

# The Indestructible Church of Christ

By Wayne Jackson

Have there been members of the true church of Christ since Pentecost? Some answer yes, based upon certain biblical texts; others doubt it since there appears to be no *continuous* historical record of such.

Daniel, in considering the future administration of the Roman Empire (63 B.C. – A.D. 476), declared:

And in the days of those kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed, nor shall the sovereignty thereof be left to another people; but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever (2:44).

Scripture is explicit: once the kingdom was established, it would “**never** be destroyed,” but would “stand **forever**.”

At Caesarea-Philippi (Mt. 16:13ff), Christ promised to build his church. In connection therewith, he pledged “the gates of Hades” would not “prevail against it” (v. 18). The expression “shall not prevail against” may signify not prevent its establishment, or never demolish it. Both may be included. McGarvey suggested it embraced the promise that the church would never be “depopulated by the death of all its members” (n.d., 146).

In a prophecy in which John foretold the persecution of the church under the figure of a woman, he declared: “[T]he woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared of God” (Rev. 12:6). The imagery would appear to suggest that even in a time of severe hardship (cf. 11:2; 13:5) Christ’s church would not become extinct.

## A False View

In contrast is the common allegation that the church of Christ is a relatively modern phenomenon, substantially beginning in America with the Stone-Campbell movement of the early 1800s (Ross 1976, 19). To the people who profess being Christians only, sometimes the pejorative term “Campbellites” is attached—“ignorantly by the non-church public . . . viciously, as well as ignorantly, by the less enlightened members of less enlightened sects” (Ferm 1945, 116).

## Reflections on History

History at best is a sketchy record of human achievement. This is particularly so before the invention of the printing press (ca. 1445). There are many movements that cannot be traced in an unbroken line throughout the centuries of the post-apostolic age. The fact is, since God took his church into “the wilderness” during those bloody epochs of persecution, it is not to be expected

there would be a definitive chronology of the historical movement. It clearly is the case, however, that genuine churches of Christ can be documented significantly preceding the Stone-Campbell movement, and far beyond this continent.

A widely-circulated quotation from Dr. William Robinson (1888-1963), principal of Overdale College in Birmingham, England, contains the following statement:

In the Furness District of Lancashire in N.W. England there existed in 1669, during the reign of Charles II, a group of eight churches of Christ. Most of them are not now in existence. An old minute book has been found of the year 1669 and it shows that they called themselves by the name church of Christ, practiced baptism by immersion, celebrated the Lord's Supper each Lord's Day, and had elders and deacons. There was also a church of Christ in Dungannon, Ireland in 1804 and in Allington, Denbeighshire. In 1735, John Davis, a young preacher in the Fife District of Scotland was preaching New Testament Christianity twenty-five years before Thomas Campbell (Alexander Campbell's father) was born (Rushmore 2000, 18).

Dr. Hans Grimm, a German scholar born in 1899, wrote a book titled *Tradition and History of the Early Churches of Christ in Central Europe*. The narrative begins:

It has always been a real church of Christ in this world since Pentecost, and this means: a church believing in faith, repentance, confession and immersion for the remission of sins—a church which worshipped at least the first day of the week, with hymns, prayers, the Lord's Supper, Bible study and contributions for the saints—a church which worked under the oversight of bishops, deacons, and evangelists—a church—not some isolated seekers, but an organized church, which trusted in the Lord's promise that “the powers of death will never prevail against it” (n.d., 5).

This work contains valuable information regarding Christian movements in Europe.

Leslie G. Thomas, in his book, *Restoration Handbook* (1971, 73), cites instances of churches of Christ in Glasgow, Scotland (1778); Edinburgh, Scotland (1798); Criccieth, North Wales (1799); Tubemore, Ireland (1807); Manchester, England (1810); and Dublin, Ireland (1810). None of these congregations was in any way connected with either Thomas or Alexander Campbell.

*The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* acknowledged churches of Christ in Dungannon, Ireland (1804), and Auchtermuchty, Scotland (1807). The author states that in 1842 there were fifty congregations with 1,300 members (Douglas 1974, 227). For their doctrinal beliefs, see [this work](#) by William Robinson.

As early as 1807, a congregation was formed in Jackson County, Alabama, near present-day Bridgeport. It is considered to be the oldest church of Christ continuing to meet regularly" (Hooper 1979, 7).

