

SUMMARY: For better or worse, it is good to have a “handle” to identify those with a commitment to follow “Just the Bible”, as most people claim they do whether they do or not. “CHURCH OF CHRIST” is such a “handle” and is a good one.

The February 2018 issue of the Christian Chronicle announced that whereas the decline rate of the Churches of Christ in 2014 was 0.5%, the decline rate increased to 1.7% in 2017.

The March, 2018 Christian Chronicle lead story was: “What is a Church of Christ? As number decline in the U.S., Christians ponder a fellowship’s identity”.

Under 30: Young believers question the fellowship’s nondenominational claim

Ages 31-40: Millennials stress worship, not labels

Ages 41-50: Gen X seeks compassion, not politics (A zeal for tradition has trumped a zeal for Christ)

Ages 51-60: Mid to late Boomer see fading sense of family

Above 60: Silent generation plus early boomers, God defines what Church of Christ is, we don’t (Speak where the Bible speaks....)

That puts us somewhere between being a denomination and not being a denomination. We will get back to that at the end. What the results say for sure is that if we are not a denomination, we have not passed that understanding and/or logic on to many of our younger members.

STARTING DEFINITIONS FOR THIS ARTICLE:

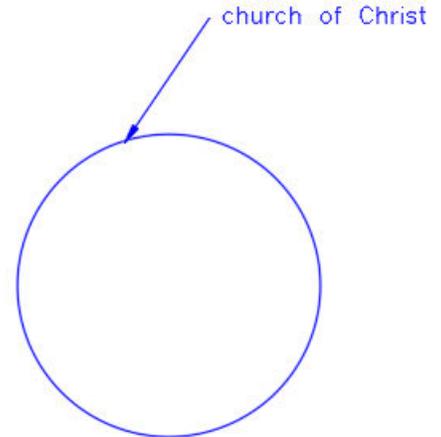
The “church of Christ” is those congregations and/or individuals which are pleasing to Christ, by whatever His measure is. The “CHURCH OF CHRIST” is that set of congregations which has that name on their sign and may or may not be pleasing to Christ. Those terms in those formats will be used throughout this article.

For a more detailed description, the church of Christ (Romans 16:6) is that body which believes that (1) in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, (2) He established the patriarchal system for early mankind, (3) He established the Jewish religion to prepare the way for the Christ, (4) His Son Jesus came to the earth to live a perfect life and be sacrificed for our sins, (5) that all the instructions we have from God for us today are in the New Testament, and (6) that ignoring what the New Testament teaches puts your salvation at risk.

This has historically stated in our brotherhood as “Speak where the Bible speaks and remain silent where the Bible is silent”. A more contemporary way of saying this is “Just the Bible”. This is taught in James 2:10 and Rev. 22:18-19.

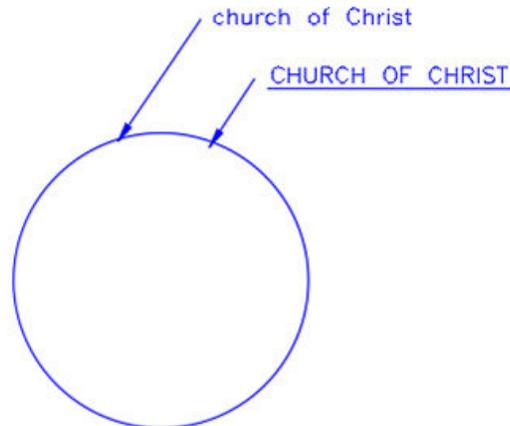
Some consequences of this belief are that His Church:

1. Loves the Lord God
2. Loves neighbor as self
3. Is evangelistic
3. Has locally autonomous congregations
5. Worships on the first day of each week
6. Observes of communion weekly
7. Offers support weekly
8. Acapella singing
9. Baptism by immersion of a consenting person
for the remission of sins
10. Local control under a plurality of male elders,
if a plurality is available.
11. Deacons appointed reporting to the elders.
12. Women do not take authority over men in worship.
13. Teaches against drunkenness.
14. Recognized divorce for adultery only.
15. Welcomes people with homosexual tendencies, but not homosexual conduct.
16. Is not equipped, and it is not our job to judge the eternal destiny of others.
17. Is equipped, and it is our job to judge that others are not following the scriptures and caution them that they are putting their salvation at risk.
18. Is identified by a scriptural name (luckily, one was available)



We would understand that these are requirements in the New Testament either by direct command, example or necessary inference. We would suggest that if you want to find Christ’s church or the church of Christ, you should look for those characteristics. There may be other criteria, but those would be a good starting point.

