

THE DNA OF CHRIST'S CHURCH¹

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“Why are there so many different churches and religions?” Have you ever heard someone ask that question?

Not only are there many different religions in the world such as animism, Hinduism, Islam, Confucianism, Buddhism, and paganism; Christianity itself split up into many hundred, even thousands, of sects and denominations.

This puzzles and discourages many people. They know that Jesus Himself prayed that His followers “may be one,” and that it is God’s purpose to “gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad” (John 17:11; 11:52). Has God’s Word failed? Is faith in Christ ineffective, so that it creates walls of separation between believers?

No, this vast, complex confusion is not God’s fault. In one of His interesting stories, Jesus described how tares and weeds sprang up in a field that had been sown with good grain. The farmer told His servants, “An enemy hath done this” (Matt. 13:28). Confusion and strife among the professed followers of Christ is the work of a master enemy! But God will not permit even one sincere seeker for truth to remain confused and misled.

Why are there so many factions? The answer is found by looking at who caused the first split in heaven itself. Heaven was once united and

peaceful until an enemy arose who led one-third of the angels into a rebellion offshoot: “There was war in heaven, Michael and His angels fought against the dragon. . . . And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the devil and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out unto the earth, and his angels were cast out with him (Rev. 12:7-9). This same enemy is continuing the war on earth, this time concentrating his attacks on the “body” of Christ, His church.

It would be foolish for us to condemn the church because of the havoc that this enemy has caused. His avowed purpose is to discredit the body of Christ and thus discredit the Head Himself; but since he cannot touch the Head, he zeroes in on His people on earth: “The devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time” (vs. 12).

Everyone knows that a very successful tactic of warfare is to “divide and conquer.” Satan knows that he can deceive many into being confused by the multiplicity of sects and denominations in the world, so that they get discouraged and give up their search for the true church. It is like counterfeiting money. Clever artists can fool ordinary people by printing look-alike paper money; but it would be foolish to say, “I will not accept *any* money lest I make a mistake and get a counterfeit note.” If Satan has succeeded in splitting the church into hundreds of competing denominations, there must be somewhere a *true* “body of Christ” that He recognizes as His. The counterfeit proves the existence of the genuine somewhere.

¹ Matthew 16:16-18. 348, 616.

This is why the Lord has seen fit to give us this disclosure of the truth in Revelation 12. The story of the true church throughout the ages is unfolded under the symbol of a “woman” (with her children) who is chased by “the dragon” as he seeks to destroy her. “When the dragon saw that he was cast unto the earth, he persecuted the woman which brought forth the man child [Christ]” (vs. 13). And so she “fled into the wilderness” for 1260 years (vs. 6). We have seen that history records the terrible suffering that faithful people of God had to endure between 538 to 1798 A.C. Revelation 12 indicates that God has always had a true church on earth, a church that believed and cherished the truths that Christ and His apostles taught, a church that faithfully handed down to succeeding generations a knowledge of God’s plan of salvation in the world.

Satan’s enmity against Christ is demonstrated in his final assault on the church: “And the serpent cast out of his mouth water as a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away of the flood. And the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed up the flood which the dragon cast out of his mouth. And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Rev. 12:15-17).

That “flood” is a vivid way of describing Satan’s divers methods of opposing God’s work on earth. But in spite of all, the “woman” stands secure; there

is a true church. And the Holy Spirit will guide every sincere seeker of truth to her door.

According to Scripture, the church is the “body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:27, 28), or the “bride” of Christ (Eph. 5:23, 25, 32). “Christ is the head of the church.” A head without a body cannot be complete, nor can a husband be complete without a wife; therefore it follows that it is impossible to have a mature faith in Christ without being a part of His “body,” the church. This means that the church is not merely a human organization, for it was founded by Christ Himself, and we read that it is the Lord’s purpose to “add to the church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:47). It is therefore tremendously important that we find His true church!

