

Lesson 4

Misconceptions About the Church

I. Introduction

A. *Why should we study misconceptions about the church?*

1. Although some of us in the church may have some of these misconceptions, my goal in compiling these misconceptions was not to list misconceptions that we in the church have about the church.
2. Instead, my goal was to list some of the misconceptions that those out in the world have about the church, and in doing so, I hope we will be in a better position to refute these misconceptions when they arise, and perhaps keep them from arising in the first place.

B. *Why do people have these misconceptions?*

1. Satan has sown division in the church for 2000 years, and he delights in creating confusion about God's word and his church. He was twisting the word of God right from the start in the Old Testament (Genesis 3) and right from the start in the New Testament (Matthew 4), and he still twists it today.
2. But we must also share some of the blame. Why?

a) **We contribute to the problem when we use denominational language to describe the Lord's church.**

- (1) If we act like there are many churches, then why are we surprised when people don't understand that there is one church?
- (2) If we talk about "our church" and "your church" and "my church" rather than the Lord's church, then why are we surprised when people think that the church is man-made and that we can each have our own different church?
- (3) If we talk about the church as if it were just another denomination, then why are we surprised when the world sees us as just another denomination?

(4) The church is distinctive, but it will not appear distinctive to the world unless we are distinctive.

b) The best way to refute misconceptions about the church is to do all we can up front to prevent people outside of the church from forming misconceptions about the church.

C. A few words about terminology

1. The church of Christ is the Lord's church, and so I will often refer to it that way.
2. As will we soon discuss, one of the misconceptions about the church is that there are many churches.
 - a) **But how, you might ask, can that be a misconception when the word "churches" (plural) occurs 37 times in the New Testament? Indeed, Romans 16:16 says "The churches of Christ salute you."**
 - b) **The answer is one of terminology. Where we generally say "church" and "congregation," the New Testament generally says "body" and "church." We also often use "church" to denote "congregation" and in that sense there are as many "churches" as there are congregations of the Lord's body.**
3. We should be consistent in our use of these terms, particularly when we talk about the church to people outside of the church. A good resolution to make would be for us to start referring to the Katy congregation rather than to the Katy church. We at Katy are a congregation of the one church established in Acts 2.
4. There was little chance of confusion with using the term "churches" to mean "congregations" in the first century before there were not at that time countless denominations also calling themselves churches. Today, unfortunately, there is a big possibility of confusion, and so we should be very careful that we do not add to that confusion by using these terms inconsistently.

II. Misconceptions About the History of the Church

A. Misconception #1: The church of Christ is a product of the Restoration Movement.

1. Wrong! The church predates the Restoration Movement.

- a) **The very name of the Restoration Movement tells us that the church did not originate with that movement – they were trying to restore something – not create something – and that something was the first century church, the one established in Acts 2 and the one Jesus promised to build in Matthew 16.**
2. But isn't the restoration movement a continuing movement?
- a) **Yes and no. Certainly we must always be on guard that we do not drift away from the pattern for the church that we find in the New Testament. And if we do drift away, then we may find ourselves again in need of restoration.**
- b) **Also, restoration can occur in a region where the church has not spread when people in that region turn to their Bibles to discover God's will for the church.**
- c) **But restoration does NOT continue today in areas (as here in Katy) where the New Testament church has been restored.**
- (1) The Restoration movement was a success! And it has concluded. The church is here -- it has been restored. We are members of the restored New Testament church.
- (2) The leaders of the Restoration movement did not establish a new church -- they restored a previously established church. How? By rejecting doctrines of men and opening the word of God to discover God's will for the church. (See Lesson 8 in this series of lessons.)
3. A related misconception is that we in the church are “Campbellites.”
- a) **That moniker is not only insulting to the Lord's church and to Alexander Campbell, but it is also historically inaccurate.**
- (1) In 1804, Barton W. Stone and others officially withdrew from the Presbyterians and begin to call themselves Christians only. They adopted the Bible as their only guide, they announced their belief in the complete autonomy of the local congregation, and they repudiated all man-made religious organizations. Shortly thereafter they began to teach salvation by baptism for the remission of sins.
- (2) Barton W. Stone did not meet Alexander Campbell until 1824, when the latter made an extended tour of Kentucky. When Campbell came to Kentucky, the church had already been restored in that area. Were they “Campbellites” before ever having met Alexander Campbell?

