

One Faith



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Discovering God's Word Bible Study Series

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About the author: My name is Eric Krieg. I am a disciple of Jesus, a Bible student, a truth seeker, and an evangelist. My interest is in using the Bible as my only guide in my faith. My desire is to help others understand the message of the Bible and pursue true, New Testament Christianity.

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My plea: It is my hope and prayer that you are searching for the truth that is contained in God's word, the Bible. My desire is to help you understand and obey these truths God has revealed in the pages of His word. It is to that end that I write this material. Please observe all of the Scripture references and evaluate whether the conclusions I have drawn are in harmony with God's word. If they are, I ask that you make honest application of those truths to your life and obey God's instructions.

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Lesson 1: Why Are There So Many Different Churches Today?

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Lesson 5: Are You Interested In New Testament Christianity?

One Faith

Lesson 1: Why Are There So Many Different Churches Today?

We live in a world where there is much religious diversity – even within “Christianity.” Take a moment to consider some of the different “Christian” churches that are present today: Catholic Church, Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church, Lutheran Church, Baptist Church, Methodist Church, Pentecostal Church, etc. In addition to these are many other denominations and religious organizations that exist (including many so-called “non-denominational” groups).

As you observe the tremendous amount of religious division in the world, perhaps you have developed the same questions that I have had. Questions like: Are all churches equally acceptable to God? Where did all of these churches come from? Does it matter what I believe and practice in the name of religion? Am I in the right church? Is it possible for us to all believe and practice the same thing as the Christians in the New Testament believed and practiced?

These are the sorts of questions that we are left to wrestle with as a result of the religious diversity that

exists in the world. Now, it is commonly believed that religious diversity is a good thing – as everyone can express his/her religion and faith in the way that best suits each individual. But, please understand that we are *not* studying about the freedom to practice our faiths in whatever ways we desire; we are talking about what is pleasing to God!

As we search the Scriptures during this Bible study series, we are going to be evaluating the state of this religious diversity by what the Scriptures teach (since the Scriptures must be our only guide). And, we are going to be considering five questions that will help us determine whether God approves of this religious diversity or not. Consider these five questions for just a moment: (1) Why are there so many different churches today? (2) Can everyone be right? (3) Is it possible to be religious and still be wrong? (4) How can you know who is right? (5) Are you interested in New Testament Christianity?

Now, as we begin to consider this series of lessons together, please notice carefully what Paul says in Ephesians 4:5. He states that there is “one faith.” This small phrase contains great implications for religious diversity. So, let us consider the fact that there is only “one faith” – and seek to be part of that faith which is pleasing to God!

In this first lesson, I want to consider the question, “Why Are There So Many Different Churches Today?” Is God the reason that there are thousands of different churches all claiming to follow Jesus Christ? Or, is there some other reason(s)? Does God’s word help us to understand why there are so many different churches today? Where did all of these churches come from? I hope that this lesson will help you answer these questions.

Did God Create Religious Diversity?

In order for God to be pleased with all of the thousands of different religious organizations that are claiming to follow Him, He would need to be the origin of them. You may recall that Jesus said, “Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted” (Matthew 15:13). So, if God did not charter

the existence of each one of these different religious organizations, then they cannot have His approval!

Ephesians 4:1-6

Please take a moment to read this text. In it, Paul says, “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.”

The oneness of Ephesians 4:4-6 is meant to be something which unites the followers of Christ and Ephesians 4:1-3 instructs and encourages unity. It also recognizes individual responsibility to unity. God, by implication, provided us with a plan in which we could be united – not divided!

Think about it! Do we serve a God who desires for us to be divided? Is all of the religious division in the world God’s fault? The Scriptures teach us that God is *not* the author/source of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33). God simply does *not* desire for us to be divided! The religious division, therefore, is *not* the result of God; but, the result of men/women throughout history! In fact, God has intended and instructed us to be united in “one faith” and has given us things we can be united in! These things are identified in Ephesians 4:4-6. Let’s observe.

One God

There is only one God who is to be recognized as “Father of all who is over all and through all and in you all.” He did not create a system in which there would be many gods who were battling for supremacy. Furthermore, the attributes of God are clearly known through study of the Scriptures (and observation from nature) so that we can all be united in the one true and living God of the universe!

One Lord

There is only one Lord. Jesus Christ is the Christian’s only Master (at least He should be – Matthew 6:24!). However, problems arise whenever men profess Christ as Lord but do not really accept Him as Lord (Matthew 7:21-23). We must profess,

accept, and obey Him as Lord, for there is only one Lord who has purchased His church with His own blood!

One Spirit

There is only one Spirit. Our Lord promised to send the Helper. The Helper is identified as being the “Spirit of truth” (John 16:13). The Holy Spirit came to guide men into all truth (John 16:13). Thus, through the Spirit, who inspired the apostles and prophets to write the Scriptures, we have the completed revelation from God to mankind (the word of God, the Bible) – see Ephesians 3:3-5; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21. Furthermore, this revelation is perfect and contains no contradictions (James 1:25)!

One hope

There is only one hope. We have been called by the one Spirit of God through the gospel of Jesus Christ (2 Thessalonians 2:14) to partake in this one hope. This calling has resulted in the same unified hope of salvation that has been given to all who are obedient to the gospel! This is the hope of eternal life in Heaven (1 Peter 1:3-9)!

One faith

There is only one faith. When used in this way, the word “faith” refers to the system of religious belief, teaching, and practice that is acceptable to God. Consider the fact that the “faith” is something that could be obeyed (in Acts 6:7). Philippians 1:27 says that “the faith” is of “the gospel.” Then, Jude 1:3 states that “the faith” is something which could be earnestly contended for – and something which was “once for all delivered to the saints.” Therefore, the term “one faith” refers to the system of religious belief, teaching, and practice that is contained within the gospel, which God requires that we obey and earnestly contend for! Now, the fact that there is only “one faith” means that there are *not* many different systems of religious belief, teaching, and practice that are acceptable to God (i.e. Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, etc.). There is only one gospel that instructs us concerning the way of salvation (Galatians 1:6-9) and any changes that are made to the gospel’s message (which outlines the faith) are *not* acceptable to God (Revelation 22:18-19)!

One baptism

There is only one baptism. The Scriptures are clear in teaching the necessity of baptism for salvation (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21; others). The Scriptures are also clear in teaching that this one baptism is only properly administered by immersion in water (Romans 6:3-4; Acts 8:38-39). Therefore, there is only one way for people to enter a relationship with Christ and obtain the forgiveness of their sins – baptism (Galatians 3:26-27).

One body

There is only one body. The body is the church (Colossians 1:18). Therefore, there is only one church! In fact, Jesus only promised to build one church. In Matthew 16:18, He said, “I will build My church.” But, someone might ask, “Aren’t all denominations members of that one body?” Absolutely not! It is simply not possible for all churches to teach different doctrines about God, sin, salvation, the church, Christian living, etc. – and still be part of the same body! Remember: There is only one faith (system of acceptable religion)! The members of this one body are individual *Christians*, not different churches (1 Corinthians 12:27). And, only those who are obedient to the faith are part of this one body of Jesus Christ!

God provides a plan that unites, not divides!

God, in His infinite wisdom and knowledge, could have chosen for each individual to be saved differently and belong to different groups (as there are today). Yet, God realized that this situation would only divide – and He desired for His followers to be united in “one faith”! Therefore, God has designed a plan and system of religious belief, teaching, and practice that is completely united (as is demonstrated by Ephesians 4:1-6) – and God expects His people to eagerly maintain that unity!

Why Is There Religious Diversity?

So, if God is not the origin of this religious diversity that exists in the world today, when did it

begin? Where did it come from? And, how does it continue today? Let’s consider these types of questions and evaluate some history of the “one faith” – and how “one faith” has become many faiths.

The one church of Jesus Christ

Throughout the Old Testament, prophecies were made concerning the coming of the Messiah, the gospel, and the kingdom of God. In the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts, we watch as these prophecies are all fulfilled. God sends His only begotten Son (Jesus Christ, the Messiah) into the world to be the ransom sacrifice for sin. Jesus Christ brings about the fulfillment of the Law of Moses (the Old Testament) and establishes His new (and better) covenant (the New Testament, the gospel). Then, those who are obedient to the instructions of the gospel are cleansed from their sins by the blood of Jesus Christ and are added to Christ’s church (see Acts 2:36-47)!

Acts chapter 2 marks a most significant point in human history. Acts 2 records the first time the gospel is preached since coming into effect – and marks the establishment of Christ’s church (God’s kingdom)! Prior to Acts 2, references to Christ’s church/kingdom are always in the future tense, since it was not yet established (see Matthew 16:18; Luke 9:27). Then, from Acts 2 and forward, the church/kingdom is always referred to as being in existence (see Acts 2:41, 47; Colossians 1:13).

There was only one church at this time – and local churches of Christ were established (see Romans 16:16). These local churches had God’s approval, as they were part of God’s plan. Furthermore, God had given instructions concerning how local churches were to be properly organized, concerning the work they were to be doing, and concerning how they were to worship Him acceptably. This was a time of great progress for the gospel and the expansion of Christ’s kingdom (church) – as many souls were being brought to the Lord and many local churches of Christ were being established throughout the world!

So, as the church of Christ is established – and local churches of Christ are established in many different communities within the time of the New Testament, God’s pattern and desire for His church is clearly observed! If we will simply hold fast to the pattern of sound words that is contained within the

New Testament (2 Timothy 1:13), we can be united and simply be part of one church. However, mankind would not be content to hold fast to God's pattern....

The New Testament warned of a coming apostasy

While the New Testament does not authorize the religious diversity that exists in the world today, it does help us to understand why it has come into existence. Even from the time when there was only one church in existence (during New Testament times), an apostasy was being foretold and division was attempting to creep into Christ's church. Concerning such a threat, Jude wrote to some Christians, instructing them to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ" (Jude 1:3-4).

The word "apostasy" simply refers to the falling away from the one faith. Thus, religious division results. God knew that people would not remain true to the "one faith" revealed in the gospel. A glance at the history of God's people tells us exactly the same thing. Throughout time (even in the Bible), we can see progressions of people who move away from the way of truth and righteousness. (1) Adam and Eve were not satisfied with God's perfect order and commandment – and violated God's law in order to establish their own way. (2) Adam's descendants would wonder so far away from God that God sent a flood to destroy them. (3) The Israelites (God's people in the Old Testament) would make frequent departures from God and His laws throughout their history (read the book of Judges to see this happen frequently).

Now, take a moment to consider the warnings in Scripture about a coming apostasy. (1) Acts 20:28-31 foretells about some who would bring error into the Ephesian congregation and draw disciples away from the truth (note that Paul is speaking to the Ephesian elders): "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among

yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears."

(2) 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 says that the Day of the Lord would not come before the "falling away" comes and the man of sin is revealed. Though the "man of sin" in this passage is not specifically identified, his description leads many people to believe that this is a prophecy about the establishment of the Catholic Church or the Pope (who claims to have all authority and be infallible). The passage states: "Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God."

(3) 1 Timothy 4:1-3 records a prophecy that some would depart from the faith. It says, "Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth."

(4) 2 Timothy 4:1-4 records Paul's instructions to Timothy to be diligent in preaching the word – and his warning about a time that would come when folks would not "endure sound doctrine," departing from the faith. It says, "I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables."

The New Testament identified factors involved in this apostasy

Having seen that the New Testament foretold an apostasy, let's consider four contributing factors to this apostasy that are specifically identified in the New Testament.

(1) False teaching. There are many warnings given in the New Testament about some who would fail to accurately teach God's instructions, leading others into error. Please read and consider the following passages carefully. Particularly notice how the one true message of the gospel would be perverted/changed discretely and would be destructive to those who would teach and follow these doctrines.

Galatians 1:6-9: "I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed."

Matthew 7:15-20: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them."

2 Peter 2:1-3: "But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber."

(2) Itching ears. Though false teaching is a common cause for apostasy – as individuals preach different gospels and follow after the same, straying away from the faith; the Bible also speaks of those who would develop "itching ears."

2 Timothy 4:3-4 says, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have

itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables."

The picture in this text is one of an individual departing from the way of truth and seeking for someone who would teach a false gospel. Why would someone *desire* a false gospel to be taught? The text says that many will not *endure* sound doctrine (i.e. sound doctrine may require too much of them, they may consider sound doctrine to be too strict, they may not like the teachings and conclusions offered by sound doctrine, etc.). However, these folks may still desire the hope offered by true religion. So, they find someone who will teach them a different gospel with the hope of the true Gospel (which becomes a false hope)! For instance, many will not like what the Bible teaches about marriage, divorce, and remarriage (because of what it requires of them). Therefore, they may find someone who teaches them what they *want* to hear on the subject. Others may reject the Bible's teaching about the necessity of baptism or the mode of baptism (immersion in water). Rather than accepting the truth, they may turn to a teacher who will tell them what they *want* to hear.

(3) The traditions of men. Another factor that contributes to division that is seen in the New Testament is man-made tradition. These are the established ways of man – even his established religious beliefs and practices. And, when these established ways are held above the doctrine of Jesus Christ, the result is more division.

In the period of the New Testament, the most frequent problem along these lines were the traditions involving Judaism. Jesus confronted such error in Matthew 15, when He told the Jewish scribes and Pharisees that they had "made the commandment of God of no effect by their tradition" (vs. 6) and they worshiped God in vain because they taught "as doctrines the commandments of men" (vs. 9). Compare also with Mark 7:8-9.

(4) Selfish ambitions. The pursuit of selfish desires above God's desires is also identified in the Scriptures as being a contributor to division. Certainly, any time that an individual puts himself/herself above God (by refusing to submit to God), he/she works to divide the church rather than unite it! While there may be numerous things as the source of these selfish ambitions (i.e. wealth, power, prestige, etc.), it always

works contrary to God's ways and His plan. Read and carefully consider the following examples from the New Testament of men who would pursue selfish ambitions.

Acts 20:29-30: "For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves."

Romans 16:17-18: "Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple."

2 Thessalonians 2:3-4: "Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God."

3 John 1:9-11: "I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church. Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. He who does good is of God, but he who does evil has not seen God."

Apostasy during New Testament times

Throughout the pages of the New Testament, not only was apostasy foretold and some of its causes identified; but, the Scriptures even record some departures from the faith that had happened within the first century of the church being established. Consider the following.

