

Does Your Religion Matter: Part 1?

by Timothy Kline

While this article does not address the setting where you currently attend a place of worship that you have always attended because of familial ties or upbringing, if you are in that group, you may still find the information below to be of interest.

Introduction

Deciding which church, synagogue, or other place of worship to attend and become a part of is certainly one of the more important decisions that you will make in your life. And yet, the number of available options can be utterly bewildering. There are so many churches to choose from, all teaching what seems to be just as many different things. You may find yourself asking, then, how it is that if they all claim to believe the Bible, to teach from it, then why so many different religions? Why isn't there only one to choose from? They can't *all* be right, can they?

When I first encountered Jehovah's Witnesses, this was one of the arguments they made to me, actually: "They can't *all* be right, so it is a matter of urgency that we determine which one *is* right, and then become a part of it." To further illustrate their point, they refer back to there only being *one* ark, built by Noah—therefore, there is only one group or organization of believers that will be preserved through the coming flood of judgment.

To the uninitiated, this seems a powerfully logical argument. It makes sense. Just examine the teachings of all of the Christian groups, and whichever one has the right teachings is, by deduction, the "Noah's ark" of our day. Problem solved. The Witness then engages in a Bible study using one of the publications of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society to help the prospective householder to see what is wrong with other Christian groups, and how Jehovah's Witnesses have it right.

The problem with this approach is that the ending is already determined for the student. All they need to do is follow the argumentation as presented in the publication to its conclusion: Jehovah's Witnesses "have the Truth," to the exclusion of all other Christian groups. Unfortunately, the majority of people today want to exert themselves as minimally as possible, to save themselves the trouble of finding the answer, and therefore reach the "conclusion" that Jehovah's Witnesses are right.

But, really, would Jehovah's Witnesses use a publication that led a potential convert to the conclusion that Catholics "have the Truth"? Or that the Pentecostals do? Or the Mormons do? Obviously, they wouldn't. So, this has to be taken into consideration as part of one's determination as to which group really does "have the Truth." It can be easy to "stack the deck" in order to get a person of little discernment to agree with you. After all, you are the one that predetermines the checklist by which other Christian groups fail, and your Christian group excels. As such, you would make sure that you *didn't* note those areas where you failed in comparison to other Christian groups, now would you?

Most people recognize this as a form of propaganda, but again—most people are just looking for the easiest answer. They feel an emptiness in their life, a separation from God, and know that it will remain there until they can figure out first which church to go to, and then go on from there.

In writing this article, then, I will not be focusing on Jehovah's Witnesses' approach to proselytism, but rather on addressing why there *are* so many churches surrounding us today, and how we can figure out which one is the *right* one. I'll also be addressing the *purpose* of the church, and what role it is supposed to have in our life. My hope is that approaching the subject from this angle, I can help shed light on an otherwise perplexing problem for so many today.

Why are there so many churches today?

One can't help but notice the number of churches around today. Some cities have upwards of two dozen or even more different churches, all offering various religious services, all with their own congregants who attend and participate faithfully. Even in much smaller towns and villages, it is rare to find just *one* church or place of worship. Look in your local phone book's yellow pages and marvel at the listings!

The first question one usually asks is, *Why are there so many different churches?!*

While I won't bore you with all of the details, you need to know that it wasn't always this way. By turning back the pages of history, we find that for some time after the death of the last of the apostles, there were numerous groups of Christians spread across the civilized world, all with a diversity as much like today that we have. However, during this time, there developed a growing authoritarian movement to centralize power over Christians, and to eliminate all competitors. Biblical scholars refer to this movement as *neo-orthodoxy*. The word

"orthodox" actually comes to us from the Greek words *ortho* and *doxa*, which translates to "right opinion" or "right thinking." The "right" opinion, of course, came from the men heading up the neo-orthodox movement, which also brought into existence *heterodoxy*. The term "heterodox" simply means "any opinions or doctrines at variance with the official or orthodox position." Used in contrast to orthodoxy, it is synonymous with the term "unorthodox" and is even closely tied to the word, "heresy".

As neo-orthodoxy gained a foothold in the Christian movement through often brutal means, the roots for Catholicism began to take shape. "Catholicism" means "universal," so when someone says "the Catholic Church," they are referring to the *universal* (one, all-inclusive) church.

And, as most readers know, this *neo-orthodoxy*, after finally becoming *Catholicism*, eventually became the state-sanctioned *Roman Catholic Church*. Too, most are very familiar with the brutality of that period in Christianity's history as power over Christians continued to be further centralized and exerted over the masses under penalty of death. Even the "Holy" Crusades owes its horrific origins with Christianity during the heyday of Catholicism's control over Christianity.

During those centuries, you only had *one* church to choose from. So, it was the complete opposite of what we see today. To be more clear: there *was* no choice during that period of Christian history. And, once the Roman Empire made Catholicism the state-sponsored religion, the empowerment of *orthodoxy* was complete. If you disagreed with the Roman Catholic Church, too bad. If you were found out, you very likely would face the loss of property ownership, employment, social status, and even death. You had no recourse. You were powerless.

That all changed when a man named Martin Luther took a stand against the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. The result of that confrontation led to the fracturing once more of Christianity, and Lutheranism was born.

Since then, Christianity has continued to fracture as people realize that they have it within themselves to disagree with the authorities of their given Christian affiliation, and to go off and form their own church. These splits or fractures came to be known as Protestantism, due to its "protest" nature.

