeyed the Lord according to the teaching of Scripture. The church is not denominational or interdenominational; the church Jesus built is actually undenominational. The New Testament concept, or the New Testament has no concept of the idea of denominationalism that's so prevalent in our world today. In the New Testament, the church was merely the church.

Sometimes the word "church" is used in reference to a local congregation as in 1 Corinthians 1:2, where Paul writes "To the church of God that is in Corinth." When Paul speaks of "churches," he's not talking about denominations with different doctrines and practices, but rather individual congregations in different locations. For instance, in Galatians 1:2, Paul wrote to the "churches of Galatia." These were local congregations in the various cities of the province of Galatia. They believed the same gospel; they practiced the same things; and they fellowshiped each other as brethren in the universal church.

Sometimes the word "church" has reference to the assembly of a local congregation. Paul spoke of the Corinthians coming together as a church in 1 Corinthians 11:18. In 1 Corinthians 14:34 he said to the women that "they are to keep silent in the churches," referring to that time when the church gathered as a congregation for worship. The very word "church" implies a calling together of people for a purpose. Being part of a church means that one assembles together with other Christians for worship.

The Lord Jesus is deeply tied to His church. Our relationship with the Lord is always in the context of being part of His church. The Lord Jesus and His church are inseparable.

First, we must realize that the Lord built His church. Jesus said, "I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). The Lord's church can never belong to men. People are not the builder of the church; they are what is built. They are the stones in the building. The Bible says, "As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:4-5). Our task is to function as living stones in what the Lord has built.

Second, Jesus purchased the church. The apostle Paul told the elders of the church at Ephesus, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28).

Jesus didn't purchase the church with gold or silver, but with His own blood. Jesus must love and treasure the church beyond measure to sacrifice Himself for it. You may not think much of the church, but Jesus laid down His life so He might purchase it.

Third, the Lord is the head of His church. Ephesians 1:22-23 says God "put all things in subjection under His (that is, Jesus') feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him that fills all in all." God likens the relationship of Jesus to the church as a head to its body. The two are inseparable. Jesus instructs and works through His body, the church, in this world today. All authority resides in Him as the head. If He is to work in your life, you have to listen and obey Him.

Fourth, the church is the bride of Christ. Ephesians 5:25-27 says, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless." The relationship of Christ to His church is like that of a husband to his wife. Notice that Jesus has but one wife; and He has only one church.

This passage teaches just how much Jesus cherishes the church and how He has made the church holy and blameless by the washing of water with the word. No husband would tolerate someone abusing or slandering his wife, and neither will the Lord Jesus tolerate someone slandering or abusing His church.

The Scriptures describe the church Jesus built as a family with God – God is our Father, Jesus is our Lord and our older brother, and you and I are brothers and sisters. Paul wrote to Timothy, "I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; but in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and the support of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:14-15). A household in Biblical times was a family that was living together, loving and supporting one another, the older taking care of and training the younger in the ways of the Lord.

The Scriptures also describe the church as a kingdom. The Lord's church is not a democracy; people can't vote on Jesus or on His teaching. Jesus is the only King and Lord of His church. In Acts 20:28 the Bible says that Jesus purchased the church with His blood; but in Revelation 5:9-10 the Lord purchased people to be a kingdom. Paul said in Colossians 1:13-14 that God "rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." The church is the kingdom of God on earth today. If you wish to go to God's heavenly kingdom, you must enter God's earthly kingdom, the church. We enter that kingdom by being born of water and the Spirit according to John 3:5. That new birth takes place when people who believe and love the Lord repent and are baptized into Jesus Christ.

The Scriptures also describe the church as God's dwelling place, the temple of God. The apostle Paul told the church at Ephesus, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:19-22). God dwells in His people, and He expects them to be His holy servants.

In the New Testament Christians were merely "Christians." God didn't approve of divisions among them. He never suggested or permitted man-made names, creeds, practices, or a hierarchy. They simply followed the Lord and held fast to His teaching. Christians simply lived holy lives, worshiped according to the teaching of Christ, and served the Lord by preaching the truth and being

zealous for good deeds. God's people love the Lord and they love each other. They share the gospel, help the needy, and follow Jesus Christ. They have strong faith and will not give in to the devil or to the world.

