

## Introduction:

Let's start with a pop quiz. Which of the following statements are true?

1. We are a church of God.
2. We are a church of Christ.
3. We are a church of God in Christ.
4. We are a church of the Way.

Which of the above are true? All of them. In **I Corinthians 1:2** and **II Corinthians 1:1**, the local congregation in Corinth is described as a "church of God." In fact, other than just calling Christ's body the church or referring to local bodies as churches, this phrase is the most used phrase to refer to the church (see also, **Acts 20:28; I Corinthians 10:32; 11:16, 22; 15:9; Galatians 1:13; II Thessalonians 1:4**). In **Romans 16:16**, Paul refers to multiple congregations as the "churches of Christ." A singular one would then be a church of Christ. Interestingly, this is the only place this phrase is used in Scripture. **I Thessalonians 2:14** describes the congregations in Judea as "the churches of God in Christ Jesus." Finally, in **Acts 9:2** it says Paul was given letters to find men and women that belonged to the Way. Notice in **I Corinthians 15:9** and **Galatians 1:13**, Paul says it was the "church of God" that he was persecuting. The Way is another term to describe the church that belongs to Jesus who is also the Way (**John 14:6**). See also **Acts 24:14, 22** in which both Paul and Luke call the church the Way. All these statements are true.

Let's have another pop quiz. Which of the following statements are true?

1. I am church of Christ.
2. I am a church of Christ preacher.
3. Church of Christ doctrine teaches a cappella singing.
4. This is a church of Christ church.

Which of the above are true? None. "Church" is a collective noun encompassing multiple people. As an individual, I can't possibly be a collective. I am not "church-of-Christ," nor am I "a church of Christ." I am a disciple of Christ, a saint, a Christian. The phrase "church of Christ," used scripturally, is not the name of an organization that can be added to a role as an adjective. For instance, I am a University of North Alabama graduate. "University of North Alabama" is the actual name of an organization that can be used as an adjective to describe its graduates, students, professors, staff. I am a preacher of the gospel or gospel preacher. I am a preacher of Christ. But I am not a "church-of-Christ preacher." The "church of Christ" is a collective of people that has never originated any teaching or doctrine. If we are teaching doctrine that was developed by a collection of men, **Matthew 15:9** says our worship is vain. We must teach the doctrine of Christ (**Hebrews 6:1**) and the doctrine of God (**Titus 2:10**), and that's it. Finally, as I said above, the phrase "church of Christ" is not the name of an organization that can be used as an adjective to be tacked on to the word "church" to describe what this congregation is. Additionally, this congregation is not part of any larger organization called "the church of Christ" or "the churches of Christ." There are large organizations that call themselves various kinds of Baptist, "Southern Baptist," "Missionary Baptist," "American Baptist," etc. Many congregations are cooperating members of these organizations. They are called Baptist churches. We are not part of any larger organization by any name, including "Church of Christ." We are not a "church-of-Christ church."

Why do I bring this up? Because I have become increasingly aware of this kind of language, which I think betrays a particular misunderstanding that is becoming rampant among Christians. I see it on Facebook, in blogs, in articles. I hear it in conversations and even in sermons. I'd like for us to tackle this concern today.

## Discussion:

I. I don't want to be a "church-of-Christ" Christian OR Why I left the Baptist church.

- A. When I was born, my parents were both Baptists. I grew up in the Baptist church until my early teens. After my mom died, my dad started dating a Christian (instigated by a connection through his parents who were Christians). We started attending a church that belongs to Christ. People kept asking me why I wanted to be a Baptist instead of just being a Christian. I was only a teenager, but I knew how to answer that question. I had been taught in my youth group classes that I was just a Christian. The name "Baptist" was a name that others had applied to the church I was part of because of the way the church baptized. It was a pejorative term that stuck, just like the word "Christian" originally was, but we were just Christians.