We frequently teach in attitude and sometimes in word that the “church of Christ” and the “CHURCH OF CHRIST” are the same set of congregations. This would be illustrated as follows, which is as we frequently present ourselves:



The present discussion is whether this is a reasonable understanding of the situation. There are 18 characteristics in the list above trying to identify the church of Christ. If a person picked up a Bible, understood it perfectly, and started a congregation, what would he or she call it? Turns out the least frequently used name for the church in the Bible is “church of Christ”. It is used only once in Romans 16:16, so by definition has the least number of mentions to have been mentioned, once. If he or she was to select the most frequently used name in the Bible, he or she would have named the church of Christ “the church”. That being said, if the new congregation followed the 18 identifying steps and called the new congregation “the house of God”, is there any reason why you would not consider it a “church of Christ”. The “churches of Christ” is mentioned as a name only once, and the “house of God” is listed something like 83 times (depending on your translation). Although being completely scriptural, it is far more likely for the new congregation to be called “the house of God” than the “churches of Christ”.

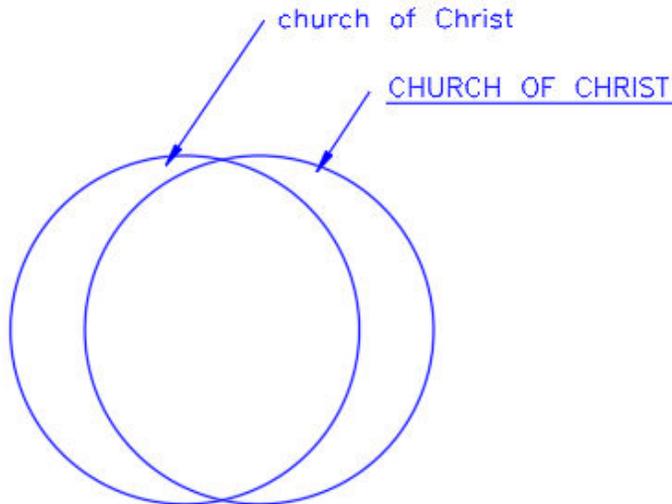
Probably more to the point in our lifetime, if someone was baptized in the new congregation and came to our “CHURCH OF CHRIST”, would you require rebaptism? If you do, what does that say?

CHURCHES OF CHRIST

church of Christ or CHURCH OF CHRIST

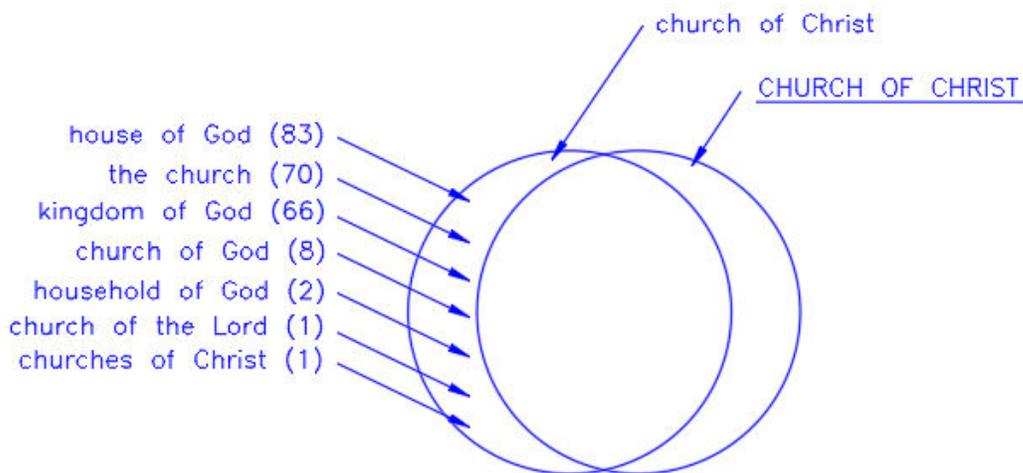


If someone could make a congregation exactly like the church of Christ and call it “the church”, consider therefore that the “CHURCH OF CHRIST” is not exactly the same subset of congregations that the “church of Christ” is. The following might be a graphic of this:



The “church of Christ” and the “CHURCH OF CHRIST” could well be described as two overlapping sets of congregations. Some being both the “church of Christ” and the “CHURCH OF CHRIST”, some being only the “church of Christ” and some being only the “CHURCH OF CHRIST”.