Of course, I am vastly oversimplifying history, for brevity's sake, and you, the reader, are more than welcome to research Christian history post-CE 1 (Common Era 1) in order to get a fuller idea of how things have developed. But the process happened like this:

Judaism → Jewish Christians → Gentile Christians (diverse) → neo-Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy → Catholicism → Roman Catholicism → Protestantism (starting with Lutheranism)

What I omitted was the division of Roman Catholicism into Eastern and Western Orthodoxy, but the point is that at first there was a great diversity within early Christianity as Gentiles were brought into the Christian movement, and then Catholicism centralized power and authority for itself until Protestantism. Today, we again see diversity in Christianity. This is meant to demonstrate why there are so many different churches today.

Having the freedom to arrive at a conclusion different from one's church's leader or leaders has been a hard-fought struggle. It used to mean death for the layperson. Now, it means that you can go looking for another church, or, perhaps, form your own. But, just as with any other freedom, it can be abused. Some go off to form groups or churches that become a cult of personality, where they attain their own following. Others successfully congregate and continue in their walk as Christians. And, still others, form their own Christian group, only to once again centralize power and authority over others—and censure or excommunicate anyone who in turn questions *them*.

But they can't *all* be right!

If it's perplexing to someone that there are so many Christian churches, then it is all the more so when you add into the mix the simplicity of this question: *They can't all be right, though, can they?*

It's a fair question. A reasonable one. However, it is also a question that has the potential to be misleading.

First of all, how does one go about determine what is right and wrong? The answer, of course, is by turning to the Bible. But isn't that what every church does? Don't *they* use the Bible as their guide? In turn, they can probably show you where *other* churches are in error, thus justifying their own existence. Some even go so far as to insist that they alone are "the Truth" or that they alone "have the Truth" and that all of the other churches aren't *truly* Christian (and therefore, are *false*).

Even so, such groups, when pressed, admit that they *have* been wrong in the past about certain teachings, but, they quickly add, they have since corrected them—adding that the ones that they were wrong in are of little consequence anyhow. Still, they show a remarkable reluctance to admit that there may still be

teachings and views that they hold and preach that could, in time, be found to be in error. If asked whether a person is free to disagree with a particular teaching or view if they can provide scriptural grounds for said rejection of the “orthodox” view, they have to admit that the person is not free to do so, that one should not “lean upon” their own understanding, that the group’s teachings are determined by those in authority.

This last aspect seems to escape their notice: the eerie similarity to the centralization of power and authority that was held during Catholicism.

In examining such groups, one finds that anyone that arrives at a different conclusion from that of the group’s leaders is usually censured swiftly, and potentially excommunicated from the Christian group to the extent of being cut off from friends, relatives, and one’s own family except for the barest minimum of interaction. What is all the more remarkable is such ones, if the group later changes its “orthodox” view to that shared by the excommunicated individual, are not then welcomed back into the congregation unless they first repent of the sin of “running ahead” of the group’s leaders. The similarity bears an uncanny, unsettling resemblance to the stonings and burnings conducted by the Catholic church during its holding of power over Christians.

Within such a Christian group, it is costly to disagree with the “orthodox” views held by the group (as determined by the group’s leaders)—even if the individual’s own view is later discovered to be correct.

But for the majority of Christian groups, if you disagree with something being taught by that church, you usually seek out a different group that more closely resembles views you personally agree with.

This can create more problems than it solves. For one thing, we have a tendency to want to be able to do as much as we can without *religion* infringing on our lives. For that reason, there is a tendency on the part of some to seek out a church that allows for whatever indulgence we are partial to. This is as much the fault of the church as it is the individual.

Even so, let’s go back to the argument that all of these hundreds and thousands of different churches can’t *all* be right. Indulge this thought for a moment: Isn’t what you’re really saying this: there has to be one church out there that’s positively correct? After all, you have to admit that every Christian church out there *is* right to a *certain* extent.

By “right,” you are looking for what used to be called *orthodox*. And clearly, one cannot say that every single church is *orthodox*, especially when you take into consideration the fact that “orthodoxy” is determined by the individual group.

Martin Luther found certain of the Roman Catholic Church's teachings to be *unorthodox*, and broke off from Roman Catholicism. But then some found not only some of the Roman Catholic Church's teachings to be unorthodox, but Martin Luther's as well, and broke off from Lutheranism. And so has gone ever since.

And yet even today, after centuries of this process of splintering off, there remains not a single church that can declare itself *the* definitive, truest, accurate embodiment of Christianity. At best all they can hope for is to have a *more* accurate understanding than most. That is still a far distance from the implication behind saying that all these churches can't *all* be "right." Each and every one of them is going to be wrong about something at some point. The issue becomes, at that point, how they, as a Christian group respond to someone within the congregation pointing out a doctrinal or theological problem—and it is in this area that nearly every Christian group fails so miserably. If it was *not* so, then people would not leave off to go find another church or start their own.

Another facet of the question is what standards will be used to determine the "rightness" of a particular Christian group? I mentioned at the start of this subsection that every one of the Christian churches in your neighborhood looks to the Bible as their guide, and yet it is clear to the outsider that every one of the Christian churches believe differently.

But *do* they?

There are specific beliefs that are held in common among all Christian groups. These are core, fundamental views that you can find in every church. Some of these include, but most certainly are not limited to:

- The Bible is the Word of God;
- God alone is Supreme, and created Man;
- Jesus is the son of God, died as a perfect man, was resurrected and returned to heaven;
- Jesus, before returning to heaven, gave his followers the commission to go forth with the Good News, and baptize those that accepted that Good News;
- That the only means of salvation available is that of accepting Jesus as our Savior, repenting of our sins, and dedicating our life to the way of Christianity.

