

At Least It's "Church of Christ"

Franklin Church of Christ
Edwin Crozier
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Introduction:

Based on a count from a book considering itself a directory of churches of Christ, there are 144 congregations using the name "Church of Christ" in the Nashville to Columbia corridor from which our membership comes. This, however, doesn't really tell us much. These churches range in a spiritual perspective from extremely strict and conservative to extremely liberal. This ranges from congregations that won't allow Bible classes and only use one cup for the Lord's Supper to congregations that have completely given up the pursuit of scriptural authority for their work. Surprisingly, despite the quarrels and squabbles that take place between these different kinds of churches, I get the feeling from some people, if it has the moniker "Church of Christ" on the sign it is ok. It is as if people can decry all the things they don't like about a church, but then they wipe it away saying, "At least it's Church of Christ." I especially get this feeling when I'm talking to some folks about family members that attend congregations they believe teach error or when someone leaves a congregation and goes to another one they believe teaches error. I certainly do not think we should set ourselves up as the judge of congregational soundness for all the other congregations. Nor do I think we are somehow the standard of what is right. However, I am concerned with the mindset I sense from some that despite the differences everything is really alright as long as it's "Church of Christ." Examine with me why this mindset is just not accurate.

Discussion:

- I. What is "church of Christ"?
 - A. The "at least it's Church of Christ" mindset has lost sight of what "church of Christ" even means. "Church of Christ" is not the approved name or title that God gave His church. It is not the approved name or title that God has given local congregations. "Church of Christ" is a description. "Church" translates the word "ekklessia" meaning assembly. It refers to a group of people gathered together. "Of Christ" is a prepositional phrase meaning belonging to Christ. Thus, "church of Christ" merely means the group of people belonging to Jesus Christ. In a universal sense, this describes all the people everywhere assembled spiritually in Christ (cf. **Hebrews 12:22-23**). In a local sense, this describes people who belong to Christ in a geographical locale who assemble together to serve the Lord and build each other up (cf. **Romans 16:16**).
 - B. Personally, I do not have a problem with a local church giving itself a name especially in our modern climate of needing to distinguish one congregation from others. However, we need to honestly admit no congregation in Scripture used a name. They simply used descriptions. Consider some of the ones used.
 1. In **Romans 16:16**, Paul referred to multiple local congregations as "the churches of Christ." Was he saying, "All the churches named 'Church of Christ' greet you"? Of course not. He was saying, "The churches that can be described as belonging to Jesus greet you."
 2. In **I Corinthians 1:2** and **II Corinthians 1:1**, Paul called the local congregation to which he was writing, "the church of God which is at Corinth."
 3. In **Galatians 1:2**, Paul spoke of "the churches of Galatia."
 4. In **I Thessalonians 1:1** and **II Thessalonians 1:1**, Paul wrote "to the church of the Thessalonians."
 5. In **I Thessalonians 2:14**, Paul called the churches of Judea, "the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea."
 6. In **I Timothy 3:15**, Paul called it "the church of the living God."
 7. Interestingly, when Paul wrote to Ephesus, Philippi and Colossae, he wrote "to the saints who are at Ephesus" (**Ephesians 1:1**); "to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons" (**Philippians 1:1**); and "to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae" (**Colossians 1:2**).
 8. Most often, it is just described as "the church"—e.g. **Acts 11:26**; **I Timothy 3:15**; **Philemon 1:2**, *et al.*
 - C. Interestingly, among churches of Christ people used to argue about whether or not we were allowed to capitalize the word "church" on our signs because it was a description and not a name. Now even some of the seemingly soundest of brethren have adopted the denominational mindset that the phrase is the approved name and for all that someone does wrong, at least they are

still one of us because “at least they’re Church of Christ.” Do not make this mistake. Our sign could just as easily read any number of biblical descriptions and we would still be the exact same church and still be a local congregation belonging to Christ. Our sign could read “the Franklin church of the living God”, “the saints in Franklin”, “the church of the Middle Tennesse-ans”, “the church of Franklin”, “the Franklin church” or “the Franklin Church of God in Christ Jesus.” I am not suggesting we need to change our sign. I’m simply pointing out what that sign and title represent.

D. The main point here being, however, that we must be very careful. The “at least it’s Church of Christ” mindset misuses and misapplies the biblical phrase “church of Christ.” We must not be guilty of that.

II. “Church of Christ” is not God’s stamp of approval.

A. **Colossians 3:17** says, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus...” (ESV). We understand that doing something in the name of the Lord means doing it with His authority as demonstrated in **Acts 4:7-12**. Some people, however, act as if doing something in the name of Jesus simply means saying those words. They have the idea that if we say what we are doing is in the name of Jesus, then it must be. That is just not true. I can do things with Christ’s authority without saying those words. Sometimes I say those words but I’m not doing something authorized by Christ. For instance, I do not have to say “I’m preaching this sermon in the name of Jesus,” to be preaching by His authority. On the other hand, I can say “I’m getting drunk in the name of Jesus” all day long and it won’t make getting drunk authorized.

