

Where is the Body of Christ?

My Search for True Christians

By Tom Cabeen

The material in this publication was prepared specifically to assist former Jehovah's Witnesses who, although they feel an earnest need for Christian associates, are uncomfortable with certain teachings and practices often found in organized churches to the extent that they feel that they cannot seek Christian fellowship in such a context. It compares ideas and practices presented by the Watchtower Society as marks of true religion in the light of historical and biblical evidence about the makeup and activities of the original apostolic Christian congregation. Its aim is not to imply that true believers must join an organized church to please God, but rather to present a wider range of options for conscientious believers, based on how some of these issues were handled by the apostles and other early Christians, and to help unify believers who decide on different courses of action.

Where is the Body of Christ?

As one of Jehovah's Witnesses, I grew up believing that I was a member of the only organization on earth that was truly patterned after the original Christian congregation. I believed that Jesus' earliest disciples were organized much as congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses are today, but that the original apostolic format had almost completely disappeared after the first century, only to be restored during the past hundred years or so, in anticipation of the imminent end of the present world and the beginning of a glorious new order of things. When I discovered that key teachings upon which that conclusion was based lacked clear biblical support, I began a course of study that ultimately resulted in a parting of the ways between the Watchtower Society and me.

Although I saw the flaws in my former religious association, I was certainly not ready to jump into a new one. At the same time, I would read passages which describe the beautiful fellowship of believers, such as Ephesians 4:11-13, and wanted to share in it. I enjoy being with other sincere and devout persons. There are so many denominations, each claiming to be Christian, but with big differences in structure, style and belief. I believed that the Christian Scriptures ought to be the standard for evaluating any fellowship of persons claiming to be Jesus' disciples, but there were many things taught and done in churches I could not reconcile with the Bible. I knew that in Scripture the first Christian disciples were called "the body of Christ" (1 Cor 12:27; Eph 1:22, 23). I liked that image and I deeply longed to be a part of that body. But I wasn't sure where to find them.

My wife Gloria and I continued to study the Bible privately and with other former Witnesses. We found that spiritually satisfying to a point. But our Christian association was limited mostly to former Witnesses, and in time felt we were spending too much time reviewing the errors of that movement. We wanted to focus more on Jesus' teachings. So we decided to broaden our Christian association.

We knew that most members of any church we might attend would hold diverse views of doctrinal and functional matters, and we were certainly not in need of "more of the same" focus on organized activities which characterizes the Watchtower Society. But when our oldest son began to attend school, many his friends and schoolmates did not receive the kind of moral guidance we believed to be appropriate. We wanted our children to have companions who at least were taught the same ethical values we believed. So, in spite of some misgivings, we began to look for a community of believers with which to associate. I know that many other former Witnesses have felt the same discomfort I felt in the search for Christian associates.

When we finally made the decision to attend a church, we saw many of the "flaws" so frequently and eloquently presented to Jehovah's Witnesses as evidence that all churches of "Christendom" are part of a world empire of false religion. I observed many of the same problems I had seen among the Witnesses. On the other hand, we also met and talked with kind, loving persons who earnestly studied the Bible and seemed to really want to please God and apply Jesus' teachings in their lives.

We continued to attend and listen and search. I began to learn why people believed or did some of the things they did. We began to study the Bible with some members of a church. Some of my

former views were replaced by new ones, some were not. I still believed that true Christians ought to pattern their behavior and attitudes after those of the congregations formed and directed by the apostles, and I wanted to find a group that was like that. But I didn't see many churches that seemed to measure up. In fact, I could see evidence to support the Watchtower teaching that the *real* Christian congregation went out of existence shortly after the death of the last apostle, John. But what if it did not disappear? Where did it go? Is it around today?

I decided to research the matter in more depth. I realized at the outset that I might have to give up some cherished patterns of thinking if I found that they were based on false premises. But I wanted the true picture of things. What I found surprised me, and the deeper I looked, the more surprised I was. But as I continued to examine the inspired Christian writings in the light of the abundant available historical evidence, a very different picture of the first Christians began to emerge from the one I was raised to believe. In many ways, my new perspective made much more sense. Many passages of Scripture took on a whole new meaning when viewed in a different light.

Frankly, it took years to adjust to a religious environment which was so much different from the one in which I grew up. I am still not completely comfortable with everything that goes on in churches, and probably never will be, but I better understand why things are as they are. More importantly, my view of persons who claim to be Christians but whose beliefs differ from mine is now, I believe, more solidly based on what the actual first-century congregation was like.

Is There One True Religion?

Even though I was disappointed by the teachings and performance of the Watchtower organization, I, like many former Jehovah's Witnesses, began my search for "the true religion" based on criteria I learned there. For example, the book *The Truth That Leads to Eternal Life* was released in 1968, just as I was making decisions about how I wanted to spend my life. Chapter 14, entitled "How to Identify the True Religion" opens with these words: "Logically there must be just one true religion." The chapter then discusses at length five "marks" presented as evidence that Jehovah's Witnesses are "the true religion." Twenty-nine years later, an article entitled "What Does God Require of Us?" briefly presented the same five identifiers (highlighted in boldface):

"Jehovah has a people on this earth, and he expects us to serve him along with them. ... How, though, can God's organized people be identified? According to the standards set out in the Scriptures, they have real **love** among themselves, they have deep **respect for the Bible**, they **honor God's name**, they **preach about his Kingdom**, and they are **no part of this wicked world**. (Matthew 6:9; 24:14; John 13:34, 35; 17:16, 17) There is only one religious organization on this earth that has all these marks of true Christianity —Jehovah's Witnesses!" —*The Watchtower*, 1/15/97 par. 21, 22

The marks presented seem valid enough, and are supported by Bible references. But the problem isn't in the marks themselves, but with how they are used. The Watchtower approach evaluates *organizations* rather than *individuals*. "Many church organizations of Christendom" are

compared with the Watchtower organization.

When one looks for a religious organization which meets certain requirements *as a group*, one really has no standard at all, for acceptance or rejection must always be based on evaluating a portion of the group. No group, even the Watchtower organization, can pass the test if every member must meet *all* the requirements *all* the time. For example, all Christians can and should strive both to show love and avoid contamination from the world. But can we quantify these things to determine definitively whether or not a particular individual is a genuine Christian based on adherence to them? To what degree do they do them? Who sets the standard to judge by? Can we ourselves measure up? The Watchtower approach is really only a way to build confidence in them as “God’s organization” while providing a basis to reject other religious organizations.

This “organizational” approach, when used by former Witnesses looking for Christian association, is almost certain to produce disappointment. If they attend a church and see members or leaders disagree openly about the meaning of passages of scripture; if the members seem overly focused on nonreligious or worldly activities, or if some member of the church engages in unchristian conduct without being publicly censured or expelled, they may conclude: “These people cannot be true Christians.” Many former Witnesses end up almost completely isolated from other Christians, never even attempting to find or associate with a community of believers.

As I continued my research, I discovered that my whole idea about religion was wrong. I had to change it. I was thinking of religion and denomination as pretty much the same thing, but I learned that this usage does not represent at all the concept of religion for early Christians. Even the idea of choosing between Christian denominations was unknown to them. It is not as if there were no associations to join back then. “Organization” is a relatively modern term, but people with common views and interests joined together in structured associations or societies in the first century just as they do today.¹

Ancient peoples worshiped various gods, but did not generally think of themselves as having a “religion” in the modern sense. Race, culture, national identity and religious views were totally interrelated. The Jewish national identity and behavior is inextricably rooted in their belief in the story of where they came from, of God’s role in their becoming a nation, and their relationship with Him. It has always permeated and influenced every part of Jewish life, culture and experience. Jews taught the same things to adults who wanted to convert to Judaism (proselytes) as they did to their own children:

“The regulations for the reception of proselytes, as developed in course of time, prove the eminently practical, that is, the non-creedal, character of Judaism. ... The aim of teaching was to convey a knowledge of the Law, obedience to which manifested the acceptance of the underlying religious principles; namely, the existence of God and the holiness of Israel as the people of his covenant. ... When foreigners wanted to live like the Jews did, they could do so by being instructed thoroughly in the behavioral requirements of the Law and the story of God’s interaction with the Jews, then by finally by being circumcised and entering into the covenant just like other Jews.”²

To Jews, “*religion*” was really reverence for God, as expressed by a life lived in obedience to His commands. “*Doctrine*” meant instruction in those commands and how to live in obedience to them.

So, in spite of the fact that religious associations were common in apostolic times, we find no discussion in the Greek Scriptures about identifying and joining the “right one.” Why? Because early Christians did not view accepting Jesus as Christ as equivalent to joining a religion. They were disciples or followers of a *person*, the resurrected Jesus Christ! They gathered with other believers, not to identify themselves as members of a particular group, but because they felt drawn by family relationship to fellow believers. Their discipleship of and relationship with Jesus was defined by changed attitudes and behavior.

