



# **Peculiar People**

**A Thirteen Lesson Bible Study by Jeff S. Smith**



## *Foreword*

The King James translation of the New Testament included a reminder that members of Christ's church should strive to be a peculiar people. Indeed, many throughout the denominations of Christendom, as it is fashioned, think of the members of churches of Christ as very peculiar—strange and antagonistic to the prevailing ecumenical sentiment that concludes all denominations are created equally. Peculiarity, however, goes beyond perceived strangeness to distinctiveness in authority, headship and calling.

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## *Introduction*

The churches of Christ are clearly different from their Roman Catholic and denominational neighbors—Protestant groups like the Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists and Lutherans.

Through the years, members of churches of Christ have sometimes been ashamed of that distinctiveness and have sought either to eliminate it or to conceal it at the very least. An ecumenical spirit often appears to be the most peaceable and friendly compromise available—an acknowledgement that all churches are created equal, even if “ours” is a little more equal than others.

Bible students will remember the story of Queen Esther, who, encouraged by her cousin, Mordecai, attained to that high post only after concealing her Jewish identity beneath a years’ worth of oil and spices and a certain undeniable pragmatism (Esther 2:12). Thus did Hadassah the lovely Jewess become Queen Esther of Persia. A moment of reckoning came, however, when the survival of her race wholly depended upon Hadassah’s willingness to proclaim her identity. She did, saying, “and if I perish, I perish” (4:16).

It is a short distance from concealing one’s identity to losing it altogether. Hadassah could have remained Esther of the Persians and she might even have survived Haman’s genocidal mania, but she would have ceased to be the lovely daughter of God amidst all the heathen trappings.

Today, members of churches of Christ are increasingly discouraged from proclaiming their faith in Jesus and their membership in his unique body, the church of Christ. An era of subjective secularism grips America and the disciples of Christ are out of step, so sure of their Bible’s authenticity, their savior’s reality and his church’s exclusivity.

Some would even contend that an ecumenical introduction is the only way to win converts and defectors from the world and its denominational cousin. Boldly exposing creedal error and inviting Vatican displeasure seem unnecessarily hostile—vinegar where sweet honey might better fill the pews and enhance the coffers.

The pious peculiarity of God’s people is disappearing as fast as the ancient Bible translations that included that word. Christ “gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works” (Titus 2:14, KJV). “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (First Peter 2:9, KJV).

Today, peculiarity is translated as “his own possession” (ESV), but that does little to nullify the call to distinctiveness. The time comes to sustain the race by standing up and speaking out.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Approximately when were the following denominations founded?
  - a. Roman Catholic:
  - b. Presbyterian:
  - c. Lutheran:
  - d. Episcopal:
2. Name a few churches that claim they are not denominations at all.
3. Why would members of churches of Christ become ashamed of being distinctive? To what can the expression of distinctiveness lead?
4. What might Christians do to conceal their identity and distinctiveness? What might we learn from Esther's example?
5. Which is the greater threat to the Christian-secularism or denominationalism? (Answers will vary.)
6. Why won't ecumenical evangelism lead to true conversions?
7. What did the Holy Spirit mean when referring to his people as peculiar (Titus 2:11-14, KJV; First Peter 2:4-10, KJV; cf. 4:1-5)?
8. List some ways the church's distinctiveness is under attack from within.

## *The Real Jesus*

Perhaps one should expect that after 2000 years, man's understanding of Jesus Christ would have changed.

Historians, after all, have revised their assessments of Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great and George Washington—why not let theologians and the people in the pews review the character of Jesus Christ and put it in a more modern context.

Moderns, after all, are consumed with ecumenical understanding and moral tolerance. Surely, when Jesus found denominational division and ripe iniquity in his day, he meekly smiled and pronounced acceptance upon it all.

It is becoming peculiar and unique to recall that Jesus, while meek, was no coward when it came to exposing both religious and moral error, wherever he found it.

The scribes, Pharisees, Herodians and Sadducees were the sects of his day—Jewish denominations involved in rivalries just as fierce as Protestantism used to be. Jesus openly exposed them as opportunistic hypocrites, selfishly promoting their cosmetic piety at the expense of people in need and imposing either false doctrine or false examples upon the unwitting (see Matthew chapter 23). “Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell” (verse 33)?

Truth is exclusive and two opposite notions cannot be equally true. The sky cannot be equally blue and brown. The real Jesus was willing and happy to tell them they worshiped in vain who taught as doctrines the mere commandments of men (Matthew 15:9). To those who feared offending their neighbors or the prominent sects, Jesus called them blind leaders of the blind, both destined to fall into a ditch (verse 14).

