

THE CHURCH OF THE TRIUMPHANT CHRIST

by

Bert Thompson, Ph.D.

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INTRODUCTION

“But when the fullness of the time came,” Paul wrote to the Galatians, “God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that he might redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons” (4:4). And nothing has been the same since that fateful day almost 2,000 years ago! Christ the controversialist had come, bringing with Him the “good news” about the last and final covenant that God would make with man. Truly, nothing has been the same since.

The advent of Christianity did not come into the world like a whisper. No indeed. Instead, it arrived like a trumpet call. When Jesus called His disciples, it was not for a quiet retreat into the peaceful, nearby hills. They were not to be “holy men” who spent each hour of every day in serene meditation. Rather, they were to be soldiers, fit for battle against the forces of evil in the world (Ephesians 6:10-17). Jesus told them: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Mark 8:34). Jesus called for self-denial, uncompromising love for truth, zeal coupled with knowledge, and action.

From the first to the last of His earthly ministry, Jesus warned those who would be His that they would be both controversial and persecuted. He began His now-famous Sermon on the Mount by speaking to His disciples about the multitudes (Matthew 5:1), and later continued His lesson as a growing crowd gathered around Him (Matthew 7:28). His words to His disciples were these: “Blessed are ye when men shall reproach you and persecute you, saying all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake” (Matthew 5:11). He later would remind them: “Think not that I came to send peace on the earth; I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man at variance against his father and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s foes shall be they of his own household” (Matthew 10:34-36). Jesus wanted no misunderstanding about the trials and tribula-

tions that His followers were about to endure. He constantly reminded them of such (Matthew 10:16,39; 16:24; 24:9; John 15:2,18,20; 16:1-2; 21:18-19). He desired that men should be at peace with men, but His **primary** goal was to bring men to a peaceful, covenant relationship with God. In order to do this, Jesus involved Himself in a daily use of the Truth that makes men free (John 8:32). In teaching that Truth, He continually emphasized divine commands and human response to those commands, while at the same time exposing error and defending the Word of God against the insidious attacks made upon it by those who advocate and uphold such error. He, His teachings, and yes, even His people, were all “controversial.” He had foretold that such would be the case. And the Christ-centered controversy that His birth, ministry, and death commenced 2,000 years ago has not ceased to this day. Nor will it as long as the Earth stands.

In words the eloquence of which few could match, the great Restoration leader, Alexander Campbell, discussed this Christ-centered controversy in the very first edition of the *Millennial Harbinger* ever published. In Volume 1, Number 1 (January 4, 1830, pp. 40-44), under the heading of “Religious Controversy,” Campbell took the stand that was to assure him a place in the annals of religious history. His words were these:

Whenever it was necessary, all—yes, all the renowned men of antiquity were religious controversialists. Moses long contended with the Egyptian magi. He overcame Jannes and Jambres, too. Elijah encountered the prophets of Baal. Job long debated the princes of Edom. The Jewish prophets and the idolatrous kings of Israel waged a long and arduous controversy. John the Harbinger, and the Scribes and Pharisees met in conflict. Jesus, and the Rabbis, and the Priesthood, long debated. The Apostles and the Sanhedrin, the Evangelists and the Doctors of Divinity, Paul and the Sceptics, engaged in many a conflict; and even Michael fought in “wordy debate” with the Devil about the body of Moses, yet who was more meek than Moses—more zealous for God than Elijah—more patient than Job—more devout than Paul—more benevolent than John?

If there was no error in principle or practice, then controversy, which is only another name for opposition to error, real or supposed, would be unnecessary. If it were lawful, or if it were benevolent, to make a truce with error, then opposition to it would be both unjust and unkind. If error were innocent and harmless, then we might permit it to find its own quietus, or to immortalize itself. However so long as it is confessed that error is more or less injurious to the welfare of society, individually and collectively considered then no man can be considered benevolent who does not set his face against it. In proportion as a person is intelligent and benevolent, he will be controversial, if error exist around him. **Hence, the prince of peace never sheathed the sword of the spirit while he lived. He drew it on the banks of the Jordan and threw the scabbard away** (emp. added).

