

What Does the Christian Church Believe?

All across this land of ours radio announcers constantly give time for station identification. It is only when they make the regular station breaks that the listening multitudes can identify the station to which we are tuned. I believe that this is a good time to pause in our life for soul identification. It's an opportunity to make our position known to the listening multitudes.

As I propose the question, "What does the Christian Church believe?", I might give a very, very simple answer by just holding up the Bible, and I can say, "This is what the Christian Church believes," because we do stand upon the Word of God. Our motto is this, "Where the Bible speaks, we speak and where the Bible is silent, we are silent."

The scripture text is Matthew 16:18. We read in the words of Jesus, "Upon this rock I will build My church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." When Jesus spoke those words in Matthew 16, the church had not yet come into existence. Christ used future tense, "Upon this rock I will build My church." We know that after Jesus spoke these words, He went ahead to fulfill His ministry. He died upon the cross for our sins. He was buried in the tomb. He arose again on the third day. Following His resurrection, He lived and walked upon this earth for forty more days and

was seen by many, many witnesses. Then He ascended in to heaven and a cloud received Him out of their sight. Following the ascension of Jesus, His apostles waited for ten days in Jerusalem obeying His instructions. Then, according to Acts 2, the church was born on the day of Pentecost in the year AD 30. The last verse of Acts 2 says, "And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."

Every Denomination Agrees!

The amazing thing is that every denomination in the world that considers itself to be a Christian denomination agrees with what I have said up to this point. The Catholics agree, the Baptists, the Methodists, the Seventh Day Adventists, the Presbyterians, the Episcopalians, you name it. They all agree that Christ established His church in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Further more, all denominations agree that in the beginning the church was one, united. We know that this united church, this one church, continued for many, many years to just be the one church that Jesus established.

New Denomination Began

Well, what happened? For the answer to that question we have to look outside of the Bible, because at the time the Bible closed in 96 AD, with John writing down the Revelation, the church was still one. As we turn then to secular history, we find that for many years the church remained one. But then men began to vie with men for power and usually this exercise in seeking power was confined to the elders of the churches. One elder would gain enough power that he would rule the entire congregation and became known as the ruling elder. Then, sometimes that ruling elder would get enough power that he would rule several congregations. So, this vying for

power continued and became worse and worse with single individuals having great power over large numbers of congregations. Until finally, one man emerged as the ruler or the pope over all of God's children here on earth. Most historians date this from 590 AD. Pope Gregory I became the first man, the first individual, to be the absolute dictatorial ruler over all of God's children here on earth. They called him the Pope because he was considered to be the papa or the father over God's children. So, then we had two churches. Beginning with Pentecost AD 30 just one church, but then starting in 590 AD two churches; the churches that Jesus established in Jerusalem and then the church that has come to be known today as the Holy Roman Catholic Church with headquarters in Rome and with a man called the Pope being the head of the church.

The First Pope

In 590 AD, with the election of Gregory I as the pope, the Catholic church gained great power. Political power as well as ecclesiastical or religious power. For one thousand years the Catholic church actually ruled the world, politically and religiously. Everyone studies this when they go through school. You remember from your school books it is called The Dark Ages. The Dark Ages, or the one thousand years of Catholic rule, came to an end in 1517 when a Roman Catholic priest named Martin Luther rebelled against his denomination. Actually, Martin Luther, as a Roman Catholic priest, loved his church, but he disagreed with some of the doctrines of his church that were contrary to the teachings of the Bible. So Martin Luther listed these points of disagreement and he nailed them to the walls of the church building where he preached in Wittenberg, Germany. They were called the 95 Theses. Ninety five objections that this priest had against his own church, the Roman Catholic Church. Because Martin Luther nailed these 95 objections to the walls of the building where he preached, he was excommunicated by the pope at Rome and they sought his

life. But Martin Luther continued to hide and continued to preach and continued to write and because of this protest, the Protestant Reformation Movement as born. Protestant coming from the idea of protest. Martin Luther was protesting those things within the Roman Catholic Church that he believed to be contrary to the teachings of God's Word. Reformation because it was Martin Luther's idea to reform that which was wrong with the church and make it right again.

The Lutheran Denomination

Martin Luther never did intend to leave the Catholic Church. It was never his idea to start another church. But, through the teaching and the preaching and writing of Martin Luther, his followers did that very thing. His followers established the Lutheran denomination. This was over the objections of Martin Luther himself, because it is plainly recorded in the teachings and the writings of Martin Luther, "Do not call yourselves Lutherans, call yourselves Christians." But the followers of Martin Luther disregarded his teachings and followed their human hero and named their denomination after their leader.

