

WHAT IS THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH?--PART 1: HISTORY

By Mark Moore

You may have them in your town. They may meet in a building just up the street with a sign on it that says, "Christian Church." So big deal? Other buildings have names like Baptist, Methodist, or Lutheran. In fact, if you were to travel across North America and Canada you could find some 219 different signs on Churches. Some have such esoteric names as: "Christadelphians," "Elim Fellowship," "Holy Ukrainian Autocephalic Church in Exile," and my personal favorite, "True (Old Calendar) Orthodox Church of Greece (Synod of Metropolitan Cyprian), American Exarchate." Frankly, it gets nauseating. You would think that after 20 or 30 denominations, that Christians would run out of things to fight about . . . but they don't. So we ask again, "Why should one be interested in the Christian Church?" Precisely because we are fed up with Denominations.

The group of people who label their churches "Christian Church" have joined an alliance of Christians who realize that they are not the only Christians, but they do want to be Christians only. These folks are committed to allowing the Bible, and the Bible alone to be the only rule of faith and practice for the church. Man-made creeds and denominational hierarchies had no place in the early church. Therefore, following the New Testament (N.T.) book of Acts, we have put away these human inventions and simply tried to follow Jesus and his Apostles.

This alliance goes back to the early 1800's. As the pioneers were spreading across America's fruited plains, so were Denominational schisms. A father-son team, by the name of Thomas and Alexander Campbell got fed up with it (along with many others). They decided to drop all denominational names, creeds, and authority structures and just be the Church as it is described in the Bible.

Obviously this is an over-simplification. And our history as a N.T. church has been checkered (as was the church of the N.T.). But the basic concepts were both pure and popular. In fact, to date, there has not been a faster growing religious movement in America than the Christian Church. Baptists, Methodist, and Presbyterians were all enamored with the possibility to follow only the Bible and Jesus as the head of the church. It would not be accurate to say that they left their denominations, nor that they started a new one. They simply dropped all divisive names and partisan creeds to be the one body that Jesus prayed about (John 17:22-23).

Today, especially in larger cities, we find another resurgence to drop denominational affiliation. But it has a different motivation. Typically a church will find itself at odds with the denominational leadership, not over doctrine, but over personality. So the church buys the building and goes independent. But God never intended the church to be independent from the universal body of Jesus. Nor did He intend for men to take power positions and struggle for predominance.

Our call is not to individuality but to the universal body of Jesus. Our call is not to the "Right" denomination but to be non-denominational. Simply put, our plea is to restore Jesus as the only head of the body and to restore the church as described in the Bible.

If you take these pristine principles and transport them into the real world, of course they will encounter difficulties. There will be personality struggles, differences of opinion, and organizational glitches. But our guiding principle has been this: In Scriptures, unity; in opinions, liberty; in all things, love.

WHAT IS THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH?--PART 2: UNITY

By Mark Moore

There are two main thrusts of the Independent Christian Churches: (1) Allegiance to the Bible and (2) Unity of all believers in Jesus. This article will deal with the issue of unity, the next will deal with allegiance to the Bible.

Let's talk reality here. Can we really expect Christians to be unified? That depends entirely on what kind of unity you are talking about.

(a) *Doctrinal agreement*--Throughout the history of the church, there have been more divisions over the Eucharist (communion), than anything else. Over a simple piece of bread and a bit of grape juice, there have been at least 10 different arguments: One cup or many, juice or wine, leavened or unleavened bread, once a week/month/year, transubstantiation or no, etc. ad. nauseam. In fact, the famed book *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* tells of more Christians killed by other Christians than by pagans. And many of those deaths were because one believed differently about the Lord's Supper than someone else. And the Eucharist is just one issue. We have fought over Millennialism, the Canon, Inerrancy, Hermeneutics, Arminianism and a whole bunch of other words that most people don't even want to learn how to spell.

Now, the likelihood of Christians agreeing on doctrine is pretty nil. But the fact that we disagree does not mean that we must disfellowship. Nor does it mean that doctrine is not essential. There are certain doctrines that we can never afford to err in (e.g. the deity and resurrection of Jesus). For these define what being a Christian is all about. God gave us the Bible because He intended for us to understand it and live by it. But on the other side of this dingy coin is the unfortunate fact that most of what Christians have divided over is of no interest to either the common man or God in heaven.

Biblical unity is hardly measured by doctrinal agreement on insignificant issues.

