

FINDING A
HEALTHY,
CHRIST-
CENTERED
CHURCH



by Greg Albrecht

The Church: The Body of Christ

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Printed in U.S.A.

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Jesus said that he would build his church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18). Where is this church he has been building for almost 2,000 years? The church of Jesus Christ is his body, those individuals who have accepted his work on the cross as sufficient for their salvation. The body of Christ trusts in Jesus as Lord and Savior and lives by God's grace. Members of the body of Christ know that they are not capable of making God love them more on the basis of their performance.

The church is universal—that means that the body of Christ doesn't have humanly imposed walls or boundaries. The body of Christ is not isolated within one denomination, but the body of Christ is capable of transcending doctrinal creeds and dogmatic traditions to enter even into the stony hearts of individual humans.

No one church can claim that it is the "one, true church." The very idea is a preposterous, pompous, anti-Christ teaching. No single legally incorporated entity has been given the exclusive right to franchise God's work on earth.

The church is both visible and invisible. The visible church meets in public places and serves in neighborhoods and communities. We can know about visible Christians, and we can know them personally as spiritual brothers and sisters. The invisible church are those Christians who are unknown to us, but people that God uses even though they are outside of our part of the body of Christ.

We must be careful not to confuse the church with organizational entities—organized

churches and ministries may be part of the body of Christ, or they may not be. Jesus did not say that he would build a denomination, a charitable organization, a media ministry, a community congregation—he said he would build his church.



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The sign posted outside a building may claim that the activity and beliefs embodied in that building represent a viable part of Jesus and his gospel, but signs erected by humans are not the infallible sign of the body of Christ.

Above all, Jesus said that *love* is the sign of his church. Love—more than activities, deeds, programs, a congregation's size, or the beauty of the sanctuary, or the history of a denomination—more than anything, love is the sign of the body of Christ. “By this all men will know that you

are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35).

Is everyone who says they are a Christian a Christian? Of course not. If someone claims to love everyone and tolerate everything—does that assertion make them a Christian? If someone is never disagreeable, never objects to anything, never questions any teaching or activity of those in their own church or someone else's, does that willingness to agree with everyone make them a Christian? As the old cliché goes, “If we don't stand for something we will fall for anything.”

Not everyone who says or thinks they are a Christian is a Christian. Attending a church does not make someone a Christian. Believing in a creed, memorizing scriptures or keeping the ten commandments do not offer iron-clad, irrefutable proofs of authentic Christianity.

According to the Bible, only those who are born again, who accept new life from Christ, his own resurrected life, are authentic Christians. Can we always identify exactly who is and who isn't a Christian? No, we can't.

What makes us Christians? Our acceptance of the finished work of Jesus Christ. *Who* makes us Christians? God, who through his grace transforms us from our desperate lives in this flesh to the new life that Christ lives in us.

Jesus said that his church, his body, would survive the gates of hell. For all of our flaws and imperfections (and there have been many) we Christians have agreed on a number of core teachings over the centuries—and these common beliefs bind us together.

These are key teachings that Christianity has always affirmed, never renounced, even though Christians have always struggled with the implications of these essential beliefs. These doctrines confirm the work of the Holy Spirit as he has established the identity of Christians, past and present, throughout the universal body of Christ. These beliefs are the common denominators of our faith, which we will discuss in our next chapter.



The Real Church?

You may have wondered if you can be a Christian without attending a church. The answer is “yes.” It is not church attendance that makes someone a Christian, but placing their trust in Jesus, and his work on the cross. You can be a Christian without attending a church and still be a dynamic part of the body of Christ. All Christians—regardless of how, when or where they reflect the new life Jesus lives within them—are part of the universal body of Christ.

God has uniquely designed every believer to help the church body grow in some way. There are no “second string” Christians, those who just warm the bench while others do the important work. God has given each Christian some special and unique ability or gift of service to be useful to the whole body.