Jesus is remembered for saying, “Judge not, that you be not judged,” but people conveniently forget that he clarified that prohibition by ordering his disciples instead to “judge with righteous judgment” (John 7:24). Jesus did not outlaw judging, but judgmentalism—the habit of men to overlook their own flaws in the rush to expose others’ (Matthew 7:1-5).

When he was confronted by the scribes and Pharisees with a woman caught in the very act of adultery, he refused to condemn her to stoning, saying, “He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first” (John 8:7). When her accusers crawled away, Jesus told her, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more” (verse 11). Far from excusing her behavior, Jesus called it sin—but he commanded her to repent, not to be executed. The real Jesus calls all men to repent of their sins; he does not validate their misbehavior or minimize iniquity based upon societal changes.

They are an increasingly peculiar people who proclaim the real Jesus, the one the gospel writers described in the New Testament.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Consider John 15:1-8. What is illogical about using this passage as authority for denominationalism in Christ's body?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What sects did Jesus find during his ministry? What did their existence suggest? For what did Jesus pray regarding his church (John 17:17)?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. How did Jesus handle religious error in these passages:
  - a. John 2:13-17:
  - b. Mark 7:1-13:
  - c. Matthew 23:1-36:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. After Christ ascended and his apostles went about establishing his church, how did they deal with doctrinal errors that arose (First Corinthians 15:32-34, Galatians 5:7-12, Romans 16:17-18, Second John 9-11)? Was it an ecumenical, tolerant manner or a more militant defense of truth?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. Explain whether the expression "Judge not" forbids Christians from all judgment (Matthew 7:1-5, cf. John 7:24, Hebrews 5:14, First Corinthians 5:3, Galatians 6:1-2).
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. How did Jesus judge the woman caught in the act of adultery in a way more fitting than the men who arrested her (John 8:1-12)?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. Summarize how the real Jesus of the New Testament differs from the semi-popular modern model.

## *Jesus Built His Church*

In the midst of his brief earthly ministry, the controversy about Jesus was coming to a head.

His very identity was a matter of conflict. Was he possibly the prophesied messiah, or was he in reality another in the line of pretenders? Was he a madman, a fraud, a charlatan? “He asked his disciples, ‘Who do men say that I, the son of man, am?’” (Matthew 16:13)?

The disciples suggested that there were many opinions about him—the most polite of which they probably described to him—“Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (14).

It was Peter who confessed the disciples’ conviction that Jesus was “the Christ, the son of the living God” (16). Elsewhere, Peter told Jesus, “You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

The Lord responded to Peter’s confident confession by issuing a prophecy, that, “on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (18). That must have sounded cryptic and unusual to Peter and the disciples, who then associated Jesus with their own dream of a Jewish revolt against the Roman overlords in Palestine. Even more surprising was how quickly Jesus connected this mysterious “church” with the dearly held expectation of a renewal of God’s favored kingdom. He told the 12 that, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (19).

Jesus promised to build his church here so it was not yet in existence, although both he and the Baptist had acquired sizable, devoted followings. The church is literally “the called out” and the true test of this calling would be after he had done something even more shocking. Rather than take up arms to battle the Romans, he laid down his life upon one of their crosses and then took it back up again by emerging both from Hades and his tomb.

He and the apostles built the church he promised with the Christ as its cornerstone and the inspired apostles and prophets filling out its foundation (Ephesians 2:19-22). The Rock that supports the church is not Peter, but Christ—glorified in Peter’s courageous confession and imitated by every believer who would be saved (Romans 10:9-10, First Timothy 6:12).

The church does not belong to latter day saints, to Luther, to the presbytery or even to the esteemed Baptist. It does not belong to the state, to the preacher or the deacons. The church belongs to Christ and he is its sole lawgiver and object of adoration (James 4:12, Ephesians 3:20-21).

Where Jesus interchanged the words “church” and “kingdom,” Paul adds the analogy of Christ’s body (Ephesians 1:22-23). That church is first spoken of as being in existence in Acts 2:47 where “the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” Any church that began before or after can lay no legitimate claim to being the church of Christ.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. To whom did Gamaliel compare Jesus after his death (Acts 5:33-40)? What distinguishes Jesus from them?

2. Who did the people think Jesus might have been during his ministry (Matthew 16:13-14)?

3. Upon what did Jesus promise to build his church (Matthew 16:15-18; First Corinthians 10:4, Ephesians 2:19-22)?

4. What role did the “gates of Hades” play in the founding of Christ’s church (Matthew 28:1-10, Acts 2:22-35, Hebrews 2:14-15)?

5. When was the church of Christ established (Acts 2:36-47, Colossians 1:13-14)? What is intended by the phrase “churches of Christ” (Romans 16:16)?

