Find and Remain in the True Church? (Part 1)

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Are you a member of the true Church? How many true Churches are there? What is the true Church? How can you know if you are in the true Church? And if you are in the true Church, how can you stay in the true Church of God? These are questions every person who desires to be a genuine Christian faces. We should know the answers. Not knowing the answers has already put the salvation of many in jeopardy, and can put your salvation in jeopardy.

A good deal of misinformation has been propagated concerning the matter of being in the Church and how it relates to our standing before God. Years ago, in the midst of an apostasy being engineered by the leaders of a Church of God fellowship, people were told that God called them into a particular corporate Church body, and that's where he expects them to stay. Individuals have said, "God called me into this Church," meaning a particular corporate organization, "and this is where I'm staying."

Is that what God called us into? Is that true?

Others have said, "Mr. X (you insert the name) is God's anointed, so whatever he says I'll follow. And to leave the Church [perceived as a human corporate organization] is rebellion against God's anointed." Is that true? Is a particular religious leader God's anointed? Is leaving the corporate Church led by such a leader rebellion against God's anointed? In the midst of wholesale doctrinal changes members of what had been purported to be "God's Church" were told "God will never leave you nor forsake you," the implication being he will never leave you nor forsake you if you remain attached to a particular corporate Church organization. Is it true that God makes an unconditional promise never to leave nor forsake us if we simply remain attached to a particular corporate body?

Would God want us to leave a Church that we had at one time thought was God's true Church, but had begun rejecting teachings of Scripture and promoting doctrines contrary to Scripture? Would God want us to remain in fellowship with such a Church? I want to deal with these questions and help you find the answers to them. And I want to discuss some general principles that will help you understand what it means to be in the true Church of God, and how you can identify the true Church, become a part of it, and remain in it. My purpose is not to attack anyone, nor any church organization, but to

help you understand the truth about some rather urgent questions that possibly you and your family or friends have dealt with or may in the future deal with.

First, let's understand just what is a "church." In the New Testament two words frequently appear either of which could be understood as equivalent to the English word "church." One of those words is *ekklesia*, which literally means "called out from." It is usually translated "church" in the King James, although it's also occasionally translated "assembly." In New Testament usage it generally implies an assembly (general or local) of people called out of the world. The Church consists of those who have been called out of darkness into the light of God's truth, and who have responded to their calling in a positive way.

Being called out of the world implies being called out of a condition of spiritual darkness and ignorance into the light of God's truth. "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (I Peter 2:9). Light is a metaphor for the *truth* of God's word.

"Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path" (Psalms 119:105). "The entrance of Your words gives light; It gives understanding to the simple" (Psalms 119:130). "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isaiah 8:20). "And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (II Peter 1:19).

The calling is done through the proclaiming of God's word, his truth, to those willing to hear. To the Church in Thessalonica it is written: "For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe" (I Thessalonians 2:13). Paul and Barnabas, preaching to a crowd in a Jewish synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia, said to them, "Men and brethren, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to you the word of this salvation has been sent" (Acts 13:26). Afterward, the word spread rapidly throughout the city. Then it says, "On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the

things spoken by Paul. Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, 'It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles'" (Acts 13:44-46).

Those who hear the word of God have the option of receiving it or rejecting it. Those who receive the word of God and respond to it can become a part of the true Church.

The second word for "Church" in the New Testament is *sunagego*, or synagogue. It means literally those "brought together." It is usually simply transliterated into the anglicized form *synagogue* in the KJV, but it is also translated into "congregation," and "assembly." In the New Testament the word "synagogue" usually refers to a Jewish assembly, the Jewish equivalent of what we would call a "church." But it also is used in reference to Christian assemblies or churches (James 2:2, for example). Some other words which you might want to consider in understanding what is the Church are: brethren, disciples, saints, the called, the elect, the chosen, the faithful, apostate, reprobate, false brethren, false apostles.

Essentially, a church is an assembly or body of people called or brought together. In the Bible, however, there is a distinction between the physical group of people that make up the visible or corporate Church, and the spiritual body which is the Church in an absolute sense. The Scriptures clearly reveal that within the visible, physical Church there are individuals who are not really converted. The Bible reveals that there can be division or schism within the visible Church. Although such division is expressly contrary to God's will, he, nevertheless, allows it.

