

Where Is God's True Church Today?

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In today's confused secular and religious milieu, is there a true church? If so, where is it? In this last generation, secularism has become a much more prominent social force, extending its influences deep into the culture. In this time of political correctness and multiculturalism, we are told by academics and social reformers—and even by some well-known "Christian" pastors—to be especially tolerant of all because no church and no set of doctrines are inherently superior to others. They claim that we all worship the same God but in different ways that seem better from our personal points of view.

On the other hand, there are those deep within what is generally accepted as Christianity who boldly proclaim that the true church is the one that they attend or the one that they pastor. Theirs is the true church because they and they only are preaching the gospel or because they and they only are following the doctrines of a certain teacher. No doubt, they are sincere, for no reasonable person would become part of a church believing it was a false one deliberately misrepresenting the Father and Son.

Only to a limited extent will this article pursue whether Jewish, Hindi, Islam, Shintoism, occultism, Brahmanism, or any other religion outside the world of Christianity is even close to being the true one. They all teach points of truth; all teach some moral principles on a high level. These religions urge their adherents to be disciplined, self-controlled, and do good works, and thus they produce some individuals of high but carnal character who sincerely follow the religion's teachings. Yet, as important as character development is—it is imperative as preparation in achieving the purpose that the gospel of Jesus Christ teaches—the true religion is about more than character.

There are good, clear reasons why I believe that the Bible contains God's truth. Supreme among those reasons is that no other religion has Jesus Christ as Savior of mankind and Teacher of the truths of God. The Bible states unequivocally in Acts 4:10-12:

. . . let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole. This is the "stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone." Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

The importance of this declaration by the apostle Peter cannot be underestimated. It is supported by numerous other verses that emphasize that Jesus Christ of Nazareth and His teaching are unique. Jesus Himself adds quite a few statements of His exceptional position, among them being Matthew 11:27: "All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and he to whom the Son wills to reveal Him."

This assertion affirms the exclusive relationship that exists between the Father and Son, as well as the fact that all access to the Father and all hope of a relationship with the Creator of all things rests in Jesus Christ. This is because the Father has delegated all things pertaining to His purpose to the Son.

In John 17:3, Jesus explains that eternal life is to know God, which, combined with the thought contained in Matthew 11:27, shows we will never come to know the Father unless it is allowed through a relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus is *that* important to us in reaching our destiny. He is truly unique in everything pertaining to salvation.

As early in His ministry as John 3:17-18, Jesus shows that He was thoroughly aware of how necessary He is to salvation:

For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Jesus asserts His necessity to salvation frankly in John 14:6, responding to Thomas, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." In I John 5:12, the apostle John adds to the vivid reality of Jesus' exclusive place in everyone's salvation: "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life."

Any religion can offer salvation and rewards for a life well lived. However, only one religion, regardless of how high-minded and appealing to a person's hopes and dreams, has Jesus Christ as its Savior and centerpiece of truth. That religion is Christianity. This fact eliminates all other religions as of little value in terms of a person dedicating his life to observing their teachings. No true church will be found in them.

Consider the Message of the Messenger

By way of an overview, we will consider some clear reasons why Christianity alone can supply the only true church. Jesus was not the first of God's agents mentioned in the Bible to preach the gospel of the Kingdom of God. Hebrews 4:1-2 makes this plain:

Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.

The Bible does not name him directly, but Moses is most likely the one who preached to the Israelites. Did he preach it as he and Aaron were preparing the Israelites to leave Egypt? There is a gap in God's revelation here because it is not terribly important who did it.

We can go further back and suppose that Abraham probably heard the gospel from God Himself as he was preparing to leave his homeland for Canaan. Hebrews 11:10 informs us that Abraham "waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God." That city is the heavenly Jerusalem that will come down from heaven with the Father when He comes to earth (Revelation 21:1-5). This, too, is an aspect of the gospel of the Kingdom of God.

However, the earliest implication of all appears in Genesis 3:15 within God's pronouncement to Satan of His curse for his involvement in Adam and Eve's sin: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel."

Early in the New Testament, Matthew 3:2 quotes John the Baptist preaching the gospel, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" However, Jesus certainly gave the most expansive and detailed information regarding the gospel's message. Nobody else even comes close.

He also clearly gives the message's title in Mark 1:14-15: "Now after John was put into prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying 'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the gospel.'"

What is the gospel—the "good news"? "Just believe on the name of Jesus and you will be saved" is a common message of many preachers. Others proclaim that the gospel is that Jesus came to die for our sins. Still others preach a rather insipid and saccharine "Jesus loves you" message. All of those catchy phrases have relevance to Jesus' message—we certainly must believe in Jesus, He did die for our sins, and He surely loves us—but nowhere does Jesus directly state that the gospel is about Him!