6. When did the church change from a community of individual Christians into a collection of local churches and then into a series of distinctive denominations?

7. What role does Christ play today in the affairs of his church (First Peter 5:4, James 4:12, Ephesians 1:22-23, 3:20-21)?

## *Baptism for the Remission of Sins*

The phrase “baptism for the remission of sins” is not all that peculiar or uncommon; it is, after all, in the Bible.

Interpreting that phrase literally, so that it means what it says, however, is quite peculiar in a world that either prefers sprinkling to immersion or that baptism should be for something other than remitting sins.

Baptism—immersion of a human being in water—enjoyed a prominent place in the ministries of John and his cousin from the start. John baptized so many people that he became known as “the baptist.” Southern or Free-Will? Well, neither. The Baptist Church did not come along for another 15 centuries; John’s role as baptist was simply that, “he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3).

When the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do,” John spelled out works befitting repentance, baptizing only those who were penitent and believing. Even Jesus was baptized, in his case “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15) and commissioned his disciples to baptize the penitent as John was doing (John 4:1-2). Not everybody was willing to go jump in the river, however. “But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the will of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him (Luke 7:30).

Following Christ’s death, burial and resurrection, water baptism was made a part of his Great Commission to the apostles just before his ascension back into heaven. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). Mark repeats certain commentary from Jesus on that occasion: “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (16:16).

The urgency and necessity of baptism throughout the gospels and into the early church is at odds with Protestant theology, which holds that no effort of man may be involved in redemption. Still, when Peter was asked by the Pentecost audience what they needed to do to correct the sin of crucifying Jesus, the apostle replied, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38).

As one cannot logically be forgiven of a sin *before* he repents of it, so he cannot expect to be *cleansed* from it before he washes. Baptism cleanses, not the literal flesh, but the sin it represents (see First Peter 3:21). Baptism, from the Greek *baptizo*, is an immersing—not a sprinkling or pouring—that has the spiritual effect of washing away sins (Acts 22:16) and putting the believer into the blood and body of Christ (Romans 6:3-4, Galatians 3:27).

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are some common modes of “baptism” today? What are some common purposes of baptism today?

2. Was John a baptist (Luke 3:3)? Was Paul (First Corinthians 1:14-17)? Were they Baptists? Explain.

3. Who were proper subjects for John’s baptism (Luke 3:1-14)? Who refused to be baptized (Luke 7:30)?

4. Complete this equation from Mark 16:15-16:

\_\_\_\_\_ + \_\_\_\_\_ = Salvation

5. How does baptism interfere with the doctrine of salvation by faith or grace alone (James 2:17-24, Luke 17:6-10, Luke 6:46-49, Romans 6:1-7, Philippians 2:12-13)?

6. What is baptism for, according to Acts 2:38 and First Peter 3:18-22?

7. When were Saul’s sins forgiven, indicating his redemption (Acts 22:12-16, Galatians 3:24-27)?

8. How is baptism similar to a burial (Colossians 2:11-14, Ephesians 4:20-24, John 3:1-7)?

## *A Rose By Any Other Name*

Names matter.

People are offended when called by a wrong name, especially if that name is insulting or malicious. Names make it simpler to identify the object of discussion, desire or derision. People learned to ask for Oreos by name and the inferior Hydrox cookie became extinct.

Members of the body of Christ can scripturally be called by just one proper name, in spite of the fact there are many modern denominations, each with its own special, artificial moniker. Today, one might call himself a Presbyterian or a Roman Catholic or a Methodist or a Lutheran without every scratching the surface of New Testament teaching or example. Nowhere in the Bible is there a single representative of any of those groups or the other denominations.

The disciples of Christ were properly called “Christians”—a term roughly translated to “like Christ”—and thus a fitting tribute to their savior and master. The same cannot be said for any denominational term that buries the name of Jesus beneath its tradition and inspires deeper loyalty to a sect than the savior.

Twice in Luke’s Acts of the Apostles, the physician and historian remarks on the biblical term. We find “the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (11:26). Some have suggested that this term was born of derision toward the disciples from their neighbors, but even if that was so, it is clear that the followers of Christ did not deem it much of an insult to be associated with Jesus and judged to be like him. It is perhaps more likely that the imposition of this name was divine and prophetic, for Isaiah predicted, “The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory, and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give” (62:2).

The reader is left to wonder about the tone of his voice, but the acceptance of the name is evident when Agrippa rejects the invitation of the apostle Paul to join the flock by saying, “You almost persuade me to become a Christian” (Acts 26:28).

Peter is the only other New Testament writer to employ the name, opting because of inspiration against other terms like “Catholic” or “Baptist.” Peter said, “Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name” (First Peter 4:16, ESV).