B. Regrettably, some folks seem to treat the phrase “Church of Christ” in the same way. It is almost as if they think if a church calls itself a “Church of Christ” even though they disagree with what the church is doing it is really not a big deal because they have God’s stamp of approval. That is just not so.

C. For instance, take a look at the seven churches of Asia in **Revelation 2-3**. While I recognize that these people were the children of God, we still see that five of the churches were not approved by God and God was threatening to remove their lampstands. God did not approve of Ephesus because it had left its first love (**Revelation 2:4**). God did not approve of Pergamum because they had some who held the teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans (**Revelation 2:14-15**). God did not approve of Thyatira because they tolerated the Jezebel (**Revelation 2:20**). He did not approve of Sardis because it was dead even though it had a reputation of being alive (**Revelation 3:1**). He did not approve of Laodicea because they were lukewarm (**Revelation 3:15-16**). What if these churches had a sign that said “Church of Christ” outside? What if they were listed in a directory of “Churches of Christ”? Would that have changed God’s disapproval? Of course not. On the other hand, God completely approved of Smyrna (**Revelation 2:8-11**) and Philadelphia (**Revelation 3:7-13**). Did He approve of them because their sign said “Church of Christ” or because they were listed in a directory of supposed “Churches of Christ”? No. They were approved because they were really of Christ.

D. We need to understand that this issue is not whether something is called of Christ, it is about whether or not it really is of Christ. Just using that phrase doesn’t grant God’s stamp of approval.

III. Being in a “Church of Christ” doesn’t equal fellowship with God, walking in the light does.

A. Sometimes I fear some have lost sight of how we gain and maintain fellowship with God. We do not gain fellowship with God by being a member of a congregation that uses the name “Church of Christ.” According to **I John 1:5-7**, we have fellowship with God by walking in the light, because He is in the light.

B. Note that John says if we walk in darkness and try to claim to be in fellowship with God, we are not. If someone is walking in darkness, not following God’s will, because of the congregation of which they are a member, then they do not have fellowship with God even if the sign says “Church of Christ.” Yes, I recognize we are all in a growth process. I am not about to stand in judgment over every individual and I will leave it up to God to sort out the hearts of everyone involved in the many different kinds of churches and the many different doctrines. However, I rec-

ognize the general rule. If someone is denying the will of God, walking in a path other than His straight and narrow, they are walking in darkness and they do not have fellowship with God.

- C. Notice the two sides of what this means. First, if a person assembles with a congregation that does not have the name “Church of Christ” above the door who is walking in the light, then he or she is in fellowship with God (Please, keep in mind the point, walking in the light means being a working part of a faithful congregation that teaches and follows God’s word). Second, if a person assembles with a congregation that does have the name “Church of Christ” but they are not walking in the light, they are not in fellowship with God.

IV. Looking at ourselves.

- A. We must not look at this lesson and talk about all those other churches out there and all those other Christians out there that aren’t getting it right. The real import is for us to look at ourselves and what this means for us. How readily we may think we are fine with God just because we have the so-called right name on our sign. Brethren, we are not in fellowship with God because of our sign. We will only be in fellowship with God if we are walking in the light. We must constantly examine ourselves and our walk.
- B. Further, we need to look at our own words and mindset. Perhaps none of this applied to you and you have never had this kind of mindset. But we each need to give consideration to how we have thought about Christians and churches we believe are not following the pattern God has given us through His word. This is especially true when dealing with our family and children. We must not breathe a sigh of relief just because they are attending a church that says “Church of Christ” over the door. We need to encourage them to walk in the light, following God’s pattern. We also need to think about this when members from our own fellowship abandon the pattern of God by leaving us to have fellowship with error in churches that do not follow God’s patterns. If someone leaves us and goes to another congregation that faithfully teaches and follows God’s word for whatever reason, then let them go with our blessing. However, when someone breaks fellowship with us to abandon sound teaching for error in another congregation we must not send them with our blessing. Rather, we must let our concern for their soul be known.
- C. How are we doing? Do we understand what “church of Christ” is and means? Are we walking in the light or trusting in our sign? That sign is not God’s stamp of approval on us. We have to be doing His will. As Jesus said, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” (**Luke 6:46**, ESV).

Conclusion:

Let us not be happy that people are attending some place called “Church of Christ.” Rather, let us be happy when people are walking in the light as God is in the light. Let us be happy when we have all come to a unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God (**Ephesians 4:13**).