Very likely, you can put together a much better list of commonalities shared among all Christian churches—and you might even be surprised at just how much they have in common when it comes to Christianity. At the same time, if you make the effort to continue with your list-making, you'll start to come up

with things that are less and less common amongst the vast diversity of Christian groups, such as below:

- Trinitarian view
- Binitarian view
- Unitarian view
- Pre-Millennialists
- Post-Millennialists
- Preterists
- Futurists

Really, the list can go on and on. The point being that if you start with the *common* system of beliefs first listed above, you arrive at the *core* teachings of Christianity. Those are areas in which every Christian group, whether they are Catholic, Protestant, or whatever other denomination, are in full agreement and hold in common. It is these particular values or beliefs that form the *orthodox* view. Go past this point and you start getting into the variations, some of which include the second list above. And go past *that* and you start getting into the variations of those variations, and so on.

So when we say something like “Well, they can’t *all* be right,” the fact of the matter is: Yes, they can and are. At least in the core teachings. And aren’t those the most important?

What, then, about the areas where they aren’t all in agreement? Well, then we have moved past the core teachings of Christianity and have moved into *sectarianism*, which, simply put, is a division within Christianity caused by a difference of opinion or conclusion in regards to a given Bible passage. When there is no agreement, and division takes place, it is because both sides insist that *they* are right. But, as already shown, these are in matters that fall outside of the core body of teachings (that is, those held in common by all Christian groups). These secondary and tertiary views are given sufficient weight so as to cause division. In many cases, they become so important that they are assigned as “salvation” beliefs—where you *must* adopt a particular view in order to be found as a “true” Christian, or to have any sort of chance at salvation. They are not optional: they are *mandated*.

Yes, it is arguable that both sides can’t be right—that one of them is wrong. Even so, there are times when it is impossible to determine which side *is* right. And it is just as possible that they are *both* wrong. Or, both may be right from their own particular point of view. The point here being that unless the individuals discussing and debating the topic recognize that what is at stake falls outside of the *core* teachings, both sides of the argument will become entrenched and willfully divide the congregation over it—even going so far as to

make the disputed argument suddenly a *salvational* issue, forcing others to choose sides. At the point of division, a given argument becomes part of the subsequently resulting group's body of teachings, and is no longer a candidate for debate. It is how they differentiate themselves from the group of Christians that they parted ways with—some even going so far as to claim that *they* are the real or *true* Christians.

Does it matter *what* a church teaches, then?

Given the fact that all of the different churches in existence today hold as many different views, even though they share a common core set of beliefs, the next logical question we need to address is whether it matters, then, *what* a church teaches? Does it mean that we can pick any church whatsoever and it'll be fine?

The fact is: this is exactly what most people do. They pick churches for convenience, for example. It's just down the street. It's within their own neighborhood. Within their own town.

Similarly, they select a church because they can go dressed as they want. Or because it focuses on singing, or plays, or focus groups.

There are as many reasons why people select certain churches as there are churches to choose from. There is a church for every flavor, one might say. So, no, for the majority of people it really doesn't matter (much) what a church teaches, so long as it has fantastic social activities.

However, perhaps it *does* matter to you personally. If that is the case, then you need to take the time to figure out what beliefs you personally hold, and then look for a church that is most in agreement with your own beliefs. Or, if you aren't sure *what* you believe, and you know very little about the Bible, then you can either take the time to get familiar with your Bible so as to become acquainted with Christianity, and then go looking for a church—or visit various churches in your area until you find one that is willing to help you to learn the Bible and that welcomes questions and examination. Regardless of the church you decide to go with, find out how they handle scriptural disagreements. Ask them about their *core* beliefs—those beliefs that they have in *common* with other churches, and how they handle the secondary beliefs that differentiate themselves from other Christian groups. If they are more insistent in talking about how *different* from all the other churches they are, rather than what they have in common, then consider that a red flag because they will hold the same view of *you* if you ever find yourself disagreeing with that group's leaders or body of teachings.

If you are an individual who is fairly well-versed in what the Bible teaches, then it will be more difficult to select a church that suitably matches your own views because you have already established your own views and conclusions and would compare those of a potential Christian group to your own. As an example, I would find it next to impossible to affiliate myself with a Christian group that extols Trinitarianism, because my own examination of the Bible finds that particular doctrine lacking and therefore unacceptable to me personally.

It becomes even more difficult when you have left a Christian group that always insisted on *rightness* and “accurate knowledge” and “having the Truth.” Such groups have an overwhelming tendency to create judgmentalism in its members, such that you turn your nose up at all other groups, smugly convinced that your group alone “has the Truth” and is, therefore, the *true* Christians. Even after leaving, this mentality is not easily dispensed with. You will be critical of everything everyone else teaches—which is ironic, since such groups that instill this critical attitude also bar its members from exercising that same critical examination towards its *own* teachings and practices once an individual officially becomes a member of the group.

For some, yes, it is very important what a prospective church teaches. But we have to know our Bible well enough to have formed our own thoughts and conclusions if we’re going to be in a position to examine a Christian group’s teachings. It is not enough to allow a church to teach us they teach, and stop there. Human nature, such as it is, will put its best face forward, and you won’t find out until much later what lies behind that façade that is presented. That is why it is of utmost importance that you know beforehand how that particular group of Christians handles disagreements about secondary and tertiary doctrines. And expect them to minimize such things, implying that they are of little consequence, or rarely happen in their group.

Having said all of the above, it now behooves us to ask ourselves, “Well, what’s *God’s* view on this? Doesn’t it matter to *Him* what a church teaches while it’s claiming to be Christian?”

I will address that facet of the discussion, along with the remaining issues, in the next part of this article.

Does Your Religion Matter: Part 2?

by **Timothy Kline**

In Part One of this series, I started by discussing why there are so many churches today and how one might go about determining which is the right church for them. In Part Two, I will explore the meatier aspects of this sometimes daunting problem, addressing what God thinks of all these different Christian groups, all teaching from the same Bible. I will also be examining the purpose of the church and the role it is supposed to have in our lives.

What does God think of all these different Christian groups?

