

Church Organization

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Before ascending from the earth, Jesus Christ organized his church on earth. The New Testament provides various details on how this was accomplished both before and after the ascension of Christ.

How closely do the Christian churches of today resemble that which was established by Jesus Christ and the early apostles of the Church? This essay examines the Structure of the Church of Jesus Christ, as well as the Name of the Church of Jesus Christ, in order to provide insights and perspectives into this important aspect of the ongoing ministry of Christianity on earth.

STRUCTURE OF THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

For the Church of Jesus Christ to carry out the work of building the kingdom of God on earth and into the eternities it must be organized effectively. God is a God of order and his son Jesus Christ came to organize his church on earth before his ascension into heaven.

Jesus Christ established his church according to certain organizational principles (Luke 10:1, Luke 6:13-16, Mark 3:14). His apostles reaffirmed these principles, as evidenced by such events and writings as the appointment of Matthias after the death of Judas (Acts 1:25-26) and the validation of church structure by Paul in his many letters (Eph 2:20, Eph 3:5, Eph 4:11, and 1 Cor. 12:28).

Christ Established an Unpaid, Participatory Ministry

The ministry established by Christ and his apostles is unpaid (1 Peter 5:2, John 10:12, and Luke 10:4), and encourages the involvement of all of its members. The opposite of this structure is a church in which ministers are paid to minister as a career, and the members belong but have little to no involvement in the operations or ministry. When people are selectively involved in a church they are not given the opportunity to feel a spiritual and temporal commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Christianity was meant to be a participatory community, where people serve and minister to one another, allowing there to be many to do the work of the Lord and eliminating the need for paid ministers.

The Original Church Structure was Lost

Following the ascension of Christ and through the centuries that followed, men changed the ordinances and doctrines established by the savior, including the organization of the Church. The result of these changes led to the propagation of sects and ushered in the period in western history known as the "Dark Ages" (approximately A.D. 400 to A.D. 1,000). Amos prophesied of this period when he said there would be "a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. ... They shall ... seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it" (Amos 8:11-12). Christ also knew that this apostasy would take place and prophesied of a restoration when through the prophet Isaiah he said "I will proceed to do a marvelous work among this people, even a marvelous work and a wonder" (Isaiah 29:14).

The Structure of the Church of Christ was Restored

The restoration of the Church of Jesus Christ included a full restoration of the structure of the Church, beginning with restoration of the authority of the priesthood. In 1829 both the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods were restored to the earth, laying the ground work for this revelation given in April of 1830: "The rise of the Church of Christ in these last days, being one thousand eight hundred and thirty years since the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the flesh, it being regularly organized and established agreeable to the laws of our

country, by the will and commandments of God..." (D&C 20:1)

This revelation inspired the direction that the Church would be organized with the same offices as during the time of Christ's public ministry, including "Apostles, prophets, seventies, evangelists (patriarchs), pastors (presiding officers), high priests, elders, bishops, priests, teachers, and deacons" (Gospel Principles 112). The commitment of the Church to restoring and maintaining the same ecclesiastical structure as during the time of Christ on earth is stated in the 6th Article of Faith: "We believe in the same organization that existed in the Primitive Church, namely, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, evangelists, and so forth" (Articles of Faith 1:6).

The Church has grown and become more complex than it was in the early days. The Lord has revealed the changes necessary to adapt to this growth and complexity. Each structural component comes about through revelation and mirrors the framework of the early church of Jesus Christ.

NAME OF THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST

Does it matter what the name of a Christian Church is? There are perhaps tens of thousands of different names given to Christian churches throughout the world, each one having a story behind it as to how it came into being. "Catholic" means universal; "Baptist" is a derivative of "baptism"; "Methodist" was named for its structured worship practices; and then there are the nearly limitless names among the vast array of non-denominational Christian churches.

A Church Name identifies its Believers

A church name does far more than serve as an identifier on the outside of the building. At the individual level a name is not just about alignment to a particular denomination; it is that which boldly proclaims who you worship and whom you follow. If a church is named "Fellowship of the Woodlands," it is not immediately clear what that church stands for or who it worships. If a church is named "Saint Peter," then the question naturally follows if they worship Saint Peter.

