

WHAT IS A CHURCH OF CHRIST?

What is a "church of Christ"? You might think that this is an easy question. However, because of the divided state of Christianity in the world, I suggest that it is not an easy question. It is a question that the New Testament answers! However, it is a question packed around many opportunities for misunderstanding! Jesus' apostle Paul sent to Christians in Rome a "salute" from the "churches of Christ." What is a "church of Christ"?

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The passage where Paul's "salute" is found is toward the end of his letter to the Romans, chapter 16, verse 16. "The churches of Christ salute you," he wrote. We will examine this statement and this chapter in our effort to understand "what is a church of Christ".

The King James Version word "salute" is a greeting. The English Standard Version uses the word "greet" as do many other English translations. "Greet one another with a holy kiss. The churches of Christ greet you," reads the entire verse. (Romans 16:16) In this concluding chapter of Paul's letter, in sentence after sentence Paul sends greetings. Paul was acquainted with many Christians among the churches of Christ in Rome. The Christian people he knew in Rome were grouped into several churches, at least three are noticeable in this chapter. For instance, there was a church meeting in the house of Paul's old friends Aquila and Priscilla, verse 5.

It seems that Paul first met Aquila and his wife in the city of Corinth, Greece. Paul had come to that city to preach the Gospel. He was by himself. His traveling companions had been left in Macedonia because Paul was worried about the churches who were being persecuted there. So, he was alone in the city of Athens and later walked 44 miles to the city of Corinth. Paul had to find work. Since he was trained as a tent maker, Paul looked for other tentmakers and found Aquila and Priscilla. They were a Jewish couple only recently come to Corinth from Rome. They being Jewish, Paul had some spiritual common ground with them as well as a common occupation. It is not stated but Paul probably taught this couple the gospel and baptized them. They became Christians like many others of the Corinthians (Acts 18:8). Eighteen months later, when Paul left Corinth and traveled across the Aegean Sea to Ephesus, Aquila and Priscilla went with him. The couple settled for a while in Ephesus and assembled with a

synagogue of Jews, no doubt teaching Christ. We are told by Luke that Aquila and Priscilla taught the gospel to a Jewish man named Apollos, who became a very influential preacher of the gospel. (Acts 18:24-26) About seven years later when Paul wrote his letter to Rome, Aquila and Priscilla were back in Rome with a church of Christ meeting in their house. But Aquila and Priscilla was not the only people Paul knew in Rome. In fact, Paul sent greetings to twenty five people in Romans 16! That's right!

In verse 14 Paul sends greetings to five names and then also to the "brothers who are with them." The term "brothers" is a generic word that spiritually refers to other Christians who were associated with the five people Paul named. The Christians Paul named were evidently meeting together in the same assembly, the same church with other "brothers" that Paul did not know personally. In verse 15 Paul wrote "Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them." Two of these four people are women, and there are other people "with them" who are called "saints". The word "saints" is yet another word that refers to Christians in the New Testament. All of those people were meeting together as a church.

A "church" is a group of people who assemble together. The Greek word translated "church" is a compound of two words that are literally translated "called out." These people were "called out" as individuals and called into an assembly of individuals. These individuals had become living parts of a group. Each group was called a "church" and the several churches were called "churches of Christ." The people in each group were called "brothers" and "sisters" in the Lord. They had been called into "God's house", God's family.

In Paul's first letter to Timothy the apostle gave his reason for writing. "I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of truth." (1 Timothy 3:14, 15) If you talk about your "household" you are talking about your family. The "household of God" is God's family. We are told that it is the same as "the church of the living God." The church is a "pillar" and a "buttress of truth." That is, the church holds up and supports the truth, the truth of Jesus Christ who was "manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, and taken up in glory." (1 Timothy 3:16) God's family, God's church, is also the church of Christ. Jesus called it "my church" in Matthew 16:18.

The individuals in the Lord's church are called brothers and sisters. They are in God's family; their father is the heavenly Father, the Father also of Jesus Christ. Jesus taught His disciples to pray to this father: "Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed is your name." (Matthew 6:9) Christians are permitted to call Him "Father" because His personal name is "hallowed." Jewish people did not call God by His personal name because they feared that they would call it in vain. For God had expressly commanded: "You shall not take the name of Yahweh (Jehovah) your God in vain, for Yahweh will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain." (Exodus 20:7) Christians then are of one family, one household, one church of the living God; one universal group of people who are encouraged to call the living God, Father.

Going back to Romans 16 we learn some other things about these churches of Christ. For instance, they assembled in separate locations. We can detect at least three house-churches in this chapter. However, they were all written to in one letter. When addressing this letter, the apostle Paul simply said, "To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints...." (Romans 1:7) And then in the last chapter it becomes evident that there are at least 3 different locations where these saints are assembling. Although they assembled in different locations, the same teaching applied to them all. This suggests another important feature of the churches of Christ. Each church should be learning and teaching the same information. This is the same as saying that they all should be led by the same Holy Spirit of God. This bedrock of truth crops up in other passages and in other churches.

There should be a natural unity among churches of Christ. Jesus' apostle Paul likened the church to a natural human body. He wrote, "For just as the [human] body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit." (1 Corinthians 12:12-13 ESV) The Holy Spirit is the One who has taught us through the pages of the Bible. Though we have been taught by different humans we should have all been instructed by ONE person's words, the Holy Spirit's! That's right! After we are instructed by the Spirit we can then be baptized into the one body of Christ where we continue to "drink of one Spirit." So, naturally, we should be like one human body. We have many members or organs, but they all work together for the common life. Members of the body of Christ are many members but we all should work together for the life of Christ in each one of us.

Jesus talked about the unity of His people in His prayer to our Father found in the Gospel of John 17: Jesus said, "Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. (John 17:7-8 ESV) Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. (John 17:17-18 ESV) The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me." (Selected vss. from John 17:7-23 ESV)

This is not what we find in the world of church-anity! Is it? We don't find this unity among the assemblies of those who believe God has sent Jesus. What has happened? Has Satan been involved in the fracturing of the body of Christ? Do you think the disunity was caused by Christ?

Jesus' apostle Paul addressed the problem of division that had arisen in the Corinthian church. Paul wrote them, "I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment." (1 Corinthians 1:10 ESV)

Paul also addressed this in his letter to the Romans. Even though they were segregated into different locations, Paul urged them to "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight." (Romans 12:15-16 ESV)

Paul said something similar to the Philippians: "Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents." (Philippians 1:27-28 ESV) In chapter 2 of this letter Paul continued:

"So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." (Philippians 2:1-4 ESV)

Our question has been, "What is a church of Christ?" From Romans 16 and other passages we have seen that the church of Christ is an assembly of people. These people have heard and answered Christ's call to come together. Christ called them through the Holy Spirit's word that He gave to the apostles. This word is found in what is called the Gospel of Christ. Furthermore, we have learned that the church of Christ is God's household. It is God's family. These people are "brothers" and "sisters" in Christ's family. This family upholds the truth of the story of Christ. That is, it believes and stands for the truth of Jesus Christ who was "manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, and taken up in glory." (1 Timothy 3:16)

Furthermore, we have learned that the church of Christ is congregated in assemblies that are scattered by location, not by theology. Although they meet in different locations they are of the same mind, having been taught by one Spirit, and baptized into one body. They now drink from the wells of the Holy Spirit's understanding. This is the church of Christ.

Visit a church of Christ near you and drink from the Spirit's teaching found in the great books of the Bible.