

Introduction

The independent Christian Church is a mystery to many today. Perhaps this is a result of local autonomy—self rule. Because the individual congregations are independent from other congregations they are, predictably, as different as the individuals within them. Personalities differ greatly, as do backgrounds and environment. Leadership skills vary—so do levels of maturity. Resources vary. There are so many reasons to be different.

These independent churches sometimes fellowship in informal, area-wide gatherings—even in conventions for sharing ideas and encouragement. But there is no central organizational oversight. Every congregation selects its own leaders and makes its own decisions. You would expect the results to be vastly different when sampled at five hundred different locations—and these pages will show that.

What is really amazing, however, is the uniformity in belief that so many individual bodies of believers still share after two centuries of history. It is indeed a testimony to the idea that Christ's Church can indeed be ONE.

While not claiming to be the only Christians, these independent Christians do voice a concern that many churches today do not recognize the foundation

of the gospel message. They believe that certain truths are essential to man's relationship with God, and cannot be compromised for they are from God. Other guidelines are from men and are based on opinion. Foremost behind their slogan "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, love" is the concern that Christ had for the church to be one.

To a congregation, these churches believe that the world cannot be won without this unity, and that unity is only possible when based on the church as it existed in the days of the apostles—the pattern of the first century church. Fundamentally sound theology—don't rewrite the rulebook. Their simple quest for unity soon became overshadowed because of so many practices in today's society that seem at odds with God's Word.

Their simple desire is to be molded after the pattern of the church as it was established and grew in the first century. Their gatherings were special. This was a church with a single focus. The problems, and there were several, were promptly addressed by the apostles, in the process leaving us with a rich heritage and a very good scriptural outline for what the church should be. Problems arise, however, when men interpret and

insert opinions, when convenience breeds tradition, and when tradition becomes scripture. Centuries of gradual change left the church greatly divided.

Circumstances on the American frontier at the close of the 1700's quickly led to revival in the early 1800's. After a religious awakening, men came to realize the need for unity, and theorized that "the Bible only makes Christians only." The Christian Church became a new kind of church—one that based its faith and order on the Bible alone.

Threatened with change, many religious bodies came to oppose these "Christians," derisively labelling them as "Campbellites" after one of their earliest and most eloquent spokesmen. The denominations sought self-preservation and attacked this new effort at unity, downplaying their objective to accept the Bible as their only rule of faith and practice. Many of the struggles were worse than any civil war.

These new 'Christians only' grew quickly as people considered their plea and found it fundamental in its truth. By 1832 their number exceeded 12,000 in upwards of 200 congregations. Within another ten years there were 2000 congregations representing most of the states and several foreign countries.

A religious survey in 2002 showed the independent Christian Churches and Churches of Christ to be the fourth largest religious body in Kentucky, followed by the Christian Church (Disciples) and the Churches of Christ. In the entire United States, conservative Christian Churches and Churches of Christ were the second fastest growing of all religious bodies in the ten-year period that was the 1990's, with a growth of 18.6 percent.

I apologize to those who may think I am being exclusive just by undertaking a project such as this, that is, including only the independent churches. This is certainly not to imply these are the only Christians. My desire is that all of God's people can unite in our common Savior and mission. There will always be differences of opinions, changing methods, and personal preferences. These are not excuses for division, but opportunities to "let our love lights shine." Surely, wise men, led by the Holy Spirit, can determine the essentials to salvation and can unite in purpose. The Bible must truly be the only rule of faith and practice.

Sadly, some of the congregations included within these pages may have lost their first love, while congregations of other faiths may truly seek Christ. Each church must seek The Way. This is a personal project that I hope will offer a fresh perspective on the identity of the Christian Church as it sought restoration beginning in the early 19th century in Kentucky.



Minorsville
Christian Church,
Scott County

A look back . . .

It's ironic that this isn't really intended to be a history book, and yet history is what inspired the project—simple amazement at the significance of what the Restoration Movement is all about, and how Kentucky has been a part of that history. It seems impossible that so many of the events leading to the restoration of the New Testament church could take place in Kentucky. Perhaps that is akin to the thinking of the Jews in Jesus' time when they asked, "Can anything good come out of Galilee?"