(1) False teaching concerning circumcision and the keeping of Moses' Law was common (see Acts 15, the book of Galatians, and Colossians 2).

(2) Sin had effectively infiltrated the Corinthian church – including divisions, fornication, corrupting the Lord's Supper, and false teaching about the resurrection (see the book of 1 Corinthians).

(3) A man named Diotrophes had taken authority over a church for himself – and violated the God-approved organizational structure for local churches (see 3 John 1:9-11).

(4) Five of the seven churches in Asia minor were not pleasing to God. The church in Ephesus had left her first love. Some in the church at Pergamos had held to the doctrines of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. The church in Thyatira had allowed Jezebel to seduce the Lord's servants. The church in Sardis was dead. The church in Laodicea was lukewarm. Read about all of these situations (plus two faithful congregations) in Revelation 2-3.

(5) There were those masquerading as apostles, who really had not been commissioned by Christ in that way – and were deceiving Christians (see the book of 2 Corinthians).

An Overview Of Church History

By the end of the New Testament period, significant pieces can be observed which pointed to a great apostasy. Now, this apostasy was *not* going to happen because of some defect with God or with God's plan. Instead, this apostasy was going to take place and continue because of man's unwillingness to submit himself entirely to God's plan!

So, how did we get from one church in Acts 2 to having tens of thousands of different (so-called) "Christian" churches in existence today? Let's consider an overview of the four periods of "church history."

Progress

This refers to the New Testament period in which there was unity and the true gospel was being taken throughout the world by the apostles and by all disciples of Christ. During this time, many souls were being added to the Lord's church and many local churches of Christ were being established throughout the world. At the first, this church was pure. However, as we have seen, it would not take long for a falling away from the faith to take place.

Apostasy

This refers to the period of time as the New Testament period ends and the apostasy we have been discussing begins to develop. Historical records show that the first great apostasy occurred when the organizational structure of the Lord's church was perverted. One elder in a congregation began to be recognized as having more authority than the other elders (becoming known as the Bishop). Then, that Bishop would later gain authority over other (smaller) churches. Then, the Bishop would gain authority over all congregations within a portion of the world. Eventually, there were five leading Bishops over all the churches. These Bishops lived in the five capital cities of the world at that time: Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Constantinople.

Then, as false doctrines were introduced and churches debated the merits of each of these doctrines, the first council of the apostate church was called in the city of Nicea in June of 325, specifically to address an issue regarding the eternal nature of Jesus Christ. With this first council came the writing of the first official creed (the Nicene Creed). Thus, by the year 325, man had now taken authority for himself to establish an official "church creed" other than the Bible!

The apostasy continued through the years and included even more false doctrines introduced, additional church councils being called, and more official "church creeds" being written. In addition, hostility developed between the five leading Bishops of the apostate church (particularly the Bishops in Constantinople and Rome) – as the Bishop of Constantinople (John, the Faster) assumed the title of "Universal Bishop." After his death, the title "Universal Bishop" was finally settled and given to the Bishop of Rome. This all paved the way and worked to develop the Catholic Church – and a Pope who is said to be the head over the church and free from all error. Years after the development of the Roman Catholic Church (unofficially recognized as beginning in 606 A.D.), a division would occur that would form the basis of what is now known as the Greek Orthodox Church.

Reformation

After years of such digression from the ways of truth, beginning around the 15th century, individuals

gained prominence in calling the practices of the Catholic church into question. Some of these individuals questioned the authority of the Pope, some questioned other points of doctrine. Regardless of the specific points they questioned, they saw that the Catholic Church had developed into something that was not according to the Scriptures. Therefore, these men attempted to *reform* the Catholic church.

Some of the most prominent figures during this time were Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, Ulrich Zwingli, and John and Charles Wesley. While these men had many noble ambitions and ideas that were in accordance with the teachings of Scripture, a study of their beliefs also reveals that they had a number of unscriptural ideas (i.e. faith only for salvation, inherited sin, etc.). As a result of the work of these (and other) men, many "protestant" churches got their beginning. The Lutheran Church began in approximately 1520 A.D. The Presbyterian Church began around 1536 A.D. The Baptist Church began around 1607 A.D. The Methodist Church began in approximately 1739 A.D.

Now, while these churches were beginning at this time in history, they were all still failing to make a complete return to the "one faith" that is outlined in Scriptures. Furthermore, as the number of churches was rapidly expanding in the world, these churches would, themselves, experience division and other churches would form as the result.

Restoration

Around the conclusion of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, there were some men who questioned even these reformation-based churches. They were students of the Scriptures and evaluated the religious beliefs and practices of the various churches – and determined to accept no other creed besides the Bible, simply doing all things according to the authority of Scriptures. These men (though they were not always perfect in their efforts) made many noble efforts to restore New Testament Christianity rather than reform the existing churches.

Some of the prominent figures in this movement were Thomas Campbell, Alexander Campbell, Barton W. Stone, James O'Kelley, Elias Smith, and others. However, even though they made great strides toward New Testament Christianity, some would still not make a complete return to simple, New

Testament Christianity. Divisions continued to exist – even within this movement, as the Christian Church was established and recognized as a separate church in 1906.

Of course, this is just a very brief overview of some significant points in church history. However, simply notice that God had only established one church and had given “one faith” for everyone to follow and be part of. Yet, because of man’s unwillingness to hold fast the pattern of sound words (2 Timothy 1:13), they departed from the “one faith” and established thousands of different (so-called) “Christian” churches over time. Today, there are still new churches beginning on a regular basis – and new doctrines and religious practices being introduced! So, the apostasy that we have been studying through this part of the lesson is still ongoing and leading many people astray!

Conclusion

I would like to challenge you to take a good look at the religious diversity in the world (or, even in your community) and ask, “Does God approve of *this* – based on what His Word teaches?” It is my hope that this study has helped you to understand that God has *not* designed/authorized the religious division that is present in the world today and that such division is contrary to His plan. In fact, the religious division that exists today is not the plan of God; but, it is the plan of Satan!

Notice the language of the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 11:13-15: “For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.” In John 17:20-23, Jesus prayed for unity among His followers – as He recognized that their unity would impact whether individuals would believe and obey Him or not. Satan also recognizes this – and he has been working throughout the centuries to confuse and mislead religious people!

Now, if you understand that God does not approve of such religious division, then ask, “Which church follows the pattern of the New Testament church?” The remaining four lessons in this study will attempt to help you develop a greater understanding of the “one faith” that is found in the Scriptures – and contrast this “one faith” with the religious division that is experienced throughout the world today!

Study Questions

As you observe the tremendous amount of religious division in the world, what sorts of questions have you had?

1. Did God Create Religious Diversity?

How does Ephesians 4:1-6 contribute to unity?

From Ephesians 4:4-6, discuss how the following “ones” should be uniting factors:

1. One God –
2. One Lord –
3. One Spirit –
4. One hope –
5. One faith –
6. One baptism –
7. One body –

2. Why Is There Religious Diversity?

How many churches did God establish? When was it established?

What is an apostasy? Did the New Testament warn about a coming apostasy?

The New Testament identifies a number of factors that are involved in this apostasy. Please discuss each of the following.

1. False teaching –
2. Itching ears –
3. The traditions of men –
4. Selfish ambitions –

Did any apostasy occur during New Testament times? Discuss.

3. An Overview Of Church History

Provide a quick overview of the following periods of church history:

1. Progress –
2. Apostasy –
3. Reformation –
4. Restoration –

***Does God approve of the religious division in the world today?**

Lesson 2: Can Everyone Be Right?

In our first study, we discovered the truth from Ephesians 4:1-6 that there is only one faith (system of religion) that is acceptable to God. We also discussed why there are so many different churches today and considered a brief overview of “church history.”

Certainly there are many *different* religious beliefs and practices. There is Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and many others. Additionally, there are many *different* (so-called) “Christian” churches (i.e. Catholic, Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Pentecostal, Lutheran, etc.).

Therefore, the question, “Are all churches equally acceptable to God?” is an important one. If the answer is “Yes, all churches are equally acceptable to God,” then you are free to belong to whichever church you desire. You can join a local Catholic Church, Baptist Church, Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church, Christian Church, Lutheran Church, Pentecostal Church, a “non-denominational” church – or any of the other churches in town! It doesn’t matter. Join whichever church you would like to join (whichever one fits you and your family best) – **if all churches are the same**, because your salvation will not be negatively impacted by your decision!

However, if the answer is “No, all churches are not equally acceptable to God,” then your soul’s salvation will be affected by your choice (so choose wisely)! Therefore, you will need to spend your time searching for the truth so that you can be part of the church you can read about in the Bible!

I understand that, for many, this will be a consequential study. You may have life-long ties to one particular church. You may have family ties to one particular church. To accept the truth on the matter (as we will continue to see throughout this study), therefore, may make you unpopular among your peers, relatives, friends, etc. However, please understand that **nothing and nobody is more important than serving the Lord** (please take the time to read Matthew 10:34-39, Luke 14:25-33, and Matthew 16:26)!

So, what must be your guide in religion? What standard should you use to determine which church you should be a member of? Certainly it must *not* be your family members, friends, popular opinion, the majority, or your conscience. Rather, it must be God’s word – and God’s word only (since God’s word will be the criteria by which we will be judged, John 12:48; Revelation 20:11-15)!

As we continue our study of “One Faith,” let’s now ask a second question to investigate during this lesson: “Can everyone be right?” That is, are the Catholics as right as the Methodists – even though they believe and practice their “Christianity” differently? Are Baptists as right as Lutherans – even though they believe and practice their “Christianity” differently? Are Pentecostals as right as Jehovah’s Witnesses – even though they believe and practice their “Christianity” differently? What does the Scriptures teach about this important question? Let’s evaluate....

What Does God Expect?

In our first study, we saw that God did not create all of the religious diversity that currently exists in the world. Instead, the Scriptures indicate that there would be an apostasy (a falling away) from the one faith which would occur. It was this apostasy that led to the development of the many “Christian” churches we have in the world today – which all believe, teach, and practice different forms of “Christianity.” So, does God approve of this religious diversity? Let’s consider what God expects from those who claim to follow Him.

Unity!

We have clearly seen that God is not the origin of this religious diversity. He has designed a system in which there could be unity and has given His followers the responsibility to eagerly maintain this unity (Ephesians 4:1-6). In addition to this responsibility for unity that God has given us in Ephesians 4, let's consider some additional passages to see this same truth.

(1) John 17:20-23: "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me."

As you consider this passage, please appreciate the fact that these are the words of Jesus, as He is praying to His Heavenly Father. Also, please appreciate the fact that this prayer is offered shortly before Jesus is betrayed and arrested. Now, consider what you would be praying about – if you knew that you were going to experience severe persecution and death in the very near future. Certainly, you would be praying for the things that were most important to you.

In John 17, Jesus does exactly that. This prayer can be divided into three parts. In the first five verses, Jesus prayed for Himself. In verses 6-19, Jesus prayed for His current disciples (i.e. His disciples who were living at that time). Then, in verses 20-26, Jesus prayed for all those who would believe on Him through the word of His disciples. Therefore, Jesus was praying for those who would even be His disciples *today* (as we have all believed on Him through the teachings of the inspired writers who were living at that time)!

Now, consider what it was Jesus was so concerned about. Notably, verses 20-23 records Jesus' prayer that these individuals would all be united! In fact, the degree to which Jesus wanted them (us) to be united is that they (we) would be as united as He and the Father are united! But, why would Jesus have such a concern about His followers being united?

Notice the reasons Jesus says this unity among His followers would be so important. In verse 21, Jesus

said, "that the world may believe that You sent Me." In verse 23, Jesus said, "that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me." Notice how Jesus said the unity among His followers would have an influence on whether others would believe in Him or not! Therefore, Jesus knew that if His followers were united, it would help others to follow Him; but, if His followers were not united, it would hinder others from following Him.

Certainly, all of the religious division that is in existence throughout the world today has hindered the cause of Jesus Christ! Today, unbelievers look at this division – and they often think that the Bible cannot be understood (since they see so many disagreements among those who all profess to use the Bible as their guide). In addition, someone who is searching to follow Jesus Christ often does not know where to begin and which church to assemble with. So, Jesus' concern about division has become reality – as this division has negatively impacted His cause!

(2) 1 Corinthians 1:10: "Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."

As Paul wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians, he addressed a number of different problems that had come to his attention. One of these problems was that of division in the church. Specifically, these individuals were dividing into different groups by saying that they were followers of different men (i.e. perhaps claiming to follow the ones who baptized them). So, verse 12 says that some of the Corinthians were claiming to follow Paul, some were claiming to follow Apollos, some were claiming to follow Peter (Cephas), and some were claiming to follow Christ.

There is simply no good reason to follow after any man. Notice the rhetorical questions Paul asked in verse 13: "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" The obvious answer to these questions is, "No!" Jesus did not have a divided purpose. No mere man was crucified for our sins. And, baptism in any man's name does no good! So, the only one we must follow is Jesus Christ! And, since Jesus Christ is not divided, there is no room for division among those who follow Him – and they must certainly never follow any men!

Therefore, in this section of Paul's letter to the Corinthian Christians, He instructs them to be united! But, notice specifically the degree to which these individuals were to be united. They were to "speak the same thing," there were to be "no divisions" among them, and they were to be "perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."

However, the religious division that exists in the world today makes it appear as if Jesus Christ was divided – and that God has permitted man to follow after other men. Certainly, the religious division in the world today does not demonstrate a desire to all be speaking the same thing and be perfectly joined together in the same mind and the same judgment! Even the ecumenical movement that encourages unity among professing "Christians" (even though they are divided from one another) does not accomplish this!

(3) 1 Corinthians 12:25: "that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another."

1 Corinthians 12:12-27 is another section in the book of 1 Corinthians that encourages unity among the followers of Jesus Christ. Specifically, this section compares the church to a body, saying that each Christian is a member of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27) and has a special role/function within the body. Therefore, all of the members are not the same; but, they are all valuable to the overall health and function of the body.

In fact, the problem that Paul is attempting to correct in giving these instructions is that some of the Corinthian Christians believed that they were more important to the church than others (because they had certain spiritual gifts). However, Paul says that each member has an equally significant contribution to make to the well-being of the church!

Therefore, Paul encourages them not to be divided; but, says that there must be no division ("schism") in the body of Jesus Christ. Now, consider how many divisions currently exist in (so-called) "Christianity" today! Each separate denomination/church represents a division. And, there are even many divisions that are present within each church. Yet, Paul said that there should be no (zero) divisions in the body of Jesus Christ (remember, Jesus is not divided)!