Loyalty to Christ and gladness at being like him should prevail when we present ourselves before the world as believers and disciples. Denominational names serve only to foster division and rivalry where unity ought to be the objective (John 17:17). A rose by any other name is just not quite the same thing anymore.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What does the word “Christian” literally mean? Where were the disciples first called “Christians”?
  
2. By what other **names** do denominational people go? What is the purpose and the problem with all of these denominational monikers?
  
3. If it is true, as some suggest, that “Christian” was born of derision for the disciples, why would they seemingly accept the term anyway (First Peter 4:14)?
  
4. How did Paul attempt to persuade Agrippa to become a Christian (Acts 26:24-28, Romans 1:16, 10:17)?
  
5. List some ways that a believer might suffer “as a Christian” (First Peter 4:16-19, Acts 5:41, Second Timothy 3:12, Hebrews 13:1-3)?
  
6. While Christian is the only proper noun associated with the followers of Jesus Christ, what are some other words that apply to them?
  - a. Romans 1:7:
  - b. Acts 6:7:
  - c. Acts 5:14:
  - d. Ephesians 2:19:
  
7. What is wrong with members of churches of Christ accepting these proper names:
  - a. Campbellite:
  - b. Church of Christ:
  - c. Water Salvationist:

*As Often As You Observe the Lord's Supper*

The Lord's Supper provides an obvious occasion to commune with our Savior in a memorial to his sacrifice on the cross nearly 2,000 years ago.

Think about that. Nearly two thousand years have passed and people are still commemorating his life, death and resurrection. No other historical event or person enjoys such enduring respect.

The Holy Spirit teaches that the Lord's Supper began as an extension of the Jewish Passover feast, for it was upon that occasion that Jesus punctuated the meal with the inauguration of a new feast (First Corinthians 11:23-26). Unleavened bread from the meal was used to represent his body, about to be arrested, tortured and buried. Juice from the fruit of a vine was imbibed to represent his blood, soon to be shed through the injuries caused by whips, fists and nails.

Somehow the idea of symbolic representation is not quite strong enough. The strange Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation is plainly false—that the bread and wine literally transform into his divine flesh and blood—but the Lord's Supper is no mere show of symbols either. It is a very real occasion of fellowship and communion with the Savior whose body and blood were sacrificed in the name of sinful humanity. Jesus “bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed” (First Peter 2:24).

As any act of worship can be either in vain (Matthew 15:1-9) or in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24), so one's observance of the Lord's Supper can be marred by thoughtlessness, apathy and ingratitude. The apostle Paul found fault with the Corinthian church because it had corrupted the Lord's Supper with a common meal, in which the wealthy dined extravagantly while the poor watched in envy (First Corinthians 11:17-22). This communion feast should instead be an opportunity to examine oneself and participate with an eye upon the cross (27-34).

With such a glorious origin, it must be impossible for the Lord's Supper to become an exercise in ritual, without meaning or emotional attachment, regardless of the frequency with which it is observed. The only word on this matter in the New Testament is found in Acts 20:7, where, “on the first day of the week ... the disciples came together to break bread.” The Lord's Supper is a feature of the Lord's Day—the first day of the week—Sunday (Revelation 1:10). It is authorized for no other day or occasion and should be gratefully observed whenever a first day of the week comes around—which is every week, of course.

Such frequency is peculiar and rare these days, but it should be a privilege, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes” (First Corinthians 11:26).

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. On what occasion did Jesus institute his supper (Luke 22:7-23)? What similarity did Paul note in Jesus himself (First Corinthians 5:7)?
  
2. What did each of the elements represent?
  - a. unleavened bread:
  - b. fruit of the vine:
  
3. What is the doctrine of transubstantiation?
  
4. How did the Corinthian church corrupt the Lord's Supper (First Corinthians 11:17-22, 33-34)?
  
5. What did Paul identify as the purpose of the Lord's Supper (23-26)?
  
6. What is required of the worshiper as he eats and drinks (27-32)?
  
7. When did the first century church observe the Lord's Supper (Acts 20:7)?
  
8. What is it that will keep us from finding such frequency too much, or from allowing our minds to wander, or from wanting to spice up the event with external emotional stimuli (First Peter 2:24)?

*Preachers, Pastors, Teachers and Popes*

The New Testament church is a remarkably simple organism—quite unlike the complicated hierarchies imagined by the Roman and Protestant versions witnessed today.

The Holy Spirit says, “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-12).