WILL THE “TRUE” CHURCH PLEASE STAND UP?

With such a dizzying array of churches to choose from, it can be difficult for people to know which church to attend, if any. Maybe you have been intimidated by the idea that you might end up in the “wrong” church.

Some groups that call themselves a “church” are not genuine Christian churches, leading to even more confusion. Some cultic groups use the word “church” in their name to attract the unwitting. Some Christian churches have doctrinal error and cultic characteristics. There are healthy, unhealthy and even toxic churches.

Remember that there is no “perfect” church. There is no such thing as “the only true” church.

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Groups of Christians join together in a variety of ways—ranging from loose-knit affiliations to highly organized, centralized structures. The body of Christ does not impose uniform structure on us, but allows us to associate with other Christians who share our own worship tastes, cultural distinctives and ministry interests.

As a result, you can find genuine disciples of Jesus in liturgical churches, as well as less traditional churches. Some churches are parts of large denominations, others are independent churches, not associated with any denomination.

There are several common denominators



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of a genuine Christian ministry or church—wherever it meets, and whatever it is called.

- The first common denominator is an intentional focus on the Bible as God's authoritative Word, and the guide for our daily living. The Bible is at the heart of the teaching and ministry of a healthy church.

- A healthy, Christ-centered church will not, on the other hand, worship the Bible as an idol. The Bible leads us to a living, dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ. Christians worship God alone, not paper and ink.

- A true church of Jesus Christ teaches and affirms that he is truly God, the perfect God/Man (Colossians 2:9, John 1:1, 14).

This is one of the essential core beliefs upon which many cults and heresies will part ways with the universal body of Christ. Those who deny that Jesus is fully God and fully man are not part of the real body of Christ. Belief in Christ's deity is essential to understand the importance of his death and resurrection, and ultimately our salvation.

If Jesus is not God, his death was merely a martyrdom, not an eternally perfect sacrifice for all time for our sins. If Jesus is not God, his words are not authoritative, and he is just one among many religious teachers in this world.

- A healthy, biblically sound, Christ-centered group will also affirm the Triune nature of God. Virtually every cult that claims to be Christian departs from the biblical description of God's nature. The Trinity is thus a watershed issue, separating authentic Christianity from counterfeits.

- A true church will also believe and affirm that a person is saved by grace through faith. It

is not by being good, or doing good works, or being "religious" that a person is granted forgiveness for sins and eternal life. Ephesians 2 verses 8 and 9 make it

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clear that "by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."

Though God certainly wants us to engage in good works, those good works do not save us. The good works of the body of Christ are performed not to appease God, but in gratitude for what he has already done for us.

Doing good deeds does not make someone a Christian—God miraculously delivers Christians into his church by spiritual re-birth. Spiritual re-birth is by grace alone. God's amazing grace is the central message of the true church.

- A true church will be Christ-centered. The focus of a true Christian church will be Jesus Christ, for he is the head of the body (Colossians 1:18). The church consists of the individual members of the body, but Jesus is the head of the body. He provides the direction, wisdom, power and resources.