The marvelous thing is what is true in the first century can be true today. You can be a member of the church Jesus built by reading and following the Lord's instructions in the New Testament. If you follow Christ, you'll reject every man-made belief or practice. Jesus said His true disciples would stay in His teaching; and this is how He distinguishes the true disciples from others. This is what the Lord said, "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32). Truth and freedom are not found in the traditions or commandments of men. They aren't found in religious groups established by men. If you want the blessing of the Lord, come to the Lord. Follow the Lord's way found in Scripture.

The Lord Jesus said, "He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day" (John 12:48). It just makes sense to do God's will and to follow the Bible in everything we teach or do. Being in the church Jesus built means giving up every man-made doctrine, idea, practice, name, or organization. It means carefully obeying what Jesus commands. The church of Christ, the church Jesus purchased with His own blood, is God's idea; and God is inviting you to be a member of it. The church always has an open door, and there is room for you in God's family. Why not come to the Lord? Let's pray together. Father, we are thankful that Your Son was willing to purchase the church with His own blood. Father, help us to value it the way He did and to follow Him in everything. This is our prayer in the name of Jesus. Amen!

To be in the church Jesus built is a great privilege! It means His blood purchased you, and you belong to Him. It means that He has saved you and made you one of His family. It means that every promise and blessing given in Scripture is a promise that you can claim! We can be true and authentic Christians by returning to the Lord and His teaching. First John 2:5-6 says, "whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked." If you love the Lord, keep His commandments, walk with Jesus!

I hope that your heart longs to listen to His voice and to serve the Lord. I hope that you'll put the Lord and His ways first in your heart and in your life. I hope your heart aches to be right with the Lord. First Thessalonians 5:21-22 says, "But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; and abstain from every form of evil." Turn away from man-made religion, which has empty promises, and turn back to God. God's ways are right.

You can't join the church that Jesus built; the Lord must add you to it. If you'll hear the gospel, believe with all your heart, turn away from sin, and out of love confess Jesus as the Christ, then you're ready to take the step where the Lord adds you to His church. That step is baptism; it's an immersion in water in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. It's simple! Just do what Peter told the people to do on the Day of Pentecost at the beginning of the church in Acts 2:38; and that is to "repent, and be baptized." Just as the Lord added the people at Pentecost, according to Acts 2:41, 47, just as He added them to the church, He will add you to His church.

“Just a Christian”

Did you know that you can be a member of the church that Jesus purchased with His own blood without belonging to any denomination? Today we're going to explore how you can be just a Christian, just a member of the Lord's church. The Bible is God's wonderful message of faith, truth, hope, and love. God gave us His Word to teach us, to encourage us, to comfort us, to reprove us, and to give us eternal life. John 20:30-31 says, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” The more we study the Bible, the stronger our faith will become; and that faith leads to life in His name.

If I told you I just bought a car, you would ask, “Well, what kind of car did you get?” It's pretty difficult to talk about cars without talking about some kind of car. We want to know the make and the model. Is it a hybrid or an SUV? What color is it? If I said, “Well, it's just a car!” we would have no concept of what that meant; but the very first car was simply a car. It was the one and only car.

When you speak of being a member of the church, the first thing people ask is, “What kind of church is it?” They want to know if we go to a community church or a denomination. The idea of being just a Christian and simply being a member of the church Jesus built is foreign to the thinking of most people. But as you read the New Testament, the church is simply “the church.” There was no kind of church. Did you know that you can be a member of that original church? That you can be just a Christian!

Our reading today comes from Paul's first epistle to the church at Corinth, chapter 1, verses 10 to 13. “Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and (that) there be no divisions among you, but (that) you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, ‘I am of Paul,’ and ‘I of Apollos,’ and ‘I of Cephas,’ and ‘I of Christ.’ Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul.” Let's pray together. Father, we are grateful for the gift of Jesus, Your Son, who died for our sins and purchased the church with His own blood. Help us to follow Him. In Jesus' name, Amen!

When people speak of the church they attend, they usually classify themselves as denominational or nondenominational. There are many kinds of community churches and denominations. Various denominations developed when religious people began holding to their own opinions about God's teaching to the point that they refused to work with others. They began spreading their peculiar doctrines or practices. In time, they needed a name to represent themselves. This name became a sort of brand or trademark for that particular kind of church having its own characteristics. It became a denomination.

