

## CHURCH SIGNS—SIGNS OF WHAT?

As we travel the highways, check the yellow pages, read brotherhood bulletins, check the e-mail and web-sites, we are aware of MANY church signs telling of various denominations, as well as churches of Christ. When we think of names for various congregations, our minds go back to the first century, and then in the Restoration Movement, and then into the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Even denominations agree with us that there were no “different named” denominations in the first century, but ONLY the church Jesus built was in existence before Catholicism and Protestantism came into the picture. Jesus promised to build HIS church (Matt. 16:18). The word “church” (from the Greek word *ekklesia*) is found multiple times in the New Testament, in reference to that body Jesus established. The church first met in Jerusalem, then in other parts of the world. Many congregations began small, and met in the houses of some of the members in the community or city where they were meeting. We don't know how or when the church ever used “SIGNS” to identify their location, but we do know there was no need to distinguish the church of Christ from other religious bodies, for there were none—except idol temples, etc.. So, in those days, they could have just put the word *ekklesia* in front of the house where they were to meet, and all would know that it was that body of which Jesus was the head (Eph. 1:22, 23). Then, there was only ONE body or church universally, but many locations. TODAY, there are two “signs” to which Church Signs point, (1) **Identification**, and (2) **Apostasy**. We shall consider both.

First, let's think about “church signs” for the purpose of **IDENTIFICATION**. Sometimes reference is made to the church “in Antioch”, or “in Corinth”, or the “church of the Thessalonians”, or the “churches of Asia”—as in the book of Revelation where seven cities are identified in the cities. Obviously, when Christians might travel from one city to another, they may not have felt the necessity of distinguishing the one church from human religious institutions. The nearest to such a denominational attitude in church names is obviously manifested in the first Corinthian letter. There was ONE congregation there, but IT was divided, and various names were used. Paul wrote to this congregation, and rebuked them for NOT speaking the same thing, and having *divisions* among them (1 Cor. 1:10). He reminded them that SOME were saying they were “of Paul”, “of Cephas”, or “of Apollos”, while some were steadfast in simply being “of Christ”. We have been told by some today, that those “of Christ” were just as divisive as those of Cephas, Apollos, or Paul. But, we ask, HOW? What ELSE would the faithful have been if they were NOT “of Christ”? There is no reason to doubt that those who were claiming to be “of Christ”, WERE INDEED the faithful ones in Corinth. So, they were the church “of Christ”. True, they were “the church of God which is at Corinth” (1:2), for the church was of God as well as of Christ. Elders of the church were to feed the church of God (Acts 20:28, KJV), while the ASV refers to it as the “church of the Lord”. So, whether it was the “church of the Lord” or the “church of God”, the PERSON involved was the one who paid for it with His own blood—which WAS Jesus Christ. Any of these terms shows divine ownership. The “churches of Galatia” (Gal. 1:2) were a part of “the church of God” (Gal. 1:23). In another instance, ALL the churches were referred to as “the churches of Christ” (Rom. 16:16). They were NOT called “churches of Christ CHURCHES”, but simply “churches of Christ”. The word church is in the plural, churchES—referring to more than one congregation. Now, a plural is made up of singulars, meaning that each one was “a church” of Christ, and collectively they were “the churches of Christ”. The writings of Ignatius (who overlapped the first and second centuries) speaks of “the church of Christ”. The so-called “Apostolic Constitution” (c. 250 A.D.) also refers to “the church of Christ”. This was before human names began to be used in the church.

From this point on, human names entered in. The apostate church in Rome came to ultimately be known as the “Roman Catholic Church”, to distinguish it from the eastern church, now known as the Greek Orthodox Church. Then, there came the Church of England, or the Anglican Church. Then, as more Protestant bodies were formed, they took on other names, such as Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, etc.. After many named Protestant bodies were formed, their NAMES of “identification” showed their different beliefs and religious practices, and their hopeless division. When the members of these bodies came to America, they brought their denominational names with them, and the division continued. When leaders of these bodies met to talk about their differences, they observed that their different NAMES as well as their different beliefs and practices had to be resolved before there could be any kind of unity. Eventually, they came to recognize that ONLY by everyone going BACK to the teaching of the New Testament, could there be unity. MANY of these leaders were willing to forsake their denominations and attempt a return to the scripture. BUT, there was one matter that stood out—the NAME. WHAT would they call themselves? Among those restorers, there were 3 names that troubled them--(1) Disciples of Christ, (2) Christian Church, and (3) Church of Christ. Those maintaining each “name” held on to different philosophies in other matters, especially on “authority”. Those wanting the first name “Disciples of Christ” based their desires on Acts 11:26, where the “disciples were called Christians” in Antioch, and since they were disciples “of Christ”, they should be called “Disciples of Christ”. However, they seemingly failed to grasp the fact that the disciples were INDIVIDUALS—NOT CHURCHES. An individual is not a church. The advocates of this view were very liberal in their attitude toward “authority”, believing that anything God didn't say NOT to do, was allowable.