There was a church of Christ in Morrison, Tennessee as early as 1810 (two years before Alexander Campbell was immersed).

The history of the Lord's Church in Morrison dates back to the settlers in Verville about 1800. Several people from various faiths were without a religious leader and simply turned directly to the Bible itself for their guide. By 1810 they were worshipping as one body, a church different from any they had known before, subscribing to no creed, and wearing no distinctive name. They called themselves "Christians" and designated the church only, "The Church of Christ." They learned, contrary to former belief and practice, that baptism was a burial and for the remission of sins, and began to practice it in that manner and for that purpose.

Of interest is a letter of recommendation written in 1818 to the Antioch Church in Alabama on behalf of one Elizabeth Brown, as follows: "State of Tennessee, Warren County, October 22, 1818. The Church of Christ at Philadelphia commends to the fellowship of the faithful in Christ Jesus our beloved Sister Elizabeth Brown, as a faithful member of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. Signed George Stroud, David Ramsey, Bishops" (see <http://www.morrisoncoc.com/History.html>).

In 1828 the Clear Creek church of Christ was formed at Stantonville, in McNairy County, Tennessee (Howell 2009, 1).

## The Seed-Soil Principle

In the parable of the sower Jesus described a man who sowed seed, some of which fell upon good soil. In explaining the parable he identified the seed as "the word of God" (Lk. 8:11) and the "good ground" as "an honest and good heart" (v. 15). Or, as Mark expressed it, those who "hear the word, and accept it, and bear fruit" (Mk. 4:20). It necessarily follows, therefore, that **whenever** (within the past two millennia) and wherever (over the entire earth) the word of God has come in contact with an honest and good (receptive) heart, a Christian has been the result. A group of Christians constitutes a church. Churches of Christ, therefore, could have existed at any place or at any time over the past twenty centuries where those components happily were combined.

Churches of Christ have functioned as a brilliant galaxy of Christian influence in a world shrouded by the darkness of human rebellion. Christians have regularly assembled in caves, barns, storefronts, and schoolhouses. They have met in dirt-floor, thatched-roof hovels, as well as in fine buildings. In the antique Roman world millions crowded beneath the imperial city in the catacombs to worship as Christians. Pliny, governor of Bithynia, wrote to the emperor Trajan (ca. A.D. 112), asking for advice about how he should deal with Christians who regularly met on an appointed day before daybreak to worship Christ as God (*Epistle of Pliny to Trajan* X.96).

The testimony of Tertullian (ca. A.D. 160-220) is most dramatic:

Men proclaim that the state is beset with us. Every age, condition, and rank is coming over to us. We are only of yesterday, but already we fill the world (*Apology* 37.4).

To suggest that non-denominational churches did not exist until modern times is the epitome of pseudo-scholastic irresponsibility. Just because one cannot exhume a written record from the

trash heaps of antiquity with an unbroken listing of congregations of Christ affords no proof of the absence of such.

### Sources/Footnotes

- Douglas, J. D. ed. 1974. *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Ferm, Vergilius, ed. 1945. *An Encyclopedia of Religion*. New York, NY: Philosophical Library.
- Rushmore, Louis, ed. 2000. *Gospel Gazette Online*. August. (<http://www.gospelgazette.com/gazette/2000/aug/page18.htm>)
- Grimm, Hans. n.d. *Tradition and History of the Early Christians in Central Europe*. Austin, TX: Firm Foundation. (<http://www.netbiblestudy.net/history/>)
- Hooper, Robert. 1979. *Crying in the Wilderness*. Nashville, TN: McQuiddy.
- Howell, Ellenor Hardeman. 20090. *Hardeman/McClure Newsletter*. Summer.
- McGarvey, J. W. n.d. *Commentary on Matthew and Mark*. Des Moines, IA: Eugene Smith.
- Ross, Bob. 1976. *Campbellism*. Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Pub.
- Thomas, Leslie G. 1971. *Restoration Handbook*. Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate.



### About the Author

Wayne Jackson has written for and edited the *Christian Courier* since its inception in 1965. He has also written several books on a variety of biblical topics including *The Bible and Science*, *Creation, Evolution, and the Age of the Earth*, *The Bible on Trial*, and a number of commentaries. He lives in Stockton, California with his dear wife, and life-long partner, Betty.