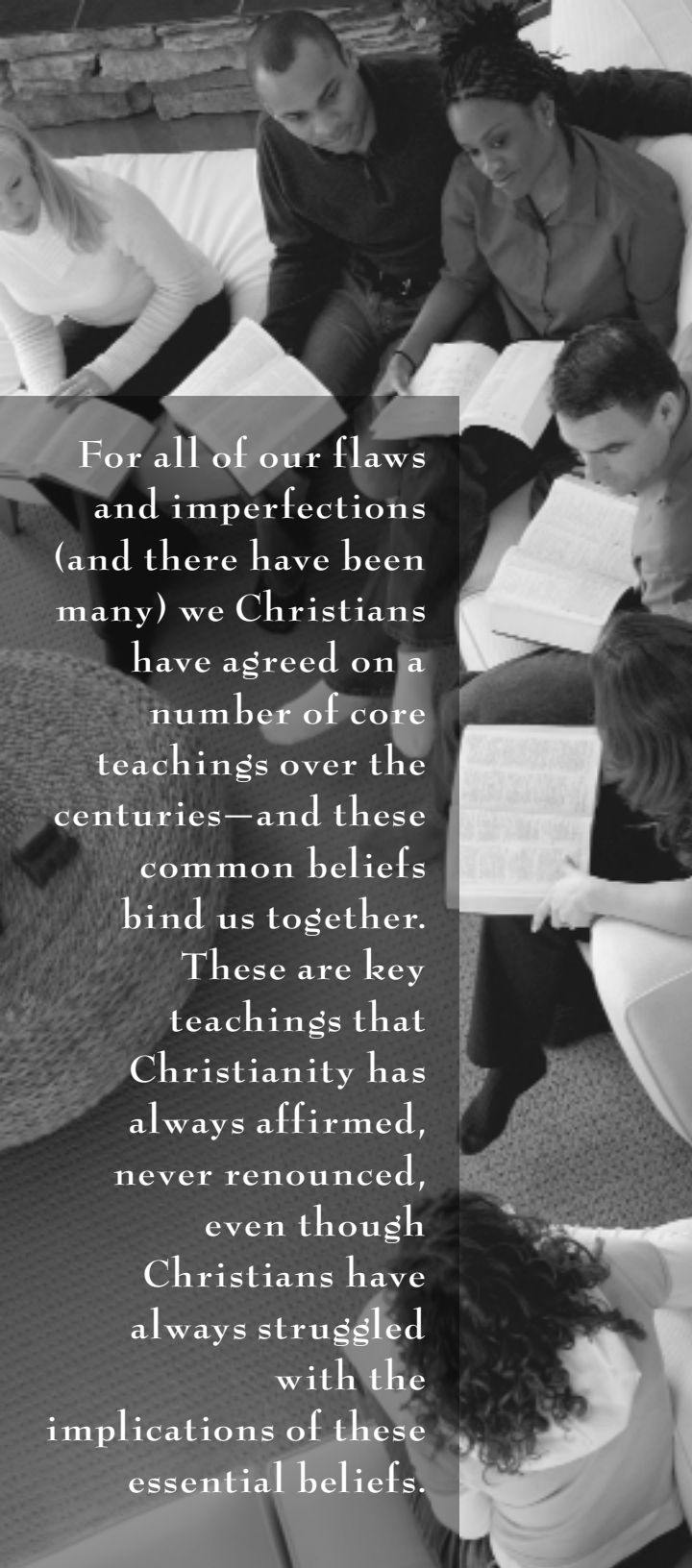
You may be a part of a church right now, but for a variety of reasons, you may find that you need to "change your spiritual address." In spite of what some churches may tell you, God will not be mad at you if you decide that you need to move to a healthier part of the universal body of Christ. And, there may be perfectly sound, biblically based reasons why you decide not to be a part of any organized spiritual entity for a period of time.

You may have had some horrible experiences with a group that called itself a church, and you may need some time while the Great Physician heals you. Remember, you don't become a member of the true church—a member of Christ's body—by signing up or by attending. To enter the kingdom of heaven, Jesus taught, we must be "born again" (John 3:3).

The true church is not entered by a physical door, or by attending membership classes, but by a spiritual re-birth where God joins you to his body, the church. This is why, sadly, there are people in churches who are not genuine Christians. They may have gone through all the external human stipulations for membership in a church, but they have yet to be truly born again.

Some are willing to do all that's necessary to be a part of what amounts to a religious club, but being a member in good standing of a religious club does not make us Christians.

For many centuries there was only one physical and outward way to be formally involved with the work of God's church on earth. There was only one church "corporation" for almost 1,000 years—then a split occurred between Christians in the West and those in the East.



