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# WHERE IS THE CHURCH JESUS BUILT?

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# Where Is the Church Jesus Built?



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# Introduction

Christianity is the largest religious group in the world—estimated by Pew Research in 2015 to be approximately 2.3 billion people and one-third of the world’s population. Thousands of denominations all profess to follow Jesus Christ, but have very diverse beliefs and practices. Individuals also have various reasons for attending a particular church, and some attend no organized church at all.

Some attend a church because it is the denomination their family attended when they were growing up. Others select a church because its members are friendly, or because it has enjoyable music or good programs for children and families, or because the pastor is a gifted speaker. Some choose a church that offers multiple services ranging from Saturday night to various times throughout the day on Sunday.

It seems few people attend a church mainly because of its teachings. Many have accepted the common adage “all roads lead to heaven,” believing that it doesn’t matter which church they attend. A common assumption is that since we’re all saved by grace and God knows our hearts, doctrinal differences don’t really matter. They are simply personal interpretations.

But should you select a church to attend solely based on the amenities it offers and how comfortable you are attending there? Can every church be acceptable to Christ when there are so many variations in belief and practice? Did Jesus intend for all of this diversity within the religion that



bears His name so we could each choose the variation that best suits our needs or preferences?

Nearly 2,000 years ago, Jesus said, “*I will build My church, and the gates of Hades [the grave] shall not prevail against it*” (Matthew 16:18, emphasis added throughout). If we believe His words, then that church—*His Church*—has to exist somewhere on earth today. So where is this Church? Did He found His Church with specific teachings that He expects people to believe and practice today? Since He declared that He was building His Church, it’s logical that He would show us how we can find it.

A careful study of the Scriptures reveals that Jesus delivered one set of doctrines that He intended His people to maintain throughout the ages.

The Bible says there is “one Lord, *one faith*, one baptism” and that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Ephesians 4:5; Hebrews 13:8). Toward the end of the first century, when people started making changes to what Jesus had taught, Jude reminded true Christians to “contend earnestly for *the faith* which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3).

With all the variations within Christianity today, it is obvious that many did not stick to the original faith. There is no universal agreement on what the Church should be and teach.

If you want to find the Church Jesus built, turn the page to begin a discovery of what the Bible says about the beliefs and practices of the true Church. Finding this Church can profoundly change your life.



A man in a dark suit, light blue shirt, and red striped tie is looking down at an open book he is holding. He is in a crowd of people, with several other individuals visible in the background, some looking towards him. The lighting is soft and focused on the man.

# Chapter 1

What Is the Church?



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**T**oday the word *church* can refer to the people who regularly worship together or to the building they meet in. When Jesus said that He would build His Church, He was speaking of a body of believers and not buildings.

In Matthew 16:18, where Jesus is quoted saying that He would build His Church, the Greek word translated “church” is *ekklesia*. This word means “a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place, an assembly” and “in a Christian sense ... an assembly of Christians gathered for worship in a religious meeting” (*Thayer’s Greek Definitions*). Biblically, the Church is not a denomination, a human organization or a building, but the people God is working with at any time.

In the early history of the Church, many congregations were small, made up of a handful of believers, so they would meet in someone’s house (1 Corinthians 16:19; Philemon 1:2). Even though these people met in a house, they were referred to as the “church.”

The concept of people gathering to worship God did not originate in the first century. In the Old Testament, the weekly Sabbath and annual holy days were to be observed as “holy convocations” (Leviticus 23:2-4). Convocations were public meetings.

Emphasizing the meaning of a *holy* convocation, which all of God’s holy days are, the last annual holy day of the year was also called a “sacred assembly” (verse 36). Because they assembled to worship God, the ancient Israelites were described as the “congregation,” “assembly” or “church” in the wilderness (Acts 7:38, New King James Version, Young’s Literal Translation, King James Version).

## Who makes up the Church?

But when Jesus said He would build His Church, He had plans for a different kind of assembly of people. In the Old Testament access to God was primarily based on being a descendant of Jacob (also called Israel). While gentiles—people who were not Israelites—could become part of the Israelite community and worship the true God, this was rare. With a few notable exceptions—such as Rahab from Jericho and Ruth from Moab, who both became part of the lineage of King David—this did not happen very often (Joshua 6:25; Ruth 2:6; Matthew 1:5-6).

The Church Jesus would build would be made up of people who were called by God the Father (John 6:44), regardless of their heritage, status in society or gender (Galatians 3:28). While the realization that God calls men and women of all backgrounds to become part of His Church is widely

“ God the Father has different periods of time in mind for calling people. ”

understood, few pay much attention to the necessity of God's *inviting* people to become a part of it.

Instead of recognizing that God calls each person at

the time He chooses, most people believe that missionaries and personal evangelization take care of this task for God.

But notice Christ's blunt statement: “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (John 6:44, compare verse 65). Humans can't invite other humans to become members of God's Church. The invitation can only come from God the Father. Humans can assist those God calls and should be lights reflecting God's way of living (Matthew 5:14-16), but only the Father can open a person's mind, allowing him or her to become receptive to His invitation.

Though most people don't realize it, the Bible says Satan “deceives the whole world” (Revelation 12:9). God's message is veiled and not understood by those “whose minds the god of this age has blinded” (2 Corinthians 4:4).

Thus, “because the carnal [fleshly] mind is enmity against God” (Romans 8:7), God the Father has to open this mind that is naturally opposed to and hostile toward Him and His way of life before a person can truly come to God.

As the first-century apostles preached the gospel—the good news of the coming Kingdom of God—they encountered people whom God was calling and others whom God was not calling at that particular time. (For further explanation on how God calls people at different times, see the articles “[Are Most People Eternally Lost?](#)” and “[Christ Didn’t Condemn Non-Christians to Hell.](#)”)

Even though the Church grew rapidly after it started on the Day of Pentecost in A.D. 31, the apostles knew that they were not responsible for the growth. It was God who was adding “to the church daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).

The important point for us to note is that only God the Father can call people to become members of the Church. On their own, humans cannot simply invite whoever they wish to be converted.

Although God the Father wants all people to be saved and is not willing that any should perish (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9), He alone determines when to call people. And, surprisingly to many, God the Father has different periods of time in mind for calling people.

Put simply, this is not the only day of or time for salvation. This little understood truth is revealed in God’s annual holy days. For further explanation, see the articles under “[Plan of Salvation: How God’s Festivals Reveal His Plan](#)” on the Life, Hope & Truth website and the booklet *From Holidays to Holy Days: God’s Plan for You*.

We should also note that the Church Jesus built was quite different from the Jewish synagogue, which had been the place of worship for Jesus, His early disciples, and initially for preaching the gospel (Luke 4:16; 6:6; Acts 13:14-15).

While the apostles used the synagogues of the first century as a forum to preach the true gospel, the Jewish synagogue was not the Church. Sadly, some from Jewish synagogues eventually expelled early Christians from their meetings and became some of their fiercest enemies (Matthew 23:34-36).

The Church Jesus established was different from the gatherings of the ancient Israelites or the Jewish synagogue. In the next chapter we will see that there would be greater blessings for those who would become part of the Church Jesus founded.



## Chapter 2

How Jesus Built His Church:  
Its Leaders, Founding,  
Doctrines and Mission

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**W**hile traveling along a road north of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus had a conversation with His disciples that revealed His plan to found His Church. Recorded for us in Matthew 16:13-20, this passage laid the foundation for Jesus' plan.

Jesus began the discussion with a question: "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" (verse 13).

After several contributions from the disciples as to what others had said, "Simon Peter answered and said, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'

"Jesus answered and said to him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades [the grave] shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven'" (verses 16-19).

