

510 How Can I Choose Between Churches?

According to World Christian Database, there are 635 denominations in the USA. Each of these denominations have their own beliefs, practices, and organizations; and these things vary widely. How do we choose between so many groups? Aren't all churches headed for the same place? How do we know what pleases the Lord? Does it matter what we believe? Are all denominations really alike?

There are so many different kinds of churches today, that it is very confusing trying to determine what Christianity really is. Some churches seem more of a business selling things than a religion. Others appear to be like a theater or a sports club. The pomp and circumstance of some churches seems far removed from the Lord Jesus Christ, who lived a humble life of service rather than preach a health and wealth gospel. Religion today seems very self-centered rather than centered in Christ. How can we get back to the Lord Jesus Christ?

Jesus prayed in John 17:20-23 "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, *are* in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me."

When Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, he wrote with a heavy heart, because they were divided. 1 Cor. 1:10-11 says, "Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's *people*, that there are quarrels among you." This divisiveness was not right in God's sight. He wanted them to be of the same mind and judgment, to think and believe alike.

On another occasion Paul rebuked several in Galatia because they were trying to change the gospel and to bind the Law of Moses on Gentile Christians. Gal. 1:6-9 says, "I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is *really* not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!"

In the small letter of 2 John, there were some false teachers saying that Jesus was not the Christ, did not come in the flesh. John said in 2 John 7-9, "For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ *as* coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves, that you do not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward. Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the

teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son."

What people believe and teach matters, because they can deceive others and give them a false hope. John gives further instructions about how to react to a false teaching in 2 John 10-11: "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into *your* house, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds." Most people haven't thought about it, but a false teaching is regarded in Scripture as evil. If I support a false teacher, I am supporting his evil.

What makes a false teaching evil?

What if all your life you had believed a certain doctrine, you thought you were right with God, but in the judgment found out that it was a lie and you had been deceived? What if the lie was so great that instead of going to heaven, you found yourself being lost? Wouldn't you look at the person who lied to you and cost you your soul as an evil person? Wouldn't you regard all that false hope they gave to you as the worst kind of lie and fraud?

The Old Testament tells of false prophets who told the Israelites what they wanted to hear, not what they needed to hear. Jer. 14:13-15 But, "Ah, Lord GOD!" I said, "Look, the prophets are telling them, 'You will not see the sword nor will you have famine, but I will give you lasting peace in this place.'" Then the LORD said to me, "The prophets are prophesying falsehood in My name. I have neither sent them nor commanded them nor spoken to them; they are prophesying to you a false vision, divination, futility and the deception of their own minds. Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the prophets who are prophesying in My name, although it was not I who sent them—yet they keep saying, 'There will be no sword or famine in this land'—by sword and famine those prophets shall meet their end!

Even the New Testament helps us understand that the devil and his followers want to look religious while they tell us lies. Jesus warned, "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves." (Matt. 7:15) Matthew 7:21-23 says, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven *will enter*. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'" -

Paul spoke about men who were "false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds." (2 Cor. 11:13-15) It should not surprise us that the devil is still telling lies to people.

Here is the advice Paul gave Timothy in 2 Tim. 3:14-17, "But evil men and impostors will proceed *from bad* to worse, deceiving and being deceived. You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned *them*, and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings

which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”

Paul warns and admonishes Timothy in 2 Tim. 4:1-4: “I solemnly charge *you* in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.”

How do we know the truth?

We continue in the Word, preach the Word. The Bible is profitable for teaching (doctrine), for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be adequate or complete. The Bible is God’s standard of right and wrong. We are to judge everything by what it says. 1 Thess. 5:21-22 says, “But examine everything *carefully*; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil.” If what we are doing today, the church did in the New Testament with God’s approval, we know we too have God’s approval.

Some people go by feelings, some go by popular desires, some churches make decisions by what sells or what people want. Are they building churches by pleasing men? Paul said in Galatians 1:10 “For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.” Again and again, we must go back to the Bible, asking the question “what does God want? What pleases God? What does the Bible teach?” When we stay with the Bible, we know we are pleasing God and not men.

The church you read about in the New Testament was congregational, each congregation had elders and deacons. It had no headquarters except heaven, no creed except Christ, no bylaws except the Bible. They worshipped with prayers and singing (no instruments of music). Each Lord’s day, they contributed to a treasury and partook of the Lord’s Supper. They also had Bible reading and preaching. The early church was made up of people old enough to believe. People were added to the church when upon confession of their faith and their repentance, they were immersed in water, so that their sins were washed away.

The early church was a spiritual family, who loved each other. Their mission was to take the gospel to the whole world, to seek and to save the lost. Peter said to them in 1 Peter. 2:9-10, “But you are a chosen race, A royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for *God’s* own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” The church is not a political organization, an entertainment society, or a social club. They are God’s people who want to serve Jesus Christ.

It is a popular notion today to think that everybody is okay, that everybody teaches his own truth, and that one person’s truth is as good as any other truth. But this notion is an ear-tickler that contradicts what the Bible teaches. The real challenge is whether we will listen to popular religion or listen to God in the Bible. Jesus said, “He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day” (John 12:48). If what Jesus said judges us in the last day, don’t you think we ought to give it a close examination?

What we believe matters.

It mattered to the people who followed Jim Jones in Guyana and David Koresh in Waco. It mattered to the people in the twin towers on 9/11. It will matter to you one day. Paul said, “Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, *so* walk in Him, having been firmly rooted *and now* being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, *and* overflowing with gratitude” (Col. 2:6). Stay with the Bible, study it, love it, practice it, and share it with others.

As I talk to people, I am amazed at how many of them are unhappy where they attend church. The church they knew in their youth is no longer the same. They feel abandoned by their church. Churches that once stood against immorality now have clergymen and clergywomen who profess immoral lifestyles without shame. Churches that once were places of worship have now become more like theaters with entertainers. Some churches preach a health and wealth gospel and rarely mention sin or repentance. Ear-tickling churches may treat you to what’s popular but may cheat you of the truth that leads to eternal life.

What should you do when your church leaves you?

Look to God and the Bible for the truth that you need not what you want. You may decide you can’t stay with a church that forgets God and His Word. You see they may also be leaving God, not just you. Realize there are people who merely want to be Christians and follow the New Testament. These are people who want to put God first and resist the false thinking of men. Churches of Christ have been saying for nearly 200 years, “Let’s go back to the Bible and do Bible things in Bible ways and call Bible things by Bible names.”

We need once again to restore in our lives a commitment to the teaching of Scripture. Let us not add to it, take anything away from it, substitute one thing for another, or change it in any way. Let us speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent. Let us do as Christ says in Luke 9:23, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me.” That may mean giving up a cherished belief or practice in order to do the will of God according to the teaching of Scripture. Will you do that?

God’s Answers to Life’s Questions
Phil Sanders, Concord Road Church of Christ
8221 Concord Rd., Brentwood, TN 37027
phil@God-answers.org www.God-answers.org
1-877-226-5747