In order to discover where the true church is, we must first make sure what is the foundation on which it was built. Jesus said to Peter, “I tell you, you are Peter [*petros*, Greek] and on this rock [*petra*, Greek] I will build My church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). The word “*petros*” in the original language means a stone so small that it can be thrown around; this is not the foundation of Christ’s glorious church! On the other hand, the word “*petra*” means a great, massive outcropping of bedrock, the kind that can never be moved. This represents the true foundation of the church, Christ Himself. He was happy with Peter’s confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (vs. 16). We learn from this that such faith in Christ is the first essential step in being a “member” of that true “body of Christ.”

It is very obvious that poor Peter himself could never be the foundation on which Christ would build His church, for only a few moments later we read how Jesus was forced to rebuke him severely: “He turned and said to Peter, “Get thee, behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men” (vs. 23). Christ’s true church needs a better foundation than such a rolling “stone” as that! Only Christ Himself has ever conquered death; therefore any church that will stand immovable against “the powers of death” must be founded on Him alone.

This gives us a valuable clue in discovering where Christ’s true church is: any church that claims to have been founded on Peter cannot be it.

What is the DNA markers for discovering the true church—Christ’s body?

(1) The true church will accept the Holy Scriptures as the divinely inspired word of God. Jesus and His apostles repeatedly referred the people to “It is written,” upholding the Bible as our unerring guide.

(2) The true church worships the one true God who has revealed Himself through the Bible as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The Bible teaching of the Godhead both logically appeals to the mind as well as the heart. Jesus aptly said that His “works” were wrought for the purpose “that ye may *know, and believe*, that the Father is in me, and I in Him” (John 10:38). The mind can grasp the filial oneness of Father and Son and the divine gift of faith makes it possible for the individual to choose to believe the truth of the Godhead.

A family is known by its last name—Mr. and Mrs. *Smith* and the children. As a family unit they are one by name, character, and personality traits. And yet, the “Smith” family is composed of individual persons. When outsiders look at individuals of the family they see common resemblances of looks and character.

The Bible uses the term “Godhead” as a family name.² At Athens Paul declared, “Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the *Godhead* is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man’s device” (Acts 17:29). We are the progeny of God. It is illogical to say that man is the handiwork of human shaping of inanimate objects such as gold, silver or stone. Man is made in the image of God. As a human family we have the general characteristics of intelligence, form, and capacity to reproduce. These features to some extent indicate the nature of the Designer.

Scripture presents the family of the Godhead consisting of three distinct persons. There is only one God as opposed to several gods. And the one God has three family members: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The Bible clearly teaches a strict monotheism: “Hear. O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD” (Deut. 6:4). We are monotheists.

² “For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and *Godhead*; so that they are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20).

“For in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the *Godhead* bodily” (Col. 2:9).

(3) But Jesus commanded us to baptize believers “in the name [Godhead] of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:20). There are three distinct persons.

The true church will practice the same mode of baptism that Jesus institute and gave to His apostles by immersion. This is like a gateway through which we all, coming out of disobedience and alienation from God, enter into Christ by faith and into fellowship with His body, the church.

(4) The “body” of Christ will cooperate with God’s work of grace accomplished by Good News proclaimed by three special angels. Because it’s “the everlasting gospel” we know it isn’t a new invention; it’s given in a modern setting of our last-day needs. It’s in language people today can understand, symbolized as truth proclaimed by three angels flying like helicopters over the treetops: “I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth—to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people—saying with a loud voice, ‘Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water’” (Rev. 14:6, 7).

It’s clear: the angel symbolizes a worldwide proclamation of pure, unadulterated truth, a rediscovery of something long lost sight of. It probes the solution to mankind’s deepest psychological and spiritual needs—the conquest of inner insecurity. Thus it embodies deliverance from every evil that enslaves or distorts the human soul.

A second and a third angel follow, bringing the first’s message to completion. The message of the three angels achieves a phenomenal worldwide impact. Every “nation, tribe, tongue, and people” hear it. What a courageous prediction to make some 2000 years ago! Should it take courage to believe it today?

Why is the message so striking? It says, “Worship Him who made heaven and earth” (Rev. 14:7). Swimming upstream almost alone against the world current of evolutionary teaching, this creation-message makes its way against popular opinion. The memorial of His creation that God’s appointed is the seventh-day Sabbath—the true Lord’s day. Already in response to this “angel’s” message, millions of Christian seventh-day Sabbath-keepers have sprung up in almost every nation in the world.