Because of its prominence in relation to the beginning of the Church, this passage is hotly debated and subject to a variety of interpretations. Catholics claim it shows that Jesus gave Peter authority over the Church and, since they believe Peter was Rome's first pope, that it is the basis for the papacy's authority to change doctrine and make other decisions that will be honored by God.

Protestants say that Catholics have stretched the passage beyond its meaning.

Given the significance of this passage, a careful study of it is critically important to a correct understanding of the Church Jesus established.

# How God Calls People: Jesus' Disciples

The Bible explains that “the mind of the flesh is opposite to God; it is not under the law of God, and is not able to be” (Romans 8:7, Bible in Basic English). Satan deceives and blinds the whole world spiritually (Revelation 12:9; 2 Corinthians 4:4). Because of this, we humans are all naturally opposed to God and His way of life.

Our resistance to God is so strong that it takes a miracle—direct intervention by God—for us to understand God’s Word and have the desire to respond to His instructions. This is what Jesus was referring to when He said, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (John 6:44, compare verse 65).

Note how the Bible describes this miracle in the lives of Jesus’ disciples.

After Jesus’ death and resurrection, He appeared to His disciples and revisited a discussion He had with them prior to His crucifixion. “Then He said to them, ‘These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.’ And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures” (Luke 24:44-45).

Jesus’ disciples had heard Jesus speak of the prophecies of His death and resurrection, but they hadn’t really understood them before. Now they all made sense. They understood the Scriptures in greater depth than they ever had before. This growth in understanding is what happens when God calls people.

## Two key lessons from Matthew 16:13-20

A careful reading of Jesus’ conversation with Peter reveals two important points regarding the Church. After Peter acknowledged Christ as “the Son of the living God,” Jesus showed that He Himself would be the Head of the Church.

Jesus told Peter, whose name, *Petros*, meant little rock, that He would build His Church on another rock, *petra*, meaning large rock. Peter and the disciples who heard what Jesus said and knew the meanings of the words He used would have understood exactly what He was saying: *You are a little stone, but on this boulder (perhaps pointing to Himself) I will build My Church.* Peter was the most outspoken apostle and often took the lead among the 12, but Jesus was clearly saying that the Church would be built on Himself—not Peter.

Jesus and other authors of the New Testament identified Jesus as the “stone” that was rejected by Jewish leaders (Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; Romans 9:33). Peter also clearly emphasized this point in his writings (1 Peter 2:7-8). Additionally, Paul identified Jesus as the “Rock” who led the ancient Israelites (1 Corinthians 10:4) and as the “head” of the Church (Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18).

As one of the apostles, Peter was a prominent leader in the New Testament Church, but he was not the head of the Church. Ephesians 2:20 succinctly speaks of the Church as “having been built on the foundation of the *apostles* [not just Peter] and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone.”

A second important lesson from Matthew 16:13-20 is the fact that Peter was indeed given authority by Christ to provide leadership within His Church. This is represented by the authority to bind and loose.

The King James Version of the Bible, by the use of the singular pronouns *thee* and *thou*, shows that Jesus was speaking to Peter in Matthew 16. So Peter was given authority by Christ to bind and loose—to make decisions within the Church.

But this authority was not given solely to Peter. The use of the plural pronoun *ye* in the King James Version of Matthew 18:18 shows that Christ also bestowed the authority to bind and loose upon all of the apostles. Furthermore, Jesus established various positions of leadership within His Church for perfecting the saints, doctrinal unity and the edification of this spiritual body (Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Corinthians 12:28).

The authority to bind and loose that Jesus gave the apostles did not include the prerogative to change biblical doctrine. Instead, it was the authority to make judgments in harmony with and based upon God’s law. See the sidebar “Acts 15: An Example of Binding and Loosing” on page 18 to see how the apostles used this ministerial authority that Jesus gave them.

## **The founding of the Church**

The Church began on the Day of Pentecost in A.D. 31. Acts 2 documents how the early disciples had gathered in Jerusalem to observe this annual holy day of God.

Pentecost was not a new observance for God’s people. Through Moses, God had revealed this observance—usually called the Feast of Weeks in the Old Testament—to the ancient Israelites as one of His annual holy days upon which believers were to assemble and worship God (Leviticus 23:15-16, 21).

But this Pentecost was destined to be different. After His resurrection,

Jesus had told His followers to wait in Jerusalem for the “Promise of the Father”—the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-5).

Miraculously, with the sound of a mighty, rushing wind and the appearance of tongues of fire resting on their heads, Jesus’ small group of believers—approximately 120 people in Jerusalem—received the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4; 1:15). Later that same day, about 3,000 more people received the Holy Spirit after responding to Peter’s admonition to repent of their sins and be baptized (Acts 2:38, 41).

It was a momentous day and has continuing significance for all who repent of their sins and believe “the gospel of the kingdom of God” (Mark

## How God Calls People: Paul

One of the most striking examples in the Bible of God’s calling someone is found in the account of Saul of Tarsus, who was later renamed Paul.

Prior to his calling, Saul was a highly trained and strictly observant Pharisee who zealously persecuted Christians (Acts 26:9-11). Then, in a truly miraculous way, this fearsome menace to Christianity was called.

As he was traveling on a road to Damascus, Saul experienced a vision in which he saw a great light, was made blind, and heard Jesus talking to him. Now he became receptive to God’s calling. After three days, a disciple named Ananias prayed for him, and Saul then received his sight once again and was baptized (Acts 9).

After repenting of his sins—which included his merciless persecution of followers of Jesus—and being baptized, Saul was a changed man (verse 18).

God had prepared Saul. He was sincere and dedicated, an expert in the law of God, but he hadn’t accepted that Jesus was the Messiah. Once he was convinced of that, he was prepared to preach “the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God” (verse 20).

Through the man who once persecuted Christians, God now had a servant who zealously preached the gospel, wrote a large portion of the New Testament and was instrumental in the founding of Jesus’ Church in gentile regions.



1:14-15). In His earthly ministry Jesus had repeatedly urged people to repent of their sins. But from this Pentecost onward, when people genuinely repented, became baptized and had the laying on of hands, they would receive the amazing gift of God’s Holy Spirit. This is a special benefit that wasn’t generally offered under the Old Covenant. (It seems only a very few people in the Old Testament were specially selected to receive the Holy Spirit before Christ’s coming.)

The Holy Spirit—which the people received when they responded to the call to become part of the Church Jesus founded—identified them as Christians (Romans 8:14), guided them into truth (John 16:13), empowered and comforted them to live in accordance with God’s commands (2 Timothy 1:7; Galatians 5:22), and sealed them to receive immortality at Christ’s return (Ephesians 4:30). For further study of the gospel Jesus preached, see the series of articles about the “[Messiah’s Message](#)” on our website and our booklet *The Mystery of the Kingdom*.

““ For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. ””

## **Doctrines of the Church**

As we noted, in the beginning of the conversation Christ had with Peter about founding His Church, Peter acknowledged that Jesus was “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). This recognition of Jesus as the Son of God is foundational to true Christianity, but it is not the sole criteria for being a genuine follower of Christ. Jesus said we must also do the will of the Father and “know the truth” (Matthew 7:21; John 8:32). So what does this entail?

The teachings and beliefs of the Church Jesus established were built on the foundation of the Old Testament (Ephesians 2:20). God made clear to the apostles the things that He had changed. The animal sacrifices, which prefigured the sacrifice of Christ for our sins (1 Corinthians 5:7), were no longer required, and some of the civil laws of the nation of Israel could not be enforced because that nation no longer existed. Additionally, since Jesus has replaced the Levitical priesthood as our High Priest (Hebrews 7:12; 9:11), Christ now

## Acts 15: An Example of Binding and Loosing

The first members of the New Testament Church were primarily Jews. Their cultural heritage included male circumcision—a practice that was a symbol of the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 17:9-10).