Taking up a brand name implies a division. A denomination is a “named division.” The divided church at Corinth had members lining up behind individuals and separating themselves from others by following his name. Some followed Paul and said, “I am of Paul,” some Apollos, and some Peter. Paul was horrified at that! He said in 1 Corinthians 1:13, “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” Of course, the answer to these questions is no. No, Christ isn't divided! No, Paul wasn't crucified for you! No, you weren't baptized in the name of Paul!

Many denominations ask their members to go beyond faith in Christ and vow to follow the denominational bylaws or official statements. They follow their brand of Christianity; and this commitment to their doctrines and practices define them as a certain kind of Christian. Isn't this

exactly the kind of division that Paul was speaking against? Because so many generations have gone by with “brand name” Christianities, people have become satisfied and settled in their ways, never dreaming that the Lord disapproves of the divisions that come from brand names. God has never approved of such division.

Have you ever broken a favorite dish? When it happened, you probably groaned and wished you could put it back together in its pure and original state. Our religious world is spiritually broken. We need to leave this brokenness and go back to the original church, the one that you read about in the New Testament. We seek to bring back the pure and unbroken church, as God meant for it to be, by returning to the truth and to the ideals that are found in the New Testament.

In the early 1800s, people who loved God grew weary of the fighting and division among Christian denominations. They believed the Lord wanted His people to be united. They realized that all of the bad-mouthing and exclusiveness of the denominations shamed the name of the Lord. Their constant conflicts and divisive ways caused people to fall away from Christ in disbelief.

The Lord Jesus prayed, “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me” (John 17:20-23).

They believed that the division and animosity came from people holding to human opinions, and creeds, and councils, and practices, and names. They believed the only way they could have fellowship and unity was to unite on what the Lord commanded.

Many Christians left Europe to find religious peace in America, but found the same conflicts here. They wanted something better – a pure and true Christianity free from the stains of human opinions. They believed that, “If we abandon the human and concentrate on what is truly divine, we can unite.” This unity could only come from following the truth that’s found in God’s Word. This meant they had to cast off everything that was human and denominational and return to the Christianity that was found in the New Testament, a Christianity that knew nothing of denominationalism.

They rejected human opinions and human innovations since these things don’t find their authority in God’s Word, but in men. They believed that “nothing ought to be forced upon Christians as articles of faith; nor required of them as terms of communion; but what is expressly taught, and enjoined upon them, in the word of God.” So they said, “We speak where the Bible speaks, and we are silent where the Bible is silent.” They wanted unity in essentials, freedom in matters of opinion, and love in all things. They wanted a pure and true faith in Christ alone found in the New Testament as the source of their faith and practice.

It shouldn’t surprise us that people left the pure, inspired teaching and pursued what they wanted. The New Testament predicted that Christians would fall away from the truth of the gospel into error and false religion. God knew the hearts of men would often follow their own paths.

Paul told the elders of the church at Ephesus, “I know that after my departure (that is, his death) (that) fierce wolves would come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:29-30). Paul, by inspiration, realized that when you twist the teaching, you cause people to fall away from the truth and from God.

Paul warned Timothy, “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity

of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from food that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth" (1 Timothy 4:1-3). The devil is a deceiver; he intends to lead people to believe false teachings and he lies about certain practices being God's will. He doesn't care who he hurts by deceiving people.

Paul knew that Christians would be weak like ancient Israel and would wander away from God's teaching. He knew they would rather believe a comforting lie than to hold to the gospel truth. Inspired of God, he predicted, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths" (2 Timothy 4:3-4). Once a lie gets perpetuated, later generations become convinced that this falsehood is true. They don't even know they've been deceived.

Many today want salvation, but they don't want to take up a cross to follow Jesus. They want a Savior, but not a Lord. They're comfortable believing a lie and will actually oppose the truth. They are so settled in what they believe, they don't want to hear it could actually be wrong. For instance, early church history confirms that Christians wandered away from the teaching and practices that were found in the New Testament. The New Testament says absolutely nothing about things like holy water, lent, penance, infant baptism, intercession of the saints, sprinkling for baptism, sacrifice of mass, celibacy of priests, purgatory, priestly absolution, a pope, instrumental music in Christian worship, salvation by faith only, or the doctrine of "once saved, always saved."

Century by century believers moved farther away from the simplicity of the New Testament and its Christianity. They no longer followed God's pattern for the church in the New Testament, but became something different. If we are to please God, we must return to what God willed in the New Testament. Returning is necessary, because repentance from error is necessary. One cannot remain in error and still please God.