Over a hundred years after the death of the apostle John, as Christianity was spreading, Tertullian said this to Scapula, Proconsul of Africa about Christians of his day:

“Though our numbers are so great—constituting all but the majority in every city—we conduct ourselves so quietly and modestly; I might perhaps say, [we are] known rather as individuals than as organized communities, and remarkable only for the reformation of our former vices.”

Was Christianity A New Religion?

Jews firmly believed that God had established the Jewish system. When the promised Messiah appeared and was rejected by Jewish leaders, that did not mean that Judaism had failed. Even though many Jews were unfaithful, God kept his promises given through the faithful Jewish prophets. To the contrary, Judaism had succeeded magnificently, and was moving into its grand Messianic era!

Jesus was righteous, holy and sinless, and the Jewish system of his day, including its leaders, was far from perfect. In spite of this, he performed every part of his ministry entirely within the context of Judaism. He “went around throughout the whole of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the good news of the kingdom.” (Matt 4:23) “According to his custom on the Sabbath day, he entered into the synagogue.” (Luke 4:16; compare Mark 1:39; Luke 4: 44) Later, “Jesus set out on a tour of all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the good news of the kingdom.” (Matt 9:35) Many of his miracles were performed in synagogues.— Matt 12:9; Luke 13:10

The first Christians were all Jews. When they became followers of Jesus, they kept much of the Jewish perspective. There was nothing in Judaism which was in conflict with Christianity. Jesus, the Christ, was also the perfect Jew. So one could be a good Jew and a Christian at the same time. The focus remained on how God wanted His people to behave.

Was there any reason for the disciples to feel a need to abandon Judaism? I looked for evidence that early Christians continued to meet in synagogues and live as Jews. I reread Luke’s account in Acts and found it. Beginning at Pentecost, the apostles and other Jewish Christians zealously encouraged fellow Jews to accept Jesus as Messiah. They could do this so much more easily if

they remained in association with them. The readings and discussions that took place each Sabbath in every synagogue provided many opportunities for them to discuss the scriptural proofs that Jesus was truly the Messiah.

By the late forties or so, even Pharisees had become disciples. (Acts 15:5) When Paul visited Jerusalem in the mid-fifties, James summed up the situation like this: “You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and *all of them are zealous for the law.*”³—Acts 21:20; also compare Acts 24:5, 6, 14, 28:22

But didn't Jesus foretell that his followers would be thrown out of synagogues? Yes, but apparently that didn't happen right away. Jewish leaders persecuted Christians, but it appears that most Christian Jews continued to live and function mostly within the Jewish community at least until the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Shortly prior to that time, when traditional Jews rebelled against Rome, Christian Jews refused to join them. Instead, when they saw Jerusalem “surrounded by encamped (Roman) armies,” they obeyed Jesus' command to flee. Most went to live in Pella. Many traditional Jews viewed them as traitors, calling them *minim* (apostates or heretics). Eventually, these traditional Jews added a curse to the eighteen benedictions which were read each Sabbath, condemning any Jew who professed belief in Jesus as Messiah. The very fact that they did that confirms that many Jews believed in Jesus. Otherwise, there would have been no need for such drastic action.

If early Christians continued to function within the Jewish system, what does that mean? To me it means that if we choose to associate with people who claim to be God's people, but see things differently than we do, especially if we desire to help them, we are like many early Christians. Association with unbelieving Jews did not contaminate them nor make them sharers in the Jewish national rejection of Jesus. What made them different was how they understood and reacted to the identity and work of Jesus.

What was new for Christian Jews was their understanding of how to put themselves right with God. Instead of relying on animal sacrifices or scrupulous observance of the Law, they came to see that only the death of their Messiah, God's Son, had the power to permanently set them free. They learned that God was willing to accept Jesus' death as a “once for all time” atoning sacrifice for their sin. With cleansed consciences, they could walk with God living lives of godly conduct as a result. (See Rom 6)

Early Christians did not view themselves as becoming members of a “new religion,” but that the Messiah had arrived and that they were thus moving on into the next part of the outworking of God's purpose and ongoing fulfillment of His promises to Abraham. They did not view their unbelieving fellow Jews as worshipers of a false god. They saw them as people in need of the message about Jesus as Messiah, who needed to see the vital role he played in the outworking of God's purposes. So, in spite of persecution or opposition, they kept encouraging their fellow Jews to examine the evidence for themselves and accept Jesus as the Messiah. To do that, they had to continue in association with them if at all possible.

The first Christians obeyed Jesus' commands in response to what God had done for them. (2 Pet 1:3-8) They did not focus on organizational structure, tradition, external rites, unique interpretations or novel explanations of Scripture passages. This same pattern of obedience, practical faith and righteous conduct was imitated by Gentile Christians as the message of Jesus spread through the Roman Empire. It has always been the mark of true Christians. It can still be followed by any disciple of Jesus Christ today. Why? Because anyone, anywhere, in any circumstance, can imitate the first Christian disciples of Jesus. Like them, anyone can define his or her Christianity in terms of *relationship* rather than creeds, interpretations or membership. The effect of that relationship is seen in changes of behavior, not membership in a religious organization or denomination.

Respect for God's Word

As a matter of interest, the Bible always applies the term "respect" to people, never to written materials. Jews always had the greatest regard for their Scriptures, so there was little need for Jesus or his disciples to argue as to the inspiration or validity of their sacred writings. If there was any question connected with those writings, it was as to what they *meant*, not what they *said*. The same is true today.

It is also important to note that the apostles and other early Christians did not think of "God's Word" as referring primarily to a collection of scrolls containing sacred writings, nor as a book which they could purchase in a bookstore or hold in their hand.

Today, because of the wide availability of the Sacred Hebrew and Christian writings, people may confuse respect for the book for obedience to God's expressed will. Some may try to show respect by loyalty to a particular Bible translation, such as the *Authorized (King James) Version* or the *New World Translation*. Others may unquestioningly accept particular interpretations of Scripture.

First-century Christians thought of God's Word as *his message or revelation to his people*. For the first few decades after the founding of the Christian congregation, the only sacred writings used by Christians were the Hebrew Scriptures. When they discussed the Scriptures at their meetings, it was evidently most often from memory. In the apostles' day there were still many people living who had known and spoken with Jesus during his earthly ministry. They could recount and discuss things they had seen and heard.

As time went by, Christians began to write things they knew about Jesus. Mark's gospel, considered by many scholars as the first to be written, was most likely penned a decade or two after Pentecost. Since he did not personally witness all the events included in it, Mark had to base it partly on information from eyewitnesses, including much from the apostle Peter, of whom he was a traveling companion and friend. Matthew and Luke also wrote gospels, each with a specific audience in mind. As congregations formed, the apostles and others wrote letters to them. Most of Paul's epistles were written on an "occasional" basis, when a particular situation called for some communication. That's why so many of them address specific problems in a single congregation or area.

The inspired Christian writers referred to the Hebrew Scriptures often, but they sometimes did not quote from the original Hebrew text. Not only did they write in Greek, they quoted from the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (now abbreviated LXX). Occasionally they quoted from the writings known today as the Apocrypha. It seems that they were not as interested in sticking to the traditional language or wording as they were in persuasively and clearly communicating the message about Jesus Christ and His identity as Messiah and Son of God.— John 20:30, 31

I was surprised to learn that these sacred Christian writings were not immediately compiled into an “official” sacred library as they were written. Also, all did not accept their validity equally. How likely is it that the “superfine apostles” in Corinth (who seem to have had positions of leadership) would have viewed Paul’s letters as inspired messages from God? Although they were widely viewed as inspired and authoritative, there is evidence that even the apostolic letters to individual congregations were not immediately copied and shared with all Christians in the first century (Col 4:16). But they were preserved, so Christians have had them through the centuries.

“The Bible” for first century Christians was what is now commonly known as the Old Testament. John’s gospel was not even penned until near the very end of the apostolic period. Many first century Christians did not have copies of all of Paul’s letters. In fact, few if any first century believers or even congregations had anything resembling today’s collection of inspired Christian writings. So it is possible, if not likely, that many early Christians had only one or perhaps two of the gospels from which to learn about Jesus, and a letter or two from an apostle.

The collection of scrolls associated with a specific congregation and considered by Christians there to be inspired and authoritative differed somewhat from area to area. Sometimes the collections included scrolls which are not now part of the “approved” Christian canon of Christian writings. One such scroll was the Didaché or “Teachings of the Apostles.” Some of the writings of men now called the Apostolic Fathers were viewed by many as inspired. Although there was much agreement all along, the final collection or canon was not widely agreed upon until at least three hundred years after Pentecost.

What is the meaning of all this? Of course, we should use whatever resources we have to learn what God has done for us, and what he wants us to do. But “God’s Word” means much more than a book. It is a divine revelation of how he wants us to live, not a book of religious philosophy or a reference book to support complex theological concepts. It includes the story of how Jesus, the Son of the living God, was sent to rescue us from a worthless lifestyle and remake us in his own godly image.

