

“The One True Church”

A neat tract with the above title was handed me by a friend. Its sub-title declares “Jesus Built Only One Church.” It was written by a respected, now deceased, brother whose name I will not reveal, for I am not to deal in personalities in my comments.

One of the things that impressed me about the tract is the familiarity of its content. I taught a similar message in pulpit and classroom many years and on the radio hundreds of times. Now it is with dismay and humiliation that I am reminded of my zealous misdirection in such teachings.

The folder-tract presents these following fourteen “Marks That Matter” replete with textual references:

<u>BIBLE FOR HIS</u>	<u>WHAT FOR YOURS?</u>
Founder	Started by man or God?
Foundation	Upon what does it stand?
Beginning	When did it begin?
Designation	What is it called?
Membership	Conditions of belonging?
Worship	What acts occur?
Work	By what does it propagate?
Doctrine	What does it believe?
Organization	How is it structured?
Government	Who controls it?
Message	What does it teach?
Unity	Is it divided?
Life	To what devoted?
Destiny	Is it eternal?

Certainly, I recognize the truth taught in the many textual references in the tract which space will not allow me to review. I wish, however, to give some thoughts as to why I can no longer give interpretations and applications that I made in earlier years. My hope is that my comments may cause someone else also to reflect without being defensive.

ITS FOUNDER – CHRIST. All agree on this! Christ’s *congregation - assembly – community* which the word *ekklesia* implies is not an organization. It is all the people he has saved. He continues to add to that community by saving people. “Did Jesus establish your church?” the tract asks. He adds all the saved to the one body, but not to segmented groups which reject other saved persons in other splinter groups.

ITS FOUNDATION – THE SON OF GOD. Universal agreement! But that “rock” (Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Son of God) is the creedal foundation. The creed is Christ, not doctrinal teachings like the emphasis of this tract which I repeated for years. Different Christian communities build on doctrinal interpretations far more complicated than belief in Jesus Christ. And that includes us.

ITS ORIGIN – A. D. 33 IN JERUSALEM. This tract lists a number of denominations assigning a date and place for the beginning of each, like I have used many times while asserting that the Church of Christ was begun in A.D. 33 preceding the denominations. The universal community of believers begun on Pentecost is still present, but how foolish I was to contend that a group wearing the exclusive name, “Church of Christ” with all the identifying marks of my splinter group in West Texas existed in Jerusalem and that we were that one true church exclusively. Our distinctive “Church of Christ” was first listed in the US census in 1906! The Lord, by saving persons, makes them his one church, but we join (place membership in!) segmented, denominating groups many of whom reject all others.

ITS DESIGNATION – BY APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY. The tract asks, “Is your church mentioned by the apostles?” Finally, I came to realize that the Scriptures do not give any proper name for the church! It is unnamed. It needed no name to distinguish it since there is only one. God’s congregation has many descriptions but no name “by apostolic authority” – not even the “Church of Christ”!

ITS MEMBERSHIP -- PERSONS WHO: Here conditions in accepting salvation are listed. However, obedience to the gospel does not give us membership in the church, as I formerly taught! “Church membership” is unBiblical. No one holds membership. It has no members! It is those in the state of salvation.

ITS WORSHIP – “IN SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH”. How often I taught those “five authorized acts of worship” as the limitation of worship. How sad that most of my life went by before realizing that all my life is an offering to God. It is whole-life, living worship (Rom. 12:1-2), not certain rituals performed legalistically correct. There is no record of God ever rejecting the sincere worship of anyone, regardless of the form of expression.

ITS WORK – SAVING SOULS. The gospel is proclaimed by individuals. Their whole lives are dedicated to showing love to all, which includes bringing them to Christ.

ITS DOCTRINE – THE NEW TESTAMENT. The community of believers has no doctrine. It was saved by the gospel and it spread for many years before any of the epistles were written. Each group in existence depends upon its distinctive doctrinal interpretations of the New Testament writings for its existence.

ITS ORGANIZATION – CONGREGATIONAL. Because the universal community of God is not an organization, it follows that it is not organized “Scripturally” or otherwise. Individuals may serve God apart from any organization. When they serve together, some organization is expedient but not a requirement for acceptable service. In such organization, no person has authority over another.

ITS ENABLING GRACE – ETERNAL LOVE. Unanimous agreement.

ITS DESTINY – HEAVEN. That is the goal of all.

ITS UNITY – UNDENOMINATIONAL. I spent a career advocating unity – if others would unite with “us” – in spite of being in a splinter group of believers who rejected all others and continued to divide among our own congregations. I was in the one true church! True, the Lord had added me to his one true church, but I had chosen to serve with an exclusive, rejecting sect separated from all others in it. God forgive my ignorant zeal.

ITS UNIVERSALITY – ALL NATIONS. Surely, all church folks shout agreement to its universality. Except that in most congregations I served, the African-American disciple was unwelcome and excluded from the church roll! The question this tract asks, “Is your church universal in time and membership?” was self-condemning when written..

ITS MESSAGE – THE GOSPEL. Yes – and no! I proclaimed the Good News of salvation through Jesus, the Son of God who died for us, was raised, and ascended to heaven. But most of my message was about the “right doctrine” and the “right church”! The gospel and Jesus faded into the background, I now confess with sadness.

ITS GOVERNMENT – AN ABSOLUTE MONARCHY. All agree that the Head of the church is in Heaven. But I was never *hired* or *fired* by Jesus! I never had to give account to him in elders’ meetings! Jesus never dictated decisions for the congregation!

ITS LIFE – DEVOTION. I think people from all churches will agree our lives should be devoted to the *word* and *example* of Christ, as the tract suggests. In my experience, this devotion was demonstrated less by living in harmony with and serving the needs of mankind and was measured more by regular attendance and proper performance of rituals.

It gives me no pleasure to review so many of my misunderstandings and misdirections that this tract has prompted me to do so painfully. It is my hope that through my sharing these thoughts you may better understand me and also, perhaps, see some points more clearly for your own adjustment in thinking.

I often wondered why so few people took tracts from our rack at church and the county fair booth about "*Why I Am A Member of The Church of Christ*" and "*Which Church Did Jesus Build?*" Now I better understand that sin-weary people want a forgiving and comforting savior, not an argument as to whose church is the "rightest".

It might be good for you to look through the tract rack, if your church has one. Do those tracts seek to convert one to Christ or to "the one true church"? Have we not always said you do not have to decide which church to join for the Lord will add you to the right one? Then, let us preach Christ and trust him to do it! []