

Let me share with you about ...

Jesus & His Church

Two of the most important truths of all time...two truths so big that my mind is unable to hold them both at the same time. **Truth number one:** Jesus is God! He has all the power of the supreme being. He is in fact the one through whom all things were created. **Truth number two:** Jesus once lived on this earth as a human being! I can think about one or I can think about the other, but simultaneous-God-and-man is so far outside the borders of my human experience that it escapes me. Or perhaps ... it captures me.

The most important event of human history is the earthly life of **Jesus of Nazareth**. All the nations, all the leaders, all the turning points of history must fall below the life of Jesus on the "List of Significant Events." No matter how important other events were, their impacts were limited by the boundary of death. But Jesus' life has implications which continue even beyond the end of any earthly life.

Jesus came and lived on the earth so that I could begin to understand what God is like and what He has done for me. In fact, He came to show me just that ... that God really is for me! That's why Jesus is truly **good news**. Without God, I was drowning in ungodliness ... punishing myself with loneliness, anger, depression, and all the other repulsive results of being self-centered. The life of Jesus gave me my first real chance to escape from my destructive life of sin. When I saw how Jesus lived and loved, it first made me ashamed of myself ... and then it gave me a ray of hope ... that my life could be better!

His life made me want to be like Him. His death and resurrection made it possible. The Bible's eyewitness accounts of how He dealt with people left me amazed at his compassion for people who had lost their way in sin. I listened to the stories of His forgiveness of sin and how He gave people power to live new lives. I watched with wonder each time He overcame evil ... not by attacking, but by loving. I wanted desperately to be like Him ... but my sin bound me with guilt and was no doubt heading me toward eternal death. I had despaired that life could hold joy and happiness.

But then...at the crossroads of all time...Jesus removed the power of death over me. **He** died as the sacrifice for **my** sin. He was buried in a tomb. But He broke the power of sin and death and returned to life. And He promised to give me the same power over sin and death if I would believe in Him and give my life to Him. I gave my life to him gladly. It was no good to me without Him. I was sick of sin. I confessed that He is the Son of God, the only one with power to change me. I rejected my previous plan to live for myself and I was buried in water as He died and was buried. I came out of that watery grave as a forgiven person, a brand new person with a new reason to live. So, the life that I now live is not really me - it is **Jesus** living in me. I still live in my body, but I live by faith in Jesus, the Son of God who loved me and gave His life to save me.

Before He left the earth, Jesus established the support group He knew I would need. In His divine wisdom, He established His **church** as a fellowship of those...like me...who are being saved by their belief in Him. He knows the fragile nature of my faith and the awesome power of earthly temptations. So He gave me a worldwide network of brothers and sisters in His love, a church family to support my new life in Him. He wants me to grow strong.

Let me tell you about my church family. It's a relationship that is making all the difference in my life as I seek to follow Jesus. The church supports me now that God has changed me from a sinner with no hope to a forgiven sinner with the hope of spending eternity in the presence of God. If that's something that interests you, we'll both be glad we had this talk. The church that Jesus established meets all of my needs. In fact, I always think of it as my family. In our transient society, I need a place where I can know I'll be loved unconditionally, accepted totally, and forgiven completely, no matter what my failures. I have found this bond in my church family, in a local church of Christ. I suppose it's just natural for me to want to share my family with anyone I can. I'm proud of it and so thankful for it.

From what I know about history, I get the feeling that Jesus established His church and then, through the centuries, we humans let it slide into something altogether different. Those first Christians shared a common faith in Jesus Christ, a common gratitude for the salvation Jesus had given them, and a common love and concern for each other. They lived and died long before our modern cliches for categorizing religions. They were neither Catholic, Protestant, nor Jewish ... but simply the church that belonged to Jesus.

In the first century, the word "church" referred to a group of Christians. That was before the word church came to describe religious buildings and organizational structures. Church meant simply those "called out" of the world by their faith in Jesus Christ, and transformed into brothers and sisters in the family of God. Today, it's still true! Christ's church results when men and women come to Him as Savior and want Him to be their Lord. When people hear that Jesus died for their sins and they turn to Him in a faith that obeys, then the church is the natural result. God keeps on adding people to the church every day when they turn away from sin, turn to Jesus, and are immersed into His death.

Time after time, I see proof that Jesus knew exactly what He was doing when He designed His church. He created a simple structure for spreading the good news and nurturing those who would believe. His church was designed to meet normal human needs for wholeness, love, and togetherness ... needs that are just as essential in our world as they were in the world of Peter and Paul. The church has shown love to me and to those close to me. I've watched my brothers and sisters seek to feed the hungry, comfort the grieving, care for the sick, counsel broken hearts, provide for orphans, reassure the widowed, champion the poor, and bring the good news of Jesus to those on the outside. These goals are worthy of our best efforts because we love Him so much. In my church family, we are continually trying to recover the church Jesus envisioned. We study the New Testament for God's picture of what He wants His church to be. We want the same organization and ways of worshiping and serving Him as we continue striving to honor Jesus. The patient pursuit of that dream increases our faith in God and our love for each other.