Then there were some in the restoration effort that chose the name “Christian Church”. They were generally more conservative than those of the “Disciples” movement. Through the years, this group has contended FOR the use of mechanical instruments in their worship, but were adamantly opposed to the term “church of Christ”. Those who preferred the term “church of Christ” were strong advocates for doing all things that are specifically authorized by the New Testament, and NOT using instruments music with their singing, and by having authority FOR what they did in worship. These matters could not be dissolved immediately, so even in the restoration process, some division continued. There was some sort of cooperative work between the three divisions, until the 1906 U.S. Census determined that the divisions were permanent, and that the “church of Christ” was a distinct body of believers. The “Disciples of Christ” came to also call themselves “The Christian Church”, and under the name on their signs, in smaller letters, was added “Disciples of Christ”. Those who were firm in “The Christian Church” have not wavered from their name on their church signs. Around 1968, the “Disciples” movement announced that they were abandoning the restoration ideal completely, and wanted to be known as simply another denomination, along with Baptists, Methodists, etc., while the “Christian Church” has become “The Independent Christian Church”, and still advocating the restoration effort.

An emerging name “Fusion Church” is influxing our society today in leaps and bounds. The name is used to suggest the merging of church with family, with special emphasis on “family”. The name “Fusion” is associated with Methodist, and other main line denominations, as well as Pastor T. D. Jakes, the “Potter's House” Pastor of note, whose background is Pentecostal. Many “Fusion” groups are associated with former “Bible Churches”, or Independent movements. Their writings show a strong allegiance to “Calvinism”, with a strong expectation of a coming millennial kingdom on earth with the

presence of Jesus on His throne. Involved in the movement now is Bill McCartney, founder of the Promise Keepers movement a couple of decades ago. Baptism “in the Spirit” (as was given the apostles in Acts 2) is also in the thought process of the Fusion movement. It is difficult to nail down exactly when the movement actually began, but is obviously a collection of activities that brought it about. Some things they advocate are scriptural, just as they are in most denominations, but there is enough doctrinal error to completely show it is NOT the church Jesus established. The “time” of its beginning, and the “name” itself excludes it from the work of Christ and the apostles in the beginning.j The very FIRST reason for rejecting the Fusion Church, is the **NAME** itself. Some of its members argue that they (and other denominations) are ALL part of the “invisible church” of the Lord, but visibly they were another name, and display their variance with scripture. No matter what ELSE they may do or teach, the very name “Fusion” takes them outside the circle of truth.

Now, church signs are clearly signs of **APOSTASY**. For over 100 years, the church of Christ has endeavored to BE the restored church—following only the doctrine of Christ, and supporting every belief and practice by the scripture. HOWEVER, the term “church of Christ” has become troublesome to some—especially those who became more “liberal” in their thinking in deciding that the use of instrumental music is not really sinful, and that the communion can be taken on Saturdays as well as Sunday. Many have even begun to change their name—no longer just “the church of Christ”, but adding another name BEFORE “church of Christ”, and/or dropping the “of Christ” FROM the name, and just being “church” AFTER the particular name they want to use before “church”. The Oak Hills Church of Christ in San Antonio, Texas dropped the “of Christ” under the guise that might be a stumbling block to some who might not like the complete term “church of Christ”. Paul even stated that “Christ” is a stumbling block to some (1 Cor. 1:23), but he did NOT suggest we quit using the word. The Austin group is now called “Oak Hills Church”, and is doesn't mind opposing the teaching of baptism as a necessity for salvation, and its preacher admits he would make a good Baptist preacher.