(4) Philippians 1:27: "Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel."

Notice the level of unity that was commanded of these Christians. They were to be working at unity – standing fast and striving for it! Again (like we have already seen), they were to be of "one spirit" and "one mind." This language simply does not leave any room for division among Christ's followers in their religious doctrines and practices.

Now, notice what they were to be united in: They were to be standing fast in one spirit, striving together with one mind for "the faith of the gospel." Therefore, they were to be united in God's word (the gospel, which reveals the one faith)! They were not to be united in the opinions, traditions, or teachings of men. They were not to be united in their agreement to disagree. They were to be united in their pursuit of the absolute truth that is contained within the gospel of Jesus Christ!

Clearly, as you consider all four of these passages, God commands and expects unity of those who profess to be His followers. And, it should also be clear that all the different (so-called) "Christian" churches and organizations that exist in the world today is evidence of the failure to be united in the faith of the gospel! So, after considering these passages, please understand that God is *not* pleased with the religious division that exists today – because He desires complete unity among those who follow Him (as they should be striving together for the faith of the gospel)!

How can unity be accomplished?

In this world that is full of religious confusion, many would question whether unity is even possible. "Everyone has their own interpretation of what the Bible says." So, can unity be accomplished? Can we understand the Bible alike?

Let's begin to answer this question by observing the fact that God's word is truth (John 17:17) and it is perfect (Psalm 19:7; James 1:25). Therefore, God's word cannot teach opposing sides of the same issue (i.e. it does not teach baptism as being unnecessary for salvation *and* as being necessary for salvation). In addition, God did not give us a law that was too complicated to obey. As we have already seen,

God expects us to be united. Why, then, would God (who is a just and fair God) give us law to follow that would breed nothing but confusion and division? Certainly, “God is not the author of confusion but of peace” (1 Corinthians 14:33) – and He has given us a law that can be understood and followed (see Ephesians 3:3-5 and Ephesians 5:17).

So, the problem of religious division (as we demonstrated in lesson 1) did not originate with God; but, with men. Therefore, when God commands unity, unity can be accomplished – if we will do what is required of us in order to achieve unity! Consider some important elements to achieving unity.

(1) Unity can be accomplished only when there is an agreement on the Scriptures as the standard (John 12:48). (2) Unity can only be accomplished when we establish Bible authority for all that we believe and practice in religion (Colossians 3:17). (3) Unity can only be accomplished when we do not hold to prefabricated conclusions and traditions (Matthew 15:8-9). (4) Unity can only be accomplished when we practice love and pursue peace (Ephesians 4:1-3).

If Everyone Is Right...

Clearly, God commands unity of His followers – and unity among His followers is possible. Yet, there are thousands upon thousands of divisions within “Christianity” today. Now, please take a moment to consider whether everyone (all of these different religious organizations) can be right – if they are all preaching and practicing different things.

I would like to take a few moments to consider some necessary conclusions *if* everyone is right. For, if everyone is right, then it does not matter what you believe or practice and the Bible teaches all sides of the various issues at hand!

If everyone is right, then...

Think about the various doctrines about which divisions exist within “Christianity.” Now, as I list these points, I will not attempt to state which (if any) are the correct views (according to the Scriptures). Instead, I simply want you to observe how divided the “Christian” world is today – and understand that it is not possible for everyone who holds to these

conflicting views to be right in God’s sight. Remember, God’s word is perfect (James 1:25) and God cannot lie (Titus 1:2). Therefore, God’s word simply *cannot* teach contradicting doctrines! Yet, these are some of the things the “Christian” world is divided about.

- If everyone is right, then the Bible teaches that God is a loving God who will not condemn anyone to Hell and He is a loving God who will condemn many to Hell.
- If everyone is right, then the Bible teaches that Jesus Christ is not God and He is God.
- If everyone is right, then the Bible teaches that baptism is unnecessary for salvation and is necessary for salvation.
- If everyone is right, then the Bible teaches divorce for any cause and teaches only one cause for divorce.
- If everyone is right, then the Bible teaches that homosexuality is not wrong and that homosexuality is sinful.
- If everyone is right, then the Bible teaches that those who die will simply cease to exist and they will continue to live beyond this earth.
- If everyone is right, then the Bible teaches that those who die in their sins will simply be annihilated and will spend their eternities in Hell.
- If everyone is right, then the Bible teaches that an individual is once saved always saved and can fall from God’s grace.
- If everyone is right, then the Bible teaches that we are born in sin and that we are born sinless.
- If everyone is right, then the Bible teaches that Jesus did not die for everyone and that Jesus did die for everyone.
- If everyone is right, then the Bible teaches that God has predestined some individuals to be saved and to be lost and that God has given everyone free will to either be saved or lost based on their own choosing.
- If everyone is right, then the Bible teaches that men can still perform miraculous gifts of the Spirit today and that those miraculous spiritual gifts have ceased to exist.
- If everyone is right, then the Bible teaches that only 144,000 people will go to Heaven and that as many as will be obedient to God will go to Heaven.
- If everyone is right, then the Bible teaches that Jesus will reign on the earth for 1,000 years and

set up His earthly kingdom and that this world will be destroyed whenever Christ returns.

Do you see the problem?

If you believe in the Bible as being inspired of God, then you must believe that it is truth and that anything which contradicts the truth is error. Please understand: The Bible does *not* teach one thing as truth and then uphold the exact opposite as being truth (as in the examples given above). Yet, many religious organizations teach such contradictory doctrines – and they all claim to be right!

However, the conclusion must be: ***Everyone can't be right!*** The Bible is right! Therefore, if we establish what the Bible says on any matter, we have reached the truth of God's word! Let us never be guilty of listening to man's doctrines and opinions rather than listening to God! Romans 3:4 says, "...let God be true but every man a liar."

Do All Roads Lead To Heaven?

It is not uncommon to hear someone say, "You go to your church, I'll go to mine; and we'll all end up in Heaven together - because all roads lead to Heaven." Yet, do all churches that claim to be "Christian" lead to the same place (i.e. to Heaven)? Let's see what the Bible says. Though there are many different passages we could consider, Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7:13-27 provides a good amount of information that will help us answer this question.

Two paths in life (Matthew 7:13-14)

Matthew 7:13-14 says, "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it."

You will be walking on one of these two roads during your life. One road leads to Heaven – and few will travel this road (because it requires great discipline to follow the Lord). One road leads to Hell – and many will travel this road (because it is the easy way of living). Therefore, not all roads lead to Heaven. This fact ought to make you evaluate yourself: "Which road am I walking on?"

Yet, some may think, "This passage just shows us that there are few who will profess 'Christianity' so as to be saved; while many will deny Christ and be lost." However, let's continue to evaluate what Jesus teaches throughout this section of Scripture to see if such a statement is accurate....

Beware of false prophets (Matthew 7:15-20)

Matthew 7:15-20 says, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them."

There are those who claim to speak in the name of the Lord, but, are actually speaking lies! That's the idea of a false prophet. However, Jesus said that you can know them by their fruits (i.e. by evaluating what they are teaching according to what God has said).

There are many false teachers today. False teachers are simply those who teach false doctrine – while claiming to speak words of truth! John wrote about those who come to you and do not bring the doctrine of Christ (2 John 1:9-11). Paul wrote about those who preach "another Jesus whom we have not preached...or a different gospel which you have not accepted" (2 Corinthians 11:4). Paul said that such individuals were ministers of Satan who had "transformed themselves into ministers of righteousness" (2 Corinthians 11:13-15). Paul warned the elders of the church at Ephesus that there would be individuals who would arise "speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves" (Acts 20:30). Peter said that there would be false teachers, just as there were false prophets previously; and that these false teachers would lead many away from the truth (2 Peter 2:1-3).

The Bible is clear: There will be individuals who claim to speak the truth, but are actually speaking lies – and many will be deceived by them! Therefore, if you follow these false teachers, you will **not** be walking on the road that leads to Heaven!

Not everyone who says “Lord, Lord...” (Matthew 7:21-23)

Matthew 7:21-23 says, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”

There are many people today who profess Jesus Christ as Lord and attend a “Christian” church, but have not done the things that Jesus has instructed of them in order to be saved (i.e. baptism). Sadly, they believe they are on the right road (i.e. the narrow road) – and are not looking to correct their lives. In fact, they are the ones who have often been deceived by the sorts of false teachers Jesus mentioned in Matthew 7:15-20!

However, Jesus says that these individuals (despite the fact that they professed Him as “Lord”) will hear the words in Matthew 7:23 on the Day of Judgment: “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!” Therefore, this great warning of Jesus should cause us to make sure that we are on the right path and that we are being obedient to God’s instructions (not just professing Him as “Lord”)! We must be evaluating our lives by the standard of God’s word; not just *thinking* or *hoping* that we are on the right road!

The hearer and doer will be saved (Matthew 7:24-27)

Matthew 7:24-27 says, “Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.”

Notice what Jesus Christ is saying in this passage very carefully! He is telling us that there will be many people who hear God’s instructions; but, will not be obedient to it! He tells us that such individuals (who

fail to obey God’s word) will be destroyed! Paul also teaches this truth in 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9 when he says that those who do not know God or obey the gospel of Jesus Christ will be “punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.” In contrast, those who hear God’s word and are obedient to it are the ones who will be saved!

Not all roads are the same!

I hope these passages have demonstrated the truth that not all roads (even roads that are identified as being “Christian”) are equally pleasing to God! You must walk on the road that God instructs you to walk on. This is the only road that leads to everlasting life. This is the road of hearing and doing God’s Word – not just believing in Jesus and professing Him as “Lord”!

One Way!

I want you to think about the thousands upon thousands of different (so-called) “Christian” churches that are in existence today. Make a list of the different churches that are present even within your own community (i.e. within a 30 mile radius). We have already established the fact that God expects unity of His followers, that everyone cannot be right (while believing, teaching, and practicing different forms of “Christianity”), and that every road does *not* lead to Heaven. Now, let’s carefully observe the fact that God expects unity from His followers – because He has only established one Way!

John 14:1-6

“Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And where I go you know, and the way you know.’ Thomas said to Him, ‘Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me’” (John 14:1-6).

The problem

It is perplexing to me how there can be tens of thousands of various denominations and religious organizations when Jesus Christ said He was “the Way”! There is only one Way – Jesus Christ. I am sure many would accept this truth. All “Christian” churches I know about would claim that Jesus Christ is the one Way – and would all claim to be following Him.

However, please remember that Jesus Christ is not divided (1 Corinthians 1:13). Therefore, those who are following Jesus Christ, the Way, cannot be divided into different organizations based upon their varying religious beliefs and practices! To follow Jesus Christ (the Way) means that we must follow God’s instructions – as revealed in the pages of the Bible! Then, if you will follow His word, you will be part of the church. But, **which church is that?**

Christ only established one church

Again, there are thousands of different “Christian” churches – all of which have different names, doctrines, organizational structures, and religious practices. But, have you ever asked the question, “How many churches did Jesus establish?”

The Bible answers this question! In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” So, Christ only promised to build **one** church! Then, in Acts 2 (the chapter that records the establishment of this church), only one church is identified as being in existence: “...the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). Therefore, since Christ only promised to build one church and only one church was established, there is only **one** church (body of the saved). Remember that this is what we observed in lesson 1 (from Ephesians 4:4) – that there is only **one body**. According to Ephesians 1:22-23 and Colossians 1:18, the body is the church. Therefore, there is only **one church!**

This one church of Christ is composed of those who are saved. Again, Acts 2:47 says that “the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” Therefore, the saved compose **this** church (and only **this** church). Those who are lost are outside of **this** church (many are even in the churches of men).

Yet, some might ask, “Aren’t all ‘Christian churches’ part of this church that has been built by Christ?” **No – because they do not all teach Christ’s doctrine or keep His commandments!** Although all “Christian” churches believe in Jesus and profess to follow Him, they simply do not all keep His commandments! This is just what we had observed in Matthew 7:21-23 – that these individuals professed allegiance to Jesus Christ; but, they failed to be obedient to Him. And, you recall, that Jesus said He would tell such individuals to “depart” from Him on the Day of Judgment – because they had not done the will of the Father!

Becoming a member of this church

So, since the Bible teaches that there is only one church that was built by Jesus Christ – and the saved are only found in this church, how does an individual become a member of this church? In order to become a member of this church, you must be obedient to God’s plan of salvation (according to the instructions of the New Testament). Again, Acts 2:47 said that the “Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”

How do you do that? The steps are as follows: (1) Hear God’s word. Romans 10:17 says that “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” (2) Believe. In John 8:24, Jesus said, “Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.” However, “faith only” (a popular doctrine among many “Christian” churches today) is **not** enough according to James 2:14-26. (3) Repent of your sins. Acts 17:30 says that God “now commands all men everywhere to repent.” (4) Confess your faith in Christ. Romans 10:9-10 says, “that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” Acts 8:37 records an example of an individual who made the confession (prior to his baptism), “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” (5) Be baptized/immersed in water. Mark 16:16 says, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” Acts 2:38 commands both repentance and baptism as being necessary “for the remission of sins.” 1 Peter 3:21 says that baptism “now saves us.” Then, Romans 6:3-4

helps us to see that the only acceptable method to accomplish this baptism (according to God’s word) is immersion in water – as the passage identifies this baptism as a burial. Whenever individuals in the New Testament book of Acts took these steps, they were added to the church (Acts 2:47). If, therefore, you have not taken these steps, you are not saved; and, consequently, you are not a member of Christ’s one true church!

Choosing a local church that follows the Biblical pattern

Upon your obedience to the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Lord adds you to His one true church (Acts 2:47). However, the Lord has given you the responsibility to seek out a faithful local church to join yourself to (as seen in the example of Saul in Acts 9:26). Though we will not discuss the local church in detail at this point in our study, we will study it in some more detail in a later lesson.

For now, please realize that local churches are composed of New Testament Christians (i.e. those who have obeyed the commandments previously identified). Yet, these are ***not*** different denominations. Rather, they are locally organized churches of Christ (Romans 16:16), composed of Christians who have joined themselves together to work and worship together in local geographical areas. Still, these local churches are expected to follow the Biblical pattern in every aspect of their existence (i.e. their work, organizational structures, assemblies) – and they must be united for the faith of the gospel (see 1 Corinthians 1:10 and Philippians 1:27)!