(b) *Organizational Unity*--We have all heard that the church is not the building but its people. Perhaps you have also heard that the church is not an organization but an organism. That is true, but naive. The church is also an organization with boards, trustees, bank accounts, title deeds, and tax-exempt status. If we look for unity in the organism led by Christ, we will undoubtedly find it. But organizational unity requires that we loose our grip on the title deeds to the property. And even harder, it requires that we abolish or at least ignore, the uniqueness that we have worked so hard to create. "Churches" have labored furiously to promote their idiosyncrasies. Their foundations are laid with blood, sweat and pride. Organizational unity requires an end of that uniqueness. Either we must all melt into one new organization which we call can agree on, or one existing organization swallows up all the others. Call me pessimistic, but that is not about to happen!

(c) *Humanitarian/Functional Unity*--Perhaps we could find unity in humanitarian efforts, or ecumenical co-services between churches. It is unfortunate that more church organizations do not work cooperatively. We could speak to Washington with a unified voice. Our corporate funds could alleviate much human suffering without each church covering the same ground. Think what more ecumenical cooperation could mean for world hunger, Bible translations, legislative lobbies, etc. But two things stand in our way. First, the prideful men who build and lead church organizations clamor for credit. This is not only unfortunate, it is sinful. Second, some feel that alliances with organizations with different doctrine somehow compromises their "pure doctrine." Now correct doctrine is essential

to individual salvation. It just seems sad that while we are preoccupied straining at gnats and swallowing camels, the world suffers on a fast track to destruction.

(d) *Spiritual Unity*--A group may have spirit, but not The Spirit. That is, no church has a 100% population of Spirit-filled members. Thus, no church is The Church. Spiritual unity, then, is found only at the individual level, not the corporate level. Two churches, even of the same stripe, will not have spiritual unity. But two Christians, from different groups can find spiritual unity. Even without agreeing on all doctrinal points, two believers who find each other, find that they are members of the one Church, led by the one Spirit, and committed to the one Lord. Denominations are a sad, but perhaps necessary evil. But Jesus' prayer has not gone unanswered: "I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me" (John 17:20-21).

WHAT IS THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH?--PART 3: THE BIBLE

By Mark Moore

As we pointed out in our last article, there are two main thrusts of the Independent Christian Churches: (1) Allegiance to the Bible and (2) Unity of all believers in Jesus. The last article dealt with the issue of unity. This one will deal with allegiance to the Bible.

The Bible is clearly an amazing book. It speaks to hundreds of controversial subjects with unmitigated unity. That, in itself, is an amazing thing. I defy anyone to find even ten U.S. Senators that would agree on five major issues of the day. But the Bible was written on three continents over a span of 1600 years by some 40 different authors with varied backgrounds. The authors included: king, politician, shepherd, fisherman, military leaders, cupbearer, prime minister, doctor, tax collector, rabbi, etc. It even uses three different languages. (The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, the New Testament in Greek, with a smattering of Aramaic in both.) When we consider such diversity in its production, and yet such unity in its content we can't help but suspect the Bible's Divine authorship.

Not only was its production amazing, so has been its distribution. The Bible was the first book printed after the invention of Gutenberg's press in 1456. Since that date nearly three billion copies have been printed by Bible Societies alone. That is equivalent to one copy every three seconds, twenty-four hours a day for three hundred years. This book has been translated more than any other and is now in almost 3,000 languages. More than 95% of the world's population is able to read the Bible in their native tongue. It has

always been the #1 best seller. Why? Because despite multiplied efforts to silence the Bible and/or discredit its teachings, it still speaks with a "lion's roar." It comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. It is simply without parallel.

As a college professor, I read scores of books every year. The more I read, the more marked becomes the difference between God's Word and man's. These other books prick my curiosity. The Bible pierces my soul. Man's words cause me to ask many noble questions. God's word gives me answers. Contemporary literature helps me process this world. The Scriptures propel me into eternity. There is simply no comparison. This book, completed nearly 2,000 years ago, is as fresh as today's news print--it is active and living as a two-edged sword (Heb 4:12).

But beyond being an amazing book which is personal, the Word of God is also extremely practical. The firm stand of the Christian Church is that the Bible is practical for the operation and institution of the Church of Jesus Christ. That is, we have no need for human creeds or hierarchies to run the church. If Christ is the head, that is sufficient. And if the Bible is God's word, we need no other constitution and by-laws.

Now the Bible doesn't deal with each event of our contemporary culture. It says nothing *directly* about the Right to Life or political parties (e.g. Democrat vs. Republican). It does not deal with A.I.D.S. or artificial insemination. So how can we be guided by the Bible in today's world? The Bible provides for three necessary ingredients and Jesus provides the fourth.