Instead, the good news is about a momentous purpose that God is accomplishing. Jesus spoke the words that the Father gave Him to preach, most emphatically confirmed in John 12:49-50:

For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. And I know that His command is everlasting life. Therefore whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak.

What is Jesus' own testimony about the subject of His preaching? Notice these verses:

- » Matthew 4:23: "And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people."
- » Matthew 24:14: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come."
- » Luke 4:43: "[Jesus] said to them, 'I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent.'"
- » Luke 16:16: "The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time, the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it."

Jesus' announcement of the good news is that the Father will establish His Kingdom and His capital city on earth. He Himself will be here, no longer separated from His children—no longer unseen and ruling indirectly through agents from His present location in heaven but ruling directly on earth. It is to this awesome, mind-boggling future that we, as a part of His Family, are being summoned to prepare for and to participate directly in.

Jesus is certainly mankind's Savior, having died for our sins, but to be *properly* understood, that event must be seen within the context of preparation for and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. A kingdom has four basic elements: a king, a territory it occupies, subjects within that territory, laws, and a form of government through which the will of the ruler is exercised. Each of these elements is part of the gospel.

Has the founder of any other religion offered a message and program that can even begin to match what Jesus taught? This is truly the most wonderful message mankind could possibly receive, and it came only through Jesus.

What About Satan and Sin?

Besides Christianity, what can the other religions do to mercifully clear their disciples of the burden of sin's death penalty? Hebrews 2:14-15 says of mankind's cursed state and the remedy for it:

Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

Some religions make no mention of Satan as a reality. Others include him as a reality and enemy, yet they make little or no accounting of him actively working to destroy mankind and God's purpose. Jesus makes no bones about Satan actively working to destroy men. In John 8:44, in accusing the Jews of unbelief, He puts Satan's nature in plain words:

You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it.

Satan is clearly responsible for drawing Adam and Eve into the first of mankind's sins, opening the floodgate to the sins of all of their progeny, all physical and mental sickness, countless emotional agonies, and the billions of deaths that mankind has experienced.

God makes it clear that the wages—the ultimate penalty—earned by one's sins is death (Romans 6:23). The sobering truth of this matter is that it takes only one sin for God to impose the death penalty! He warned Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden before they ever sinned, "In the day you eat of it you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:17). The death penalty falls immediately on anyone who sins, even if it is the first time!

All of those other religions that are without Christ leave the door open to thoughts that salvation can be earned by means of good works. The idea is that the evil an individual has done in the past can be compensated for by doing good deeds. This is the very charge the apostle Paul lays against the Jews in Romans 10:1-4:

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

In order for one to be justified before God and accepted by Him requires a righteousness that no man who ever sinned even one time can achieve. No amount of good works can compensate for even one sin. God will accept only the righteousness of One who has never sinned, and He will accept that payment only when a repentant sinner by faith believes.

Peter's statement in Acts 4:12 confirms that salvation is found nowhere else: "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we *must* be saved" (emphasis ours throughout). Christ's involvement in the forgiveness of sin for salvation is imperative; there is no alternative! Peter is not saying we can be saved or may be saved. The word "must" reveals necessity according to God's decree. Salvation is found through no other person and no other way of life except through the sacrifice of Jesus of Nazareth.

Salvation denotes deliverance or preservation from harm or evil. In this case, it is deliverance and restoration from the effects of sin. The result, then, is deliverance from eternal death (unless one goes on from that point to commit blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, which Jesus says God will not forgive; see Matthew 12:31-32). This is because salvation begins upon one's repentance from his sins and faith in the sacrifice of Christ for the forgiveness of sins. This combination of acts justifies a person before God, and no human works, regardless of their quality or quantity, are acceptable for the forgiveness of sins.

Does any other religion have a Savior with the qualifications of Jesus Christ? No other religion offers such a magnanimous gift. Forgiveness, and therefore justification, is available only through that perfect sacrifice, along with the sincere repentance of a believing sinner who exhibits faith in the God /Man Jesus Christ and in God's grace. God will then give us of His Spirit.

He Is Our Sanctification

By revealing that Jesus plays another important role in our salvation, Hebrews 10:14 takes our salvation another step beyond justification: "For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified." Justification and sanctification are both essential to God's purposes regarding salvation. However, most are far more familiar with justification.

Some believe that justification preserves one's salvation through to the resurrection. This cannot possibly be so, though, because that would mean that justification *is* salvation. In Hebrews 6:1, this same author writes, "Let us go on to perfection." At the time one is justified, the perfection or maturity of which he writes is still future.