The Scriptures also show that there is a false Church, a counterfeit, which is not God's Church at all but is of Satan. And there are false apostles, false ministers and false brethren, who claim to be Christian, and may appear to many to be Christian, but are not in God's eyes.

What is it we have been called into? In the baptism ceremony experienced by many of those who have responded to the true gospel in a positive way, it was stated that you were *not* being baptized into any denomination or sect of this world.

In a valid baptism one is baptized into Christ. "Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? (Romans 6:3). A true Christian is one who has been baptized into Christ, and into his death. That means that we not only enter into a spiritual union with Christ, but we also die, in a symbolic sense. We are to be changed from what we were before, slaves to sin, and live for God. "Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin" (Romans 6:6).

"For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts" (Romans 6:10-12).

So a true Christian is one who has been baptized not into some organization of men, but into Christ, and into his death, to become a new person, having been changed to a newness of life. "Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4).

Becoming a part of the true Church is a life transforming event. As one is baptized into Christ, into his death, that person is also baptized into the Church. "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (I Corinthians 12:13). The true Church is, in a sense, the body of Christ, as it is infused with Christ's Spirit. "Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually" (I Corinthians 12:27). The Apostle Paul wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

In a valid baptism one is baptized not in the name of any man but in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Christ told those he sent out as apostles to preach the gospel: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19).

God called you, not into a corporate body, not into an organization of men, but "into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:9). According to Scripture, then, this is what we are called into: the truth, and fellowship with Jesus Christ, who is the personification of truth. "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me'" (John 14:6).

We are called to be a part of the true Church. "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel" (Hebrews 12:22-24). The true spiritual Church of God consists of the "general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven" (Hebrews 12:23). "Here we have no continuing city," but "our citizenship is in heaven" (Hebrews 13:14; Philippians 3:20). The true Church of God consists of those registered in heaven, that is whose names God has written in the "Book of Life." It is they, if their names remain written in the Book of Life, to whom the promise of eternal life pertains. When God's presence is with men in the New Jerusalem, we are told: "... there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life" (Revelation 21:27).

Yet, not all who are of the visible Church are of the true Spiritual body of Christ. Israel at Mt. Sinai, though called out of Egypt, had many faithless people who remained in their sins. Israel serves as an example for us. We are warned that we, within the Church, will fall into the same errors as ancient Israel if we fail to diligently pursue the true faith.

"Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. **Now these things became our examples**, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.' Nor let us commit sexual

immorality, as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand fell; nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents; nor complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore **let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall**" (I Corinthians 10:1-12).

We are warned, "Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today,' lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, while it is said: 'Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.' For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses? Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief" (Hebrews 3:12-19). Continuing, "Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it" (Hebrews 4:1).

In such circumstances, the name of one who has been baptized can be removed from the *Book of Life*. In warning his Church to hold fast to the truth and repent, Jesus says, "He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels" (Revelation 3:5). Clearly the admonition implies that if we don't heed Christ's warning, our names can be removed from the Book of Life. We're also warned: "...if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life..." (Revelation 22:19).

Paul included in a list of perils he faced in his ministry, those "among false brethren" (2 Corinthians 11:26). We see in the prophecy of Revelation concerning the Church references to false apostles, false teachers, people who claim falsely to be (spiritual) Jews, but are of the "synagogue [church] of Satan," etc. Jesus says to the Church of Ephesus, "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested

those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars" (Revelation 2:2).

And to Smyrna, Jesus said, "I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan" (Revelation 2:9). He's speaking to the Church of God. The reference to those who falsely say they are Jews is speaking of Jew's in a spiritual sense, not of the flesh. In other words those who claim to be spiritual Jews, converted people, members of the Church of God, but they are not. "... he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God" (Romans 2:29).

To Pergamos Jesus said, "But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth" (Revelation 2:14-16). And to Thyatira Jesus said, "... I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. And I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. I will kill her children with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works. Now to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, who have not known the depths of Satan, as they say, I will put on you no other burden. But hold fast what you have till I come. And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations" (Revelation 2:20-26).

