



## **IDENTITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH**

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Greetings and welcome. I'm glad you're with us today and if it's you're just finding us, I hope you'll take a few moments and look into the bible with me. We are in a series about the church as we read about it in the New Testament. Last week, we looked at the worship of the church. Today we want to consider its identity – or the name by which it was known. In Ephesians 3:14-15, Paul wrote: "For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named." The family God wears some kind of name, according to the apostle. What is that name – or I should ask – whose is that name? Names are important to God – they always have been and today we want to talk about names regarding the Lord's church.

Most religious organizations wear a name. In fact, it is hard to find one that doesn't refer to itself in some unique way. I am not referring to descriptions of the city, neighborhood, or region telling people where a congregation meets but rather, names that identify them as belonging to a particular set of theological beliefs or practices or that associate us with a person who prominently held those beliefs or people instrumental in their establishment. Not only is there an overwhelming number of denominations in the religious world today, but there are also just as many different names used to refer to various churches. It's ironic that we often hear that there is nothing in a name and names don't matter yet, every church seems to have one and usually spends a good deal of time choosing that name and using it to brand their organization. You see, with many, names matter until you enquire about the scriptural reason for that name or raise questions about the beliefs that name represents and then, all the sudden, they don't matter anymore.

What about the church in the New Testament? Did it wear a name? Due to the hostile culture and environment in which the early church often found itself, I doubt if most or even any of those churches went to the trouble of having a sign made to display pointing people to their meeting places, wherever they may have been. But that doesn't mean that they did not wear a divinely given name, for they did.

There were variations of that name, but they all referred to the same concept and the same people. They did not denominate and distinguish one group of believers from another. They were different ways of referring to the same truth. We'll see more about that in a few moments.

The question now is, does it matter what we call the church or how we refer to it? Well, let me say this: If there is nothing in a name, religion is about the only sphere of life where we think that. People have names, and we usually value our name and are protective of it. You would be insulted if I knowingly mispronounced or misrepresented your name. You might be offended if I called your wife or husband by some other last name than the one you both wear. Why? Because our name uniquely identifies us, but it also identifies us as belonging to a particular family. We descended from our parents, and we wear that name, or a woman marries a man and usually, she takes his name as her own because they are now united as one. Businesses have names. In fact, corporations spend millions of dollars adopting a name, promoting that name, and associating their service or product with that name in peoples' minds. They usually want a name that represents who they are and what they provide. They want a name that reflects positively upon their business, and they are highly protective of that name because of the damage that can result if it is abused or misused. And we could go on and on.

There's no denying that names are important in every society around the world. Where did that come from? Why do we give people and things names anyway? Would it surprise you to hear that that practice originated with God Himself? When God created the world, filled it with life, and then created the first man in His image, He gave that man a name. Genesis 2:19 is the first time the record refers to him as "Adam" which means 'red ground' or 'the man formed from the ground.' God gave him a name that described what he was and where he came from. God then said that it was not good for him to remain alone and so he brought forth Eve, the first woman, and made her his wife and in Genesis 3:20, we read: "And Adam called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living."

From the dawning of time down through the centuries, God has placed a great deal of emphasis upon names. They are significant all throughout the bible. This was the case in the generations following Adam and Eve. Several generations later, there was a man in Ur named Abram. We remember that God called him out of Ur to the Land of Canaan, choosing him as the one through whom God would continue to work out His redemptive plan for the world. God made a covenant with him, saying in Genesis 17:5, "No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations." He then renamed Abraham's wife Sarai, to become Sarah. Why would God do such if names are not significant?

From the union of Abraham and Sarah, God brought forth a family of people through whom He would operate in covenant relationship. Once again, we find God giving them a name. When God changed Abraham's grandson, Jacob's name to Israel, He was assigning a name to His people. God didn't just arbitrarily attach some name to him but gave him a name that was significant and meaningful. 'EL' in Hebrew means 'God' and thus, God was exalting His own name by naming His people after Himself. He was identifying them as the people of God, a special people who were in covenant with Him, by giving them such a name. God is jealous for His people and wanted them to be a people separated from all other so-called gods and the nations that served those gods. One of the ways He indicated this was by giving them a name that said as much. Daniel said, "Thy people are called by thy name." (Daniel 9:19)

One may say "but that was Israel in the Old Testament; what does that have to do with the church today?" Well, let's notice some of the prophecies in the Old Testament concerning the church which Christ would later come and establish – the true Israel – or God's covenant people today. God plainly

said to them back then that His people would be one day be called by a new name. Isaiah 62:1-2 says, "For Zion's sake I will not hold My peace, And for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, Until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, And her salvation as a lamp that burns. The Gentiles shall see your righteousness, And all kings your glory. You shall be called by a new name, Which the mouth of the LORD will name." This is prophesying of the age of Christ's kingdom. Notice that God's people in that day would receive a new name. It would be an everlasting name that would never be cut off, and he says that name would be given when the Gentiles came to the know God and His salvation.