Conclusion

It is my hope that you are beginning to see that everyone can’t be right (even among those who profess to be “Christians”) and just how much of a problem the religious division that is prevalent in the world today really is! ***Everyone can’t be right!*** Therefore, there are many ways that are wrong – and only one way of truth! Remember, there is only “one faith” (Ephesians 4:5).

Therefore, a choice is developing for you as we continue in this study: Will you choose the way of

error – or the way of truth? Will you choose to be part of a man-made church – or the one true church Jesus Christ established?

As we have seen in this lesson, this choice is one that will impact your soul’s salvation! You must be obedient to God and be part of Jesus’ church! I hope and pray that you will not allow anything or anyone to hinder you from obeying the way of truth! Remember, ***everyone can’t be right!*** Therefore, “let God be true but every man a liar” (Romans 3:4)!

List some things that must *not* be our guide in religion. Then, identify what must *be* our guide in religion.

Study Questions

1. What Does God Expect?

Discuss God’s purpose for unity among His followers from the following passages:

1. John 17:20-23 –
2. 1 Corinthians 1:10 –
3. 1 Corinthians 12:25 –
4. Philippians 1:27 –

Can unity be accomplished? If so, *how* can unity be accomplished?

2. If Everyone Is Right...

List some necessary conclusions *if* everyone is right.

Do you see the problem? Explain.

How do you become a member of this church?

3. Do All Roads Lead To Heaven?

Have you ever been told that "...all roads lead to Heaven"? What does this mean?

Why is it important to choose a local church that follows the Biblical pattern?

What does Jesus say about there only being two ways in life (Matthew 7:13-14)?

***Is everyone right? If not, will you choose the way of truth or error? Will you be part of a man-made church – or the one true church Jesus Christ established?**

What does Jesus say about false prophets (Matthew 7:15-20)?

What does Jesus say about many who say "Lord, Lord" (Matthew 7:21-23)?

What does Jesus say about being hearers and doers of the Word (Matthew 7:24-27)?

So, are all roads the same?

4. One Way!

List some observations from John 14:1-6.

What is the problem?

How many churches has Christ established?

Lesson 3:

Is It Possible To Be Religious And Still Be Wrong?

In our first study, we discovered the truth from Ephesians 4:1-6 that there is only one faith (system of religion) that is acceptable to God. We also discussed why there are so many different churches today and the importance of unity.

In our second study, we discovered that everyone can't possibly be right! There are many different beliefs, practices, and doctrines in the religious world and they simply cannot all be right in God's sight. Furthermore, we discussed the truth that there is only one Way – and briefly discussed that Way.

Still, some say that it does not matter how you worship or how you live – saying that all morally good, religious people will be saved. But, is this a concept that is to be found within the pages of God's word? I believe that we will (upon investigation) find that this idea is foreign to the word of God and is a lie!

As we continue our study of "One Faith," let's ask a third question: "Is it possible to be religious and still be wrong?" Briefly, let's define what it means to be religious. The term implies devotion to something/someone (either to God or a god). Religious people would include (but are not limited to): The atheist who is devoted to his god ("science"), the Buddhist who is devoted to his god (Buddha), the Muslim who is devoted to his god (Allah), the Jew who is devoted to God and the observance of Old

Testament laws and Jewish traditions, the "Christian" who believes in God and claims Christ as Lord – but who is not truly following the one Way described in the Bible (perhaps one who is involved in denominationalism), and the Christian who is following the Scriptures and is part of Christ's church.

Now, let's also take a moment to identify what is under discussion when we talk about the word "wrong." Let's phrase the question another way: "Is it possible to be religious and still not please God and be saved eternally?" Therefore, to be wrong in this sense is to remain lost in sin and be destined for eternal punishment in Hell fire!

This question, then, has great implications to our overall study of the "one faith" that is identified in Ephesians 4:5. If God is pleased with all or most of the ways in which folks express their religious beliefs, then it does not matter which church an individual is part of, what an individual believes, or what an individual practices in the name of religion. However, if the Scriptures demonstrate that it *is* possible for an individual to be religious (and even be a "Christian") and still fail to please God, then it does matter which church an individual belongs to, what an individual believes, and what an individual practices in the name of religion!

As always, please investigate this question with an honest and open heart that is seeking for the truth and make the proper applications of the answer! Let's begin this study investigating some Bible examples that should answer this question for us.

Examples

As we are diligent to search the Scriptures and accurately interpret them, do we find examples which demonstrate a God who does not care how individuals serve and worship Him? Or, do we find examples demonstrating a God who wants people to serve and worship Him only according to the instructions He has given? Let's consider some examples of people who were religious – and observe whether their religious beliefs and practices were acceptable to God.

Cain

Cain was religious. He was the son of Adam and Eve. All indications are that Cain believed in the Lord. In fact, during Cain's lifetime, we find the Lord directly speaking to Cain (see Genesis 4:6-15). In addition, we also read about Cain offering a sacrifice to God. His brother, Abel, also brought an offering to God. Yet, consider the Scripture records which demonstrate Cain to have been wrong.

Genesis 4:3-5 says, "And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the Lord. Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the Lord respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell." The passage then proceeds to identify how that Cain became angry and killed his brother out of envy. However, the Lord had told Cain, "If you do well, will you not be accepted?" (verse 7). Therefore, this passage (while we do not have all of the details) demonstrates that there was something about Cain's sacrifice which was not pleasing to God. God did not "respect" it (that is, He did not look upon Cain's offering with favor). A couple of New Testament passages will help to provide some additional information.

Hebrews 11:4 gives the following testimony of Abel's faith in God – and also comments concerning Cain's sacrifice: "By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks." In 1 John 3:12, as John gives instruction concerning the need for Christians to love their brethren, he says, "not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous." Therefore, these two inspired verses provide some commentary on the nature of Cain's sacrifice – and why it was not approved of God. The Hebrew writer implied that Cain's sacrifice was not "by faith" and was not as "excellent" as Abel's offering. Then, John said that Cain's offering was evil, while Abel's offering was righteous.

So, Cain was religious (believing in God and offering a sacrifice to God); yet, Cain was wrong (by failing to offer an acceptable sacrifice to God)!

Nadab and Abihu

Nadab and Abihu were religious. They were two sons of Aaron (the high priest to God). In fact, they were priests themselves (being from the tribe of Levi). Therefore, they would perform the duties as priests that were identified under the Old Testament Law. Yet, the Scriptures record how these two individuals failed to be pleasing to God – and experienced the consequences as a result.

Consider the events recorded in Exodus 24:9-11, as the Lord called Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel to come to the mountain in the wilderness of Sinai: "Then Moses went up, also Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and they saw the God of Israel. And there was under His feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone, and it was like the very heavens in its clarity. But on the nobles of the children of Israel He did not lay His hand. So they saw God, and they ate and drank."

Now, consider the record in Leviticus 10:1-2: "Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. So fire went out from the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord."

While we do not have all of the details regarding their sin, consider what we are told in the passages we've just read. Clearly, Nadab and Abihu had seen God – and should have been devoted to serving and worshiping Him according to His instructions. God had given very clear instructions concerning the sacrifices that were to be offered by the priests. However, rather than obeying those instructions, they violated them in some way. The passage states that they offered "profane fire" which God "had not commanded them." The *New International Version* of the Bible says that they "offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to his command." Perhaps this fire was from an unauthorized source. But, regardless of the specifics of this error, they had failed to be diligent to obey God – and they suffered the consequences!

So, Nadab and Abihu were religious (being priests of God and having seen God); yet, they were wrong (by failing to obey God's instructions and by offering a sacrifice that was unauthorized by God)!

The Pharisees

The Pharisees were religious. A “Pharisee” referred to an individual in a particular sect of the Jewish faith. In particular, Paul (who had been a Pharisee) said that to be a Pharisee was to be part of the “strictest sect” of the Jewish religion (Acts 26:5). Yet, the Scriptures reveal that these individuals (who prided themselves on their strict observance of Moses’ Law) often failed to please God.

In Matthew 23, Jesus Christ exposed some of the scribes and Pharisees as being hypocrites! He said that the “scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. Therefore, whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers” (Matthew 23:2-4). Often, within this chapter, Jesus would condemn the hypocrisy of these individuals – and even pointed to the condemnation that they would receive (Matthew 23:14)!

In another encounter with this religious group, Jesus again exposed their error. In Matthew 15, the scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus, “Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread” (vs. 2). Jesus responded, “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition” (vs. 3), saying that they had “made the commandment of God of no effect by [their] tradition” (vs. 6). Then, He continued by saying, “Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: ‘These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men’” (vs. 7-9).

So, the Pharisees were religious (in their practice of Judaism and their traditions); yet, they were wrong (by their hypocrisy and vain worship, holding to the traditions of men over the commandments of God – and ultimately rejecting Jesus Christ)!

The Jews

The Jews were religious. They were God’s own special people during the Old Testament times. They were the people through whom God fulfilled the

promises He had made to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-5. They were the people God had made His covenant with in the Old Testament. They were the people who had seen the mighty works of God on numerous occasions (i.e. the plagues in Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, the conquest of the Canaan land, etc.). They were the ones who were expected to devote themselves completely to the observance of God’s laws. Yet, the Scriptures reveal that these individuals (who were supposed to be devoted to following God’s ways) often lived in ways which were contrary to God!

They complained and rebelled against God shortly after their miraculous deliverance from Egypt. They forsook God in order to serve and worship the idols in other nations. They rejected God as King over them and wanted a human king (so that they could be like the other nations). They even lost the book containing God’s law. The history of the nation of Israel is full of examples of such failure to obey God. Then, whenever these things would take place and they would refuse to repent, God would bring consequences upon the nation of His people – just as He had promised!

Particularly, during the time of Jesus, the people God had been preparing to accept His only begotten Son (Jesus Christ, the Messiah) rejected Him! Notice, then, the sad statement Paul made about the Jews in Romans 10:1-4: “Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” Clearly, these people were religious. They had a “zeal for God.” However, their zeal was misdirected (it was “not according to knowledge”). They were “seeking to establish their own righteousness” through the works of the Law of Moses rather than seeking to submit themselves to the “righteousness of God” that was available only through faith in Christ!

So, the Jews were religious (in their belief in God and their adherence to portions of the Law of Moses); yet, they were wrong (because of their refusal to obey God and accept Jesus Christ)!

Saul

Saul was religious. Saul (who would later be known as Paul) was a Jew (being from the tribe of Benjamin, Philippians 3:5). He had been circumcised on the eighth day in accordance with the Law of Moses (Philippians 3:5). He was devoted to the observance of the Law of Moses. In Philippians 3:5-6, Paul says that he had been a Pharisee – and blameless according to the Law of Moses. Acts 22:3 reveals that he received training from a highly regarded Jewish teacher, named Gamaliel. However, this zealous Jewish man who had received training from one of the most prominent teachers in Jewish history was not pleasing to God!

Consider what Paul said about himself in Acts 26:9-11: “Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.”

This persecution that Saul brought against Jesus’ followers was done in “all good conscience” before God (Acts 23:1). Therefore, Saul was truly doing what he thought God wanted him to do – even in persecuting Christians. However, the Scriptures demonstrate that Saul needed to stop fighting against Christ – and live for Him! Whenever Jesus appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus, he was instructed to go into the city of Damascus so that he would be told what he must do in order to be saved (see Acts 9:1-19). Particularly, Saul was told that he must be baptized in order to have his sins washed away, calling on the name of the Lord (Acts 22:16).

So, Saul was religious (being zealous for God and doing all things in good conscience); yet, he was wrong (because he was not following the way of Christ)!

The Athenians

The Athenians were religious. The people of the ancient city of Athens were noted for their philosophy and interest in learning new things (i.e. the latest philosophies of others). In fact, when Paul arrived in this city in the first century, the Scriptures

say, “For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing” (Acts 17:21). Particularly, these individuals were identified as being “very religious” by Paul in Acts 17:22. However, their religion did not make them pleasing to God!

Their religious nature is further explained by the text in Acts 17. Verse 16 says, “Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols.” Sources say that the city was literally covered with idols. There were so many different idols in this city that, as Paul was passing through the city and saw the great number of idols, he even saw one altar that especially grabbed his attention. This altar had the inscription: “TO THE UNKNOWN GOD” (verse 23). So, just in case they missed a god, they had an altar erected to it!

Paul, to these religious people, then began to proclaim the truths about the one true and living God they truly did not know! As he does, he contrasts the true God with all of their idols, demonstrating that their gods are not real and living gods – and that they needed to repent of their sins because the one true God has appointed a Day upon which He will judge the world in righteousness by His Son, Jesus Christ (see Acts 17:30-31)!

So, the Athenians were religious (worshipping a great number of false gods); yet, they were wrong (because they were not worshipping and serving the one true God)!

Ananias and Sapphira

Ananias and Sapphira were religious. These were husband and wife – and members of Christ’s church. So, unlike the other examples we have been discussing up to this point, these individuals were Christians. This conclusion can be reached by considering the Biblical account of their lives in Acts 5:1-11. However, these Christians still conducted their lives in a way that displeased God!

Acts 4:32-37 describes the work of the early church regarding a contribution for needy Christians. The passage describes how that Christians were selling their possessions and bringing the proceeds from the sales to the apostles – who would distribute the funds properly in order to meet the needs of the other Christians. The story of Ananias and Sapphira finds

itself in this context. The passage describes how both of them were involved in the lie of selling a certain possession and keeping back part of the proceeds for themselves, while claiming they had given the entire amount from the sale to the apostles.

Later, the Biblical record reveals how Peter confronted both of these individuals separately – and how they lied to God by refusing to tell the truth about the actual selling price of the possession. Therefore, the text records how that both of them fell down and died – being killed by the Lord!

So, Ananias and Sapphira were religious (as they had become Christians and were involving themselves in giving to needy Christians); yet, they were wrong (because they lied to God)!

Simon

Simon was religious. When we are first introduced to Simon (in Acts 8:9), he is identified as being a sorcerer and astonishing the people of Samaria. In fact, they were convinced that he was someone great (as he had deceived them for a long time with his sorceries). Then, whenever Philip (a Christian evangelist) came to Samaria and performed true signs and miracles from God, they believed him as he preached the message of Jesus Christ and His kingdom to them. Some of the Samaritans were baptized (Acts 8:12). Acts 8:13 says, “Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done.” However, even though Simon had once accepted the gospel and became a Christian, he then chose to sin against God and become displeasing to God!

