

The Divine Designations Of the Church

A careful reading of the New Testament reveals that the church was created to be a special organism. It is, therefore, referred to in special ways by the inspired writers. These references can be divided into three groups. They are used with specific meaning, to express function, ownership, and relationship. They were given by divine direction and fulfill a divine purpose.

The phrases used by the Holy Spirit to refer to the church should not be thought of as mere illustrations.¹ The New Testament calls the faithful followers of Christ His “church,” His “body,” and His “kingdom.” These divine designations² identify, character-

¹The church is often illustrated in the New Testament, for example, as a sheepfold (John 10:1), a vineyard (Matthew 20:1), or a precious pearl (Matthew 13:45, 46). Such images help us to understand the church better; but they are only illustrations, not ways to identify the church.

²“Designations,” as used here, means the biblical ways of referring to the church.

ize, and describe the church which the Lord established. Consider them carefully.

DESIGNATIONS OF FUNCTION

Some designations given to the church in the New Testament relate to the function of the church as a body, a living thing. These designations highlight what the Lord's church is in purpose, design, and action.

What Christ established is referred to simply as "the church" (Colossians 1:18, 24). This phrase means "an assembly of people who have become followers of the Lord." These people are referred to in an assembled sense (1 Corinthians 11:18), a local sense (1 Corinthians 1:2), a regional sense (1 Corinthians 16:1), and a universal sense (Ephesians 5:23). This designation declares the basic meaning of what Christ established—a group of people redeemed by His blood who live for Him, worship Him, and do His work.

Individual members of the church are called "Christians," since they are trying to be like Christ. (The word "Christian" means "Christ-like.") The name Christian was first given to the disciples at Antioch (Acts 11:26). The circumstances of the giving of this name are unclear, but we can be certain that God chose it for His people. As a name, it is found three times in the New Testament (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16).

The Bible also refers to members of the church as "saints," those who have been sanctified. These are people who have been set apart as God's chosen ones. Paul addressed the Ephesians by saying, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to *the saints*

who are at Ephesus and who are faithful in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 1:1; emphasis mine). The King James Version of the Bible has "peculiar people" in Titus 2:14. The New Testament in the back of this book says "a people for His own possession." The basic meaning of "holy" or "saint" is "set apart for God." God's church is "a people for God's own possession," a holy people, a people set apart for God. Christians have been called with a holy calling (2 Timothy 1:9); they are to live in holy conduct and godliness (2 Peter 3:11); they seek to appear before Him on the last day "holy and blameless and beyond reproach" (Colossians 1:22b).

Some translations of the Bible have "Saint" in the titles of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and have entitled Revelation "The Revelation of St. John the Divine." These titles to these New Testament books came from man, not God. The New Testament labels everyone in Christ as a "saint." The church is even referred to as "the churches of the saints" (1 Corinthians 14:33). People are set apart for God when they become Christians.

In addition, the church is referred to as the "body" of Christ (Ephesians 1:22, 23). This term is sometimes used as an illustration of what the church is like in function (1 Corinthians 12:12–27) and sometimes to indicate what the church actually is, as a term of identification. When used as a designation, the phrase "body of Christ" stresses the function as well as the relationship of the church: The church is the spiritual body of Christ on earth, and it is related to Christ as a body is to its head. In this spiritual body of Christ, individual Christians are said to function as "members" of the body, each Christian being a member of

it and working as part of the body. Paul wrote of the church at Corinth, "Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27).

The church is also referred to as "the kingdom" (Acts 8:12). Sometimes the expression used is "the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 16:18, 19), and sometimes it is "the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Both phrases reflect the spiritual nature of the dominion and rule of the church/kingdom (John 18:36). The church is a group of followers of Christ who have submitted to the rule of God upon earth. Christ is King and is now reigning over His kingdom, the church (1 Corinthians 15:24, 25). Consequently, the church has a divine head, or king, and it is governed by divine authority. Members of the church have bowed to the authority of King Jesus and are living as "citizens" of His spiritual kingdom (Philippians 3:20), though they dwell on earth.

Those who are part of the kingdom of God are likewise described as "citizens" of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 16:18, 19). Paul said, "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 3:20). He also wrote, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone" (Ephesians 2:19, 20). Christ is our King (1 Corinthians 15:24, 25), and only those who live under Christ's rule are in His kingdom (Matthew 7:21).