- B. Then my dad got married. While they were on their honeymoon and were consolidating their separate houses in to the new house that had been purchased, I was sent to stay with some old family friends in Idaho who were members of the Baptist church. After one of the church's services, the family friend was having a conversation with his nephew who was a pastor for another Baptist church. They were talking about something that was going on in the Southern Baptist Convention that they didn't like. I don't think they knew I was listening. The family friend said something I have remembered ever since, "If they keep doing stuff like this, I'm going to quit being a Baptist and just be a Christian." My world was totally rocked. Here I had been telling people I was just a Christian and that was all I wanted to be. In a moment's time I learned I was wrong. I didn't suddenly believe everything the congregation my family attended was teaching or disagree with everything in the church of my youth. But I did know I didn't want to be a certain kind of Christian. I just wanted to be a disciple of Christ. I wanted to be a Christian only. I'm not saying I understood the nature of the church universal or that congregation. But I knew I wanted to be what they claimed they were being —just Christians. That is all I wanted then. That is all I have ever wanted. That is all I want now.
- C. It has been nearly 30 years since I was baptized into Christ and added to His church (cf. **Acts 2:38, 47**). I have been striving to live as just a Christian ever since with varying degrees of success. But over the past 30 years, I've started noticing a bothersome trend diametrically opposed to the Scriptures and to what we claim we are trying to do. While many Christians point fingers at "all those denominations" out there, they have started to speak and behave just as denominationally. I hear Christians say things like, "I'm church-of-Christ." I hear people say, "You're church-of-Christ? Me too." Christians introduce me as a "church-of-Christ preacher." They ask if a school is a "church-of-Christ school," or if a radio program is a "church-of-Christ program," or if a book is a "church-of-Christ book." They talk about "church-of-Christ doctrine." Or even worse, they've shortened it and said, "I'm C.O.C." It really concerns me when a Christian speaks of another person saying, "They're Christian, but they're not church-of-Christ." This is said as if the church of Christ is some kind of organizational subset of the universal body of the Lord.
- D. Perhaps the worst happened years ago when a sister and I were talking about a congregation in town that was admittedly abandoning the Scriptural pattern for a congregation of the Lord. They were involved in unity meetings and joint services with denominational, false-teaching churches. They were adding in all kinds of unscriptural practices to their worship and work. The sister wanted to share with me one more "egregious sin" that congregation was committing. She had looked in the phone book and discovered something that was just unimaginable to her. While the name of that particular congregation still included the phrase "church of Christ," it didn't have its entry listed under the heading "Church of Christ" but under the heading "Non-denominational." I know she wanted me to be incensed, but my first thought was not, "Oh my goodness how could that congregation do that?" My first thought was, "Oh no, what is my congregation listed under?"
- E. Brothers and sisters, I left the Baptist church because I didn't want to be some kind of Christian. I don't want to be a Baptist Christian or a Methodist Christian or a Roman Catholic Christian or a Pentecostal Christian. I'll tell you what else I don't want to be. I don't want to be a Church-of-Christ Christian.

## II. When "of Christ" isn't right either.

- A. In this vein, I'd like to share with you a passage that has long shocked me. In **I Corinthians 1:12**, Paul rebukes the Corinthians for sectarian divisions. While the ESV talks about following certain people, the NKJV and NASB word the problem in similar ways. The different members of the church of God that was in Corinth were saying, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ" (NKJV).
- B. As Paul addressed this divisiveness, he didn't say, "And only a few of you are getting it right, saying that you are 'of Christ.'" He also never said, "Hey you guys who are claiming to be of me, Apollos, and Cephas, you're lining up with the wrong groups. Those who are claiming to be 'of Christ' are getting it right. You need to be like that group." Instead, he rebuked the Corinthians across the board for their divisiveness and factionalism. Should all of these Christians say they are "of Christ" or "following Christ"? Of course. But apparently, in Corinth the folks who were claiming to be "of Christ" were committing the same kind of sectarian divisiveness in their declaration that those who were declaring to follow Paul, Apollos, and Cephas were.
- C. Some of the Corinthians were using correct terminology, but were using it incorrectly. Is the phrase "church of Christ" a biblically authorized phrase? Of course it is. But if we mean by it essentially the same thing others mean by Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic, Pentecostal, etc. then we are using a biblical phrase in unbiblical ways, and we are betraying that we misunderstand the very fundamental nature of Christ's church. If we mean by the phrase "church of Christ" an organization of local congregations that have the name "Church of Christ" on their sign, teach similar things, and trade preachers among each other but are only one subset of all the Christians out there, then we are acting just like the divisive Corinthians.

- D. Please understand. I want this congregation to be a congregation of Christ, a congregation that belongs to Christ, a church of Christ. I want to be of Christ. But I do not want to be a Church-of-Christ Christian.