Beginning in Acts 8:14, the Scriptures record how that the apostles Peter and John came down to Samaria after they had heard that the Samaritans had obeyed God’s word. When they came to Samaria, they laid their hands on the Samaritans so that the Samaritans would receive the Holy Spirit. Then, Acts 8:18-24 records Simon’s sin – and Peter’s response.

“And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, saying, ‘Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’ But Peter said to him, ‘Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! You have neither part nor

portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.’ Then Simon answered and said, ‘Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me.’”

So, Simon was religious (as he had become a Christian); yet, he was wrong (in his desire to purchase the gift of God for money)!

Apollos

Apollos was religious. He is introduced to us when the Scriptures teach that he was a Jew, an eloquent man, a man who was “mighty in the Scriptures,” and a man who had come to the city of Ephesus (Acts 18:24).

The Scriptures also indicate that this man was a sincere man who was only interested in helping people to understand the way of the Lord. In Acts 18:26, the passage reveals that he “began to speak boldly in the synagogue.” However, though he had taught the way of the Lord “accurately,” he had erred in one specific area – baptism.

Acts 18:25 says, “This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John.” He had (evidently) never been accurately instructed concerning the baptism that Jesus had commanded – and been informed that John’s baptism was no longer in effect. Fortunately, two Christians (Aquila and Priscilla) heard Apollos’ teaching and took him aside in order to explain the way of the Lord “more accurately” to him (Acts 18:26).

So, Apollos was religious (having been proclaiming the way of the Lord boldly – according to his knowledge); yet, he was wrong (because he did not have an accurate understanding about baptism – and he needed to learn, follow, and teach this way of truth)!

Man in 1 Corinthians 5

The man in 1 Corinthians 5 was religious. Though we do not know this man’s name, it is implied that he was a Christian and was a member of the

church in Corinth. However, this Christian man was not living his life in a way that was pleasing to God!

Specifically, 1 Corinthians 5:1-2 identifies the sin that this man was involved in: “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles — that a man has his father's wife! And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you.”

Because of this man's fornication – and the Corinthians' improper response to his sin, Paul rebukes the congregation and gives them specific instructions concerning how they were to deal with him. Specifically, Paul instructs them to put him away from them – and not even to eat with him!

So, the man in 1 Corinthians 5 was religious (having become a Christian – and evidently remaining a member of the Corinthian church, even though he was living in sin); yet, he was wrong (because he was living in fornication)!

5 churches in Asia Minor

The churches of Christ in Asia Minor were religious. They were composed of individuals who had been obedient to the saving message of the gospel and become Christians. It may even be reasonable to believe that these congregations were all strong and faithful to the Lord at one point (certainly, this was true about the Ephesian congregation – as you can observe from the book of Ephesians). However, by the time the book of Revelation was written (perhaps right before the end of the first century), five of the seven congregations that were addressed were not pleasing to God (though some of the individual members were).

Take some time to read Revelation chapters 2 and 3 to consider everything that Jesus says about these congregations, including what He says about the two congregations who were faithful to Him. For now, take a moment to consider an overview of what Jesus says about those congregations which were not pleasing to Him.

The church in Ephesus had left their first love. Even though they were doing some good things, they were lacking the love (fervor) that was essential to pleasing God. The church in Pergamos had compromised the truth of the gospel. Even though

they had been steadfast for the Lord in some difficult times, there were those permitted to remain in the congregation who held to the doctrine of Balaam and the doctrine of the Nicolaitans (which the Lord hated). The church in Thyatira had become corrupted by sin. Even though they had grown in their service to the Lord in many ways, they had allowed a woman to remain in the congregation who had taught and seduced Christians to commit fornication and eat things sacrificed to idols. The church in Sardis was dead. Even though they had a name that they were alive, God knew their works and saw that they were spiritually dead. The church in Laodicea was lukewarm in their faith. Even though they thought they had no need of anything, they were a wreck spiritually because they were simply not zealous to follow the Lord.

So, the churches of Asia Minor were religious (having become Christians); yet, five of them were wrong (because they were not living according to God's standard)!

Summary

Numerous other examples could be provided like the ones we have just briefly studied. However, these examples should make it clear that it is possible to be religious and still be wrong in God's sight. And, as we have seen, this does *not* just apply to those who do not classify themselves as Christians (i.e. Jews, idolaters, etc.); but, we have seen that this can be just as true about those who would classify themselves as Christians!

Now, before moving on to consider our final points very quickly, I want to review something we observed from Romans 10:1-4. Remember that the Jews had a zeal for God; but, not according to knowledge. Then, in Revelation 2:1-7, we saw that the Ephesian Christians had an accurate knowledge of God's will and were “going through the motions”; but, they had lost their fervor (left their first love). Therefore, it is fair to conclude that there are two aspects that are essential to being true followers of Jesus Christ (being religious and RIGHT): (1) Right doctrine and (2) Right deeds.

Doctrine Matters

Does it matter what we *believe* in religion? Does God care what doctrines we accept as being true – as long as we accept Jesus as His Son? What place does doctrine have in true religion that is acceptable to God?

Man says...

Some say, “It doesn’t matter what doctrines you believe – just as long as you believe in Jesus” (i.e. His Deity, virgin birth, sacrifice, resurrection, etc.). Some say, “We cannot all understand the Bible alike so as to believe the same doctrines.” Some say that “The Bible is just a ‘love letter’ from God and a book of suggestions – not a law which must be strictly adhered to.”

Therefore, doctrines like the following are seen as being unnecessary/inconsequential to salvation: Baptism, the organizational structure of a local church, the work of a local church, instrumental music in worship, the frequency of the Lord’s Supper, and many, many others.

God says...

God says that His doctrine (His teaching) is an essential component to the “one faith” (Ephesians 4:5). Remember (as we briefly discussed in lesson 1) that the faith is revealed in the gospel (according to Philippians 1:27). Then, Jude also indicates that doctrine is an essential component to this one faith when he instructed Christians to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3).

In order to be pleasing to God we must abide in the doctrine of Christ. 2 John 1:9-11 says, “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.” Now, please understand that the “doctrine of Christ” is not just God’s teaching about Jesus Christ; but, all of God’s teaching!

Therefore, to change any part of God’s message is unacceptable to God (see Galatians 1:6-9

and Revelation 22:18-19). In addition, while the words of Jesus Christ will judge us on the Last Day (according to John 12:48), Paul also informs us that his inspired writings will also judge us (Romans 2:16) – because the things he wrote are the commandments of God (1 Corinthians 14:37). Therefore, in order to be acceptable to God, we must hold to the right doctrines. We must hold to the pattern of sound/uncorrupt words (2 Timothy 1:13) found within the pages of God’s word!

So, it *does* matter what we believe in religion. We must believe Bible doctrine! For, in order to *do* the right things, we must *believe* the right things!

Deeds Matter

As long as you believe the right things in religion, does God care how you actually conduct your life? Isn’t faith in God and a clear conscience the only things that God actually requires of you in order to be acceptable in His sight?

Man says...

Some say, “If you believe in Jesus, it doesn’t matter how you live your life – God’s grace will save you.” Some say, “In Christ, you are at liberty to choose how you want to live.” Some say, “Your sinful conduct won’t condemn you to Hell if you believe in God and have accepted Christ as your Lord and Savior.” Some say, “God only cares if you live your life according to the directions of your own conscience.”

Therefore, the Bible’s instructions are ignored in many areas: In baptism, in the choice of a church to assemble with, in the consumption of alcohol, in marriage, divorce, and remarriage, in entertainment choices, in choices involving sexual sin, and in many other areas.

God says...

Again, remember that the “one faith” does not *just* include religious belief and teaching which is acceptable to God; but, it also includes actions which are acceptable and pleasing to God. You may recall (as we briefly discussed in lesson 1) that the one faith was something which must be obeyed (as demonstrated in Acts 6:7).

In order to be saved, we must not *just* believe in the right things; but, we must also obey Him. Hebrews 5:9 says that Jesus Christ became the Author of eternal salvation to “all who obey Him.” In Matthew 7:21-23, Jesus makes this point very clear: “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”

In order to be pleasing to Him, we must be doers of His word; not just hearers only. In fact, if we are only hearers of God’s word, we are said to deceive ourselves (James 1:22-25). In addition, James says that “faith without works is dead” (James 2:26) – and that we are not justified before God by faith only, but by works of obedience (James 2:24). Furthermore, James writes that if we keep the law in all points; but, fail in one area, we are guilty of all (James 2:10). Similarly, Paul wrote that if we fail to obey the gospel of Jesus Christ, we will experience the wrath/vengeance of God (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9).

So, it *does* matter how we live our lives! Our lives, as Christians, must be *entirely* devoted to serving the Lord!

Conclusion

There is much that could be added to our discussion – including many examples and passages to consider. The Bible is full of illustrations and instructions that could be added to further demonstrate the things we have been considering throughout this lesson.

So, is it possible to be religious and still be wrong? The answer is, “Yes!” In order to be right in the sight of God we must believe Bible doctrine and be obedient to Him! Doing neither will not result in pleasing God – nor will only partially doing these things be pleasing to God! God requires both! Remember, from Matthew 7:13-14, the way to eternal life is narrow – and it will take a determined effort in order to be saved eternally in Heaven!

Since it is possible to be religious and still be wrong in God’s sight, we should each spend a great deal of time in personal evaluation – evaluating our lives compared to the standard of God’s word to see if we are believing and practicing the things that are pleasing to God (2 Corinthians 13:5)! Your soul is too valuable to take anything for granted (see Matthew 16:26)! And, since it is possible to be religious and still be wrong, we will want to consider the question, “How can I know who is right?” – so that we will be following the way that is pleasing to God. This will be the focus in the next lesson of this study.

Study Questions

What does it mean to be religious?

What does it mean to be wrong?

1. Examples

From the following examples, discuss how it is possible to be religious and still be wrong.

A. Cain –

B. Nadab and Abihu –

C. The Pharisees –

D. The Jews –

E. Saul –

F. The Athenians –

***Is it possible to be religious and still be wrong?**

G. Ananias and Sapphira –

H. Simon –

I. Apollos –

J. Man in 1 Corinthians 5 –

K. 5 churches in Asia Minor –

List some conclusions from these examples.

2. Doctrine Matters

What do some men say about the importance of doctrine?

What does God say about the importance of doctrine?

3. Deeds Matter

What do men say about the deeds that are done?

What does God say about the importance of deeds?

Lesson 4: How Can You Know Who Is Right?

In our first study, we discovered the truth from Ephesians 4:1-6 that there is only one faith (system of religion) that is acceptable to God. We also discussed why there are so many different churches today and considered a brief overview of “church history.”

In our second study, we discovered that God expects and desires unity from those who profess to follow the Lord – and observed the simple fact that everyone can’t be right! There are many different beliefs, teachings, and practices in the religious world (even in so-called “Christianity”) – and they simply **cannot** all be right. God’s word is right and perfect and contains no conflicting doctrines. Instead, we discussed the truth that there is only one Way – and briefly discussed that Way.

In our third study, we evaluated several Bible examples to see that it is possible to be religious and still be wrong in God’s sight. Not only did we see that it is possible to be religious and still be wrong; but, we saw that it is possible to be a professing “Christian” and still be wrong in God’s sight. Then, we discovered the significance of believing the right things (doctrine) and doing the right things (deeds), emphasizing that God expects both from His people.

At this point in our study, I hope that you recognize that there is only “one faith” (according to Ephesians 4:5). This “one faith” refers to one system of religious

belief, teaching, and practice that is acceptable to God. Up to this point in our study, our emphasis has been to observe that God does not approve of the thousands of different so-called “Christian” churches that are in existence today. We have seen that everyone cannot be approved of God. Now, in this lesson and in the final lesson of this study, I want us to be thinking about what we need to do with that information.

You may now understand that everyone cannot be right; but, may be having difficulty distinguishing between who is right and who is wrong. I hope that these final two lessons will help you get started in finding and following the Way of truth! Remember, Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6).

As we continue our study of “One Faith,” it is important for you to consider the question, “How can I know who is right?” This is important so that you are not led astray by those who teach false doctrine. This is also important so that you can join yourself to those who are doing what the Bible says – practicing New Testament Christianity (as we will discuss in lesson 5).

The Importance Of Knowing Who Is Right

So, why is it important to know who is right? That is, why is it important to know whether an individual or church stands for the truth of God’s word or for the ways of error?

As we consider these things, we need to develop an understanding of the great danger involved in religious error. If we view religious error as being “no big deal,” then we will be unconcerned with establishing who is right and who is wrong. So, let’s take a few moments to consider what the Bible says about the danger involved in religious error.

Religious error promotes a different gospel

Only the gospel of Jesus Christ is the “power of God to salvation for everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). Yet, religious error perverts the gospel of Jesus Christ – either by adding to it or taking away from it. Think about it. If someone taught exactly what

the Bible teaches, he/she would be teaching truth. However, the moment that an individual changes God's message, the result is error (because he/she is now either saying something the Bible does not say – or refusing to say something the Bible does say)! Both actions are condemned by God in Revelation 22:18-19: “For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.”

God simply does not want His saving message to be changed in any way! There is nothing that mankind can add to it that would make it more pleasing to God – and there is nothing God has said that He did not mean! Yet, there are many individuals and churches who will pervert the gospel of Christ. Galatians 1:6-9 warns about such: “I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.”

There are many false gospels being promoted among “Christian” churches today. The gospel of health and wealth, the social gospel, the faith only gospel, the once saved always saved gospel, and the postmodern gospel are just a few. Yet, religious error (whichever gospel it promotes) does not promote the pure and whole gospel of Jesus Christ – the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 1:3)!

Clearly, the Scriptures teach that there is no other acceptable gospel than the one true gospel God has revealed. And, there are clear consequences for following a false gospel. Therefore, you need to identify the way of truth because religious error promotes a different gospel besides the true gospel of Christ!

Religious error leads others into error

Religious error leads others into error as a direct result of the promotion of a false gospel. Notice

what Peter wrote in 2 Peter 2:1-3: “But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.”

Notice carefully that the false doctrines of these teachers were “destructive.” And, notice that their doctrines would not be publicly identified as such. Instead, these individuals would proclaim doctrines that they would claim to be true. However, they would actually be bringing in these “destructive heresies” secretly. Therefore, they would deceive many unsuspecting people to follow after their destructive ways!