About the same time something was happening over in England. King Henry VIII was having his disagreements with the pope in Rome. King Henry VIII could not agree with the pope because he had many different wives. You know this particularly dark part of the history of England. King Henry VIII murdered some of his wives in cold blood. Sometimes he would divorce his wife and get married to someone else immediately. After he had many wives, the pope at Rome spoke out quite loudly against him and King Henry VIII said, "OK. If we cannot agree then I'll start my own church." So, King Henry VIII started the Church of England. He appointed himself to be the head of the church in opposition to the pope at Rome who had declared that he was the head of the church. So, another denomination was born.

The Methodist Denomination

As the years went on, a lot of people could not agree with the Church of England. So, there were more protests and there were more denominations formed. One of the most prominent that came out of this period was the Methodist denomination. John Wesley was the leader of this group. John Wesley could not agree with the formalism of the church of England nor its lack of spiritual life. As John Wesley taught, many people enthusiastically followed him. It was said that John Wesley taught a very methodical religion. So, they nicknamed the followers of John Wesley Methodists. I believe that the Methodist denomination has become the very largest of all denominations in America today, as they have followed after the teachings of this brilliant leader, John Wesley.

In the meantime, there were many other denominations that had their beginnings from these days of the Protestant Reformation period. The Catholic Church had taught sprinkling as a substitute for baptism. There were lots of people who wanted to go back to the Bible way of baptizing. So, this group of people eventually took upon themselves the name Baptist because they immersed people, or, they baptized them according to the teachings of the Bible rather than by the Catholic substitution, which was sprinkling.

All of the modern denominations that we hear so much about today came out of this Protestant Reformation effort until finally there were more than 300 denominations. Each one of these denominations professed to believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. Each and every denomination professed to believe that the Bible was the Word of God. Each and every one of these denominations also insisted that they were the only ones that were going to be saved and go to heaven. There were all kinds of arguments, confrontations, disagreements, and divisions. The competition was fierce.

The Restoration Movement

This was the situation that faced the scene in America in the late 1700's, when the Restoration Movement was born. The Restoration Movement came out of all denominations and came out of this background of divisions and competition. There were two preachers that became quite prominent in the Restoration Movement. They were father and son, Thomas and Alexander Campbell. One was in Europe studying the Bible, while the other was in America studying the Bible. Independent of one another and two continents apart they both came to the very same position as a result of studying God's Word.

The position that they came to was that it was wrong to be divided into denominations, that we ought to be united in the Lord Jesus Christ and His Church. When Thomas and Alexander Campbell got together later, here in America, they were both astonished that independent of one another they had both come to this same position. They were from the Presbyterian denomination as a background.

About this same time Alexander Campbell was coming to this position, there was a Presbyterian preacher by the name of Barton W. Stone, who preached in Kentucky. He also came to this very same position and began to preach the restoration of people to the New Testament Church.

About this same time, there was a Methodist preacher in North Carolina named James O'Kelly, who came to this very same position. All of these men studying God's Word, independent of each other, began to preach, "Where the Bible speaks, we will speak. Where the Bible is silent, we are silent." They all began to say, "Let's forget about denominationalism. Let's forget about competing with one another and let's simply restore the church as it was in the beginning on the day of Pentecost when Jesus first established the church."

Dear friends, this is exactly what the Christian Church believes today. I believe that is a valid position. Surely, as we look

around us and see a world divided by denominationalism, we can realize the validity of restoration.

A Funny Story on Unity

I wonder how many of you have heard the very humorous story about the Jew who was injured in an automobile accident. It just so happened that near the accident there was a Catholic hospital. Of course, one of the witnesses to the accident quickly stepped to a telephone and called Emergency at the Catholic hospital and said, "Send the ambulance over quickly, there's been an accident over here on the interstate." Immediately, the Catholic hospital dispatched one of their ambulances and don't you know that a Seventh Day Adventist driver was on duty that day. So, he quickly whisked over to the site of the accident in the Catholic ambulance to pick up the Jew, who had been injured.

Now, when this Seventh Day Adventist driver arrived in the Catholic ambulance with the Jew at the Catholic hospital, it just so happened that a good Methodist doctor was on duty in the emergency room. Of course, he received this Jew, who had been injured in the traffic accident, and this Methodist doctor was assisted by an Episcopalian nurse. As soon as they examined the Jew, they said, "Oh my, we are going to have to amputate his leg." The Jew said, "Oh no, don't do that. I could never afford a wooden leg." Well, the Methodist doctor said, "Don't worry about it. I have a friend, down at the newspaper, who is the editor. He happens to be a good Lutheran and I know that he'll be glad to run an ad in this Lutheran newspaper and we will surely find somebody that would donate a wooden leg."