At the end of Part One, I asked the questions, "Well, what's *God's* view on this? Doesn't it matter to *Him* what a church teaches while it's claiming to be Christian?" In Part One, I spent most of the time approaching the debate from a *human* point of view, since that is how the vast majority of believers decide which church they will attend. For that majority, this works for them and they are quite satisfied with the results.

For some, however, it isn't enough to view a church or religion as a social event. And it is to those individuals that this second part of the article is written.

Surely we care what *God* thinks about all of these different churches all claiming to be Christian, all claiming to be teaching and preaching from the Bible, all claiming to worship God and to accept Jesus as Savior. For us, it is not enough to simply pick and choose the most amenable church to *our* preferences.

But before we can figure out God's view, we have to first discuss some things in relation to churches.

The first is this: to some, a church is a building that you *go to* in order to worship. People differentiate between what you get to do while *not* at church in comparison to the façade you must put on (your Sunday's best) when you *go to* church. For some, it's a social network wherein you can gain renown and prestige in your community, either through your donations or your activities within the church. For others, it's just something that the family has always done; you were raised as a child to go to church, and now that you're grown you are continuing that tradition with your own children. Some groups refer to their building as a church, a temple, a hall, a Kingdom Hall, a synagogue, or any number of similar terms. This group of Christians I shall refer to as the "*Go to church*" group.

Another point I would like to make is that throughout this series thus far (including Part One), I refer to selecting a “church.” However, some find the word “church” distasteful, with it conjuring up images of “Christendom” buildings filled with idols, crosses, and other religious paraphernalia. If that is your situation, then you can simply substitute “church” with “place of worship” if it makes it more palatable for you. Keep in mind that I will also be shifting gears from “church” being a place you *go*, to “church” being something you are a *part* of. At that point, I will be referring to the *congregation*, rather than “church,” for reasons which will become evident as we move forward in this discussion. It is also important that you have your own Bible handy, as we will be looking at numerous passages throughout the remainder of this discussion, and although I will often cite a passage in the article, it is important that you read it in your own Bible and familiarize yourself with both the setting and context.

Without further ado, then, let’s begin by first determining *what* the church is.

What *is* the Church?

We’ve already touched on the understanding that countless Christians have that “church” is a place that you *go* to, usually on Sundays and Wednesdays and certain “holy” days like Christmas and Easter. We won’t, therefore, need to say more on that limited understanding, and will instead move past it for the remainder of this article.

The Bible speaks about how God took out a people for His Name during the period covered by the Hebrew Scriptures, also known as the “Old Testament.” He entered into a covenantal relationship with the nation of Israel, who were descended from the patriarchs of old: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Provided that the nation of Israel remained faithful to that covenant, they would remain God’s representative nation upon earth. They would also be the privileged people through whom would be born the savior of *all* humankind, who would in due course restore Humankind to the close, intimate relationship that was originally enjoyed by Adam and Eve before their Fall.

As every student of the Bible knows, the nation of Israel failed miserably on numerous accounts to live up to their side of the covenant, resulting in defeat at the hands of various empires down through history. Their rejection of the prophesied Messiah, Jesus Christ, brought the harshest judgment of reprimand from Jehovah, as the Roman empire utterly destroyed Jerusalem, Israel’s most holy of cities. It would not be until our day that Israel would again find statehood as an individual, recognized nation, and even now that statehood is beset with angst and embittered rivalries with neighboring nations—a far cry from the

pinnacle of Israel's greatness during the days of David and Solomon. It is important to note that today's statehood of Israel was wrought from the hands of political powers, and not by the hands of God himself.

The Bible relates how, because of the nation of Israel's rejection of their promised Messiah, God established a period of rebuke for Israel that would continue until the fullness of the people of the nations (Greeks, Gentiles) has come in. [See Romans 11:1-32]

The question to be asked here is "come into *where*"? If the nation of Israel was God's unique, covenanted people, and He placed them into a state of rebuke which, by our human reckoning, makes it appear as though He has *rejected* them, then the Bible writer must be referring to something else. Again we must turn to the letter to the Romans for clarification:

...namely, us, whom he called not only from among Jews but also from among nations, [what of it]? It is as he says also in Ho'se'a: "Those not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved 'beloved'; and in the place where it was said to them, 'YOU are not my people,' there they will be called 'sons of the living God.'" (Romans 9:24-26)

Here we begin to see the plan that God has to form a covenanted relationship with a *new* group of people, one from every walk of life rather than strictly Israel itself. This in itself would have proven a difficult fact for the nation of Israel to accept, having been God's exclusive people for millennia—but God had a greater intent that He was putting into action. It would not be a nation borne of familial ties, as it had been for generations through the nation of *natural* Israel.

Paul elaborates on how it is that this new people would become sons of the living God when he writes in his letter to the Ephesians:

In other generations this [secret] was not made known to the sons of men as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by spirit, namely, that people of the nations should be joint heirs and fellow members of the body and partakers with us of the promise in union with Christ Jesus through the good news.
(Ephesians 3:5-6)

The common factor here would no longer be a matter of simply being *born* a Jew, but now a matter of one's responsiveness to the good news—thus opening the way for every person in every nation to potentially become a part of God's new nation.

This is further certified by 1 Peter:

. . .It is to YOU, therefore, that he is precious, because YOU are believers; but to those not believing, "the identical stone that the builders rejected has become [the] head of [the] corner," and "a stone of stumbling and a rock-mass of offense." These are stumbling because they are disobedient to the word. To this very end they were also appointed. But YOU are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for special possession, that YOU should declare abroad the excellencies" of the one that called YOU out of darkness into his wonderful light. For YOU were once not a people, but are now God's people; YOU were those who had not been shown mercy, but are now those who have been shown mercy. (1 Peter 2:7-10)

The "cornerstone" referred to here is Jesus, who became the founding stone for a new temple, not built by mere mortal hands and will, but a *living* temple unlike anything before imagined.

