

## What is “The Church of Christ”?

Franklin Church of Christ  
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AM Worship

### Introduction:

Reportedly, Vince Lombardi, legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers, started each spring training with men who had been playing the sport for years by holding up the ball and saying, “Men, this is a football.” Lombardi understood that growth and success are processes that begin with the basics. Spiritual growth and spiritual success are no different. Regrettably, too many Christians get a few years of Bible study under their belt and get tired of hearing the basics. However, ignoring the basics is a sure way of forgetting the basics. Not surprisingly, when Christians, members of Christ’s church, neglect the basics about Christ’s church they forget what it is, they misrepresent it and they do not speak about it correctly. Therefore, on occasion we need to remind ourselves the basics about Christ’s church. I imagine we all know what a football is, right now we ask, “What is the church of Christ?”

### Discussion:

- I. Examine the meaning and grammatical use of the phrase.
  - A. To my knowledge the phrase, “church of Christ” (actually a variation of it), is only used once in the Bible. In **Romans 16:16**, Paul says, “The churches of Christ greet you.”
  - B. Grammatically speaking, “churches of Christ” is a noun phrase. In **Romans 16:16** it is used as the subject of the sentence. The phrase is made up of two distinct parts.
    1. “Churches” is a noun in this phrase. The word “church” translates the Greek “ekklesia”, literally meaning “the called out.” It is used in the Bible to refer to assemblies, whether of Christians or otherwise. In fact, in **Acts 19:32, 39, 41**, Luke used this phrase to describe the Ephesian riot against the Christians. The term basically refers to a grouping of people.
    2. “Of Christ” is a prepositional phrase acting as an adjective in this case. It modifies the noun “church”. That is, it tells us which grouping of people. “Of” is a preposition of source or ownership used as an alternative to the possessive “Christ’s”. In other words, the meaning of this phrase could be accurately represented by another phrase, “Christ’s church.”
  - C. Thus, in **Romans 16:16**, this phrase describes groups of people who belong to Christ. If we took the singular, “church of Christ” it would speak of a group of people belonging to Christ.
- II. To what can this phrase refer?
  - A. While **Romans 16:16** is the only place we see this phrase used in the Bible, we can cross reference other phrases that refer to the same groups of people and used interchangeably with this. Doing so demonstrates that this phrase can be biblically used in two related ways.
  - B. Even a shallow study of the Bible demonstrates the phrase “church of Christ” refers to a universal grouping of people who belong to Christ. In **Matthew 16:18**, Jesus promised to build His church. In **Ephesians** we learn about this one body (**Ephesians 4:4**) over which Christ is the head (**Ephesians 1:22-23**). **Ephesians 2:19-22; 4:11-16** demonstrates that this one church is the group of people who have become Christ’s and are growing in the Lord, fulfilling various roles in that group. In **Acts 2:47**, we find that one is automatically added to this group when one is saved. Thus, the term “church of Christ”, used in a universal sense, refers to all the saved, everywhere and of all time.
  - C. The phrase “church of Christ” is also used in a more restricted sense referring to a group of people in a given geographic location who assemble together for the express purpose of serving God and doing his work as a corporate body. **Romans 16:16** is used in this way. Consider that there is only one universal church. How then can Paul speak of the “churches of Christ”? He is speaking of local groups of people who belong to Christ. Paul addresses both Corinthian letters to the church of God (an interchangeable phrase for “church of Christ”) at Corinth (**I Corinthians 1:2; II Corinthians 1:1**). It was a particular group of people in a local area who had banded together to serve God. **Galatians 1:2** speaks of the multiple churches in Galatia. **Revelation** is written to seven churches in Asia (**Revelation 1:4**).
  - D. The phrase “church of Christ” can only be used biblically in these ways. As such, we should note three ways in which this phrase is never biblically used.

1. These terms never refer to a building. No building is the church of Christ. Yes, I recognize by metonymy we can grammatically refer to this edifice as “a church.” But we must always be clear that Christ’s church is not a building; it is a group of people.
2. These terms are never used to refer to a denomination. According to Donald Tinder’s ***Evangelical Dictionary of Theology***, “Denominations are associations of congregations ... that have a common heritage. Moreover, a true denomination does not claim to be the only legitimate expression of the church.” A denomination is an organized group of churches. It is a supposed midsized organization, smaller than the universal body but larger than a local church. The Bible, however, never speaks of such an organization. Secondly, we need to remember that the church, even in the universal sense, is a grouping of people who belong to Christ. It is never a group of churches.
3. These terms never refer to an individual. Some have mistakenly thought that because the church is the people and not the building, a person is the church. Church is a collective noun, always referring to a group. The Bible demonstrates the distinction between the church and the individual in **I Timothy 5:16**. Paul commanded that individual Christians take action so the collective church not be burdened. However, if the individual is the church, then the church is automatically burdened when the individual takes action.

III. What does all this say about the present day uses of the phrase “church of Christ”?

- A. It is not uncommon to hear some of the following from Christians and non-Christians alike.
  1. I’m church of Christ.
  2. Church of Christ preacher.
  3. Church of Christ doctrine.
  4. Church of Christ magazine.
  5. Church of Christ radio program.
- B. This terminology mirrors the language of denominationalism.
  1. I’m Baptist.
  2. Methodist preacher.
  3. Episcopalian doctrine.
  4. Presbyterian magazine.
  5. Pentecostal radio program.
- C. Considering all of these phrases, would you say that this is a “Church of Christ church”? I hope not. Remember, “church of Christ” is a noun, not an adjective. It is the object, not the describing term. Instead of the above, we should use the grammar correctly to avoid confusion.
  1. I am of Christ or I am Christ’s (**I Corinthians 1:12**).
  2. Christ’s preacher or preacher of Christ (some prefer gospel preacher).
  3. Christ’s doctrine or doctrine of Christ.
  4. Neither magazines nor radio programs belong to Christ in the sense that a Christian or the church does. What we really mean is these are magazines or radio programs produced by Christians or by a local congregation which belongs to Christ. Why not say that?

**Conclusion:**

Modern uses of the phrase “church of Christ” are often mere grammatical gaffes. I do not believe we will be condemned for using incorrect grammar. On the other hand, we must take care with this kind of speech because it is an accommodation for denominational falsehood. Christians use these phrases because modern religious society does not grasp the concept of mere Christianity, expecting us to be a particular kind of Christian. Did the new disciple on Pentecost have to describe themselves as particular kinds of Christians? On the day of Pentecost, one was either a part of Christ’s church or not. Despite denominational confusion, that is still the case. One is either a Christian or not. Christianity does not come in flavors. When we use the phrase “church of Christ” incorrectly we accommodate error and perpetuate misunderstanding. Someone will say, “But Edwin, people don’t understand when I say I am just a Christian.” If that is true, do not perpetuate their misunderstanding, lovingly teach them.

As we conclude, you must ask yourself, “Am I of Christ?” **Galatians 3:26-29** explains how to be of Christ. Based on your faith, be baptized for the remission of your sins into Christ. Why not do that today and become a part of the group of people who are of Christ, the church of Christ?