Along with deacons, mentioned in First Timothy chapter three and in the salutation of the Philippian epistle, these are the sole offices known to the biblical church. The apostolic office was not subject to perpetual succession—only that of Iscariot was filled and only once when Matthias assumed it in Acts chapter one. The office of prophet was quite active during the first century as God used such scaffolding around the construction of his son’s church, but when the perfect law of liberty was once for all delivered, miraculous abilities ceased and the office disappeared.

Besides deacons, what remains are evangelists, pastors and teachers, and while one man might occupy all three roles, they are neither synonymous nor interchangeable. Peter was all three, but Paul only two (First Timothy 2:7, Second Timothy 1:11). The modern office of Pope is nowhere described in the New Testament—a document which goes to great lengths to describe both the requirements and functions of the offices of elder and deacon, but says nothing at all about a pope.

The papal office is the result of an unscriptural consolidation of power in the hands of a few and finally, of one. In the Bible, a plurality of bishops acted as overseers of the local congregations of which they were members and had no authority beyond (see First Peter 5:1-4, Acts 20:28). There was no regional government—dioceses—or worldwide headquartering of the earthly church in Rome, Jerusalem, Constantinople, Alexandria or anywhere else.

Moreover, a distinction existed between the pastor and the preacher, or evangelist. While a man might occupy both roles, frequently he did not. Pastors tended to those flocks as shepherds, bishops or overseers, while the evangelists preached the gospel and built up the church there and wherever he might travel. The preacher was seldom also a pastor and without such an additional ordination, he did not exercise the kind of unilateral congregational oversight so common today.

The New Testament is also silent on the subject of archbishops, cardinals, synods and doctrinal conventions. Each of these threatens the autonomy of the local church and entangles it needlessly in the affairs of other congregations, subjecting it to the virus of error wherever it first appears.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why was the apostolic office of Judas Iscariot refilled, while others were not (Acts 1:15-20, Psalm 69:25, 109:8; Acts 12:1-2)?

2. What became of the office of prophet in the church (First Corinthians 13:8-13, Mark 16:20, Second Peter 1:19-21)?

3. What does an evangelist do (Second Timothy 4:1-5)? Must a preacher become itinerant to be an evangelist (Acts 19:13, 21:8)? What difference is there between a preacher and an evangelist (First Timothy 2:7, Second Timothy 1:11)?

4. Are preacher and pastor synonymous terms? What is the difference, if any (Acts 20:17, 28; First Timothy 5:17)?

5. List five New Testament synonyms for pastor. (Different English translations employ various words in each place.)

a. First Peter 5:1:

d. First Timothy 4:14:

b. Titus 1:7:

e. Acts 20:28:

c. First Timothy 3:1:

6. What is the work of the bishops (First Peter 5:1-4, Acts 20:28-31, Titus 1:10-14)?

7. What keeps women from occupying such offices (First Timothy 2:8-12)?

8. If the work of the seven men in Acts chapter six indicates that of deacons, what kind of work is done by that office (1-6)?

*Melody in the Heart*

When one thinks of “church music” today, he probably thinks about an organ, maybe a piano and perhaps some harps. More contemporary worshipers might think about electric guitars and drum kits. To learn that the phrase *a cappella* means music in chapel or church style, and is without any instrumental accompaniment, is, well, shocking.

Although the psalmists and singers of the Old Testament boasted of many musical instruments, the infant New Testament church left them behind when it was founded. As a result, not a single example exists of the first century church worshiping God with instrumental accompaniment. For hundreds of years after its founding, the church continued to eschew them, until apostasy went far enough that they became standard, not only in Catholicism, but later in Protestantism.

Any effort to restore twenty-first century Christianity to a first-century model will have to include a consideration of worship. Lacking any command or example, the church is authorized only to sing its music, to “offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name,” as the Hebrew writer heard it (13:15).

Rather than augment the lyrics, instruments tend to interfere with the message and the dual purpose of song is to praise God and instruct one another. “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:19). The only instrument mentioned in this passage is a human heart, whose strings are plucked by thoughtful singing of praises to the Lord (First Corinthians 14:15).

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Colossians 3:16).

Besides the orthodox churches which eschew instrumental music as a Roman innovation, churches of Christ are peculiar in rejecting their use and producing vocal music alone. They do so in imitation of approved examples and in the absence of New Testament authority to do otherwise, the Law of Moses being recognized as fulfilled and abolished (Ephesians 2:15-17).

Instrumental music in worship becomes something akin to the strange fire offered by Nadab and Abihu in the book of Leviticus. “So fire went out from the LORD and devoured them, and they died before the LORD. And Moses said to Aaron, ‘This is what the LORD spoke, saying: “By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy”’” (10:2-3). Strange fire is any act of worship “which he had not commanded” (1).