First, the Bible is full of Godly principles which guide our lives. If it did deal with all the details of this world's economy, it would be too big for any of us to read. But these broad principles touch on literally every aspect of our human existence no matter when, where, or how a person lives. Most people who don't know what God says about particular issues are ignorant, not because the Bible is silent, but because they have not bothered to read it.

Second, the Bible calls for the institution of Elders in the local church-- Godly leaders who help teach and relate the Bible to the local church. Third, where there are matters of opinion, the Bible teaches us to accept one another as Christ accepted us (Rom. 15:7). And how did Jesus accept us? With forgiveness, gentleness, grace, and generosity.

Finally, beyond the Bible, we have the contemporary voice of God through the Holy Spirit indwelling the believer. It is He who helps us understand and apply God's eternal and divine Word today (1 Cor. 2). Such a view of the Bible opens up for us the freedom to take it as our own. But as always, with freedom comes the responsibility to diligently study and live out the Word of God.

WHAT IS THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH?--PART 4: BAPTISM

By Mark Moore

Besides our commitment to the Bible and our commitment to unity, the Independent Christian Churches have been identified by our view of baptism. Here's the deal: We fully immerse individuals in water as their initial step of faith when they believe in Jesus. We do this as a declaration of their forgiveness of sins and a promise of their gift from God--the Holy Spirit. Why? Because we sincerely believe that is what the Bible teaches us to do. There are several questions people ask us about our practice of baptism.

(1) Why do you immerse rather than sprinkle? Because that was what Jesus and the Apostles did. John the Baptist baptized where there was "much water" (John 3:23). Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch "went down into the water" (Acts 8:38-39). And because baptism is a picture of death, burial (Rom 6:5; Col 2:12), and resurrection (Rom 6:4), immersion is the most appropriate form. In fact, the Greek word for baptism [*baptizo*] means to immerse or to dip. And in the first few centuries of the church it was the only form of baptism practiced by Christians.

(2) Why do you baptize people right when they confess their faith in Jesus? Why not wait? In the book of Acts, the record of the birth and growth of the church, everyone who was baptized did it at the point of their conversion (e.g. Acts 2:41; 8:12; 10:48; 16:33; 22:16, etc.). Baptism is intended to be the starting point for the Christian. It is the initial act of faith. It has been compared to new birth (Titus 3:5; John 3:5); clothing one's self with Christ (Gal 3:27); and an entrance rite, like circumcision of the Jews (Col 2:11-12). We simply have no example of baptism which properly took place at any other time than conversion.

(3) Is baptism a necessary part of conversion? Let me begin simply by

quoting some Scriptures and then making application:

--*Matthew 28:19-20 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*"

--*Mark 16:16 Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.*

--*Acts 2:38 Peter replied, "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.*

--*1 Peter 3:21 and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also--not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.*

Baptism in no way earns your salvation. The very thought of gaining heaven by getting wet is ridiculous. But baptism is the appropriate expression of faith in God. We are all aware that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:24-26). So the question is not "Should we respond to God's gracious gift of Christ?" but "How should we respond to receive Christ?" When the Jews first asked this question, the Apostle Peter gave the answer in Acts 2:38. And Jesus, in his great commission designed baptism to be part of making disciples (see Matthew 28:19-20 and Mark 16:16). Peter, in his letter, went so far as to say, "Baptism now saves you . . ." Not that it earns merit, but that it expresses faith. It is God's ordained gift by which we die to ourselves and are wedded to Christ. Some have supplanted baptism with a "prayer of faith" which is nowhere to be found in the Bible. Baptism, however is riveted to the N.T. as God's invitation to come to Christ.

(4) Can someone be saved if they have not been baptized? In my answer to this question you will notice a conspicuous absence of Scripture. That is because the Bible neither asks nor answers this question. The N.T. just assumes that every believer will accept this beautiful gift from God at conversion. Therefore, we are left with my own opinion, (of which I have many, free for the asking). But be warned: This is the opinion of one man, not the eternal word of God.

With that understanding, yes, I feel that person who truly believes in Jesus and bears spiritual fruit, but never submits to baptism can be saved. It is much like a "Caesarean-section." A child has come into the world, without passing through the natural birth canal. If man is clever enough to perform a Caesarean-section, I suppose that God is too. However, it is both unnatural and unhealthy. God's design, yea His command, is for every repentant believer to die to self and live to Christ through Christian baptism.