The call to “fear God and give glory to Him” is not to crawl on our stomachs like a cowering slave before a tyrannical master. It means to reverence Him, to cherish a humble appreciation of His love and holy righteousness. God does not want us to shake with terror before Him, but to shiver with the delightful thrill of appreciating His glorious self-sacrifice of love. It led the Son of God to yield Himself totally on His cross! It makes shivers run up and down on your back. The death He died for us was the equivalent of what Revelation calls “the second death,” the final yet-unknown despair of being “forsaken” of God (Matt. 27:46; Gal. 3:13; Rev. 2:11; 20:14).

Nor is God a selfish potentate reveling in the shallow flattery of fawning admirers. To “give glory

to Him” means to cooperate with His Holy Spirit in demonstrating His love to the world, to pass on the welcoming message, “Be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20). God’s greatest joy is seeing alienated, miserable, wrecked people find the sunshine of a healing reconciliation with Him. This is His glory—saving lost people. And we can “give Him glory” by ministering with Him in that work of reconciliation.

God does not want anyone to serve Him in terror of being condemned in judgment. The “house of His judgment” cannot be the hour when *He* condemns the world, for “God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved” (John 3:17). If anyone is condemned at last, it won’t be the Father who condemns him, for Jesus said, “The Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22). And furthermore, Jesus says that neither will *He* condemn those who reject Him: “If anyone hears My words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world” (John 12:47).

Thus it is evident that those who finally reject God’s grace will hear no scathing denunciation from either the Father or Son. Amid the silence from God, the voice of their own accusing conscience will be deafening. “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” (John 12:48). And the one whom Christ will judge, He vindicates: “I will confess his name,” He says, “before My Father” (Rev. 3:5).

So the angels’ call to believe God’s “everlasting gospel” in the context of “the hour of His judgment” is really a message assuring us of vindication. It tells us that “in Christ” God has accepted us, forgiven us, and adopted us.

These three angels proclaim an arresting message that focuses all the revealed truth that God has been communicating for thousands of years, demanding at last a thorough-going response. No one can sit on the fence after hearing and understanding this last-day message. “Everyone” will choose either to believe and respond, or to disbelieve and reject. All will line up on one side or the other for the final “battle of Armageddon.”

(5) The true church will demonstrate the beautiful fruits of a living faith in God by being different from the world in purity of life, in temperance and self-control, in choice of recreation and amusements, even in standards of modesty in dress. Women should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire but by good deeds, as befits women who profess religion” (1 Tim. 2:9, 10, R.S.V.).

(6) Two thousand years ago God’s people were expecting their long-awaited Messiah to appear. But when He came as a Baby in Bethlehem, they did not recognize Him, and the leaders of the true church of that day led the people to murder Him.

Now God’s people are expecting a great blessing to come from heaven, that is, the long-promised “latter rain,” the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that will

“lighten the earth with glory” (Rev. 18:1-4). It will be a message that will prepare God’s people for the second coming of Jesus.

Not everyone on earth will be converted for many will reject, as many rejected Jesus long ago; but the message will seek out honest hearts everywhere who will respond. The Lord will be honored. Some will come from places that will seem unlikely to those who have been in the way a long time; the message of the “everlasting gospel” will be presented so clearly and powerfully that Christ will be uplifted as the crucified Son of God. He not only died for the world in a vague corporate sense but He also died for each individual soul. And each who permits his heart to be moved by the “love of Christ [that] constrains us” (2 Cor. 5:14, 15) will be sanctified by the message that will be finally full-blown.

The watching universe will be amazed at the transformations that the pure, true gospel will accomplish, as Paul said, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). But Satan’s cleverness has confused “the truth of the gospel” even as “certain men [who] came from James” (the early leader of the church in Paul’s day) confused even Peter and Barnabas (Gal. 2:6, 12-14). The story of that stumbling on the part of the early leaders of the church is not well known (cf. Gal. 2:1-13). Paul was right! And his Romans is “the clearest gospel of all.”