Notice how Paul describes this new creation:

. . .Do YOU not know that YOU people are God's temple, and that the spirit of God dwells in YOU? If anyone destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him; for the temple of God is holy, which [temple] YOU people are. (1 Corinthians 3:16-17)

. . .For we are a temple of a living God; just as God said: "I shall reside among them and walk among [them], and I shall be their God, and they will be my people." ... "And I shall be a father to YOU, and YOU will be sons and daughters to me," says Jehovah the Almighty." (2 Corinthians 6:16, 18)

Remember how we referred to the "Go to church" Christians earlier? These really misunderstand just what powerful, awe-inspiring work God is building, and as a result they are missing out on a wonderful truth. You don't *go* to church: you *become* the church.

For the nation of Israel, Jerusalem was their holiest of cities. It was there that the Temple was built and maintained. It was where you could go if you wanted to be nearest to Jehovah. Yet the time was fast approaching in those days that the Temple would be razed to the ground, its function fully realized and fulfilled. No more would people need a Temple in order to worship God—something far better was coming.

Jesus touched on this in a conversation he had with a Samaritan woman:

“Believe me, woman, The hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will YOU people worship the Father.”
(John 4:21)

In simple terms, one would no longer need to *go to* a place of worship—instead, as Paul wrote, you would *become* a living temple of worship. You. And rather than dwelling in a temple made of human hands, God’s holy spirit would dwell *within* you as that temple.

Even so, although we become living temples of the Most High God, we are not isolated from other believers. Together, we compose a new nation, a *body* composed of members with particular gifts and purposes—just like our own natural body’s members has their own particular purposes and functions.

. . .we are members of his body. (Ephesians 5:30)

. . .One body there is, and one spirit, even as YOU were called in the one hope to which YOU were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all [persons], who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:4-6)

For just as the body is one but has many members, and all the members of that body, although being many, are one body, so also is the Christ. For truly by one spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink one spirit. For the body, indeed, is not one member, but many. If the foot should say: “Because I am not a hand, I am no part of the body,” it is not for this reason no part of the body. And if the ear should say: “Because I am not an eye, I am no part of the body,” it is not for this reason no part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the [sense of] hearing be? If it were all hearing, where would the smelling be? But now God has set the members in the body, each one of them, just as he pleased. If they were all one member, where would the body be? But now they are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand: “I have no need of you”; or, again, the head [cannot say] to the feet: “I have no need of YOU.” But much rather is it the case that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary, and the parts of the body which we think to be less honorable, these we surround with more abundant honor, and so our unseemly parts have the more abundant comeliness, whereas our comely parts do not need

anything. Nevertheless, God compounded the body, giving honor more abundant to the part which had a lack, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the other members suffer with it; or if a member is glorified, all the other members rejoice with it. Now YOU are Christ's body, and members individually. And God has set the respective ones in the congregation, first, apostles; second, prophets; third, teachers; then powerful works; then gifts of healings; helpful services, abilities to direct, different tongues. Not all are apostles, are they? Not all are prophets, are they? Not all are teachers, are they? Not all perform powerful works, do they? Not all have gifts of healings, do they? Not all speak in tongues, do they? Not all are translators, are they? (1 Corinthians 12:12-30)

. . .And he gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelizers, some as shepherds and teachers, with a view to the readjustment of the holy ones, for ministerial work, for the building up of the body of the Christ, until we all attain to the oneness in the faith and in the accurate knowledge of the Son of God, to a full-grown man, to the measure of stature that belongs to the fullness of the Christ; in order that we should no longer be babes, tossed about as by waves and carried hither and thither by every wind of teaching by means of the trickery of men, by means of cunning in contriving error. But speaking the truth, let us by love grow up in all things into him who is the head, Christ. From him all the body, by being harmoniously joined together and being made to cooperate through every joint that gives what is needed, according to the functioning of each respective member in due measure, makes for the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:11-16)

It starts to become clear that what we're talking about is not a building in the typical sense, as in a structure built by human hands. Rather, we are talking about the Christian *congregation* as being the *body* of believers. It is and has always been all-inclusive of all Christians.

Let's focus on that for a moment before we go on with the discussion.

Every one of us is or was a part of a natural family composed of parents and siblings. An extended family as well: aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, in-laws, and further extending beyond that in some cases to great-aunts, great-uncles, great-grandparents, and on the list goes.

But returning to the immediate family, let's look at things in this way. If you are an only child, you still have your father and mother, of course. Professionals refer to this as the *nuclear* family. It's a core familial relationship.

However, if, later on, your parents have another child, you are still their child. The only thing that has changed is that you now have a brother or sister. That brother or sister is going to have a different personality from you, different preferences, different viewpoints. Even so, these differences do not change the fact that you are siblings. One of you might "take after" your father, the other might "take after" your mother. Or, there may be some combination of the two.

Regardless, you are still part of the same family. And, in time, you, too, will go on to have your own family, with your own children. For the sake of this part of our discussion, though, suffice it to say that the family constitutes a *body*.

Applying that principle, then, to Christianity, here is what we find: Christianity was born of Judaism. That is to say that the *first* Christians were *Jewish* Christians. In time, Christianity reached out to Gentiles, who became *Gentile* or *Greek* Christians.

Like our nuclear *natural* family, the child that was at first the only child was the body of believers known as Jewish Christians. Then, a second child came along—a second body of believers known as Gentile or Greek Christians. While on the one hand they together constituted the *family* of Christianity, and thus were of that single body of faith, each had their own individual personality, so to speak, and their own preferences and tastes, just as human children tend to have. And, just like natural human children, the siblings had their spats and disagreements, much of which can be found in Paul's writings.