Christians are citizens in the eternal kingdom of which Daniel spoke in the Old Testament (Daniel 2:44). The writer of Hebrews described it as an "un-

shakable" kingdom: "Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude . . ." (Hebrews 12:28). The next time you ask yourself where you will be one thousand years from today, if you are a Christian, you can tell yourself, "I will be in the eternal kingdom!" God's kingdom is not here today and gone tomorrow—it is eternal.

DESIGNATIONS OF OWNERSHIP

Three ways of referring to the church in the New Testament emphasize the possession-type of relationship that the church has to God and Christ. These phrases suggest ownership and leadership.

First, the church is referred to as "the church of Christ." In Paul's conclusion to his letter to the Romans, he sent greetings from the churches of Achaia: "All the churches of Christ greet you" (Romans 16:16b). This designation emphasizes the ownership and the identity of the church. The church is the church of Christ because Christ founded it, purchased it, owns it, and serves as its head. When one is converted to Christ, he belongs to Christ (1 Corinthians 6:20). He becomes so completely identified with Christ that he is called a Christian, a follower of Christ (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16). The special assembly of followers of Christ, then, is called the church of Christ to show who the church is, who owns it, and who is part of it.

Second, the church is referred to as "the church of God" (1 Corinthians 1:2). If the church is referred to in the New Testament as the church of Christ, we would also expect it to be referred to as the church of God, for Jesus said that He and His Father are one (John 10:30). God planned the church before the

foundation of the world (Ephesians 3:10, 11). He sent Christ into the world to prepare for the church (Matthew 16:18) and to purchase it with His blood (Acts 20:28). Just as God was in Christ at the cross reconciling the world to Himself (2 Corinthians 5:19), even so God was with Christ in the founding and purchasing of the church.

Third, members of the church are described as “slaves” or “servants.” Those who submit to Christ and obey Him are servants. When the New Testament was written, the slave / master relationship was part of the society of the Roman Empire. A slave was totally under the control of his master. He had no rights and no real possessions. He did not even own himself. No wonder this term and relationship is used to illustrate our surrender to Christ and our life under His Word. Paul wrote, “If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ” (Galatians 1:10b; see Philippians 1:1). He further said, “We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Christians—those who claim Christ as their Master—can no longer be masters over their own lives. They must “crucify” their own wills. That is, they must destroy their own sinful human desires and put God’s commands first in their lives. Paul said, “But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Galatians 6:14). He further said, “From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus” (Galatians 6:17).

DESIGNATIONS OF RELATIONSHIP

Several ways in which the New Testament refers to the church stress the idea of relationship. This is to be expected, since being a member of the Lord's church involves various relationships.

In addition to the slave/master relationship and the body/head relationship which have already been mentioned, the word "Christian" itself expresses the beautiful relationship which church members have to their Lord. They are His followers; they live for Him and wear His name. The apostle Paul described his religious life after becoming a Christian in the now famous words "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). Christ was not just first in Paul's life—Christ *was* his life! The sum and substance of Paul's life was Christ. He was truly a Christian.

The New Testament also describes the church as "the family of God." Paul said that Christians are "of God's household" (Ephesians 2:19). He told Timothy that he was writing to him so that he might know how to conduct himself in "the household of God, which is the church of the living God" (1 Timothy 3:15). At the time of one's conversion to Christ, God adopts him as His child, giving him family privileges and making him an heir of eternal life along with Christ (Romans 8:15–17; Ephesians 1:5). Christians have a heavenly Father to pray to and a loving Savior—an elder brother, Jesus—to pray through. As brothers and sisters, they love, help, and encourage each other (Acts 2:44).

Members of the church are referred to as "the children of God." They have a special relationship with God; He is their Father, and they are His chil-

dren. When believers are baptized into Christ, they are adopted as God's "sons" (Ephesians 1:5). As His children, Christians have an eternal inheritance (Ephesians 1:11) and the strength and support of God's earthly family (1 Timothy 3:15; Ephesians 2:19–22). In this spiritual, heavenly family, God is the Father (Matthew 6:9), Jesus is the elder brother (Romans 8:17), and all Christians are brothers and sisters (2 Peter 3:15; 1 John 2:8–11).

God has a special love for His children (1 John 3:1). He protects them from Satan and provides for their daily needs. Jesus taught that if an earthly father gives good gifts to his children, then the children of Almighty God—the perfect Father in heaven—can expect Him to give them even more beautiful gifts when they ask Him! (See Matthew 7:11.)

Members of the early church considered each other not only brethren, but also friends (2 Peter 3:15; 3 John 15) who stand together in a beautiful comradeship. Christians are the highest type of friends.

