

Churches: USA (1999): 15,000; Canada (1997): 140

Members: USA (1999): 1,500,000; Canada (1997): 8,000 (Source: Eileen W. Lindner, ed., *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches 2000* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000], pp. 334, 343)

Organization

Churches of Christ view themselves as autonomous churches in voluntary fellowship and not as a denomination. They believe denominational organizations are contrary to the teachings of the New Testament. They have no official organization beyond the local church.

History

Churches of Christ grew out of the Disciples of Christ movement that began in the early nineteenth century. Thomas Campbell organized the “Christian Association of Washington” (Pennsylvania) in 1809. He hoped to reunite Christian churches by restoring the apostolic practices of the early church.

He and his son, Alexander, were key participants in the Restoration Movement. They sought to restore the first century beliefs and practices of the apostolic churches. Alexander Campbell took over the leadership of the movement after he joined his father. Their interpretation of the Bible led them to accept immersion of believers as the only acceptable mode of baptism. Consequently, they joined the Baptists.

Alexander Campbell became a very influential leader among Baptists. He was editor of the *Christian Baptist* and a well known debater and preacher. However, his teachings concerning the need for a new reformation in the church caused animosity between his followers and traditional Baptists. In 1830 he and his followers separated and became known as the Disciples. In 1832 they united with many of the followers of Barton Stone and later became known as the Disciples of Christ.

In the early twentieth century some Disciples of Christ felt their movement had drifted away from its original purpose. In 1906, a group led by David Lipscomb asked federal census takers not to list Churches of Christ with the Disciples of Christ. This marked the beginning of Churches of Christ as a distinct group from the Disciples

of Christ. While the Churches of Christ have congregations throughout the United States, most of their members are located in the South and Southwest.

Religious Practices

Churches of Christ have a congregational form of church government. Each local church is autonomous and self-governing. The only rituals they observe are those, which they believe, were part of the first century church. The Churches of Christ reject the use of musical instruments in worship.

Salvation

Churches of Christ believe salvation is the free gift of God's grace provided through the atoning work of Jesus Christ. They avoid theories of the atonement claiming they are speculative. Those in the Churches of Christ reject Calvinistic theology. They downplay the effects of original sin. The role of the Holy Spirit in conversion is regarded as either non-essential or minimal. They view faith as a rational decision where the individual accepts the biblical facts about Jesus. The Churches of Christ also teach that Christians can lose salvation by apostatizing. Many understand faith as an intellectual acceptance of the biblical facts about Jesus. They believe that Christians may sin in such a way that they lose their salvation.

Baptism

Churches of Christ teach that baptism by immersion for believers is essential for the remission of sins and is necessary for salvation. They use passages such as Mark 16:16 and Acts 2:38 to substantiate this teaching. Baptism has a threefold purpose: (1) it is necessary for salvation; (2) it places the believer in Christ; and (3) it places the believer in the church.

Response: While baptism is important, it is not necessary for salvation. The biblical passages quoted by the Churches of Christ to argue for the necessity of water baptism do not prove their point.

“He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned” (Mark 16:16). Contrary to the claims of the Churches of Christ, this passage does not prove the necessity of water baptism. There are four possible relationships between belief and baptism. First, one both believes and is baptized. We are told in the first part of verse 16 that this person will be saved. Second, one believes and is not baptized. This possibility is not discussed in the passage so we cannot draw any conclusions about whether such an individual will be saved or lost. A third possibility is that one does not believe but is baptized. Fourth, one both does not believe and is not baptized. According to verse 16, one who does not believe is condemned whether baptized or not.

If the Churches of Christ really want to speak only when the Bible speaks and be silent when the Bible is silent, they will not use Mark 16:16 to argue for the necessity of water baptism for salvation. Mark 16:16 is silent concerning whether the person who believes but is not baptized is saved or lost.

“Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost” (Acts 2:38). The Churches of Christ claim this passage teaches that both repentance and baptism are necessary for salvation. An examination of the Greek text reveals information not available in the English translation. The word “for” is a translation of the Greek preposition *eis*. The Churches of Christ are correct when they point out that *eis* can sometimes express aim or purpose. If Luke intended that usage, then this passage would teach that baptism is necessary to receive forgiveness of sins. However, this is not the only meaning that the Greek term *eis* can have in this passage. *Eis* can also be used to indicate the basis or ground of something. According to A. T. Robertson, this usage “occurs at least three times” where it cannot be purpose or aim, but rather the basis or ground” (Matt. 10:41; 12:41) (A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures In The New Testament*, Vol. III, p. 35). Acts 2:38 can mean that one is baptized because his or her sins have already been forgiven. Acts 2:38 does not prove the necessity of water baptism for salvation.

The Lord’s Supper

The Lord’s Supper is one of the three elements central in Churches of Christ worship. The other two elements are preaching and baptism. According to the Churches of Christ, the Lord’s Supper has three primary meanings: (1) commemoration of the memorial meal commanded by Christ; (2) proclamation of Christ’s death for sinful

people; and (3) examination of the individual’s Christian commitment. In keeping with their understanding of the New Testament, Churches of Christ celebrate the Lord’s Supper every Sunday.

The Trinity

Churches of Christ subscribe to the doctrine of the Trinity, but they avoid the use of the terms *Trinity* and *Trinitarian*. These are considered philosophical rather than New Testament terms.

The Bible

The Churches of Christ believe that the New Testament is the primary guide for understanding Christian faith and practice. Creeds are considered unnecessary and extraneous. A popular slogan of the Churches of Christ (and other Protestants) is: “Where the Bible speaks, we speak. Where the Bible is silent, we are silent.”

Ministry

Churches of Christ have three basic types of ministers: evangelists, elders, and deacons. Evangelists are ordained by a local congregation and sent out to preach, win converts, and establish churches. Elders function much the same as pastors, providing spiritual and disciplinary functions in local churches. Deacons function in servant roles in churches.

Baptist Comparisons

Both Baptists and Churches of Christ place a strong emphasis on the autonomy of the local church. Both groups also advocate the support of missions.

While there are many similarities between Baptists and Churches of Christ, there are also many areas of differences. Baptists do not consider water baptism essential to salvation. Baptists believe baptism is a symbol of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Believers are baptized to identify publicly with Christ, and to portray their death to a life of sin and resurrection to a new life.

Baptists, unlike Churches of Christ, have organizations beyond the local church in order to work together for purposes of missions and evangelism. Contrary to the practice of the Churches of Christ, Baptists accept the use of musical instruments in worship. Baptists see faith as requiring a personal trust in and commitment to Jesus Christ rather than just an intellectual acceptance of the biblical teachings about Christ Jesus. Baptists believe the Bible teaches that salvation does not depend on membership in a particular church. Salvation comes as a result of a personal faith in and commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

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