

People think about a lot of factors when they set out to choose a church. “I want a small church.” “They’re so conservative; they just wouldn’t accept me.” “We want to find a church that has kids for our children to play with.” “It needs to be close to our house.” “Their church has a Mother’s Day Out.” The assumption behind these priorities is, “*All churches are equally good in God’s sight, and it’s up to me to find the one that fits my personal needs.*”

This tract tests that assumption using the word of God and looks at His advice for choosing a church.

## LIMITED OPTIONS

What churches did the apostle Paul have to choose from? In the city of Athens alone, he could have assembled in the Jewish synagogue or worshiped in a wide variety of Greek temples. He could have assembled with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, and there was a “modern”, progressive group which was always coming up with something new (Acts 17:17-21). But these were really not options for Paul because he was a Christian, a disciple of Jesus Christ.

We may be more narrow-minded than we realize. The simple fact that we believe in Jesus drastically reduces our options. By limiting ourselves to “Christian” churches, we exclude from our list of options **dozens** of churches - Unitarian, Moslem, Jewish and various cults and “New Age” groups just for starters (John 14:6).

But just how far do we take it? Are we satisfied when we narrow the field to the so-called Christian churches? Consider this: Christ intended to establish one church, not many. He said, “. . . *I will build my church*” (Matthew 16:18), and made no plans for it to be divided into denominations. It was a unified body of people “in Christ” which was united by the apostles’ teachings.

*“There is one body (i.e. church, Ephesians 1:22-23) and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God. . . ” (EPHESIANS 4:4-6).*

In 2 John 1:9-11, the apostle John expresses it this way:

*“Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the*

*Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.”*

The idea of having many denominations was distasteful to Jesus Himself. He prayed for His apostles and then prayed for “. . . *those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us. . .*” (JOHN 17:20-21).

## How many churches did Jesus build?

### A NOTE ABOUT UNITY

Some people feel that they can have unity through love while practicing different doctrines under different names. They often cite the following passage:

*“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples” (JOHN 15:5-8).*

In this passage, Jesus is talking to His disciples before His death, before the first gospel sermon, before the start of the church. He is referring to individuals, not churches, abiding in Him and bearing fruit. (Notice how Jesus says, “He who. . .” and “If anyone. . .”) It simply does not support denominational diversity. When the church in Corinth attempted denominational unity, Paul wrote,

*“Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, . . . that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, ‘I am of Paul,’ or ‘I am of Apollos,’ or ‘I am of Cephas,’ or ‘I am of Christ.’ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (1*

*CORINTHIANS 1:10-13).*

Other people believe that religious unity is not a reasonable expectation, and that it’s good to have more than one church. A tract titled, “How to choose your church” (Concordia Tract Mission) says, “. . . We thank God for the freedom to choose the denomination which teaches and practices what we believe” and “[Our church] does not claim to be the only saving church.” Was Jesus being unrealistic when He prayed for the unity of His disciples? Will God automatically accept the many churches that men form? Is Christ really divided after all? No. So let us thank God for religious freedom (1 Timothy 2:1-4), and let us hear the truth about His church:

### To God, unity means only one church (Ephesians 4:4).

### A NOTE ABOUT NAMES

When men are not of the “same mind” and the “same judgment”, they divide from each other. Each faction adopts a different name. Groups of the same judgment use the same name (label), and every group with a different judgment will avoid that name. . . and they are neatly divided.

So, what’s in a name? The difference between division and unity, “contentions” and peace, honoring men versus honoring Christ. The names of modern churches often do not claim, “*I am of Christ,*” just as the Corinthians did not give glory to Christ with the names they chose. For example, the terms “Presbyterian”, “Episcopal” and “Congregational” describe a church’s organization; the terms “Baptist”, “Methodist” and “Pentecostal” describe a practice or set of practices of a church; the terms “Lutheran” and “Mormon” honor someone besides Christ; the term “Catholic” describes the relative size of the church. (“Catholic” means “universal”.) The only descriptions of God’s church found in the Bible describe the relationship between saved people and God: “church of God”, “churches of Christ”, “bride of Christ”, “household of God”. These names were used interchangeably, as descriptions rather than labels. There is no single name for God’s people.

### How do you describe Christ’s church?

### A HARD MASTER TO FOLLOW

Because Christ is such an example of love,

many people believe that He would not condemn any group that claims to believe in Him, regardless of its practices. They say, “The important thing is that we all believe in Jesus.” However, Jesus shocked the people of His day by saying:

*“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (MATTHEW 7:21),*

and also,

*“Whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven. Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to ‘set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law’; and ‘a man’s enemies will be those of his own household.’ He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me” (MATTHEW 10:32-38).*

Jesus is hard to follow. His path is the way to the cross, the way of sacrifice. We may not like to be considered narrow-minded, but Christ was one of the most narrow-minded teachers of all!

*“Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it” (MATTHEW 7:13-14).*

Will you follow Jesus down the narrow path and limit your choices to His choice, or is what you want more important?