Turning now to the New Testament, we see the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. In Acts 10, with the conversion of an Italian soldier named Cornelius, we see God confirming that salvation had been offered to the Gentiles or to people of any nation, not just the Jews. In the chapter before that, we read about the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, and how Christ was going to rename him as Paul and use him as an apostle. Notice in Acts 9:15 how He told Ananias "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel." Two chapters later, we find Paul in the city of Antioch with Jews and Gentiles, teaching the word of God and the scripture says there in Acts 11:26, "And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch." Now, some say that was a name given to them by unbelievers in derision and ridicule. I don't believe that for a second. It is much more than coincidence that as the other requirements of Isaiah's prophecy were being fulfilled, the record says, "the disciples were FIRST called CHRISTIANS in Antioch." Friend, this was a divinely given name. It was later used twice in scripture by Paul and Peter to refer to those in Christ. The name "Christian" simply means a Christ follower. Notice how that name indicates Who they follow – Christ. In other words, in bearing the name "Christian", they were bearing the name of "Christ" himself.

Christians then and now are to be known as belonging to and following Christ and not man. In fact, Paul was alarmed at the divisions that were springing up in the Corinthian church and wrote to them in 1 Corinthians 1:12-13 saying: "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?" That even has a modern ring to it, doesn't it, when you consider the many denominations and religious organizations that have since come about and the names that some of them wear. Friend, if I were going to wear a name besides Christ, Paul would be good one, wouldn't it? You will never find a truer and more devoted servant of Christ than the Apostle Paul. Yet, Paul forbade people from wearing His name! If Paul forbade people wearing the names of the apostles, I can't imagine him being complicit with people today wearing the names of men who amount to much less! No, Paul said that we are to "of Christ". We have been baptized in the name of Christ, into a saving relationship with Christ, and we to from that point forward be the disciple OF Christ. My question is, why would we desire to wear any name besides Christ?

Let's think now about the relationship between Christ and the church. How is the church described? It is "the body of Christ". (1 Corinthians 12:27, Ephesians 4:12) It is the bride of Christ. When Paul described the relationship of a husband to his wife in Ephesians chapter 5, he then explained in verse 32: "This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church." Today, we usually expect a new bride to begin wearing the name of her husband. This indicates the relationship between them. Two who were separate have now become as one. If the church is the bride of Christ and married spiritually to Him, why should it not be identified as such? Why should it wear some other name? Again, the church is called the family or household of God (1 Timothy 3:15) over which Christ is the head. Ephesians 5:23 says "For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body." Shouldn't the family, of which Christ is the head, wear His name?

Christ is the builder of the church, not Martin Luther, John Wesley, John Knox, John Calvin, or any other man. Why would we wear the name or identify ourselves as being followers of any person besides Christ? The church has been put on earth to bring glory to God. Why should it wear a name that brings glory to itself? The church has been given many things to believe and practice within the faith once delivered to it (Jude 3) but why should we be identified by one of those particular features or practices? For example, the church of the New Testament certainly practiced baptism and placed great significance upon it (Acts 2:38, 1 Peter 3:21) but that doesn't mean the church should be called by that practice. The early church was very careful to follow the right methods but is that what the name should indicate? The church of the New Testament had elders or presbyters, but is that how the church should be identified and referred to in name? The church that Jesus built is universal in its scope, but does that constitute the name it should wear? Why one feature, practice, or doctrine over another? Friend, listen now, the reason some may attach those kinds of names to the church is to delineate them from others. Those names, by their very nature divide. The name of Jesus Christ unites.

The church is identified by several variations of the same idea in the New Testament, but they are rooted in a common name. They are descriptions of the same thing. Notice some of them and what they have in common. In Romans 16:16 "the churches of Christ greet you." Hebrews 12:23 "to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven..." Who is the firstborn? Revelation 1:5 "...Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood." The church of the firstborn, you see, is the church of Christ, God's Son. It is the bride of Christ. It is the body of Christ.

And then, at least eight times, it is called the church of God. But what or WHO does that refer to? Look at Acts 20:28 now. Paul said to the Ephesian elders: "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." Notice it now, "the church of God – which HE (God) purchased with His (whose? God's) own blood." God refers to Christ, the Son, you see.

Yes, my friend, God has given the church of His Son a name. It is a divine name. It is the name above all names. It is the name of Christ Himself who purchased, and built, and who is Sovereign over His church. I know and fully agree that wearing the name of Christ, within itself, does not make a church 'the church of Christ' but why would a church belong to Christ and choose to wear some other name? Think about it.

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