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What kinds of musical instruments were employed in Old Testament worship (Second Samuel 6:5, First Chronicles 13:8, 23:5; Second Chronicles 29:5)? Does their presence in the Law of Moses automatically make them acceptable for the church's use (Ephesians 2:14-18, Colossians 2:13-17, Hebrews 8:13)? Give some similar examples.

2. Consider Colossians 3:16-17. How can the Christian's musical praise show evidence of Christ's word dwelling richly in him (cf. James 5:13)?

3. How does music teach and admonish others?

4. Consider Ephesians 5:15-21. What do people often do while drunk? What is a better way to celebrate?

5. What can make even singing detestable to God (First Corinthians 14:15, Amos 5:21-24)?

6. If we are to play harps in heaven, doesn't it make sense for us to practice on Earth (Revelation 5:8, 14:2, 15:2; First Corinthians 14:7)?

7. Why does divine authority matter (Leviticus 10:1-3, James 4:12, Ephesians 5:10, 17)?

## *Taking A Holiday*

Two religious holidays are prominent on most modern churches' calendars; some adherents have even reduced their worship appearance to just those two occasions.

Christmas and Easter are both innovations of the Roman Catholic tradition, as its ancient forbears found it difficult to convert many pagans without accommodating some of their more beloved customs and observances. Festivals which celebrated the sun god and Ishtar were successfully, if not scripturally, morphed into commemorations of the birth and resurrection of Jesus.

Holidays as diverse as Pentecost and Purim were a part of the Mosaic calendar, with the weekly Sabbath observance lending predictability to the Jewish week. It is evident Hebrew converts to Christianity were free to continue observing some of these vestiges of the old law even after it was replaced with the new. We witness the apostle Paul participating in a purification ritual at the temple to appease Jews who were uneasy about his attitude toward Moses (Acts 21:17-26). (His act of appeasement nearly got him killed.) Paul likewise accepted the fact that, "One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike" (Romans 14:5).

When attempts arose by certain Judaizing teachers to impose Hebrew holidays upon the church and its burgeoning Gentile membership, he balked, however. "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ" (Colossians 2:16-17).

The Jewish special days, including Sabbath, were not revisited upon the church, and the popularly accepted holidays of Christmas and Easter are nowhere mentioned in the Bible. Nothing is said about the date when Jesus was born, although December 25 is a most unlikely candidate, nor is there any divine authority for celebrating his birthday at all.

The word "Easter" can only be found in an obvious mistranslation of Acts 12:4, where the writer clearly refers to Passover instead. Otherwise, the church is only authorized to commemorate the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus according to New Testament example—not in some annual, artificial Easter celebration, but in the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper (First Corinthians 11:17-32, Acts 20:7).

The trouble with manmade holidays is that they take away from the impact of the sole New Testament special day—the Lord's day upon which the Supper is taken and the his death is proclaimed each week until he should at last return.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Describe the introduction of the Christmas and Easter holidays.
2. Which of the various Jewish feast days were imposed upon the church of Christ, especially its uninitiated Gentile members?
3. What was the church's stance on the Sabbath observance (Acts 15:5, Colossians 2:16-17)? Describe the "Christian Sabbath."
4. What is the church's lone special day? Describe what it entails.
5. What is the real danger of introducing holidays like Easter and Christmas to the church calendar (Hebrews 3:13, 10:24-25)?
6. What other "holidays" do churches sometimes observe? Where do they become unscriptural intrusions upon God's authority?
7. Is it permissible for the Christian to observe Christmas and Easter in any way at all?

## *The Church and the Kingdom*

The Jewish people had become familiar with the concept of a kingdom by observing their neighbors and eventually persuading God to institute a monarchy among their confederation of tribes as well.

The kingdom led by giants like Saul, David and Josiah was notably flawed, however, by numerous missteps, especially the accommodation and eventual adoption of idolatry. God accepted the division of Israel after the death of Solomon, dissolved the northern alliance by 721 B.C. and allowed the Jews to suffer a similar fate at the hands of the Babylonians in 586 B.C.

It is at this point that the Old Testament kingdom prophecies take on new importance, with the element of restoration now attached to the promise that God would institute a kingdom which would not be so shaken.

The prophecies of Daniel, himself an exile in Nebuchadnezzar's courts, are especially pertinent to the search for God's renewed kingdom. Daniel explained to his Babylonian captors that, after a series of empires cycled through, God would establish "a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever" (2:44).

Such prophecies lay dormant for centuries as the Jews remained under the authority of the Babylonians, the Medes and Persians and the Greeks, sometimes resisting and rebelling, but always remaining in chains. By the time that special baby was born in Bethlehem, the time had grown ripe for this kingdom to arrive and for its monarch to ascend.

