

Is There A True Church?

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There was a time when the church of God appeared to be focused in one corporate body, the Worldwide Church of God. However, during these times of disintegration and disappointment, the church is widely scattered following that body's collapse. It is so widely scattered that it persuades us to wonder how many who attended the Worldwide Church of God were truly converted!

Does a single, corporate, true church of God exist? Those who left the Worldwide Church of God find themselves in different organizations, each with basically the same doctrines but different corporate names identifying them. Each group may have a somewhat different focus as to its message and purpose, and some may even exhibit a standoffish attitude toward other corporate churches of God. Because of these things, unity, purpose, and solidarity have suffered greatly.

For those who spent a long time in the Worldwide Church of God, constant references to its being the "true church" drilled the concept of a true church deeply into their consciences. A many-decades-long record of unified purpose and growth supported this, as that one body carried out a large-scale, worldwide work. Its preaching of the gospel was done with such strength that it was evident that they were members of the true church.

Do the following words of Jesus in John 10:7-16 still hold true, even though we are now scattered?

Then Jesus said to them again. "Most assuredly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who ever came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father, and lay down My life for the sheep. And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock, and one shepherd."

This passage—with terms like "thieves," "robbers," "kill," and "destroy"—certainly indicates that attacks against Christ's Body will cause turmoil within it. Scattering results so that there is not merely one corporate body of believers.

For those who spent many of their religious years in the world, such a one-flock concept as we have experienced is not so clear. They are accustomed to many similar organizations, especially in the Protestant world, where doctrinal tolerance is held in such high esteem. The church they fellowshiped with was just one of many.

Is there a true church even among the church of God groups? A person's first reaction might be, "What a dumb question! Of course, there is!" and he would be right because Jesus said this in John 10:16.

I receive an occasional letter claiming that such a group never existed, not even in the first century following Christ's resurrection. Most certainly, the letter will declare, one does not exist today. Why would someone say such a thing? It is because they have not been able to find one in their own private searches or because they have come to this conclusion after someone cleverly twisted scriptures, passing such thoughts on to them.

Here are some brief excerpts taken from a recent letter:

What I learned is that in the days of Christ there were no churches; Christians gathered in homes to study and not once a week but often. . . . The church as an institution /building came along much later and is a creation of man. I learned too that the Greek word "ekklesia" was mistranslated in the bible [sic] when in fact "ekklesia" means assembly or congregation. . . . When read in its proper context it is obvious that there isn't one [church] that is righter [sic] than another. . . . We do not need to attend a designated service on a certain day at a certain time, sing certain approved songs, say so many prayers and listen to someone read off a piece of paper "their" opinions. . . . So for me it makes perfect sense that I do not need a church at all. I am intelligent, discerning, and I think pretty brave in that I have never "gone along to get along." Quite the opposite I must say. . . . I have been mislead [sic] to believe I needed a [church] with people to be a true Christian. Now I know that is not true at all.

This woman wants to be a Christian on her own terms. She is creating her own religion and is proud of it. She does not believe Christ, so she cannot follow Him. Believing and following are the major requirements for becoming and remaining a Christian. For Jesus clearly says, "I will build *My* church" (Matthew 16:18)—singular. He does not say, "I will build *My* churches."

Finding the True Church Begins

Such people are truly confused, blinded, and deceived. They focus more steadfastly on what has happened in the world than on what the Bible actually says. They may have been sincerely searching, but unless God is with them in the search to convert them, they will never find the church that Jesus built any more than they can find God without His first revealing Himself.

This existence of a true church belongs within the same category of fact that people can be very religious and of generally good character and yet be unconverted. Many sincere people in the world fit this description. In fact, the Bible shows some like that within its pages.

Jesus says in John 6:44, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day." One does not find the true church on his own any more than one can find Christ and the Father on His own. A person is led to God and to the church, and he is added to it upon repentance, baptism, giving himself wholly to God, and receiving the Holy Spirit. We see not only that God's true church cannot be found without revelation, but also that it cannot be joined. What this reality begins to reveal to us is God's sovereignty over His creation and His purpose. Therefore, as Jesus clearly states, He built and continues to build His church.

Seekers badly misunderstand, thinking salvation is open to anybody at any time. However, Paul puts a damper on this notion, writing in Romans 9:16, "So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy."