- (3) One of the congregations that Stone helped to establish was the Bethlehem church of Christ in Tuckers Cross Roads, Tennessee. My father (and co-teacher) preached there from 1955 to 1957. The church was restored in Tuckers Cross Roads before Barton Stone ever met Alexander Campbell. Members of the Lord's church are not Campbellites – we are Christians and Christians only.

b) G. C. Brewer told the following story:

- (1) A community in Kentucky decided to build a building for community religious and social use. Several denominations in the community led in the effort. Our brethren who lived in the community decided not to cooperate. When the building was completed, the people who built it naturally did not want it to be used by those who had declined to have any part in building it. They were in the process of putting a clause in the deed that allowed anyone in the community to use the building "except Campbellites." A knowledgeable man among them said, "If you want to keep those folks out of this facility, that won't do it. I have heard some of them say they aren't Campbellites, and they do a pretty good job of proving it." After considerable discussion, they finally wrote, "This building may be used by anyone in the community except Christians."

4. We will have much more to say about the Restoration Movement in Lesson 8, which will be devoted exclusively to that subject.

B. *Misconception #2: The church is a product of the Reformation Movement. That is, if you are a Christian and you aren't a Catholic, then you must be a Protestant.*

1. Wrong! The Lord's church existed prior to the Catholic church, and thus we aren't Catholics or Protestants.
 - a) **The Catholic church has been around a long time, but it was not around in the first century. The departures from the New Testament pattern that eventually became Roman Catholicism began after the first century when elders first began to elect a head elder, and then the head elders began to choose even higher leaders, until we finally had a Pope. That hierarchy and the other departures that accompanied it were unknown in the first century church.**
 - b) **Christians in the first century were not Catholics --- and they were not Protestants. Why? Because Protestants began centuries later as a protest to the Catholic church, so how could there be a Protestant before there was a Catholic?**

- c) **If we are members of the church that we read about in the New Testament and if we are members of no man-made religious group, then we are neither Protestant nor Catholic.**
- d) **We should NEVER refer to ourselves as Protestants, and we should NEVER permit others to call us that. The Lord's church is not a Protestant denomination. And the converse is also true – a Protestant denomination cannot possibly be the Lord's church established in Acts 2.**
- e) **The Reformation Movement was right to reject Catholicism, but it should have gone back to the source of truth rather than simply trying to *reform* one man-made religious body by replacing it with other man-made religious bodies.**

C. *Misconception #3: Constantine was a great champion of the church.*

1. Wrong! A popular historical myth is that the church had a great victory when the Roman emperor Constantine was supposedly "converted" and Rome supposedly became a "Christian" empire.
 - a) **Indeed, history books portray Constantine as a great champion of Christianity and a friend of the church.**
 - b) **Constantine was born in about A.D. 285 and came to power after a series of civil wars. His primary concern was to unify the empire, and he embraced Christianity as a unifying force.**
 - c) **Constantine not only ended the persecution of Christianity but he began to treat Christianity as though it were a state religion, which, in fact, it later became. He authorized state money to be used for the construction of elaborate church buildings.**
 - d) **Was Constantine a positive influence on the church? Alistair Kee (in "*Constantine versus Christ: The Triumph of Ideology*") makes the following point with regard to that question.**
 - (1) **"Because of his relationship to the church, Constantine was able to influence it and Christianity at a profound level. We must now consider how Constantine's values infiltrated the church: not how he was converted to Christianity, but how through his religious policy he succeeded in converting Christianity to his position."**
 - (2) **The Roman empire's embrace of Christianity did much more to damage the Church than its earlier persecutions ever did. Persecution, in a sense, allowed the Church to remain "pure" by**

effectively excluding anyone not willing to face death for his or her beliefs.

(3) Alistair Kee mirrors these thoughts when he states: "[T]he history of the church till the fourth century was of random and often intensive persecution. Whenever the Emperor or the traditions of the Empire seemed threatened, it was open season on persecuting Christians. And yet this tiny minority, insignificant, weak and defenseless, not only survived but grew. ... To Christians ... it was not at all incredible that persecution could actually strengthen the church: it brought precisely the experience in which God was made known to them in strength. The later Roman influence effectively weakened the Church from within."

e) **In the first century, the church was persecuted by Rome, and God in the book of Revelation announced the ultimate judgment and destruction of Rome and the ultimate victory of the church. Yet, the church (like Israel had long before) sought a foreign alliance rather than trust in God. Kee describes the situation beautifully:**

