



"A church does not make you a Christian any more than going into a garage makes you an automobile."

—John B. Conlan

23-Oct-09

Can the True Church Be Found?

Perhaps the most famous line from the quill of American patriot Thomas Paine is the sentence that opened his pro-revolution pamphlet, *The American Crisis, No. 1*: "These are the times that try men's souls." We are not living in the same kind of revolutionary period, despite the rebellious rumblings coming from Americans who vehemently disagree with the radical transformation of America envisioned by the Obama administration. Yet, we do live in soul-trying times—in fact, these days rank high on the list of periods in which men's souls, if you will, are at their greatest spiritual risk.

As Herbert Armstrong often said, this is a time of great religious confusion, and it has only become worse since his death in 1986. There are literally thousands of different Christian churches and hundreds of denominations. Beyond that, the religious seeker must contend with the crusading fervor of Islam, the enduring presence of Judaism, the growing influence of Buddhism and other Eastern belief systems, and the persistent appeal of New Age and [occult](#) "spiritualities." There is also a rather militant, activist advocacy of atheism to contend with, along with its secular partners, the isms of relativism, multiculturalism, feminism, socialism, and the like, which are simply intellectual and/or political religions—idolatries of the ungodly. Where is a person who is truly [seeking God](#) to turn?

[Jesus Christ](#) tells His disciples in [Matthew 16:18](#), ". . . on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades [where the dead are, the grave] shall not prevail against it." This is both a prophecy and a promise, and it is based on the authority, power, and [faithfulness](#) of [God](#). In this first mention of the Christian church in the Bible, Jesus

informs us of its source and foundation: Himself. He is the Rock on which the church rests, and the whole structure built atop it is also His. That is why nothing, not even death, can [hope](#) to defeat or destroy it. The church will continue until it has accomplished its purpose—which means that the [true church](#) of Jesus Christ is still in existence on the earth, and it can be found.

Of course, one cannot simply decide on one's own to seek it and find it. Many think they can, but they have deluded themselves on this matter. Jesus says very clearly in [John 6:44](#), "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him." No one! The true Christ will not be found unless His Father personally invites some to draw near to Him. God has not chosen to save everyone now, in "this present evil age" ([Galatians 1:4](#)), delaying that general calling to a more conducive time (see [Revelation 20:11-13](#)). Currently, He is working through a small body of people called "the elect," who are firstfruits of His Kingdom (see [Revelation 14:1](#), 4-5; [James 1:18](#)).

Students of the Bible know that "many are called and few are chosen" ([Matthew 20:16; 22:14](#)). As the Parable of the Sower and the Seed ([Matthew 13:1-9](#), 18-23) depicts, God casts [the gospel](#) far and wide, but only those on "good ground" produce results. These are the chosen, the elect, the little flock ([Luke 12:32](#)) of true disciples of Christ. These few are the church or *ekklesia* ("assembly," "those called out") of God. [Revelation 14:1](#) limits the number of these "called out ones" to 144,000 throughout all of human history up to the [return of Christ](#), a mere remnant of humanity.

[Ephesians 1:22-23](#) tells us that the church is Christ's body and that He is the Head of the body. Clearly, this is a spiritual description of the organization and function of the church in [the world](#). The church of God, then, is not necessarily found in one human organization or denomination; instead, the church is a spiritual organism composed of individual true Christians, wherever they may be. So it was in the first century, when the twelve apostles and Paul scattered over the face of the earth to spread the gospel, raising up congregations everywhere. Whether under Peter or Paul or John or another apostle, the truly converted members were all united in the spiritual body of Christ despite having little or no contact with each other and working within different organizations. [Revelation 2-3](#) more than suggests that the end-time church members will be similarly scattered among at least seven "churches." Whether these are real church organizations or spiritual designations in the mind of God, we cannot say for certain. Nevertheless, to consider only one physical church organization to be the only true church ignores biblical reality.

Even so, there are larger church organizations in which true disciples of Christ congregate. In [Romans 8:14](#), Paul gives us the most important clue concerning how to

find the true church: "For as many as are led by the [Spirit of God](#), these are sons of God." True Christians are those who show by their words and behaviors that God is directing them. God, through the prophet Isaiah, speaks of His people, "'You are My witnesses,' says the LORD, 'and My servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe Me, and understand that I am He'" ([Isaiah 43:10](#)). This puts a great deal of pressure on church members to represent Him properly before the world.

Perhaps the simplest test to find members of the body of Christ is one spoken by Jesus just before His crucifixion: "If you [love](#) Me, keep My commandments" ([John 14:15](#)). In other words, Christ's true disciples will be keeping God's commandments—all of them. They will not pick and choose which ones they will keep; they will in [faith](#) follow all of them to the best of their abilities. Paul proclaims concerning the church's teaching, "For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God" ([Acts 20:27](#)). In this vein of endeavoring to follow Jesus' complete instruction, members of the true church will be "go[ing] on to perfection" ([Hebrews 6:1](#)), seeking first God's Kingdom and His righteousness ([Matthew 6:33](#)), striving to "be perfect, just as [our] Father in heaven is perfect" ([Matthew 5:48](#)). These are tall orders that will quickly eliminate most churches of this world.

A minor point, but one that is a good indicator, is that a true church of God will call itself a "church of God" or some similar form. The New Testament names God's church eleven times, and each time it uses such a phrase ([Acts 20:28](#); [I Corinthians 1:2](#); [10:32](#); [11:22](#); [15:9](#); [II Corinthians 1:1](#); [Galatians 1:13](#); [I Thessalonians 1:1](#); [II Thessalonians 1:1](#); [I Timothy 3:5](#), 15). It is not named after a man, a [doctrine](#), a form of church government, or anything other than the great God who is its Lord. To do otherwise gives honor and glory where it does not belong.

Obviously, a search for the true church of God will not be an easy one—liketrying to find the proverbial needle in a haystack. It takes a great deal of study on the part of the seeker to know what God's true disciples believe and teach, and it is likely such a person will go through many worldly churches before He finds one of God's churches. However, if God is indeed drawing the individual to Christ, He will put him on the path to make contact with the true church.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon
[Of One Accord](#)

CGG Weekly: Can the True Church Be Found? (23-Oct-09)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Observing that more controversy exists about the counting of Pentecost than for any of the holy days, John Ritenbaugh suggests the confusion may be a function of the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:19). Confusion, separation, and division have been our legacy since the Garden of Eden. The major reason for Christ's ministry was to put an end to the quarreling and division, enabling us to be one with the Father and with each other. Three of God's festivals (Passover, Atonement, and Pentecost) have a direct bearing on the principle of unity. As we individually strive to become unified with God, believing in His authority and His doctrines, we will ultimately become unified, in one accord, with our brethren. It is our individual responsibility, enabled by God's Holy Spirit, to follow those things that were revealed by God through His apostles, keeping God's Commandments, rather than following our own inclinations or private agenda.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Is a Rock Just a Rock to God?](#)

by Bill Keesee (1935-2010)

God calls us 'living stones' in I Peter 2. Bill Keesee illustrates why this description is so apt view of God's work making us His jewels.

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