Many times, the error that is promoted by these false teachers and false gospels is more appealing than the one true gospel of Jesus Christ. Often, folks are not willing to endure the teaching of the sound gospel and will desire for teachers to tell them what they want to hear (2 Timothy 4:3-4). However, there are also many times when honest-hearted individuals are deceived by these false teachers to believe that a false gospel is actually the way of truth. Therefore, you need to identify the way of truth because religious error is actively deceiving many people and leading them into error!

Religious error does not lead to the Father

There is only one Way to the Father – Jesus Christ. Again, in John 14:6, Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

Clearly, Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father. But, what does it mean to follow Jesus Christ? In lesson 3 of this study, we discovered that both the things we do (our deeds) and the things we believe (doctrine) matter to God. We must both believe and do the right things in order to be acceptable to God. For instance, Jesus is said to be the author of eternal salvation to all who “obey Him” (Hebrews 5:9). Then, 2 John 1:9 informs us that if we do not “abide in the doctrine of Christ,” we do not have God!

I invite you to take a moment to consider the impact, then, that religious error will have on your soul's salvation (as well as the salvation of others) – and to understand that religious error does not lead people to the Father through Jesus Christ! Instead, religious error often perverts the gospel's plan of salvation. To be saved, the Bible teaches that we must: Hear God's word (Romans 10:17), believe (John 8:24), repent of our sins (Acts 17:30), confess Christ (Romans 10:9-10), be immersed in water (Acts 2:38), and remain faithful (Revelation 2:10). However, most churches today will teach "faith only," a "Sinner's Prayer," salvation before baptism, infant baptism, baptism by sprinkling or pouring, and/or once saved, always saved doctrine.

While this is just a sample, please realize that religious error fails to lead individuals to the Father through Jesus Christ. Instead, of setting folks free from their sins (John 8:32), religious error keeps folks enslaved to their sins. Therefore, there will be many people who *thought* they were on a path that leads to the Father and eternal life in Heaven; only to find out that they were walking on a path that leads away from the Father and to eternal destruction in Hell (see Matthew 7:21-23). Therefore, you need to identify the way of truth because religious error fails to lead people to the Father through Jesus Christ!

Religious error creates a false sense of security

Those who are involved in religious error are being promised eternal life in Heaven (or some other promise). However, these are only false promises! As we have already seen, religious error does not (generally) teach the gospel's plan of salvation accurately – and it does not lead to the Father!

Still, this does not prevent false teachers from making false and empty promises about salvation and other matters. Remember what 2 Peter 2:1-3 warned about false teachers. Now, consider 2 Peter 2:17-19, as this passage demonstrates their work of making false promises: "These are wells without water, clouds carried by a tempest, for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever. For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness, the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are

slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage."

False teachers cannot make true promises for salvation with false gospels! They can only offer false and empty promises for salvation. Unfortunately, many people are convinced by their "great swelling words of emptiness" and are brought into bondage through the false message being preached! Certainly, the thousands of religious organizations we have discussed which are not pleasing to God – are not all claiming to be false. Furthermore, they are all promising *something* to their members. Usually, this promise is concerning everlasting life in Heaven.

Therefore, those who are listening to these false teachers making false promises believe they are living in a way that pleases God and that will result in their eternal salvations. However, consider again what Jesus said in Matthew 7:21-23: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'"

Certainly, there will be many who will stand before Christ on the Day of Judgment from many "Christian" churches and hear these words – because they had been deceived by false teachers! Therefore, you need to identify the way of truth because religious error creates a false sense of security!

Religious error causes religious division

Religious error does not lead to unity. Remember the passages that we studied in lesson 2 (John 17:20-23, 1 Corinthians 1:10, 1 Corinthians 12:25, and Philippians 1:27). All of these passages demonstrate that God expects unity! In addition, you should recall how Ephesians 4:1-6 teaches that God has created a system in which we can all be united!

However, the only way for religious unity to truly exist is when we all are united in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Again, Philippians 1:27 instructs that we "stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel." Our desire must be to be united in the one faith which is revealed in the message of God's gospel!

In lesson 1, we observed how most of the religious division that exists in the world has been caused by religious error (either in teaching or in practice). Certainly, the world does not need any more religious division. Therefore, you need to identify the way of truth because religious error causes religious division.

Religious error causes the way of truth to be blasphemed

It is said that, “If you repeat a lie often enough, people will believe it to be truth.” This can easily be demonstrated in the religious world today. As we have already seen, there are thousands of religious organizations which are all claiming to follow Jesus Christ – but, claiming to follow Him in their own ways. Each one of these organizations have convinced others to follow their own interpretation of God’s word – and accept such as being truth.

Often times, though, it does not stop there. Not only will these organizations deceive others into believing a false system of religion. But, these organizations will also speak despairingly of those who are following the way of truth – with their true Bible doctrines and practices! Yet, this is just as Peter said would happen in 2 Peter 2:1-3. We have already noticed this passage and seen that Peter warns about false teachers who would secretly bring in destructive doctrines. Now, I want you to focus on verse 2: “And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed.”

Because of those who are promoting false gospels, those who are standing for the true gospel message often have evil things said about them – to try and ruin their reputations. Many people today have not only believed lies from false gospels about God’s requirements for salvation (i.e. faith only, a “Sinner’s prayer,” infant baptism, baptism as sprinkling/pouring, etc.); but, they have also believed lies about the true gospel’s plan of salvation (i.e. lies about baptism, lies about the church of Christ, lies about works, etc.). Therefore, you need to identify the way of truth because religious error causes the way of truth to be blasphemed.

Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness!

As you consider all of these spiritually harmful and deadly effects of religious error, it should be evident why you must avoid it! Therefore, you will need to spend time discovering who is teaching the truth.

But, before we consider how you can know who teaches the truth, understand that you must determine to have no participation in any of the works of evil that are associated with religious error! Consider the following passages.

Ephesians 5:11 says, “And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them.”

2 John 1:9-11 says, “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.”

Romans 16:17-18 says, “Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.”

Titus 3:9-11 says, “But avoid foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and useless. Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned.”

So, what do all of these passages mean for your association with any church that teaches a false gospel or practices anything that is contrary to God’s word? These passages simply instruct you to get away from it! You must have “no fellowship” (zero joint-participation) with any of these works of darkness (evil) that are contrary to God’s word! Instead of going along with those who are teaching false gospels, you must be diligent to note and avoid them for teaching false gospels, and reject them as being divisive!

Test Everything!

I hope that you have a better appreciation for why you must know who is right – and about the dangers of religious error. Still, we have not discovered *how* you can know who is right and who is wrong. Does the Bible even help you know?

I believe that 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22 gives us a few simple steps that (if followed) will help us to determine who is right and who is wrong – so that we can avoid religious error. The passage states: “Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.”

Test

The instructions in 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22 begin and center around the idea of putting things to the test. To “test” is to evaluate, scrutinize, and examine something so as to discover its true identity.

But, in order to evaluate, scrutinize, and examine things, we must have a standard. We simply are incapable of coming to any sort of conclusions about the thing being tested unless there is some sort of a standard to compare it by. For instance, if we wanted to examine whether a \$20 bill we were given was legitimate or if it was counterfeit, we would need to use the right standard in order to make this determination. If we used another counterfeit bill to examine it by, we would not be able to come to the proper conclusion. However, if we used a genuine bill and observed the guidelines for official currency, we would be able to come to the proper conclusion about whether it was genuine or counterfeit (upon diligent evaluation of both the standard and the \$20 bill).

In the same way, when we are looking to follow the way of truth in order to please God and be saved, we must be using the right standard! There are many false standards that are used to justify religious beliefs and practices today. Family, friends, tradition, doctrines of men, opinions of men, our consciences, the Law of Moses – these are just a few of the false standards that people appeal to in order to evaluate religious beliefs and practices today. However, these standards will not enable you to come to an understanding of the truth!

Instead, the Bible is the *only* perfect guide in religion today. Remember that the faith is revealed in the pages of the gospel (Philippians 1:27). Therefore, you need to establish Bible authority (specifically, New Testament authority) for everything that is done! Now, please briefly consider that you can only establish Bible authority for something when there is (1) a direct command, (2) an approved Bible example, or (3) a forced conclusion. Without one of these three things, you do not have Bible authority for a practice.

For instance, if you wanted to find out who is right on the subject of baptism, you would need to read everything God says about the subject. Then, you would be able to know that baptism is commanded for salvation (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16), that baptism for the remission of sins was practiced throughout the book of Acts (Acts chapters 2, 8, 9, 10, 16, 18, 19), and be forced to the conclusion that baptism was accomplished only by immersion in water (Acts 8:38-39; Romans 6:3-4). So, you have Bible authority established in this area – and know that only those religious organizations which practice baptism for the remission of sins by immersion in water are pleasing to God.

Test everything

Now that you understand what standard to use in evaluating things, let’s consider what must be put to the test. Again, 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22 says to test “all things.” Nothing is to be excluded from this careful examination. Therefore, you must test what you believe – no matter who taught you (even if it was your parents, your preacher, a close friend, a spouse, etc.). You must test what you do – no matter how long you have done it, no matter who taught you to do it in that particular way, no matter how enjoyable it may be, no matter how much “good” it may seem to do, etc. Test everything – no exceptions! Remember, Galatians 1:6-9 condemns all false gospels – no matter who teaches them (even if they are taught by an apostle or an angel)!

Colossians 3:17 clearly says, “And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.” Everything that you do and believe must be given over to God’s full control! Everything must be “in the name of the Lord Jesus” (or, by His authority).

Then, after you have been diligent to study out the Scriptures and apply its teachings to everything you

do and believe, what then? What must you do whenever you find something that you believe or do that is not according to the Scriptures? What if you discover things that are according to the Scriptures? Let's continue to consider the teaching of 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22.

Hold fast what is good

When you have evaluated everything and discovered things that are in harmony with the true teachings of Scripture, you must hold fast (cling) to those things. Do not let them go for anybody or anything. 2 Timothy 1:13 says, "Hold fast the pattern of sound words..." Proverbs 23:23 tells us to buy the truth and not to sell it!

Now, again, please make sure that you have properly applied God's word in order to come to your conclusion. Then, when you have diligently and accurately applied God's teachings, do not let them go! Make them part of who you are, what you believe, and what you practice!

Abstain from every form of evil

When you have evaluated everything and discovered things that are not in harmony with the true teachings of Scripture, you must abstain (get away) from those things. You must view those things as being without Bible authority – and things that will endanger your soul (as well as the souls of others).

Do not be swayed into accepting any of those things which have no Bible authority by your family, by a trusted preacher, by a close friend, by your own reasoning, by tradition, or by any other false standard. Determine to do all things by the authority of Jesus Christ – and abstain (keep away from) everything that does not have His approval! Refuse to allow them to be part of who you are, what you believe, and what you practice!

Following What Is Right

Through this point in our study, we have emphasized the importance of knowing who is right – and discovering how you can know who is right by testing all things. After you have tested all things, you must follow the way of right by holding fast to what is

good and abstaining from every form of evil. Again, the standard that must be used to make this determination is God's word. After all, it is God's word that will set you free from your sins (John 8:32), save your soul (Romans 1:16), and Judge you on the Last Day (John 12:48). No other standard does these things!

Now, we need to apply our conclusions in such a way that will help us join others who are following the way that is right.

Your salvation depends on doing what is right

As we saw in the previous point, we must hold fast what is good, following the pattern of sound words contained within the Holy Scriptures (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22; 2 Timothy 1:13)! So, any attempt to join others in following the way of truth begins with a commitment to follow the way that is right ourselves – and refuse to follow any way that is contrary to God's word (no matter who teaches or follow them)!

It may be that you have studied your Bible (or are now doing so) and do not find that anyone is practicing what is right in your community. If this is the case, you may need to start a local church that is dedicated to following the New Testament pattern in your area and you will need to teach others about what you have discovered. However, perhaps there is a congregation of New Testament Christians that assembles in your community (or a nearby community). If so, I strongly encourage you to join them in their work. Still, making these types of changes will not always be easy. You will almost certainly encounter some obstacles. Perhaps these obstacles will come from within your own family. Maybe they'll be from your friends. Maybe they'll be from others. Regardless, let me encourage you to always follow what is right – regardless of the consequences!

Your soul will spend eternity either in Heaven or in Hell after your earthly life is over. If you fail to do what is right, you will spend eternity in Hell. But, if you do what is right, you will spend eternity in Heaven. So, the question is: What are you willing to give in exchange for your soul. This is the question Jesus asked in Matthew 16:26: "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Are you willing to exchange your soul to save your own physical life? Are you willing to exchange your soul to please your family? Are you willing to exchange your soul to please your friends? Are you willing to exchange your soul for an easier way? Are you willing to exchange your soul for the riches and pleasures of this life? The truth of the matter is that nothing and no one is worth losing your own soul for!

Make a commitment to follow Christ

First and foremost, you must make a commitment to follow Jesus Christ in your life. Take a moment to consider what this type of commitment to Jesus must look like in order for you to be acceptable to Him.

Luke 9:23-26: “Then He said to them all, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His own glory, and in His Father’s, and of the holy angels.’”

Luke 14:25-27, 33: “Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them, ‘If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple... So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.’”

Both of these passages (along with many others) simply emphasize the point that Jesus Christ must come first in our lives – before everyone and everything else! Certainly, this kind of commitment to Jesus Christ will help you come to the right conclusions about who is right and who is wrong. For, if you have this kind of devotion to Jesus Christ, you will ***not*** be more devoted to anyone or anything else than you are to Him – and you will be willing to give up anything/everything in order to do what God wants you to do!

Give God full control over your religious practices

If you make this kind of complete commitment to Christ, it will include giving Him full control over all of your religious beliefs and practices. Again, Colossians 3:17 says, “And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.”

Whatever He commands you to do, you will do. Whatever He commands you to abstain from, you will abstain from. This is the control you must give to Jesus Christ! You no longer rely on your own traditions and opinions. Instead, you do everything according to book, chapter, and verse – according to the authority of Jesus Christ!

After all, Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life – and the only way to eternal life in Heaven with the Father (John 14:6). The only way to please Him is to submit yourself fully to the doctrine and instructions contained within the Bible. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 reveals that it is the Bible which will fully equip us to accomplish every good work and be pleasing to God: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

Joining yourself to other Christians

Now, all of the things we have discussed (namely, your commitment to follow Christ) will help you to know who is right. The question of, “Who is right?” is settled by understanding what is right!