The following illustrates this basic concept. On the left side of the figure are some congregations completely complying with the list of requirements but choosing a scriptural name other than “CHURCH OF CHRIST”.



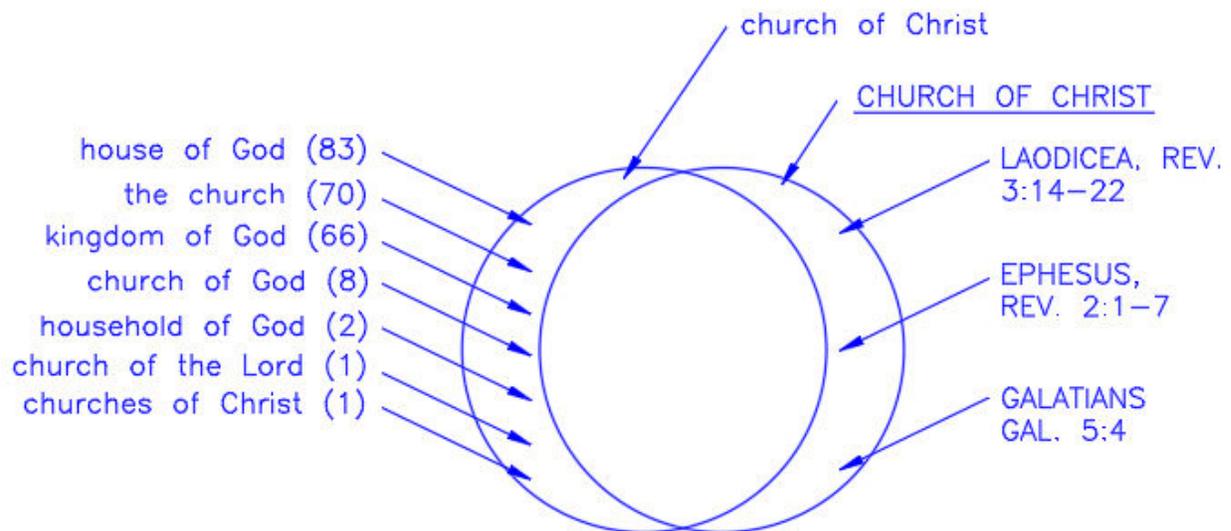
CHURCHES OF CHRIST

church of Christ or CHURCH OF CHRIST



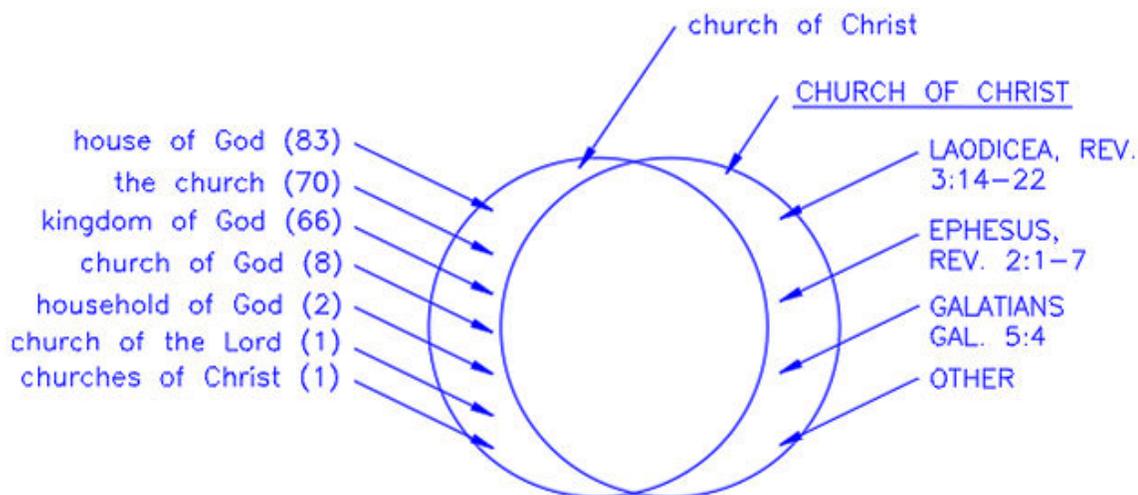
Conversely, can you think of a congregation in the scriptures which might have the "CHURCH OF CHRIST" sign, but not be a "church of Christ"?

