
EQUIPPING THE SAINTS

“...FOR THE EQUIPPING OF THE SAINTS FOR THE WORK OF SERVICE...” ~ EPHESIANS 4:12



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WHAT'S IN A NAME?

By Andrew Dow

In what is perhaps William Shakespeare's best known play, *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet mourns the feud that keeps she and Romeo from being with one another: "Tis but thy name that is my enemy. Thou art thyself, though not a Montague," she says. "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet." All that keeps Juliet from her beloved are their families' names: she is a Capulet, he is a Montague.

Juliet's question is intriguing to think about: "What's in a name?" Does calling something by a different name change what it is fundamentally? Juliet concludes accurately that a name cannot change a thing. That said, there must be some value in names since we name things.

I'm thinking in terms of the church. Does the name a church puts on its sign matter? Can the name of a church make that church right or wrong? Consider a few points.

1. In Scripture, churches are not named, they are described. For instance, peruse the opening verses of Paul's epistles. It is not to "The Corinth church of Christ," but to "**The church of God which is at Corinth**" (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1). It is not to "The East Ephesus church of Christ," but to "**The saints who are at Ephesus**" (Eph. 1:1). Consider as well the variety in Rom. 1:7, Gal. 1:2, Phil. 1:1, Col. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; and 2 Thess. 1:1. These are not

proper names as we might think, but they simply describe the group of people that is under consideration.

We often point to Romans 16:16 as the basis for the description we put on our sign: **“all the churches of Christ greet you.”** It may surprise you to know that, although this is a good, biblical description of God’s people, it is not the only good, biblical description of God’s people! While we don’t have space for an exhaustive list, consider that the New Testament also calls the church: **“the church of God”** (Acts 20:28), **“the household of God”** and **“the church of the Living God”** (1 Tim. 3:15), **“the bride of Christ”** (Eph. 5:22-32), **“the kingdom of His beloved Son”** (Col. 1:13), **“the body of Christ”** (Col. 1:18), and **“the Way”** (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 24:14, 22). These, like **“churches of Christ,”** are descriptions of God’s people and would be appropriate designations for our use today (either on a sign or in daily conversation). So, which one should we use?

2. We shouldn’t restrict ourselves to only one descriptor. The New Testament uses a host of terms to describe God’s people, and we should follow suit! To exclusively call the church, “the church of Christ,” ignores the helpful descriptive imagery of “the bride,” “the kingdom,” or “the household.” Let me encourage you to think of and speak of the church in these various terms regularly so that we keep these aspects of the church before our minds always.

However, a more pragmatic person might ask, “What should we put on the sign?” After all, it would be cumbersome to list all of these descriptors on one sign. This practical question deserves a practical answer, so allow me two practical observations: (1) Any of these

descriptors would be appropriate on our sign and (2) Our sign is not for our benefit, but for the benefit of those trying to find us. With this in mind, we should be sensitive to what certain descriptions may imply to passersby who are unfamiliar with us. For example, although “church of God” is an accurate descriptor, it is only wise to distinguish ourselves from the pentecostal denomination that uses that name. With this in mind, let me say...

3. Having “the right name” does not make a church God-pleasing. God is not pleased by those who say the right things, but by those who do the right things (Matt. 7:21-23). A church can call themselves “the household of God” or “the bride of Christ,” but unless that church is united like a household or committed like a bride, those are just inaccurate descriptions. Conversely, a church may describe themselves in ways that are not as familiar to us. That a church does not call itself a “church of Christ” does not automatically make it an unfaithful church. We must not judge a church based on its name alone, but by whether or not it conducts itself according to the pattern of Scripture!

Conclusion: I’m not advocating that we change our sign, our business cards, or our flyers. To be clear, I’m also not advocating that we keep all of these things the same. I’m simply encouraging us to have a biblical view of the way we describe ourselves. We should be careful to use Scriptural designations when speaking of God’s people, but we should also be careful to use ALL of the Scriptural designations for God’s people. Be careful, brethren, not to become so enamored with one descriptor that we reject all others. We call ourselves a “church of Christ.” Do we fit that bill? Do we fit the other Scriptural descriptions?

