



DOES IT MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE WHICH CHURCH?

Kevin Presley

Good morning and welcome. It's my privilege to be with you to study the word of God. Should we be concerned about doctrine and religious practice? Does it matter what we believe; how we are saved; how we worship God; what name we wear spiritually? I believe it is safe to say most people today would answer, at least regarding most of those questions: "No, it doesn't make any difference, as long as a person is sincere or their heart is in the right place," and so forth.

We have been engaged in a series of lessons over the past few weeks asking, "Does It Make Any Difference?" Today, we wish to apply that question to the subject of the church. Thousands and thousands of congregations will come together today or this week to worship God according to their own consciences and beliefs. There are so many differences between them, that is certainly is tempting to throw our hands up, exasperated, and ask: "what difference does it make anyhow?" Is that the biblical attitude to take toward the situation that exists today?

Long ago, the first converts to the Christian faith were baptized when they heard Peter preach the gospel. Acts chapter 2 tells us that these who believed wanted to be saved and Peter commanded them all to repent of their sins and to be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins. Some three thousand people did just that and were added to the number of the disciples that same day. Acts 2:47 tells us, ***"praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved."*** Notice that every person who was saved was added by the Lord to the church. That should inform us that our being part of the church is important to God. But which church? Were there various options for people to choose from? Today, we want to look seriously into the word of God to answer the question: "Does it make any difference which church I am a member of?"

If we were to try to settle this question by people's opinions, we would just conclude this broadcast now, because most people would surely say, "it makes little to no difference about the church as long as people are honest and sincere." But we shouldn't be concerned with the opinions of men. Instead, we should earnestly want to know what the Bible teaches and thus, what the Lord says about the matter. Paul said that we to "Test all things; hold fast what is good." (1 Thessalonians 5:21) and that is just as true when it comes to the church as it is any other matter.

First, before we discuss the differences that exist between religious organizations, we should point out that it makes a difference whether we're a part of the church at all. Every survey that is taken shows an accelerating decline in the number of people who identify with a church or attend the assemblies of any church whatsoever. Many of these people still claim to believe in God and claim to be Christians but don't believe that the corporate church is necessary to being a Christian and living the Christian life. One must overlook several plain passages of scripture to reach such a conclusion, however. For one thing, the word church refers to a body of people called out, not only into a literal local assembly, but also called out of the world and into a relationship with Christ and simultaneously, one another. "The Lord added to the church daily those were being saved", says Luke in Acts 2:47. Paul referred to the congregation in the city of Corinth as the "body of Christ" in that place in which they were all members individually. (1 Corinthians 12:27) Well, you can't have a living and functioning body with its various parts detached and independent of one another.

It is God's will for every Christian to be not only part of the church as that word describes a unique relationship to God, but to be a part of a local congregation of people of like precious faith. We are not to "forsake the assembling of ourselves together", said the apostle in Hebrews 10:25. Paul said in Ephesians 3:21 that we glorify God in and through the church which His Son established. Paul also told the elders of that same congregation in his final and tearful meeting with them at Miletus in Acts 20:28, "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 (or the church of the Lord as one version renders it) which He purchased with His own blood." Now, my friend, if Jesus Christ endured the agony of the cross and poured out His own life's blood to purchase the church and if God even foreknew and predestined that to take place, you can know beyond the shadow of any doubt that Christ is not indifferent about the church! The church matters. Whether you are a faithful member of it matters. It makes a difference!

But then we're confronted with the disturbing reality of confusion and division among those who claim to be part of the church. One organization that compiles research about Christianity estimates that there are 33,000 denominations in the United States alone. Now, that number sounds rather high, and I don't know how they are defining a denomination. Perhaps they are counting individual congregations that don't have any visible association with any others. But regardless, we know that whatever the specific number, it is a disgrace and a disservice to the cause of Jesus Christ. Now I'm not so naïve as to think that we got here overnight and that with the snap of a finger such an awful condition will simply disappear. The present state is the result of centuries of division and human tradition. What I do know is that is not according to the will of God! How do I know that? For several reasons. Number one, because the bible plainly condemns such divisions. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:10, "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." That's a lofty aim but a biblical one, nonetheless.

The problem is there is very little effort to achieve it because people have chosen to indifferently shrug and assume this is way things simply must be. So, why worry about it? You have your beliefs and I'll have

mine. Who's to say who is right and who is wrong? As long as we are all sincere, then what difference does it make what church I am a member of? But you see, Jesus not only did not institute a system of denominations and varying and contradictory organizations within Christianity, but He also actually prayed and pleaded for the very opposite. In His great High Priestly prayer before He went to the cross, he prayed in John 17:20-21, "I do not pray for these alone (the apostles), but also 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, that the world may believe that You sent Me." Paul indicted the behavior of the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 1:12-13, "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?"

What would Paul say today about the religious landscape of thousands of sects and denominations wearing every kind of name, professing all sorts of various creeds, preaching different doctrines, and practicing all sorts of contradictory things? Would he approve or might he call people back to Christ's and his and the other apostles' teachings? You see, the answer of most people today to the division that exists is to overlook and even accept it and continue it. When it is condemned, the blame is nearly always placed upon those who demand a thus-sayeth-the-Lord for our belief and practice instead of those who insist on things that cannot be found in the New Testament. Very few people seem interested today in searching the bible and doing as Paul required in the passage we cited earlier and that is to "test all things, hold fast to those things that are good."

