



JESUS' CHURCH: DESIGNATION

When you are baptized, the Lord will add you to His church. You then need to function as a member of the Lord's church. Since there are so many churches in existence today,¹ it is not easy to identify Jesus' church. In the next few lessons, we will examine characteristics of the church in the New Testament. Every religious organization should be evaluated in light of those characteristics.

Time and space will not permit an in-depth study of each attribute. You will have questions. Write them down and share them with the one who gave you this study guide. He will be happy to study more in detail with you on any of these topics.

We will first consider scriptural designations. We will see how the Bible refers to the church as a whole, then how individual members of the church are designated.

DESIGNATION: BACKGROUND

Before we consider specific designations, I need to say a few words about the background. First, note that I use "designations" rather than "names." I do that because, in the New Testament, the church is given no proper name.²

What is the difference between a "designation" and a "name"? You are probably sitting on something as you read this. For the purpose of my illustration, let us assume that it is a chair. If you call it "a chair" (or "a seat" or something similar), you are simply speaking of what it *is*. That is a descriptive term; that is a designation. You could, however, decide to give it a name. For instance, you might name it "George," with a capital "G" on "George": "George, the chair." That would be a proper name.

True, my illustration is silly, but I am trying to impress upon you that the New Testament uses only designations for the church, not proper names. All the terms used concerning the church simply tell what it *is*.

Since that is true, whenever I use a designation for the Lord's church, I use a small "c" in the word "church."³ I do not make an issue of this,⁴ but I want to emphasize that I am using a designation, not a proper name.

Second, as a rule, the designations for the church honor Christ and His Father. Jesus has "the name which is above every name" (Philippians 2:9). Denominational names often exalt some characteristic of the denomination, a founder, or some doctrine. Only the Lord should be exalted. Peter said that "there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

DESIGNATION: AS A WHOLE

Keeping all this in mind, let us first look at designations for the church as a whole. Most of the time in the New Testament, the church is simply called "the church" (Acts 5:11; 8:1, 3; 9:31; 11:22, 26). Therefore, in my writing and teaching, I usually refer to the church as nothing other than "the church."

Occasionally, the Scriptures do use descriptive phrases to refer to the church. For instance, Paul referred to the church as "the church of the Lord" (Acts 20:28; ASV).⁵ Hebrews 12:23 calls the church "the church of the firstborn [ones]."⁶ A term used several times is "church of God" (1 Corinthians 1:2; 15:9; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:13; see 1 Timothy 3:15).

In Romans 16:16 Paul referred to several congregations in his area as he said, "All the churches of Christ greet you."⁷ "Churches of Christ" is not a denominational name, but rather a descriptive phrase. "Of Christ" means "belonging to Christ."⁸ "Churches of Christ" means "the churches which belong to Christ." A phrase meaning the same is "Christ's church." When I use the term "church of Christ" or "churches of Christ," I mean the church or churches that belong to Jesus.

DESIGNATION: AS INDIVIDUALS

How were individual members of the church designated? A variety of terms are used in the New Testament to refer to individual members. Here are several:

- "Brothers"⁹ and "sisters" (Acts 6:3; 9:30; Romans 16:1; James 2:15). This is the most common term used. It indicates a family (spiritual family) relationship.
- "Saints" (Romans 1:7; 8:27; 12:13; 15:25). "Saint" does not mean "sinless," but "set apart."¹⁰ At the point of baptism, God sets the Christian apart as one of His special people (Titus 2:14).
- "Disciples" (Acts 6:1, 2, 7; 9:1). This word is often used to refer to followers of Christ in the Book of Acts. The word indicates a "follower," a "learner."¹¹

The distinctive designation for individual members of the church is the term "Christian." Unlike the other designations we have seen, this one can be thought of as a proper name (notice the capital "C" at the beginning of the word). It is not found often in the New Testament; but when it is, it is used in a significant manner. Luke said that "the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch" (Acts 11:26). After Paul preached to Agrippa, the king said to him, "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian" (Acts 26:28). Peter wrote, "But if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name" (1 Peter 4:16).