This often neglected story of human fallibility encourages us to study “the truth of the gospel”

(vss. 5, 14) directly for ourselves. Even in modern times, sincere, converted leaders can err and can mislead people, even the “faithful” such as Barnabas long ago. There is no prayer that Heaven is more eager to answer than the prayer of an honest heart who wants to understand truth! The Lord would rather empty heaven of angels, sending them all down here to help one soul, rather than allow that soul to become misled.

The true church will proclaim to the world the pure truth of God’s Word, for the apostle Paul says that “the truth of the living God [is] the pillar and support of the church” (1 Tim. 3:15, G.N.B.). God has no other way of communicating to the world His truth; He cannot write it in burning letters of fire on the clouds, or command the clouds and storms to shout it. Mankind must hear the truth proclaimed through warm human lips, and his true church is the voice. Unless God’s Word is a failure (which is unthinkable), there *is* such a church.

The true church will be a world-wide body, proclaiming a message to “every nation, kindred, and tongue, and people.” Jesus predicted that His gospel message “shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations” (Matt. 24:14). No sect or denomination that works in limited areas can fit the inspired criteria of identification.

(7) An often neglected truth is that which concerns the work of Christ as our High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary. This work has to do with the great battle between Christ and Satan which Revelation 12 describes, because this sanctuary ministry is to bring an end to Satan’s dominion over human

hearts and lives. It is to accomplish something that has never yet been fully accomplished in Christ's "body" during all the thousands of years of history: it is to destroy sin, to purify the conscience, to accomplish a "blotting out of sins" so that Christ can "appear the second time without sin unto salvation for those who are his." (See Heb. 9:9, 14, 24, 28; 10:1-4). It is to prepare a faithful people to "stand" before Him without fear, for "our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29).

Nothing happening in all the world today is as important as this grand ministry which Christ is performing. Speaking of the time when it is to be completed, our Lord says, "Keep a watch on yourselves; do not let your mind be dulled by dissipation and drunkenness and worldly cares so that the great day closes upon you suddenly like a trap; for that day will come on all men, wherever they are, the whole world over. Be on the alert, praying at all times for strength to pass safely through all these imminent troubles and to stand in the presence of the Son of Man" (Luke 21:34-36, N.E.B.).

(8) The next event to follow the last-day message of the three angels is the personal, literal second coming of Christ in the clouds of heaven (see Rev. 14:14, 15). The work of the true church is to proclaim the good news of His coming everywhere, so that a people can be prepared to meet Him when He comes.

It's nice to remember that if and when we die, we can come up in the first resurrection.

But is that the "blessed hope" Paul talks about in this passage?—

"The grace of God that brings salvation to all men [margin] has appeared, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:11-14).

Hardly! The "blessed hope" is that of being "alive and remain on the earth" (1 Thess. 4:15, 17) to welcome the Son of God at His second coming. Some say it doesn't matter; we can come up in a special resurrection prior to His coming and thus "remain," but this implies there is no real significance to "the signs of the times" we have witnessed for the past century and a half.

Multitudes of believers have died in the past 2000 years; but Daniel's "time of the end" defines when these who cherish "the blessed hope" will be living, and that time is now. It's Paul's "last days" he speaks of (2 Tim. 3:1). And it's the same time Jesus speaks of: "There will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, . . . men's hearts failing them for fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth. . . . Know that the kingdom of God is near" (Luke 21:25-31). Matthew adds, "even at the doors" (24:33).

"The Son of man is coming in an hour when you do not expect Him" (vs. 44). The suddenness of His coming will surprise everyone.

Cherishing “the blessed hope” of seeing Him come in your lifetime is not a quirky little idiosyncrasy for unbalanced elders; it’s Christian duty for us all because it’s “present truth” faith (2 Peter 1:12).

(9) The true church must understand what the Bible teaches about death and eternal life. Never before have so many people in the world been concerned about the meaning of death. The Bible teaches that man’s nature is mortal, that is, subject to death. Only God “hath immortality” (1 Timothy 6:16). The idea that man’s soul is naturally immortal came from ancient paganism, and not from divine revelation.