We will never begin to right the ship until we agree upon a standard for what is right as opposed to what is wrong and faithfully uphold that standard. Instead, we want ecumenism and simply go along and get along and whatever people want to believe, preach, and practice, well, don't say anything about or you're just causing more division. Friend, I do not expect to see a wholesale return to the bible and denominationalism and institutionalized division to simply disappear, but we can plead for the unity of the Spirit and we can, as idealistic as some think it is, we can resolve to go back to the bible and simply be the church as Christ established it in the beginning, only practicing those things the New Testament church practiced. If that's not our goal, just how far are you willing to go embracing the continuing change that we see in religion today? Is there a point where it goes too far and you say, "no more?" If you do, are you causing division or are you trying to point people back to the beginning and the pattern that we find in Christ and His apostles?

So, number one it makes a difference which church because the bible condemns the division that denominationalism represents. Number two, it makes a difference which church, because Christ only built one. We will never read in scripture where Jesus ever promised or where He ever did establish more than one church. He told Peter and the other disciples in Matthew 16:18 "...on this rock (which was the truth of Christ Peter had just confessed) I will build MY church and the gates of hades shall not prevail against it." Jesus did not say, 'I will build 33,000 or how ever many churches'. He said, "I will build my church" (singular) and please note that He said it would be HIS church. It belongs to Him. He planned it. He died for it. He built it. He commission His apostles to rule with Him over it. And no one has ever had or ever will have the right to build any other. Now, today, you can launch out and found any kind of church you want to. I see all kinds of professing churches today that wear every manner of name (some of them especially strange) that identify them as a peculiar religious body. You have the civil right to do that. You can establish a church that believes whatever you want it to believe, preach just about whatever you to preach, and worship however you see fit. But friend, it won't be the Lord's church! You may have the civil right to start it but you don't have the scriptural right to start it. And the Lord will not accept it. "Every plant which my heavenly Father has not planted, shall be uprooted." (Matthew 15:13)

The only congregation that has the scriptural right to exist is one that is built by Christ Himself and that means one that is built according to His word and is patterned after the one He began on the Day of Pentecost.

Now, I know people say that denominations are inevitable because there are just too many differences between people culturally, historically, socially, and so forth. But is that true? Well, it's interesting that Christ could have built two or more churches very early on but did not. The first converts to Christianity were Jews and a few years later, gentiles began to flood into the kingdom. There were thousands of years of cultural, social, and religious differences that had existed between the children of Abraham and the other nations of the world. Even though many of the Jews of the first century were Hellenized throughout the Greek world and Roman Empire, the differences were still vast. And when the first gentiles became obedient to the faith, it caused no little stir among Christians of Jewish descent. You had Gentiles coming from a pagan and immoral background and Jews who had lived under the Law of Moses. It presented such difficulty, that the apostles and elders had to meet in Jerusalem in Acts 15 to quell the controversy. The apostles (who were inspired and acting by Christ's personal authority) gave instructions to keep the Gentiles free from idolatry and refused to bind the Old Testament law on them but what they could have done but did not do was countenance a division into two denominations. They could have started a Jewish denomination and a Gentile denomination, arbitrarily assigned them identifying names, and allowed them to worship and operate according to their own traditions and desires but that is NOT what happened. In fact, listen to Paul in Ephesians 2:13-16. He says, "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off (that's the gentiles) have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both (Jew and Gentile) one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity." Notice, they were brought together in ONE BODY! What is the body? Well, Paul said in Colossians 1:18 that the body is the church.

When Paul recited the seven things that bind together the church of Christ in Ephesians 4, he succinctly and emphatically said "There is one body" (verse 4). "One Lord, one faith, one baptism. (verse 5). If a person can find room for denominationalism in that, I don't know what the bible could possibly say to teach otherwise. Denominationalism is an invention of man and it's a tool of the devil to divide, confuse, and obfuscate the path to serving God in spirit and in truth. Yes, it makes a difference which church because Christ only built one and no more.

Finally, it makes a difference because it is possible to restore and practice the ancient faith. We're not left to wonder what the early church, under the oversight of the apostles, believed and how they were organized, and how they worshiped. We're not left to wonder what they taught for doctrine. We have the New Testament. The book of Acts is a rather detailed record of the spread of Christianity throughout the world and the establishment of many congregations of the Lord's church. The epistles are letters by Paul, Peter, James, John, and others instructing the church how to live and how to operate. Paul told Timothy in 1 Timothy 3:15 "...I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." Paul told the Corinthians that they were not to "think beyond what is written..." (1 Corinthians 4:6) Paul commended them because they were trying to "keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you."

You see, we can not only know what the apostles expected the church to believe, preach, and practice, those things are there so that we might do the very same. Now, that means we don't practice many of

the things that are widely embraced by the religious world today because they are not authorized in the scriptures, but so be it. If the New Testament gives us a pattern and example for what the church was then while Christ's apostles preached and worked among them, then it makes a difference what we believe and practice today as well. Friend, are you curious enough and earnest enough to take the bible in hand and search for the church you may be a member of? Can you read its way of worship in the New Testament? Can you read how it is organized and governed in the New Testament? Can you read the name you call it in the New Testament, or does it wear some other name – perhaps that of a man or a movement? These are serious questions. The church for which Christ died is too precious, the words of God are too important, and our souls are too valuable to believe error and embrace that which Christ did not author nor intend. Yes, the church – WHICH church – makes a difference – and I hope you'll set out to discover the church of the bible and make sure you're a member of it.

©2023 BibleWay Media. All rights reserved.

BibleWay Media grants permission to copy this material for personal use. Permission is also granted to distribute this transcript as long as it is reproduced in its entirety, used solely for its original purpose of spreading the gospel, and attribution is given to the author and Let the Bible Speak.