These early Christians were now under the New Covenant—an agreement in which God’s laws were written on their hearts and one that included “the promise of the eternal inheritance” (Hebrews 9:15; Jeremiah 31:31-33). These members of the Church who were Jewish by culture continued to circumcise their sons even as they lived under the terms of the New Covenant.

When God started adding gentiles—non-Jews—to His Church, a contentious dispute arose over whether gentile males needed to be circumcised in order to be saved. To resolve this doctrinal issue, “the apostles and elders came together [in Jerusalem] to consider this matter” (Acts 15:2, 6).

After much discussion, Peter recounted how God through him had begun calling gentiles into the Church and advised that gentile males not be required to be circumcised (verses 7-11). Barnabas and Paul then explained how “God had worked through them among the gentiles” (verse 12). Finally, James noted that the prophets had predicted that gentiles would also seek God. He concurred that under the New Covenant, circumcision in the flesh should not be required of gentile males (verses 13-19). Paul later explained that God was looking for an attitude characterized as circumcision “of the heart” (Romans 2:29).

One of the main decisions the assembly of ministers came to was that gentile males would not be required to be circumcised. The leaders of the Church made this binding ruling within several key boundaries.

First, they noted the work God was doing among uncircumcised gentile males. Second, they noted that the calling of gentiles was prophesied by God through the prophets. Third, they noted that this decision was inspired by the Holy Spirit, which was to guide them into truth (Acts 15:28; John 16:13).

This example of binding and loosing what would be required of the congregations was not made by Peter alone. It was a decision made by the apostles and elders who carefully considered what God was doing among uncircumcised gentile males, what the Scriptures said, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

For more, see our article “[Acts 15: How Was the Law Changed?](#)”

has His own ministers and teachers (Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Corinthians 12:28; 2 Corinthians 11:23).

Although some mistakenly think Jesus came to do away with God's law, notice His very clear statement in Matthew 5:17: "*Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.*" The Greek word *pleroo* translated "fulfill" means "to make full ... to cause to abound, to furnish or supply liberally ... to fill up to the top: so that nothing shall be lacking to full measure" (*Thayer's Greek Lexicon*).

What Jesus fulfilled or added to God's law was the necessity of obeying not just the letter but also the spirit of the law. He tied being angry at a brother without cause to murder (verses 21-24) and lusting after a woman to adultery (verses 27-28). Jesus was clearly magnifying God's law—making it more binding—as opposed to doing away with it or diminishing it.

Just before His crucifixion, Jesus reminded His disciples: "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15, compare verse 21). Some believe Jesus' commandments are different from God's commandments. But what commandments did Jesus teach? In Matthew 19:16-19 He clearly taught from the 10 Commandments.

Noting that keeping God's commandments is difficult and that all have sinned, some have mistakenly concluded that God's commandments cannot be kept. But this is faulty reasoning. While humans do indeed sin,

... day, and hallowed it.  
12 ¶ Honour thy father and  
mother: that thy days may be  
upon the land which the LORD  
God giveth thee.  
13 Thou shalt not kill.  
14 Thou shalt not commit adultery.  
15 Thou shalt not steal.  
16 Thou shalt not bear false witness  
against thy neighbour.  
17 Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thine

they can repent of their sins and with the help of God's Holy Spirit live according to God's commands.

John wrote, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3).

Notice how John links commandment keeping with having God's Spirit: "Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit" (1 John 3:24). Having God's Holy Spirit assists the members of Jesus' Church in living in obedience to His laws.

Consider also how significant it is that the Church keeps the commandments. This means that the Church kept the Fourth Commandment, which enjoins us to keep the Sabbath—the seventh day of the week, from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset—holy (Exodus 20:8). This Church did not meet on Sunday. Additionally, the Church Jesus founded observed the annual holy days of God (1 Corinthians 5:7-8; Acts 2:1; 27:9; John 7:2, 10). Members of this Church did not observe Christmas or Easter. For additional study on the 10 Commandments, see "[The 10 Commandments for Today](#)."

## The World Prepared for Christianity

"But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son" (Galatians 4:4). Centuries earlier, via Daniel the prophet, God had revealed the time when the Messiah would appear (see our online article "70 Weeks of Daniel" for further explanation). In addition, the preaching of John the Baptist prepared the way (Malachi 3:1; Matthew 11:10-14). And historically, it appears that the "fullness of the time" spoken of in Galatians 4 also included the preparation of the world for the arrival of Jesus and the beginning of Christianity.

Consider the following:

The establishment of the Roman Empire provided relative peace throughout a large portion of the world prior to the coming of Christ. This, along with a network of roads and ships, made possible safe travel, secure transportation of goods, and improved communication.

The early Church also understood that:

- God consists of both God the Father and the Son (John 1:1).
- Man does not have an immortal soul (Ezekiel 18:4).
- We are saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8).
- Through Jesus, our sins can be forgiven (Acts 13:38-39).
- People don't go to heaven when they die (John 3:13).
- The dead in Christ will be resurrected to life eternal at Jesus' return (1 Corinthians 15:21-23).
- Faithful members of God's Church who are alive at Christ's return will be changed into spirit (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).
- Christ will return to reign on earth for 1,000 years (Revelation 20:1-4).
- Others will be resurrected 1,000 years after Christ returns to earth (Revelation 20:5).

For further study on any of these doctrines, see the related articles on the [LifeHopeandTruth.com](http://LifeHopeandTruth.com) website and our [Fundamental Beliefs](#).

The fact that Judaism was tolerated within the empire offered protection to the early Christians, who were considered a sect of Judaism by Roman leaders.

It is also interesting to note that the Greek language had become the common language of the Roman Empire. The Septuagint—a translation of the Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures into Greek—was completed in the latter part of the second century B.C., and God inspired the writers of the New Testament to use the Greek language. Although people did not have their own personal copies of the Holy Scriptures, the instruction book for Christianity was available in the most widely known language.

The conditions were favorable for Christ to come as our Savior, preach the gospel of the Kingdom and train leaders who would establish His Church. God the Father, the One who sent His Son to earth, obviously knew when the “fullness of the time had come.”

Read more about this in our [LifeHopeandTruth.com](#) article **“Church History: The Beginning.”**

## The mission of the Church

During a period of 40 days after His crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus spent time with His disciples “speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3) and giving them instructions for their soon-coming ministry. Jesus told His apostles that after they received the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost they would “be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (verse 8).

On one poignant occasion during these days leading up to the founding of the New Testament Church, Jesus had a breakfast meeting with some of His disciples at the Sea of Tiberias (also called the Sea of Galilee). The disciples had fished that night and caught nothing, and then when morning had come Jesus called to them from the shore. He instructed them to cast their net on the right side of the boat in order to catch some fish (John 21:1, 3, 6).

Doing as they were told, suddenly their nets were filled with a multitude of fish. John then recognized that Jesus was the One who had called out to them. Upon hearing this, Peter dove into the water and swam to shore to be with Jesus as the other apostles brought in their bounteous catch.

As they all enjoyed a breakfast of fish and bread, Jesus turned to Peter and asked him three times if he loved Him. Each time Peter responded “yes,” Jesus told him to feed or tend His sheep—the people who would become part of Jesus’ Church (verses 15-17).

In this conversation Jesus was emphasizing to Peter and the other disciples that their jobs would soon change. In a matter of days they would begin fulfilling their calling to be “fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19; Mark 1:17).

In Matthew 28 Jesus’ commission to His disciples is described as a twofold task. “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (verses 19-20).

They were to make disciples of those God calls out of all the nations and to teach them what Jesus had commanded. The mission included preaching the good news of the Kingdom of God “in all the world as a witness to all the nations” before Christ’s return (Matthew 24:14).

Furthermore, Jesus reminded them that He had been given all authority in heaven and on earth and that He would always be with His disciples and those who would follow in their footsteps until the end of the age (Matthew 28:18, 20).