In 1978, I obtained a copy of *The Good News Bible (Today’s English Version)*. I decided to read it from beginning to end. I had grown up with the *New World* and memorized many passages from it. Its language and expressions were familiar. When I began to read the *Good News Bible*, I found at times that the message conveyed seemed to be so different. When I read the same

passage in the *New World Translation*, I would find that words I was familiar with could also be understood another way. In that case, the result was a different message. Slowly it dawned on me that I had learned many verses or passages only as support for a particular interpretation. From then on, every time I read that verse or passage, the interpretation I had learned would jump right into my head.

That was a good lesson for me. I began to try to look “through” the words and phrases to really get the *message* of Scripture. Reading the same passages in different translations was of great help. Words can mean different things as the culture and context and hearer change. As time went on, my first step in trying to understand the message of Scripture was to try to see the message in the original context. This changed my whole perspective on the Bible, and opened up a new world of understanding.⁴

I thought at one time that I respected God’s Word because I could quote many verses from memory and had learned explanations for some difficult passages. I was willing to live in accord with my understanding of Scripture. But I came to realize that I had in many cases merely accepted someone else’s interpretations and explanation of things. I have come to believe that the basic message of the Bible is simple and straightforward, and that God will help all sincere seekers to find the way to an acceptable relationship with Him, as explained in the sacred Scriptures. “Respect for God’s Word,” then, is really “obedience to his commands” (2 John 6). *It means getting to know how God wants us to live and living in harmony with him, accepting His arrangement through Jesus to reconcile us with Himself.*

Honoring God’s Name

One thing that distinguished Jews from pagans is that Jews had only one God. Their God had a name, written as four Hebrew letters (the tetragrammaton), transliterated Yahweh or Jehovah. Ancient Israelites used it in everyday speech. Not only does it appear over six thousand times in the sacred Hebrew writings, but forms of it appear as part of many Israelite names.

After the Jews were exiled in Babylon nearly six hundred years before Jesus’ birth, there was a change in their use of the divine name. Gradually it began to be viewed as too holy to pronounce. After Jews were dispersed throughout the pagan world, many who returned to Israel from the exile spoke Aramaic instead of Hebrew. By the time the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek a century or two before Jesus’ birth, the Greek word *kyrios* (lord) was widely used in place of the Hebrew divine name. Nearly all scholars agree about this.

Solid historical and biblical evidence suggests that common use of the divine name had completely disappeared by Jesus’ day. By the second century few Christians even thought of God as having a name. Justin Martyr (born around 100 A.D.) wrote: “to the Father of all, who is unbegotten, there is no name given. ... Father and God, and Creator, and Lord, and master, are not names, but appellations derived from His good deeds and functions.”⁵ His view was typical of early Christians, who universally expressed that no one knew the name of the Father. They did not view the Hebrew tetragrammaton to be the only “correct” ancient name of God. In all the thousands of pages of writings left behind by Christian writers in the second to fourth century,

covering the whole range of Christian teachings, Clement of Alexandria (born around 150 A. D.), is the only one of the pre-Nicene writers to even mention it. He calls it “the mystic name...by which those alone who had access to the Holy of Holies were protected...”⁶

What does this mean? One thing is clear: Jesus was viewed as the divine Son of God the Eternal Father and the only one through which the Father could be accessed. (Rom 5:1; Eph 2:18) Early Christians did not transliterate the Hebrew name of God into Greek, nor focus attention on the Father to the exclusion of his official representative, Jesus Christ. Jesus represented his Father perfectly, and was given all authority in heaven and earth, so their focus on Jesus in no way detracted from his Father, for it was the Father’s will that all honor the Son just as they honor the Father: “He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.” (John 5:23) Jesus, in fact, said that they would be *his* witnesses to the most distant part of the earth. (Acts 1:8) *That is why Jesus’ followers were called Christians.* They were his servants, for Jesus said: “My Father will honor the one who serves me.”—John 12:26

The Good News of the Kingdom

At the time of the Babylonian exile, God performed a miracle in connection with the king of Babylon. It showed the Jews that God is always in charge of everything, even when people do not submit willingly to his rulership, and that he can appoint anyone he wants to as ruler (Dan 4:32, 34, 35). The Jews believed that the Messiah would receive that kingdom. But in addition to being King, Jesus was also a Savior and Redeemer. Through him, complete reconciliation with God was announced for the very first time. The message about how this was to come about was called “the good news of God’s kingdom.” Jesus “went around throughout the whole of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the good news of the kingdom.” (Matt 4:23)

Peter explained the good news to curious Jews who witnessed the unusual behavior of Jesus’ disciples at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-36):

“The “last days” are here (vs 14-20). Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord can be saved (vs 21). Jesus was the promised Messiah. The powerful works he did prove it (vs 22). His execution as a criminal was foreknown by God and accomplished His purpose (vs 23). God raised Jesus to life, as foretold by the Hebrew prophets (vs 24-32). Exalted to God’s right hand, he received Holy Spirit from the Father and poured out what they witnessed (vs 33-35). God made the resurrected Jesus both Lord and Christ. (vs 36)”⁷

Peter did not specifically use the word “kingdom” in this passage, but his concluding references to Psalm 110 (vss. 33-36) show that the message was intimately connected with Christ’s rulership. He knew what Gabriel had announced to Mary: “[Jesus] will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.” (Luke 2:32, 33) He heard Jesus say, shortly before going to a mountaintop with James and John where he saw Jesus transfigured, “some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” (Matt 16:28) After the resurrection, he heard Jesus announce: “All authority has been given me in heaven and on the earth.”—Matt 28:18

The Jews who heard him got the message. They had long awaited their Messiah or Anointed One. For them it was good news to hear that he had arrived and, although his own people had put him to death, God had raised and exalted Jesus to His own right hand, where he ruled as king. As such he was capable of making peace between them and God. This was wonderful news!

Psalm 110 is quoted often by the inspired Christian writers. Early Christians universally believed that Psalm to be fulfilled, and they understood it to mean that Jesus was actively ruling as king. (Col 2:9, 10; Eph 1:18-23; Col 1: 12-14; 1 Pet 3:21, 22) When Paul cited it in a letter to the Corinthians, he even substitutes the term “rule as king” for “sit at God’s right hand”:

Next, the end, when he hands over the kingdom to his God and Father, when he has brought to nothing all government and all authority and power. For he must rule as king until [God] has put all enemies under his feet. As the last enemy, death is to be brought to nothing.”—1 Cor 15:24-26 NW

There was no authority left to give Jesus at some future time. He had it all! So the good news is, and always has been, the message about reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ, God’s Son; about his work and teachings, the significance of his sacrificial death and resurrection and his ongoing activity as high priest and king. (Mark 1:1) “Salvation through Jesus Christ” was the good news preached throughout the Roman Empire by the apostles and other early Christians.

How Early Christians Evangelized

“Evangelization” means to tell good news. The fact that Jesus had begun to rule was good news that needed to be told to everyone. Jesus commanded his followers to “make disciples of people of all the nations.” The spread of Christianity shows that they obeyed his command. What methods did they use? They followed the pattern set by their Master. Jesus spoke most often in synagogues or private homes (Matt 4:23; 9:35; 26:6; Mark 1:29; 14:3). Sometimes he spoke in the open (Matt 5-7) or in the temple courts (Mark 12:35; 14:49). His disciples did the same. From Pentecost on they “were in constant attendance at the temple with one accord, and they took their meals in private homes.” (Acts 2:46)

A Christian could contact every family in a Jewish community at the synagogue. No Jew, including Jesus’ followers, would forego regular synagogue attendance. The services held there several times a week presented many opportunities to share the good news about Jesus Christ.

How did they preach to Gentiles? Jews did not visit Gentiles in their homes. It is unlikely that even Christians would have gone to a Gentile home uninvited. It took direct intervention by God to get Peter to visit Cornelius in his home, a fact Peter mentions: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection.” (Acts 10:28, 29) Peter had great difficulty changing his deeply-ingrained ways. Paul told the Galatians that “before certain men came [to Antioch] from James, [Peter] used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.”—Gal 2:12

But doesn't the Bible say that "every day in the temple and from house to house they continued without letup teaching and declaring the good news about the Christ, Jesus"? (Acts 5:42) Yes, but the Greek words translated "from house to house" here are exactly the same words translated "in private homes" in Acts 2:46, which describes the disciples' habit of sharing meals in their homes. It means the same in Acts 20:20; "in houses" or privately. Paul taught the Christian elders in Ephesus both in public (including at the synagogue; see Acts 18:19) and in their homes, in the same way that Aquila and Priscilla had spoken to Apollos. (Acts 18:26)

I was surprised to learn that nearly all first century Jews were zealous proselytizers, actively trying to convert Gentiles to Judaism. Often this occurred in synagogues. There were thousands of synagogues scattered throughout the Middle East. Meetings there were open to the public, and many Gentiles attended regularly to hear the Hebrew Scriptures read and explained. Many believed in the God of the Jews, although some did not become proselytes or get circumcised.⁸ How did this situation come about?

