

Denominationalism, Religious Cults and World Religions

Lesson 10

The Christian Church

Introduction:

The term "Christian Church" can be applied to two different groups – the Disciples of Christ, and the Independent Christian Church. As members of churches of Christ we share a common background with the Christian Church in that both came out of the movement to restore the New Testament church. The Disciples of Christ are frequently called the Christian Church, while the Independent Christian Churches are also known as the "Conservative Christian Church" or the "Church of Christ – Instrumental." Despite the fact that these two churches have little fellowship between them today, they both share a similar heritage. Therefore, for the purposes of this lesson, these two churches will be studied together.

The Disciples of Christ and the Independent Christian Church trace their beginnings back to the Restoration Movement of early 1800's. While religious denominationalism flourished for a time, many reformers were becoming dissatisfied over the lack of progress to bring about any significant change in the older more established churches (Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, etc.). These denominations had become deeply entrenched in their own particular church doctrines (church confessions of faith and manuals) and were quick to label any dissenters as heretics. Therefore, reformers began to change their approach from attempting to reform existing religious denominations to the restoration of primitive New Testament church. What began as the great Reformation Movement in Europe and America eventually became the great Restoration Movement.

Some of the principle leaders of the Restoration Movement were:

- Elias Smith and Abner Jones (New England)
- James O' Kelley (Virginia and North Carolina)
- Barton W. Stone (Kentucky)
- Thomas and Alexander Campbell (Pennsylvania and West Virginia)
- Walter Scott (Ohio)

The aim of the Restoration Movement was to return to the New Testament as the sole authority in all matters of faith and practice, and to set aside all denominational names, practices, organizations, and creeds, and simply restore the one true New Testament church that we read about in the Bible.

Although the original intentions were good, some began to abandon that mission and lost sight of their desire to return to the original pattern of New Testament Christianity.

While the Christian Church claims the New Testament as its authority, it has sanctioned and officially adopted many denominational practices.

The first sign of division was seen in 1849 when the American Christian Missionary Society was formed. Many (including its principle proponent, Alexander Campbell) believed the Missionary Society was an essential expedient to help evangelize the world. Opponents maintained that the Missionary Society was a violation of the New Testament pattern of evangelism for two principle reasons. First, the Missionary Society was a man-made organization formed to do the work God ordained the local church to perform. Second, the Missionary Society violated the New Testament pattern in the manner in which it was funded, and in the manner in which it dispersed those funds. It actively solicited contributions from churches to help finance its operations, and then operated as an agent on behalf of those churches to select and financially support men to preach the gospel in mission fields. The New Testament pattern, however, shows that churches acted independently and sent financial aid directly to those preaching the gospel.

The second major sign of division occurred in 1859 with the introduction of instrumental music in worship. Advocates contended that instrumental music was a matter of expediency and an aid to worship since it was said to improve the singing. However, the main reason for the introduction of instrumental music in worship was simply because the practice was widely accepted in the denominational world, and brethren wanted to attract members from those denominations. Opponents of instrumental music in worship contended that instrumental music is not a matter of expedience nor an aid since an expediency or an aid cannot change or alter an expressed command or apostolic example. Therefore, instrumental music in worship is clearly an unauthorized addition to biblical worship and not an aid.

The official split between churches of Christ, and the Christian Church occurred in 1906.

Today, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Independent Christian Church, or (Church of Christ - Instrumental) are both recognized as a "Protestant denomination." The Christian Church is considered to be ultra-liberal, while the Independent Christian Church is slightly more conservative of the two. Despite the fact that both groups claim to hold to the "Restoration principles," they tend to interpret those principles in a very liberal manner. For example, both groups profess to believe baptism is essential for the remission of sins, but they usually fellowship and accept members from other religious denominations that practice immersion for any reason other than remission of sins. Both groups have also been known to simply go by the name "Church of Christ" (especially in the North and in Canada), but have little or no similarity to the churches of Christ in the New Testament.