For all of our flaws and imperfections (and there have been many) we Christians have agreed on a number of core teachings over the centuries—and these common beliefs bind us together. These are key teachings that Christianity has always affirmed, never renounced, even though Christians have always struggled with the implications of these essential beliefs.

Then, following the Protestant Reformation, the church of Jesus Christ mushroomed and grew. But still, national churches within countries seemed to be the sole external, visible, religious option for a believer.

When Christianity moved to North America, many varieties of Christianity thrived within the multi-cultural freedoms offered by democracy. However, this same fertile spiritual soil has also given birth to many cults and counterfeits of Christianity.

In addition to many biblically sound and Christ-centered churches available today (as distinct from cults) there are many para-church ministries that specialize in fulfilling a particular role and minister to specific needs within the body of Christ.

Many Christians today have fellowship with a formal church entity or a para-church ministry—or both—and are active parts of the universal church. For those who have had regrettable experiences with church groups—help, comfort and spiritual nurturing are available without the formal affiliation that may not be desired or needed. Far from being a weakness, this diversity within the authentic body of Christ is a real plus.

Somewhere near you there are several churches. They may be large, they may be small. Some of the churches may be formal and liturgical, some are spontaneous and informal.

Para-church ministries are even closer, on the internet, radio, magazines and in your mail box. In many of these parts of the body of Christ you will find a group of people growing in God's grace, in relationship with him. They are not perfect, they are in process, just like you.

If you have believed in Jesus, and have been born again, they are your family. They are a part of the body, just as you are.

Looking for God in All the Wrong Places

I'm sorry," my friend said, "but I'm worried about going to church. In the first place, I have had some bad experiences with churches in the past. What really worries me about going to church is the fear of the unknown. I don't dance, so I don't go to dances. It's the same with traditional churches. I don't know whether they will expect me to find passages in the Bible, whether they will chant, speak in tongues or raise their hands when they are singing. I'm worried about looking for God in all the wrong places!"

It reminded me of a story I once heard about a group of American sailors who were on shore leave in Italy. Even though none of them spoke Italian, they decided to go to church, because it might be a good place to meet girls. When they arrived at the cathedral, they picked out a dignified gentleman to sit behind. They agreed to do what he did, because he looked like he knew what he was doing. During the service, the priest made an announcement, and the man in front of them stood up. All eight sailors stood up as well, only to be greeted by roars of laughter from the congregation.

When the service was finally over, the sailors met the priest as they left. The priest, who also spoke English, shared with them what the congregation had found so funny during the service. "I announced a baptism," he explained, "and I asked the father of the child to stand."

You can be a Christian and not attend a church. But if you have had a bad church experience, don't write off all forms of worship. You may not wish to attend a formal, traditional



church, but there are other options that could help your relationship with God. You might choose a less structured small group, an informal Bible study or even worship with others electronically.

So, if you are like my friend, seeking God without all the religious stuff, what should you look for?

- Look for a part of the body of Christ where Jesus is the center and focus of the preaching and where the Bible is the final authority. If that doesn't happen, move on down the road.
- Examine the statements of faith and mission statements. Be sure you read the complete statement of beliefs, not an abbreviated version. Find out what they really believe. If you suspect some minimizing and diminishing of God's grace and the centrality of Jesus Christ, then question the leadership. Ask about their focus. Always challenge performance-based religion.

Be on guard for a pastor or church that tells you that everyone else is wrong. Watch for enticing rhetoric, which claims that no one else knows the "truth" except this group.

or religious group spends time and effort explaining a lot of stuff about the founder of the church or group, that's a huge red flag. If anyone other than God or the Bible is cited as a source of authority for behavior or doctrine, that's another red flag. Christianity is all about Jesus.