(1) "[I]t is therefore all the more tragic that Christians should, in the moment of victory, forsake the Revelation in Jesus, for its opposite in Constantine. The church did not need the protection of Constantine; it had already taken on the Empire, century after century, and had in the end been victorious. ... If Constantine had in turn persecuted the church, he too would have failed to conquer it. How was it then that he was able to succeed where his predecessors had failed? How was it that by a little kindness, a word of praise here, a grant to build a new church there, he was able to induce the church to forsake what they could not be made to forsake under threat of torture or death? ... [O]nce again the Son of Man was betrayed with a kiss. Not that the betrayal took place in a moment. It was a gradual process. Gradually the church came to have faith in the Emperor, to trust him and to see in him and in his ways the hand of God."

f) **Constantine was no champion of the church. Instead, he was a lesson in the danger of compromise with the world. When we embrace the world, we reject Christ. We cannot serve God and Mammon. When congregations embrace the world, they begin to proclaim what the world wants them to say rather than what God wants them to say.**

III. Misconceptions About the Nature of the Church

A. *Misconception #4: There are many churches.*

1. Wrong! The Bible tells us repeatedly that there is ONE BODY.

- a) Romans 12:5 So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.
 - b) 1 Corinthians 10:17 For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.
 - c) 1 Corinthians 12:13 For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.
 - d) Ephesians 2:16 And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby:
 - e) Ephesians 4:4 There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling;
 - f) Colossians 3:15 And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful.
2. The Bible also tells us that the BODY is the CHURCH.
- a) Ephesians 5:23 For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body.
 - b) Colossians 1:18 And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.
3. Thus, there is ONE BODY; the BODY is the CHURCH; and so there is ONE CHURCH.
4. This is definitely not a popular message today. Why?
- a) The world does not want to have just one of anything! The world loves to have many choices, because we lose control when we don't have any choices. But God tells us that there are many areas in which we do not have freedom of choice!
 - b) God tells us there is one faith. Man says there are many. God tells us there is one way to him. Man says there are many. God tells us there is one church. Man says there are many.
 - c) There is one church. It may not be not be a popular message, but it is a message that we must never cease to proclaim.

B. Misconception #5: The name of our church is "Church of Christ."

1. Wrong! There are really two misconceptions here -- one, that the church is our church, and two, that the name of the church is "Church of Christ."
2. We in the church need to watch how we talk about the church -- particularly around outsiders.
 - a) **The church is not our church or my church or your church. The church is the Lord's church. (In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said "upon this rock I will build my church.")**
 - b) **Why does it matter? The church is distinctive -- and our language needs to reflect that distinctiveness. The world wants to categorize us -- don't let them! We are Christians, and Christians only.**
 - c) **We open doors when we refuse to be categorized --- people will notice our refusal to be categorized, and their curiosity will give us an opportunity to teach them about Jesus and about his church.**
 - d) **But won't we appear arrogant if we act like our church is the only church? Yes --- if we call it our church! But no, we won't appear arrogant at all if we refer to the church as it really is -- the Lord's church. But "you members of the Church of Christ believe that only members of your church will be saved!" The best response to that charge is that it is not our church! They may have their own church, but we do not. We are members of the Lord's church, and yes, we believe that only members of the Lord's church will be saved. Why? Because people are added to the Lord's church when they are saved, and if they are not members of the Lord's church it is because they are not saved.**
3. The second misconception in that statement is that the name of the church is the "Church of Christ."
 - a) **That is not the name of the church at all! The "church of Christ" is its description --- not its name! That is why we write "church" with a lower case "c." We are the church that belongs to Christ -- the church of Christ.**
 - b) **A large, prominent denomination in town was raising money from community businesses to build a new building. They**

approached a business man who was a Christian, and he made them an offer. "I will give you \$1000 if you put up a sign in front saying 'This is a church of Christ.'" "We can't do that," they said, "this is a ___ church" (where the blank was filled in with the name of a local denomination). "Well," the Christian business man responded, "I'll still give you a \$1000 if you will put up a sign saying 'This is NOT a church of Christ.'"

C. *Misconception #6: The church is man-made.*

1. Wrong! Daniel spoke about the church 600 years before it was established in Acts 2, and here is what he said:
 - a) **Daniel 2:44-45** And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever. ⁴⁵ Forasmuch as thou sawest that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it brake in pieces the iron, the brass, the clay, the silver, and the gold; the great God hath made known to the king what shall come to pass hereafter: and the dream is certain, and the interpretation thereof sure.
2. Notice verse 45 --- God tells us that this kingdom (his church) would be made "without hands." It would not be an earthly kingdom like the Babylonians, the Medes and Persians, the Greeks, or the Romans. It would be established and created by God. As we saw in Lesson 2, that church was established in Acts 2 – and it was NOT man-made.
3. What about denominations? They are man-made. It is men who create denominations; it is men who create their creeds; it is men who create their doctrines; it is men who create their hierarchy. No man-made denomination can claim to be the kingdom made without hands in Daniel 2:45.