There is probably no better way to review the history of the church than to begin by looking at the authoritative document on church history—the Bible's own book of Acts. This amazing book picks up the story where the Gospels leave off, telling about the early days of the Christian church.

One of the ideas that is prominent in the Gospels, and in the other New Testament writings, is the fact that mere mortals have difficulty grasping something new. People are surprised, often bewildered or confused, when God confronts them in an unusual way. I suspect it's our own human limitations that restrict our ability to understand God and His ways. That might help to explain why so many of the very people who had been awaiting the Messiah for centuries were unable to recognize the Christ when He

actually came.

It was even harder to recognize the new and improved body of believers and the worship that pleases God. No longer a sabbath, but the first day of the week. No burnt offerings and animal sacrifices, but the perfect Lamb. No longer the high priests, but now the priesthood of all believers. No longer the law, but grace. No more waiting for the promise, but now an empowered workforce with a mission. Acts 1:8 could well be the key verse of the book of Acts: "...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." It is truly exciting when God confronts people in unexpected ways.

And so the empowered believers became the church, the body of Christ, that day in Jerusalem when God sent his Holy Spirit. It was a body with a mission to share the gospel—learning as they grew in the faith just how and where to accomplish that mission. The body of believers was the church, and God added to their number such as were being saved.

We see in the early church hints of what is really important. Go out into the streets and alleys and bring in the blind, the lame, the halt. Compel them by loving them, by logic, by attractive aggression.

We see that the Holy Spirit was in those who obeyed Christ.

We can compile lists of traits of the early church. They were devoted to study. They loved being together. They were devoted to remembering Christ. They prayed and believed and continued to pray. They were filled with awe. They were willing to give everything when needed. They met faithfully with glad and sincere hearts, praising God. The early church was meeting people's needs—physical and spiritual. We read that the church was strengthened and encouraged by the Holy Spirit. It grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.

Then we read of persecution breaking out, forcing the believers to come out of their comfort zone. The church begins to spread out—it discovers that the gospel is for everyone. Followers can no longer say "Be like me." The statement is now "Be like Christ."

There are so many lessons for the church in Acts, and in the other scriptures—the importance of being "missions-minded," the warnings about leaving out essentials, the need to have the proper baptism, the importance of steadfastness, the admonition to love. We are reminded that God doesn't always call the church to take the easiest route. We see so many important principles that are

necessary for the church to be what Christ chose to be His bride.

The church that models itself after the church of the first century is the one that is striving to say, like Paul as he defended his work to the Roman authority, we have confidence in the Gospel message we share, we have courage to share it even in difficult times, and we have confidence that our efforts will produce results as we allow the Holy Spirit to work through us. We are making a contribution.

Sadly, that “ideal” church of the first century began changing almost from the day of its establishment as men came to regard their ideas as better, or more sensible, than God’s. For 1700 years, some would say nearly 2000 years, the church has undergone seemingly miniscule changes, nevertheless, changes that have wrought a radical departure from the church established by our Savior.

Men came to accept heads of state as their spiritual guides, they chose “sprinkling” as a means of baptism, they decided they could buy penance, they chose other men as God’s spokesmen and sometimes regarded them as divine. Some decided to worship mortals. All erred each time they added or subtracted from God’s Holy Word. Traditions became the norm, eventually the required.

Arriving at the point where traditions could be discarded and an effort made to restore the New Testament church is a story in itself. It required a people who would seek to hold the Bible to be the only rule of faith and practice, believing it to be inspired by God and therefore

without error or contradiction—the sole authority for faith and practice. All their beliefs would come from the Bible.

It seems impossible that many of the events leading to the restoration of the New Testament church could take place in the United States—even more incredible that so many occurred in Kentucky. This is not to diminish events of the Protestant Reformation, but to highlight the climax that began unfolding in the new nation established on the principle of religious freedom.

Consider the times. Centuries had passed where people were illiterate and books were yet to be published. Human ideas grew into traditions as the rulers interpreted scripture, first for their subjects, then for their own pleasures. Individual study of God’s Word was not generally possible. Sovereign empires became the Church.