Jewish zealots had learned to look for revolutionary men as potential deliverers—men in the style of Gideon or David. False messiahs had appeared, staking short-lived claims to the office, only to be defeated (see Acts 5:36-37). Jesus of Nazareth, however, was different from them, in that he avoided fomenting rebellion against the Romans and talked instead of effecting liberty from a greater, if less tangible dictator—Satan, who used sin and temptation and guilt to enslave people.

Jesus gradually unveiled his royal pedigree and kingdom intentions, resisting provocations to make him an earthly ruler, while taking the painful steps necessary to become a spiritual ruler (Matthew 16:13-28 and First Timothy 6:15). He frequently couched his kingdom teaching in parables, eventually revealing that, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36).

In keeping with Daniel's timing, Jesus predicted that, "there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power" (Mark 9:1). His own death seemed to derail those plans until it became evident that his kingdom was different from others, that it was a realm of the called-out—the church—and that he was seated upon the throne of David as its only head (Acts 2:29-47, Ephesians 1:22-23).

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. With what were the Israelites dissatisfied when they asked Samuel to anoint them a king (First Samuel 8:1-22)? What did Samuel warn them?
2. What became of the kingdom of Israel? To what did this lead (Acts 1:6)?
3. Describe the kind and timing of the kingdom that Daniel foresaw in the dream of Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 2:31-45).
4. What kinds of men had tried to restore Israel (Acts 5:36-37)? How was Jesus most unlike them (John 8:28-47, Matthew 22:15-22)?
5. What important predictions did Jesus add to the kingdom story (Matthew 16:13-28 and Mark 9:1)? How many of them fell short?
6. Reasonable people assumed that his death quashed his royal ambitions, not seeing his greater mission. How did he explain this (Luke 24:13-27)?
7. Describe the kingdom of Christ (Matthew 16:18-19, Colossians 1:13, Ephesians 1:22-23, Philippians 3:20-21). What is its fate (Ephesians 5:26-27, Second Peter 1:10-11)?

## *Social Gospel*

The apostle Paul warned the beleaguered saints in Galatia about “turning to a different gospel” at the behest of “some who distort the gospel of Christ ... preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received” (1:6-9).

In the twentieth century, a different gospel arose among noble Christian thinkers, a gospel that appeared to be a continuation of the message of Christ, but which has proven to obscure the message of spiritual salvation in favor of earthly self-affirmation (Romans 8:5).

The social gospel started out by addressing various social problems in America -- child labor, poverty, crime, hygiene, education -- by trying to apply Christian ethics to them. Today, the social gospel has come to overshadow the true mission of Christ -- to save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21) -- by causing the church to evolve into a predominantly social and recreational institution. Churches offer profitable child care programs, enticing sports programs, frequent and free meals, and membership in a family life building -- a glorified multipurpose gymnasium with no redeeming spiritual value at all.

Some churches openly cater to the “whole man,” a reference that minimizes the spirit and pursues the body. Satan is behind the introduction of any different gospel, any corruption and perversion of the original, especially one so insidiously crafted to resemble the real thing.

The modern social gospel is as much recreational as it is socially-conscious. It is fleshly and carnal, mixing the blood of Christ with basketballs under the assumption that lost youth can be won with nothing less. Focus on the heart is lost when free karate lessons are the real draw, “for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come” (First Timothy 4:8).

The social and recreational gospel goes beyond the doctrine of Christ and his mission for the church to make known “the manifold wisdom of God ... to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places” (Ephesians 3:10). Whether it is an angel, a demon or a soft-spoken, well-meaning pastor, “Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son” (Second John 9).

Churches of Christ have not proven immune to the obvious successes of the social and recreational gospel. Kitchens, gymnasiums and daycares -- so unnecessary to the cause of the cross -- are threats to the progressives’ attachment to the text and their focus upon preaching the soul-saving good news about a risen savior who takes away the sins of mankind (First John 3:5).

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What was the nature of the “different gospel” about which Paul warned the Galatians (1:6-9, 2:1-5, 5:1-12)?
2. What might be Satan’s objective in promoting a “different gospel”, especially one that was steeped in “Christian ethics” (Second Corinthians 11:3-4, 13-15)?
3. How did the social gospel begin? How has it evolved (First Timothy 4:8)?
4. Why did Jesus come to the Earth and later die (Matthew 1:18-25, Acts 20:28, First Timothy 1:15)? What is the purpose of the church (First Timothy 3:15, Ephesians 3:10)?
5. When certain disciples clamored for a first-century social gospel that fed the hungry, how did Jesus react (John 6:22-35)?
6. Why is the individual permitted to campaign for social issues where the church is not (Ephesians 2:10, Galatians 6:9-10, First John 2:9)?
7. How can sound churches survive and compete against family life centers, karate programs, fifth quarter fun and food parties, and the like?