John concluded his third epistle by writing, "Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends by name" (3 John 15). He called the Christians around him "friends," and he called the Christians who would be receiving the letter "friends." Jesus called His disciples friends, and John is no doubt using this term after Jesus' example. Jesus had said to His disciples,

Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that

I have heard from My Father I have made known to you (John 15:13–15).

Someone has said, “A friend is someone who stays with you when everyone else leaves.” Jesus is this type of friend. When no one else could help us, He laid down His life for us. Christians are to be this type of friend to each other (1 John 3:16). Christians are “friends.”

The first-century church was often referred to as “the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1), or simply “disciples” (Acts 9:26; 11:26). The word “disciple” means learner or follower; it suggests the continual relationship which exists between the Christian and his Lord. A disciple is one who has committed himself to someone greater than he, one who has learned from the greater one, and one who continuously seeks to learn more from the greater one through instruction and imitation. He is not just a listener; he is a learner, an understudy. His Lord is his Master, his Teacher (John 13:13).

The word “disciple” is especially used in the Gospels, appearing 238 times in them. It is found twenty-eight times in Acts, and it does not appear in the Epistles or Revelation. Perhaps the reason for the obvious change in terminology as we go from the Gospels to Acts to the Epistles is that during Christ’s life on earth, His followers were called “disciples” in reference to Him. Afterwards, in Acts, the Epistles, and Revelation, they were called “saints” in reference to their holy calling or “brethren” in relation to one another.

In the Great Commission given to His apostles before His ascension, Christ commanded, “Go there-

fore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19, 20). In this way, He gave a continuing use to the word "disciple," even though it is not often seen in the latter part of the New Testament.

A disciple is a doer of the Word. James said, "But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers . . ." (James 1:22). A disciple is more than a student; he is an imitator of Christ, a follower of Christ.

From another viewpoint, the New Testament church is called "the temple of God." Paul said to the Christians at Corinth, "Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16). The church as an assembly of Christians forms a dwelling place for God. God's sanctuary today is a living body, the church. Individual Christians are called "saints" because they are set apart by the gospel to do sacred work and to provide a dwelling place for God (1 Corinthians 1:2).

In one passage, the New Testament refers to the church as the "church of the firstborn" (Hebrews 12:23). The church sustains a unique relationship with the future because each member of the church is "enrolled in heaven." The future for the Christian does not hold fear and dread because of the eternal hope Christ gives him. These relationship-type designations give insight into what the church is and how the church should live. They tell Christians how to live on earth and tell how the saved will be with God in the future.

CONCLUSION

God changed Abram's name to Abraham because the name Abram no longer fit him. Abram was told that he would be the father of a multitude (Genesis 17:5). The name Abram means "exalted father." Abram was a meaningful name, but it did not represent the future Abram would have. The name Abraham means "father of a multitude," the right name for a man who would father a nation of people. The designation God gave to Abraham meant something to God and to Abraham. Even so, the designations God gave to the church mean something to God, and they should mean much to us.

There are proper ways to refer to the New Testament church, and they should be used. We confuse the identity of the church by using nonbiblical designations for it. If a group of people seek to be the New Testament church and want to be known as the New Testament church, they should use the designations given in the New Testament for the church. A church can call itself the New Testament church and not be the New Testament church; but if it truly is the New Testament church, it should refer to itself with the proper New Testament language.

The commitment to being God's church today must be shown even in the way members designate and describe themselves. Using the designations that God used for His church is at least a beginning place for Christians who are trying to practice in their lives what God wants His church to be and to do. When Christians call themselves what God called the church, they are setting themselves on the right path, going toward what God wants them to be and become. (See Appendix 3 on page 279.)

STUDY QUESTIONS*(answers on page 268)*

1. How is the word "kingdom" used in the New Testament in connection with the church?
2. Why does Paul refer to the church as "the church of Christ"? What other designation for the church suggests ownership?
3. Why should we use the designations for the church that are given in the New Testament?
4. What is accomplished when we refer to the church the way the Bible does?
5. Why is the church called "the family of God"?
6. What is the basic meaning of the word "Christian"? How does one live when he lives as a Christian?
7. How did Paul describe his life as a Christian in Philippians 1:21?
8. What does it mean to be a "child of God"? Give characteristics of this relationship with God.
9. How often does the word "disciple" appear in the New Testament?
10. Give the characteristics of a disciple.
11. Give the basic meaning of the word "saint." When does a person become a "saint"? What are the characteristics of a saint?