In the centuries before Christ, the Greeks taught the people they conquered (including the Jews) the Greek language and culture. As Greek philosophers popularized "truth seeking", ordinary people from different cultures began to take great interest in new ideas, especially religious ones (Acts 17:21).⁹ Fascinated by the Jews' story of one God who created heaven and earth, they wanted to learn more about this all-powerful God. To do so, they went to synagogues. There, readings from the Hebrew Scriptures provided many opportunities for Christian Jews to teach the good news about Jesus Christ. A Christian could find every religious-minded person in the community—Jew and Gentile alike—at the local synagogue. Since very few private individuals had a personal copy of the Hebrew Scriptures, anyone wanting to learn what they taught had to go to a synagogue, or hear it from someone who had attended synagogues often enough to memorize passages of Scripture.

Although specifically called to preach to Gentiles, when Paul began evangelizing in a new community, he normally went first to the synagogue (Acts 13:5; 14:1; 17:1-3, 10, 17; 18:4). He was able to preach to both "Jews and Greeks" there. (Acts 18:4) Paul often quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures in letters addressed to congregations which contained significant numbers of Gentiles. These Gentile believers must have been familiar with those Scriptures for those quotations to be authoritative. The only way that could have happened is if the Gentiles associated regularly with Jews in synagogues, where they could hear the Hebrew Scriptures read and discussed every Sabbath. Cornelius, the first Gentile Christian, was probably one of these.

One Faith, One Hope, One Baptism

Paul certainly did not view Gentile Christians as members of a different new religion which would one day replace Judaism. In his view, Gentiles were *becoming* "Jews," joining faithful natural Israelites as fellow members of God's household:

"Formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" ... were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But

now in Christ Jesus ... you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household."— Eph 2:11-13, 19 (Compare Rom 2:25-29)

In his letter to the Romans (11:17-24), Paul compares true Israel (natural Jews with faith like Abraham) to an olive tree which had "unfaithful" branches (unbelieving natural Jews) cut off and replaced by the branches of a wild olive (believing Gentiles). The cultivated tree remains. It is not replaced by a new, wild olive tree; rather, it is pruned and new branches grafted onto the original tree.

All Christians were to be one body, all share one Lord, one faith, one baptism. (Eph 4:4-6) Every Christian in the first century, Jew and Gentile alike, believed that all the blessings promised through the Messiah were to be shared by all Christians.

Jehovah's Witnesses, like Baptists, practice full immersion of believers. In this, they follow the practice of early Christians. But Witnesses differ in their understanding of the meaning of baptism. Early Christians connected baptism with membership in Christ's body, with all the privileges of the new covenant immediately applicable to them:

"Jesus answered, 'I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.'"—John 3:5

"Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"—Acts 2:38

"You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."—Gal 3:26-29

These passages make it clear that there was to be no distinction whatsoever among Christians. Paul repeatedly taught the importance of breaking down the barriers that separated believers, including Jew and Gentile (Eph 2:14). His letters show that, in spite of different ways of looking at many religious matters, including the need for the observance of certain rituals and the significance of foods that had been sacrificed to idols, early Christians from diverse backgrounds were to meet together.

While still on earth ministering to Jews only, Jesus had told his disciples "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They, too, will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd." (John 10:16) Doubtless he was here referring to the Gentiles, who would shortly thereafter be invited to become his sheep also. Shared faith in Jesus Christ was to unify his followers as "one flock" with "one shepherd."

The Lord's Evening Meal

All Christians in the first century were baptized, in obedience to Jesus' command (Matt 28:19). Because they all considered themselves under the new covenant, all shared the special meal which came to be called "the Lord's Evening Meal" the memorial meal. —1 Cor 11: 17-34

In the first century, this meal was not very much like the celebrations observed either among Jehovah's Witnesses or most churches. On a regular basis, possibly each week after the Sabbath ended,¹⁰ the disciples gathered together in private homes to share a meal. Both believers and interested parties would have been invited. Paul's comments about it, cited above, show that this was a real meal, not a symbolic one. Among Jews it would have begun by breaking bread and ended by passing a common cup of wine.¹¹

These meals were sometimes called "love feasts" (Jude 12), which suggests that they were generally happy occasions where believers ate together, enjoyed fellowship, discussed passages of Scripture, sang sacred songs, prayed and thanked God for his blessings. These meetings were a practical way for fellow believers to encourage, refresh and care for each other, and to share material things with those who were needy. (1 John 3:16-18) Groups were relatively small, for they had to fit in the dining room of a private home. Most likely, there were rarely more than about thirty people in attendance.

Among the writings of early Christians, there is no trace of any idea of two classes of Christians, one of which participates fully in the blessings of the new covenant, and another class which does so only in a secondary way, by associating with the first. This teaching is based partly on a literal interpretation of a number which appears three times in the Revelation. It was first announced by J. F. Rutherford in the twentieth century. When John received the Revelation around the end of the first century, there were hundreds of thousands of Christians, even by conservative estimates. All considered themselves to be anointed, born-again participants in the new covenant. So either Rutherford was an inspired prophet revealing something genuinely new, or he was seriously in error.

As a result of what Rutherford taught, millions of Jehovah's Witnesses believe themselves to be outside the new covenant, and as a result disobey one of Jesus' most specific commands to his followers: "Do this in remembrance of me," that is, "Take and eat, this is my body" and "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."—Luke 22:19; Matt 26:27-28

This meal served as a constant reminder that Jesus Christ had died for their sins, and that they were all one body in him. Participation was not to distinguish one as part of an elite group among Christians. It was not to divide believers but to unite them! It required that they accept all believers as equals before God.

If people with differing views about things make us feel uncomfortable, imagine what it must have been like for these believers! Although the Jewish Law commanded kindness toward Gentiles, in the first century most Jews had no friendly interaction of any sort with Gentiles.

Gentiles were allowed, even invited, to attend the synagogue services, but they could only listen and observe, not participate. How strange it must have felt for them to be invited into the private homes of Christians, to share meals and participate in discussions of the Scriptures!

It is difficult for us to imagine how differently conservative Jewish Christians must have viewed certain matters compared with their Gentile brothers and sisters. Obedience to Jesus' command to share a common meal meant an enormous change in thinking and behavior. But they had to do so, for they were all one in Christ.

If Jews had to make adjustments in attitude, early Gentile Christians did, too. In Roman society, well over half of the population were slaves. Slaves were expected to behave differently from free people. Imagine how difficult it was for a Roman citizen and his or her slave to sit down together and share a meal as equals! And yet that is what Jesus expected of them (Compare Philemon 15-17). Becoming disciples required changes by everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, with the goal of bringing everyone together in Christ.

In any community of believers, we do well to focus on how to help others, and on things we have in common rather than those on which we disagree. Jesus found listening ears within the largely unresponsive community of Israelites in his day. He associated with sinners, and so can we. We have no reason to fear being with persons who are not who they ought to be, as long as we do not join them in unchristian attitudes and actions, and they do not try to prevent us from living a Christian life in obedience to God.

No Part of the World

At one time I believed that I was a member of the only true religion on earth. I believed all other religious organizations to be false, even those claiming to be Christian. As discussed above, I now believe that the issue at stake is not about selecting from among religious organizations, but showing reverence for God by obedience to him in imitation of Jesus Christ.

Still, Jesus' followers are to be different from the world around them. About his disciples, he prayed, "They are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it." (John 17:14-16)

James said that "true religion" means keeping ourselves "without spot from the world." I was taught from my youth up that the way to do that was by strict non-participation in a whole list of "pagan" practices and activities which I believed could contaminate me, including celebrating any birthday or holiday, saluting any nation's flag, or standing for the singing of the national anthem. Such practices, I was told, had pagan connections, and participation in them was false worship. As time went on, I began to question the meaning and validity of that view. What, exactly, makes some act or perspective "pagan"? If I perform some act which a pagan also performs, does that also make me a pagan? Can an act or celebration be "pagan" in itself, so that any type of observation of it would make one a pagan? I needed to address these questions as I

began to associate with Christians who did participate in celebrations that had pagan connections.

Is it possible for us to rid ourselves of everything even remotely connected with paganism? What constitutes a meaningful or significant “connection”? Much of the culture of the whole world has been shaped by pagan influences of one sort or other. In many Western countries, the days of the week and months of the year are named for pagan deities. Money may have symbols on it first used by pagans. Even practices like shaking hands and wearing wedding rings originated among pagans. In a similar vein, an item (a statue of Buddha, for example) may be viewed by some as art but worshiped by others. Do these things constitute a danger to Christians? If so, what is it?