Sanctification is the inward spiritual transformation that Jesus Christ, as our High Priest, works in a convert by His Holy Spirit following justification. I Corinthians 1:30 informs us that Christ is not only our righteousness but also our sanctification. Hebrews 2:11 names Him as "He who sanctifies," and in the same verse, His brethren are called "those who are being sanctified." During Jesus' prayer in John 17:19, He says, "And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also [the converts] may be sanctified by the truth." Ephesians 5:26-27 adds, ". . . that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish."

If words mean anything, these verses—and there are many more—teach us that Jesus Christ undertakes the sanctification of His brothers and sisters no less than He does their justification.

Hebrews 10:14 is apt to be misunderstood. Perhaps this illustration may help: Imagine an observer, who, looking to his left, sees a perfect work—Christ's sacrificial offering for our justification—already completed in the past. On his right, he sees an ongoing continuous process—our sanctification—stretching off into the future. The author of Hebrews is showing that Christ's one offering is so efficacious that nothing can be added to it. It will provide a solid foundation for the continuing process of godly character growth to holiness for all mankind for all time.

In the Old Testament, the words translated as "sanctify" and "holy" are derived from the same Hebrew root, and in the New Testament, they come from the same Greek root. In both languages, they are used in essentially the same way, meaning "to be made or declared clean or purified." Because of the sense of cleanliness, both imply being different from others of their kind that are not holy, and thus they are separated or set apart from what is common. One author suggests that the cleanliness of something holy makes it "a cut above."

Justification is essentially a legal operation on God's part by accounting Christ's righteousness to us because of faith on our part. Romans 4:1-5 confirms this:

What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something of which to boast, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.

No works on our part are acceptable for justification. There is no way a sinner can "make up" for his sins. By contrast, we are deeply involved in the sanctification process, where works are very important. Ephesians 2:10 from the *Amplified Bible* clearly states our responsibility following conversion:

For we are God's [own] handiwork (His workmanship), recreated in Christ Jesus, [born anew] that we may do those good works which God predestined (planned beforehand) for us [taking paths which He prepared ahead of time], that we should walk in them [living the good life which He prearranged and made ready for us to live].

After being justified, we are required to live obediently, to submit to God in faith, glorifying God by overcoming Satan, the world, and human nature. Sanctification is normally the longest and most difficult aspect of salvation. Real challenges, sometimes very difficult ones, abound within it if we are to remain faithful to God, the New Covenant, and His purpose. This preparation period for the Kingdom of God is vividly exemplified in the Old Testament by Israel's pilgrimage in the wilderness.

Righteousness and Holiness

Christians are clearly identified as saints in Scripture (Philippians 1:1). A *saint* is a "holy one," separated from the unconverted, who do not have God's Spirit. We must not confuse righteousness and holiness. Though they function together in the salvation process, they are specifically not the same qualities. Righteousness is the practical and consistent application, the right *doing*, of God's way of life. At its foundation, holiness is being cleaned, purified, and set apart, distinguished from others, for God's uses. Holiness is notable by a life as free from the defiling acts of sin as the convert can achieve as he overcomes and grows. Holiness is godliness.

So essential is holiness that the author of Hebrews declares, "Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). Holiness must be pursued. Thus, God's legal declaration of holiness, which we receive through Christ's righteousness as we begin converted life, is not the end of our pursuit of glorifying God. I Peter 1:13-16 charges us 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."

Holiness reflects the attitude and way that God conducts His life. Peter's charge to us is not to add to the righteousness conferred on us by receiving Christ's righteousness. Never in our human lives will we ever be more righteous than at that moment. The purpose of the pursuit of holiness through living God's way in our daily lives is to engrain His way into our pattern of living so thoroughly that it becomes habitual, or as we might say, first nature. This effort as a living sacrifice is our contribution that helps transform us into the image of Jesus Christ (Romans 12:1).

II Corinthians 5:17 describes what we presently are in God's purpose: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation: old things have passed away; behold all things have become new." II Corinthians 3:17-18 more specifically defines where God's creative process is headed:

Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

J.C. Ryle, the author of *Holiness*, writes:

Sanctification is the same with regeneration, the same with the renovation of the whole man. Sanctification is the forming and the framing of the new creature; it is the implanting and engraving of the image of Christ upon the poor soul. It is what the apostle [Paul] breathed after. (p. 317)

In Galatians 4:19, Paul writes, "My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you. . . ." He also says in I Corinthians 15:49, "And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man."

Just as surely as Christ's sacrifice is absolutely vital to our justification before God, so His labor in support of our sanctification forms the reflected image of Him within our very beings, our "hearts," in preparation for life in the Kingdom of God. There would be no salvation, no entrance into that Kingdom, without His efforts because we would be unprepared to live in that sinless environment.