James 5:19-20 says, "My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins." By ceasing to follow man-made doctrines and practices, the church could restore the doctrine, worship, and organization of the New Testament church.

Our intent is to follow the teaching and the ideals of the New Testament. The Lord Jesus built His church before any denomination existed. We want to be in His church, the church purchased with His blood. His church is not denominational, inter-denominational, or even non-denominational. The church that Jesus built was undenominational. Moreover, it was pre-denominational. Jesus would never approve of unifying the truth with error, because Jesus wants the church to remain holy and pure.

Churches of Christ strive to "do Bible things in Bible ways and call Bible things by Bible names." They believe they must "discard from their faith and their practice everything that isn't authorized by the New Testament of the Lord and Savior, and to believe and practice whatever is there enjoined."

This desire to restore New Testament Christianity grew out of a conviction that the Bible is the complete and final authority. Therefore, it was and still is sufficient to teach us all that we need to know for eternal life and for godliness. Just as a seed will produce only after its own kind, so the seed of God's Word will produce the same Christianity today that it did in the first century. The Lord Jesus said in Luke 8:11 that the seed of the kingdom is the Word. The Bible gives us all of God's revealed will for life and godliness. Jesus promised His apostles that they would be guided into all the truth (John 16:12-13). If men go beyond this Word and begin to preach other things, they

will not only lose their relationship with God, according to 2 John 9, they will also produce a different product than the church that Jesus built. Who would really want that?

Some believe that the primary goal of restoration is to unite all churches. They believe that Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17 means that all churches should embrace one another on the basis of the most fundamental things. In their minds, there are very few essentials. Some feel as long as a person believes in and loves Jesus, he is right with God. They seem to ignore everything else that Jesus said and they embrace only what He said about unity.

Before Jesus prayed for unity in John 17:20-23, He first prayed for His followers to be sanctified or "set apart" in the truth (John 17:17). We can't have unity without the truth. We can't blend truth with all kinds of error and still have unity. Christians are to buy the truth and not sell it (Proverbs 23:23). Jesus said, "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples (real disciples, indeed disciples) of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32).

Christ didn't pray for a unity that sacrifices or compromises the truth. Actually, it's our faith in the revealed truth that unites us. Christian unity is not ecumenism, where groups unite but maintain conflicting and contradictory beliefs and practices. Uniting with those who teach or worship in error sells out the truth for compromise. To be faithful and true to the Lord, Christians cannot ignore or tolerate error like the ancient churches at Pergamum or Thyatira did. Jesus called them to repentance; and He calls us to repentance as well.

Why are we talking about this? Because our love for God and the souls of men means speaking out against error and for the truth. Loving the Lord means loving the truth that He taught and loving what is written in the New Testament. Let me ask you, "Isn't the church of our Lord, the one He purchased with His own blood, given to the world through His inspired apostles and prophets, isn't that good enough? How could we dare to change it or think that we could improve on it with our human ideas and practices? We can't! That's why we have to leave everything that violates the will of God and return to the pure teaching. We must remain in God's Word. Let's pray together. O Father, help us to come back to You and to do Your will and Your will alone. In Jesus' name, Amen!

God expects His people to leave sin when they learn the truth. Repentance leaves every wrongdoing and embraces the Lord's will. When the church at Pergamum in Revelation 2 strayed by holding to false teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans, Jesus sternly warned them to "repent therefore or else I am coming to you quickly." In the same chapter, Jesus also warned the church at Thyatira not to "tolerate" the false prophetess Jezebel or her teachings but to repent. When people believe or practice something false, God expects them to repent.

Calling people back to the truth is to save their souls. We must get right with God. This is true, whether we make our plea to an individual, or to a group of individuals, or to a church. To follow Christ, we need to put away what comes from man and follow what comes from God.

Love the Lord, get right with God, and get involved in the Lord's church. Place your faith in Jesus as the Christ; repent of every sin; confess Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God; and be baptized into Christ. Peter told the people at Pentecost in Acts 2:38, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Both repentance and baptism are necessary. The New Revised Standard Version says, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Many have come to believe falsely that baptism is unnecessary, but more than a dozen recent translations show one must be baptized to receive forgiveness. Won't you be baptized today?