The Christian Church boasts of approximately 1,160,000 members in 5,000 congregations in the United States and Canada, and is active in the National Council of Churches and the World Council, both of which are deeply involved in the Ecumenical Movement. In 1968, the Christian Church restructured the church into local churches

that are grouped into 35 regions. A "General Assembly" was instituted which for all practical purposes is a law-making body, and a "General Board" which administers church affairs. In 2005 the Christian Church appointed a woman, Sharon E. Watkins, as the new "General Minister and President" of the church. She is the seventh General Minister and President, and the first woman to lead that denomination.

I. Some Truths They Have Advocated:

- A. Although the Christian Church holds many of these fundamental truths today, they have clearly abandoned others.
 1. Rejection of all human creeds, and the Bible as the only authority (2 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Pet 1:3-4)
 2. The New Testament is the sole authority for all Christians today – the Old Testament is no longer binding (Eph 2:14-16; Col 2:14-17; Hebrews and Galatians)
 3. The New Testament church can be restored by simply following the New Testament pattern of organization and worship (Phil 1:1, 1 Tim 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 11:23-26; 1 Cor 16:1-2; 2 Cor 9:6-7; Eph 5:19; Col 3:16; 1 Tim 2:8; 1 Thess 5:17)
 4. Believers should wear the name of Christ only (Christians) and refuse to wear divisive, human names (Acts 11:26; 1 Pet 4:16)
 5. Unity is desirable and possible in the New Testament church by using the same standard of authority – the New Testament (John 8:32; Eph 3:1-5; 5:17; 1 Cor 1:10; Eph 4:1-6; Gal 1:6-9; 2 John 9-11; 2 Tim 3:16-17; 4:1-4; 1 Pet 4:11; 2 Pet 1:2-4)
 6. We become Christians today in the same manner as in the first century by following the Scriptural plan of salvation – namely hearing the gospel, having faith in Jesus Christ, confessing Him as Lord, and the baptism of penitent believers by immersion in water for the remission of sins (Rom 10:17; Acts 8:12, 36-37; Acts 2:38; 8:17; Rom 10:9-10; Acts 22:16; Rom 6:4-18; 1 Pet 3:21; Gal 3:27)

II. Christian Church Doctrine vs. Bible Doctrine:

A. Questions over how to establish Scriptural authority.

1. During the early days of the Restoration Movement a number of slogans showed a strong belief in following the Scriptures as the sole basis of authority.
 - a. "Call Bible things by Bible names, and do Bible things in Bible ways."
 - b. "Where the Bible speaks, we speak; where the Bible is silent, we are silent."
 - c. "Book, chapter and verse!"
 - d. "No creed but Christ."
 - e. "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God." (1 Pet 4:11)
 - f. "Unity through the restoration of the ancient order."
 - g. "In essentials unity; in non-essentials liberty; in all things charity."
2. However, over time brethren began to divine over how to use the Scriptures to establish authority.
 - a. There were brethren who contended that we must have authority for all we do as the Lord's church – meaning, whatever is not taught by direct or specific command, a binding apostolic approved example, or is necessarily inferred or implied by a clear meaning of the Scriptures is forbidden.
 - (1). Certain practices may be allowed as a matter of expediency (as an aid in carrying out a specific command, a binding apostolic example, or that which is inferred), but they must never change or alter a command, binding example or inference in any way.
 - b. Others took a more liberal attitude toward authority, contending that whatever is not strictly forbidden in the Scriptures is therefore allowed.

- (1). This is the same approach to Scriptural authority advocated by Martin Luther. Luther's concept of Biblical authority was to condemn only those things the Scriptures specifically condemn – meaning, if the Scriptures did not specifically condemn a practice, then it is Scriptural.
 - c. A summary of these two positions:
 - (1). The former method of establishing Scriptural authority limits matters of faith and practice to only that which is specifically authorized by the Word of God.
 - (2). The latter method provides no limitations in matters of faith and practice, and opens the doors for any and all teachings and practices in the church as long as they are not specifically condemned.
 3. However, God does not permit what He authorizes to be changed or altered under any circumstances, without dire consequences.
 - a. Moses (Compare Exo 17:6 with Num 20:7-12)
 - b. Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10:1-2)
 - c. Uzzah (Compare Num 7:9; 10:21; 4:5,19,20; 1 Kings 8:3,6; 1 Chron 15:1-3; 2 Sam 6:1-8)
- B. The importance and necessity of baptism for the remission of sins.
 1. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) still baptizes those who wish to be members of the church.
 - a. Baptism is by immersion in water for the remission of sins.
 2. However, today they have relaxed their standards. The official position of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) over baptism is:
 - a. "Most Disciples today recognize other forms of baptism as valid. A person baptized in another Christian tradition wishing to join a Disciples congregation is simply asked: 'Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and proclaim him Lord and