To answer that question, I went in search of indications as to how early Christians handled that issue. Their world, especially outside Israel, was thoroughly pagan. According to *A History of Pagan Europe*,¹² pagans hold three characteristics in common:

They believe that there are multiple divine beings or gods.

They believe that there is both a male and female divine principle; both God and Goddess.

They believe that all nature is a theophany or manifestation of divinity; that all things, living and nonliving, are divine within themselves, not by virtue of having been created by a divine being.

With this in mind, I began to think less in terms of *things* being Christian or pagan, and more about the beliefs and behavior of *persons*; in particular how people worshiped, *what they did* and *why*, especially as a way to please or appease their gods. Pagan worship took many forms, including the ritual sacrifice of animals or humans, performing various types of sexual acts, or eating and drinking to excess.

Most pagans did not have a specific moral code such as the one in the Jewish law. In the ancient pagan world, immoral behavior (from the Judeo-Christian perspective) was common. Not only were there few sanctions against it, there was often not even a sense among the general pagan populace that doing such things would in any way affect their standing with their gods. In pagan myths, their gods themselves did the same kinds of things. According to one historian,

“In heathen times, a man would have been regarded as of exceptional goodness if he practiced those homely duties which an ordinary Christian gentleman would now count himself disgraced if he failed in. When Pliny [a first century Roman] set himself to inquire what was the *sacramentum* [oath, sacraments or sacred rites] administered to Christians at their meetings before daylight, [he learned] that the disciples then pledged themselves to what seems to us very elementary morality, that is, that they were not to rob or steal, not to commit adultery, not to break their word, and if the money of others were entrusted to them, not to appropriate it to themselves.”¹³

From very ancient times, the Jews were rightly proud of the high moral standards taught in their Law. Their prophets, from Moses on, spoke out against the worship of idols (very often connected to such things as child sacrifice), sexual immorality, drunkenness and other loose conduct. Christians were also to avoid such things. In fact, Christianity had an even higher

standard, for the love taught by Jesus demands that we put the interests of others ahead of our own, even if we suffer inconvenience or loss as a result. That is what comes into focus when Paul considers the issue of contamination by paganism.

One way in which first century pagans worshiped their gods was to bring an animal such as a goat or bull to the temple of a particular god, dedicate it to that deity, then kill and eat it. According to Albert Barnes,¹⁴

“When those sacrifices were made to pagan gods, a part of the animal was given to the priest that officiated, a part was consumed on the altar, and a part (probably the principal part) was the property of him who offered it. This part was either eaten by him at home, as food which had been in some sense consecrated or blessed by having been offered to an idol; or it was partaken of at a feast in honor of the idol; or it was in some instances exposed for sale in the market in the same way as other meat.”

Was there even a possibility that a Christian could purchase and eat such meat without contamination? Yes, Paul says, for in itself, the act of eating meat is not out of harmony with God’s revealed will nor does it require disobedience to any of God’s direct commands. That was not the issue Paul raises. Instead it was an issue rarely considered by either Jews or pagans—putting others’ rights ahead of our own.

Paul does not focus on contamination by contact with an object directly involved in pagan worship or performing some act also performed by pagans. Instead, he focuses on a Christian’s responsibility to avoid wounding the conscience of another. How could this happen? To a person who considers an idol to be nothing, the meat was in reality not contaminated at all. If an idol or a false god is nothing, meat cannot be influenced or contaminated by it. But someone who had often eaten meat consecrated in that very way might still consider eating such meat as an act of worship to a pagan god. Paul showed that we ought to consider the consciences of others. But he left the decision about eating to the conscience of each individual.

“Everything is permissible”—but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible” —but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others. Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it.” If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. But if anyone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, both for the sake of the man who told you and for conscience’ sake — the other man’s conscience, I mean, not yours. ... So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. —1 Corinthians 10:23-31

What is the point here? A person does not become a sharer in paganism either through contact with items used in pagan worship nor by performing some act also performed by pagans (even if that act is performed as worship), as long as the activity itself is not in violation of God’s expressed will in regard to the conduct of his servants. What really distinguishes the Christian from the unbeliever is the willingness to put the needs of others ahead of his or her own. Jesus’ teachings ought to have such an influence on us that, not only do we avoid conduct that violates

the rights of others (1 Thess 4:1-7), but our attitude changes so much that we take a positive stance, actively looking out for the good of others putting their needs ahead of our own. (Phil 2:3, 4) *The importance of unselfish interest in others, even at great cost to ourselves, is one of the basic lessons of Jesus' entire life, death and resurrection.*

So separation from the world does not mean avoiding any act that “worldly” people do. It means practicing a new kind of behavior, seeking to imitate the unselfishness of our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. God’s Spirit at work in us produces fruits that are appropriate under all circumstances (Gal 5:22, 23). Our whole focus changes from “ourselves” to “others” as a result of our belief in Jesus Christ. That change, lived out in our lives, makes us very different from “the world” of ungodly people in which we live.

I once believed that the command to “come out” of Babylon the Great in the Revelation given at the very end of the first century meant avoiding all connections with any “false religion.” But, as explained above, I learned that early Christians did not view “religion” in that way. So what did Babylon represent, and how could we get out of her? The command was addressed to Christians, most of whom were either Jews or closely associated with Jews. They did not interpret Babylon to be a “world empire of false religion.” They did not view Judaism as a false religion which they had to abandon when they became Christians, or Jews who still had not accepted Jesus as false worshipers (Rom 3:1, 2). Early Christians understood Babylon to mean Rome; not just the city, but the empire, which included religious, political and commercial elements.¹⁵ It represented “the world” of which Jesus’ kingdom was no part (Jn 18:36). Jesus’ true followers abandon worldly conduct and attitudes, as Paul explains: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”—Rom 12:2

Up to this point, we have examined four of the five marks put forth by the Watchtower Society as those which identify true Christians and found that in none of them do Jehovah’s Witnesses actually imitate first century Christians. But how about Jesus’ command to love one another? How the Witnesses measure up in this regard we will see in an examination of the meetings and activities of early Christians.

Fellowship and Practical Christianity

I grew up imagining early Christians sitting in chairs in neat rows in a small building much like a lecture hall, listening to one of the apostles standing in front, teaching. This may have happened from time to time, but I could find no evidence that this was their pattern. The Greek word *ekklesia* in the Bible, translated “congregation” or “church,” just meant a group of people. It was not even a religious term.¹⁶ During the first century, many of Jesus’ disciples regularly attended synagogues. But they also met with other believers in small groups or associations. There is no evidence that they kept membership rolls, but they did keep lists of people needing financial assistance (1 Tim 5:9). What were these meetings like? The two most common formats for Christian meetings mentioned by early Christian writers were a meal and gatherings for prayer. Above, we have discussed the shared common meal. But believers also gathered at dawn to pray with other Christians. (They surely prayed at other times as well, but the dawn meeting is mentioned specifically). If both the meal and the meeting to pray happened on “the Lord’s day,”

it may have taken place the following morning (our Sunday). The first day of the week was a normal day of work in Israel.

Supporting the poor and needy was always among the most prominent activities of early Christians. Jesus told a rich young ruler, “if you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” (Matt 19:21) He told his apostles: “Sell your possessions and give to the poor.” (Luke 12:33) Even during Jesus’ earthly ministry it appears that they did this, for Judas complained that the nard with which Mary anointed Jesus could have been sold and the money given to the poor (John 12: 4, 5). After Jesus’ resurrection, they continued the practice (Ps 112:9; 2 Cor 9:9). Both individuals (Dorcas, Cornelius, Paul) and congregations gave generously (Acts 9:36; 10:4, 31; 24:17; Rom 25:26). The poor were invited to the common meal (Luke 14:12-14), and believers regularly contributed money for their support and distributed it to them there.

Historian Edwin Hatch explains that the state of the first-century Roman economy produced huge masses of poor people. He continues:

“Such was the state of society when those who accepted Christian teaching began to be drawn together into communities. They were so drawn together in the first instance, no doubt, by the force of a great spiritual emotion, the sense of sin, the belief in a Redeemer, the hope of the life to come. But when drawn together they ‘had all things common.’ The world and all that was in it were destined soon to pass away. ‘The Lord was at hand.’ In the meantime they were ‘members one of another.’ The duty of those who had ‘this world’s goods’ to help those who were in need was primary, absolute, incontrovertible. The teaching of our Lord Himself had been a teaching of entire self sacrifice. ‘Sell that thou hast and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven.’... It was in this point that the Christian communities were unlike the other associations which surrounded them. Other associations were charitable: but whereas in them charity was an accident, in the Christian associations it was of the essence.”—*The Organization of the Early Churches*, pg. 35, 36

Jesus’ words indicated that acts of charity were not to be limited to fellow believers. It is easy to confuse separation from the world with self-righteousness, and Jesus showed the difference:

“Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ lend to ‘sinners,’ expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”—Luke 6:31-38

While it is commendable if members of different races can meet together in religious meetings

without fighting, *unselfish kindness toward one's enemies is a truer measure of Christlike love.* (1 John 3:17, 18) Anyone who practices this kind of love will certainly be different from those in the godless world around them, and show in a practical way that they are sons of their heavenly Father!

