

Changing the Name of Your Church

In recent years there has been open discussion about changing the name of local groups from our traditional name, Church of Christ. A few congregations have done that. More recently the Oak Hills Church of Christ in San Antonio where Max Lucado serves has changed its name to Oak Hills Church. That has aroused more discussion of the “pros and cons.”

Some have decried the “dishonoring of Christ” by removing his name from his church. But they have not decried leaving the name of God off of it all these years. After all, it is the church of God also. Nor do they advocate leaving off the word “church” which is an unwarranted rendition of “ekklesia.” A bit of consistency may help in all discussions.

If a proper name for God’s saved people were prescribed by inspired writers, then we would be obligated to respect it. Since no name is authorized to put on the building, or in the deed, or to list in the phone directory, we name the church without Biblical authority or precedent. One name is no more “authorized” than another. Our people chose “Church of Christ” as a name to distinguish us from all others, and we were first listed by that denominational name in the census of 1906 – only twelve years before I was born.

Since one name is as denominating as another, why are congregations changing their names? It is motivated by a desire to dissociate the group from the image our people have gained as separatists, thinking we are the only ones with a chance of heaven, and condemning believers in other groups. It is to escape a negative image many outsiders and even more insiders have of our traditional congregations.

How effective such a change may be is yet to be demonstrated and proven. Maybe we say it is effective for Oak Hills Church, so it will be effective with other groups also. But other congregations do not have Max Lucado, the most popular writer of Christian literature in America and named the best preacher in the USA by Reader’s Digest, and David Robinson who is probably the most loved and respected athlete in our country. Those two personalities are more attractive than a sign on the building.

When an outsider sees a building with a new, unfamiliar name on it, is he more likely to say, “Wow! A new name. I want to visit that church!” or “A new kind of church? Must be more hair-splitters!”? Who knows? Recognizing that a long known person is a scoundrel is not likely to make you trust a stranger.

Having a disreputable member in your family does not lead you to change your name but it should make you realize your need to live honorably.

In larger cities, a congregation's membership is more often made up of persons who drive distances from various municipalities. Look at your address list. How can they claim to become a "community church" if few of them live in the community?

To the general public, a new name may present a blank page to be filled out. If a group selects a new, unfamiliar name, its reputation will have to be gained through its teachings, individual conversations, public advertising, community programs, interactions with other churches, and cooperative efforts with other churches and civic groups. A Church of Christ with a bad image can change that image in the community by aggressive involvement in the same methods and activities mentioned above. Word gets around. The judgment call is to choose which method may prove more effective.

Without question, Reader's Digest gave an effective boost to the church. The question is: Would the favorable exposure have been more effective to the Oak Hills Church or to the Oak Hills Church of Christ – a single congregation, or shared by all churches associated in our Movement?

Since the matter of a proper name for the saved is not dealt with in the Bible, it becomes a matter of judgment. We should pray for wisdom in all such matters. It should not be pressed into a divisive issue. Below, I will list a few thoughts for further consideration in making wise decisions.

No congregation or denomination is without problems. In making changes one must be cautious that familiar problems are not being traded for unfamiliar ones.

In a name change, there is loss of identity. If a person is converted at Midland Church and, after a few years moves to Marshall, Marlin, or Muleshoe, that person will be a sort of orphan, having no ready family with whom to associate. A new search for a compatible group may be too discouraging for the faint at heart. When persons from the Church of Christ in Lufkin, Lamesa, or Longview visit or move to Lampasas, they would likely pass by an unfamiliar Lampasas Church for lack of identity with it. Identifiers are important if distinctive doctrines and practices are important.

While kindred souls will applaud your change, family and friends who do not understand may be grieved that you "left the church." And most of our congregations, when seeking a new preacher, would toss out the application resume of a preacher from a "non-Church of Christ" group.

A study would need to be made to see how many would leave the congregation because of a name change. A judgmental evaluation would then be made taking that into account.

If a congregation is not going to change its identifying doctrines and practices, then a name change would only be an effort to hide what it truly is. If a church is going to change its distinctive doctrines and practices, why not join with a denomination which already teaches and practices those things rather than starting a new one? If there is no other group whose teachings and practices your group can approve, then are you claiming the “inside track,” indicating that you are still separatist and exclusive – the character you are trying to escape from?

All denominations claim the “inside track,” else there would be no justification for their existence as separate bodies. All groups have stated beliefs, aims, and procedures which distinguish them from others. While they may not condemn those who differ, they are separatists because of distinguishing differences.

Although I set out to give an unbiased evaluation of this matter, in looking back at what I have written, I see that I have presented more negatives than positives. That may reflect a basic philosophy of mine. Since I began seeking to give redirection through my writings, many discouraged disciples have asked my advice about leaving the fellowship of Churches of Christ. I have expressed no scruples against their leaving but I have generally discouraged it as unwise. I explain that there are no perfect groups. There is no advice from an inspired writer for persons to leave a problem-filled church in favor of another or to start another. They, instead, called for reformation. In my limited capacity, I am a reformer, even as every teacher should be. One cannot leave a group and be effective in reforming it. Instead, the would-be reformer is more likely to be considered as a deserter.

Since my first book, *Free In Christ*, was published twenty years ago, dramatic, much-needed change has been sweeping through our congregations. Reform and redirection are taking us beyond our focus on distinctive doctrinal differences. Our emphasis is more on Christ, unity in him rather than in doctrinal scruples, and to the serving of the needs of society in cooperation with others who serve Christ. A refreshing message is being heard at our lectureships. The books that are published by ACU Press, for instance, show that our people are welcoming challenges to our traditional philosophies and reclaiming the spirit of the early disciples.

Our Movement added some vitality and repossessed some fading insights in the American scene. Even though we lost much of our direction, we can be proud

to be reclaiming our original emphasis. Another twenty years may see a vastly reformed group. It took a long time to develop our misdirection and it will not be corrected over-night. As for me, it is not a time to jump ship but to help steer the course of reformation. (More thoughts about our name may be read in FR 244, "Nameless Road.") []

(Cecil Hook; May 2005)

Talkin' Texas: New Braunfels, my home for 21 years, was then about 25,000 in population, but in 1850 it was the fourth largest city in Texas after Houston, San Antonio, and Galveston.