Savior of your life?' The person who answers, 'I do,' is welcomed into the congregation."¹

3. If baptism is for the remission of sins as the Bible teaches (Mark 16:16-17; Acts 2:38; 1 Pet 3:21), and thus necessary for salvation, how is it acceptable to consider someone a faithful Christian who has not been baptized correctly? (Also compare Acts 8:12)
- C. The role of women in the church.
1. The Christian Church had adopted the denominational position of allowing women to fill the roles of preachers, elders, and deacons. The official position of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) states:
 - a. "The Disciples of Christ churches allow for the fullest participation of women in the ministry of the church. . ." ²
- D. The Christian Church does many things contrary to the Bible.
1. Contrary to the teachings of the Bible, the Christian Church has women Counselors, Directors and Lecturers. (1 Tim 2:11-12; 1 Cor 14:34).
 2. Contrary to the Bible, the organization of the Christian Church includes Educational Directors, Associate Ministers and Youth Directors. The Lord's church has elders, deacons, evangelists and teachers. (Eph 4:11; Phil. 1:1).
 3. Contrary to the Scriptures, the Christian Church celebrates unbiblical days of worship, such as Easter, Mother's Day and Christmas.
 4. Contrary to the Word of God, the Christian Church fellowships various denominations in their activities, leaving the impression that all are brethren. (2 John 9-11; Gal 1:6-10).
 5. Contrary to what the Bible teaches, the Christian Church elevates its preachers above the rest of the members by using such titles as Pastor, Superintendent, President and Doctor. (Matt 23:5-12).

¹ <http://www.disciples.org/discover/baptism.htm>.

² http://ozarkswatch.missouristate.edu/v12n34/art02_01.asp.

6. Contrary to what the Scriptures regarding the name "Christian," the Christian Church misuses the name (which is a noun) by speaking of "Christian nations," "Christian schools," and the "Christian Church." (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Pet 4:16).
7. Contrary to the Biblical pattern for financing the Lord's church, the Christian Church takes up collections at services other than on the first day of the week, and uses unscriptural means to raise money for the church such as suppers, property rentals and special collections. (1 Cor 16:1-2).

III. The two major issues that led to the formation of the Christian Church

A. The American Christian Missionary Society (1849).

1. Alexander Campbell and others stressed the need for churches to pool their resources together to support preachers in various parts of the world.
 - a. The result of those efforts was the formation of the American Christian Missionary Society (ACMS), which operates with its own Board of Directors, officers, by-laws, etc.
 - b. The creation of the missionary society sparked immediate Scriptural objections and controversy.
2. Those supporting the American Christian Missionary Society offered the following in defense of the society.
 - a. *The American Christian Missionary Society is an expedient way of preaching the gospel.*
 - (1). It was argued that when God commands something to be done, and the method for doing it is not specified, we are at liberty to use our best judgment in determining the best way to carry out that command.
 - (2). While the above statement is true, those objecting to the missionary society contended that it's pointless to argue about an expedient way for an organization to preach the gospel

unless that organization is first authorized in the Scriptures to do that work. The only organization authorized in the New Testament to do the work of evangelism is the church. The missionary society is an unscriptural organization.