Is it possible that people cannot find it partly because they do not know what to look for? Yes! This is true partly because of what God's church is. The Bible variously describes it as part of a Kingdom that issues citizenships (Colossians 1:13; Philippians 3:20); a building of which its members are materials (Ephesians 2:20-22); as the body of Jesus Christ of which its members are vital, living parts (Ephesians 1:22-23); and as a Family into which God's children are summoned (Ephesians 3:15). There is no more important and exclusive institution on earth. No volunteers are accepted. Each person becomes a part of it by God's design and His design only. He is sovereign!

Jesus says in Luke 12:32, "Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Despite this, the number of people calling themselves "Christian" tops two billion worldwide. Yet, just because people profess faith does not mean they are truly converted, and by the Bible's standard, the overwhelming majority are not.

Compared to the two billion professing Christians, the true church is minuscule and virtually invisible. However, it does exist, for Jesus promises in Matthew 16:18, "I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." It will never die out because eternal life resides within it, and the most powerful army in all creation protects and provides for it.

Those who say it does not exist are ignorant of its identity and purpose and are therefore misguided about what they are seeking. Does a true church not exist because it is not easily seen? Does a true church not exist because it might be small? Does a true church not exist because its visible membership is a mixture of wheat and tares, and the tares tarnish its image?

The Origin of the "Church"

By beginning with a definition of the word "church," some start off on the wrong foot and therefore fail to reach a true conclusion on this issue. As the author of the letter quoted earlier correctly stated, the term "church" literally does not appear in the original text of the Bible.

In Matthew 16:18, the word Jesus used for "church" is *ekklesia* (*Strong's #1577*), and it is so translated in the King James Version 115 times. This Greek word means "an assembly" or "a group of people called together for a purpose." It contains no implication at all of sacredness or holiness.

In practical usage, it commonly identified people called by a magistrate for a public service of some sort. This is how it is used in Acts 19:32, 39, and 41:

Some therefore cried one thing and some another, for the *assembly* was confused, and most of them did not know why they had come together. . . . But if you have any other inquiry to make, it shall be determined in the lawful *assembly*. . . . And when he had said these things, he dismissed the *assembly*. (Emphasis ours throughout.)

Each time, *ekklesia* is translated as "assembly" and names what could easily be described as a mob of excited and confused people. However, the writers of the New Testament clearly agreed this was the word that best fit the groups of Christians called of God for service to Him. How did it come to be translated as "church" when the word "assembly" fits more accurately?

This change apparently has its beginning in another, far different Greek word, *kuriakos* (*Strong's* #2960). *Kurios*, the Greek word for "Lord," is easily recognizable as the root of *kuriakos*, which means "belonging to the Lord." Curiously, according to Joseph T. Shipley, author of *The Origins of English Words*, pp. 183-184, the root of *kurios* and *kuriakos* literally means "to bend or curve."

In the course of time, *kuriakos* was picked up by the Scots as *kirk*. Shipley shows that *kirk* and *kuriakos* share the same root. In the Scottish language, *kirk* indicates a place or a location, as in a building belonging to the Lord. The *kirk* became the place where the assembly bent before God in reverence, as in prayer, appealing to Him; or bent looking upward in praise of God; or where God bent in extending mercy.

As more time passed, the English pronunciation of *kirk* changed to "church." Thus "church," which indicates a building, a place where God is worshipped, gradually evolved to include, not just the place, but also the people who worshipped there and the worship services too. The modern English *Reader's Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary* reflects this in its definitions for *church*: "1. A building for Christian worship. 2. Regular religious services. 3. A local congregation of Christians." We regularly use all three in our everyday speech and writing, allowing the context to indicate which is intended.

However, *in the Bible* the word "church" *never* refers to a building or to worship services held within the building. It *always* refers to the assembly, group, or congregation of called-out ones who belong to the Lord, worship Him, and fellowship with others of the same mind.

The True Church Is Exclusive

We should consider another factor in identifying the true church: that the Bible itself assigns exclusivity to it, and this is good. For example, Amos 3:1-2 reveals that in Old Testament times God worked in and through only one family, the family of Abraham. He made a covenant with just one nation, Israel.

In the New Testament, Ephesians 4:3-6 supports this exclusivity in reference to the church:

... endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

Obviously, the apostle Paul did not want members of the church to be "all over the place" in terms of doctrine and fellowship. For this to be best accomplished, people must also be in one body and unified in purpose. As we saw, Jesus did not say, "I will build my churches."

The doctrine of sanctification actively promotes exclusivity. II Corinthians 6:17 declares, "Come out from among them and be separate," as does Revelation 18:4, "Come out of her My people." I Peter 1:13-16 charges the sanctified with this responsibility:

Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy."

God separates His holy people in conduct and fellowship.