The massive “Richland Hills Church of Christ” began using the instrument with some of its singing, taking Communion on Saturdays, dissolving the function of “deacons”, and renaming it “Servants”, while admitting women to this new function. This church is NOW called “Hills Church”, serving as somewhat of a mother church to many smaller house or satellite groups. The Farmers Branch Church of Christ (formerly an ultra conservative group opposing the practice of having Bible Classes on Sundays) swung the other direction to the point that virtually everything is now all right. They too have changed their church sign to emphasize BRANCH CHURCH (with their websites either leaving off “of Christ”, or putting “of Christ” in less bold letters), and being the mother-church to other “branches” under their influence and control. BOTH of these congregations have been dropped from the 2009 Church of Christ Directory, as being NO LONGER churches of Christ. More and more congregations are wanting to become “Community Churches”, and in order NOT to be that offensive “church of Christ”, they are dropping the “of Christ”, and adding some attractive name. One congregation was formed in Durant, Okla., and named themselves, “DAYSPRING OF DURANT”, and under it, in smaller letters, were the words “A church of Christ family”, and they enjoyed very little fellowship with more than one congregation within 50 miles of it. Later, they removed any reference to “church of Christ” from their sign. Then, they began to split within the movement, and finally closed their doors. There now stands an empty building. We recently learned of another congregation that put their name before the word “church”, and THEN added “a church of Christ” underneath. This gives emphasis to

the first term OVER the second term (which we predict that within 10 years, at the most, “a church of Christ” will be dropped from their sign). We are not trying to be judgmental, but the “signs” are obvious that they will soon no longer be of us, because they have gone out from us (1 John 2:19). MANY other congregations are emphasizing their location with the word “CHURCH” (in larger print), while older members there feel somewhat satisfied that they are STILL in “the church of Christ”, because the name is still visible (a little bit), at least until they either pass on, or become numb to the concept of having become another denomination. **WHY would any church want a double name, using the word :”church” TWICE on a sign?** Obviously, the first name is the primary name, and the second can easily be avoided, neglected, or finally removed.

True, just because a congregation calls itself a “church of Christ”, and has those words ON the sign, does not necessarily mean they ARE a true church—true to the word of God. BUT, if a congregation wants to be true to the New Testament, WHY find ways to get away from the designation “church of Christ”??? What better terminology or language can we employ that is BETTER? The church was built by CHRIST, upon the foundation of CHRIST, purchased by CHRIST, owned by CHRIST, is the body of CHRIST, whose head is CHRIST, whose Savior is CHRIST, is the bride of CHRIST, teaches the doctrine of CHRIST, and is sanctified by CHRIST, and we are to give glory to God in the church by CHRIST (Eph. 3:21). Jesus taught that if some are ashamed of Him here, that HE will be ashamed of them in the next generation (Mark 8:38). It seems a shame that we are trying to get rid of “Christ” in identifying the church, while at least some yearn to HAVE His name attached to their church. I was in Oklahoma City a few years ago, and passed a church building with the sign in front that said, “BAPTIST CHURCH OF CHRIST”. I thought that was very interesting. I stopped my vehicle, and went in and talked to one of the “pastors”, and asked him about it. He explained by saying, “We are Baptist in belief, and are also evangelical, so we decided to give it a scriptural name—adding ‘church of Christ’”. At least SOME people like scriptural terminology. Many years ago, the records in Howard County, Texas reveal that at one time there was a “BAPTIST CHURCH OF CHRIST” in that area. The explanation was given that the building was used by both the “Baptist” Church, and the “Church of Christ”—but at different times. Perhaps due to a lack of funds, one building was selected for both. The record did not explain anything about the ownership of the property, but we did find it interesting. WHY would any church want to have a DOUBLE NAME—using the word “church” twice on the same sign, unless they are trying be two churches? The first name is obviously the most important, and the second can easily be neglected, avoided, or finally dropped. As an example, consider this sign: PLEASANT VALLEY CHURCH, with (in smaller letters) “a church of Christ”—WHICH would you think that church is trying to emphasize?? In any case, the “of Christ” is given second place, or dropped completely. Most of the congregations alluded to in this writing have either placed “church of Christ” in *very small*, almost *unnoticeable* letters, or have dropped them completely. If you are defensive of some congregation that fits into this discussion, keep all this in mind and when you see them drop from the next directory of churches of Christ, or hear of them completely leaving the church, you will know what we are saying here. The church, being the bride of Christ, should never be ashamed to wear his name with honor and obedience.

Don Tarbet, 215 W. Sears, Denison, Tex. 75020 <donwtarbet@cableone.net>