Be that as it may, there was one consistent reality still in place at this stage in Christianity: Jesus was the *head* of the body of believers, that is, the *Christian congregation*.

...he [Jesus] is the head of the body, the congregation. . . .
(Colossians 1:18)

Sidepoint: The Usurpation of Jesus as Head of the Congregation

As Christianity expanded, it became a perplexing problem for the apostles as they saw certain men enter into the body of believers, seeking authority for themselves and taking power where they could.

. . .However, there also came to be false prophets among the people, as there will also be false teachers among YOU. These very ones will quietly bring in destructive sects and will disown even the owner that bought them, bringing speedy destruction upon themselves. Furthermore, many will follow their acts of loose conduct, and on account of these the way of the truth will be spoken of abusively. Also, with covetousness they will exploit YOU with counterfeit words. . . . (2 Peter 2:1-3)

For a time, the apostles acted as a restraint, but this would only last until the last of the apostles went to rest in death. It is important for us to note that even in the first century, this was taking place; it would only get worse. As noted in the first part of this series, this became especially evident in the development of *neo-orthodoxy* in the later part of Common Era 1, but more so moving into the second century.

These men claimed to be staunch defenders of *truth*, claimed to treasure and attempt to preserve the good news. They spared no effort to stamp out anything that did not meet their "orthodox" view. All the while, they solidified their stranglehold on the Christian body.

Authority was shifted as a result. No longer was Jesus the head of the body: men had insidiously worked their way into that position. Jesus took on a figurehead-like role that lended these men their authority over the body of Christians—supposedly appointing them to ensure the preservation of Truth as determined by these men.

One need only grab any encyclopedia or Bible history reference to see what extent these men were willing to go to in order to secure and preserve their position of authority. In the course of this period of Christianity, these men also seen to it that the Bible was taken out of the reach of the congregation—claiming that only the Christian leadership could properly be entrusted with the preservation of Bible truth and dissemination of Christian teachings. Anyone who tried to obtain the Bible or disagreed with these Christian leaders would be punished to the utmost severity, even so far as to be put to death.

The above is mentioned only because today, there continues to be Christian groups that practice the same authoritarianism under the claim of having been appointed by God or Jesus over the congregation. They stand in Jesus' stead as head of the Christian congregation, claiming that really Jesus *is* still the head—but proving false to that claim by their exercise of secured power and authority over the Christian congregation.

If you encounter such a group, you can be assured that your personal relationship with God will be impacted accordingly as you come to realize that the men in authority act as mediator between you and your Heavenly Father. You will be convinced that your righteousness will be directly proportionate to the extent you submit to their authority and their Biblical interpretations.

Can all these groups *really* all be Christian?

One question that might be asked is how it is possible that all of these countless groups claiming to be Christian while teaching different things about the Bible can *really* all be Christian.

Thus far, we've established just *what* the Christian congregation is: It is the body of believers that compose the family of Christianity, whom, individually, constitute temples of God in which Jehovah's holy spirit dwells and bears witness that they are indeed children of God. At the head of that body is Jesus, ideally—although we've also touched on the propensity for men to intrude into that relationship, basically usurping Jesus' position as head of the Christian congregation and assigning that role to themselves. Not that this changes the *reality* that Jesus *is* the head of the Christian congregation from God's own point-of-view—but it certainly drives a wedge between God and His people as these would-be leaders act as intercessors and mediators between the congregation and God.

Humans are, for all intents and purposes, members of the same family: Human. This is irregardless of their nationality, skin color, sex, or ethnicity. However, as simple as that fact is, nearly every war ever waged is over the *differences* between humans that cause one group of humans to consider another group of humans lesser than the former. We still cannot get to the point where we accept the blunt, simple reality that we are all brothers and sisters—every one of us.

That being the case, should we expect that this happens within the Christian body of believers? Ideally, yes, we should. And for some measure, it is achieved. But sectarianism is a strong force that continues to wield a powerful influence within Christianity. Lines of doctrinal demarcation run deep between bodies of believers. And these differences are just as real among Christian groups as skin color, the shape of one's nose, the angle of their eyes.

Yes, in spite of great strides in acceptance within Christianity, there is still much work left to do if we are to achieve the ideal.

For some groups, it is impossible to view any other group of believers as Christians—because they themselves believe that they alone “have the truth,” which implies that everyone else doesn’t. If, they reason, that proves that they alone are *true* Christians, then by extension that means that any other group that calls itself Christian is *false*.

This mode of thinking requires that the particular group redefines the Christian congregation or body of believers to mean *their* group exclusively. This, in contrast to the apostles’ writings which say that *all* believers constitute the body of Christ, with Jesus as its head. These xenophobic groups reason that this only applies to those who hold to the exact same views as their own (after all, *they* have the truth).

Can Christian groups believe differently from other Christian groups and retain their Christianity, though?

As was discussed in Part One, every single Christian group holds to an identical *core* set of beliefs. It is only when we get into the secondary and tertiary beliefs of any given group that we start seeing diversity. This is where *sectarianism* enters into the picture.

Sectarianism was not new to Christianity, as much as this might surprise the reader. Judaism had its own sects, the foremost being the Pharisees. Earlier, I explained that a sect constituted a group of individuals who held to a different opinion and used that difference of opinion to determine who was truly a Christian and who wasn’t, who really believed and had the truth, and who didn’t.

Even in Paul’s day, he could identify sectarianism, and he had something noteworthy to say about it:

...when YOU come together in a congregation, I hear divisions exist among YOU; and in some measure I believe it. For there must also be sects among YOU, that the persons approved may also become manifest among YOU. (1 Corinthians 11:18-19)

This is noteworthy because Paul says that there must be sects among Christians, and that they serve a purpose: “...that the persons approved may also become manifest among you.”