A scripture from the Book of Mormon sums the subject up thoughtfully, where Jesus Christ appears to the people of America and becomes involved in a conversation regarding the naming of his church (3 Nephi 27:3-7): "And they said unto him: Lord, we will that thou wouldst tell us the name whereby we shall call this church; for there are disputations among the people concerning this matter. And the Lord said unto them: Verily, verily, I say unto you, why is it that the people should murmur and dispute because of this thing? Have they not read the scriptures, which say ye must take upon you the name of Christ, which is my name? For by this name shall ye be called at the last day; And whoso taketh upon him my name, and endureth to the end, the same shall be saved at the last day. Therefore, whatsoever ye shall do, ye shall do it in my name; therefore ye shall call the church in my name; and ye shall call upon the Father in my name that he will bless the church for my sake."

An Example of a Meaningful Church Name

Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles wrote an article in 1990 in which he describes a church name, phrase by phrase, to expound on its meaning—in this case the name of the church being The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Russell M. Nelson, "Thus Shall My Church Be Called," Ensign, May 1990, 16). The following is a summary of that article:

The Church

"The first two words of the name the Lord chose for His earthly organization... Note that the article The begins with a capital letter. This is an important part of the title, for the Church is the official organization of baptized believers who have taken upon themselves the name of Christ." (D&C 10:67-69; D&C 18:21-25.) The foundation of the Church is the reality that God is our Father and that His Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ, is the Savior of the world. The witness and inspiration of the Holy Ghost confirm those realities. The Church is the way by which the Master accomplishes His work and bestows His glory..."

of Jesus Christ

"By divine directive, the title of the Church bears the sacred name of Jesus Christ, whose church this is." (See

D&C 115:3–4.)... We worship God the Eternal Father in the name of His Son by the power of the Holy Ghost. We know the premortal Jesus to be Jehovah... We know Him to be “the chief corner stone” upon which the organization of His Church is based. (Eph. 2:20.) We know Him to be the Rock from whom revelation comes to His authorized agents (see 1 or. 10:4; Hel. 5:12) and to all who worthily seek Him (see D&C 88:63)...”

of Latter-day

“It is true that scriptures foretell the final days of the earth’s temporal existence as a telestial sphere. The earth will then be renewed and receive its paradisiacal, or terrestrial, glory. (A of F 1:10.) Ultimately, the earth will become celestialized. (See Rev. 21:1; D&C 77:1; D&C 88:25–26.) But its last days must be preceded by its latter days! We live in those latter days, and they are really remarkable. The Lord’s Spirit is being poured out upon all inhabitants of the earth, precisely as the prophet Joel foretold. His prophecy was of such significance that the angel Moroni reaffirmed it to the Prophet Joseph Smith.” (See Joel 2:28–32; JS—H 1:41.)

Saints

“The word Christian appears in only three verses of the King James Version of the Bible. In contrast, the term saint (or saints) appears in thirty-six verses of the Old Testament and in sixty-two verses of the New Testament. Paul addressed an epistle “to the saints which are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus.” (Eph. 1:1.) To recent converts there he said, “Ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God.” (Eph. 2:19; see also Eph. 3:17–19.) In his epistle to the Ephesians, Paul used the word saint at least once in every chapter! A saint is a believer in Christ and knows of His perfect love...”

Nelson’s explanation answers the question, “What’s in a name.” One can see that there is the possibility of assigning deep spiritual meaning in each element of a church’s name, thus Christian Churches are urged to do the same for their own congregations.

Conclusion

While on earth Jesus Christ provided guidance on how his Church was to be organized, which was further outlined by the authors of the New Testament. Although the structure of the Church of Jesus Christ was eventually lost during the period of apostasy, it has been restored again on earth with apostles, prophets, and a priesthood to represent God on earth.

There is nothing wrong with calling a church “catholic” to mean the universal church of Jesus Christ—or calling the Church Saint Lukes, New Life, Valley Christian, or Holy Family. However, if one considers a church name which reaffirms our taking upon us the name of Jesus Christ, becoming one of the saints of God, and being a part of His Church in these latter-days—then the meaning of a church name takes on a whole new significance and should be carefully considered.

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