The right side of the figure shows 3 congregations which could have had "CHURCH OF CHRIST" on their sign but would not be the "church of Christ". They were not pleasing to Christ as the congregation at Laodicea had become lukewarm, the congregation at Ephesus was not doing what they had done at first, and the Galatians were importing Jewish teachings. It is reasonable to conclude that the congregations at Laodicea and Ephesus were not evangelistic.



The following figure adds "OTHER" to the side which might have "CHURCH OF CHRIST" on their sign but not be a "church of Christ". "OTHER" is representative of any congregation which would not be pleasing to Jesus today. It would be reasonable to say that if we are not evangelistic, are lukewarm, are not doing what we did at first, or are importing Jewish teachings, we would not be pleasing to Jesus.

At our present decline rate, it is probably reasonable to conclude that at least 50% of our congregations are not evangelistic and/or are lukewarm. This should be a serious wake-up call for a little self-analysis as it would say that there is better than a 50/50 chance that your congregation has a serious problem and you are an “OTHER”.



Now, on to whether the “CHURCH OF CHRIST” is a denomination.

THEIR DEFINITION:

Webster Collegiate Dictionary (1965)

De•nom•i•na•tion: 4: a religious organization uniting in a single legal and administrative body several local congregations.

Webster Collegiate Dictionary (2008)

Denomination: “a religious organization whose congregations are united in their adherence to its beliefs and practices”.

Webster Online (2018)

Denomination: “a religious organization whose congregations are united in their adherence to its beliefs and practices”.

Wikipedia (2018) A religious denomination is a subgroup within a religion that operates under a common name, tradition, and identity. The term refers to the various Christian denominations (for example, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and the many varieties of Protestantism). If you are reading this after 2018, you might want to check the current definitions.

Note the dramatic change from 1965 when a denomination was identified by a single legal and administrative body to in 2018 when even the Roman Catholic Church is a denomination.

OUR DEFINITION:

Our definition is based on the history that for more than 1000 years the Roman Catholic Church dominated religion in western Europe. Starting in about 1517 A.D. with Martin Luther groups were formed which protested the practices of the Roman Catholic Church and formed Protestant Reformation Movement, generating Protestant Denominations. Our basis is that we did not protest the Roman Catholic Church or any other group and try to reform it. We basically abandoned them all and simply went back to the Bible with the motto of “Speak where the Bible speaks, and remain silent where the Bible is silent”, or a more contemporary saying “Just the Bible”. This means that all instruction from God for us is in the New Testament and is not optional to add to or take away from it (James 2:10, Rev. 22:18-19).

The problem with our definition is that the world has moved so far from when our definition was established that even the Roman Catholic Church has become a denomination. We are clinging to the tradition of a truth without effectively communicating the basis for it.

The basic answer is that we would be a denomination by their definition and not by our definition. Unfortunately, they have never heard of our definition and if you look up a common source (e.g. Wikipedia), we don't even make sense. As we have not taught our children well, it doesn't make sense to a lot of them either (e.g. the Christian Chronicle article).

That being said, the “church of Christ” is defined by obedience to the information provided to us in the New Testament, not by a sign in your front yard.

For better or worse, it is good to have a “handle” to identify those with a commitment to follow “Just the Bible”, as most people claim they do whether they do or not. “CHURCH OF CHRIST” is such a “handle” and is a good one. Whether or not it makes someone a denomination according to the evolving definition of that word is not the issue. Whether or not we are actually doing it is the issue.