In John 14:15-20, Jesus makes this meaningful declaration:

If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to

you. A little while longer and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me. Because I live, you will live also. At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and *I in you*.

In verses 22-23, He clarifies a question, adding a firmer assertion that reveals who will be working in and through us during our sanctification unto holiness:

Judas (not Iscariot) said to Him, "Lord, how is it that You will manifest Yourself to us, and not to the world?" Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and *We* will come to him and make Our home with him."

Jesus Christ Is Our All in All

Hebrews 2:9-11 opens to us a spiritual reality that we must come to understand and appreciate if we are to make the most of this wonderful opportunity of salvation that God gave to us completely unbidden:

But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren.

Because of our disobedience and the resulting curse of death placed on us, we could never experience what is said of us in Psalm 8:4-8, which the author of Hebrews refers to here. However, Jesus suffered death and gained the victory for us. As a result, He wears the crown of glory and rules the universe. We know this Being as God-in-the-flesh, but the author uses His earthly name, Jesus, so that we can see the historical setting of His victory.

"Jesus" calls to mind the concept of salvation, as it means "savior." The author writes that Jesus accomplished the redemption of His people by "tast[ing] death," not—interestingly—by merely "dying." To taste death is a graphic illustration of the painful way He suffered and died. He was not spared this excruciating trauma because He was the Son. He experienced suffering, both physical and emotional, to the very marrow of His bones.

In Hebrews 2:10, we find that the "everyone" of verse 9 is, in reality, not in this context the whole world, but it is limited to the "many sons" being brought to glory—in other words, the church. He bore the suffering that should have come upon us as the wages of our sins. He is the Author, the Pioneer, the Trailblazer, the Forerunner, going before us to our salvation. He is the One clearing the path, as it were, as we make our way following our calling. In Hebrews 12:2, He is called "the author and finisher [or perfecter] of our faith." The Father made Him pass through gruesome suffering in our behalf.

He completed His preparation for the responsibility that He now holds as our High Priest; the Father has charged Him with the task of preparing many others to share life with Them in the Kingdom of

God. Jesus, therefore, is the One who makes men holy. The path to sanctification lies in obedience to doing God's will, and that obedience is to be given out of gratitude because one understands and knows the Father and Son from within an intimate relationship (John 17:3).

Hebrews 2:12 quotes Psalm 22:22, putting the words in Jesus' mouth: "I will declare Your name to My brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will sing praises to You." In the holy Family of God, this spiritual relationship supersedes all human aspects. Jesus died for our sins; He redeemed us from the curse of sin; He forgives our sins; He gives us gifts; and He leads us to glory. Because of His sacrificial work, He is not ashamed to give us the name "brothers"! This implies that we, in turn, may call Jesus our Brother. What a privilege to be called brothers of the Son of God!

Christ and His Bride, His Body

Ephesians 1:21-23 describes in a limited way His exalted place in the Father's purposes:

[The Father has seated Him] far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

Despite its smallness and visible weaknesses, as the complement of Christ, the church is also in an exalted position. We members do not literally add a thing to Christ's divinity, but in His view, He is not complete and will not be complete until united with His bride. Thus, as He sanctifies and shapes us in holiness, He gradually fills His bride's every part with every gift needed to enable her to function effectively so that she, as a whole, can glorify God in her overall responsibility to our Father and to our Lord and Savior. Since everything in Christ's spiritual body comes from Him, He *is* everything to every member within it.

No religion but Christianity offers such an exalted and loving, spiritual Being sent to labor on behalf of its adherents. He is our Creator, our Lawgiver, the Forgiver of our sins, the Dispenser of His Spirit, the Giver of eternal life, our Guide through life who blazes the trail before us, and the Enabler of true spiritual growth and overcoming.

This body of believers is not contained within one corporate entity, and an individual cannot just go out and join it. The Father must lead a person to it (John 6:44). When He does, the newly called person will find people who are keeping God's commandments—*all ten* of them—in both letter *and* spirit. They will worship God in spirit and truth (John 4:24) without dodging spiritual realities, and they will sacrifice themselves despite personal costs. They will be honest to a fault, trustworthy, and uncomplaining. They are not driven by envy and covetousness, nor are they fixed on immediate or self-gratification.

The Kingdom of God is the vision that drives them. They strive to transform into the image of Jesus Christ and to glorify the Father and Son in everything. They live solidly in the present, aware of many of its harsh realities, but they make every move with their gaze on their eternal future. They truly are pilgrims, people who humbly see themselves as mere tiny specks in a vast and awesome purpose yet privileged beyond all bounds. They believe that purpose, and in gratitude, give themselves by faith to see it accomplished in their lives.