- b. *The society is necessary for smaller churches to be involved in evangelistic work.*
 - (1). If that is true, then the society would not be an *expedient*, it would be a *necessity*.
 - (2). However, the Lord does not expect churches to do more than they are capable of doing, and even the smallest church is capable of evangelizing in their own community.
 - c. *Those who oppose the society are against missionary work.*
 - (1). Those objecting to the society were considered "anti" missionary work, in spite of the fact that many who objected to the society made great personal sacrifices to preach the gospel to those who had never heard it before.
 - d. *The missionary society must be scriptural because it is doing a good work.*
 - (1). This argument is simply another way of saying, "the end justifies the means." In other words, the end result of taking the gospel to a lost world justifies whatever means is necessary to accomplish that goal.
 - (2). The Bible never teaches that the end justifies the means. For example, the Scriptures condemned Uzzah for touching the ark to keep it from falling (2 Sam 6:1-11).
3. Those objecting to the Missionary Society presented the following arguments.
- a. *The missionary society is an indictment against the all-sufficiency of the church.*
 - (1). The church, as planned by God and built by Jesus Christ, is a perfect church, lacking nothing, and is capable of

accomplishing whatever task God has given it. No human institution or organization is needed or authorized to do the work God has assigned to the church.

- b. *There is no authority for churches to function collectively.*
 - (1). Churches in New Testament times functioned as independent, autonomous congregations and never as a collective of churches – they never pooled their resources together under the oversight of some other institution or church.
 - (2). Even when more than one congregation participated in the same work (such as the churches of Macedonia and Achaia sending relief to needy saints in Jerusalem – 1 Cor 16:1-2), those congregations continued to function independently from one another (1 Cor 16:3-5).
- c. *The Scriptures do not authorize the church to do its work through any human institution.*
 - (1). There is no authority for churches to make contributions to or financially support another institution to do its work.
 - (2). Although some contend that donations to a missionary society are no different than paying a printing company to print fliers, there is a huge difference between financially contributing to an institution to do the work of the church, and simply buying a product or service. While the church may buy the things it needs to do its work, it does not have the authority to contribute to an organization which in turn does its work for it.
- d. *The silence of the Scriptures does not authorize anything.*
 - (1). The principle of the silence of the Scriptures taught in the New Testament (Heb 7:14; 1 Cor 4:6; 1 Pet 4:11). If there is no positive divine authority (either general or specific in nature), then we cannot introduce such practices into the work or worship of the church without transgressing the word of God (2 John 9-11).

e. *The ACMS has become a powerful ecclesiastical organization exercising oversight and exerting pressure on local churches.*

- (1). Churches that were not willing to financially support the missionary society were isolated, and their preachers were marked as radical extremists simply because of their objections.

B. Instrumental Music in worship (1859).

1. When brethren found they could justify the American Christian Missionary Society as an aid, or an expedient way of carrying out the command to preach the gospel to the world, they had no problem justifying instrumental music in worship as an aid, or an expedient way of carrying out the command to sing and make melody in our hearts.
 - a. in 1859, the first mechanical instrument of music was introduced into the worship of the church in Midway, Kentucky.
 - b. Brethren immediately divided over the issue of using instrumental music in worship, and that division, along with the division over the missionary society, helped crystalize the division between the Christian Church/Disciples of Christ and churches of Christ.
2. Those supporting instrumental music in worship offered the following arguments.
 - a. *David used instruments of music in the Old Testament.*
 - (1). Appealing to the Old Testament to justify the use of instrumental music in worship shows that these brethren recognize the need for Biblical authority to justify the practice.
 - (2). However, they can find no Biblical authority for the use of instruments of music in New Testament worship.
 - (3). A number of things were authorized under the Old Testament (burning incense, animal sacrifices, a separate priesthood, observing the Sabbath, tithing, etc.) that are no longer part of New Testament worship, simply because we are under a new covenant.

