

Introducing the Churches of Christ



Your Friends • Your Neighbors

Introducing The Churches of Christ
Your Friends • Your Neighbors

Michael Armour

Eastern European Mission
2011

Introduction

Around the globe, millions of men and women are members of the Church of Christ. Their numbers grow daily on every continent.

Yet not everyone is familiar with the Church of Christ. They have questions about who we are and what we stand for. If you have asked similar questions yourself, give us a moment to introduce ourselves.

The Bible

As you come to know the Church of Christ, you will quickly discover our deep respect for the Bible and the Bible's authority. We study the Bible diligently and try to follow it faithfully for one simple reason. We consider the Bible to be the world's most precious book. We refer to it as Scripture and as God's Word, because we see it as God's written message to mankind.

The Bible is divided into two sections commonly known as the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament traces the history of man's relationship with God from the very beginning of time. Thus, the pages of the Old Testament help us understand who God is, the nature of good and evil, and God's faithfulness in keeping His promises.

For Christians the New Testament is especially important since it tells the story of Jesus, records his teachings, and explains how God expects Christians to live. The New Testament also describes the early growth of Christianity as it spread quickly from city to city. From the New Testament we learn that Christians in

every town met regularly for study, worship, and prayer. We also learn that they provided compassionate care for people who were sick, poor, or suffering.

When these early Christians needed guidance on how to practice their faith, they sought counsel from apostles like Paul, Peter, and John. The apostles were chosen personally by Jesus to take his message to the world and to nurture new Christians. They commonly provided their counsel by writing lengthy letters. Many of these letters are preserved in the New Testament, along with other books written by the apostles. By exploring the New Testament, we gain life-changing insight into the teachings of Jesus and the apostles.

What We Believe

Some people study the Bible merely out of academic interest or as an act of curiosity. In the Church of Christ we study the Bible to align our teaching and conduct with what it says. We fully accept the Bible's claims about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, good and evil, and our duty to one another. We uphold God's standards of right and wrong. We celebrate his mercy and grace. But we heed his warning that sin will result in punishment.

We particularly cherish the Bible's message about the cross of Jesus, his resurrection, and what these events mean for each of us. Through the cross and resurrection of Jesus God offers us hope for life after death, a life spent forever in the presence of God. To secure this hope,

according to the New Testament, God expects certain commitments from us.

- First is a commitment to faith. Faith is putting total trust in God and his promises. According to Hebrews 11:6, “Without faith it is impossible to be pleasing to God.”
- Second is a commitment to repentance. Repentance means turning away from everything that is contrary to God’s will. Jesus instructed his followers to proclaim “repentance for the forgiveness of sins” to all nations (Luke 24:47). The apostle Paul said that God “commands all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30).
- The third commitment is to confession, a willingness to tell others that we serve Jesus as Lord. Jesus said, “Whoever confesses me before men is the one whom I will confess before my Father in heaven” (Matthew 10:32). Paul wrote, “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you shall be saved” (Romans 10:9).
- The fourth commitment is to baptism and to its implication. The New Testament speaks repeatedly about being “baptized into Christ” (Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27). In Acts 2:38 Peter ties repentance and baptism together when he calls on his hearers to “repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.”

Because the New Testament teaches these commitments so plainly, the Church of Christ

elevates them in its message to the world. Once people have made these commitments and acted on them, God adds them to the Christian community (Acts 2:47). Therefore, the Church of Christ imposes no conditions for membership beyond these four commitments.

Weekly Worship

The Church of Christ draws its members from every race and from every level of society. We are united by a common devotion to Jesus and to the Bible. We gather with other Christians each Sunday for worship, where we sing, pray, listen to teachers, and observe the Lord's Supper. We also use the occasion to collect money for good works.

Our meeting place can have a variety of forms. It may be a building designated for Christian worship or we may meet in homes, in schools, or in outdoor settings. Wherever we meet, each gathering is called a church or a congregation.

You will find these congregations of Christians all over the world. They number in the tens of thousands. Their largest concentration is in North America, but their fastest growth is in Asia and Africa.

Organization

These individual churches are all fully independent, choosing their own leaders and managing their own affairs. Unlike other religious groups, the Church of Christ has no regional, national, or international organization. It is simply an informal alliance of local churches. Because they are independent, these local

churches are free to choose their own name. Almost all of them choose the name “Church of Christ.” For this reason, the term “Church of Christ” (or “Churches of Christ”) is also used in a global sense to refer to all of these congregations collectively.

If you are familiar with the extensive hierarchy in other religious groups, you may ask why Churches of Christ have chosen this independent structure. The answer is found in our deep respect for New Testament practices. The New Testament shows no evidence of a denominational hierarchy in the early church. Even the apostles exercised their influence gently and through persuasion. While they often offered counsel and advice, they always recognized the right of individual congregations to govern themselves. The Church of Christ therefore follows the pattern of the early church with each congregation being free and independent.

Benevolence

When people hear about this structure for the first time, they sometimes question its practicality. Is it possible to be effective on a large scale with this kind of informal organization? The answer is, “Yes!” Churches of Christ have structured their work this way for over 200 years and with great success. Independence does not prevent multiple congregations — sometimes thousands of them — from joining hands to pursue common goals.