D. *Misconception #7: The church is a building.*

1. Wrong! No graduate of Vacation Bible School would ever fall for this one, but it is surprisingly common out in the world. This is also one we can contribute to if we aren't careful. We need to watch what we say (and what we sing!) about the church. (After teaching this lesson, someone noted that in VBS the children sing "Tiptoe Tiptoe in God's house." Perhaps then there are a few graduates of VBS who need this point cleared up!)

a) **Example: “I am driving over to the church to pick up something.” “Let’s meet at the church.” “My church is located on 5th Street.” (Are we sure we don’t think the church is a building?)**

b) **Example: Song #296 in our books includes the line, “We have come into His house and gathered in His name to worship Him.” Is that correct? No! We have not come into the house of God to worship him. The house of God has come into this building to worship him!**

c) **Is this building the house of God? No!**

(1) When the Bible opens in the book of Genesis, God is dwelling with man, but that changes when man sins. Later, in Exodus, we find that God wanted to once again dwell with man. (Exodus 25:8 “And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them.”) In many ways, that verse sets the stage for the rest of the Bible.

(2) But did God actually dwell in that man-made temple? No. Solomon told us as much in 1 Kings 8:27. (“But will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?”)

(3) So does God dwell with his people now as he said he wanted to in Exodus? Yes! Paul tells us how in 2 Corinthians 6:16. (“for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”)

2. We in the church are the temple of the living God. The church (not the church building!) is the household of God. (Ephesians 2:19)

E. *Misconception #8: Denominations are part of God's plan.*

1. Wrong! Believe it or not, there are some who look at the denominational mess in the world today, and they teach that it was part of God's plan for the church all along! They often point to John 15:5 as support for this strange idea:

a) **John 15:5 ⁵ I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.**

b) **Are the branches denominations? Of course not! Read the language! “HE that abideth in me, and I in HIM” -- the branches are individual Christians!**

2. They also sometimes point to John 10:16.
 - a) **John 10:16** And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.
 - b) **Who are these other sheep? Denominations? Mormons? No!** The other sheep are the Gentiles who were about to be given access to the kingdom along with the Jews.
 - c) **The Old Testament had always looked toward a day when ALL men would be blessed through the offspring of Abraham, and that was about to happen through Jesus Christ. Notice that John 10:16 tells us there is one fold – not many folds!**
3. This discussion of Jews and Gentiles brings up a very important question about denominations: If God had really wanted denominations, then why not make one denomination for the Jews and another denomination for the Gentiles? That would have solved countless problems that faced the church in the first century.
 - a) **The answer is that God did not set up denominations because he wants Christians to be reconciled unto him in one body. He wants Jews and Gentiles to be united in one fold.**
 - b) **Ephesians 2:14-16** For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; ¹⁵ Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; ¹⁶ And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby.
 - c) **This peace in Ephesians 2 was spoken about by the prophet Isaiah many years earlier, and we will treat this topic in much greater detail in Lesson 6.**
4. Paul dealt with the problem of denominationalism in his first Corinthian letter. That congregation was beginning to divide up along man-made lines, just as the denominations have done today, and here is what Paul told them:
 - a) **1 Corinthians 1:11-13** ¹¹ For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. ¹² Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of

Cephas; and I of Christ. ¹³ Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?

b) Note that some were saying "I of Christ" along with "I of Apollos" and "I of Cephas." Paul is telling us that we can wear the name of Christ and still be a denomination. We must always be on our guard that we do not become a denomination – perhaps one named “The Church of Christ.”

c) How could we tell if we became a denomination? There are warning signs!

(1) We would start speaking about the church as being "our church" rather than the Lord's church.

(2) We would cease to proclaim any differences between "our church" and the denominational groups that surround us. We might even swap pulpits with them.

(3) We would water down any doctrine that might make us appear distinctive. After all, we wouldn't want to appear arrogant -- as if "our church" alone possesses the truth.

(4) We would study our "religious heritage" to firmly position "our church" among the other man-made churches.

(5) We will begin to soft play anything that makes us distinctive.

(a) If you had to list the top three or four things that are distinctive about the church as opposed to most of the denominations that surround us, what would they be?

i) The necessity of baptism for the remission of sins?

ii) Instrumental music as a departure from the New Testament pattern for worship?

iii) The role of women in church leadership?

iv) The non-denominational nature of the church and its establishment in Acts 2?