If you establish that God and His word are right, then the question of “who is right?” answers itself. The only way for someone to be right is to be living according to God’s instructions. Therefore, if individuals (or churches) believe, teach, and practice only the faith of the gospel, they are right! However, if individuals (or churches) believe, teach, and practice something other than the faith of the gospel, they are wrong!

So, as you seek to join yourself to other Christians to help one another serve the Lord more effectively and be an encouragement to one another (i.e. Acts 9:26), simply evaluate what they believe, teach, and practice by what God’s word teaches!

Conclusion

You can find and follow the way of truth! God has not hidden His message from you so that you (and others) cannot know and follow it. Instead, He has revealed His message within the pages of the gospel so that you (and others) can know and obey it. Though the saving message of the gospel had once been a “mystery,” it has now been revealed – and we can understand that saving message when we read the words which were written by the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 3:3-5).

However, though we can know the true message of the gospel and follow it, it is our responsibility to study that saving message and properly apply it to our lives. Ephesians 5:17 says, “Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.” Understanding the will of the Lord is a personal choice that we must each make. Acts 17:11 records an excellent example of individuals who made diligent search of the Scriptures on a daily basis in order that they would know whether they were being taught the truth or not! Therefore, they were testing all things by God’s word – so that they could follow the way of truth!

If you truly love the Lord and give Him full control over your life, you can find and follow the way of truth! And, you are not alone! There are others who are attempting to follow Jesus Christ in a way that is free from all denominationalism and religious error! If you will be diligent in your search for the truth and test everything, you can know who is practicing the truth and who is practicing error!

In the final lesson of the study, we will discuss what New Testament Christianity looks like in greater detail. I hope that lesson will give you some specific things to look for as you seek to give Christ full control over all your religious practices and adhere to the one faith that is revealed in the pages of the gospel!

Study Questions

Why is it important to consider the question, “How can you know who is right?”

1. It Is Important To Know Who Is Right

Identify the danger involved in religious error:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

Is the problem of religious error insignificant? Explain.

Why do you need to identify the ways of error and the way of truth?

2. Test Everything!

Explain the teaching in 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22 and apply it to our discussion today.

Identify some false guides in religion.

3. Following What Is Right

What will you need to do after establishing who is right?

How does your soul's salvation depend upon your doing what is right? In addition, what are you willing to give in exchange for your soul?

What kind of commitment does Jesus require?

Do you desire to do what is right? Are you willing to do what is right?

Lesson 5: Are You Interested In New Testament Christianity?

In our first study, we discovered the truth from Ephesians 4:1-6 that there is only one faith (system of religion) that is acceptable to God. We also discussed why there are so many different churches today and considered a brief overview of “church history.”

In our second study, we discovered that God expects and desires unity from those who profess to follow the Lord – and observed the simple fact that everyone can’t be right! There are many different beliefs, teachings, and practices in the religious world (even in so-called “Christianity”) – and they simply **cannot** all be right. God’s word is right and perfect and contains no conflicting doctrines. Instead, we discussed the truth that there is only one Way – and briefly discussed that Way.

In our third study, we evaluated several Bible examples to see that it is possible to be religious and still be wrong in God’s sight. Not only did we see that it is possible to be religious and still be wrong; but, we saw that it is possible to be a Christian and still be wrong in God’s sight. Then, we discovered the significance of believing the right things (doctrine) and doing the right things (deeds), emphasizing that God expects both from His people.

In our fourth study, we considered the importance of knowing who is right and who is wrong so that you are not led into error by those who are teaching and practicing forms of religion and “Christianity” that are not pleasing to God. In addition, we evaluated how you can establish who is right and who is wrong – and attempted to encourage you to follow the way that is right!

It is my hope that you have a burning desire within your heart to do what is right – regardless of the persecutions or afflictions it may bring! Perhaps you have looked around the religious world for the truth, but, you have found that the denominations are simply not practicing New Testament Christianity. But, what if I told you that you can be a New Testament Christian today? What if I told you that you could be part of a New Testament church today? Would you be interested?

You might wonder if that is even possible today – as we are nearly 2,000 years removed from the writing of the New Testament. However, consider a very simple illustration. In Luke 8:5-18, Jesus taught a parable about a sower who went out to sow his seed. This seed, Jesus said, was the word of God (Luke 8:11). Our hearts are represented in the parable by the different types of soils. Now, it is a fundamental law of agriculture that seed produces after its own kind (Genesis 1:11-12). Therefore, you expect to plant corn and reap corn. You would not expect to plant corn and reap tomatoes.

Now, suppose that we were to preserve corn seed planted in Tyler County, West Virginia, this spring – and plant it in Africa 2,000 years from now. If the climate and soil conditions were right, what would it produce? Quite simply, it would produce the same kind of corn which was harvested in West Virginia in the fall! In the same way, whenever the original seed of God’s word is planted in honest and good hearts in any community and in any age, it will produce Christians identical with those we read about in the New Testament!

This is what we are interested in investigating during this final lesson of our study! The final lesson in our study of “One Faith” will focus on New Testament Christianity – asking the question, “Are you interested in New Testament Christianity?” New Testament Christians are simply those who are only following Christ according to the instructions found in the New

Testament Scriptures. Please consider this lesson about New Testament Christianity and evaluate whether you desire to be a Christian according to the teachings of the New Testament! If you do, you will want to search for a church that is patterned after the New Testament also! Therefore, let's ask three questions during the course of this study. (1) Is *this* New Testament Christianity? (2) Why practice New Testament Christianity? (3) What is New Testament Christianity?

Is *This* New Testament Christianity?

Take a moment to reflect back on the things we have established in this series of lessons. Think about how the tens of thousands of churches which are in existence today have come about because of a departure from the "one faith" God has revealed in the pages of the New Testament (Ephesians 4:5). Think about how these churches all believe, teach, and practice different forms of "Christianity." From these observations, ask yourself, "Is *this* New Testament Christianity?"

Many profess Christianity, but do not follow the teachings of the New Testament!

Ask yourself a very simple question. "Can an individual truly be a New Testament Christian if he/she does not follow only the teachings of the New Testament?" Then, ask yourself a simple follow-up question to this. "Can everyone who professes to be New Testament Christians be New Testament Christians – if they are all believing, teaching, and practicing their 'Christianity' differently?"

Sadly, there are many individuals who are professing to be "Christians," but, they want to have their "Christianity" and "church" their own ways! However, true New Testament Christianity is not a "smorgasbord" religion where you can pick and chose what you want to believe, teach, and practice – and leave out what you do not want!

Have "Christianity" your own way

Many individuals who profess to be true "Christians" believe in God and Christ; but, then practice a form of "Christianity" that is contrary to the teachings of the New Testament. Ask yourself, "Is *this* New Testament Christianity?"

Is it New Testament Christianity to be involved in the sinful things of the world? Is it New Testament Christianity to participate in sexual relations outside of marriage? Is it New Testament Christianity to divorce and remarry for causes other than fornication? Is it New Testament Christianity to use God's name in vain, to slander others, to use profanity, or to gossip? Is it New Testament Christianity to approve of or be involved in homosexuality? Is it New Testament Christianity to consume alcoholic beverages? Is it New Testament Christianity to dress immodestly? Is it New Testament Christianity to willfully neglect the assemblies of the local church? Is it New Testament Christianity to fail to fulfill your God-given role in the home (as a husband, wife, or child)? Is it New Testament Christianity to refuse to teach others the gospel of Jesus Christ?

These are the sorts of things that many who profess "Christianity" are involved in. Is *this* New Testament Christianity? Certainly we could study each one of these issues and discover that these practices are contrary to the teachings of the New Testament. Therefore, to practice this form of "Christianity" simply cannot be New Testament Christianity! New Testament Christianity simply is not a system in which we select which items we want to obey and which ones we do not! Instead, we must be obedient to the totality of God's instructions for what He wants His people to be!

Have "church" your own way

Many individuals who profess to be "Christians" (who believe in God and Christ) will associate themselves with churches that are not dedicated to following only the New Testament and will be involved in many unauthorized practices. Again, ask yourself, "Is *this* New Testament Christianity?"

Is it New Testament Christianity when churches are providing entertainment for its members? Is it New Testament Christianity when churches are focused on being politically correct? Is it New

Testament Christianity when churches use mechanical instruments of music in their worship services? Is it New Testament Christianity when churches sponsor dinners, athletic events, movie nights, and other social and recreational activities? Is it New Testament Christianity when churches raise money through rummage sales, bake sales, admission to events, and similar activities? Is it New Testament Christianity when churches send money to human institutions? Is it New Testament Christianity when churches use women as preachers, deacons, or elders?

These are the sorts of things that many churches which would claim to be “Christian” are involved in. Is *this* New Testament Christianity? Certainly we could study each one of these issues and discover that these practices are contrary to the teachings of the New Testament. Therefore, to practice this form of “Christianity” simply cannot be New Testament Christianity! New Testament Christianity is simply not a system in which we select which items we want to obey and which ones we do not! Instead, we must be obedient to the totality of God’s instructions for what He wants His churches to believe, teach, and practice!

Why Practice New Testament Christianity?

Why should you be dedicated to practicing *only* New Testament Christianity (the kind of Christianity the New Testament approves)? Then, when you consider why you should only be practicing New Testament Christianity, you will be able to understand why you should not be practicing any other form of “Christianity”!

God’s word identifies what is pleasing to God

How do you know what will and what will not please God? How do you determine whether something is right or wrong? How do you know who will spend eternity in Heaven and who will spend eternity in Hell? Is this answer determined by your own opinions, by your own religious traditions, or by your own conscience? Or, is there some objective standard that determines right and wrong in religion?

Consider 2 Timothy 3:16-17: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” So, what is that which equips us to live in a way which pleases God? It is His word! It is the faith of the gospel!

It is the gospel’s message (the message of the New Testament) which fully reveals the “one faith” that is pleasing to God (Ephesians 4:5; Philippians 1:27). This message from God, according to 2 Timothy 3:16-17, fully/completely equips us “for every good work.” The message of God contained within the New Testament (the gospel) is the only way we can know what pleases God and what does not please God. This message, which has been revealed by God’s Holy Spirit, reveals the mind of God to us!

1 Corinthians 2:10-11 says, “But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God.” Man is simply incapable of knowing the mind of God unless He reveals it to us! Therefore, Jeremiah 10:23 says that the “way of man is not in himself; It is not in man who walks to direct his own steps.” And, Proverbs 14:12 says, “There is a way that seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death.”

This “one faith” (one system of religious belief, teaching, and practice that is pleasing to God) is not a progressive revelation in which God is continuing to reveal His will today. Instead, Jude wrote that we must “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3). Therefore, this “one faith” has been completely revealed by God through His Spirit to the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 3:3-5), who wrote His words in the pages of the New Testament. It is by following these instructions that we can be found pleasing to God!

You will be judged

Why does it matter whether you practice New Testament Christianity and please God? Because your life on this earth is temporary – and because there is a day coming on which all people who have ever lived will be judged by God. Hebrews 9:27 says, “And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the

judgment.” 2 Corinthians 5:10 says, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” Therefore, your earthly life will end – and God will judge you for how you have lived your life!

What will the standard/criteria be for this judgment? God says that it will be His word! In John 12:48, Jesus said, “He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him — the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day.” Similarly, Paul wrote that God “will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel” (Romans 2:16). Furthermore, Revelation 20:11-15 depicts this Judgment scene, saying that we will all stand before God and be judged according to our works “by the things which were written in the books” (i.e. the books containing the law of God). Therefore, you will be judged by God by His written word (the words recorded in the New Testament) – and you will either be judged by God to have been obedient to Him or disobedient to Him!

Take special note, then, of what Jesus taught in Matthew 7:21-23: “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’” Clearly, Jesus has said that there will be many on this Day of Judgment who will have been religious – and who will have even professed “Christianity.” However, Jesus says that those who failed to do the will of His Heavenly Father will be sentenced to everlasting destruction in Hell! Therefore, it does matter whether or not you are obedient to God’s word during your earthly life! 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9 states that those who do not obey the gospel of Jesus Christ will “be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.”

There is only one kind of Christian!

Many people view “Christianity” as being a large umbrella – with many different “brands” of “Christians” that fall under it. For instance, being

Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Pentecostal, etc. are commonly viewed as being particular branches of “Christianity.” And, according to this way of thinking, one church becomes just as good as another – as long as they believe in Jesus!

However, you will fail to find the term “Christian” used in this way in the New Testament Scriptures! In fact, you will recall (from lesson 1) that these different churches did not even exist in New Testament times! Yet, our culture has adapted and changed the word “Christian” to include all those who profess allegiance to Jesus Christ – regardless of how they practice their “Christianity” and which church they belong to!

Therefore, you need to take a moment to consider how the Bible uses the term “Christian” – and who it refers to in doing so. The term “Christian” is actually only used three times in Scripture – in Acts 11:26, Acts 26:28, and 1 Peter 4:16. Of these passages, particularly note Acts 11:26 – as it tells us who would be called “Christians.” It says that “the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.” Therefore, Christians are disciples of Jesus Christ – and disciples of Jesus Christ are Christians.

Now, it is important to recognize that a disciple of Jesus Christ is one who has devoted himself/herself entirely to learning from and following the ways of Jesus Christ (see Luke 9:23 and Luke 14:25-33). These who are Christians, then, are those who have been obedient to the gospel’s plan of salvation (which we’ll observe momentarily). Furthermore, the Scriptures teach that those who have become Christians and fail to continue to follow Jesus Christ fall from God’s favor (see Galatians 5:4). Therefore, those who are Christians are following Jesus Christ – and Him only!

Furthermore, please observe the fact that there were to be no divisions between Christians in New Testament times. You should recall (from lesson 2) the passages in which God commands unity of those who will follow Him. Particularly, 1 Corinthians 1:10 says that there must be “no divisions” among Christians – and that they be “perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” Then, Philippians 1:27 instructed that Christians “stand fast in one spirit” and strive together with one mind “for the faith of the gospel.” So, God never intended for there to be different “brands” of “Christianity.” Rather, those who

followed Jesus Christ were to be joined together, working together in unity for the faith of the gospel!