What purpose could sectarianism serve? Well, first, it is not the *ideal*—but it *is* the inevitable outgrowth of human involvement in anything.

With that in mind, sectarianism provided others with proof of two things in particular. The first was proof that malicious men were entering into the

Christian congregation, seeking control and authority and power. They enticed others with their message, gained a following, and when they had gained as many followers as they could, they divided the body of Christ to suit their purposes, establishing their own sect(ion) of Christianity.

...their word will spread like gangrene. Hy·me·nae'us and Phi·le'tus are of that number. These very [men] have deviated from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already occurred; and they are subverting the faith of some. . . . (2 Timothy 2:17-19)

In so doing, they manifest their own wickedness and betrayal of the body of Christ by stealing away that which rightfully belongs to Jesus alone.

. . . , there also came to be false prophets among the people, as there will also be false teachers among YOU. These very ones will quietly bring in destructive sects and will disown even the owner that bought them, . . . (2 Peter 2:1)

But it also serves as proof the mindset of certain believers, as well. Paul, in his letter to Timothy, noted that the time would come when:

. . . they will not put up with the healthful teaching, but, in accord with their own desires, they will accumulate teachers for themselves to have their ears tickled; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, whereas they will be turned aside to false stories. (2 Timothy 4:3-4)

Even today, there can be little question that there are Christians who seek out a congregation that will allow them to live as they so choose, with minimal intrusion. Various Christian groups are upholding, as one example, homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle. Others make no issue over congregants smoking or partying in worldly manner—hoping to appear tolerant and therefore gain popularity.

But are such groups *really* Christian? One need only to go to the pastoral letters found in the Christian Greek Scriptures to see similar things going on—and never was it declared that they were *unChristian*. In fact, it was precisely because they were Christian that they were put on notice and called to account by the various apostles. If they continued in their shameful way, they would be brought to judgment by God Himself. [See the letters to the seven congregations, in Revelation for more on this.]

The nation of Israel, in spite of its numerous acts of unfaithfulness and apostasy, never stopped being Israel, God's exclusive people—right up until the destruction

of Jerusalem in 70CE. The same applies to Christianity. Still, they are put on notice that God's patience is not endless, and the day will come when each and every Christian group will be called to account for what happened in its midst, what it taught, and what it did with what it knew.

This last statement deserves some elaboration.

Sidepoint: Then are you saying it *doesn't* matter what a Christian group teaches, that anyone can teach anything they want and still be considered Christian?

As already mentioned, it *does* matter what a particular group of believers teach and allow. This does not, however, take away their standing as Christians. What it *does* do is bring them into potential judgment by God. As I pointed out earlier, in order to *be* Christian, one adopts and holds to a core set of beliefs held in common by *all* Christian groups today. I am talking specifically about these *core* beliefs only. If a particular group does not share one of those core beliefs, they cannot be defined as Christian, simple as that—and very likely, they won't even claim to be anyhow.

Having said that, one's *knowledge* of the Bible will never be a reliable indicator as to one's Christianity. The world has a saying: Even Satan could quote scripture. We would never claim that just because Satan could quote scripture, and evidently was very well acquainted with the Bible, that he was a *true* Christian. And yet there *are* groups who point to the amount that a person *knows* the Bible, the *better* the Christian they are. Groups that similar insist that *they* alone "have the truth" do not necessarily have anything to back it up.

Notice these words from Jesus:

. . .that slave that understood the will of his master but did not get ready or do in line with his will will be beaten with many strokes. But the one that did not understand and so did things deserving of strokes will be beaten with few. Indeed, everyone to whom much was given, much will be demanded of him; and the one whom people put in charge of much, they will demand more than usual of him. (Luke 12:47-48) [*Compare* James 3:1]

Emphasis seems to be more on what you *do* with what you know than on what you know itself. This can be confirmed from other passages:

. . .Therefore, if one knows how to do what is right and yet does not do it, it is a sin for him. (James 4:17)

“For it is just as when a man, about to travel abroad, summoned slaves of his and committed to them his belongings. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, to still another one, to each one according to his own ability, and he went abroad. Immediately the one that received the five talents went his way and did business with them and gained five more. In the same way the one that received the two gained two more. But the one that received just one went off, and dug in the ground and hid the silver money of his master. “After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. So the one that had received five talents came forward and brought five additional talents, saying, ‘Master, you committed five talents to me; see, I gained five talents more.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful slave! You were faithful over a few things. I will appoint you over many things. Enter into the joy of your master.’ Next the one that had received the two talents came forward and said, ‘Master, you committed to me two talents; see, I gained two talents more.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful slave! You were faithful over a few things. I will appoint you over many things. Enter into the joy of your master.’ “Finally the one that had received the one talent came forward and said, ‘Master, I knew you to be an exacting man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not winnow. So I grew afraid and went off and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ In reply his master said to him, ‘Wicked and sluggish slave, you knew, did you, that I reaped where I did not sow and gathered where I did not winnow? Well, then, you ought to have deposited my silver monies with the bankers, and on my arrival I would be receiving what is mine with interest. “Therefore TAKE away the talent from him and give it to him that has the ten talents. For to everyone that has, more will be given and he will have abundance; but as for him that does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. And throw the good-for-nothing slave out into the darkness outside. There is where [his] weeping and the gnashing of [his] teeth will be.’ (Matthew 25:14-30)

“Woe to YOU, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because YOU give the tenth of the mint and the dill and the cumin, but YOU have disregarded the weightier matters of the Law, namely, justice and mercy and faithfulness. These things it was binding to

do, yet not to disregard the other things. Blind guides, who strain out the gnat but gulp down the camel! (Matthew 23:23-24)

...The form of worship that is clean and undefiled from the standpoint of our God and Father is this: to look after orphans and widows in their tribulation, and to keep oneself without spot from the world. (James 1:27)

What we find in these passages (and there are others similar) is that God expects us to *do* on the basis of what we *know*. How closely are we following the example Jesus set for us? Are we feeding the hungry, caring for the sick and plundered, looking after widows and fatherless children?