Founded on the Day of Pentecost as repentant believers received the Holy Spirit, the Church Jesus built was now ready to fulfill its purpose. Jesus had trained its leaders, established its doctrines and given it a commission.



## Chapter 3

Attacked From Its Beginning:  
How the variations in  
Christianity Began

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**T**he Church founded by Jesus grew rapidly after its miraculous start in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. God was performing “many wonders and signs” through the apostles, and was adding people daily to His Church (Acts 2:43, 47; 3:1-8).

There was great excitement among these early believers as they shared their possessions in order to help those in need and as they met at the temple daily and fellowshiped with each other (Acts 2:42-46). Their conduct was undoubtedly honorable, as they had “favor with all the people” (verse 47).

Unfortunately, the favor these early believers had with the public in general did not include the Jewish religious authorities. Instead of praising God for the miracles that had been done and learning from the teaching of the apostles, they became angry over what was occurring.

“Now as they [the apostles] spoke to the people, the priests, the captains of the temple, and the Sadducees came upon them, *being greatly disturbed* that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they laid hands on them, and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening” (Acts 4:1-3).

Conferring among themselves the next day, they said, “What shall we do to these men? For, indeed, that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. But so that it spreads no further among the people, let us severely threaten them, that from now on they speak to no man in this name [Jesus Christ of Nazareth]” (verses 16-17).

Believing they should obey God rather than men, the apostles did not allow the threats to stop them (Acts 5:29).



The next clash between the two groups led to the Jewish authorities plotting to kill the apostles (Acts 5:33). Fortunately, the Jewish leaders listened to a respected Pharisee named Gamaliel, who advised them to be careful in what they did. Instead of killing these leaders of the Church, they had them beaten and again “commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go” (verse 40).

So began a disagreement between Judaism and the Church Jesus founded that continues to this day. In short, the early Christians believed that Jesus was the Son of God, while most Jews did not (Acts 5:30-33).

Because of this difference, the leaders of Judaism eventually expelled Christians from their synagogues just as Jesus had foretold (John 16:2) and sought to have Jesus’ followers beaten, imprisoned and even killed (Matthew 23:34-36; Acts 7:58-59; 9:1-4; 12:1-4). But this threat to the Church did not succeed.

Although its rate of growth slowed, the Church continued to increase and spread throughout the Roman world. In the face of opposition, the apostles rejoiced “that they were counted worthy to suffer for His [Christ’s] name ... and did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ” (Acts 5:41-42).

This opposition came from outside the Church. But instead of deterring these early Church members (who were variously called “Nazarenes,” “believers,” followers of “the Way” and “Christians”), the persecution actually strengthened their resolve to carry out the commission of the Church (Acts 24:5; 5:14; 9:2; 11:26). (For more about the Nazarenes, see our [LifeHopeandTruth.com](http://LifeHopeandTruth.com) article “[Church History: The Ancient Nazarenes.](#)”)

Soon even more insidious and deadly attacks upon the Church would arise from within. These challenges would come from people who claimed to be Christians, yet didn’t accept all of the doctrines of the Church or live as Christ had lived. These disagreements would come from people who were only Christian in name.

### **Persecution from within**

As people heard about Jesus Christ and the gospel of the Kingdom, some, having hearts made receptive to the message by God the Father (John 6:44), responded to the message. Others did not. Some were temporarily caught up in the excitement of the new movement, but didn’t really have the heart to continue.

One such individual, a man named Simon, previously practiced sorcery (“magic,” English Standard Version) in Samaria. Hearing Philip preach

about Christ and seeing the miracles that accompanied his ministry, Simon decided to be baptized along with others who were responding to Philip's preaching (Acts 8:9-13).

Unfortunately, Simon became fixated on the fact that people received the Holy Spirit by the laying on of the apostles' hands, and tried to buy this power for himself (verses 18-19). His background as a sorcerer once again became his focus.

Peter then told him, "Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity" (verses 20-23).

After Simon asked Peter to pray for him, the biblical account of this man ends. The Bible doesn't say whether he actually repented, and it appears that Simon was among the first people to join the Church and then work against it.

## **The argument over circumcision**

As noted in an earlier sidebar, "Acts 15: An Example of Binding and Loosing," the Church at its founding was primarily composed of Jews. When God began calling gentiles (non-Jews) into the Church, a controversy arose over whether gentile males should be circumcised.

At a ministerial conference in Jerusalem (probably around A.D. 49), the leaders of the Church determined that gentile males did not need to be circumcised according to the law of Moses. This decision was communicated to the gentiles via a letter and by men who were present at the conference (Acts 15:22-29).

Unfortunately, even though this decision was made in harmony with the Scriptures and the guidance of the Holy Spirit (verses 15-17, 28), some of Jewish background disagreed and on this point zealously opposed Paul and his ministry among the gentiles. In the book of Galatians Paul vigorously defended the teaching of the Church on circumcision that He and the other apostles and elders had come to understand.

Paul referred to these advocates of circumcision as "false brethren" who were teaching "a different gospel" and trying to "be justified by law" (Galatians 2:4; 1:6; 5:4). He also reminded the brethren that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek" and "in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything" (Galatians 3:27-28; 6:15).

# Judaism: A Protector and an Enemy of the Church

In the early years of the Church, Roman authorities considered Christianity to be a sect of the Jews—a belief that protected the Church from the accusation that Christians were illegally starting a new religion. After all, the Jews already had divisions among themselves, such as the one between the Sadducees and Pharisees. The former did not believe in the resurrection or angels, while the latter believed in both (Acts 23:8)

The early Christians were like Judaism in that they recognized the same Hebrew Scriptures, believed in the God revealed in the Old Testament, worshipped on the seventh day of the week, kept the same holy days and followed the dietary laws given in Leviticus. So to the Romans, these Christians were Jews. The major issue that the Romans saw that made the Christians different from other Jews was that they were following their preferred rabbi—a man named Jesus (Acts 25:13-19).

Sadly, however, the biblical record shows that some leaders in Judaism also became aggressive persecutors of the members of Jesus' Church from its beginning. It is an interesting irony that Judaism thus served as both a protector and an enemy of the Church Jesus founded. Jesus declared that His Church would never die out or cease to exist (Matthew 16:18), and the circumstances were optimal for it to be legally protected by the Romans as it began.

What made this argument over circumcision harder to deal with than the persecution that came from Judaism was the fact that these “false brethren” apparently accepted some portions of Christianity while rejecting its teaching on circumcision. Put another way, people were designing their own form of Christianity.

## **The rise of gnosticism**

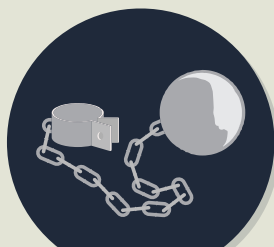
Cafeteria Christianity—the kind where people pick which parts of the Christianity Jesus established that they want to accept and practice—was flourishing as the first century came to a close. This practice was a dire threat to the Church Jesus instituted, and leaders of the true Church repeatedly warned brethren to hold fast to what they had been taught.

# The Sabbath—

**“There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His” (Hebrews 4:9-10).**

## God commanded the Sabbath

**Exodus 20:8-11** “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.”



## God created the Sabbath

**Genesis 2:2-3** “And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.”

**Mark 2:27** “And He said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.’”



## Israel ignored the Sabbath

### **Ezekiel 20:21, 24**

“Notwithstanding, the children rebelled against Me; they did not walk in My statutes, and were not careful to observe My judgments, ‘which, if a man does, he shall live by them’; but they profaned My Sabbaths. Then I said I would pour out My fury on them and fulfill My anger against them in the wilderness. ... Because they had not executed My judgments, but had despised My statutes, profaned My Sabbaths, and their eyes were fixed on their fathers’ idols.”