“The Church of Christ”

Occasionally people ask me why I am a member of the church. Many years ago I became a member of the church Jesus built, the one you can read about in the New Testament. We search the Scriptures because we know God has revealed the truth in them. God's Word is pure and holy; it never teaches anything but what is good and acceptable and perfect. When we follow God's Word, we show Him our love and our loyalty. The more we study His Word, the more we love Him. And, the more we love Him, the more we want to give our hearts to Him. When we obey Him from the heart, the Lord is pleased.

The church that Jesus built is the one you can read about in the New Testament; it appeared on earth in identifiable, local congregations. They were like families in various locations, meeting each first day of the week to worship. They ate their meals together; they took care of their needy; and they served the Lord. Acts 2:42 says, “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” To be the church Jesus built today, congregations must seek to follow the examples of what God desires. We can know what God instructs by examining the New Testament.

The Lord's teaching was not merely for the first century. He gave it for all time. That teaching is preserved for us in written form in the New Testament so that people in every age might know God's will. What God desired in the first century, He desires in the twenty-first. If the Lord gave us this model in His Word, shouldn't we follow it? Jesus said, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46). Because we call Jesus our Lord, we follow Him and obey His words.

Our reading today comes from Ephesians 4:1-6. “Therefore, I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of all who is over all and through all and in all.”

As members of the Lord's church, our heart's desire is to believe in and to obey the Lord Jesus. We don't want to add to His words or take away from them. We want to believe and practice everything He taught and nothing else. When we became Christians, we recognized Jesus Christ as our only Lord. Colossians 3:17 says, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” We act in His name and by His authority. We belong to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Some encyclopedias say that the church of Christ began in America in the early 1800s with men such as Thomas and Alexander Campbell, and Barton Stone; but Campbell and Stone could not establish something that had already been established. I've never claimed membership in any church but the church Jesus established at Pentecost in 30 A.D. I wasn't baptized in the name of Campbell or Stone. Neither of them was crucified for me. I didn't even know of them until years after I was baptized. I believe in the Lord Jesus and was baptized in His name. I've taken up my cross to follow Jesus. He is my Lord and the only head of His church. Churches of Christ look to Him alone as our Savior and Lord.

Today, there are more than 12,000 local churches of Christ across the United States. Like the churches of the New Testament, these congregations look to Jesus as their Lord and Savior. They

don't have bylaws or a manual that they use in addition to the New Testament. They don't have a headquarters or an organization that's over the local congregations. They don't meet annually to make official statements of the church or to make binding theological decisions. While these congregations recognize one another as brethren, they are autonomous. Each congregation has its own leaders made up of its elders and deacons, who look to the Bible for their teaching and practice.

Should you visit one of these congregations on a Sunday morning, you'll find a warm welcome. Churches of Christ are families who gather together with a common faith, hope, and love. They are brothers and sisters to one another, but there is room in their hearts for someone new. They care about your soul, your well-being, and your family. Churches of Christ generally have Bible classes for all ages on Sunday mornings. These classes study the Bible closely to learn the truth about God and how we should serve Him.

Churches of Christ gather each Lord's day, which is the first day of the week or Sunday, to worship the Lord. They look to the Scriptures to see how God wants them to worship as a church. They pattern their worship today after the examples and instructions that were given in the New Testament.

Worship is a time to draw near to God and to express our love, our praise, and our thanksgiving for all that God has done for us. Worshiping God reminds us of how holy God is and how we stand in need of His grace and forgiveness. Worship is a time of humility and of reverence toward God.

Christian worship to the Lord consists first of prayers. First Timothy 2:1-2 says, "First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made in behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity." As Christians we pray for everyone in need. We thank God for all His blessings and for peace. We pray for strength, courage, and comfort. We even pray for our enemies. We pray especially that God will open a door for the Word, so that men may learn the will of God.

During worship we enjoy the reading of the Scripture. Paul told Timothy, "Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching" (1 Timothy 4:13). Scripture nourishes our hearts and builds us up. Paul told the elders of the church at Ephesus, "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32). God's Word builds us up and gives us our inheritance. We need God's Word in our lives every day.

Churches of Christ sing from their hearts, because they want to praise God and to edify one another. Ephesians 5:18-19 says, "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord." Colossians 3:16 says, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you; with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God."

The music in Christian worship in the New Testament was by means of vocal singing, and every member of the congregation participated. The New Testament gives no example or instruction for Christians to worship with instruments of music. We seek to follow the New Testament teaching in all things, so we simply sing. We know this pleases God, because the early church didn't use instruments of music in worship for many centuries. Since our worship is to glorify God, our desire is to please Him by following the instructions of the New Testament for

Christian worship. Hebrews 13:15 says, "Through Him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name."

