

## What's in a Name? (Part 2)

There are those who insist that the collective name of believers is vital, even to the point of salvation. A [Truth for the World](#) correspondence course, for example, claims that the wrong name "will cause all who wear [them] to be lost."

In the [last issue](#), we looked at the names used to describe and address believers in the early church and discovered that while names are important to God, there is no one name for them. In this issue, we'll look at more controversial questions:

- Does God name His church?
- Is so, what is it?
- Is any name okay?

### Then

"You will be called by a new name which the mouth of the LORD will designate" (Isaiah 62:2).  
"My servants will be called by another name" (Isaiah 65:15).

The **first question** is whether or not God named his collective followers "the church." The word translated "church," is the Greek *ekklesia*, which literally means "those who are called out." It was the term given to assemblies of free Greeks called together to decide important issues, like traditional New England town meetings (although no one would refer to them as an *ekklesia* today). In the ministry of Jesus, only Matthew records His use of *ekklesia*, once in a discussion of resolving disputes (Matthew 18:15-17) and the other a particularly significant saying in response to Simon Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ:

"Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church (*ekklesia*); and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16:17-19)

Taken literally, Jesus is saying "upon this rock I will create a called-out people." The risen Jesus uses the term again in His revelation to the Apostle John, addressing the seven "churches" (*ekklesia*) of Asia ([Ephesus](#), Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and [Laodicea](#)).

There are 88 additional occurrences of *ekklesia* in the New Testament. Remember that "church" can refer to the universal body of believers (e.g., Acts 5:11; 1 Corinthians 5:12; Ephesians 5:25), all believers in a particular city or region (e.g., 2 Corinthians 1:1; 1 Corinthians 16:1; Galatians 1:22), or a specific congregation meeting in a home (e.g., Romans 16:5; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 1:2). The term is used by Luke, Paul, the Hebrews writer, James, and John. There is no example of Peter using the term; he addresses his two letters simply to "those who reside as aliens" (1 Peter 1:1) and "to those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours" (2 Peter 1:1).

There are other biblical names applied collectively to believers: general assembly, body, bride, family, flock, household, kingdom, priesthood, sect, pillar, and the Way, but most of these are used metaphorically and only occasionally. There can be no doubt that God took a previously political term, *ekklesia*, and applied it uniquely to His followers through Christ Jesus.

Having established that "church" (*ekklesia*) is the "new name" designated by God, as prophesied by Isaiah, the **second question** is whether or not there is some mandatory qualifier. Of the 88 occurrences of *ekklesia* in Acts-Jude, 71 have none. There are six variations of the other 17:

- Church of God, used 10 times (Acts 20:28; six times in the two Corinthian letters; Galatians 1:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:4; and 1 Timothy 3:5)
- Church of/in Christ (Romans 16:16; Galatians 1:22)
- Church of the saints (1 Corinthians 14:33)
- Church of God in Christ Jesus (1 Thessalonians 3:14)
- Church in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 1:1, 2 Thessalonians 1:1)
- Church of the living God (1 Timothy 3:15)
- Church of the firstborn (Hebrews 12:23)

Where in this is a God-given mandate for the use of any specific qualifier to the word "church"? God doesn't designate any qualifier. In Revelation, the risen Jesus does not refer to the seven churches of Asia as "the church of Christ" or "the church of God," but simply "the church in (city name)." Over and over in his letters, Paul addresses believers the same way: the church in Cenchrea (Romans 16:1), Corinth (2 Corinthians 1:1), Laodicea (Colossians 4:16), Galatia (1 Corinthians 16:1), Asia (1 Corinthians 16:19), Macedonia (2 Corinthians 8:1), and Judea (Galatians 1:22). If something were vital about the naming of groups of Christians, how could Jesus and Paul fail to apply that name time and again?

The **third question** relates to divisions within God's church, something Jesus prayed about in His "High Priestly Prayer" (John 17) and Paul condemned. When the church in [Corinth](#) began to divide into apparently conflicting loyalties (see 1 Corinthians 1), they were essentially denominating the church (e.g., The First Apollonian Church of Corinth, etc.). Paul was direct: "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" (1 Corinthians 1:10a).

Clearly, God wants His church to be united in its faith in Christ Jesus, and divisions based on man-made distinctions are wrong. Within the first three centuries of the church, denominational movements surfaced (Valentinians, Marcionites, Montanists, Donatists, Animists, etc.)—most were stamped out by the orthodox church in the name of correct doctrine (orthodoxy) and unity. With a few exceptions, the church remained monolithic and (mostly) unified for 1500 years while becoming more and more autocratic in the meantime. But that changed on October 31, 1517, when an obscure theology professor at Wittenburg College posted a set of [95 theses](#) on the door of the City Chapel. In doing so, Martin Luther did not intend to birth a litter of denominations, but only to challenge the Catholic Church to return to the truths he had discovered in Scripture.