We—because we wear His name (Acts 11:26)—will be, just as Christ was, controversial. We—because we are His soldiers, fighting His “good fight of faith” (1 Timothy 6:12)—will be, just as He was, “pressed on every side, yet not straightened; perplexed, yet not unto despair; pursued, yet not forsaken; smitten down, yet not destroyed” (2 Corinthians 4:8-9). We—because we are His kingdom, His church, (Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 4:4)—will be held accountable both for proclaiming the “good news” that sets men free from the shackles of sin (Matthew 28:18-20; John 8:32) and defending that same Gospel (Philippians 1:16; Jude 3), understanding all the while that it is by His words that we will be judged (John 12:48). Knowing these things, it is little wonder that we are admonished to wield the “sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:14-17). Little wonder the Prince of Peace drew that same sword on the banks of the Jordan and threw the scabbard away forever!

CHRIST’S CHURCH: HEAVEN-SENT, BLOOD-BOUGHT, SPIRIT-FILLED

At Caesarea Philippi, situated at the base of Mt. Hermon which rises some seven to eight thousand feet above it, Jesus inquired of His disciples as to how the public viewed Him. “Who do men say that the Son of man is?” He asked (Matthew 16:13). The reply of the disciples was: “Some say, John the Baptist; some, Elijah: and others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets” (16:14). But Jesus delved deeper. To those same disciples He put the question: “But who say ye that I am?” (16:15). Ever the impulsive one, Simon Peter quickly answered, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (16:16). Jesus’ response to Peter was this: “Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jonah: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father who is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the Gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (16:17-18).

Jesus had come, “in the fullness of time,” to accomplish that for which all of recorded history—from the time of Genesis 3:15 until that very day—had been waiting: the salvation of mankind through the building of His church. His exclamation to Peter that the building of the church would be upon a “rock” was nothing more than what the Old Testament prophets already had foretold. Hundreds of years before Christ was born, Isaiah prophesied: “Therefore, thus saith the Lord Jehovah, Behold, I lay in Zion for a

foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious cornerstone of sure foundation; he that believeth shall not be in haste” (28:16). Later, Peter himself (through inspiration, and no doubt with the events of Caesarea Philippi still fresh on his mind) would make reference to this very rock foundation when he wrote about the “living stone, rejected indeed of men...the stone which the builders rejected, the same was made the head of the corner” (1 Peter 2:1-7). In fact, even Jesus Himself mentioned the rejected stone of Old Testament allusion. In Matthew 21, Mark 12:10, and Luke 20:17 He referred to the psalmist’s statement (118:22) about “the stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner” and applied the rejection of the stone by the builders to the Sanhedrin’s rejection and repudiation of Him.*

Jesus was a man with a mission. Deity had come to Earth, taking the form of a servant (Philippians 2:7), with at least a two-fold purpose: (a) to communicate to man the truth (John 8:32) about the lost state in which he now found himself (Romans 3:23; 6:23); and (b) to pay the ransom for man (Matthew 20:28), thereby extricating man from a situation from which he could not extricate himself (Jeremiah 10:23). Jesus made it clear that He would accomplish this mission through the establishment of His church. He also made it clear that against the building of that church, not even the Gates of Hades could prevail! The church would be heaven-sent (Acts 2:23; John 8:28; 10:25), blood-bought (Acts 20:28), and Spirit-filled (1 Corinthians 6:19-20; Romans 8:9-10). The prophecy would be fulfilled: Satan would bruise the Lord’s heel, but the Lord would bruise Satan’s head (Genesis 3:15). The church would bear Christ’s name (Matthew 16:18; Romans 16:16; Acts 4:12). It would be known as His bride (Revelation 21:2), His wife (Revelation 19:7-8), and His kingdom (Revelation 1:9). It would be one and only one (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 4:4-6), and those in it would be victorious over both Satan and death (1 Corinthians 15:26,54-56; 2 Timothy 1:9-10).