Each Lord's Day, the first day of the week, we commune together in the Lord's Supper. Paul said, "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; and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, 'This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). The Lord's Supper is a simple memorial meal, and every member of the church partakes. Christians remember the body and the blood of Jesus sacrificed for them so they might have the forgiveness of sins.

Each first day of the week, Christians contribute to the Lord for the work of the church. They believe 2 Corinthians 9:6-7 where Paul said, "Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly; and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver." Churches of Christ do not send bills or expect a tithe of ten percent. They urge members to give cheerfully as they have been prospered and as they purpose in their hearts.

During worship a preacher or minister will preach the word of God to build up and to encourage brethren to live faithful and holy lives, to know the Lord and His truth, and to keep on doing good and reaching out to others with the gospel. Paul urged Timothy to "preach the word; to be ready in season and out of season; to reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction" (2 Timothy 4:2). Preachers have the responsibility of persuading the lost to come to Jesus and of strengthening the brethren. They must teach the whole counsel of God, and that means they must speak against what is false and what is immoral. They must call men to repent of their sins and to follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

The church is a family that's made up of brothers and sisters. In fact, 1 Peter 2:17 tells us to "love the brotherhood." No one is above or better than anyone else. Each member of the body is loved and valued. The Lord Jesus said to the apostles in Matthew 20:25-28, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The church that Jesus built wasn't divided into clergy on one hand and laity on the other. In fact, each congregation had its own leadership, and no leader held power over several congregations. The idea of an archbishop or a hierarchy over many congregations is foreign to the New Testament. It was a development brought about by men over the centuries. In the New Testament a plurality of elders or shepherds oversaw the work of each congregation. They didn't have one bishop over the elders in a local church. When Diotrephes, in Third John, put himself first and tried to run the church, the apostle John rebuked him.

The Lord Jesus refused to let His followers assume a title that put them above others as some of the Jews did. The Lord Jesus said, "But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors (or masters or teachers), for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you (He says) shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be

humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matthew 23:8-12). For this reason, ministers and others in the church of Christ refuse to be called “Reverend” or “Father.”

In the Lord’s church every member is called a “saint”; there isn’t any special class of Christians that are above others. Paul wrote, “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours” (1 Corinthians 1:2). Every person washed in the blood of Jesus and sanctified by the Spirit is a saint.

In the Lord’s church every member is a priest. Peter said to the whole church, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). Israel had a special tribe of priests among the Levites, but the church doesn’t have that! According to 1 Peter 2:5, every Christian is a priest offering up “spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Every Christian has the task as a priest to serve God, to worship, and to teach others about God.

While the church Jesus built, the church of Christ, is not a denomination or a sect, you can find it today in identifiable congregations. You can be a member of the Lord’s church! The same seed that made members of the church in the first century makes members of the church today. What seed is that? It’s the Word of God. First Peter 1:23 says Christians are “born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, (that is) through the living and abiding word of God.” If you have the same seed, you have the same church. If you change up that seed by mixing it with human traditions and doctrines, you have something different. Let’s stay with God’s Holy Word and remain pure.

The Lord Jesus said, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it” (Matthew 7:24-27).

You’re building your religious house; and what you build will determine your destiny. Be wise and build your house on the rock. How? By hearing the words of Jesus and doing them. Go to the New Testament, all of it, and find everything that Jesus taught. Don’t build your house on human traditions or doctrines and then expect to have a firm foundation. It doesn’t work that way. Go to the Bible alone to find the rock. In churches of Christ, it’s our passion to listen to the Lord’s words found in the New Testament and simply to do them. We don’t want to add to them or take anything from them.

Become a Christian by putting your faith in the Lord and obeying Him. If you love Him, turn away from every sin and serve Him; confess Him as the Christ, the Son of the living God; and be baptized, immersed in water. Do it in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Romans 6:3-7 says that when we’re baptized into Christ, we are baptized into His death. Baptism unites us with Christ in His death, in His burial, and in His resurrection. When we’re united with Christ, God sets us free from sin; we become children of God and members of the church. Churches of Christ today are simply made up of people who trusted and obeyed the Lord according to His teaching. They believed, repented, confessed, and were baptized.