- Be on guard for a pastor or church that tells you that everyone else is wrong. Watch for enticing rhetoric, which claims that no one else knows the "truth" except this group. If you hear talk about special anointings, inside revelation and esoteric knowledge, head for the parking lot.
- Find out where the ministry or group stands on the historic Christian faith. A healthy church does not see itself or promote itself out-



Consider the extent of authority. Red flags should include authoritarian pastors who will not allow questions about their leadership or the direction of the ministry, movement or congregation.

side of and superior to what Christ has done here on earth for almost 2,000 years, but as a part of it. A healthy, well-balanced part of Christ's body finds its identity in Jesus and his body, the historic Christian faith. If a church finds its identity in some other way or in some other name, keep on looking, you haven't found a healthy church! If they talk about themselves as being a restoration of the truth that no one has experienced since the New Testament, don't stick around. Things will probably go downhill from there.

- Consider the extent of authority. Red flags should include authoritarian pastors who will not allow questions about their leadership or the direction of the ministry, movement or congregation. While there is no biblical model of church governance which will characterize authentic Christianity, the idea that leaders are exempt from accountability because they have a "spiritual covering" is a breeding ground for abuse and heresy. Keep looking. You can be almost certain that you haven't found authentic Christianity.

- Absolute and dictatorial control in the hands of a board that legislates and enforces religious legalism is just as bad as the same domination in the hands of one person. Authentic Christianity seems to function best with checks and balances, with all human leadership held accountable to standards, for the health and vitality of everyone it serves and the body of Christ at large.

Find out where the ministry or group stands on the historic Christian faith. A healthy church does not see itself or promote itself outside of and superior to what Christ has done here on earth for almost 2,000 years, but as a part of it.



If you suspect some minimizing and diminishing of God's grace and the centrality of Jesus Christ, then question the leadership. Ask about their focus. Always challenge performance-based religion.

- Find out how they talk about and treat those who leave. If this is part of authentic Christianity, people will not be browbeaten and threatened if they decide to change their spiritual address from one healthy part of the body of Christ to another.

- Be on guard for pastors who seem threatened by education or academic credentials. If education is derided and science characterized as evil, then the group claiming to be Christian has something to hide. Authentic Christianity is logical and coherent. It has nothing to hide and thrives on questions about all of its teachings.

- Sermons in a healthy church are centered in the Bible. The Bible is the source of the gospel, not shoe-horned as an afterthought into a feel-good lesson or experience.

- Look for Christ-centered substance, meaning and relevance. Be suspicious of glitz, entertainment for its own sake and an emphasis on emotional feeling.

- Beware of exotic manifestations, claims of unique prophetic insights, guarantees of wealth and healing and revival crusades that seem to be more hype than reality.

- A healthy part of Christ's body will accept the basic, fundamental and essential core doctrines of Christianity. Jude 3 tells us that the faith has been once and for all entrusted to the saints. Jesus said that the gates of hell would not prevail against his church. So we can look to the history of Christianity to find those teachings that have been examined, affirmed and re-affirmed, as well as issues that have been redefined and reformed.

- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, listen and look for grace. You will hear lots of sermons about grace in a healthy church. You will even witness and enjoy some gracious behavior. You will see, hear and experience Jesus, not religion. The health of an authentic part of Christ's body is directly related to its emphasis and insistence on God's grace.



Jesus, in founding the church, told us that the church is his body. The body of Christ. He is the head, and all Christians play a part. He told us in the book of John that we are a vine, and that we must be connected to him to grow.

What About Christians Who Don't Belong to or Attend a Traditional Church?

Question: I am a Christian, but I don't go to church or adhere to any orthodox creed, and I would not say I am a Catholic or Protestant. Most of the Christians I meet and know seem always to belong to a particular branch of Christianity. I lean on Jesus and I pray regularly and try to live in word and deed, as a Christian should. I would like your view on the many Christians who try, as honestly as they can, to live in the example of Jesus, without feeling the need to be a part of any church or organization.

