

What Is the Church of Christ?

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When you hear the term “Church of Christ,” what do you think about? Probably most people think about a building in a particular locality with the name “Church of Christ” on it. Others may think about what they view as a “denomination” within “Christendom.” Still others may think about a friendly and benevolent group of people who call themselves the “Church of Christ.” In this article, we are considering the term church of Christ from the standpoint of the Bible. Biblically speaking, “What Is the Church of Christ?”

The Church of Christ Is an Institution Established by God. An institution is an organization within society or culture. There are numerous institutions — some good, some not so good. However, there are only three institutions established by God.

When God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...” (Genesis 1:26), and when He made woman from the rib of Adam (Genesis 2:21-23), He established the oldest institution which is the home. When Jesus spoke of marriage (Matthew 19:5), He quoted from Genesis 2:24. He said, “For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh.” Thus, the home was established at the very beginning of time.

As the population of man grew, God established His second institution — governments. Paul wrote, “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God” (Romans 13:1). God established governments to serve two basic purposes: “for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well” (1 Peter 2:14).

In the city of Jerusalem, God established His third institution — the church of Christ. Though it was in the mind of God before the creation of the world, the church was not established until the Jewish holiday of Pentecost in AD 30, fifty days after the crucifixion of Jesus. On that marvelous and miraculous day, the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles, and they began to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ in its completeness for the first time. Those who heard “were pricked in their heart” and asked, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). “Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). On that day, there were three thousand souls immersed into Christ and added to the church (Acts 2:41).

Not Only Is the Church One of Three Divine Institutions, It Was Planned, Prophesied, and Promised. In the fifth century BC while in exile in Babylon, Daniel interpreted King Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Daniel 2). He saw five kingdoms. The fifth kingdom would be an eternal kingdom that would never be destroyed and shall stand forever. Daniel saw it would be established by the God of heaven in the days fourth kingdom — the Roman Empire (verse 44).

During the eighth century BC, Isaiah prophesied the establishment of the Lord's house (Isaiah 2:2-3) which is the church (1 Timothy 3:15). He saw all nations flowing into it which has its fulfillment in the gospel age (Romans 1:16). He also saw the word of the Lord going forth from Jerusalem which, again, is fulfilled in Acts 2.

Jesus and His disciples as well as John the baptizer preached, "the kingdom of God is at hand" (Matthew 4:17; 10:6-7; Mark 1:14-15). In fact, Jesus said, "There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom" (Matthew 16:28). The kingdom (or church) was so at hand that it was to come in the lifetime of some living in Jesus' day.

In Acts 2, the kingdom/church was established in Jerusalem (Joel 2), in the days of the Roman kings (Daniel 2), and all nations flowed into it (Isaiah 2). Throughout the epistles of the New Testament, the kingdom existed, and Christians were citizens of it (Colossians 1:13; 1 Thessalonians 2:12; Hebrews 12:28).

Not Only Is the Church a Divine Institution That Was Prophesied and Promised, but It Is Divinely Regulated in Doctrine, Worship, Mission, and Organization. Because the church of Christ belongs to Christ, it is not left to man to regulate. When man takes it upon himself to regulate the church, it is simply "will worship" (i.e. self-imposed or self-made religion; Colossians 2:23). Christ is the testator of the New Testament (Hebrews 9:15-17). In other words, the New Testament is Christ's testament. It was given for us to study, understand, and follow. Since "sin is the transgression of the law" (1 John 3:4), then to not follow Christ's testament is sin.