“Membership in the Church”

If you could be a child of God and a citizen in the kingdom of God, would you? Today, we're exploring what it means to be a member of the church. Romans 15:4 says, "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." The Bible gives us hope on every page. Scripture reveals God's plan to bless and redeem man from His weaknesses and sins. The Scripture teaches us how to live so that we may be free from the trapping of sin and find a home with God in heaven.

Many people today say, "Jesus, yes; but the church, no." About 80 percent of Americans believe that you can be a "good Christian" without ever being a member of any church. Many want to be Christians but not members of an "organized religion". Some people have decided to be Christians "at large" or to establish small "house churches"; but they hold the organized church today in contempt. Can a Christian please the Lord Jesus and refuse to be part of the church that He built? Is attending church and being a church member optional?

Some quit worshipping at church because they had a bad experience, and we're sorry for that. Some leave the church because they have sinned and are ashamed. Some stop going because they disagree with some teaching of the church. Many in our culture think churches are too "judgmental" and have quit because they don't want to hear about sin. Others have simply gotten too busy for God and don't have time to worship. We hope you'll put God first; and we want to explore the value of the church that Jesus built. He purchased His church for a reason, and you will be blessed to be a member.

Our reading today comes from Romans 12:4-8. "For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness."

I hear people speak about "being the church", and they have an important message. We must be the body of Christ in the world today. The notion that we can "be the church" but not a part of any local congregation, however, is an unscriptural idea. God expects His people to assemble with one another for worship and ministry. The Hebrew writer says, "and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as the habit of some is, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:24-25). In the New Testament, when a Christian quit assembling with the church, he was falling away from God. He was leaving the faith. He was hurting himself and hurting the church by returning to the world.

Jesus built the church to bless us. Solomon said, "Iron sharpens iron, So one man sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17). People in the church make each other stronger, better, and more faithful and committed. Each Christian needs the example of love and faith that his brothers and sisters give him. Each Christian needs to so live and so love that he provides an example of commitment to the cause of Christ. Saying, "I love Christ, but I won't go to church" sends a mixed signal. It says, "I love God, but I'll choose which commands I'll obey and which I won't." This person isn't really obeying God, but is obeying himself and his own wishes. Jackie and I

engraved some words of Scripture in our wedding rings. Solomon said, “Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12). God knew His people needed the strength and the love that each one could give the other to grow and to remain strong in faith. Two are better than one, because they have each other.

Where would we be without Bible teachers and godly examples? If you have children, don't cheat them out of a spiritual education. It's a shame that nearly 40 percent of the young people in America grow up without any spiritual guidance. They need the help of God to face the temptations and the pitfalls of life. Your children's education isn't complete if it lacks the Bible. If you educate their minds but fail to educate their souls, you haven't prepared them for the day when Jesus comes again. They won't know Him, but will be like the five foolish virgins who didn't have oil for the lamps and found themselves shut out of the kingdom.

Someone converted you to Christ, and they were likely faithful members of the church. They not only taught you the gospel but also taught you about the church. Bible stories are not myths or legends; they are historical accounts of God's interaction with man. The Bible helps us to make sense of where we came from, why we're here, and what will happen to us after we die. We need this spiritual education!

The church is God's kingdom in this life, and heaven is God's kingdom in the next life. We enter the church here so that we may enter the kingdom of heaven in the days to come. Philippians 3:20-21 says, “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.” People who have this hope of heaven and want to live for the Lord have a tremendous opportunity by putting their faith there and being active in church.

First John 3:1-4 says, “See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. But, we know that when He appears, that we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. And everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness.” Church helps us focus on the things that matter and to keep ourselves ready and pure for the return of our Lord Jesus.

We ask, “What was the church like in the New Testament?” The word “church” refers to an assembly, a congregation that was called together for a specific purpose. After Paul had established several congregations on his first missionary journey, he returned to those congregations, strengthening and encouraging them. Acts 14:23 says, “When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” Later, in Philippians 1:1, Paul wrote “to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons.” Did you notice that all the members were called “saints” and not a special class? There are no “super saints” in the Lord's church; everyone is important and loved.

New Testament churches were organized with established leaders. They were visible congregations, meeting at set times and in set locations. Paul mentions that many of the members of the church at Philippi or Rome or Corinth by name. Sometimes churches met in a family's house; but in those days a large house could hold a congregation. In some cases, congregations met outside or in caves. At that time, the church was often persecuted and considered illegal. The earliest church buildings date about 250 A.D. Although they could not openly show themselves, churches assembled to worship and to encourage each other.