III. So, what is the church of Christ really?

- A. The word “church” translates the Greek word “ekklesia” which simply means a group of people called out for a special purpose. It was originally a reference to the assemblies of citizens in Greek city-states gathered together to conduct public business. We see a similar use of the term in **Acts 19:32, 39, 41**. The word is a collective noun, like the words club, group, class, herd, flock, etc. These are singular words that refer to a group of members. A flock is a collection of sheep. A club is a collection of people. A herd is a collection of cows. A church is a collection of people. That is exactly how the word “church” is used in the New Testament. See **Acts 8:1**. In this verse, a persecution arose against the church. It arose against a singular group. However, it says, “*they* were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria...” (emphasis added). The singular church was made up of multiple people.
- B. When we add the prepositional phrase “of Christ,” we modify that collective noun. We are saying who the group of people belong to. Saying “church of Christ” is the same as saying “Christ’s church.” Thus, when we say “church of Christ,” we need to mean a group of people who belong to Jesus. When **Romans 16:16** refers to “churches of Christ,” it is speaking of multiple groups of people who belong to Jesus Christ. When **I Corinthians 1:2** talks about the “church of God that is in Corinth,” it is referring to a group of people who belong to God and are in Corinth. However, knowing the unity of Father and Son, we realize that these are not two different kinds of groups. As **I Corinthians 3:23** says, Christ is God’s. Therefore, any church of Christ is also a church of God and vice versa. Of course, in the New Testament, the writers often just say “church,” expecting us to realize based on the context that they are talking about the group of people that belong to God/Christ.
- C. “Church” is used in two main senses, a universal sense and a local one.
1. When **I Corinthians 1:2** talks about the “church of God that is in Corinth,” it is referring to a localized group of people. When Paul wrote to the “churches of Galatia” (**Galatians 1:2**), he was writing to multiple groups of people who belonged to Christ meeting together throughout the large region of Galatia. These groups are churches because they assemble, not just when they assemble. In **Acts 8:3**, the people Paul was persecuting were still the church in Jerusalem even though they were in their individual houses.
  2. In **Matthew 16:18**, when Jesus talked about building “his church,” He was referring to the church in a universal sense. The same sense is seen in **Hebrews 12:23**. But here is the very important point. Just as flock is a collection of sheep and never refers to a collection of flocks, just so church always refers to a collection of people and never a collection of churches. The universal church is not the collection of all the local congregations that belong to Christ. The universal church is a collection of people. It is the collection of all those people who are enrolled in heaven. Please understand exactly what that means. It is not the collection of all the people who are enrolled in the directories of all the churches that have the words “church of Christ” on their sign. It is the collection of all the people who belong to Jesus Christ and are enrolled in heaven without reference to their participation in a local fellowship of believers. In **Acts 9:26**, when the Jerusalem Christians initially refused to accept Saul into their local fellowship, he was still part of the universal fellowship of believers. He was still part of the universal church. Additionally, acceptance among a local group of believers does not mean the individual is actually part of the universal church. In **I John 2:19**, there were folks who had been part of the local group of believers to whom John was writing, but they weren’t really “of us.” That is, they didn’t actually belong to Christ.
  3. Look at **I Corinthians 1:2** to see a local congregation and its relation to the universal church. In this verse we have a church in Corinth. That is a local group. It is made up of those sanctified in Christ Jesus in Corinth. However, they are called together with all in every place who call on the name of Jesus. Notice what this demonstrates. The local church is a group of people. The congregation is not part of a greater organization with structure and hierarchy. But the individuals are in fellowship with all the other individual people who call on Jesus no matter where they live.
  4. The term “church” is used in another sense in **Acts 9:31**. It is a modified use of the universal sense. It talks about “the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria” (ESV). Obviously, that region is too large to refer to one local congregation. Yet, in **Acts 9:19** we have already seen disciples in Damascus. Therefore, this can’t refer to all of the universal church. It is not referring to all the people who are part of all the local churches in the area, nor is it referring to some organization of those churches. It is referring to all the members of the universal church in that region. As far as I know, this is the only passage that uses the term “church” in this way, though I wonder if passages like **Romans 16:5** and **Philemon 1:2** are using it in a similar way.

