

WHAT SHALL WE CALL THE BODY?

In our article last week, we considered the idea of one, true church. We demonstrated from the Bible that Jesus only built one church and that God has never approved of the divisions that we call denominations, Jesus gave himself for one church, His church, the one he died for.

Now we consider what to call this one church. How shall it be identified so those seekers of truth can readily find a group with which to properly worship? After all, the name is vital. Just as one would never expect to find a “Big Mac” at Burger King, one would not expect to find scriptural worship in a place without a scriptural name. Let us hear the voice of the Restorers who urged us to “call Bible things by Bible names.”

The term “church” is unique to the New Testament, not being found in the Old Testament. Its usage continues to the present day. The idea of an organization or gathering of believers was first announced by Jesus in Matthew 16:18. He called that organization “my church.” Later He would instruct that “the church” (Matthew 18:17) be told of an unrepentant, trespassing brother. This “church” would actually have its beginning at Pentecost (Acts 2). Since the church and the body are the same (Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 5:23) and it is baptism that puts one into the body (Romans 6:3), it is baptism that puts one into “the church.” Since Pentecost is the first time Christ’s baptism (as opposed to John’s) is recorded, it was the beginning of the church.

Biblically, the church is designated in one of four ways: *Globally*, as “the church;” *Geographically*, as the “church at Laodicea;” *Possessively*, as “the church of God”, “the churches of Christ” or the “church of the Firstborn;” or *Compositionally*, as “the churches of the saints.” Some examples will be helpful.

Frequently, Paul would simply refer to “the church” (or “churches”) with no other qualification other than its location (Galatians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1). Jesus would have John send letters to seven churches in Asia as recorded in Revelation 1:20 – 3:22). As we see, often the name includes a geographical reference but only as a means of defining a single congregation or a group of congregations. The teachings of these churches was always the same as the greater body, that is, they were parts of the whole, not different, stand alone groups with their own doctrine.

At other times, the Bible speaks of the church possessively, that is, it is spoken of as belonging to someone. Luke mentions the “church of God” in Acts 20:28 and Paul does likewise in 1 Corinthians 1:1; 10:32; 11:16; 15:9; 2 Corinthians 1:1 and Galatians 1:13. In Romans 16:16 he writes of individual congregations when he writes of the “churches of Christ.” The Hebrew writer mentions the “church of the Firstborn” (Hebrews 12:23). The church, written of in the New Testament, belongs only to God and Jesus. It certainly does not belong to any man. What shame to the church that bears the name of any mere mortal or even the name of an angel (1 Corinthians 1:12-16).

1 Corinthians 14:33 uses the name the “churches of the saints.” Because the saints and the church are identical (1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1; 2 Corinthians 13:13; Ephesians 1:1), Greek language rules state that we may properly translate this passage as “the churches consisting of the saints.” In other words, the church does not belong to the saints, it is composed of the saints.

We would humbly suggest that denominations cease using non-Bible names. No New Testament church we are aware of was ever named for its form of governance, method of entrance, or name of an earthly founder. Reject the names of men and use what God has given. It must be said that just because someone chooses to use a Biblical name for a church does not mean that church is pleasing to God. Let us honor Him who died for and paid for His church. Let us worship Him according to His desires.

Bryant Evans

NEXT WEEK: MUST ONE BE A MEMBER OF THIS CHURCH?