Right Doctrine

A problem I had to wrestle with when I began associating with a church was disagreement on doctrinal matters. I grew up believing that unity meant agreement in most such matters: "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," Paul wrote. (1 Cor 1:10) Yet I found it common for persons claiming to be Christians to disagree on interpretations or even on which doctrines are important. Coming from my background, I also found it a bit distressing that there did not appear to be any "standard" for interpreting the Bible. I was used to having an authoritative governing body which acted as the source of and protector of the body of Bible interpretations and practices unique to my denomination. Although I had decided that the Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses was not speaking for God, I still felt that there ought to be more agreement among true Christians about the meaning of Scripture passages.

Once again, I discovered that my expectations were not based on the actual situation among early Christians. Their main source of unity was their common acceptance of Jesus as Messiah and their determination to follow him by obedience to his commands. Christians were in complete agreement in their understanding of the Hebrew prophecies which identified Jesus as their Messiah. Why? Because Jesus himself explained them. Shortly after he was resurrected, Jesus met two confused disciples on the road to Emmaus. "Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." (Luke 24:27) Here, then, was the "official" Christian interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures. There was little need for clarification or interpretation of these matters. The apostles and other disciples passed on what they had learned from Jesus completely and correctly. First-century congregations formed and flourished without ongoing centralized direction by a group of humans, even the apostles.

When Paul and Barnabas were commissioned to begin their missionary work by the believers in their local congregation in Antioch (under divine direction), no other congregation, including the one at Jerusalem, was involved or even informed (Acts 13:2, 3). As discussed above, the letters which are now part of the Greek Scriptures were sent to individual congregations or believers in a particular region. They were not widely distributed until later. But there was another reason why early Christians did not insist on uniformity in unimportant matters.

Early Christians tended to allow a fairly wide latitude in regard to differences of opinion when it came to most theological matters. Of course, some Jews were dogmatic (the Pharisees and Sadducees views on the resurrection come to mind). But the desire to formulate "accurate" or "approved" interpretations, *and use them as a basis for deciding who were and were not true disciples* was not typical of early Christians.

The disposition to focus on righteous behavior and avoid being dogmatic about matters of theological speculation is still evident in the writings of Gentile Christians of the second and third centuries. But dogmatism in these matters eventually made its way into the thinking and writings of Christians. The tendency toward formulating and using “approved” opinions as the basis for deciding who was and who wasn’t a Christian increased greatly in the fourth century, especially after membership in the Christian church became more closely connected with Roman citizenship. “Heretics” were viewed as enemies of the state and forced compliance with dogma became much more common among persons claiming to be Christians. Over the centuries, the church drifted farther and farther away from the simple theology of the apostles and their focus on holy living resulting from union with Christ.

Centuries later, the Reformers made the Bible much more accessible to many believers. But they were at times even more dogmatic than Roman Catholics. Rather than a return to simple apostolic Christianity, their solution to theological disagreement resulted in separation from the main (though corrupt) body of Christians and forming entirely new denominations. Since then Christians have split again and again, forming many thousands of denominations. Theological dogmatism has divided rather than unified believers, for the sword of dogmatism cuts both ways: it can make those who hold “approved” opinions exclude those who do not, and it can prevent those who reject “approved” opinions from associating with those who accept them.

Recently, I became aware that there is quite a large body of information available about what early Christians believed and how they lived. Since it sometimes conflicts with the beliefs and practices of popular denominations, it has not attained wide distribution, and relatively few are even aware of it. Fewer still try to live by it. But it is an excellent source of guidance as to the doctrines and practices of the first-century apostolic congregation, making it easier to see those which are original, and those that were added later.¹⁷

If you attend most any church, most members will likely accept some doctrines or practices adopted or defined long after apostolic times. Moreover, those who hold to those theological opinions are often not disposed to give them up easily. But that does not mean that you cannot find fellowship among those people, or that they are not Christians.

In the apostles’ day, Pharisees who became believers still called themselves Pharisees, in spite of Jesus’ well-known condemnations of some of them. It also appears that they retained at least some of their approach to things. (Acts 15:5) So we have apostolic precedence to allow individuals with different views to decide about nonessential matters of interpretation for themselves (Titus 3:9). Perhaps in time they will change, perhaps not. But it is good not to judge others too harshly, since you, too, may now reject teachings you once sincerely believed.

Many theological views are based on opinions about metaphysical matters not clearly revealed in Scripture. Others largely hinge on the meaning of certain words. Rather than waste time on theological wrangling or trying to win arguments, we do well to follow the example of the apostles and keep our focus on living as God would have us live, obeying Christ’s commands that express themselves as the fruits of God’s Spirit, in godliness and unselfish service to others.

Few if any doctrines that are widely accepted and taught in Christian churches contradict the two great commandments to love God and neighbor. In fact, if any passage of Scripture is interpreted and taught in a way that its implications in practical living contradict God's expressed will in regard to our conduct, it is wrong, no matter how compelling the logic that appears to support it.

The simple fact is that most theological issues are largely irrelevant to the daily lives of Christians. If you are determined to obey Jesus' commandments about attending to the needs of others and living an upright moral life, it is likely that you will find that your life is full and satisfying, and you will have no need to spend time either trying to resolve the correctness or incorrectness of theological convictions held by others, or converting them to your personal point of view.

The Rule of Faith

Does this mean that there were no actual teachings connected with early Christianity, that Jesus' teaching was only about ethics? Not at all. But Jews who became Christians started out believing what the Torah taught about God and their relationship to him. It also appears that most first century Gentiles who became believers had attended synagogues and had a fairly complete understanding of Jewish teachings and Scriptures.

After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., an increasing number of pagan Gentiles learned about Jesus Christ. These had little or no background in Judaism. A period of instruction of up to three years usually preceded their conversion and baptism.¹⁸ Prospective disciples were taught about the sacred writings, as well as hymns, songs, and Christian ethics. They had to make an informed lifetime commitment to accept Jesus Christ and follow him (Luke 14:28-30). After this training, they were examined by elders for knowledge and character. Only then were these "catechumens" or learners accepted for baptism.

When converts were about to be baptized, they would say "I believe..." followed by a brief summary of what they had learned. In Latin, "I believe" is *credo*, so these brief pre-baptismal statements were later called creeds. One of the earliest, now known as the Apostle's Creed, was developed within the lifetime of persons who had known the apostles:

"I believe in God the Father Almighty. And in Jesus Christ His only begotten Son our Lord, who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary; crucified under Pontius Pilate, and buried; the third day He rose from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father, from there He shall come to judge the living and the dead. And in the Holy Spirit; the holy Church; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; the life everlasting."

Few who call themselves Christians reject any of the above teachings. They are all based solidly on Scripture and have been accepted by the vast majority of Christian denominations since the days of the apostles.¹⁹ These teachings, combined with the moral instruction summarized in the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer, have formed the core beliefs among Christians, even though other traditions and interpretations may have been added to them. It is true that many

have learned and repeated these teachings without really getting the sense of their true meaning and implications. But many others have trusted in God to help them live holy lives as best they could through Jesus Christ.

Doctrine, to the first Christians, meant *instruction in how to follow the Christian way of life*. Note how Paul expresses this concept in his letter to Titus: “You must teach what is in accord with *sound doctrine*.” (“healthful teaching”, *NW*) The Greek word translated “doctrine” (*didaskalia*) means the act of teaching or instructing, or that which is taught. Paul added the word *hugiainouse*, which means healthy or correct, sound, free from error. What is this “healthy teaching”? Titus was to teach believers to be “temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance... reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, ... self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind.” What was the purpose and result of such teaching? “So that no one will malign the word of God, ... so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us, ... so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.”

Paul’s focus was not on creeds or dogma, but righteous conduct guided by devotion to God: “The grace of God that brings salvation... teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives.” (Titus 2:1-12; compare 1 Tim 1:9-10) The same theme, holy living as a result of our relationship with God through Jesus Christ, is found throughout the inspired Christian Scriptures. This may sound too simple, but living a godly life cannot be done without God’s help, especially when one is under severe trial.

Messiah Rules in the Midst of His Enemies

But why isn’t there a church or religion in which all are true Christians, especially if, as we have already discussed, early Christians believed that Jesus was reigning even in their day?

Psalms 110 foretells that David’s Lord (Messiah) would rule “in the midst of his enemies.” This does not create a mental image of Jesus first wiping all his enemies off the earth, then ruling over those who are left. His rulership would be exercised while his enemies were still numerous and active. Even though ‘all authority in heaven and on earth’ was given to Jesus, (Matt 28:18) not everyone submitted to his rulership.