The apostle Paul put it this way:

...If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but do not have love, I have become a sounding [piece of] brass or a clashing cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophesying and am acquainted with all the sacred secrets and all knowledge, and if I have all the faith so as to transplant mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my belongings to feed others, and if I hand over my body, that I may boast, but do not have love, I am not profited at all. (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

This is a powerful witness to *any* Christian group that insists that it alone “has the truth,” because unless that is evidenced by activity that bears witness to that fact, it is mere words. Some group priding itself on “having the truth” may point to their “preaching work” as evidence of their Christianity and proof of their love. Yet even here, we familiarize ourselves with the pattern set by Jesus—the very pattern which all Christians should follow after him—know that Jesus always saw first that the people’s *physical* needs were met first. If they were hungry, they were fed. If they were naked, they were clothed. If they were sick, they were prayed over and anointed with oil. If they were suffering or grieving, Jesus suffered along with them, and grieved alongside them. It creates an interesting situation when we find another Christian group rejected as “false” by such an egocentric group performing works such as Christ did, in spite of holding to secondary and tertiary teachings that are in error according to the judging Christian group that insists that it alone “has the truth.”

Ironically, when this is pointed out to such xenophobic groups that operate under the conviction that they alone are the *real* and *true* Christians, the group members are quick to point out the *faults*, rather than praising the Christlike actions of the group—as if these undermine the “weightier matters” such as “justice, mercy, and faithfulness,” as if the form of worship that God has decreed

as “clean and undefiled” is not that at all. In effect, they set themselves up as judges of those belonging to Jesus as head of the Christian body of believers from whatever walk of life they come.

But it is clear that God is no respecter of persons. For Him, it comes down to this: “Okay, you *say* you’re a Christian. That’s a very serious confession. If you’re saying that you’re following Jesus’ example, then are you *doing* the works of my son?” And, with it, Jesus said the following:

...“Stop judging that YOU may not be judged; for with what judgment YOU are judging, YOU will be judged; and with the measure that YOU are measuring out, they will measure out to YOU. Why, then, do you look at the straw in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the rafter in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Allow me to extract the straw from your eye’; when, look! a rafter is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First extract the rafter from your own eye, and then you will see clearly how to extract the straw from your brother’s eye.
(Matthew 7:1-5)

There should be no question that we don’t understand everything that we should, and the things that we *think* we understand we may very well be wrong in. Some Bible passages can be understood a multitude of ways, and yet all be true. Unfortunately, we let such matters divide us, cut us off one from another—even though the day will come when we *will* understand and we *will* be clear on such things, for as Paul says:

...For we have partial knowledge and we prophesy partially; but when that which is complete arrives, that which is partial will be done away with. When I was a babe, I used to speak as a babe, to think as a babe, to reason as a babe; but now that I have become a man, I have done away with the [traits] of a babe. For at present we see in hazy outline by means of a metal mirror, but then it will be face to face. At present I know partially, but then I shall know accurately even as I am accurately known. (1 Corinthians 13:9-12)

For that reason, emphasis must be on what one *does* with what they know, to as closely as possible emulate the example left by Jesus, and yet to try to grow on into maturity as well, becoming better acquainted with God so as to become better servants of the Most High.

Not forsaking the gathering of ourselves together

The congregation is a provision provided by a loving Father. As such, we would never want to underestimate its capacity to be exactly what we need. If we are individual members of the body of Christ, each with a gift and a purpose that contributes to the whole, then why would we ever want to forsake that? We may not be aware of what our purpose is within that body—but you can be certain that Jehovah knows. But unless you make yourself available to Him, He can't use you as a vessel.

By meeting together with those of like faith, we not only have an opportunity to worship God, but to also become an encouragement to others, to become aware of the needs of our brothers and sisters and see to it that those needs are provided for. We are refreshed beyond words when we meet with loving friends in the congregation—something that may be essential when we face daily struggles and challenges that wear us down. Likewise, we contribute ourselves to refreshing others. To listening, to sharing prayers, to assisting, to exchanging experiences that bolster faith, and to weep and share in the sorrow for those who are struggling or grieving or gravely ill.

Whether in a congregation setting or two or three meeting together, these things should take place as frequently as possible. There should never be an atmosphere that contributes to a loss of “freeness of speech,” as Paul described it.

This is not to say that in any given congregation, there won't be issues. Some individuals will “rub” us the wrong way. We will be particularly “drawn” to others. The congregation is a *family*, and like any family, it has its own unique challenges and issues. More often than not, they present an opportunity for us to reach beyond our comfort zone, to reach out to those we might not otherwise do so—and as a result not only learn something about a person that we sought to avoid, but about ourselves as well. We are, after all, children of God—and brothers and sisters in a faith greater than ourselves.

At the same time, some find themselves unable to find a congregation with which they can associate with fellow believers. This presents a challenging situation, as we are a member without an immediate body—even though technically we are still a member of the body of Christ. For those who are in such a situation, make your petition known to God, and pray fervently about it. At the same time, follow-up your appeal by making yourself available to opportunity when it presents itself—and there is no question that it will present itself. You will likely be surprised at what happens—but be receptive. It may not be where

God intends you to stay permanently, either. It might prove to be a temporary oasis that He is providing. Make the most of it, even in that case, and continue in your determined prayers. In time, you will find a body of believers with whom you will feel welcomed, cared for, and loved.