

What Kind of Church Is This?

By LeRoy Lawson

One thing is certain – there is no shortage of churches. You can take your pick among the hundreds of different kinds, from the proud old denominations like the Episcopalian and Presbyterian to the newer, more energetic Assembly of God or Seventh Day Adventists, to say nothing of those amazingly numerous and various cults that keep springing up.

In the midst of such diversity, what is special about our church? What kind of a church is it, anyway?

We answer paradoxically. The distinctive about this Christian church is that it has no distinctives. In fact we deliberately seek not to be different, because our goal is unity, not division. Christianity has suffered long enough from deep divisions separating denomination from denomination, Christian from Christian. When Jesus prayed “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us” (John 17:21), He had us in mind. In the spirit of His prayer we seek unity with all others in Christ.

Obviously that desire is difficult to achieve. Human nature resists oneness. We seem to believe with Robert Frost that “good fences make good neighbors,” even though something within us “doesn’t love a wall, [but] wants it down.” God desires unity, however, so it must be possible.

Christian churches and churches of Christ trace their modern origins to the early 19th-century American frontier, a period of militancy among denominations. America’s pioneers brought their deeply rooted religious convictions to the new land and perpetuated their old animosities. Presbyterian squared off against Anglican who defended himself against Baptist who had no toleration for Lutheran. A reaction to this mutual animosity was inevitable.

Our Roots

When it came, the reaction was spontaneous. A group of New England Christians broke out of denominationalism, announcing their intention to follow the Bible only. Another group in Kentucky, and still another in Pennsylvania, each independent of the others, felt the spirit of unity moving them to stand with, not against, fellow Christians. Under the leadership of minister Barton W. Stone, some Presbyterian leaders in Kentucky published *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*, putting to death their denominational connections. They said, “We will, that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large; for there is but one body, and one Spirit . . .”

The early leaders of what later came to be called the Restoration Movement believed unity in Christ was — and is — possible. To achieve it required letting go of human traditions and loyalties to dynamic personalities. Christ alone could be exalted. The ideal of the church that emerges from the pages of the New Testament must be the standard for today’s congregations.

While gratefully acknowledging their debt to great reformers like Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, and others, these “Christians only” believed their reforms remained unfinished. The only way to determine what the church should be and how Christians should behave is to study New Testament

documents in which the churches of Christ are presented in splendor — and in shortcomings. While there is no single church that we should imitate, the ideal of the church as the body of Christ, the household of faith, the temple of the Holy Spirit, and the people of God is clearly pictured.

In a unity effort initially separated from the Stone movement, another Presbyterian minister, Thomas Campbell, published his now famous Declaration and Address in 1809. He had earlier migrated to Pennsylvania from his home in Ireland. While still there, he had grown restless with the strictures of his denomination, and the Old-Light Anti-Burgher Seceder Presbyterian Church, a splinter of a split of a division in the denomination.

When he found the divisions caused by local grievances in Scotland separating Presbyterians in America, he rebelled. He would not exclude nonmembers of his denomination from Communion in his church. He was expelled from his presbytery. It was really a question of who fired whom, for by this time Campbell could not carry out policies he deplored.

His son Alexander, meanwhile, had reached similar conclusions in his studies in Ireland and Scotland and, when father and son were reunited in America in 1809, each embraced the other's position. In time, the son surpassed the father as the leader of their unity movement.

In his *Declaration*, Thomas Campbell set forth principles that sound as modern as today to New Testament Christians:

1. That the church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the Scriptures. . . .
2. That . . . there ought to be no schisms, no uncharitable divisions among [local congregations].
3. That . . . nothing ought to be inculcated 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.
4. That . . . the New Testament is as perfect a constitution for the worship, discipline, and government of the New Testament church, and as perfect a rule of the particular duties of its members, as the Old Testament was for the worship, discipline, and government of the Old Testament church. . . .
5. That . . . [no] human authority [has] power to impose new commands or ordinances upon the church, which our Lord Jesus Christ has not enjoined.

There are more propositions, but these are enough to show Campbell's unusual good judgment. From his day until now, millions of others have decided they also wanted to be Christians only, without the complications of denomination.

Our Position

How, then, shall we summarize what kind of church we are talking about? Perhaps the following terms will help.

1. **A *Christian church***

Our message is that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.” We require no other creed. He alone is Lord and Savior.

2. **A church of *Christ***

The church belongs to Him. We have no authority to change the teachings, rewrite the rules, alter membership requirements, or usurp His place. The church is not a democracy.

3. **A church seeking *unity***

Like the Campbells and Stone, members of this church seek to be one in Christ with all others He calls His own.

4. **A church seeking to *restore***

As much as possible, we imitate the New Testament precedents. That is why our baptism is by immersion, our Communion is every Lord’s Day, our leaders are called elders, our preaching is about Christ, and our prayers are in Christ’s name. Even our church name is rooted in the earliest days, when disciples were called Christians and their congregations were often addressed as “churches of Christ.”

5. **An *apostolic church***

The church, Ephesians 2:20 states, is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.” Whatever we know about Christ and the church we learned from Jesus’ closest companions, the apostles.

6. **A *thinking church***

In the same Ephesian letter, Paul prays that God will give a “Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. . . .” Christian faith demands the best our minds can give, so we are a studying church, seeking to apply biblical truth intelligently.

7. **A *feeling church***

Ours is not a dryly intellectual approach to God, however. We rejoice and praise and pray and love and serve from the heart. We are unashamed of the gospel and not embarrassed to let our excitement be seen.

8. **A *sharing church***

We share our faith and love with as many as we can reach and our possessions as persons who know that everything we have belongs to God to be used for His purposes.

9. **A *free church***

We have no bishops or superintendents or national headquarters to determine local church policies. We elect our own leaders, call and support our own ministers, and decide where our mission money will go. We are not isolationists, though. Our congregations freely associate with one another to accomplish tasks too big for one church alone.

10. **A growing church**

We want to grow, because we are under Christ's commission to disciple the world. We haven't completed the task yet, so Christian churches and churches of Christ are renewing our commitment to go unto the ends of the earth, preaching and baptizing and teaching, until the whole world knows the one Lord of all.

LeRoy Lawson is the recently retired president of Hope International University, Fullerton, California. Adapted from *The Family of God* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1980).

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