However, the church's exclusivity has a potential downside that we must be careful of. Notice Isaiah 65:1-5:

I was sought by those who did not ask for Me; I was found by those who did not seek Me. I said, "Here I am, here I am," to a nation that was not called by My name. I have stretched out My hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, according to their own thoughts; a people who provoke Me to anger continually to My face; who sacrifice in gardens, and burn incense on altars of brick; who sit among the graves, and spend the night in the tombs; who eat swine's flesh, and the broth of abominable things is in their vessels; who say, "Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am holier than you!" These are smoke in My nostrils, a fire that burns all the day.

Our concern is His holier-than-you accusation. In this case, God is saying that Israel was rejecting Him, as if they were somehow better than He was and did not need the correction He had for them. Within a Christian assembly, a negative exclusivity can form in an individual and create hazards in our attitudes about ourselves and others, laying a spiritual minefield.

This attitude requires understanding. We must be careful. It causes some among us to be aloof within the group to their own hurt or to withdraw themselves and become independent. It infected the Jews of Jesus day—in fact, the origin of the word "Pharisee" is vague, but most commentators believe it means "separatists." It affected the church, too, in the days of the apostles.

Matthew 9:10-11 records an incident in which a form of it confronted Jesus:

And so it was, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, that behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to His disciples, "Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

Jesus' response pointedly reveals the error in their thinking and conduct.

Galatians 2:11-13 exposes its existence in the early church:

But when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.

This is a possible downside of the true church's exclusivity. It can produce a self-righteous, I'm-better-than-you hypocrisy if we forget or overlook the fact that it was God's work and not ours that provides our calling and spirituality. Even today, there are groups claiming to be the exclusive true church.

Was the church, the assembly of called-out ones, ever all in one corporate group? Yes, but it did not last very long. It was during the period generally covered by Acts 1-12. After that, as the apostles scattered from Jerusalem to preach the gospel, congregations began to form beyond Jerusalem and Antioch, and a gradual dissolving of the unique, one-true-church unity occurred because it no longer consisted of only a handful of congregations.

I Corinthians 1:10-14 provides an early indication of this phenomenon:

Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no division among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius.

The cracks in that one congregation's unity had clearly surfaced, and they were no longer completely one with the Jerusalem assembly of called-out ones or even among themselves. But because differences had arisen, were they no longer part of the one true assembly?

Matthew 28:18-20 suggests God knew full well this would occur:

Then Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Clearly, it was God's will for the assembly of called-out ones to increase, not only in number, but to worldwide locations. In so doing, the apostles and evangelists were spreading the gospel to people with backgrounds of experience and education entirely different from the Israelitish people centered in Jerusalem. These were Gentile people who had little or no background of Israel's relationship with God through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, other prophets, and Old Covenant theology.

Unlike the Jews, they were not focused on Israel's Old Testament history; in fact, their lifetime of experiences had been focused on rank paganism and its standards. This made the probability of division much higher. Yet, these divisions and their lack of Old Testament background are largely responsible for the writing of the New Testament, the apostles' endeavor to achieve uniformity of Christ's teachings and God's purpose in the whole church and unity within individual congregations.

Nonetheless, divisions most assuredly occurred. As a result, the concept of a single congregation or single corporate entity being the one true church or assembly became vague and substantially disregarded.

The End of the First Century

A closer look at Revelation 2 and 3, which was written at the end of the first century, reveals some of the consequences of this. Note that each of these congregations—those in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea—was located in a Gentile city, and in all probability, each congregation's membership was primarily Gentile. It is quite likely that in each congregation the Jews were a minority.

Recall that the Romans ravaged Jerusalem in AD 70, and its Christians had to flee to Pella to save their lives. It is highly probable that none of these congregations had any communication with any

survivor of the first congregation in Jerusalem. All of the apostles except John were dead, and he had been banished to Patmos. This circumstance was far different from the one in which the church was founded.

Were these Gentile congregations still part of the true church? Were they free of flaws and perfect in their character, attitudes, and doctrines? Would such a negative judgment eliminate them from being a true assembly?

Consider these further factors: Revelation 2:4 commends the congregation in Ephesus for doctrinal vigilance but castigates it for leaving its first love. Revelation 2:9-11 shows Christ commending Smyrna for being spiritually rich, but He also admonishes them to overcome. Despite His commendation, they are not a finished product.

Revelation 2:13-15 praises those in Pergamos for not denying their faith, but its members are doctrinally divided, and they permit heresy to continue. Revelation 2:19-20 presents Thyatira as growing in good works, but its members tolerate heresy and are guilty of sexual immorality.