The more we become a church that honors Jesus ... the more unusual we might appear if you compare us to traditional churches. Perhaps it is because we take the authority of the Bible so seriously. The quest to please God leads us to search the scriptures for a picture of how God would have us worship Him and serve Him.

If you visit as we worship, you might be a little surprised when our men stand up to preach and lead prayers because these worship activities are conducted not by clergy with special robes or titles but by our own brothers. And while many of our preachers and evangelists are highly educated, we try not to accept any message just because of the credentials of the messenger. We are determined to listen to messages that are **Christ-centered** and **Bible-based**.

Another major emphasis of our worship together is the **weekly** observance of the Lord's Supper. We partake of unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine every Sunday. This memorial meal was started by Jesus himself on the night of His betrayal when He asked His disciples to let the supper always remind them of Him. I know from the New Testament that the early Christians regularly met for the purpose of eating the Lord's Supper on Sunday, "the first day of the week." As we participate in the Lord's Supper, we think back to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Those memories cause us to focus on the death, burial, and resurrection that each of us went through when we were baptized. Also, each time we take the Lord's Supper, we are obeying our Lord's request that we proclaim our continuing faith in His return, His coming again.

Each Sunday, we contribute financially as we have been prospered. The financial needs of the early church were met because Christians gave each Sunday as they had been prospered. We don't limit our giving to tithing, since 100 percent of what we have belongs to the Lord already. It is a freewill gift.

In our worship, we have tried to restore the simplicity and power of the New Testament church's music. Historically, instrumental music in church worship first appeared in the sixth century and was not in general use until after the eighth century. The joining of our hearts and voices in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs is a treasured part of our worship. Whether our mood is happy or sad, prayer or praise, we unite our voices in songs as one person. All are encouraged to sing, to understand with feeling the grand and noble thoughts of the ages. These songs are the nondenominational call upward to God, to worship Him with heartfelt thanksgiving.

In our public teaching and preaching, you are very likely to hear from one or more of our elders. These are **spiritual** leaders of Christ's church who have been appointed to lead the local congregation. Elders, who are also referred to as pastors or shepherds of the flock, work together to guide Christians as they grow and serve. Whenever I'm going through rough spots in my life, these elders are ready to pray with me and give me the benefit of their years of experience in the Lord.

Also, deacons support the spiritual leadership of elders by coordinating the diverse activities of the church, such as benevolent programs. The deacons, however, don't have to personally do every job that needs doing. Ours is a fellowship where each member is responsible for active service in the Lord's work. Jesus didn't set up a church where members could get their names on the roll, send in an occasional donation, and expect someone else to do all the work. The

Christian life is one of total commitment and personal involvement. Each member of the family has a responsibility to seek out the ways that he or she can best serve the Lord. It's a responsibility that I accept gladly because my life now belongs to Jesus Christ, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.

In the New Testament, the church is compared to a human body with Christ as its head. The head supplies the body with its life. The head unifies and coordinates the different organs of the body. At the same time, the head depends on the body to carry out its functions. My brothers and sisters and I are the hands, the feet, and the voices by which Jesus continues His work in the world today. One of the most exciting characteristics of the church family is the fact that we each have a part to play. There are no free rides and no part time memberships in the church that Jesus established. Just as the members of a human body carry out complementary functions, the members of the church's body have different strengths and talents. One may teach. Another may serve. Another's gift may be in giving, or encouraging, or in spreading the gospel to those who have yet to hear.

Of course, in a church made up of human beings, there is always the potential for disagreement, God's remedy for that danger is the essential glue that has held His people together since the church was founded ... **love**. Many centuries of church history have demonstrated that nobody can make enough rules and policies to guarantee peace and contentment within churches. Even compromise will not bring unity. The only thing that has ever brought religious unity on the earth has been the love of Christ, applied in patience and understanding, between brethren. The kindness that each of us needs will vary, but the love of Christ motivates us to make whatever allowances are necessary and helpful.

In the centuries since Jesus established His church, God has continued to add people to the church as they were being saved. The scriptures promise salvation to those who believe in Christ as the Son of God ... turn from their sin ... confess their faith in Jesus as Lord ... and are baptized (immersed in water) in the name of Christ.