Through cooperative efforts, Churches of Christ have sent missionaries to almost ev-

ery nation of the modern world. Wherever we have sent missionaries, we have also provided humanitarian assistance. Churches of Christ have given millions of dollars to victims of natural disasters. We have built orphanages and medical clinics in dozens of countries. We have developed major colleges, universities, and educational institutes in Europe, North and South America, Africa, and Asia. We operate institutions to care for elderly people and underwrite summer camps for kids.

In all of these endeavors, the Churches of Christ have shown compassion and generosity without regard to race, nationality, or religious affiliation. Our goal is to demonstrate the love of Christ through acts of kindness, caring, and mercy. We often quote a passage from the New Testament which says, “This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (James 1:27).

Unique Practices

You now see that the Church of Christ tries to replicate the teaching of the early church as closely as possible. This commitment leads to unique practices that distinguish the Churches of Christ from many of our spiritual neighbors.

- Because the early church took the Lord’s Supper on a weekly basis, we do the same. Indeed, we treat the Lord’s Supper as the central element of our Sunday worship.
- Because baptism in the New Testament is a matter of personal choice and is based on

our own faith and repentance, Churches of Christ refrain from baptizing infants. We only baptize those who are old enough to profess their faith and demonstrate a life of repentance.

- Because the New Testament word for “baptize” means “to immerse,” we practice immersion as our only form of baptism.
- Because music in early Christian worship was purely vocal, without instruments, Churches of Christ use no instruments in worship. We put great emphasis, however, on congregational singing. (Instrumental music first appeared in Christian worship many centuries after the apostles died. Orthodox Churches and others never adopted it. Reformers like John Calvin and John Wesley also rejected it.)
- Because early Christian churches were led by elders, selected by the congregation, we govern our congregations the same way. These elders are assisted by a group of deacons, again selected by the congregation. Further we expect elders and deacons to meet the qualifications laid down in Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3 for those who serve in these roles.
- Because ministers did not wear special religious titles in the New Testament, we do not refer to ministers in Churches of Christ by names such as “reverend” or “father.” Nor do we refer to them as clergy, since the New Testament never describes ministers with this term.

- Because the New Testament uses the word “pastor” (or shepherd) to describe the work of elders (1 Peter 5:1–2), Churches of Christ use the name pastor for those who serve as elders, not as a title for ministers.

Unity

Churches of Christ also stress the importance of Christian unity. The first Churches of Christ in Europe and North America were formed by men and women who had grown weary of strife between Christian denominations.

This strife began when the Protestant Reformation broke with Roman Catholicism. Then various factions of the Reformation united around specific creeds that defined their view of Christianity. All too often these factions turned on one another. In England, France, Germany, and elsewhere, vicious wars erupted over religious disputes.

To escape this turmoil, thousands of Europeans migrated to North America hoping to find religious freedom. Fortunately, Europe’s religious wars did not follow them to America, but religious strife and division remained commonplace on American soil.

Then, almost spontaneously, new efforts at unity emerged on both sides of the Atlantic. People weary of the strife began looking for ways to bring all Christians together on common ground. “We will never find common ground in the language of competing creeds,” they said. “We will only find common ground in the language of the Bible.”

They appealed to their religious neighbors to do two things. First, they called for churches to set aside the religious creeds and confessions of faith that had served to divide. Second, they urged churches to teach and practice only those things that are specifically authorized in the New Testament. The most certain path to unity, they believed, was a full return to what the early church taught and practiced. People who advocated this approach became known as “restorationists,” because they were trying to restore the ideals of the New Testament. Initially many of these restorationists were widely separated and unaware of each other. They eventually discovered one another, began sharing ideas, and built momentum for their movement.

As a group they were not concerned with a specific name for themselves, because the church in the New Testament had no particular name. The restorationists merely wanted to be known as Christians. Nothing more, nothing less. As a result, local congregations chose different names for themselves, although “Church of Christ” eventually became the most common. Similar “restorationist” groups emerged in Scotland, England, Russia, and various places in western Europe, often unaware of churches elsewhere in the world who shared their ideals.

Today Churches of Christ remain committed to unity, just as we are committed to all Biblical principles. Our call for a return to New Testament beliefs and practices remains undiminished. Our plea for unity is as relevant today as when we first made it.

Freedom

In our quest for unity, Churches of Christ also foster an atmosphere of freedom. We have already seen the freedom of individual congregations. This same spirit extends to personal freedom within local congregations.

In this atmosphere of freedom, Christians are encouraged to study the Bible for themselves, draw their own conclusions, develop their own personal convictions, and practice these convictions without fear of ridicule or censure.

Thus, while Churches of Christ are united around certain core principles from the Bible, there is considerable diversity within congregations and between congregations. In this setting of freedom every Christian has abundant opportunities to grow spiritually and develop a self-sustaining faith.

If this simple approach to Christianity appeals to you, we invite you to learn more about us. What will be expected of you if you are a member of the Church of Christ? You will be encouraged to:

- live a moral and ethical life,
- treat others with kindness and respect,
- meet regularly with other Christians for worship,
- develop habits of daily prayer and regular Bible study,
- practice generosity with those who are poor or in need,

- promote peace, love, and care within your family,
- honor Jesus with all that you say and do.

Why not begin today? Our worldwide spiritual family is eager to welcome you.

For further information please contact:

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, positioned below the text. It is intended for providing contact information.