The situation is similar to that of God’s chosen people Israel in ancient times. The Scriptures show that there was never a time in which all Israelites were faithfully obedient to God. That doesn’t mean God was not their king, only that many who claimed him as king did not obey him. Ultimately, the nation was exiled due to widespread disobedience to His commands.

After the exile, only a few Israelites returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and reestablish true worship. There were always some faithful Jews, but they were often mistreated. Stephen said to Jewish leaders of his day, “Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him — you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have

not obeyed it.” (Acts 7:52-53) Only a small remnant accepted their Messiah when he arrived. In Paul’s words: “Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: ‘Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved.’”–Rom 9:27

What was true of ancient Israel Jesus said would hold true for those claiming to be his followers: “Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. ... Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” (Matt 7:13, 14, 21) This even applied to one of the apostles.

The same perspective is reflected in Jesus’ illustrations of the mustard seed and the leaven: “Jesus asked, ‘What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches.’ Again he asked, ‘What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.’” (Luke 13:18-20) This suggests that Jesus’ kingdom or realm of influence would start small and continue to grow until its influence was felt everywhere, even if all did not choose to submit willingly to Jesus.

False teachers, imitation apostles, and counterfeit Christians have been right alongside true disciples since the days of the apostles. The appearance of “many antichrists” (1 John 2:18) did not mean that Jesus was not ruling! He was ruling “in the midst of his enemies”, so we must conclude that what has actually happened in connection with Christianity, its successes and influence, as well as its infiltration by false teachers and false Christians, was not only what the Lord expected, but that it has not sidetracked or stopped him from reconciling a “great crowd” of humans with God. The good news is that he has been doing that reconciliation work successfully since the days of the apostles.

The apostles had observed Jesus’ earthly ministry. They saw how few accepted Jesus even when he was here, performing miracles and preaching the Kingdom of Heaven. They knew that many would not submit to Christ’s rulership, but that it would continue increasing as the disciple-making work gradually continued.

Many persons have followed Jesus faithfully. Some have influenced the course of human history for the better. Following the example of early Christians, they have given to the poor, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, visited those in prison, looked after widows, orphans and the dregs of society. More importantly, they have carried the good news about reconciliation to God through Christ to the farthest part of the earth, translated the Bible into hundreds of tongues, suffered persecution and even death rather than deny their Lord and Master Jesus Christ. —Matt 23:34; 24:9

But history also records the sad fact that people claiming to act in Jesus’ name have committed horrible atrocities against humanity, slaughtered their enemies without mercy, enforced doctrinal

interpretations on others under severe coercion, enriched themselves at the expense of the poor and innocent, practiced every sort of immorality and denied their Lord by their actions. Many of the worst offenders have been persons in leadership positions in churches. Of course, this came as no surprise to our Lord.—John 16:2, 3

False Teachers

Even if members of churches may be less than what they should be, shouldn't we expect that church leaders ought to be true, faithful Christians? Wasn't that how it was in the first century? When Jesus was on earth, many persons represented themselves as teachers. They had scholarly credentials and extensive training, but were not living as God wanted them to live. Many were hostile toward Jesus. He called them hypocrites, and said to guard against their teachings. (Matt 16:6-12). Evidently he meant their attitudes and behavior, since those are what Jesus condemned. The problem was not that they did not *know* the Scriptures, but that they did not get the real *message* behind them, (John 5:39; Acts 15:21) for much of what they taught was based on the Hebrew Scriptures.²⁰

Before enumerating the flaws of the Pharisees conduct, Jesus said: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat."²¹ So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach." (Matthew 23:2, 3) They read from the Scriptures, and the disciples were to listen and obey God's message, whether the preacher actually practiced the things taught or not. The disciples were not told to argue with them or try to correct them.

Concerning the Pharisees, Jesus said: "Leave them alone. They are blind leaders of the blind; and if one blind person leads another, both will fall into a pit." (Matt 15:14) They could be recognized primarily by their behavior: "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. ... Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." (Matt 7:15-19) The disciples had no authority to 'cut down' a 'bad tree' and 'throw it into the fire.' This is clearly a reference to the final judgment, which is in God's hands, not ours.

Many of Jesus' illustrations plainly suggest that true and false Christians would be mixed together; that many who would become associated with his kingdom would be Christians in name only. Jesus compared the kingdom to a dragnet, which gathered in both good and bad fish. (Matt 13:47-50) He said many would call him "Lord" but not be true disciples (Matt 7: 15-23) that false teachers would arise and mislead many. (Matt 7:15; 10:16; 24:10-14, Acts 20:29,30) Other illustrations which suggest the same situation: the faithful and wise servant (Matt 24:36-44; Lk 12:41- 48); the wise and foolish virgins; the talents; the sheep and goats —Matt 25:1-46.

In one illustration, Jesus compared his kingdom to a field in which a farmer planted fine wheat, after which his enemy sowed with weeds. The word Jesus used may refer to bearded darnel, a form of degenerated wheat.²² (Matt 13:24-30) In any case, this illustration teaches us that true Christians would never disappear, but that most communities of believers would contain some

“wheat” and some “weeds,” or false Christians.

Why would Jesus allow weeds to be sown among the wheat? Surely it wasn't because the one having “all authority in heaven and on earth” failed to plan ahead to prevent their growth! Jesus also did not command that his followers abandon the weedy field and search for a field containing only wheat. Wheat and weeds were to grow up together, in the same field. So it must be that the weeds would not interfere with Jesus' work of finding his sheep, nor prevent true Christians from following their Master.

During the early centuries of Christianity, heretical Christians moved freely among true Christians. Jesus gave the disciples no authority or procedure to take official disciplinary action against false teachers. They could not force anyone to stop preaching or teaching wrong things, nor punish or imprison false teachers. But true disciples could (and did) warn other disciples of false teachers, set a good example themselves, and strengthen the disciples' resolve to live godly lives. To do this, they needed to know the Scriptures; what kind of conduct pleases God and what does not, and how to defend the true faith. There was no question of simply going to another congregation that had no heretics.

The weeds have never completely choked out the wheat in the field. True disciples may not always make it into history books. But what has always been true is still true today: *even if associated with a community of persons claiming to be Christian which is mostly weeds, one who loves God and neighbor can live as a true follower of Jesus Christ.* Neither history nor the Scriptures record the existence of any congregation composed only of mature believers who agreed about everything. If such a congregation were to exist, wouldn't they invite interested persons and new, immature believers to join them, who would bring their problems with them?

It is not our job to identify wheat or weeds or decide who is sheep or goat, good fish or bad. It is difficult if not impossible for us to determine whether a person who still displays worldly attitudes or habits is just taking a long time to learn how to submit to Christ, or is really a false Christian. We rarely have the insight or ability to discern such things.

Even if a person repeatedly and unrepentantly teaches or behaves in a way that is clearly out of harmony with Jesus' teachings and refuses to change, the most we are called on to do is limit our association with them as individuals, not abandon the fellowship entirely. The Scriptures tell us explicitly what kinds of conduct merit such disassociation. (1 Cor 5:9-11) We ought not to want close fellowship with such people. We ought to have little or nothing in common with them. But we do no wrong if we keep the lines of communication open in case they want to repent and change their conduct. (2 Thess 3:14, 15) And we must be very careful not to set up our own personal guidelines as to whether certain actions or interpretational views merit such limitation of association, lest we judge wrongly and stumble a weak brother or sister.—Matt 18:6

The practice of true Christianity is so pleasant to behold, few in any community claiming to be Christian will oppose you if you choose to live a simple holy life, walking in fellowship with God. You can grow, prosper and be effective ministers of the gospel in virtually any

environment, as long as you are not prevented from proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ or obeying his commands. The congregational arrangement seems to be the approved one, even if false prophets sometimes abuse and mislead the flock (Acts 20:29-31). But there is no biblical command to leave a congregation, even if serious problems arose. Many early Jewish Christians evidently continued in association with their Jewish brothers until they were no longer tolerated.

People who have faith in Jesus love him, and show that love by obedience to his commands, including the most important commands to love God and neighbor. This is how the apostle John summed it up: “The man who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God’s love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him *must walk as Jesus did.*” (1 John 2:3-6) John then states that genuine Christian love is expressed in actions, not just shared interpretations, experiences or strong emotions.

Living as a Christian does not mean accepting a “religion,” or denomination; it means learning and obeying the good news about a person, Jesus the Son of God. It means accepting him as Ransomer, Redeemer, Savior, High Priest and King, making a commitment to follow Him, then following through on that commitment by endurance in godly living. There have been many, faithful disciples of Jesus Christ throughout the centuries who have done that.

How Important Is A Christian Community?