THE CHURCH—CHRIST’S KINGDOM

Everything that we would know about the church, its Head, its origin, and its purpose must be gleaned from the only authoritative source now extant, the inspired Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

* I am indebted to Guy N. Woods’ book, *The Second Coming and Other Sermons* (1978, pp. 83-97), for ideas presented in this section.

That Word teaches forthrightly that Jesus Christ is the Head of His body, the church (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18). He stated: “All authority hath been given unto me in heaven, and on earth” (Matthew 28:18). Paul, writing through inspiration, thus was constrained to say: “And whatever ye do, in word or deed, do all in the name of [by the authority of—BT] the Lord Jesus” (Colossians 3:17). The Bible makes it clear, first, that Christ’s church is His kingdom, all the disclaimers of dispensationalists notwithstanding. Christ announced while He was here on the Earth that He would build His church (Matthew 16:18). Luke later reported (Acts 2:47) that the church was established on Pentecost following the Lord’s crucifixion, burial and resurrection, and that great fear came upon it (Acts 5:11). There can be no doubt that the church was established in Christ’s generation. Christ also spoke, however, of His kingdom. He stated in Mark 1:15 that the time for its coming was “fulfilled” and that the kingdom was as near as that generation of people to whom He spoke, saying to them that some would not taste of death before they saw the kingdom of heaven come (Mark 9:1). Only a few, short years later, Paul wrote that the saints in the church at Colossae had by that time been “translated into the kingdom of the Son of his love” (Colossians 1:12-13). It is obvious, then, that the kingdom had been established by the time the Colossian saints were said to have been translated into it. If the kingdom had not been established by that time, then Paul obviously made a mistake when he said that the Colossians were in it. To assert such not only destroys inspiration, but at the same time forces premillennialists (who believe the church and the kingdom are separate entities, and that the kingdom has not yet come) to the absurd conclusion that there are yet living on the Earth today some of the very persons to whom Jesus spoke nearly 2,000 years ago! That hardly is rational.

The New Testament teaches that the church is composed of individuals who have been purchased with the blood of Christ (Acts 20:28). It also teaches (Revelation 1:5-6; 5:9-10) that those blood-purchased individuals were made to be a kingdom. Since the church and the kingdom both are composed of blood-purchased individuals, then the church and the kingdom must be the same. Paul taught that the church is constituted of saints (1 Corinthians 1:1-2). However, he also taught that those saints are “trans-

lated into the kingdom of the Son of his love” (Colossians 1:12-13). Since those saints that constitute the church are themselves translated into the kingdom, it is conclusive that the church and the kingdom are the same. The time of establishment of the kingdom coincides with the time of the establishment of the church. Not only did the Lord foretell both the establishment of the kingdom and the church in the time period of His generation, but the New Testament writers spoke of both the church and the kingdom as being in existence during the very generation of Christ’s coming—the first century!

ENTRANCE INTO THE KINGDOM

In this day of proliferating denominations, the common adage often is heard, “Join the church of your choice.” How foreign to biblical teaching this is! Billboards spring up on road sides and Saturday afternoon newspapers are filled with advertisements urging us to “join the church of our choice,” while the Bible makes it clear that: (a) there is only **one** church (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18); (b) the only “choice” we have is whether to become of a member of that one church or not (i.e.: it’s not a matter of “choosing” one church over another, since there is only one); and (c) once we do determine that we wish to become a member of the Lord’s church, **He does the adding, we don’t do the “joining”!**

In these days of “anything goes in religion,” these concepts may seem somewhat narrow-minded. But then, Truth is narrow (cf. Matthew 7:13-14). Furthermore, we need to remember that it is the **Lord’s** church and He, having all authority, has the right to set the admission requirements, choose the name, etc. In fact, He has done exactly that. Nothing could be clearer in Scripture than the design, purpose, function, entrance requirements, and destiny of the church. The Greek word that is translated “church” in our English Bibles is *ekklisia*, which means “the called out.” The church therefore is composed of those people who have been “called out” of the world of sin and who now are in God’s service. They still are “in” the world, but they are not “of” the world (Romans 12:2; 1 John 2:15-16).