Baptism is an act of obedience to the command of Christ. My burial in water was a decisive act that identifies for me the moment at which Christ's saving blood began to remove my sins. Baptism demonstrated a radical turning point in my life ... the death of the old sinful person and the birth of a new creature in Christ. As a person born again of water and the Spirit, I participated in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ.

In the first century, a person who became a Christian was automatically a member of the church. The same is true of churches of Christ today. There are no additional rules or ceremonies which one must follow to be inducted into the church. When you are in Christ ... you are in Christ's body ... the church. No further steps are required to qualify for church membership.

For some people, the idea of a church with no earthly headquarters takes a little getting used to. But that's the way Jesus originally established it. Instead of a man-made organization restricted by all the limitations of time, space, and bureaucracy, Jesus established a dynamic church that exists wherever people believe in Him and follow His written word. Because its only headquarters is in heaven, the church of Christ is not limited by languages, cultures, or

international boundaries. In Spanish cultures, you will find the "Iglesia de Cristo." In Germany, you'll find the "Gemeinde Christi." Or, you may find groups of Christians wearing other New Testament names ... like "the family of God," "the household of faith," "the people of God," or "the community of faith."

So if you ask me how many members of the church of Christ there are in the world, the only sure answer I can give you is, "I don't know." You see, God is really the only One who has the power to count His people and He has always placed a lot more emphasis on **qualities** than on quantities. When you come right down to it, I don't really need to know the size of the church in the world. I just need to know its size in my life.

Christ's church today can be recognized by the fact that its behavior and loyalties are like those described in the New Testament. We are committed to cry together, laugh together, and encourage each other. We seek to bear one another's burdens. We want to support the weak and care for the lonely. We earnestly desire to demonstrate for the world around us the one quality that can actually change people ... the love of Christ. Your needs and mine are the same as those people in the first century when Jesus established His church. For all our space age technology, we still have not come close to conquering failure, guilt, fear, pain, or death. Our human wisdom has not been able to develop a cure for sin. In God's plan, Jesus Christ brought the only answer to the dilemma of sin ... **Himself**. Our problem is sin. Our solution is Christ.

We place a lot of emphasis on the **Bible**. We believe the scriptures were inspired by God and were protected through the ages for those in every age who would seek God. We are dependent on the scriptures and we believe they are fully inspired by God and authoritative for our lives. Since only the New Testament sets forth Christ's instructions to His followers, it alone must serve as the basis for what we teach and do.

SOME THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT JESUS AND HIS CHURCH

There are many things in the word of God that we can know for a certainty. These are matters that have to do with our becoming Christians and living the Christian life. They are not complex or intricate. Responsible people can understand them. To make this as strong as I can, I would like to say that the things which pertain to our salvation are understandable; they are unquestionable, undeniable and indisputable. God has made them plain. It would be a reflection upon Him, His goodness and His ability to contend that these Scriptures cannot be understood.

- BUILT BY JESUS CHRIST

You should know that the church was: built and paid for by Jesus Christ (Matthew 16:13-18; Acts 20:28); built on Christ as the only foundation (I Corinthians 3:11); not built on Paul, Apollos, Cephas, or any other man (I Corinthians 1:12-13); fully established on the first Pentecost after Christ arose from the dead (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8; Mark. 9:1; Acts 2).

- THE NAME OF THE CHURCH

You should know that in the New Testament, the church is called: the temple of God (I Corinthians 3:16); the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:21-32); the body of Christ (Colossians 1:24; Ephesians 1:22-23); the kingdom of God's Son (Colossians 1:13); the house of God (Ephesians 3:15); the church (Ephesians 3:10); the church of God (I Corinthians 1:2); the church of the firstborn ones (Hebrews 12:23); the church of the Lord (Acts 20:28); the churches of Christ (Romans 16:16).

- THE CHURCH AND THE KINGDOM

You should know that the church and the kingdom are the same. John preached that the kingdom was near (Matthew 3:2). Jesus said: "... I will give you the keys of the kingdom" (Matthew 16:18-19). We have been delivered from darkness and translated into the kingdom (Colossians 1:13). He has called us into His kingdom (I Thessalonians 2:12). Christ is our King-eternal, immortal, invisible (I Timothy 1:17). He is King of kings and Lord of lords (I Timothy 6:15).

- JESUS CHRIST LOVED THE CHURCH

You should know that Christ Himself: loved the church (Ephesians 5:25); shed His blood for the church (Acts 20:28); established the church (Matthew 16:18); called the church His (Matthew 16:18); added people to the church (Acts 2:47); is the head of the church (Ephesians 1:22-23; 5:23); will save the church (Ephesians 5:23).

- IN THE CHURCH

You should know that "in the church" there is: redemption (Ephesians 1:7); forgiveness of sins (Colossians 1:13-14); sanctification (Ephesians 5:25); all spiritual blessings (Ephesians 1:3).