But through Christ God will confer upon His people the gift of immortality *at the resurrection*. This means that at the present time the dead are asleep, unconscious of the passage of time or of events on earth; it is impossible for them to communicate with us. (See Eccl. 9:5; 1 Cor. 15:51-54).

It is important that the true church make this clear, otherwise many will be deceived by clever evil spirits who counterfeit the dead through the power of Satan and his fallen angels. God’s truth about the dead becomes a marvelous shield of protection from deception.

The true church must also make clear what the Bible teaches about the future life. It would not bring glory to God for Him to perpetuate the existence of sin and sinners through all eternity. What righteous person could possibly be happy in heaven if he continually looked over to watch the helpless lost people writhing and screaming in eternal agony? Scripture teaches that the lost will “perish,” in “the

second death,” and that sin and its originator, Satan, will also be destroyed forever. The good news is that “affliction shall not rise up the second time” (Nahum 1:12). Sin and rebellion will be forever ended!

Those who accept the Lord’s salvation will rejoice forever in the gift of a life that measures with the eternity of God; for their eternal home, God will re-created this earth, making a new heaven and a new earth. The true church will proclaim these words of hope and encouragement.

(10) The true church must enjoy the gifts that the Holy Spirit imparts (see 1 Corinthians 12:28, 29; Ephesians 4:8-15). One of the gifts is that of prophecy, which the Book of Revelation singles out for special mention as a criterion for the true church in the last days: “And the dragon [Satan] was wroth [angry] with the woman [the church], and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Rev. 12:17).

“The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Rev. 19:10).

The gift provides for direct communication between Jesus and His people through a messenger chosen by Him,—a prophet. This gift is a lesser light that leads to the great light of the Bible.

The last page of the Bible invites us to come if we are thirsty, and “take the water of life freely” (Rev. 22:17). And Jesus says, “Come to Me” if we’re weary and heavy-laden, and He will give us “rest” (Matt. 11:28-30). So, we “come” and we are

baptized, and we become members of the church. We are so happy at last to find fellowship in the Lord, heaven on earth.

And we continue to “read the Bible, and pray, and witness” like we’re always told to do. And we believe the Bible and say so, but then opposition and controversy arise. We’re tempted to wish that we had kept still. So, we are driven to our knees to pray, and we ask the Lord, “Why is this happening? I wanted peace, and now this ‘war’ has come!”

The Lord has indeed promised, “the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out!” (John 6:37). As you wait quietly before Him in prayer, He answers your questions faithfully:

If you keep your eyes on Jesus you will see a Man who was cruelly crucified because He told the truth. And He tells us all, “I did not come to bring peace but a sword” (Matt. 10:34). Deny self, take up your cross daily (Luke 9:23). But wait a moment—you never fight a battle alone! This is what you must believe.

He faithfully promises, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ So we may boldly say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?’” (Heb. 13:5, 6). You choose not to be afraid, in the Lord. Then . . . you’re not afraid.

Even in the church, the Lord’s house, where we expect to find heaven on earth, we find conflict and even persecution. That’s where the most severe and painful conflicts come! But the Lord still assures you, He won’t forsake you.

He loves the church for it is yet to become the Bride of Christ; and it does indeed have very severe

problems within it, for Jesus tells the leadership of the church today that of all the “seven churches” of world history, you are the one outstandingly “miserable, poor, blind, and naked” (the little Greek word “ho” is there, the one; Rev. 3:17).

Therefore do not give up on the church, the body of Christ, His Bride-to-be. The final victory in the “great controversy between Christ and Satan” comes at the very end and it requires that the church finally “overcome” and do what He says in Rev. 3:19—repent. It won’t at last be fear that motivates her, but a deeper appreciation of what it cost Him to save us. That melted-hearted repentance will come, it has to come; hang on!

Have you ever looked closely at a key that fits a good, quality lock? It has many spurs and points that must fit the lock perfectly, or it will not open it. This brief summary of some of the truths that must be held by the true church, shows how we can find the key and thus identify the church which is symbolized in Scripture as the “body of Christ.”