- b. *The Bible does not forbid the use of instruments of music in New Testament worship.*
- (1). This is an attempt to find authority from the *silence* of the Scriptures (Martin Luther's approach to Biblical authority).
 - (2). However, the Bible does not need to give us a list of those things that are not authorized. All we need is to know what is authorized by specific command, binding apostolic approved example, or by necessary inference.
 - (3). The only kind of music authorized in New Testament worship is singing (vocal music), which automatically excludes all other kinds of music (instrumental music).
- c. *The Greek words "psallo" and "psalmos" mean to sing with a stringed instrument, thus justifying instrumental music.*
- (1). If the words *psallo* and *psalmos* (Eph 5:19) mean "to sing with a stringed instrument" then we must sing with a stringed instrument in order to be obedient. This would make instrumental music a requirement, not an option.
 - (2). Furthermore, everyone must sing and play a stringed instrument in order to be obedient, since the command is to every Christian – not just to musicians.
 - (3). Finally, if this is true, then the early church was in violation of the will of God because they did not use instruments of music in worship. Instruments were not used until after the latter part of the seventh century.
 - (4). The words *psallo* simply means to "make music" or "make melody" – and the place where Christians are told to "make music" or "make melody" is "in your hearts" (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16).

- d. *The piano is just an aid to our worship, much like a pitch pipe, song book, and song leader.*
 - (1). An "aid" does not change or alter what is authorized by command, example, or inference.
 - (2). Singing (vocal music) is authorized by command. The pitch pipe, song book or song leader do not change or alter what is authorized.
 - (3). However, a piano or other instrument of music does change or alter what is authorized by including another kind of music (instrumental music).
 - e. *Revelation 14:2 describes singing with a harp in praise to God.*
 - (1). The book of Revelation mentions many things that are not authorized in the worship of the New Testament church, such as incense with prayers (Rev 8:3-4), and an alter (Rev 6:9).
 - (2). The book of Revelation is a book of signs and symbols, and is written in symbolic and figurative language – drawing from the symbolism of the Old Testament to convey a spiritual message.
 - (3). These symbols are not to be taken literally or used to describe what can and cannot be used in the worship of the New Testament church. If that were true, then the church could build an alter for animal sacrifices.
3. Those objecting to instrumental music in the worship of the New Testament church offer the follow arguments.
- a. *We do not use instrumental music in the worship of the church for three basic reasons:*
 - (1). The Lord has not *commanded* the church to use instruments of music in worship.
 - (2). There is no recorded *example* of the early church using instrumental music in worship.

- (3). The Scriptures do not even *necessarily imply* that the early church used instrumental music in worship.
- b. *The reason we do not use instrumental music in worship has nothing to do with personal likes or dislikes, but simply because there is no authority for it.*
 - (1). Most enjoy hearing songs sung with instrumental music accompaniment, and many Christians are talented musicians.
 - (2). Furthermore, we don't object to instrumental music in worship simply for cultural or personal reasons, or because the church cannot afford a piano, or cannot find someone to play it. We object simply because we cannot find any authority for it.
- c. *Even those who believe it is permissible to use instrumental music in worship have admitted church worship has become more of a show.*
 - (1). Worship in many denominations now uses professional musicians, bands, or full orchestras, lighting and visual effects, sophisticated sounds systems, etc.
 - (2). The purpose is to "set the mood" for worship through artificial means – to appeal to the senses and emotions.
 - (3). In the end, the *worshipper* is the main focus. The main purpose of worship is to emotionally move the *worshipper* rather than the worshipper offering simple praise to God.

Conclusion:

- I. **During the 1970's and 80's there were numerous attempts to reunited churches of Christ and the Christian Church.**
 - A. Sadly, all these efforts ended in failure.
 1. The reason for the failure to bring about unity can be traced to two fundamental causes:
 - a. A failure to agree on the fundamental principles of how to establish Scriptural authority.

- b. A failure to accept the fact that unity cannot be achieved unless we are "endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:1-6), and unless we are "perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Cor 1:10).
- 2. Advocates within the Christian Church who promoted unity among churches with a Restoration Movement heritage argued for "Unity In Diversity" – meaning we must allow for differing view even on fundamental Biblical truths.
 - a. Unfortunately, this is not Biblical unity.

Study Questions:

1. What two groups are commonly identified as the Christian Church?

2. What is the difference between *reforming* religious denominations and *restoring* the New Testament church?

3. What were the two principle causes of division among those who were attempting to restore the New Testament church?