In the early church God gave leaders, "for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-13). God knew that His people needed training and equipping to do the work that He called them to do: to take the gospel to the whole world, and to build up the church, and to render help to the needy.

Salvation is never without obligation. To be a member of the church means we're responsible to the Lord and to our brethren. The Lord Jesus said, "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:27). When you become a Christian, the Lord adds you to His church. From that day forward, you're God's servant and belong to Christ. You are not your own, and since you belong to Christ, you must consider how your life reflects on Christ and on His church.

Second Timothy 2:19 says, "Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, 'The Lord knows those who are His,' and, 'Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness.'" People who live for the Lord should live so as to bring glory and honor to the name of Christ. Sadly, some Christians by their ugly language and wicked behavior bring shame on the Lord Jesus and His church. When we become a Christian, we decide to live the moral life that Jesus Christ teaches. We must leave sin behind. Paul asked, "Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" (Romans 6:1-2).

We are obligated to support the church by our attendance. Hebrews 10:24-25 says, "let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as the habit of some is, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near." When we get involved in the worship of the church, we influence others to get involved. By attending worship, we get to know our brothers and sisters, and we can encourage them to stay faithful to the Lord; we can stimulate them to love God; and we can stimulate them to be kind and to serve others.

God also expects His people to support financially the work of the church. Paul said, "Now this I say, that he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly; and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart; not grudgingly or under compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed" (2 Corinthians 9:6-8).

As Christians, we have an obligation to one another. Titus 3:14 says, "Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, so that they will not be unfruitful." 1 John 3:17-18 says, "But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and then closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with

word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.” We can show our love for God by caring for others and helping them.

The best thing that you can do to bless another's life is to teach him about the Lord. The primary work of the church is to preach the gospel to every creature. People need more than physical food; they need God's Word to live spiritually. The Lord Jesus said, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God’” (Matthew 4:4). We must stay busy working for the Lord. First Corinthians 15:58 says, “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.”

Someone says, “Well, Phil, we had a bad experience at church and we won't be going back.” I'm sorry that you had that experience, but was it the whole church or just an individual that hurt you? The Bible teaches that when a fellow Christian sins against you, you're to go to that person privately and talk to him, trying to restore the relationship (Matthew 18:15). Many times people, rather than following the instructions of the Lord, simply quit and separate themselves from other godly people that they need in their lives. Don't quit the church over some rude brother or sister. Talk to that person and work it out.

I became a Christian many years ago because of Jesus. He is my Lord and Savior. I committed myself to Him. I want to go to heaven and live with Him forever. My pride is not as important as going to heaven. So, I won't let anything or anyone come between my God and me. We will always have to deal with rude, selfish, and sometimes immature people; but if the Lord was gracious enough to forgive and put up with us and all our sins, we can be gracious enough to forgive and put up with those who sin only a little against us. We don't want to risk our souls, because we couldn't get along with a brother or sister in the church. I would rather forgive and be forgiven than to hold a grudge and lose my soul. Wouldn't you?

Some say they want to follow Jesus, but have no use for the church; but if we enter into a relationship with the Lord, we must also embrace the Lord's family. The Bible calls the church the household or family of God in 1 Timothy 3:15. The church is not only God's family, but also His creation. The Lord Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, “I will build my church.” He loved the church so much that He purchased it with His own blood (Acts 20:28). We must not set the church aside so quickly. To reject the church is to reject Jesus and His will.

We all realize the church is made up of fallible people who sometimes fail to measure up to the will of God. But, before we give up on the church, let's remember that we all “have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). We all need God's grace. I don't know of any perfect Christians, but I do know forgiven brothers and sisters in the church who seek to live righteously and grieve when they sin. Amazingly, God's gracious love moves our hearts to walk in the light and to be in His family. We invite you to join us in serving the Lord as a member of His family, the church.

To become a Christian and be added by the Lord to His church, you must believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Repent of your sins, every one of them, and turn your heart to the Lord. Confess the Lord Jesus before others and be baptized into Christ. When you are baptized into Christ, Romans 6:3 says you're baptized into His death, and verse 6 says we are crucified with Christ “in order that our body of sin might be done away with.” We're buried with Christ and raised to walk in newness of life. When you're baptized, the Lord Jesus will add you to His church, His family. Nothing, nothing is more important!