The question arises: “What must one do to become a member of the Lord’s church?” In answering this question, let me first point out from the Scriptures that the God puts us into Christ’s church. The membership rolls of the church are kept in heaven; subsequently, it is God who does the adding of mem-

bers to His Son's church. Luke stated: "Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were **added unto them** about three thousand souls.... And the Lord **added to the church** daily such as should be saved" (Acts 2:41,47, emp. added). Those who did what God said to do were **added to the church**. They did not "join" (as if it were some kind of "club"); nor were they "elected" or "screened" by some voting body of humans. They were **added** to the church by the Lord Himself. Why?

The people on the day of Pentecost were added to the Lord's church (the church of Christ, Romans 16:16), because they had obeyed His commands regarding what to do to be saved. And what are those commands? Again, the Scriptures are clear on this point. If one **believes** that Jesus Christ is the Son of God (John 3:16), is willing to **confess** that belief before men (Matthew 10:32-33), **is penitent** of past sins (Luke 13:30), and **is baptized** for the remission of those sins (Acts 2:38; Mark 16:15-16), then that person is added by God to the Lord's church. He is then a Christian (Acts 11:26), and is commanded to live a faithful Christian life—even unto death (Revelation 2:10). This person—exactly like those first-century Christians on the day of Pentecost—is "added" to the church, is now among those in God's service who are "called out" of the world, and is a "new creature" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

THE CURRENT CONTROVERSY—THE PLEA FOR "UNITY THROUGH NON-DENOMINATIONAL CHRISTIANITY"

In every age, it seems, controversies appear that are indigenous to the times. From eating meats sacrificed to idols to support of orphans from the church treasury, every age sees its share of religious controversy. Some controversies are dealt with speedily and effectively, and rarely seem to raise their heads again. Others, although perhaps dealt with adequately at one point in the past, reappear for one reason or another—sometimes in the same "suit of clothes," sometimes in a "new dress."

For example, consider the current controversy surrounding the plea by some in the churches of Christ for "unity through non-denominational Christianity." Some in our fellowship have initiated strong pleas centering on the biblical themes of unity and the non-denominational nature of the church. Under titles such as "Is Unity Possible?" and "Undenominational Christianity," eloquent speeches, lectures, and sermons have been presented at preachers' forums, to public radio audiences, and in worship services,

urging that the time has come for a renewed zeal on the part of those of us in the churches of Christ to: (a) re-examine our attitudes in order to make certain that we ourselves are not “sectarian”; (b) broaden our perspectives (and thereby avoid “legalism”) in regard to **who** might be Christians and **where** they might be; and (c) unite in efforts to show the world what “non-denominational” Christianity truly is, through fellowship one with another even though “minor” differences may have to be overlooked in order to accomplish such fellowship.

To those of us who are younger, and who have not heard such urgings in our lifetimes, these ideas seem novel at the very least, and at best, innovative ways by which to accomplish biblical unity—the kind that Jesus Himself sought among His disciples (John 17:20-21). We have long been taught that unity is much to be desired and that division is something God truly hates (Psalm 133:1-2). Subsequently, when some among us stand forth to herald the idea that “unity is possible” through “non-denominational” Christianity, there seems little cause for alarm. May I kindly suggest, however, that a closer examination of the present-day urgings is warranted and that there is more to these urgings than at first meets the eye.

For example, in March 1983 Rubel Shelly, minister of the Ashwood Church of Christ in Nashville, Tennessee, presented a speech titled “Is Unity Possible?” to a preachers’ forum in Centerville, Tennessee. In that speech, Rubel said: “There are sincere, knowledgeable, devout Christians scattered among all the various denominations.”* He then went on to state:

Surely there are individuals in practically all the denominations known today who’ve learned of Jesus, look to him in sincere faith, turned away from their conscious rebellion against his will and embraced him as Savior through immersion in his name. And their unfortunate entanglement in some denominational error or some other point in no way alters the fact that they are Christians! They’re God’s children....*

Rubel said that he wanted to urge those of us in the churches of Christ to leave the “sectarian attitude” that he felt we now possess in order to enjoy “unity through non-denominational Christianity.”