We are *not* commanded in Scripture to abide in any particular corporate body, nor any other organization of men. But we *are* told to abide in Christ. "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as

a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned" (John 15:4-6). For us to abide in Christ, *his words* must abide in us. "**If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you**, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you" (John 15:7). We are to abide in his love, which requires *keeping his commandments*. "As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love" (John 15:9-10). "Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him" (I John 3:24). Scripture teaches, "He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:4).

Despite clever arguments to the contrary, the Sabbath, the Holy Days, tithing and other laws rejected by most nominal "Christian" churches are among the commandments of God and of Christ. Jesus taught and set an example of keeping these commandments. The apostles, and, for the most part, as history shows, their immediate successors continued in the commandments. Yet vast numbers of people who believe themselves to be Christians walk according to human devised Church traditions, traditions which have supplanted God's commandments in matters of religious observance. Jesus Christ's and the apostles' clear teachings and example are often ignored, in favor of "tradition." But Scripture teaches, "He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked" (1 John 2:6).

Many, even many who once understood clearly the importance of walking according to God's commandments after the example of Christ and the apostles and the plain teaching of God's word, have been confused or deluded by false assertions regarding the new covenant, and derogatory epithets such as "legalists." Where do you find in the Bible God punishing anyone for *obeying his commandments?*

You will find plenty of warnings and examples of punishment, on the other hand, for *disobedience* to the commandments. Note how the Church of God is described or defined in Scripture. "And the dragon was enraged with the woman [symbolic language here for God's Church], and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 12:17). "Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Revelation 14:12).

In the *New* Testament we are told: "*Blessed* are those who *do His commandments*, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city" (Revelation 22:14). You lightly *assume* at the peril of your eternal life that the commandments referred to do not include the Sabbaths and others widely rejected. It can be definitively proven that such commandments are binding under the New Covenant. Christ hates lawlessness, as is stated in Hebrews 1:9. The Greek for "lawlessness" there is *anomia*, without law, implying contempt for and rejection of God's law. Christ, as we read in Revelation 2, hates the deeds and doctrines of Nicolaitans, a symbolic term for haters of God's law who by their teachings lead members of God's Church into committing idolatry and spiritual fornication (Revelation 2:6, 14-15). It is those who *overcome* such deceptions who are promised eternal life. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death" (Revelation 2:11).

Christ's Church consists of those who *have fellowship with Christ,* into which we were called. "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (I Corinthians 1:9). To have fellowship with Christ requires walking in the light, a metaphor for truth, as opposed to walking in darkness. "This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth" (I John 1:5-6). The Sabbath, the Holy Days, are just the more obvious doctrines of the Bible that have been rejected or adulterated by leaders who have turned from truth. We are to "have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them" (Ephesians 5:11).

Those who reject the truth, or who no longer believe the truth, regardless of position, are unbelievers. We are told, "Do not become unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness?....What part has a believer with an unbeliever?" (2 Corinthians 6:14-15). We cannot enter or remain in those fellowships whose leaders reject the truths of God's word and teach doctrines contrary to God's word.

"Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?" Scripture asks (Amos 3:3). Jesus said, "Every...house divided against itself will not stand" (Matthew 12:25).

We are admonished many times in Scripture to be unified not merely in some superficial manner, but to be of one mind. Such unity cannot be accomplished by being forced through intimidation or coercion. Before we can hope to be of one mind with one another in the way God intends, we must first individually become of one mind with Jesus Christ. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). "Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God" (I Peter 4:1-2).

Under the New Covenant, as we yield to him, Christ engraves his very law, which expresses his mind and nature, in our minds. "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them" (Hebrews 10:16). As we learn to truly live by God's ten commandments, as expanded and magnified by his word and Christ's example, and grow in having his mind developed in us, we can become more like-minded with one another.