After the invention of the printing press and the publishing of the King James Bible, people began to read for themselves and to question their traditions. Men like Martin Luther began what we think of as the Protestant Reformation, but this was just the beginning. Their reforms were built on the idea of returning to the New Testament church by backtracking through centuries of where they had been—trying to identify and eliminate objectionable elements as they backtracked in time. It never occurred to them to just return to the beginning and restore the principles as first established.

As people continued this quest to worship God in the way God desires, their

search for religious freedom eventually led to the settling of America. History records the young nation’s struggle to survive, and then its fight for independence. Through these centuries of struggle, the ministry of the churches became widely disregarded. Freedom of religion had come to mean freedom from religion. In fact, religion was actually a by-word for denominations following human guidelines, and each was territorial and adversarial of the other. The Bible was virtually a closed book to the masses. The quest for religious freedom had been derailed. On the edge of the frontier, Kentucky statistics in 1800 showed that only ten thousand out of a population of 221,000 were church members. Towns were named for infidels. The times were right for revival.

And revival came at the close of the 18th century, recorded in history books as an extension of “the Great Awakening.” Events of this second Great Awakening led some groups directly to an effort to restore the church of the New Testament times—a return to the river’s source—the church in its purest form. It was a movement that believed unity is possible, but only when denominational connections “die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large; for there is but one body, and one Spirit...” Christians would come to call it “The Restoration Movement.” Kentucky just happened to be poised at the frontier.

A movement begins . . .

Moved by Jesus' prayer for the unity of His church, there are numerous instances in history where individuals have voiced this plea for unity. One of the earliest recorded was the voice of a Puritan minister in the mid-1600's. Richard Baxter (1615-1691) put it this way: "In fundamentals unity, in non-fundamentals (or doubtful things) liberty, in all things charity."

This statement soon found its way to America. A period of spiritual enthusiasm dating from about 1735, known as the Great Awakening, saw great orators excite audiences to revival. George Whitefield, recognized by some as the greatest preacher of the century, spoke these words in a sermon in Philadelphia: "Father Abraham, whom have you in Heaven? Any Episcopalians? "No." Any Presbyterians? "No." Have you any Independents or Seceders? "No." Have you any Methodists? "No, no, no!" Whom have you there? "We don't know those names here. All who are here are Christians—believers in Christ—men who have overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of his testimony." Oh, is this the case? Then God help us, God help us all, to forget party names, and to become Christians in deed and in truth."

Though there were many advocates of unity, it would be fifty

years after the Great Awakening before a widespread movement would arise seeking this ideal. It would be based on a simple plea: the unity of the church through a restoration of primitive Christianity. Several congregations were seeking this path. Notable among them was a group of former Methodists in Virginia who, in August 1794, met to consider a name for their group of followers. Rice Haggard stood before the group with the New Testament in his hand and said: "Brethren, this is a sufficient rule of faith and practice, and by it we are told that the disciples were called Christians, and I move that henceforth and forever the followers of Christ be known as Christians simply." Thus, many date the rebirth of the Christian Church to August 1794.

Significant revival again swept across the frontier in the early 1800's, known as the Second Great Awakening, or the Great American Revival. If the Great Awakening served to make the young nation more religious, the revivals at the beginning of the 19th century served as the impetus for groups of people, entire congregations, to seek unity by seeking to restore the church as it was established in the first century.

The revivals, first in Logan County Kentucky, then spreading across Kentucky to Tennessee and beyond, were not characteristic of the restoration

movement, but played a significant part in shaping the thoughts of those who would be involved, notably Barton W. Stone.

Stone was a young Presbyterian minister at Cane Ridge in Bourbon County Kentucky. In August of 1801 Stone was joined by dozens of other preachers in conducting the greatest of all revivals on the Kentucky frontier. Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist clergy forgot their confessions and creeds and preached the gospel. The revival not only added numbers to the churches, but brought spiritual renewal. With this spiritual renewal came a movement to unite the Christians in all the sects.

Soon charged with teaching contrary to the Presbyterian Confession of Faith, and at odds with other denominational and man-made creeds, Stone and four others, representing a new presbytery of fifteen congregations, signed a protest to the Kentucky Synod on September 10, 1803. This Apology of the Springfield Presbytery is recognized today as the movement's first declaration of freedom from ecclesiastical control, proclaiming the right of free men to interpret the scriptures for themselves, and to base their faith upon the Bible alone, apart from the opinions of other men. These five ministers were suspended, reinforcing the man-made tradition that

demanded conformity based upon a creed.