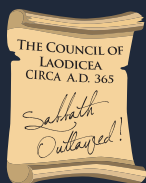
# Past, Present and Future

## Jesus observed the Sabbath

**Luke 4:16** "So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read."

## The apostles observed the Sabbath after the resurrection

**Acts 13:42, 44** "So when the Jews went out of the synagogue, the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath. . . . On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God."



## The Sabbath will be observed after Christ returns

**Isaiah 56:6-7** "Everyone who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, and holds fast My covenant—even them I will bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer."

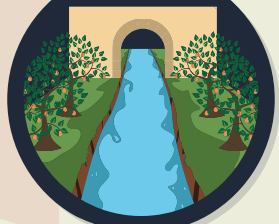
**Isaiah 66:23** "And it shall come to pass that from one New Moon to another, and from one Sabbath to another, all flesh shall come to worship before Me," says the LORD."

**Revelation 22:14** "Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city."

## Roman Christianity tried to abolish the Sabbath

**The Council of Nicaea, A.D. 325:** Constantine and the Catholic Church established Sunday as a day of rest.

**The Council of Laodicea, ca. A.D. 365:** The Catholic Church made it illegal to "Judaize" or be idle from work on the seventh-day Sabbath.



To gain an in-depth understanding of God's Sabbath, download our free booklet *The Sabbath: A Neglected Gift From God* at

[LifeHopeandTruth.com/Learning-Center/Booklets](http://LifeHopeandTruth.com/Learning-Center/Booklets)

Jude exhorted members of Jesus' Church "to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3). And John wrote of people who had left the Church and who were then apparently trying to lead members away (1 John 2:19, 26).

Although the New Testament writers did not use this term, their writings countered a growing heresy called gnosticism. The term comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning knowledge. Gnosticism was an intellectual, anti-Christian philosophy that had multiple variations of belief.

Even though gnosticism did not fully blossom until the second century, its faulty ideas were already circulating in the first century. Here is how Paul Johnson, in his book *A History of Christianity*, describes it:

"Certainly gnostic sects were spreading at the same time as Christian ones; both were part of the general religious osmosis. Gnostics had two central preoccupations: belief in a dual world of good and evil and belief in the existence

of a secret code of truth, transmitted by word of mouth or by arcane writings. Gnosticism is a 'knowledge' religion—that is what the word

“ There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies. ”

means—which claims to have an inner explanation of life. Thus it was, and indeed still is, a spiritual parasite which used other religions as a 'carrier'. Christianity fitted into this role very well.”

Continuing, Johnson writes: “Thus gnostic groups seized on bits of Christianity, but tended to cut it off from its historical origins. They were Hellenizing it, as they Hellenized other oriental cults [created Greek versions of other eastern religions] (often amalgamating the results). Their ethics varied to taste: sometimes they were ultra-puritan, sometimes orgiastic.

“Thus some groups seized on Paul's denunciation of the law to preach complete license. Paul fought hard against gnosticism, recognizing that it might cannibalize Christianity and destroy it. At Corinth he came across well-educated Christians who had reduced Jesus to myth. Among the Colossians he found Christians who worshipped intermediate spirits and angels. Gnosticism was hard to combat because it was hydra-headed and always changing” (p. 45).

For further study on how Paul and John countered gnostic ideas, see our online articles “[Colossians](#)” and “[1 John](#).”

## **Wolves from within**

From the outset of His ministry Jesus had warned His followers about false religious teachers. “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves,” He said (Matthew 7:15).

Since Jesus called those who would respond to the gospel “My sheep” (John 10:27; 21:16-17), what He was saying was that false religious teachers would come among His people and look like true Christians. These false teachers would gain the confidence of Jesus’ disciples and then attempt to deceive them and turn them away from Jesus’ teaching.

Speaking to the elders of Ephesus, Paul warned, “For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves” (Acts 20:29-30).

Sadly, what Jesus and Paul had foretold came to pass. Toward the end of his life, Paul wrote of a minister who left the Church. “Demas,” he wrote, “has forsaken me, having loved this present world” (2 Timothy 4:10). And John wrote of a leader named Diotrephes, who was wrongly putting people out of the Church (3 John 1:9-10).

Similarly, Peter wrote: “But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be *false teachers* among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction” (2 Peter 2:1).

John added: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many *false prophets* have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1).

## **Congregations in Revelation reveal conditions in the Church**

The book of Revelation, revealed by Jesus Christ to John near the end of the first century, contains messages to seven congregations of the Church of God. These messages had meanings applicable to the Church of God then and throughout the ages until Christ’s return. The issues addressed, especially in the first three messages, provide a snapshot of the challenges the early Christians were facing and the state of Christianity as a whole through the early centuries.

The members at Ephesus had rejected the teaching of false apostles and resisted the ungodly “deeds of the Nicolaitans” (Revelation 2:2, 6). The congregation at Smyrna had suffered tribulation and endured blasphemous teaching by people who claimed to be genuine followers of Christ but were not (verses 9-10).

Some brethren in the congregation at Pergamos had been influenced to “eat things sacrificed to idols, ... commit sexual immorality” and accept the false “doctrine of the Nicolaitans” (verses 14-15).

These examples show that the Church Jesus instituted and its members (represented by these seven churches) were struggling to hold to the doctrines Jesus had established. These struggles are indicative of what was happening within Christianity as a whole during the early years and its challenges in the future.

Instead of being one unified body, Christianity had diversified into multiple variations, and the Church Jesus founded with the doctrines He established was simply one of them.

As Paul Johnson notes: “Before the last half of the third century it is inaccurate to speak of a dominant strain of Christianity. So far as we can judge, by the end of the first century, and virtually throughout the second, the majority of Christians believed in varieties of Christian-gnosticism, or belonged to revivalist sects grouped round charismatics” (p. 52).

For additional study on the congregations listed in the book of Revelation, see [“Seven Churches of Revelation”](#) and its accompanying articles.

The fact that Jesus’ Church was only one small group of people among the many who claimed to be Christians was what Jesus had foretold. Jesus had stated that “narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to [eternal] life, and there are *few* who find it” (Matthew 7:14; compare Luke 13:24). He also referred to His followers as a “*little flock*” (Luke 12:32).

Even though Jesus’ Church was small, He had promised that it would not die out (Matthew 16:18). In the next chapter we compare Christ’s promise with the church history found in secular records.





# Chapter 4

God's Church Through  
the Centuries

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**W**e have noted Jesus' promise that His Church would continue throughout the ages. As He told His disciples, "the gates of Hades [the grave] shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).

Because of this clear promise, we know that the Church of God has continued to exist since its founding on the Day of Pentecost in A.D. 31. But tracing its history is challenging.

One reason it is difficult to state with certainty how and where the Church continued is because this body of believers was prophesied to be small (Matthew 7:14; Luke 12:32). Jesus also explained that it was destined to be persecuted. "If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you," He told His closest followers just hours before His crucifixion (John 15:20).

Throughout the centuries, the people who remained faithful to the doctrines Jesus established for His Church came to be labeled as heretics because they would not accept the changes that were being made to Jesus' instruction. History shows that the Roman Catholic Church became the largest and most powerful of all the competing variations of Christianity and that this church, in alliance with civil authorities, systematically crushed all who opposed its decrees.

Most of the early writings on church history were written by Roman Catholics who usually didn't include extensive records about the beliefs of those they deemed heretics. In fact, the Catholic Church often vilified and mischaracterized those who disagreed with its teachings. Many were even put to death through various inquisitions.

The ruthless effectiveness of the Catholic Church's effort for primacy over all others claiming to be Christian is evidenced in

many religious practices accepted by the vast majority of churches today. Some of its unbiblical teachings included denying the commandment to keep the seventh-day Sabbath, enforcing Sunday worship, rejecting the Passover and the annual holy days of God and adopting new holidays rooted in paganism, such as Christmas and Easter.