Revelation 3:1, 4 exposes Sardis as spiritually dead, though it contains a few who remain undefiled, indicating that its members have virtually lost their faith and are capable only of dead works. Revelation 3:8, 11-12 reports that those in Philadelphia are faithfully enduring, but Christ admonishes them to hold fast and overcome. Finally, Revelation 3:15, 19 judges Laodicea as spiritually bankrupt and gives it no commendation at all. The congregation is strongly advised to be zealous and repent.

What does a composite picture of these congregations reveal?

1. All seven of them are admonished to repent, hold fast, or remain faithful.
2. Only two of them, Smyrna and Philadelphia, receive strong commendations and no listing of their sins and other shortcomings.
3. Two of them, Pergamos and Thyatira, receive a lesser commendation and fairly strong rebukes for sexual immorality and allowing deceivers into the congregation.
4. Two of them, Sardis and Laodicea, receive strong rebukes and no commendations.

In terms of a true church in a single corporate body, what do we see? Only sixty years or so following Christ's resurrection, we have a mixed bag as regards overall stability and righteousness.

Even so, is any one of them not a true congregation, an assembly of truly called-out ones? Does Christ in any way say that even one of them was no longer part of His church, His body of people? Not in the least. There are, however, warnings that, if they did not repent, some within their fellowship might not be within the Body of Christ in the future. Two things are sure:

1. Some of these congregations are clearly spiritually better than the others.
2. Some of them are decidedly awful, even though, using carnal judgment, they may outwardly appear good.

Since Revelation is an end-time book, the overview given in Revelation 2 and 3 is especially significant at this time. It is forecasting what things will be like just before Christ returns, and He uses these first-century congregations to illustrate His forecast for our time.

In our time, the headquarters' congregations of the Worldwide Church of God, first in Eugene, Oregon, and then in Pasadena, California, were the mother congregations for our time, just as Jerusalem was in the first century. The Jerusalem congregation's leadership effectively ended in AD 70 when Jerusalem was sacked and destroyed by the Romans. Because of the apostle John's presence, the Ephesian congregation became the church's headquarters as the century ended.

The corporate entity called the Worldwide Church of God crashed spiritually in the late 80s and early 90s, and with it, its headquarters in Pasadena ceased being the lead congregation. For various reasons, the remnants of that true congregation of God have scattered into the various corporate groups bearing the name "Church of God." They exhibit the spiritual characteristics of the first-century congregations shown in Revelation 2 and 3. No one corporate group of called-out ones now represents anything remotely similar to what Jerusalem and Pasadena did.

Misuse of This Circumstance

Revelation is clearly an end-time book. Christ addresses each group in a manner that shows that He still views them as His, and therefore each of them is still part of His true assembly of called-out ones. There is no true church that dominated our spiritual activities in the way that the Worldwide Church of God did.

However, because the true church is in reality a *spiritual organism*, the true church still exists though in a scattered condition. Frankly, this scattered condition is the more normal circumstance for Christ's church throughout its history. The Worldwide Church of God was the *abnormal* configuration, in which the called-out ones were mostly in one body.

Why does the true church still exist? Because of God's faithfulness, we have retained enough of the true doctrinal base and of His Spirit, and we are maintaining that doctrinal base to varying degrees of faithfulness to retain that identity. Some congregations may be dominated by Laodicean characteristics and others by Smyrnan and Philadelphian characteristics. It is also highly likely that all the congregations may contain individuals with these characteristics within them.

Remember that God is judging us individually within each group. An attitude that we should not allow to grow in us is to think that we are the only ones who retain a true-church identity. The other side of that same concept is that, even if we agree that others are still part of the true church, we are still better than they are—indeed, everybody else is Laodicean by comparison.

This unmistakably holier-than-you attitude is extremely destructive to true brotherhood and proper fellowship and unity. Luke 18:9-14 records this teaching of Christ concerning self-righteousness and its effects on these matters:

Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' And the tax collector,

standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Those who elevate themselves in their judgment of themselves as compared to their fellow members bring on themselves this condemnation. God does not justify them when they make this kind of judgment.

Hebrews 10:23-27 adds important counsel applicable to all of us:

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.

Christ's brethren are scattered but not necessarily by their own choice as "independent" entities without opportunity to fellowship. We are indeed scattered, but under present circumstances, fellowship of some sort is still available with the various congregations of God.

This situation gives God the opportunity to judge us regarding the depth of our personal conversion in ways that the church's former situation did not. This has occurred for our good. We must not merely endure it but use it as an occasion to grow and glorify God. And we certainly must not elevate ourselves as better than others, erecting walls against true unity.