### Who is Lord of your life?

### DIFFERENCES THAT MATTER

God’s plan for His church is perfect - both complete and flawless - but anytime we humans are involved, there will be problems. You simply won’t find a “perfect” church. Let’s look at a Bible example. The church in the city of Corinth was “the church of God . . . at Corinth” (1 Corinthians 1:2). So whatever else we say about that group of people, God claimed them as His

people, and the apostle Paul associated with them in full fellowship.

But we know that the church in Corinth had many problems. The letter of First Corinthians tells us that they were tending toward denominationalism (as noted above), they allowed public immorality in their group with no attempt to correct the brother who was doing it, they were taking each other to court (showing a lack of wisdom and an unwillingness to be wronged), they were abusing the Lord's Supper, and their worship services were not orderly, just for starters. So how does the apostle Paul call them "the church of God" in that city, and why did he associate with them?

### Willing to correct mistakes

First of all, their attitude toward God and His will was good in spite of weakness and lack of understanding. They zealously followed instructions which were very hard to carry out - to cut off social relations with their immoral brother so that he would see and correct his error. Their love for their brother and their respect for God's word spoken by Paul resulted in a willingness to correct sin when it was pointed out. This good attitude benefited the group as well as that individual, and they were cleared of their guilt in the matter. Paul later wrote, ". . . I perceive that the same epistle made you sorry, though only for a while. Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. . ." (2 CORINTHIANS 7:8-9).

It's important for the members of a church to be humble enough to correct any error. This is especially true for the leaders of God's people. Consider the Bible example of the first two kings of Israel, Saul and David. They had the same office, the same responsibilities, the same privileges and the same power. They both sinned, and their sins were known publicly. But God stripped the kingdom away from Saul, while calling David "a man after My own heart" (Acts 13:22).

What made them different? Their hearts. Notice their different reactions when confronted with their own sins: Saul was proud and blamed others for his sin (1 Samuel 15:15, 20-21) and when he finally admitted his sin, he was concerned about his image in front of the people. God's prophet told him, ". . . You have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you from being king over Israel" (1 SAMUEL

15:26). But David promptly confessed, "I have sinned against the Lord" and was told that God had put away his sin (2 Samuel 12:13). Not every difference of opinion needs to be resolved, but all cases involving sin or error must be corrected. This is especially true when the whole church is involved. If someone showed you from the Scriptures that you were in the wrong,

*how would you respond?*

### The form of doctrine

A second sign that the Corinthians were God's church is that each member became a Christian in the same way - God's way. In Acts 18:8 we read, ". . . *The Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized.*" While the truth spread to at least three continents, we find that people always became Christians in the same way that the Corinthians did. (See Acts chapters 2, 8, 9, 10, 16, 18, 19 and 22.) No matter who the preacher was, and regardless of the person's race, age, gender or background, people always did the same things to become Christians. Paul said to Christians in Rome,

*"But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness" (ROMANS 6:17-18).*

Each person who wants to be freed from sin has a similar heart. From the heart (sincerely), each one allows himself to be delivered into God's form of teaching. God has made the form (or pattern) and pours each sinner into it, like pouring liquid metal into a mold (or matrix) to make a statue. The person is "set free from sin" and becomes a "slave of righteousness". God adds that saved person to His church (Acts 2:47).

After each of the Corinthians had become a Christian, they started a congregation. The result was a church whose members had all obeyed the same teachings from the heart. They had all received the teaching from Jesus Christ that "*he who believes and is baptized will be saved. . .*" (MARK 16:16). This was Jesus' idea, not some man's idea, and we see people poured into this mold time after time in the New Testament. Unfortunately, there are many teachings of men on how to be saved. But whatever the teaching is, we may assume that the people within a given church have all been taught the same on this topic.

*Have they been taught truth or error?*

## SEVEN CHURCHES

Finally, someone may ask, "Since all churches have problems of some kind, aren't they all basically the same in God's sight?" Definitely not. In Revelation chapters 2 and 3, we read letters written by Jesus to seven churches. One church was given no threat of God's judgment. Two were told to hold on to what they had. Another was told to strengthen what they had. One was warned of a relatively mild, selective form of punishment. And two churches were about to be disowned by God. Jesus can and will disown a church ("remove its candlestick", Revelation 2:5).

How can we tell whether a church still has its "candlestick"? Jesus warned churches to repent in order to maintain a good relationship with the Lord and to avoid punishment. Their success depended on their willingness to be corrected by God, which was discussed earlier in this tract. Yes, every church has its problems, but some will repent and stay in God's favor. Others will refuse to change.

## SUMMARY

Choosing a church? The group's size and location are not emphasized in the Bible, and the number of children is not even mentioned. What matters to God is that the group be

- 1) undenominational,
- 2) willing to be corrected by God's word
- 3) obedient from the heart to God's form of teaching on how to become Christians.

Be sure you're happy with these aspects of a church, first. Your options will be drastically reduced, but you will find a group of Christ's followers.

*May God bless you to find His church.*

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Written by  
Ink Man

Quotes from the New King James Version of the Bible



# How to



# Choose



# A



# Church