Shortly after Rubel’s speech, Joe Beam, who at the time was serving as the minister of the Carriage Hills Church of Christ in Montgomery, Alabama, presented a series of sermons and radio lessons on “Un-

* Centerville, Tennessee speech, March 1983. Tapes and written transcripts of the speech are available.

denominational Christianity.” In his second sermon in the spring of 1983, Joe made the following remarks:

I’m submitting to you, my brothers and sisters, and I hope you’ll prayerfully consider it, that any individual who’s been baptized “in the name of the Lord Jesus,” based on his faith, is a child of God. What I’m saying is there’s [sic] a lot of people in this religious world who’ve submitted to baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus based on their faith who accomplished remission of sins whether they realized it or not. That there was a “misunderstanding” as to whether they were saved before or afterwards does not negate or invalidate the whole process.**

Rubel Shelly and Joe Beam (and others of like persuasion) have made it clear that as long as a person is sincere in his faith toward Christ, and therefore is baptized “in order to obey God,” that person is a New Testament Christian. But more than that, however, they also have made it clear that a “misunderstanding” of what baptism is for does not “negate or invalidate the whole process.” In a letter dated July 18, 1983 to Wayne Jackson in Stockton, California, Rubel stated:

I don’t think that one has to understand “for the remission of sins” in order to be baptized scripturally, for I do not think there is ONE right reason for being baptized. I would say that one must be baptized for a right reason in order for his baptism to be acceptable—to obey God, to wash away sins, etc. (This means that I don’t think that one receiving baptism “to join the Baptist Church,” for example, has been scripturally baptized.) So long as one is baptized for a right reason, however, and is not consciously rejecting other clear teachings of the Word on that subject (e.g.: denying Acts 2:38, as one might well do if under a Baptist evangelist) his baptism seems to me to be proper.*

Rubel further elucidated his views on this subject when he appeared at the Freed-Hardeman College lectureship “open forum” on February 9, 1984. When asked by Alan E. Highers, moderator of the forum, “Does a person have to understand that baptism is for the remission of sins in order for his baptism to be valid?,” Shelly responded, “No” (Highers, 1984, 126[1]:17-18). It should be obvious from the above statements that, according to these views, one does not have to have a clear view of what baptism is **for** (i.e.: introduction into the body of Christ) or what it **does** (i.e.: remit sins) in order to be a Christian. In fact, Joe Beam even has gone on record as stating that one may “think” he is “saved” prior to baptism, undergo baptism “to obey God,” and **still** be a Christian.

** “Undenominational Christianity” (a series of four sermons presented in the spring of 1983); this quotation is from tape number two.

* Letter from Rubel Shelly to Wayne Jackson, July 18, 1983. Used by permission of Wayne Jackson.

These kinds of remarks—to make a mild understatement—have stirred quite a controversy. If what Rubel and Joe are saying is true, there may well be “Christians in practically all the denominations.” But more importantly, some whom we have understood **not** to be Christians may, in fact, **be** Christians! Furthermore, these are not matters “done in a corner.” Rubel, for example, initially published a tract (*Christians Only*) expounding his views, and later authored an entire book, *I Just Want to be a Christian*, expanding those views. The pages of brotherhood journals have been filled with articles expressing concern over, and refuting, some of the things being urged upon us in the name of unity through non-denominational Christianity.** In addition, at least one book has been published reviewing, and refuting, some of the above mentioned errors (Thompson, 1984).

WHAT THE ISSUES ARE *NOT*

Let me begin by stating what the issues in the current controversy are **not**.

First, the issue is not whether there may be Christians in some of the denominations. I know of no one among us who would deny that one or both of the following situations might arise: (a) an individual becomes a Christian, worships for a time with the churches of Christ as described in the New Testament, and then apostatizes, joining himself with a denominational group; or (b) a sincere, devout, religious person studies the Bible, does exactly what the Bible says to do to be saved, and yet for a time associates with a denominational group. That there may well be Christians in some of the denominations is a point that can be conceded.

Second, the issue is not whether or not a person must be baptized in a building owned and/or operated by the churches of Christ, or whether a person must be baptized by a Christian. Fellowship, according to New Testament teaching, is not based on **who** baptized a person or **where** they were baptized.

