

Lesson Fifteen

Several denominations claim to be the only true church. Some even claim that you must belong to their denomination if you are going to be saved. In this lesson we look at what God says about his church, the reason why there are so many denominations, the blessings God gives us through churches, and how to protect those blessings.

The Feast of Pentecost following Jesus' return to heaven marks the birth of the Christian church. Since then, many changes have occurred. The most obvious change is that where there was once only one group of believers, now there are many different denominations that all call themselves Christian churches. To understand how this has come about, we must first look at how God describes his church, which is also called the Holy Christian Church.

What is the Holy Christian Church?

God says:	From this we know:
<p><i>Ephesians 2:19-20</i> "Consequently, you are ... members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone."</p> <p><i>1 Peter 2:4, 5</i> "As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."</p>	<p>The Holy Christian Church is the gathering of all believers in Jesus Christ. It is called 'Holy' because all believers are righteous through the blood of Jesus. It is called 'Christian' because it is built on Christ Jesus as its cornerstone.</p>

Is there more than one Holy Christian Church?

God says:	From this we know:
<p><i>1 Corinthians 12:12-13</i> "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink."</p>	<p>There is only one Holy Christian Church.</p>

How do we become members of the Holy Christian Church?

God says:	From this we know:
<p><i>Romans 10:12-17</i> “For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’ But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our message?’ Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”</p>	<p>One becomes a member by believing in Jesus Christ as their only Savior. This faith in Jesus comes from the gospel. Membership in the Holy Christian Church is not limited to any one denomination. It is determined by faith in Jesus, not by membership in a congregation or church body.</p>

Are all who call themselves ‘Christian’ members of the Holy Christian Church?

God says:	From this we know:
<p><i>Matthew 15:7-9</i> “You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’”</p> <p><i>1 Samuel 16:7</i> “But the LORD said to Samuel, ‘The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.’”</p>	<p>Some people claim to be Christians, but they do not have faith. Therefore, they are not members of the Holy Christian Church. However, these people (known as hypocrites) can belong to Christian congregations.</p>

Because we cannot see who has true faith in Christ (only God can do that), we cannot tell who in a given congregation really belongs to the Holy Christian Church. This is why the Holy Christian Church is also called the Invisible Church. Visible churches are made up of believers (members of Invisible Church) as well as hypocrites.

We noted earlier that there once was only one group of believers with a common set of beliefs. Now there are numerous denominations. How did this happen?

God says:	From this we know:
<i>Matthew 7:15</i> "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves."	The Devil has sent many false prophets and false teachers into Christianity.
<i>Galatians 5:7-9</i> "You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth? That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. 'A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.'"	When false teaching is tolerated and not stamped out, it spreads.
<i>2 Timothy 4:2-4</i> "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths."	When people don't want to hear what God has to say, they find pastors who tell them what they want to hear. Denominations have arisen within Christianity because people have departed from the truth of God's word. The Devil has succeeded in getting Christians to hold to false teachings instead of the truth.

Because there are hypocrites in visible churches and because of the differences in teaching between denominations, many people decide that they do not need to belong to a church. However, God commands us to gather together and uses our local congregation to provide us with blessings.

What purpose do visible churches serve?

God says:	From this we know:
<i>Psalms 35:18</i> "I will give you thanks in the great assembly; among throngs of people I will praise you."	God wants Christians to gather together to worship him and to encourage one another. The local congregation serves as that gathering place.
<i>Hebrews 10:24-25</i> "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us	Jesus has also promised to be present whenever Christians gather around his word.

God says:	From this we know:
<p>encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”</p> <p><i>Matthew 18:20</i> “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”</p>	
<p><i>Matthew 18:15-18</i> “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”</p>	<p>God wants Christians to warn each other about sin and to proclaim forgiveness when there is repentance. The local congregation makes sure that is done.</p>
<p><i>Matthew 28:19-20</i> “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”</p>	<p>God wants Christians to spread his word throughout the world. The local congregation provides training so members can witness to their families and friends. The local congregation and national organizations allow Christians to pool their resources and send missionaries where they cannot go.</p>

While visible churches provide blessings to the members of the congregation, God does not want us to take the issue of false doctrine lightly.

What does God expect us to do with religious organizations that do not teach God's word truthfully?

God says:	From this we know:
<p><i>Isaiah 55:10-11</i> “As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will</p>	<p>We will rejoice that God's word works. Even in church bodies where God's word is mixed with false doctrine, people can still be brought to faith through God's word.</p>

God says:**From this we know:**

accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”

John 17:20-23 “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

Acts 17:11 “Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”

1 Corinthians 1:10 “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.”

Ephesians 4:15 “Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.”

1 Peter 3:15-16 “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.”

1 John 4:1 “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are

We will work to establish union / fellowship with other Christians who hold to the truth.

We will attempt to establish union / fellowship by examining their teachings in light of God's word.

We will not “agree to disagree” and call that unity.

We will lovingly contend for the truth of God's word with everyone who gives us the opportunity.

Out of love for God we will separate ourselves from anyone or any religious organization

God says:

from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

Romans 16:17 “I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.”

Titus 3:10-11 “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.”

2 Corinthians 13:8 “For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.”

From this we know:

(including other Lutheran churches) that persists in teaching false doctrine in spite of our warnings.

We separate ourselves from groups who teach false doctrine because we love God and his word above all things; because we love our own souls and those of our children and we don't want false teaching to endanger their souls; and because we love others and have an obligation to warn them against false teaching.

The Bible's teaching about separating from false teaching and false teachers while seeking unity with those who agree with the Scriptures is called the teaching of FELLOWSHIP. The basic principle is that we will not express Christian unity unless that unity exists. Unity is normally expressed in membership; joint worship—prayer, praise and communing; as well as joint mission work. Without being self-righteous, those who have pledged themselves to Jesus will try to apply this teaching in their dealings with other Christians, other churches, and organizations that have a religious framework.

God gives us many blessings through our church. We have opportunities to exercise our faith. We have opportunities to grow in faith. We have opportunities to encourage and to be encouraged. We also have others watching out for us on the road to heaven. Those blessings are protected and preserved through a faithful practice of fellowship.

All Bible passages are from the New International Version.