Paul wrote, "And I call upon you, brethren, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that the same thing ye may all say, and there may not be divisions among you, and ye may be perfected in the same mind, and in the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1:10, Young's Literal Translation). As the YLT makes clear, Paul wrote in the subjunctive mood, the mood of contingency, in urging unity of mind among the brethren. Because of carnality of mind among them, the Corinthian church lacked unity. Paul recognized that some truly converted people are more spiritually mature than others, and that *perfect* unity of mind is a *goal* towards which we should be striving. Even so, while making allowances for individual differences and levels of maturity, the converted ought to maintain at minimum a unity of mind in things of major importance. "Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind.... To the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind" (Philippians 3:15-16).

One of the primary reasons Jesus Christ established a ministry to serve the Church is to develop and strengthen the bonds of unity through example and sound doctrine. "And he gave some [to be] apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ: till we all attain unto the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a fullgrown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-13, ASV). Notice that unity is to be centered on faith – our *beliefs*, our *system of belief-*-and on the *knowledge* (Greek: *epignosis*, **precise and correct** knowledge) of the Son of God. These are matters of the mind. They relate directly to *doctrine* as well as *how one lives*. Paul exhorted Timothy, "...be an **example** to the believers, in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity." And further, "Take heed to yourself and to the **doctrine**. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you" (1 Timothy 4: 12, 16). A ministry faithfully practicing and teaching sound biblical doctrine is a key to the development of the unity of mind God wills for his Church.

Yet we are often warned that there would be *in our midst* those of another mind, who would lead many into paths of destruction. "But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed" (II Peter 2:1-2). The natural, fleshly mind, the carnal mind with which we were all born, "...is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be" (Romans 8:7). Even as it was in the New Testament Church, within any Church body there can be those, even in the ministry, who allow their carnal minds to prevail over God's Spirit. They are or become "men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth.... From such withdraw yourself" (1 Timothy 6:5). These false teachers cause the way of truth to be blasphemed (2 Peter 2:2). They are "...men who have crept in unnoticed..., ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness..." (Jude 4). These are "mockers" walking "according to their own ungodly lusts...sensual [or worldly] persons, who cause divisions..."(Jude 18-19). Yes, such men, teaching falsehoods, teaching lawlessness contrary to true doctrine, cause division, and we are to withdraw from them!

Many times in the history of the Church, division has occurred as a result of heretical teachings being introduced. People have had to choose to obey the truth or take the easy, expedient course of conforming to the wishes of those in charge (humanly). This occurred at the end of the apostolic age, as new leaders

began to compromise with the world. Most, as is usually the case, chose to abandon truth and go the way of compromise. It's occurred many other times before and since. During the human lifetime of Christ, "even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God" (John 12:42-43). Many allowed the church leaders of their day, this Scripture tells us, to intimidate them into inaction concerning their convictions. They chose remaining in fellowship with the church (synagogue is a synonym for church), over having fellowship with Christ. Jesus told his followers, "They will put you out of the synagogues [churches]" (John 16:2). This tells us that there would be times when unfaithful men would assume control even of what had been churches of God – and would put Christ's own disciples out of the assemblies. This was already happening before the close of the first century. "I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us" (III John 1:9). Diotrephes sought to supplant John the Apostle, who had testified of the truth.

Our salvation is not in men, nor an institution, but in faith towards God. "Look to Me, and be saved, All you ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. (Isaiah 45:22). "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Jesus said, "I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture" (John 10:9). "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name [besides Jesus Christ] under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). We must not allow misguided loyalty to any man, nor any organization of men, to lead us into compromising God's truth and hence rejecting him. Having the Eternal as our God and being his people implies our continuing faithfulness in accepting and obeying his commandments. This is as true today as it was when Moses said to the Israelites as they were about to enter the promised land: "Today you have proclaimed the Lord to be your God, and that you will walk in His ways and keep His statutes, His commandments, and His judgments, and that you will obey His voice. Also today the Lord has proclaimed you to be His special people, just as He has promised you, that you should keep all His commandments, and that He will set you high above all nations which He has made, in praise, in name, and in honor, and that you may be a holy people to the Lord your God, just as He has spoken" (Deuteronomy 26:17-19).

Wherever an assembly of God's true Church is, it will be walking in his ways, and keeping his commandments.

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