#### IV. Some takeaways

- A. Since being a Christian means belonging to Christ, no one can be a Christian without also being part of the group of people who belong to Jesus, or “the church of Christ.” When I belong to Christ, I also belong to God (cf. **I Corinthians 3:23**). Therefore, no one can be a Christian without also being part of the group of people who belong to God, or “the church of God.” Certainly, a faithful Christian will not be a member of the denominational group that has named itself “Church of God.” In just the same way, no faithful Christian will be a member of a denominational group that has named itself “Church of Christ.” Therefore, if you say, “That guy is Christian, but he’s not church-of-Christ,” you must be referring to some organization that neither of us should be part of either. In fact, if you’d like a good example of someone who is a Christian but not church-of-Christ, look no further than this pulpit. I am a Christian. I belong to Christ. I am, therefore, part of the group of people who belong to Christ. I am, therefore, a member of the church of Christ. But I’m not church-of-Christ in the sense that mistaken phrase quoted above asserts. So, if the phrase “church of Christ” means merely a division, part, or segment of the universal body of Christ to you, then you misunderstand Christ’s church. Or if it means an association of all the congregations you are willing to claim are faithful, you misunderstand Christ’s church (see **Revelation 2:18-3:6**).
- B. “Church of Christ” is not the official name of the Lord’s body (cf. **Ephesians 1:22-23**). Regrettably, I have heard preachers who otherwise preach the sound gospel of the Lord claim that “Church of Christ” is the only true biblical name for the Lord’s universal body and for a local congregation. That is patently false. The New Testament never names either the universal church or local churches. It describes them. It demonstrates many different descriptive phrases we could use to refer to our congregation: “church of Christ” in **Romans 16:16**; “the church of God in Lutz” in **I Corinthians 1:2**; “church of God in Christ Jesus that is in Lutz” in **I Thessalonians 2:14**; “the Way” in **Acts 24:14**; “a church of Florida” in **Galatians 1:2**; “the church of the Lutzians” in **I Thessalonians 1:1**; “the church of the living God” in **I Timothy 3:15**; “the saints in Christ Jesus at Lutz” in **Philippians 1:1**; “the assembly of the firstborn” in **Hebrews 12:23**; “the household of God” in **I Timothy 3:15**; or even just “the church” in **Ephesians 1:23**. Recognizing that not one single mention of congregations putting up signs with a designation on them suggests that we don’t have to have a particular phrase that we assert as our name. And that is why at this congregation we don’t have a sign that asserts a name. Here is the shocking point for many of us in this. If our sign had one of these other descriptive phrases on it (“church of God,” “church of the Way,” “assembly of God,” etc.), we would still be just as much a church that belongs to Christ as we are now even if other faithful congregations don’t like it. Further, having a sign that reads “Church of Christ” does not make a congregation belong to Christ. No doubt, there are some unscriptural designations that would automatically declare we are not a church belonging to Christ. If the sign said this was the “Livingston Avenue Church of Edwin Crozier,” then we wouldn’t be a church belonging to Christ.
- C. We must monitor our terminology. I hope you have seen why I answered the pop quiz at the beginning of this lesson the way I did. I am not a “church-of-Christ preacher.” I’m a preacher of the gospel or a preacher of Christ. I’m not “church-of-Christ,” “a church of Christ,” “a church-of-Christ,” or a “COC.” I’m a disciple of Christ, a saint, a Christian. There is no “church-of-Christ doctrine.” There is Christ’s doctrine. Anything else is manmade and useless. I shouldn’t talk about all the *other* denominations, because I’m not part of a denomination. Don’t ask, “Is it church-of-Christ?” Or worse, “Is it COC?” If you are talking about congregations and are trying to find out if it is a sound church, a faithful church, a church that belongs to Christ, ask those questions. If you are referring to something else like a radio program, a book, or some kind of activity, then ask if it is run by Christians or written by a Christian. If you are in a conversation with people and some of them say, “We’re Baptist,” and others say, “We’re Methodist,” and others say, “We’re Pentecostal,” and others say, “We’re Catholic,” don’t say, “I’m Church-of-Christ.” Say, “I’m just a Christian.” Please don’t say that folks won’t understand. If they don’t understand, what better way to generate a spiritual discussion that might lead to a study of Christ and His church?

#### Conclusion:

I can’t tell you how to become a “Church-of-Christ Christian.” However, I can tell you how to become Christ’s. If you realize you are a sinner and want to forsake that way of life, turning to God’s way (cf. **Luke 24:47**), and if you believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who died for you and who God raised from the dead and you are willing to confess that belief (cf. **Romans 10:9-10**), according to **Galatians 3:27-29**, you can be baptized into Christ for the remission of sins (**Acts 2:38**). When you are baptized into Christ, you become Christ’s. You belong to Him. You are then part of the group of people who belong to Jesus Christ. According to **Acts 2:47**, when you belong to Christ, God

adds you to His church, the church of God, the church of Christ. When you belong to Christ, we would invite you to join yourself to the group of Christians who belong to Jesus that meets here on Livingston Avenue (cf. **Acts 9:26**).