Because the world was so hostile to the Christianity founded by Jesus, the people in God's Church often had to flee to obscure locations. Many gave their lives for their beliefs or were shunned and ostracized by those around them. Due to these conditions, the history of the Church of God after the first century is sparse.

In the history available to us, there are often only small clues indicating people observing the commandments and instructions of Jesus. God knows who His people are, but for us, these records provide the best evidence we have of where they likely existed. With this disclaimer in mind, here are some notable events in Church history in the centuries following the establishment of the Church of God.

### **First century (31-100): apostolic leadership**

The Bible itself, in the book of Acts, provides information on the founding of the Church of God on the Day of Pentecost in A.D. 31 and gives us an overview of the congregations established by Paul during his first three journeys. For additional study on how the book of Acts documents the beliefs and practices of the early Christians, see the Life, Hope & Truth article "[Acts of the Apostles](#)."

As the first century came to a close, John was given a vision that he wrote in the book of Revelation. In this vision he recorded messages to seven existing congregations of the Church of God. These messages included instructions applicable to the members at that time and also provided an overview of the Church's continued existence from that time until Christ's return.

As previously noted, these messages to the seven congregations named in Revelation 2 and 3 reveal that members of the true Church were facing a number of challenges to the Christianity Jesus and His disciples had founded. These messages also show that the true Church of God would continue to exist through Christ's return to earth to establish the Kingdom of God. As such, they also represent eras or a progressive history of the Church.

Speaking of this history, Dr. John F. Walvoord wrote: "Many expositors believe that in addition to the obvious implication of these messages the seven churches represent the chronological development of church history

## How God Calls People: Lydia

The story of Lydia's calling is more typical than the one Saul received. When Saul, now known as Paul (Acts 13:9), came to Philippi, it seems that there was no synagogue for him to meet in on the Sabbath and preach the gospel.

The custom there was for some of the religiously inclined women to go outside the city and pray near a river. So on the Sabbath Paul and his companions went to the place where prayer was customarily made and spoke to the women who were there.

Luke, a companion of Paul, then gives this account: "Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.' So she persuaded us" (Acts 16:14-15).

Being a seller of purple—uniquely dyed fabric that was quite expensive at that time—indicates that Lydia was likely a very successful merchant. Of course, God doesn't choose who He will call based on a person's financial status.

What made Lydia's response to God possible was that God opened her heart. This was similar to the experience of those who were baptized at the founding of Jesus' Church on the Day of Pentecost. These people were "cut to the heart" when they heard Peter's message to repent and be baptized (Acts 2:37).

viewed spiritually. They note that Ephesus seems to be characteristic of the Apostolic Period in general and that the progression of evil climaxing in Laodicea seems to indicate the final state of apostasy of the church. ... The order of the messages to the churches seems to be divinely selected to give prophetically the main movement of church history" (*The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 1989, pp. 51-52).

Illustrative of this progression of history, Smyrna, the second church representing the second era, was predicted to have "tribulation ten days" (Revelation 2:10). Commenting on this passage, Adam Clarke writes: "As the days in this book are what is commonly called 'prophetic days,' each

answering to a year, the ten days of tribulation may denote ‘ten years of persecution’; and this was precisely the duration of the persecution under Diocletian, during which all the Asiatic churches were grievously afflicted. Others understand the expression as implying frequency and abundance, as it does in other parts of Scripture” (*Adam Clarke’s Commentary on the Bible*, Revelation 2:10).

Another indication of progressive history is that Christ tells the latter churches that His return is imminent (Revelation 2:25; 3:3, 11, 20). For additional study on these churches and the messages written to them, see the article [“Seven Churches of Revelation.”](#)

### **Second and third centuries (101-300): sects and persecution**

Changes to the doctrines Jesus had established for His Church were clearly occurring by the early part of the second century. Describing what had occurred, Jesse Lyman Hurlbut wrote: “For fifty years after St. Paul’s life a curtain hangs over the church, through which we strive vainly to look; and when at last it rises, about 120 A.D. with the writings of the earliest church fathers, we find a church in many aspects very different from that in the days of St. Peter and St. Paul” (*Story of the Christian Church*, 1970, p. 33).

One of the prominent doctrinal debates was about when Passover should be observed. In the second century, first Polycarp and later Polycrates, pastors of congregations in Smyrna and Ephesus respectively, stayed firm to the biblical teaching.

Representing themselves and other pastors in Asia Minor, they resisted efforts by the church at Rome to change Passover from the 14th day of the first month, as the Bible instructs, to what would later become the Good Friday–Easter Sunday tradition. Polycarp and Polycrates insisted that Passover was to be observed annually on the same evening Jesus observed it with His disciples before His crucifixion. In history this is known as the Quartodeciman Controversy.

This refusal to accede to the unbiblical demand of the powerful sect of Christianity that was developing in Rome indicates that these pastors and their congregations were determined to stay faithful to the practices of the Church Jesus founded. For additional information about these men and their efforts to remain faithful to Jesus’ instructions, see the article [“Church History: Polycarp and Polycrates.”](#)

The second and third centuries were also a time of persecution for members of the true Church of God and all who claimed to be Christians.

In spite of their developing doctrinal differences, the professed followers of Christ almost universally refused to worship the Roman emperor as a god and did not participate in the typical pagan festivals dedicated to other gods.

These differences from non-Christians provided a basis for their persecution, and they were often blamed for tragedies and natural disasters. Insightful documentation of this treatment of Christians is found in Pliny the Younger's letter to Emperor Trajan around A.D. 112 asking for guidance on how to deal with people accused of being Christians. The emperor responded that Pliny had acted properly in having these people executed for being Christians but that he, Pliny, need not initiate a special effort to find and punish them.

### **Fourth century (301-400): consolidation into heresy**

This century was a particularly important turning point in Church history. During this landmark century it became legal to be a Christian in the Roman Empire, and the majority of Christian sects were unified. But from the perspective of members of the Church Jesus founded, it was a time of mixed feelings. Freedom to be a Christian was welcomed, but the unification of teaching was distressing because what was adopted by the majority was such a blatant departure from what Jesus and His disciples had taught.



Bronze statue of Roman Emperor Constantine (A.D. 272-337) in York, England.

The person primarily responsible for these major developments of the fourth century was the Roman Emperor Constantine (272-337). Seeing that Christianity was a growing movement that respected the authority of the state, historians suggest that Constantine decided to legalize this relatively new religion and bring together its differing sects through the establishment of a universal set of doctrines.

Although some claim Constantine converted to Christianity following a vision he experienced of seeing a cross and being told to conquer in this name, the record actually shows that he continued to be a sun worshipper and was not baptized until just before his death. He is the one who made it law that Christians were to rest on Sunday—the same day for the worship of his pagan god.

The switch from worshipping God on the seventh day to Sunday was indeed a historic event. But this change was significant in a different way than most people today comprehend.

The Fourth Commandment instructs us to set apart and rest on the seventh day. God reveals that worship on this day is an enduring sign between Him and His people (Exodus 31:12-17). This is why Jesus, His disciples and members (both Jew and gentile) of the Church Jesus built worshipped on the seventh day. And it's why members of God's Church through the centuries have continued to assemble on this day for worship.

From this point forward in history, observance of the seventh-day Sabbath is a key indicator of where the Church of God was.

Noting the significance of this point, A.H. Lewis wrote: "Dissenters who kept the Sabbath, existed under different names from the time of the Pope to the Reformation. They were either the descendants of those who fled from the heathen persecutions previous to the time of Constantine, or else those who, when he began to rule the church and force false practices upon it, refused submission, and sought seclusion and freedom to obey God.