The movement to restore the New Testament church and to seek unity was a movement in flux as traditions were examined and found wanting. Realizing that the New Testament contained “neither precept nor example” for the likes of presbyteries and synods, Stone would later write, “we had not worn our name more than one year, before we saw it savored of a party spirit.” As he put it, “with the man-made creeds, we threw it overboard and took the name Christian.”

The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery was read on June 28, 1804 at Cane Ridge. It was the final meeting of the organization. Its Imprimis reads: “We will that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large, for there is but one Body, and one Spirit, even as we are called in one hope of our calling.” Some have suggested this is a suitable date for the rebirth of the Christian Church.

Another pioneer in the faith, Alexander Campbell, was soon to give these new churches a design to sustain the movement. His Declaration and Address, ordered to be published on September 7, 1809, furthered the idea that division is sinful and Christ is the only source of unity, His Word the only terms. The first proposition in the Declaration is probably the most quoted: “That the church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the Scriptures, and that manifest the same by

their tempers and conduct, and of none else as none else can be truly and properly called Christians.”

The next significant event was again in Kentucky. The Christian meetinghouse on Hill Street in Lexington is seen by many as the next pivotal point in the movement’s history. Unity between these “Christians” and “Disciples” was consummated in the winter of 1831-32.

Kentuckian “Raccoon” John Smith was instrumental in this union. Speaking in dramatic fashion, Smith said he was willing to surrender any opinion for the sake of unity, but he would not



surrender one fact, commandment, or promise of the gospel for the whole world. “While there is but one faith,” he told them, “there may be ten thousand opinions; and hence if Christians are ever to be one, they must be one in faith, and not in opinion.”

Smith concluded by saying,

“Let us, then, my brethren, be no longer Campbellites or Stoneites, New Lights or Old Lights, or any other kind of lights, but let us all come to the Bible, and to the Bible alone, as the only book in the world that can give us all the Light we need.”

These churches experienced phenomenal growth as they joined to share the gospel on the nation’s frontier. Sadly, these “Christians only,” seeking unity from the beginning, would themselves see division. A faction opposing the use of musical instruments in worship, among other matters of methodology, sought to add these matters of opinion to the list of essentials. The period of 1889-1906 saw this division materialize.

Yet another separation came in the period of 1927-1968 when basic tenets of theology were liberalized into yet another branch. On September 26, 1968, the Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) officially became the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Today, still overcoming the resistance of the denominations and the divisions within, the remaining “independent” Christian Churches and Churches of Christ continue. And so, two hundred years after their inception, these churches are still identified among the fastest growing religious bodies in Kentucky. They are the focus of this book.

The work continues . . .

How, then, shall I begin—such an important undertaking, yet one so most likely to be misunderstood? For perspective, there are hundreds upon thousands of churches in Kentucky. Obviously I could not photograph each of these. Please forgive my oversight if yours is not included within these pages.

I think I've already partially explained why I've chosen to focus on the independent Christian Churches, but please, don't misunderstand this focus. Let me assure you that this is not an undertaking to judge, to evaluate, or to diminish the value of any church—either those included within these covers, or those intentionally omitted. I am convinced of the human failings existing within each of the churches documented within these pages, as well as every other church. This book is an effort to encourage, explain, and perhaps, to exhort each group of believers to begin achieving a collective purpose.

I am fully persuaded that the intent of our Savior was to establish one church, unified in purpose and faith and action. Jesus explained the need for every soul to be born again—to be rescued from sin which separates us from God. He said there can only be one Lord, one faith, one baptism. Jesus gave parables

to emphasize the need to be active and growing. He often taught his disciples the importance to not only love, but to also be shrewd in using their heads to promote the gospel—to invest things material in ways that would produce spiritual results. His teachings also illustrate God's love for sinners, actively seeking the lost sheep, or the lost coin, or the wayward son. He taught us to be good neighbors, and who our neighbors are. He taught that His servants are to be productively involved as they wait for His return. He taught that sloth and disobedience will be punished. And He taught that the Kingdom will definitely come.