(b) Now list the top three or four things that are most under attack by change agents in the church today. Is it just a coincidence that we come up with the same list in response to each question?

IV. Misconceptions About the Role of the Church

A. Misconception #9: The church was an accident.

1. Wrong! Premillennialism is based on the premise that the church was an accident -- that it was never part of God's plan for mankind, but was instead a temporary "Plan B."
 - a) **They teach that Jesus intended to set up an earthly kingdom, but his plans were thwarted when the Jews rejected his message. So instead, he set up a church as a "Plan B" and someday he will return to set up the earthly kingdom as he originally intended.**
 - b) **Of course, the first question is why they think Jesus will be any more successful on his second attempt than they think he was on his first attempt! Maybe we will have a Plan C and a Plan D until he finally gets it right!**
 - c) **The truth is that the church has been part of God's plan all along. Jesus never intended to set up an earthly kingdom -- his kingdom is a spiritual kingdom. (John 18:36)**
 - d) **As we saw last week, Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:24 that when Jesus comes again it will be to deliver up an existing kingdom to God -- not to set up a new kingdom on earth.**
2. They also teach that the Old Testament has nothing to say about the church.
 - a) **We will address this misconception in Lesson 6 when we study in detail what the Old Testament has to say about the church of Christ.**

B. Misconception #10: The church is something that you can join.

1. Wrong! A phrase we used to hear a lot was "Go to the church of your choice!" Then it became "Go to the church or synagogue of your choice!" And now that religious matters have been almost entirely thrust out of our public discussions, we don't hear that phrase much at all in any form. But should we go to the church of our choice?
2. A recently published book is entitled "The Unauthorized Guide to Choosing a Church" by Carmen Berry.
 - a) **The book has been called "kind of a Consumer Report on how to choose a church."**

- b) **Berry writes: "We've reached an age in American religion where the shopping mentality, the consumer mentality, means people choose what appeals to them. ... Some of the 'seeker churches' that benefit from this trend have discovered that they can be victims of the shopping-around, too. So they try to have more intense small groups or service activities to draw people in and keep them."**

- 3. David Libscomb once said: "No church can ever permanently prosper until it conforms to the will of God. We present that will, and simply in God's name protest that all departures from that will, how much soever of present good they may promise, bring permanent and lasting evil to the church. Let us strive to do the will of God and leave results in his hands."

- 4. The church should be Christ driven -- not results driven or numbers driven. Our job is to plant and to water -- NOT to give the increase.
 - a) **1 Corinthians 3:6-7 I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. ⁷ So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase.**

 - b) **John 12:32 And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.**

- 5. But if we just change what we do here in our worship service then maybe we can do a better job of reaching the lost. Right? Let's sing the songs they like and make sure we never say anything that might seem intolerant or rigid. Then maybe we can do a better job of reaching the lost. Right? Wrong!
 - a) **When we change what we do IN HERE to try and reach the lost who are OUT THERE then we have taken a major **WRONG TURN**. We need to change what we do OUT THERE if we ever want to reach the lost and bring them to Jesus Christ!**

 - b) **The church service is where we come to worship God -- not to reach the lost. We typically have very few lost people in our worship services, and those that do come have usually heard and rejected so many gospel sermons that it is difficult to imagine what might finally get them to respond. The lost people are **OUT THERE** – and **OUT THERE** is where we should focus our evangelistic efforts.**

C. Misconception #11: Belonging to a church is optional for a Christian.

1. Wrong! A popular misconception about the church is that "You can be a Christian without being a member of any church."
 - a) **The church consists of all Christians, and all Christians are in the church. In fact, we don't have any choice in the matter! God adds people to HIS church when they are saved. Thus, if you are saved then you are in his church. If you are not in his church, then you are lost. There are no saved people outside the Lord's church.**

2. A similar misconception is that "You can be a Christian and be a member of any church."
 - a) **As we have seen, there is one church, and it is not man-made. It is not our church, it is the Lord's church. We do not join it or add people to it or vote people into it. Instead, God adds people to his church when they are saved. That church is not the Catholic church, it did not arise from the Reformation movement, and it did not arise from the Restoration movement. It is the church that Jesus promised to establish in Matthew 16 and that was established in Acts 2.**

 - b) **If you are a member of something else or something more or something less, then you are not serving God according to his plan or according to his will. He wants you to be a Christian and only a Christian, wearing only the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, who is the head and the savior of the church, his body.**