- HOW TO GET INTO THE CHURCH

You should know that to get into the church you must: believe in Christ (John 8:24; Acts 16:31; Hebrews 11:6); repent of your sins (Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38; 3:19); confess faith in Christ (Matthew 10:32-33; Romans 10:10); be baptized (Acts 2:38; 10:48; 1 Peter 3:21; Galatians 3:27).

- ONE IN NAME AND DOCTRINE

You should know that in New Testament times there was: one family of God (Ephesians 3:15); one kingdom of Christ (Colossians 1:13-14); one body of Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:4) one bride of Christ (Romans 7:1-7; Ephesians 5:22-23); one church of Christ (Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:4); one name for its people (Acts 11:26; Isaiah 62:2), who are added to the church (Acts 2:47).

- REQUIREMENT OF BAPTISM

You should know that by baptism: you get into the church (Acts 2:37-47); you put on Christ (Galatians 3:27); you walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3-5); you obey Christ (Acts 10:48; 11

Thessalonians 1:7-9). Baptism requires water (Acts 10:47); much water (John 3:23); going to the water (Acts 8:36; Matthew 3:5-6) going down into the water (Acts 8:38); a burial (Romans 6:3-4; Colossians 2:12); a planting (Romans 6:5); a washing (Acts 22:16), a birth (John 3:5); a raising out of the water (Colossians 2:12); a coming up out of the water (Acts 8:39). You should know that in baptism: sins are washed away (Acts 22:16); you are saved from your sins (I Peter 3:21; Mark 16:16); you have remission of sins (Acts 2:38); you get into Christ (Galatians 3:27); you are added to the church (Acts 2:47).

- CHRIST'S TEACHING

You should know that Christ gave the church His doctrine. False teaching or accepting another gospel will condemn souls (Galatians 1:6-10). One must not go beyond the things which are written (I Corinthians 4:6). If anyone goes on and does not abide in His doctrine, he does not have Christ (II John 9). If one does abide in His doctrine, he has both the Father and the Son (II John 9). Nothing can be added or subtracted (Revelation 22:18-19).

- WHAT MEMBERS ARE CALLED

You should know that members of the church are called: members (I Corinthians 12:27); disciples (Acts 6:1); believers (Acts 5:14; I Corinthians 6:15); saints (Acts 9:13; Romans 1:7; Philemon 1:1); priests (I Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:6); children (I John 3:2); Christians (Acts 11:26; 26:28; I Peter 4:16).

- LEADERS OF THE CHURCH

You should know that those who lead the local congregation (church) are called: elders, bishops (overseers), pastors (shepherds), leaders - all referring to the same work (I Timothy 3:1-7; Acts 20:17; 20:28; Titus 1:7-9). Their duty is to oversee and feed the flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 3:17; Titus 1:5-9; I Peter 5:1-4). Deacons are to serve the church (Acts 6:1-6; I Timothy 3:8-13). Evangelists are to teach and preach the word of God (Ephesians 4:11; I and II Timothy and Titus).

- JESUS PURCHASED HIS CHURCH

You should know that man did not: purpose the church (Ephesians 3:10-11); purchase the church (Acts 20:28); build the church (Matthew 16:18); nor name its people (Acts 11: 16; Isaiah 62:2). Jesus Christ did!

- THE CHURCH AND THE BODY OF CHRIST

You should know that the church and body of Christ are the same (Ephesians 1:23). All are reconciled to God in the body (Ephesians 2:16). There is but one body (Ephesians 4:4). Christians are members of His body (Ephesians 5:30). He is the head of the body (Colossians 1:18). We are called into one body (Colossians 3:15).

- WORSHIP

You should know that the faithful in the church must: worship in Spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24); must meet upon the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; Hebrew 10:25); must sing (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16); must pray (Acts 2:42; 1 Timothy 2:1-2); must edify one another (I Corinthians 14:15-26); must eat the Lord's Supper (Acts 20:7; Hebrew 10:26; 1 Corinthians 11:20-32), and, must give of their money (I Corinthians 16:1-2; II Corinthians 9:7) on the first day of the week.

- WORK OF THE CHURCH

You should know that the work of the church today is: preaching the gospel (II Timothy 4:1-7); teaching (I Timothy 3:1-2; Ephesians 3: 10-11); visiting the sick (Matthew 25:34-40); and, caring for the fatherless and widows (James 1:27).

- THE CHURCH TODAY

You should know that the church today: is in many communities; is not a denomination; is faithful to God's word; is one in fact and teaching; gains members by obedience to the gospel; has the same freedom from human powers; has the same names for its members; has the same names for the church You should know you are a member of the church by obeying the gospel as described in the New Testament.