## Now

Today, there is no lack of names for churches. The [Handbook of Denominations](#) (Abingdon Press, 2001) lists more than 20 major varieties, almost all with multiple sub-varieties. Some are named for leaders (Lutheran, Mennonite, Amish, Wesleyan), some for organization (Congregational, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Community), some for specific aspects of Christianity (Baptist, Bible, Methodism), some for a time (Adventist, Pentecostal), some for membership (Brethren, Christian, Friends), and some for scope (Catholic, Orthodox, Unity).

Putting aside the profound doctrinal differences between many of these churches, there are those who claim that the only valid, biblical name is "Church of Christ." Based on what? Certainly not the two references in Scripture. Acts 4:12 tells us "there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved," but the name referred to by Peter is "Jesus Christ the Nazarene." Calling a group of believers a church of Christ is fine, even noble, but there is absolutely no biblical basis for insisting on it and in doing so, some of my misguided church of Christ brothers and sisters are literally participating in the

denominationalism they abhor! To denominate is to name, placing importance in a name rather than what it represents.

Remember, God designated the new name for His followers, and He simply called it "the church." Adding "of God" or "of Christ" or "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" ought to simply be a clarifying designation in a day when others (e.g., Church of Scientology, Unitarian Church, etc.) claim the name. There is only one church, and a problem arises when the name is qualified by someone other than God and/or Christ Jesus. I am certain that just as Paul criticized the Corinthian church for its divided loyalties to Apollos, Cephas (Peter), and himself, he would also criticize the name "Lutheran" or "Mennonite." He might have less problem with something like "Methodist" (which, like "Christian" was initially a disparaging name applied by outsiders) or "Congregational," but he would certainly still insist that there is only one church.

The key issue, however, is not one of name because even "Church of Christ" is a name, but of faith. Last time I checked, Lutherans weren't worshipping Luther, Episcopalians weren't worshipping bishops, Methodists weren't worshipping Wesley's approach to Bible study, and Congregationalists weren't worshipping themselves. They and others were worshipping Christ Jesus and placing their faith in the power of His permanent blood sacrifice.

Yes, there are differences in the expressions of that faith, some which I frankly find egregious, but to suggest, as [Truth for the World](#) does, that someone is lost simply because s/he walks into a building with a "wrong" name is far more divisive than that "wrong" name. In his exhortation to the Corinthians, Paul gives no hint of eternal condemnation to the Apollonians, the Cephites, or the Paulines. Paul's issue was not that the Corinthians followed the teaching of different leaders. In fact, there is no evidence that the teaching of Apollos, Peter, or Paul differed in any significant way. Paul's concern was that each group looked down on the others as less spiritual. Isn't that exactly the case when Catholics view Protestants as "separated brethren," or Amish view mainstream Christians as "wordly," or Pentecostals view others as less Spirit-filled, or church of Christ members view "outsiders" as lost?

What we **all** need is to get over ourselves, ask God's forgiveness for our exclusivity, and focus solely on the business of worshipping and serving Him!

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In closing, I return to the Shakespeare quote at the beginning of [Part 1](#).

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." So says Juliet in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, trying to get her lover to shed his last name, Montague. "Deny thy father and refuse thy name," she asks. Or, if he swears his love, "I'll no longer be a Capulet."

Does the church by any name smell as sweet? Some believe the "Rose of Sharon" (Song of Songs 2:1) refers to Jesus, so perhaps Shakespeare's line can have special significance although the actual Rose of Sharon has never been a rose. Today, the flower of that name is *Hibiscus syriacus*, and the biblical flower was more likely a variety of gladiola common to the fertile plain of Sharon. Personally, I don't think the Song of Songs Rose of Sharon refers to Jesus at all, particularly since the female writer's comment is self-deprecating. The Rose of Sharon was attractive, yes, but it was nothing special among the hundreds of flowers flourishing in that region. Nevertheless, the term obviously resonates with many people and has inspired songs (see [here](#), the classic hymn; [here](#); [here](#); [here](#), and [here](#), a bluegrass tune) and poems (see [here](#)).

It's not very important whether or not the "Rose of Sharon" is meant to be Jesus, but Paul used odor as a metaphor for Christians:

"...(W)e are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life." (2 Corinthians 2: 15-16)

A group of believers smells as sweet (or awful) regardless of the name they use to describe themselves as long as each puts his or her faith in Christ Jesus and strives to worship and serve Him.



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17: 10-11). If you still disagree, post a message so we can all share in the discussion!

## **NEXT ISSUE: Creeds**

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