The doctor contacted the Lutheran editor of the newspaper and sure enough he ran a story in his newspaper about the plight of the poor Jew that was in the Catholic hospital that was going to have his leg amputated and don't you know, a good Baptist man answered that ad and he said, "I have a wooden leg that I haven't

used in a long time and I would be glad to donate it to the cause.” Well, the Salvation Army sent a messenger boy down and picked up this wooden leg from the Baptist fellow, who was donating. They rushed it down to the Catholic hospital and there the Methodist doctor and the Episcopalian nurse installed the wooden leg on the Jew. As he went happily walking or hobbling out of the hospital, he said, “You know, this must make me a United Brethren!”

What Must We Restore?

I think you must agree with me that when we consider all the confusion that is caused by denominationalism that restoration is a valid plea. What is it that we must restore if we are going to restore the church that Jesus established on the day of Pentecost?

I. In the first place, we need to restore Jesus Christ to His rightful position as the Head of the church. Under Catholicism, which was the first denomination, they declared, and still do today, that the pope is the head of the church. Under Protestantism, or reformation, each one has their human heroes that they put up as the head of the church. Sometimes they are called bishops. Sometimes they are called state secretaries. It doesn't make any difference what name they wear, the point is that no man here on earth should be looked upon as head of the church, because the Bible says in Ephesians 5:23, “For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the Head of the church, and He is the Savior of the body.” In Colossians 1:18, the Bible says, “And He is the Head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the first born from the dead that in all things that He might have the preeminence.”

We, who are members of the Christian Church, insist that Jesus Christ be recognized as the only Head of the church. We, who are members of Christian Churches, will not, under any circumstance, recognize the pope as the head of the church, and neither will we recognize any man, be he an elder, preacher, bishop,

director, or whatever, as the head of the church. We insist that Jesus Christ only be recognized as the Head of the church. We believe we should restore Jesus Christ to his rightful position that belongs to Him, and to Him alone.

II. Secondly, if we are going to restore the church to its primitive, pristine purity, then we believe we should restore the name Christian as the name for all members to wear. In Acts 11:26, we find that the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch. In I Peter 4:16, the Bible says, "If any man shall suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this name." When we start talking about the name to wear, denominational people always come up with this argument; they say, "Oh well, there is nothing in a name. Absolutely nothing in a name. We may call ourselves by such and such denominational name, but it really means nothing because actually we are Christians."

Well, if there is nothing in a name, why is it that every wife always takes the name of her husband when they get married? How do you think I would feel if my wife would smile at me very nicely and say, "Reggie, I know that we are married and I know that I am 'Mrs. Thomas' and I really do love you, but somehow or another I don't like that name 'Thomas.' I would rather wear the name 'Snupenagle.' It won't make any difference, I'll still be your wife and wherever we go you can stand up and say, 'I'm Mr. Thomas and this is my wife Mrs. Snupenagle,' and it will be O.K. because there is nothing in a name." What do you suppose I would think? I would think that something had gone wrong with her brain and then if she insisted upon such a ridiculous position as that, I would become angry. I would not be able to stand for something like that. No self-respecting husband could permit his wife to wear some other man's name. A name is tremendously important when it comes to marriage.

If there is nothing in a name, how about signing a check for about \$10,000 and putting your name on it. There would be nothing wrong with that, would there? There is nothing in a name!!

There would be lots of trouble if I tried to sign your name on a check, because a name is tremendously important. Dear Friends, when it comes to the church, the name is more important than any other area of life. In fact, it is so important that in Acts 4:12 it says, "There is no other name under heaven given among men whereby that we must be saved." If we are going to restore the church as it was in the beginning, we must restore Jesus Christ as the Head of the church and we must restore the name of Jesus Christ as the name that the members of the church will wear.

III. In the third place, we must restore the plan of salvation taught by Jesus Christ and His apostles. During the time of Catholicism, followed by the time of the Protestant Reformation, the simple, New Testament plan of salvation became very perverted. It finally reached the point that every denomination had a different plan of salvation. One denomination would say, "You've got to have an experience if you are going to be a Christian." Another denomination would say, "You've got to study our rule book if you are going to be saved." Another denomination would come along and say, "Well, you cannot be saved in our group unless we vote on you." It just goes on and on and on, you could name the different plans of salvation that have been provided by men. But, dear friends, it is up to us to restore the simple plan of salvation taught by Jesus and His apostles. That is faith in God, repentance from our past sins, a confession of Jesus' name, Christian baptism for the remission of sins, followed by living a Christian life faithfully until death. If we study the book of Acts, we find that is the one and only plan of salvation that was presented by the apostles of Jesus Christ, who were guided by the Holy Spirit. Nowhere in the book of Acts do we find anything about experiences being required. No where in the book of Acts do we find anything about creeds or voting or age limits or any of the other impositions that have been made by men. Let us restore the simple plan of salvation as found in the Word of God.