One does not need to find a community of perfect disciples of Jesus to enjoy Christian fellowship. One can meet with a small group in a small “house church” similar to many in the first century, but one can also find wholesome fellowship among a wide variety of denominations and traditions. What makes someone a Christian, whether within or outside an organized denomination, is being in a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and one can find Christian fellowship where even “two or three” are gathered in Jesus’ name. –Matt 18:20

But even within the context of a religion which does not closely follow the apostolic pattern, one can also find meaningful fellowship. I have presented evidence herein that Jehovah’s Witnesses do not follow the example of early Christians, even in characteristics they point to as identifying them as the “right” religion. But when I was a member of that organization, I saw what I believed to be evidence that I was a true Christian and a member of the right religion. I sincerely wanted to please God, and he heard and answered my prayers to open the Scriptures to me so I could know him better. I believe he has guided me throughout my entire life course, including the years when I was deeply involved in the Watchtower organization.

Members of many churches today also fail to imitate early Christians in many particulars. But sincere members of most denominations see themselves as Christians. If they believe or practice things which appear to be in conflict with the Scriptures, perhaps they are simply misled as I was. In time, God may guide them into a more accurate knowledge of his will and they will walk in a way that is more pleasing to him. Perhaps, due to our having access to them, we will be used by God to help them do that. If Jesus came to earth and lived among sinful humans in order to save

them, would he disapprove of us helping those in need who happen to be in churches?

Don't let the behavior or teachings of oppressive religious leaders from your past paralyze you or make you unfruitful. If you have been freed from an oppressive religion, you are uniquely qualified to help others who may have had a similar experience and are wounded spiritually as a result. They are in need of tender care and understanding which you may be able to render.

Jesus' parables, including the one about wheat and weeds, suggest that most communities of believers will include both true disciples and those who only practice the externals of Christianity. To the Corinthians, Paul wrote: "You are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." (1 Cor 12:27) That congregation included true Christian believers, but it had many problems, including divisions and quarrels (1 Cor 1:10, 11), immaturity (3:1-3), immorality (5:1, 2), legal disputes (6:1- 6) irreverence (11:20-22), misused spiritual gifts (14:20-23) and even doubts about the resurrection (15:2-19)! Why should we think that today's churches, with all their problems, cannot also contain genuine members of Christ's body?

God's will for Christians, as stated specifically in Scripture, includes being sanctified (1 Thess 4:3), renewed in Christ's image (Rom 12:2), thankful (1 Thess 5:18), doing good to all (Heb 13:21), enduring evil (1 Pet 3:17) and learning to trust in God (1 Pet 4:19). Virtually no community of Christians will complain about such behavior. Most will welcome you with open arms! Jesus said that it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). Most any community of believers will provide you with virtually unlimited opportunities to learn to give joyfully, unselfishly and generously.

If you have decided to obey Jesus and biblical Christianity, and you want to do so in fellowship with others who want to do the same, you will be accepted in just about any community of believers which claims to be Christian, regardless of style or tradition. In short, *it is important to have regular fellowship with other believers, and if you choose to seek for them in an organized Christian community, you can expect God to bless your efforts to find them.* If a particular religious association or denomination is so narrow they refuse to tolerate someone who will not accept all their teachings or conform to all their expectations, you may decide to find associates elsewhere. On the other hand, if you choose to stay and associate with people who differ in viewpoint from you, that does not mean you approve of their unscriptural views or behavior. God may have sent you there to help some of them see the error of their ways.

Jesus promised to be with his disciples until his return at the end of the age or system of things (Matt 18:20). The development of multiple religious traditions and denominations has not changed that promise. From the founding day of the Christian congregation on that Pentecost nearly two millennia ago, Christians have gathered together in imperfect communities. Yet Paul's words, "in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (Rom 12:5) make it clear that regular interaction with other believers is very important.

As a youth, I believed that not only did one have to be associated with an organization to be saved, I thought that there was only one organization in the entire world through which salvation

was available. Several years ago, after I changed those views, I wrote an essay entitled *Does God Work Through An Organization?* I presented biblical evidence that God has never selected one organization to be his official channel of communication with humans. I argued that God has no relationships with organizations, only with people. Does this essay contradict the views I presented then? Have I changed my mind on this issue? Not in the least. I still believe that each individual is accountable to God independently of any organizations with which he or she may be connected.

Organizations, whether religious, charitable, commercial or governmental, are only a way for humans to accomplish things. They are not wrong in themselves. Organizations have provided ways for people to pool efforts and channel funds which in many cases have produced results which have ultimately resulted in God's will being done, even if imperfectly so. The poor have been helped, the sick cared for, the naked clothed, the hungry fed. There have been and there always will be evil, corruption and improper motives and actions connected with any organized group of imperfect humans. But that does not mean that a true Christian cannot function effectively within them. We need not fear or avoid organizations or their members. Not only is that impossible, it does not reflect the attitudes and actions of Jesus or his first-century disciples.

There is no command from God in the Hebrew Scriptures to form or use synagogues. From that perspective, they were of human origin. But the activities done there were in harmony with commands in the Torah for God's people to gather together, and the activities there were in harmony with His will. They provided a wonderful place for Jesus and the apostles to turn sincere Jews to God.

The result of my decision to seek out Christian associates in an organized setting has been a great blessing to me. I have come to know many wonderful men and women of faith within many denominations who believe in Jesus and follow Him as Lord. May God bless your efforts to find other believers, and may you experience the truest love, found only within the body of Christ! §

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Notes

¹ *The Organization of the Early Christian Churches*, pg 26, 27

² *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, Funk and Wagnalls, 1906- 1910, *Articles of Faith*

³ Jesus' half brother James was very prominent among Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. But he was also highly respected among the inhabitants of that most Jewish of cities. They called him "James the Just." In 62 A.D., during a brief breach in the succession of Roman procurators, some Sadducees, angry because James preached against the love of money, managed to orchestrate his assassination. The people of Jerusalem were outraged. Josephus reports that many of them later considered Jerusalem's destruction as God's revenge against them for allowing James to be killed. This would not have been the case if James had not been a strict observer of the Law of Moses in addition to his obedience to his Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ An excellent resource which helped me enormously in this regard is a book entitled *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart (Zondervan).

⁵ *Second Apology*, Ch. 6, *Names of God and Christ*

⁶ From *The Catena On The Pentateuch*, published In Latin by Francis Zephyrus, P. 146.

⁷ Rather than referring to the final days of a longer period, this passage reflects the Jewish perspective that time is divided into two great epochs, one ending and another beginning at the coming of Messiah. The same view is presented in the opening words of the epistle to the Hebrews, where the time of the prophets is called "the former days," and the time of the Son is called the "last days."

⁸ "Josephus (*Apion*, II; BJ, VII, iii, 3) Greek and Roman writers testify to the widespread effects of the proselytizing propaganda of the Jews. Many gladly frequented the synagogues and kept some of the Jewish laws and customs. Among those were to be found the "men who feared God," spoken of in Acts. ...Another class kept practically all the Jewish laws and customs, but were not circumcised. Some again, though not circumcised, had their children circumcised."—*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (1939 ed.) "Proselyte"

⁹ See *A History of Christianity*, by Paul Johnson, P. 6-9

¹⁰ This suggestion is based on the fact that they met on the first day of the Jewish week, which began after the Sabbath ended. They called it "the Lord's day," to remind them that Jesus was resurrected on that day. The expression, found in Rev. 1:10, also appears in other early Christian writings.

¹¹ See *Paul's Idea of Community*, pg 84-88.

¹² ©1995 Jones & Pennick, Barnes & Nobel Books, NY

¹³ *A History of the Church to A.D. 461*, B. J. Kidd, P. 17

¹⁴ *Barnes' Notes on the Bible*, Vol. 14, P. 239: Notes on 1 Corinthians 8, Par. 1

¹⁵ Tertullian (around 197 A.D.) said: "Babylon, in our own John['s writings], is a figure of the city of Rome." (*Answer to the Jews*, Ch 9). Victorinus, about 280, mentions "...the great overthrow of Babylon, that is the Roman state."—*Commentary on Apocalypse* Pg. 790

¹⁶ In Acts 19:32, *ekklesia* refers to a mob!

¹⁷ For a very insightful discussion of the significance of the record of early Christians, I recommend *Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up—A New Look at Today's Evangelical Church in the Light of Early Christianity*, (1989) and *Common Sense—A New Approach to Understanding Scripture*, (1992) both by David W. Bercot. (Scroll Publishing, Tyler Texas)

¹⁸ *God's Peoples—A Social History of Christians*, Spickard & Cragg, P. 60

¹⁹ With the exception of capitalization, which did not exist at the time of its composition, most Jehovah's Witnesses could say in good conscience that they believe these teachings, even though they might feel it necessary to add other "essential" teachings to them.

²⁰ Our English word "hypocrite" comes from the Greek *hupokrites*, which refers to actors in the theater, who pretend to be something other than what they really are.

²¹ This may have been a literal stone chair such as those found in ancient synagogues near where the scrolls were kept. The Scripture reader may have sat there to read during services at the synagogue.

²² See *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1939 edition, "Tares"

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