The church was to be unified in purpose and faith and action. Perhaps the old adage, "If you can perceive it, and if you can believe it, then you can achieve it" fits in here somewhere. I suspect that the mere existence of so many denominations is not a testimony that there are so many different faiths—rather, I think it speaks to the preponderance of so many different methods of achieving. Which one works? Which please our Lord? Can the Lord use them all?

I am convinced that I should share with you the story of these independent churches without calling them part of a movement, that I should generally give

heritage without names, that I should refer to congregations without naming leaders, and that I should mention history only for the purpose of showing the achieving, not for the perceiving, or for the believing. Bear in mind that this is not a directory of Christians—such a conclusion would require judgments not reserved for mortal man.

That greatly simplifies things. It is my belief, and, I think that of many of the churches documented within these pages, that a portrait of the church Christ prayed for is most accurately drawn when it resembles the description within the scriptures themselves—the first century church.

Just as I am quick to emphasize that the buildings photographed are not churches, but places where they assemble, I am also quick to emphasize that God has not changed over the years. The Old Testament prophets basically said "God's way or the highway." Who, then, would be daring (or foolish) enough to explain away scriptures for modern day convenience? It didn't work for Judah when they were divided from Israel and could no longer worship at the temple. And the leper was probably not cleansed on the first or the sixth dip, but only on the seventh.

Hence comes the rub—which are the essentials and which are the opinions? And how significant is it that human nature gets in everyone’s way from time to time? Who hasn’t been guilty of trying to make themselves taller by making the rest shorter—could that be true among faiths as well? We protect our time and our egos and our traditions.

And so, the conclusion: I think we grieve the Lord when we don’t work together. I think we need common ground, and that must be the Word. I think we have wasted too much time convincing ourselves why our way is correct. We

should never prefer opinions of eloquent spokesmen, or of denominational literature, to Scripture. Century upon century has given ever so many man-ordained variations of that first century church. It is time to return to the basics. I have taken the liberty on the following pages to summarize what, I think, most of these churches would tell you are the basics.

Enjoy with me a visit to some of the places where believers have followed their search for heaven, on earth, in Kentucky. There are many insights to be learned, plus the encouragement of

knowing there are others in many places seeking like precious faith. I have tried to gather information from every church that will, perhaps, give your family of believers encouragement and, possibly, new ideas. Purpose, faith, action—perceiving, believing, achieving—may the Lord bless your group of believers as you honestly seek His good and perfect Way.



Imprint from a walkway at the
Philadelphia Church of Christ in Johnson County.

The basics . . .

The Bible is the inspired Word of God. We accept this by faith.

God's Word helps us recognize what sin is and how it separates us from God. It reminds us that everyone has sinned, and shows us the consequences.

God loves each person and wants everyone to be restored to the right relationship with Him. Since He is holy, sin must be dealt with, and it requires a perfect sacrifice. God provided a way for us, but we have the freedom to accept or deny the offer of a restored relationship. God loves us and wants everyone to be saved, but does not impose His will upon us. The offer came at a price—a once for all sacrifice of God's only Son. He arose from the grave on the third day and lives forever. He will return when we are not expecting Him to judge both the living and the dead.

God's gift of eternal salvation is given without any merit on our part, truly given by the grace of God, but without faith it is impossible to please God, and faith requires action on our part to accept God's gift.

This action on our part includes a change of heart that brings about a change

in direction—we call it repentance. The change is visible.

This change of heart and direction brings about a desire to be and do what God wants, but we can't do it on our own, or without being changed. Jesus taught that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again. The first gospel message began to explain to the people what this involves—baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. Through baptism we are buried with Him in His death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. Born again.

God expects us to grow as we live—to be faithful.

God adds to the Church—it is not by the vote of men. Those who are being saved continue to meet together with glad and sincere hearts.

The apostles' teaching, fellowship of believers, remembrance of the Lord through the Lord's Supper, and prayer were all a part of the church as it was first established. The first century epistles were preserved as a guide to help today's church

worship in the proper manner.

Christian churches and churches of Christ offer every believer the opportunity to be "Christians only," not bound by human authority. In order to achieve unity of the church, these congregations seek to restore first century principles to our worship. They call themselves Christians.