

**June Questions and Answers**  
**What Are The Differences Among**  
**“Churches Of Christ”?**

|   |
|---|
| Franklin Church of Christ<br>Edwin Crozier<br>June 13, 2004<br>PM Worship |
|---|

**Introduction:**

In **Matthew 16:18**, Jesus claimed He had come into the earth to establish His church, His only church. In **John 17:20-21**, He prayed that all those who believed on Him throughout time would be united as one. We know this and we stand for this plea. As we reach out to the religions of the world, we claim we want all the religious to unite in one body, hearkening to the one Spirit, having one hope of one calling, obeying one Lord, believing one faith, submitting to one baptism and worshiping one God and Father of all (**Ephesians 4:4-6**). At times, however, that plea seems to ring hollow. It does not take much for others to discover that among congregations that claim to make this same fundamental plea for unity, there is division. There are such practical differences among differing churches that, in some cases, apart from grudgingly agreeing we are brethren, we will have nothing to do with each other.

As we do each Second Sunday night of the month, we are entertaining questions. This month, one has asked regarding the differences among churches of Christ. What are the differences?

Over the years, we have developed labels to describe the different kinds of churches that agree we should practice undenominational, noncreedalized, Bible following Christianity. We refer to liberal churches, conservative churches, sound churches, “anti” churches, no Bible class churches, one cup churches, institutional churches, non-institutional churches, instrumental churches and on the list goes.

To try in one lesson to define all the practical differences would be impossible. However, going into that would not define the real differences anyway. There are about five fundamental differences among churches that produce nearly all of the practical differences.

Before we examine these, I have to explain that I am uneasy answering this question as it is worded. Most people, even Christians, upon hearing this question will read it with a denominational mindset. Regrettably, too many have the concept that every church over which they see the sign saying “Church of Christ” is somehow connected with every other one and with us. That is simply not the case. Further, many assume that if a church does not bear the name “Church of Christ” on their sign or letterhead, it must not be in the least associated with us. That is not true either. We are not in any way denominationally or organizationally affiliated with any other congregation no matter what their sign says. At the same time, if a congregation stands for the principles of uncreedalized, antidenominational, biblical Christianity, baptizing people for the remission of sins into Christ’s body then the members in those churches are our brethren no matter what name appears above the door. When I ask the question regarding differences among churches of Christ, I am not asking what differences there are between each congregation that wears that name. I am asking what are the differences that divide brethren who claim to have the same plea to get back to the Bible and baptize people into Christ.

**Discussion:**

- I. Different understandings on how to establish Bible authority.
  - A. This is the first and greatest dividing line. Nearly every difference whether among churches similar to the Franklin Church of Christ or between us and denominational churches come down to handling the Bible and its authority differently.
  - B. First, some congregations differ on the need to establish Bible authority. **II Timothy 3:16-17** says that the Bible equips us for good works. To me and the Franklin church, that statement demonstrates that we must find Bible authority to know a work is good. Other Christians and congregations, however, despite the clear teaching of this believe that every work is authorized unless it is specifically condemned. Because of this difference, we will not get involved in the social work of orphan’s homes or private secular education. Further, we will not send part of our treasury to be overseen by another eldership to do the work of evangelism, but oversee all of our own work. Those who do not look for authority but for condemnation will do each of these things that are not authorized in scripture. How we apply **II Timothy 3:16-17** is a great dividing line that fans Christians out on the spectrum which we label as conservative and liberal. Those who deal conservatively ask, “Does the Bible authorize it? Then it is a good work.” Those who deal more liberally ask, “Is it a good work? Then the Bible must authorize it.”