Third, the issue is not merely, or strictly, “should we do (or not do) something because the great Restoration leaders did (or did not do) it?” While I never would understate, underrate, or underestimate the great good done throughout the Restoration movement by such men as Alexander Campbell, Barton W.

** See: McCord (1983), pp. 560-561; Highers (1984), pp. 17-18; Workman (1983), pp. 2-3; Meredith (1983), 4[1]:2-3,9-10; Woods (1984), 126[6]:162,168; *The Restorer*, entire March 1984 issue.

Stone, “Raccoon” John Smith, and others, the fact that they **did** a thing does not, in and of itself, mean that the thing is proper and good. Nor does the fact that they **did not** do a thing, in and of itself, mean that we should not do it. Whatever we learn from these great men should be gleaned by comparing their writings and actions with Scripture and then imitating them in whatever is right, while at the same time avoiding their mistakes.

WHAT THE ISSUES ARE

What, then, are the issues in the current controversy? They may be summarized as follows:

1. What **must** one **do, and understand**, in order to become a Christian as described in the pages of the New Testament?
2. Is it true that there actually are Christians in “practically all the denominations”? And if so, how many of these are there? Is the problem one of considerable magnitude?
3. May a person who is a Christian but in a denomination **remain** there and be saved?
4. May we in the churches of Christ **fellowship** those who have done what the Bible teaches to become a Christian but who now are in denominationalism?
5. Are those of us in the churches of Christ “sectarian” when we teach that a person must:
 - (a) obey (with the proper mental attitude and its accompanying appropriate amount of knowledge, understanding the proper purpose and design) the biblical commands regarding salvation;
 - (b) be a faithful member of the church of Christ; and
 - (c) worship God correctly outside of denominational error?

AN EXAMINATION OF THE ISSUES

First, is it true that there are Christians “in practically all the denominations”? Gary Workman, in the June 1983 issue of the journal he edits, *The Restorer*, addressed this issue when he wrote:

Really, now, Christians “in practically **all the denominations**”? How an advocate of New Testament Christianity can imagine such a thing is amazing. Though our brother [Shelly—BT] implies that he still adheres to the necessity of scriptural immersion, he must surely realize that most denominations do not immerse at all, much less for the remission of sins! How, then, did all these people come to be Christians in those denominational churches? (1983, 3[6]:2-3, emp in orig.).

This question needs to be addressed. Few denominations today baptize by immersion for the remission of sins. Furthermore, the point will have to be conceded that it is difficult to be taught wrong (i.e. denominational error) and be baptized **right** (i.e.: according to the New Testament pattern). Normally men are bap-

tized **in keeping with the teaching of those who baptize them** (cf. the case in Acts 19). How is it, then, that “in practically all the denominations” there are people who are being taught error, obviously believing error (else why would they not leave their denominational affiliation?), and yet are being baptized **correctly**? It hardly seems to be a fair assessment of the facts to assert that there are Christians “in practically all the denominations.”

Second, must one understand the design and purpose of baptism in order for that baptism to be valid? Indeed one must! Consider the importance God places on **mental attitude, foundational knowledge, proper understanding, and correct spirit** in biblical matters dealing with worship to God, prayer, giving, and so many other matters—and then apply this to baptism. Consider the Pharisees of Jesus’ day. They did their works “to be seen of men” (Matthew 6:1). The **purpose** for which they did the thing was not correct; hence, God did not accept their acts. The Bible makes it clear, for example, that God wants a cheerful giver, not one who gives grudgingly (2 Corinthians 9:7). The **purpose, understanding, and attitude** were important! We know, too, that it is possible to partake of the Lord’s Supper in an incorrect manner (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:27-29), thus making it null and void in its effects. Is baptism any different? Why is it we are being told that one **must** understand about praying, fasting, giving, the Lord’s Supper, etc., but does **not** have to understand (go into it for the right purpose, with the correct attitude, with proper knowledge) that baptism is for the remission of sins? Further, how can someone assert concerning baptism that a person can be immersed and not understand it, and the baptism is valid; but a person can be immersed and **misunderstand** it (denying its design), and the baptism is invalid? Surely it is obvious that if one teaches it is **not necessary to understand the design of baptism**, he cannot contend that a **misunderstanding** then would invalidate that baptism!