IV. In the fourth place, if we are going to restore the church as it was in the beginning, then we need to restore the simple organization of the New Testament Church. In the Word of God, we find that the first church was simply organized by having each congregation take care of its own business. They had their own elders and their own deacons. There was a plurality in both offices. There was no ruling elder or ruling deacon. These men, chosen by the congregation, carried on the business of the congregation. In the first church, the elders were the spiritual overseers. They were the shepherds. They were the bishops. They devoted themselves to prayer and to teaching the Word of God, to the spiritual life of the congregation. We find that the deacons took care of the financial matters and the business matters of the congregation. This simple organization of the first church was sufficient to convert the world and turn it upside down for Jesus Christ. I think we cannot improve upon that simple organization outlined for us in the New Testament.

V. In the fifth place, if we are going to restore the church that Jesus built, we must restore the worship service of that church. On Pentecost, the birthday of the church, we find that the worship service was outlined quite clearly in Acts 2:42, "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles doctrine, and in fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." Each Lord's Day in our worship services, we try to imitate or restore the worship we found in the first church. We gather each Lord's Day to pray, to sing God's praises, to preach His Word, to gather around the Lord's Table and remember the Lord's body and blood that He gave so freely for our sins. This is the worship that the New Testament church practiced in the beginning.

VI. And finally, in the sixth place, if we are going to restore the church that Jesus built, then we need to restore the unity of that church. We find that after the church was established, divisions did begin to creep into the church and it was wrong. So, the

apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, where division reared its ugly head and in I Corinthians 1:10 Paul said, "I beseech you brethren by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that ye all speak the same thing and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."

If we are to restore the church that Jesus built, we must restore the unity of that church. The Christian Church pleads for unity. Christian Church people do not belong to any denomination. We have no headquarters save those in heaven. We have no creed save Jesus Christ himself. We wear no name except the Christian name that gives honor to Jesus Christ, Himself. We have no church laws except the Bible itself. We bind nothing upon anyone to keep except what the New Testament binds. We who are members of the Christian Churches do not claim to be the only Christians. We do not claim to be the only ones who are going to heaven. We just simply claim to be Christian only, striving for unity and pleading with all people and all groups to unite together as one under the banner of Jesus Christ.

Let's Unite Before It's Too Late!

The wheat had grown very tall in the Kansas wheat field. All of the workers were out in the field harvesting the grain. The wives were quite busy cooking and preparing for their husbands, who would come in at meal time tired and hungry. So, one mother failed to notice her two year old girl had quietly slipped away from her side out into that gigantic wheat field comprising thousands of acres. It was fully four or five minutes before the mother was aware that her child had gone. When she suddenly missed the little girl, she quickly began to search. When she couldn't find her she sounded the alarm and soon all the workers came in from the fields and she excitedly told them that the child was missing. They began searching. It wasn't long before one of the workers found some lit-

tle footprints starting out into the wheat field and then everyone was greatly alarmed. They intensified the search and all together, about 100 men, joined in the search, but after looking all afternoon they had not found the child.

Night time came and so they rounded up torches and strong flashlights and lanterns and all night long those men searched through that wheat field, but they could not find the child. At day-break, they gathered back at the house for hot coffee and donuts. One of the men from that group made this suggestion. He said, "Men, we haven't gotten together. You know, if we would unite, we'd find that child. Let's join hands, let's get in a straight line just like a giant comb and with our hands joined together, united, let's walk down through this field and I know we will find the child." Everybody agreed that it was a brilliant idea. Each one had been searching on his own, individually; naturally they had missed lots of the land. But, now with this suggestion in their minds, they all joined hands. They formed one straight line. They started down that field like a big giant comb covering every square inch of the ground. It wasn't more than 20 minutes until a tug was felt toward the center of the line and quickly they closed in.

There they all witnessed the heartbreaking sight; the father kneeling down beside the lifeless form of his little two year old daughter. The previous afternoon as she wandered through that tall wheat, a big snake had bitten her. Without medical attention, the child had died. As the poor, grief-stricken father picked up the lifeless form of his little daughter, he looked into the faces of his friends and neighbors, who had helped all day and night in the search, and he sobbed out this cry, "Oh fellahs, why didn't we unite before it was too late?"

Dear friends, as we look today out into a world divided and torn asunder by denominations, I am afraid that some day lost souls will point their finger and say, "Why didn't you church folks unite before it is too late?" That's what we believe in, we believe in uniting, we believe in getting together, we believe in uniting upon the Word of God. So, we plead with you , if you have not yet united

with Jesus Christ and His church, then we invite you to do so at once!