As you consider all of this, please recognize that the Scriptures do not support the use of the term “Christian” with regard to those who are practicing unbiblical forms of religion! Only those who are practicing New Testament Christianity (those who are only following the New Testament teaching and associating themselves with New Testament churches) are true Christians! If this conclusion is incorrect, you must prove it by the Bible!

Summary

Why should you practice only New Testament Christianity? Because God’s word identifies what is pleasing to God, because you will die and you will be judged by God’s word, and because there is only one kind of Christian! You should be interested in New Testament Christianity because no other form of “Christianity” will be sufficient to please God! There is only one type of true Christianity – Christianity as described in the pages of the New Testament!

Again, consider the illustration about sowing and reaping that was given at the beginning of this lesson. If only the doctrines and instructions contained in the New Testament are planted, a Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Wesleyan, Catholic, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, etc. will *not* be produced! In order for an individual to become any of these, there must be a different seed planted in his/her heart (i.e. Catholic doctrine, Baptist doctrine, etc.). Instead, if only the doctrines and instructions contained within the New Testament are planted in good and honest hearts, only New Testament Christians will be produced – who will be members of the one church Jesus Christ established!

What Is New Testament Christianity?

It is my sincere hope that you now have a great desire to follow only the teachings of God contained within the New Testament! I hope that you recognize that His word is sufficient – and that only it will result in being pleasing to Him (as we must never add to or take away from His word, Revelation 22:18-19). I hope you realize that practicing any other form of

“Christianity” besides the “Christianity” described in the pages of the New Testament will put your soul in great danger!

While we have briefly identified what New Testament Christianity is during this lesson, we now need to consider this in a little more detail. So, what exactly is New Testament Christianity?

New Testament Christianity is entirely patterned after the teachings of the New Testament

As we begin this section, please take a moment to consider Paul’s instruction in 2 Timothy 1:13: “Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.” New Testament Christianity is dedicated to accomplishing this purpose of holding fast to the pattern of sound (uncorrupt) words contained within the message of the New Testament!

As you consider this great responsibility, please imagine that you lived in New Testament times (in the first century A.D.). There would be many things that would be different – traveling, housing, technology, etc. Yet, these would not be the only differences you would observe. If you wanted to follow Jesus Christ, you would also notice many differences. Consider, if you lived in the first century (during New Testament times), what plan of salvation would you obey? What would you be taught to do as a Christian? Which church would you belong to? What would local churches do during their assemblies? What work would local churches be involved in? How would local churches be organized? Let’s consider an overview of how the Scriptures answer these questions.

What plan of salvation would you obey?

If you wanted to become a Christian and follow Jesus in New Testament times, what would you have been taught to do? Certainly you would *not* have been taught to say the “Sinner’s Prayer” – because it was not practiced in the New Testament and did not come along until much later (becoming popular in the 20th century). You would *not* have been “baptized” as a baby – because the practice of “infant baptism” did not exist in the first century. You would *not* have been baptized by sprinkling or pouring – because these practices were not in use in the New Testament. You would *not* have been taught to have “faith only” –

because this was contrary to the teachings of the New Testament Scriptures (i.e. Matthew 7:21-23; James 2:14-26). You would **not** have been told that there is nothing for you to do to be saved – because this is contrary to New Testament practice and teaching (i.e. Acts 2:36-47). Indeed, there are many common doctrines being taught today that you would **not** have been taught in New Testament times.

Rather, if you lived during New Testament times, you would have been taught to (1) Hear God's word. Romans 10:17 says, "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." (2) Believe. John 8:24 says, "Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins." (3) Repent of your sins. Acts 17:30 says, "Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent." (4) Confess Jesus Christ. Romans 10:9-10 says, "that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." (5) Be baptized (immersed in water) for the forgiveness of your sins. Acts 2:38 says, "Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'" (6) Remain faithful to Christ throughout your life. Revelation 2:10 says, "...Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life." If you had lived during New Testament times and wanted to become a Christian and be saved, this is what you would have been taught! Therefore, if you want to be a New Testament Christian today, you must do these same things!

What would you be taught to do as a Christian?

If you had obeyed the gospel's plan of salvation to become a Christian, what would you have been taught you must do as a Christian – if you had lived during the first century? Surely, you would **not** have been taught that you could not sin so as to fall from the grace of God and be eternally lost. You would **not** have been taught that a little participation in sin is permissible. You would **not** have been taught that it is OK to make a partial commitment to Jesus Christ. You would **not** have been taught that it is permissible to engage in sinful worldly activities. Indeed, there are

many common practices of "Christians" today that are **not** approved by the New Testament!

Rather, if you had lived during New Testament times, you would have been exhorted to live a faithful life to the Lord until (through the point of) your death. Revelation 2:10 indicates this to be true – even if it means suffering for Christ physically! You would have been exhorted to live a holy life that was completely separated from the ways of sin. 1 Peter 1:15-16 says, "but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy.'" You would have been expected to be involved in good works and remain steadfast in serving the Lord. 1 Corinthians 15:58 says, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord." You would have been told to put off the old man of sin and put on the new man who is created according to God – and taught certain characteristics and activities which must be put on and put off (see Ephesians 4-5). You would have been taught that you had certain responsibilities as a member of a local church and in the home. If you had lived during New Testament times and wanted to serve the Lord, these are the sorts of things you would have been taught. Therefore, if you want to be a New Testament Christian today, you must live according to this same standard.

Which church would you belong to?

If you had lived in the 1st century and became a New Testament Christian by obeying the gospel's plan of salvation, which church would you belong to? Certainly, you would **not** have been added to the Catholic Church – because it did not begin until around 606 A.D. You would **not** have been added to the Lutheran Church – because it did not begin until around 1520 A.D. You would **not** have been added to the Episcopal Church – because it did not begin until around 1536 A.D. You would **not** have been added to the Baptist Church – because it did not begin until around 1607 A.D. You would **not** have been added to the Methodist Church – because it did not begin until around 1739 A.D. You would **not** have been added to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormon) – because it did not begin until around 1830 A.D. You would **not** have been added to the Jehovah's Witnesses – because that organization did not begin until around 1872 A.D. In fact, you would **not** have

been added to any of the modern-day religious organizations – because they did not exist in the first century!

Rather, upon your obedience to the gospel of Christ and becoming a Christian, you would have been added to Christ's church! For instance, after Peter instructed individuals what they must do in order to be saved (in Acts 2:38), consider what is said in Acts 2:41: "Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them." Then, verse 47 says, "praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." So, those individuals who obeyed the gospel of Christ were added to Christ's church! This church belonged to God/Christ and local congregations were called churches of God and churches of Christ (see Acts 20:28; Romans 16:16). This was the only church that belonged to Jesus Christ – and it still is! Therefore, you would have simply been identified as a "Christian" (Acts 11:26) – not as a Mormon, a Jehovah's Witness, a Catholic, a Lutheran, a Baptist, a Methodist, etc.! Therefore, if you want to practice New Testament Christianity today, you need to be added to Christ's church (something that is accomplished by being obedient to the gospel's plan of salvation, as demonstrated in Acts 2)! Then, if you were part of Christ's church in New Testament times, you would have tried to associate yourself with other New Testament Christians and form a local New Testament congregation (see Acts 9:26) – like the ones formed in Corinth, Rome, Ephesus, etc.

What would local churches do during their assemblies?

If you walked into an assembly of a local church in New Testament times (one that was following the proper pattern), what would you have observed? You would **not** have observed a physical meal being shared – as such was condemned in 1 Corinthians 11:22, 34. You would **not** have observed a band with musical instruments – as there is no mention of the use of mechanical instruments of music being used in worship in New Testament times. You would **not** have observed a choir – as every Christian was to sing (not just a select few). You would **not** have observed the Lord's Supper only once per year or once per month – as it was done weekly in New Testament

times. You would **not** have observed many of the things that are common in church assemblies today.

Rather, you would have observed (1) Teaching/preaching. Acts 20:7 makes reference to Paul's preaching to this church assembly. (2) You would have observed (and participated in) the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (1 Corinthians 14:15; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). (3) You would have observed the congregation praying together (1 Corinthians 14:15). (4) You would have observed the Lord's Supper on the first day of every week – as they did in Acts 20:7. (5) You would have contributed to a free-will offering to support the work of the church on the first day of the week (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). These are the acts of worship that you would have observed in the assemblies of churches of Christ in the first century. Therefore, if you want to practice New Testament Christianity today, the local church you associate yourself with should be doing these same things in its assemblies – not changing or perverting this pattern in any way!

What work would local churches be involved in?

If you were part of a local church in the New Testament, what work would the church have been involved in? You would **not** have been involved in organizing and operating fundraisers (i.e. carnivals, bake sales, rummage sales, etc.) – because you never read of such in the Bible and the only means of the church raising funds to do its work is found in 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 (a free-will offering from its members on the first day of the week). You would **not** have been involved in producing theatrical events (i.e. plays, dramas, etc.) – because New Testament churches were not involved in the work of entertainment. You would **not** have been involved in organizing or attending social and recreational events (i.e. game nights, movie nights, dinners, athletic events, etc.) – because the God-given work of the church did not include such things! You would **not** have been involved in sending church funds to human institutions (i.e. missionary societies, benevolent institutions, etc.) – because God never authorized these activities. You would **not** have been involved in sending your funds to another church to "sponsor" a work that they were doing – because God only authorized each congregation to do its own work independent of each other. Certainly, you would **not**

have participated in many of the works that churches are involved in today!

Rather, you would have been involved in the works of (1) Benevolence toward need *Christians* (not general benevolence to anyone). 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, 2 Corinthians 8-9, Romans 15:25-26, and other passages demonstrate that God has only authorized churches to financially assist needy Christians (though individual Christians are authorized to help those who are not Christians, see Galatians 6:10). (2) Edification of the saints. God wants local churches to be involved in the work of building up each member of the congregation spiritually (see Ephesians 4:11-16). (3) Teaching the gospel. God expects each local church to be dedicated to spreading the gospel to those throughout the community – and to as many as it has opportunity to teach (see 1 Thessalonians 1:8). These are the works that local churches were involved in (collectively) in the first century. Therefore, if you want to practice New Testament Christianity today, the local church you associate yourself with should also be engaged in these same works – and not be engaged in any unauthorized works!

How would local churches be organized?

Finally, if you were part of a local New Testament congregation in the first century, how would the church be organized (if it was operating according to the God-approved pattern)? You would *not* have been part of a church with a centralized governing body which had authority over all the congregations (i.e. church councils) – because no such arrangement is described in the pages of Scripture. You would *not* have been part of a church which was subject to one man oversight (i.e. a Pastor, a Reverend, the Pope, etc.) – because such a perversion was condemned in 3 John 1:9-11. You would *not* have seen women serving as elders or deacons – because they did not meet the God-given qualifications to serve in that capacity (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). Certainly, you would *not* have been part of a church that was organized in many of the popular ways churches are organized today!

Rather, the church would have been subject to its one and only Head, Jesus Christ (in the language of Colossians 1:18). Then, local churches would have been organized with elders (also called presbyters, overseers, bishops, pastors, and shepherds) – if there

were men who met the qualifications given in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. Also note that there would have always been more than one elder in each local congregation (see Acts 14:23). Local churches also would have had deacons who served the congregation – if there were men who met the qualifications given in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. Sometimes, an evangelist would also work with a local church (as Paul worked with the Ephesian congregation for three years, according to Acts 20:31). Philippians 1:1 summarizes the God-given organizational structure of the local church nicely: “Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.” This is what the Bible teaches about the organizational structure of the local church. There are no other offices besides the two we’ve considered. Therefore, if you want to practice New Testament Christianity today, the local church you associate yourself with should be organized in this same way (although local churches of Christ *did* exist without elders and deacons if there were no qualified men – and such are also fully authorized to exist today!)

Conclusion

Are you interested in New Testament Christianity? Not all religions are equally pleasing to God. You must be a New Testament Christian and be part of Christ’s one true church! But, before we close this study, let’s briefly consider the question of “How?” How can you practice New Testament Christianity today?

The answer is simple – and there are only two steps. Step 1: Use the Bible as your only guide in religion. Reject all other standards of authority and submit yourself entirely to the teachings of God’s word. Demand Bible authority for everything that you do in your life! Colossians 3:17 says, “And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.”

Step 2: Be a doer of God’s word and not a hearer only. Put what you have studied into practice – no matter who resists you or what obstacles try to derail your pursuit of New Testament Christianity. James 1:22 says, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”

Now, as we conclude our study of “One Faith,” I hope that you are fully convicted by the truths we have studied from God’s word. Please understand that this study was *not* designed to answer every question you may have or teach you all there is to know about New Testament Christianity. Instead, this study was intended help you recognize the lies that are promoted by the religious world and encourage you to seek true New Testament Christianity. Please consider this study as a beginning point for your ongoing studies. Take the information you have gained from this study and continue searching the Scriptures for more information about the church of Christ and true Christianity!

One final exhortation I wish to offer you before I close this study. If you have been convicted by the things that we have studied in this course (or, if they have even raised some doubts or questions), please do not allow anything or anyone to hinder your pursuit of obedience to the faith of the gospel! Make the determination to continue your study and make whatever changes you must make in order to please God! Your soul hangs in the balance! Give God full control over your religious practices! Remember, God said there is only “one faith” (Ephesians 4:5)!

Study Question

Do you believe that it is possible to just be a NT Christian today? What if I told you that you could be part of a NT church today? Would you be interested? Why or why not?

What is produced whenever the Word of God is planted in the hearts of honest and good hearts? Why?

1. Is *This* New Testament Christianity?

Can an individual truly be a NT Christian if he/she does not follow the teachings of the NT? Explain your answer.

Make a list of many common practices of individuals who profess Christianity – that are not according to the teaching of the New Testament.

Make a list of many common practices of churches which profess Christianity – that are not according to the teaching of the New Testament.

2. Why Practice New Testament Christianity?

How does God tell us what is right and wrong?

What significance does the coming Judgment have on your decision to pursue NT Christianity?

How many different “kinds” of Christians are there – according to the Bible?

So, why should you only practice NT Christianity?

3. What Is New Testament Christianity?

What is the pattern for NT Christianity?

What plan of salvation would you have obeyed in NT times?

What would you have been taught to do as a Christian in NT times?

What church would you have belonged to in NT times?

How would local churches have been organized during NT times

What would local churches do during their assemblies in NT times?

What work would local churches have been involved in during NT times?

***Are you interested in NT Christianity? Will you allow anything/anyone to hinder you from pursuing NT Christianity?**