- C. Second, some Christians differ on how the Bible authorizes. Most recognize that the Bible authorizes through *Direct Statement* (cf. **Luke 6:46**) and *Approved Example* (cf. **I Corinthians 11:1**). Clearly if the Bible says we are allowed to do something or demonstrates early Christians doing something with God's approval, we can as well. Some, however, struggle to understand the concept of the Bible authorizing through *Necessary Inference*. That is, some actions and works are specifically authorized because they must be performed to accomplish the works that are directly stated or exemplified for us. An example of authorizing or even commanding by *Necessary Inference* can be found in **Romans 10:13-15**.
  - D. Third, some misunderstand the concept of action and work being authorized specifically and being authorized generically. When God specifies an action, everything else in that class is refused. When God told Noah to build an ark out of gopher wood (**Genesis 6:14**), all other kinds of wood were thereby condemned. However, at the same time God did not specify the lengths of wood or how that wood was to be put together. Thus, by generic authority God allowed Noah to decide how long or wide the pieces of wood could be and how to get them to stick together. Those who do not recognize the authoritative power of necessary inference and who struggle with understanding the difference between specific and generic authority will not allow for Bible classes and sometimes will not allow for the church to own property and build a building to house their assemblies. Further, missing the point that specific authority excludes all other actions in the class cause some to bring the instruments of music into their worship.
  - E. Fourth, we recognize that while the Old Testament is for our learning (**Romans 15:4**), there has been a change of God's law and the New Testament is our standard of authority (**Hebrews 7:12; 8:6-13**). Here we find what renders the difference regarding the use of mechanical instruments to accompany singing. Those who use the Old Testament as authority will have instruments. Those who use the Old Testament for learning how God deals with His covenant people, but use the New Testament as our covenant and law will not use the instruments.
- II. Different understandings regarding the spiritual nature of a local church's work and mission.
- A. We can summarize the purpose of the church and its work with a couple of passages. According to **I Timothy 3:15**, the church is the "pillar and support of the truth." Further, in **Ephesians 3:10**, we learn that God's eternal purpose for the church was that the church would make known the wisdom of God. The local church's job is to hold up the truth.
  - B. Thus, we learn that the church is to proclaim the gospel, teaching people how to be in fellowship with God and how to grow in that fellowship. That is our only job. The church's job is not...
    1. ... *to provide recreation*, sponsoring ball teams, building gymnasiums or "fellowship" halls, planning, providing or paying for "fellowship" meals or sending the young to Six Flags.
    2. ... *to promote social work*, sponsoring food pantries or inner city soup kitchens, building counseling centers or providing counseling services for everyone with emotional trouble, running orphan's homes or paying bills for every person who hits hard times.
    3. ... *to provide relief to the world*, sending out "medical missionaries" to build health clinics or provide flu shots, planning mission trips to build houses in destitute countries or establishing welfare funds for our country's poor.
    4. ... *to provide secular education*, running daycares, sponsoring or supporting private schools, or running tutoring hotlines.
    5. ... *to promote political agendas*, hosting campaign rallies, preaching support of particular candidates or providing headquarters for political candidates.
  - C. When we look to the New Testament churches, we do not find any of those works. We simply find churches planning, providing and paying for whatever was necessary to worship God and to teach His will to the lost and the saved. The only exception to this was allowing churches to benevolently take care of Christians, such as the widows mentioned in **Acts 6**.
  - D. Most churches, even among the denominations, claim the proper mission. Yet they are involved in all those other things as well. They justify it by saying that these other works are simply their means by which they draw people to the real spiritual work of teaching. But **John 6:44-45** demonstrates the only drawing power God uses. He does not need us to develop secular or material draws to bring people in so we can teach them. Rather, He expects people to be drawn to Him by teaching.

III. Different understandings regarding the purpose of worship.

- A. We will find a number of differences regarding worship in churches. These range from having “children’s church” to keep the kids out of mom and dad’s hair, to having solos, choirs and performance based worship, to pushing for spontaneous outbursts, to only meeting in houses so the worship can produce a greater “horizontal” relationship with other Christians.
- B. These differences, and a number of others, are caused by a different understanding regarding the purpose of worship. **John 4:24** provides the great summary regarding worship and its purpose. “God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”
- C. The purpose of worship is not to entertain. It is not to provide time away from the kids. It is not to spontaneously express the emotions of our heart. It is not to draw close to other Christians. It is not for us to get anything out of it at all. Rather, the purpose of worship is to honor God in spirit and truth. That is, to revere God the way He wants to be revered with our whole person and not just by going through motions. No doubt, when we honor God, we will get something out of it. No doubt, we will be drawn closer to others who worship God. No doubt, we will, at times, enjoy it. But even when those things occur it is not the purpose of worship to accomplish those things. It is simply the happy by-product of honoring God with our whole heart.
- D. When churches get the cart before the horse with worship, they completely restructure what they do as they assemble to worship God.