*No Creed But Christ*

A creed is a statement or set of beliefs and every church and denomination has one. Even the churches of Christ.

Where the Roman church looks to its papal catechism for direction, Protestants entrust conventions and synods with the development of their belief documents. The Watchtowerites look toward Brooklyn for regular pronouncements and reminders while the Mormons listen to Salt Lake City and the many writings of Joseph Smith.

Human creeds change over time. The twentieth century saw a remarkable digression in the American standard of morality and denominational creeds reflect that. In the twenty-first century, attitudes toward sin threaten the stability of the creeds as plebiscites are conducted to nudge the people toward accepting the practice.

Baptists, Methodists, Catholics—everybody’s got a creed book that sometimes supplements and sometimes substitutes for Scripture. There the Bible stands, however, proclaiming to anyone who will listen, that it is sufficient, complete and thorough enough to preclude any artificial addendum.

The sole creed of the churches of Christ is Christ himself—the incarnate Word who possesses all authority in heaven and earth and is the one lawgiver for his church (John 1:1-14, Matthew 28:18-20, James 4:12). Few homes boast a copy of any denominational creed book, but nearly every home and hotel room has a copy of the one used in churches of Christ.

Paul told one young preacher that, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work ... preach the word” (Second Timothy 3:16-17, 4:2).

Denominational creeds exist to explain distinctive sectarian opinions about Scripture, especially regarding controversial subjects in which great differences exist from group to group. Their existence presupposes that Scripture, by itself, is not understandable. The cultic groups are more apt than others to admit this, but the very presence of a human creed indicates such an attitude. Paul, however, told his students, “By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ” (Ephesians 3:4).

The Bible is understandable and the effect of the creeds is merely to solidify denominational affiliation and isolation. True unity is only possible when believers take a plain stand with Jesus and his word. Sectarian creeds, like their monikers, shift one’s loyalty away from the Lord to the denomination and make unity more difficult to secure. If Scripture is understandable, they aren’t necessary anyway.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the name of the creed for the following groups?
  - a. Roman Catholic Church:
  - b. Baptist Church:
  - c. Methodist Church:
  - d. Lutheran Church:
  - e. Watchtower Bible and Tract Society:
  - f. Latter Day Saints:
  - g. Churches of Christ:
2. Why do denominational creeds exist? How are they developed?
3. If a denominational creed is a restatement of divine truth, should it ever change? Why does it change with nearly every generation?
4. Explain whether denominational creeds are an assault upon the authority of Jesus Christ.
5. How do denominational creeds interfere with the pursuit of believers' unity?
6. Some have suggested that churches of Christ have an unwritten, but still artificial creed, that goes beyond Scripture. How would you respond?

*Review*

1. Why would members of churches of Christ become ashamed of being distinctive? To what can the expression of distinctiveness lead?
2. Summarize how the real Jesus of the New Testament differs from the semi-popular modern model.
3. Upon what did Jesus promise to build his church (Matthew 16:15-18; First Corinthians 10:4, Ephesians 2:19-22)? When was the church of Christ established (Acts 2:36-47, Colossians 1:13-14)? What is intended by the phrase “churches of Christ” (Romans 16:16)? When did the church change from a community of individual Christians into a collection of local churches and then into a series of distinctive denominations?
4. What is baptism for, according to Acts 2:38 and First Peter 3:18-22? When were Saul’s sins forgiven, indicating his redemption (Acts 22:12-16, Galatians 3:24-27)?
5. Describe the three passages where “Christian” is used.

6. What is the purpose of the Lord's Supper (First Corinthians 11:17-34)? How can it be corrupted?
7. List five New Testament synonyms for pastor. (Different English translations employ various words in each place.)
- a. First Peter 5:1:
  - b. Titus 1:7:
  - c. First Timothy 3:1:
  - d. First Timothy 4:14:
  - e. Acts 20:28:
8. Consider Colossians 3:16-17. How can the Christian's musical praise show evidence of Christ's word dwelling richly in him (cf. James 5:13)? How does music teach and admonish others?
9. What is the real danger of introducing holidays like Easter and Christmas to the church calendar (Hebrews 3:13, 10:24-25)?
10. Describe the kingdom of Christ (Matthew 16:18-19, Colossians 1:13, Ephesians 1:22-23, Philippians 3:20-21). What is its fate (Ephesians 5:26-27, Second Peter 1:10-11)?
11. When certain disciples clamored for a first-century social gospel that fed the hungry, how did Jesus react (John 6:22-35)?
12. Why do denominational creeds exist? How are they developed?



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