"In their earlier history they were known as Nazarenes, Cerinthians and Hyspistarii, and later, as Vaudois, Cathari, Toulousians, Albigenses,

“ Dissenters who kept the Sabbath, existed under different names from the time of the Pope to the Reformation. ”

# How God Calls People: James, the Lord's Brother

Sometimes it is difficult for siblings to have much respect for each other. Such was the case with Jesus' brothers toward Him when He was on earth as a human. Technically, Jesus' brothers were His half-brothers since Jesus was begotten by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:18). Even so, Matthew 13:55 refers to them as His brothers, and James is listed as one of these four brothers of Jesus. (The New Testament also speaks of two other men named James. They were among Jesus' 12 apostles.)

The scriptural record shows that during the latter part of Jesus' ministry, Jesus' brothers did not believe in Him (John 7:5). But this began to change, especially for James, after Jesus' death and resurrection.

James, the brother of Jesus, may have been among those who saw Jesus after He was resurrected (1 Corinthians 15:7). Perhaps it was this experience that God used to soften his and his brothers' hearts. It is recorded that a few days later Mary—Jesus' mother—and His brothers had gathered with the other disciples in Jerusalem awaiting the receiving of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 1:14).

For James, doubt turned to belief. A few years later, Paul speaks of visiting "James, the Lord's brother" in Jerusalem (Galatians 1:19). He seems to have been the pastor of the Jerusalem congregation who chaired the ministerial conference held in Jerusalem in A.D. 49 (Acts 15:13, 19).

Petrobrusians, Passagii, and Waldenses. ... These widely scattered Sabbath reformers were our denominational ancestors" ("The Sabbath From the Time of Christ to Its Appearance in England," *Seventh Day Baptists in Europe and America*, Vol. 1, 1910, pp. 15-17).

Of course, not all who were called by these names were Sabbath-keepers, but indications are that these groups that were out of step with the Roman church contained some who saw the importance of obeying God's Sabbath command.

The fourth century also witnessed a change in festival observance. By this date, the earlier efforts of the bishop of Rome to change the date of Passover observance had largely succeeded, and the first recorded date of Christmas being observed on Dec. 25 occurred in A.D. 336. The



variation of Christianity that became mainstream in the fourth century was transitioning from the biblical holy days to man-made holidays.

Still another doctrinal matter decided in the fourth century was the Trinity. Although this teaching is not found in the Bible, a series of discussions, first to counter mistaken ideas by a man named Arius, eventually concluded in this humanly formulated doctrine.

### **Key fourth-century dates**

Here are key dates for the major events in church history for this century:

**The Edict of Milan, 313:** Via this document Constantine and his coemperor Licinius encouraged governors throughout the empire to allow people to worship any religion they personally felt best for themselves.

**The Council of Nicaea, 325:** This gathering of church leaders passed the first Sunday law, establishing Sunday as a day of rest. However it still permitted agricultural work if people thought it necessary to be done on this day. Additionally, at this meeting the date of Easter was officially set so it would not coincide with the Jewish Passover, and discussions took place regarding the nature of God. These discussions led to the formulation of the Athanasian Creed, which later led to the doctrine of the Trinity.

**The Council of Laodicea, circa 365:** The Catholic Church at this council ruled, “Christians shall not Judaize and be idle on Saturday [Sabbath], but shall work on that Day; but the Lord’s day [Sunday] they shall especially honour, and, as being Christians, shall, if possible, do no work on that day. If, however, they are found Judaizing, they shall be shut out from Christ” (Charles Joseph Hefele, translated by Henry N. Oxenham, *A History of the Councils of the Church: A.D. 326 to A.D. 429*, Vol. 2, 1876, p. 316).

**The Council of Constantinople, 381:** “The council dealt a death blow to the formerly popular form of Christianity known as Arianism and basically settled the trinitarian controversy that had divided the empire since the time of Constantine the Great” (*New World Encyclopedia*, article “First Council of Constantinople”).

Before concluding this overview of the fourth century, it is important to note that this developing form of Christianity was entwined with the Roman government, meaning that these doctrinal changes became mandatory and enforceable by the civil authority. Those who resisted could be put to death.

Though these laws of punishment were primarily passed to pressure pagans into accepting Christianity, they were also used against Christians

“ The sign of a Vaudois, deemed worthy of death, was that he followed Christ and sought to obey the commandments of God. ”

holding what were considered unorthodox beliefs. Because of the zealous hostility toward any who kept the seventh-day Sabbath and held the original teachings of Jesus and His disciples, members of the Church of God often fled to relatively unpopulated areas in order to survive.

### **Fifth through 15th centuries (401-1500): a time of hiding**

During the centuries that followed, there were always people who observed the seventh-day Sabbath. Though often persecuted and punished, they survived in various valleys and mountainous areas in Germany, England, France, Italy, India, Ireland, Scotland and other countries.

While attempts have been made to identify specific groups through these centuries as seventh-day Sabbath-keepers, in many cases the evidence is sparse or disputed. Rather than trying to identify specific groups among whom were likely Sabbath-keepers, we'll give here a few historical indicators of people observing the biblical Sabbath during these centuries.

Writing about such people in Scotland and Ireland in the sixth century, Catholic historian Alphons Bellesheim wrote: “We seem to see here an allusion to the custom, observed in the early monastic Church of Ireland, of keeping the day of rest on Saturday, or the Sabbath” (*History of the Catholic Church in Scotland*, Vol. 1, p. 86).

Similarly, Professor James C. Moffat, D.D., professor of church history at Princeton, said: “It seems to have been customary in the Celtic churches of early times, in Ireland as well as Scotland, to keep Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, as a day of rest from labor. ... They obeyed the fourth commandment literally upon the seventh day of week” (*The Church in Scotland*, 1882, p. 140).

These peoples may have also continued to observe the Passover as did the early Church. In 664 at the Synod of Whitby, Irish Christians were condemned for following the example of the apostle John instead of the



Illustration depicting a Waldensian as a witch in *Le Champion des Dames*, by Martin le Franc, 1451.

Easter customs of the Catholic Church. Bede, in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, records a priest named Wilfrid stating, “The only people who stupidly contend against the whole world [regarding Easter] are those Irishmen and their partners in obstinacy the Picts and Britons, who inhabit only a portion of these the two uttermost islands of the ocean” (p. 189).

Pope Gregory (590-604) lamented the fact that even in Rome there were people who kept Saturday as the Sabbath (Epistles of Gregory I, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*).

Regarding the eighth century in India, China and Persia, the *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* notes: “Widespread and enduring was the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath among the believers of the Church of the East and the St. Thomas Christians of India, who never were connected with Rome. It also was maintained among those bodies which broke off from Rome after the Council of Chalcedon namely, the Abyssinians, the Jacobites, the Maronites, and the Armenians” (“Nestorians”).

Regarding the 13th century, H.C. Lea wrote that “the sign of a Vaudois, deemed worthy of death, was that he followed Christ and sought to obey

the commandments of God” (*History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages*, Vol. 1, 1906, p. 87). The Vaudois are often connected with the Waldenses, and although most Waldensian histories say these peoples worshipped on Sunday, several seventh-day historians include some of their peoples as ones who kept the seventh-day Sabbath.

Among other areas, Sabbath-keepers flourished in Bohemia, the area of the modern Czech Republic: “Erasmus testifies that even as late as about 1500 these Bohemians not only kept the seventh-day scrupulously, but also were called Sabbatarians” (B.G. Wilkinson, *Truth Triumphant: The Church in the Wilderness*, 2004, p. 255).

### **16th through 20th centuries (1501-2000): preaching the gospel to the world**

With the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in 1517, the Roman Catholic Church lost much of its power to enforce its form of Christianity, and people in general, including those in the Church of God, gradually began to enjoy more freedom to openly worship in accordance with their conscience.