I stated earlier that, as a rule, New Testa-

ment designations honor Jesus and God. This is obvious in the word "Christian": Two-thirds of "Christian" is "Christ."

The word "Christian" is an anglicized Greek word.¹² The original Greek combines the word for "Christ" with an ending that indicates possession. "Christian" literally means "one who belongs to Christ."

CHRISTIAN = ONE WHO BELONGS TO CHRIST

This word means the same on an *individual* basis as "church of Christ" does on a *collective* basis: "Christian" means the individual who belongs to Christ, while "church of Christ" means the church that belongs to Christ.

When I am asked what I am religiously, I reply, "I'm a Christian." Sometimes I am pressed: "But what religious organization are you a member of?" Then, I might say, "I'm a member of the church that belongs to Christ," or "Christ's church," or "the church of Christ." At all times, I want to honor my Lord.

CONCLUSION

The wearing of manmade names contributes to religious division. This is true today; it was true in Bible times. When Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, it had started to splinter into various factions:

Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, . . . that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos,"¹³ and "I of Cephas,"¹⁴ and "I of Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:10-12).

Phrases like "of Paul" and "of Apollos" indicate possession—as mentioned earlier, regarding Romans 16:16. They literally mean "I belong to Paul," "I belong to Apollos," and so on. Today, we would say, "I am a Paulite" or "an Apollosite." Paul shamed those who thus identified themselves by asking, "Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he?"

Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" (1 Corinthians 1:13). Only Christ has been crucified for man's sin (1 Corinthians 1:23). Believers are baptized in Christ's name (Acts 2:38); therefore, they should wear only His name.

Do not misunderstand me: A correct designation is not sufficient in and of itself. I could paint the words "Mercedes Benz" on my mini-van, and it would still just be a mini-van, not a Mercedes Benz.¹⁵ Nevertheless, scriptural designation is important. Remember that Peter said, concerning the name of Christ, "There is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). He later wrote, "Glorify God in this name" (1 Peter 4:16). ❖

¹As I study with people, I am often asked "If there was just one church in Bible times, where did all the churches come from?" or "Why do so many denominations exist?" The simplest answer is that it was prophesied that men would depart from the truth, and that is exactly what happened. (Read Acts 20:29, 30; 1 Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 4:1-4.)

²As a rule, a proper name begins with a capital letter.

³An exception is made when the word "church" is used as the first word of a sentence or in a title (such as the title of a lesson).

⁴I do not make an issue of this because early manuscripts of the New Testament used all upper case (capital letters) or all lower case (small letters).

⁵The NASB has "church of God." The context tells us that this is God, the Son.

⁶In the original text, the term "firstborn" is plural. The term means "the church consisting of the first-born ones"—that is, Christians.

⁷Romans 16:16 begins, "Greet one another with a holy kiss." In those days, men greeted men with a kiss and women greeted women with a kiss (as is still the case in some parts of the world). This is not a command to greet each other with a kiss. The emphasis is on the word "holy": When you greet each other warmly, *mean it*. In my part of the world, we might say, "Greet one another with a *sincere* handshake."

⁸The Greeks did not use an apostrophe with the letter "s" (as at the end of "Christ's") to indicate possession. They generally indicated possession by using the genitive case, which is translated "of this" or "of that."

⁹The plural of "brother" in the New Testament is "brethren."

¹⁰The word "saint" comes from the same basic Greek word as "sanctified."

¹¹It can refer to a follower of *any* leader. The context determines whether or not a follower of Christ is meant.

¹²"Anglicized" means that they made an English word out of a Greek word.

¹³Apollos was a preacher who worked for a while in the area of Corinth (which was in Achaia). (See Acts 18:27, 28.)

¹⁴Cephas is another name for the apostle Peter (John 1:42).

¹⁵A Mercedes Benz is a *very* expensive automobile.

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