IV. Different understandings of church organization.

- A. Some of the differences caused among churches of Christ come from a different understanding of church organization. From the Bible we learn that there are basically three levels of organization. There is the universal church, the local congregation and the individual Christian. While these three are related, they are not the same and must not be confused.
- B. Regarding the universal church: Jesus promised the establishment of His church in **Matthew 16:18**. In **Ephesians 1:22-23**, we learn Christ is the only head of this one body. Finally, in **Hebrews 12:23**, we learn something very important regarding the make-up of this universal church. The universal church is not the collection of all the congregations that claim to be a “church of Christ.” The universal church is the collection of all the individuals enrolled in heaven.
- C. Regarding the local church: We learn from scripture that groups of Christians in different localities banded together to assemble regularly to worship God (**I Corinthians 5:4; Hebrews 10:25; James 2:2**), having a common work, under a common oversight (**I Timothy 5:17; I Peter 5:1-4**), using a common treasury (**I Corinthians 16:1-2**). One key we must highlight is that the New Testament presents these local churches not as a collectivity of cooperating or associated congregations to accomplish a work. Rather, it presents them as autonomous, self-governed, working units. According to **I Peter 5:1-4**, the elders are shepherds within a particular congregation, feeding the flock among which they are appointed. They are not granted the authority to oversee other congregations or the work of other congregations. Nor are they appointed to organize or oversee some cooperative missions work. Their job is to shepherd the flock among which God appointed them as overseers and that is it. Differences arise because some groups establish their elders as overseers of works larger in scope than a local church. They are going beyond the scope of what God appointed them to do.
- D. Regarding the individual Christian: While both the universal and local church are collectivities of individual Christians, an individual Christian is not the church. Many practical differences come from obscuring this point. We find this distinction made clearly in **I Timothy 5:16**. In this text, individual Christians are charged to take care of their own so that the church would not be burdened. If the individual Christian was the church, then the church would be burdened when the individual took care of their own widows. However, a distinction is made between the individual Christian and the church, whether local or universal. One common error made among many churches today is to claim that a local church is authorized to plan, provide or pay for some activity because individual Christians are authorized to engage in them. A common example is going to **Galatians 6:9-10**, a passage charging individuals to do good to others, especially other Christians, and claiming authority for a whole host of church sponsored activities that would otherwise never even cross the Biblical radar such as private schools, orphans homes, soup kitchens, etc.

- V. Different understandings regarding biblical fellowship.
- A. Some of the differences that occur among churches of Christ are the result of a different understanding of “fellowship” in the Bible. We must understand that this is an issue of using Bible terms in Bible ways. The English word “fellowship” and its Greek counterparts simply mean to share or partner in something. To the extent that we share in anything, we can accurately claim to have fellowship in that.
  - B. When we examine the New Testament, we find that fellowship was a very important part of the early churches. In fact, in **Acts 2:42**, we find the very first congregation devoted itself to fellowship. But remember, fellowship is simply sharing or partnership. In what was this early congregation devoting itself to share and partner? Today, the popular usage of “fellowship” indicates sharing or partnering in social experiences. Thus we hear about churches having fellowship meals and building fellowship halls. How many times have you heard people pray when they are at someone’s house for a meal, “God, thank you for this time of fellowship.”? I even once heard a religious comedian talk about church code language. He explained that when a worship service was over Christians were ready to go pig out. But they would never say, “Hey ya’ll, who wants to meet over at Pizza Hut and pig out?” Instead they will use code language saying, “Hey ya’ll, who wants to meet with us over at Pizza Hut for a little fellowship?”
  - C. Yes, I understand to the extent we are sharing a meal together we can use the word “fellowship” to describe that. However, we must not believe that when we are eating a meal together, playing a game together or watching a movie together that we are remotely doing what the Bible commanded as fellowship. In the KJV, the English word “fellowship” is found 14 times. The three Greek words that are at times translated “fellowship” are used in various forms 31 times. Not one single time are either the English word or the Greek words used to describe the early Christians spending time together socially. Do not get me wrong, I know the early Christians did spend time together socially (**Acts 2:46**), but Biblically it was never called fellowship.
  - D. The point to note is that the fellowship to which the church devoted itself as a work of the church had nothing to do with social time. Rather it is used to describe the sharing in faith, worship and work that Christians maintained. Consider just a few passages.
    1. **Romans 15:26**—the Greek word is used and translated “contribution,” referring to Christians sharing the burden of other Christians needs (This is what was happening in **Acts 2:42**).
    2. **I Corinthians 10:16**—the Greek word is translated “sharing” or “communion” and refers to the only meal in which the church sponsored joint participation. This sharing and partnering was in Christ and with one another through the Lord’s Supper.
    3. **Philippians 1:5**—the word is used to describe supporting Paul financially as he preached.
    4. **I John 1:3, 6, 7**—the word is used to describe partnership with Christ and with other Christians through Christ.
  - E. Some differences today come from these different understandings. Those who try to fit the modern popular usage of the term “fellowship” into the Bible will allow the local congregation to plan, provide or pay for all manner of social, secular and recreational activities. Those who recognize the Bible’s limited use of the term “fellowship” maintain a distinction between what individual’s will do as they build relationships with other Christians and what the church does as part of its work. Making that distinction takes us back up to points we have already discussed.

### Conclusion:

Certainly, we find brethren in any congregation that baptizes sinners into Christ for the remission of their sins. However, that does not mean we can go along with everything done in every congregation that shares that foundation. Regrettably, there are differences even among the ranks of baptized believers. Most of the differences do not simply come from disagreements over particular passages but different understandings of major issues that affect how Christians view passages. I hope this overview has helped you understand the differences that exist and encouraged you to stand fast on God’s word, binding only what He has bound and loosing only what He has loosed.