Answer: Your question can be approached two ways—with two different answers—let me try them both:

You describe yourself as a denominationally non-involved Christian—is that possible? That is—do Christians need to be a member of a denomination? Of course, the answer is “no.” The Bible does not tell us that denominational affiliation is necessary for salvation. Your approach, as you describe it, is biblically defensible.

And there are some Christians who might need to have a non-organizational relationship with God for a while, because of their own personal history. The organized church is and has been a problem, primarily because Jesus, from the beginning of the church, decided to populate it with people and lead it with people. The church is a great idea—except for the people who compose it!

Because of people like you and me, the church is not perfect. However, many churches have excelled at being imperfect and have given God a bad name.

So—do we need a traditional church? On one hand, “no.” But on the other hand, we do. Being in a church is somewhat like being on Noah’s ark—the stench inside would be unbearable were it not for the roaring storm outside. Jesus, in founding the church, told us that the church is his body. The body of Christ. He is the head, and all Christians play a part. He told us in the book of John that we are a vine, and that we must be connected to him to grow.

Christians are not islands but are connected with each other in Christ. When we take communion, we not only take of the body and blood of Christ, and so become one with him, but we also express solidarity with all Christians everywhere—church-going or not.

The church is here for a purpose. One of the needs that media ministries like Plain Truth Ministries fulfill is to help people who are not regular church goers—believers and unbelievers alike. We thank God for many whom we serve who are members of a traditional church. We also thank him for many whom we serve who, for one reason or another, choose not to attend a geographically located church. For that reason, we offer weekly worship services at our online church without walls, *Christianity Without the Religion*.

Christians, by definition, are people in whom Jesus lives. Christ lives in us, not just for our personal benefit, but to equip us to help others. The body of Christ in all of its forms and roles, is a vital part of that commission and role. God will help each of us, as our relationship with him grows, to find where we fit within the body of Christ.

What if you never join a traditional church? Is eternity in jeopardy? Not at all. Your spiritual health and vitality may be helped or it may be hindered by any kind of organized Christianity.

Your eternity, the spiritual new life you have been given by God’s grace, is not arbitrated by other humans. Your personal relationship with Jesus Christ is the key to your spiritual health.

A New Kind Of Church

PTM sponsors and supports a healthy, Christ-centered and grace-based online church. Our church, *Christianity Without the Religion (CWR)*, is an online cyber-church. We are not a brick-and-mortar church that meets in a building, but a worldwide community of believers who live and work thousands of miles apart, yet who join together to worship God at *CWR*. Our church is a church without walls, because the body of Christ is *what* we are, not *somewhere* we go.

Many enjoy and profit from a ministry like PTM and a church like *CWR*, because of past unhealthy, dysfunctional experiences with a group or church that called itself Christian but was anything but. Many of these folks are burned out because they have endured “bad news religion.”

CWR is convenient, for there are many who are housebound who cannot travel to a building so that they may worship God. Others find it difficult to travel to church during the winter months. Still others find that *CWR* is convenient because their schedule doesn’t

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allow them to attend church on Sunday mornings. People who work in law enforcement, within medical and nursing establishments, who work in the restaurant industry, or in some form of public transportation are among those who need a church that is convenient for their schedule.



Many enjoy and profit from a ministry like PTM and a church like CWR, because of past unhealthy, dysfunctional experiences with a group or church that called itself Christian but was anything but.

PTM receives thousands and thousands of letters, phone calls and emails—cries for help. Many who contact us have dramatic needs, rising out of broken relationships and captivity to spiritual addictions. Many continue to wrestle with the impact of religious slavery. All to whom we minister are just like you and me—men and women who were dead in their sin, but who long to be alive in Christ, free

in him from all of the bondage of this world.

We stand for *Christianity Without the Religion*. Together we are able to do great things for God, to help encourage and minister to people around the world—watching with joy as he changes lives through our collective work. Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever—and it is this message we proclaim. We proclaim Christ and him crucified. May we recommit ourselves to being part of the body of Christ, and doing the job God has given us!