Third, may a person who is a Christian, but in a denomination, **remain** there and be saved? The Bible answer, of course, is that no, he cannot! How can such a one be faithful to Christ and His Word while at the same time holding membership in a man-made denomination? The psalmist wrote: “Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build it” (127:1). Jesus Himself said: “Every plant that my

heavenly Father hath not planted shall be rooted up” (Matthew 15:13). By remaining in a denomination, the person upholds the false teaching of that denomination, supports the false teaching through the giving of his funds, worships in vain, and (by staying) is being divisive. He **could** worship with the true church of Christ, but instead acquiesces to denominational error. Can he thus be saved in so doing? No, he cannot.

Fourth, may we in the churches of Christ **fellowship** those who have done what the Bible teaches to become a Christian but who now are in denominationalism? The Bible points out that within the church of Christ fellowship may be restricted (to one degree or another) from the following classes: (a) the rebelliously immoral (cf. 1 Corinthians 5); (b) apostates—those who “fall away” (Luke 8:13) or “depart from the faith” (1 Timothy 4:1); and (c) teachers of false doctrine (we are to “turn away from” those who teach divisive doctrines contrary to apostolic truth, Romans 16:17).

It **always** is wrong to share in the wickedness of others. Furthermore, scripture has circumscribed the sphere of our spiritual fellowship. Fellowship with one another is limited by the phrase “if we walk in the light” (1 John 1:7). Are those in denominationalism “walking in the light”? And once the Christian in a denomination has been shown the error of his ways, has he left that error? As long as people remain in denominational error, teach that error, and worship in vain, those people are not “walking in the light” and therefore we may not fellowship them.

Fifth, are those of us in the churches of Christ “sectarian” when we teach the truth on such matters? No, we are not. Our plea is exactly what it always has been. We plead for people to forsake human creeds and sectarian names and to be only what God intends them to be if they desire to be a part of His family. We still plead for people to come out of denominationalism and into the church. We draw the lines of fellowship exactly where the Lord Himself drew them in the great long ago. We, with the great apostle Paul, “confess unto thee that after the Way which they call a sect, so serve I the God of our fathers, believing all things which are according to the law and which are written in the prophets; having hope toward God” (Acts 24:14-15).

THE CHURCH OF THE TRIUMPHANT CHRIST

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor depth, nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:35,37-39). These famous words from the apostle Paul certainly would have been well understood by the people to whom the book of Revelation was written. As Merrill Tenney has written:

The conditions under which the book was written may fairly be deduced from a study of its contents. It was addressed to seven churches of the province of Asia, which had been in existence for a considerable period, and in which there had been spiritual development and decline. In the letters to these churches are hints that persecution was either imminent, or that it had already begun.... Revelation, then, is a witness to the growing hostility between the church and the Roman state. It does not necessarily imply that a universal policy of persecuting Christians had been adopted, but it does make clear that there can be no compromise between a pagan state and the Christian church.... Revelation was written as an encouragement for the churches that were feeling this growing hostility and as a warning to the careless and negligent Christians who were tempted to lapse into an easy conformity to the world (1953, pp. 384-386).

John needed to send an important message to the Christians of his day. That message was this: the fear that was gripping the first century should have no hold over them. They, like all Christians who had gone before them, were “safe in the arms of Jesus.” The apostle Paul—who admittedly was far from safe and secure in a physical sense—wrote: “But thanks be unto God, who always leadeth us in triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest through us the savor of his knowledge in every place” (2 Corinthians 2:14). The first-century Christians at the time of the writing of the book of Revelation could take great comfort in those words. As Wayne Jackson has well stated:

The book of Revelation is a message of victory. One of the document’s key words is “overcome.” The Greek term *nikao* (overcome, conquer, victory) is found twenty—eight times in the New Testament, and seventeen of these are in Revelation. Now it is a fact admitted by all that, this book was written in a time of severe and widespread persecution. The blood of the saints ran red. It must have appeared to many that the Christian movement was on the brink of virtual extinction. The object of the writing, therefore, was to assure followers of Christ of the ultimate, complete overthrow of God’s enemies and of the glorious triumph of Christianity. This word of consolation was couched in the imagery of the Old Testament Scriptures (1979, pp. 337-338).

John’s point to the “triumphant church” was that those who answered Jesus’ call found in Him One Who provided a sense of victory. Christians were not to be people found whining over the emptiness of life or

huddled in corners with dread fear of their fate. Their outcome already was sealed. Christ had made it so!

Yes, Christ foretold that His church would be subject to persecution, and He knew full well that such difficulties would have a way of shaping perspectives for many years. He therefore endeavored to prepare His followers. He warned that intense pressure would be brought upon them from other religions (Matthew 10:17), from civil governments (Matthew 10:18), and even from within (Matthew 7:17). As James Baird observed:

In actuality, Christianity was opposed more vigorously than any other religion in the long history of Rome. Church historians usually cite the following reasons:

1. Christians formed closely-knit groups (Acts 5:13). The meetings in which they observed the Lord's Supper invited rumors. One alleged that at their services Christians placed before a new Christian an infant covered with raw meal which was then slain by the young in the faith and the blood and limbs consumed by those present.
2. Christians thought of themselves as a distinct people (II Cor. 6:17) and this won them no good will.
3. Unlike other faiths of the time, Christianity was hostile to other religions, opposing them as untrue. (Jude 3).
4. On certain matters, Christians would not budge (Acts 4:19,20) and in some instances, the principles held by Christians were considered to be working against the continuation of an orderly civilization. Pagans did not demand that Christians believe in the gods, but held that if they failed to sacrifice to them the neglect would bring ill fortune upon all.
5. Christians were aggressively missionary (Acts 8:1,4).
6. Christians believed in the sudden and possibly imminent end of the world (Acts 3:20,21). Considerations of this world became of secondary importance.
7. Christians broke up families; their faith led to dissension (Mt. 10:35)
8. Their refusal to attend public spectacles seemed antisocial (1 Thes. 5:22).

In addition, there was a more fundamental reason for persecution set forth by Jesus. He said, "And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake." (Mt. 10:22) Persecution against the church is rooted in the nature and work of Jesus. Jesus explained the reason for this in John 7:7, "...but me it hateth because I testify of it, that its works are evil." The world hates Christ because of the judgment, which he brings against what the world is and loves. The world resents the judgment because it does not fully know God. (John 15:20) If the world hates Christ, it will hate those of the church who remind it by life and word of this judgment. "If the world hateth you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you." (John 15:18) Hatred results in persecution, therefore it is inevitable that the church, if true, will be hated and opposed (1978, pp. 29-30).

John wanted the Christians of his day to understand that there is no possibility that some power or set of circumstances would be able to snatch from Christ's hand even the weakest one who trusted in Him. John wanted the saints to know that there is perfect safety and security in the Savior for even the weakest sheep who follows the Good Shepherd and listens to His voice (John 10:27-29). The sole peril—as John

portrayed so beautifully in the letters to the seven churches—was that they should fail to listen to the Lord and to obey Him. It is possible to fail to abide in Him (John 15:4-6) and therefore to fail to continue to share His life and victory. One thing, however, was for certain. **The saints would be triumphant!** As the great Restorationist, F.G. Allen, put it:

One by one will we lay our armor down at the feet of the Captain of our salvation. One by one will we be laid away by tender hands and aching hearts to rest on the bosom of Jesus. One by one will our ranks be thus thinned, till ere long we shall all pass over to the other side. But our cause will live. Eternal truth shall never perish. God will look down from His habitation on high, watch over it in His providence, and encircle it in the arms of His love. God will raise up others to take our places; and may we transmit the cause to them in its purity! Though dead, we shall thus speak for generations yet to come, and God grant that we shall give no uncertain sound! Then may we from our blissful home on high, watch the growth of the cause we love, till it shall cover the whole earth as the waters cover the face of the great deep (1949, pp. 176-177).

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