Sadly, although Martin Luther and the other reformers claimed to use the Bible as their authority to *reform* Catholicism, most did not return to keeping the seventh-day Sabbath and harshly criticized those who did. Protestantism rejected the seventh-day Sabbath and many other biblical doctrines, so the Church of God cannot be traced through the many denominations of mainstream Protestantism. To learn more, read “[The Reformation That Didn’t Go Far Enough](#)” and “[Sola Scriptura vs. Sunday: Why the Reformation Failed](#).”

As for Sabbath-keeping churches, during this period history records churches in England that honored the Fourth Commandment. With the founding of the United States, Sabbath-keepers came from England and other countries in search of religious freedom and opportunity.

One of the seventh-day Sabbath-keeping organizations founded in the 18th century in the United States was the Church of God (Seventh Day), which considers itself a continuation of a seventh-day Sabbath-keeping church founded in Rhode Island in 1671.

In the late 1920s Herbert W. Armstrong (1892-1986) and his wife, Loma, learned of the seventh-day Sabbath from members of the Church of God (Seventh Day) in Oregon. After several years of intensive study of the Bible, Mr. Armstrong established the Radio Church of God in 1933, which was later renamed the Worldwide Church of God.

Mr. Armstrong was a pioneer of radio and television evangelism, and millions of people heard him proclaim the authentic first-century gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. He also published *The Plain Truth* magazine, which was sent to millions of households around the world. As a result, the Church grew rapidly and three colleges were established.

After Mr. Armstrong's death in 1986, leaders of the Worldwide Church of God gradually abandoned the biblically based doctrines he taught in favor of a mainstream Protestant approach reflecting the doctrines established by the Catholic Church in the fourth century. Due to the doctrinal upheaval that occurred over the next decade, thousands of members left, and new organizations were formed that continued to teach and practice the authentic Christianity of the first century.

As a continuation of the Church founded by Jesus in A.D. 31, the Church of God, a Worldwide Association, publisher of this booklet, traces its roots and history through Herbert W. Armstrong and the many other faithful Christians throughout the centuries.

The commission of the Church of God, a Worldwide Association, is the same commission given by Jesus to His disciples approximately 2,000 years ago. It is to preach the gospel to the world and to teach those who respond to God's eternal truths (Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20).

Ambassador College in Pasadena, California, was the flagship campus and headquarters for the Worldwide Church of God.





# Chapter 5

How to Find Jesus'  
Church Today

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**W**ith so many churches all claiming to be a continuation of the Church Jesus founded, yet having such a wide diversity of beliefs, it can be difficult to determine where Jesus' Church actually is today. One way to locate the Church instituted by Jesus is to start comparing churches today to the first-century Church described in the New Testament and eliminate those that don't meet the criteria.

After all, we previously noted that biblical Christianity is more than just recognizing Christ as the Son of God and calling oneself a Christian. Jesus said His true followers would also do the will of His Father (Matthew 7:21) and keep His commandments (John 14:15).

### **Consider the name**

Let's begin with the name of the Church. When Paul, the most prolific writer of the New Testament, wrote about the Church, he primarily referred to it as "the church of God" (Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 10:32; 15:9; Galatians 1:13; 1 Timothy 3:5). On one occasion he referred to the congregations as the "churches of Christ" (Romans 16:16), and on another, he referred to them as "the churches of Judea which were in Christ" (Galatians 1:22).

Yet when Paul wrote about a specific congregation, he called it "the church of God which is at Corinth" (1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1) or wherever. This name is in keeping with Jesus' prayer to the Father to "keep through Your name those whom You have given Me" (John 17:11).

So the Church Jesus built will correctly identify itself as "the Church of God."

# What Church Would Jesus Attend?

WWJD—what would Jesus do?—is often a helpful question to ask when trying to determine what a Christian should do. If Jesus were to return to earth today, what church would He attend?

Would Jesus go from church to church simply because He wouldn't want to hurt anyone's feelings? Would He accept them all—with all of their variations of beliefs—simply because they mean well?

The New Testament record of Christ's earthly ministry shows that His custom was to observe the Sabbath (Luke 4:16), the seventh day of the week, and that He often denounced the breaking of God's commandments (Matthew 15:3, 6, 9; 19:17; Mark 7:8-9). He pointedly said, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15).

The commandments of Jesus were not different from the commandments of God the Father, as some mistakenly believe. The commandments of God the Father and Jesus are the same commandments (Matthew 5:17, 19; 19:16-19). One way faithful Christians can be identified is by their commandment keeping (Revelation 12:17). Those who obey the commandments will be the ones who will "have the right to the tree of life" and access to New Jerusalem (Revelation 22:14).

Since "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8), we know He will have the same perspective when He returns.

So what church would Jesus attend if He were to return today? He'd attend the same Church He founded—the Church of God, which keeps all of God's commandments, including the Fourth Commandment that instructs us to keep the seventh day of the week (Saturday) holy by resting from our labor and attending church services.

## The day of worship

Another issue that will eliminate a large number of churches is the day of the week on which they worship. Since members of the Church Jesus founded strove "to walk just as He walked" (1 John 2:6), we'll need to only consider churches that worship on the seventh day of the week—Saturday—as did Jesus, His apostles and the members of the early New Testament Church (Luke 4:16; Acts 13:44; 18:4). For further information



about the Sabbath, see the video series “[The Sabbath: A Gift From God](#)” and the article “[The Fourth Commandment: Remember the Sabbath Day.](#)”

Only considering congregations that have the name Church of God and meet on Saturdays will eliminate a lot of churches. But there are still additional doctrines of the Church Jesus founded that will eliminate many churches that assemble on Saturdays.

## Holy days

Observance of God’s annual holy days is an additional practice that will identify Jesus’ Church today. The Scriptures clearly show that the first-century Church of God observed these days that were given by God to ancient Israel (Leviticus 23), though now with Christian meaning (1 Corinthians 5:7-8; Acts 2:1; 20:16; 27:9).

Members of the Church of God will be observing these days instead of the man-made holidays of Christmas and Easter. For additional study, see the articles under the Life, Hope & Truth section “[Holy Days vs. Holidays](#)” and the booklet *From Holidays to Holy Days: God’s Plan for You*.

## Striving to fulfill the mission

The Church Jesus founded will also continue preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God (Matthew 24:14), making disciples and “teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Though it is called a “little flock” (Luke 12:32), it will do its best to reach the whole world with this message of hope. Read more in our online articles “[What Is the Mission of the Church?](#)” and “[The Church: A Worldwide Work.](#)”

## Additional doctrines

The name of the church and whether its members worship on Saturdays and observe the annual holy days will greatly narrow one’s search for Jesus’ Church today. Of course, these criteria do not represent all of the doctrines Jesus’ Church will be teaching.

As previously noted in Chapter 2, Jesus established additional doctrines for His Church. These included teachings that:

- God consists of both [God the Father and the Son](#) (John 1:1).
- Man does not have an [immortal soul](#) (Ezekiel 18:4).
- We are [saved](#) by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8).
- Through Jesus our sins can be [forgiven](#) (Acts 13:38-39).
- People don’t go to [heaven](#) when they die (John 3:13).

# Was Christ's Resurrection a Basis for Worshipping on Sunday?

Many Protestant churches say that they worship on Sundays because Jesus was resurrected on a Sunday. Yet this teaching is contradicted by the Scriptures.

The commonly believed Good Friday crucifixion and resurrection on Easter Sunday morning timeline does not fit Christ's teaching that He would be in the grave for "three days and three nights" (Matthew 12:40). There simply aren't three days and three nights between Friday afternoon and Sunday morning.

A careful examination of the scriptures pertaining to Jesus' crucifixion, burial and resurrection shows that He was crucified on a Wednesday and buried late that afternoon. After three days and three nights—72 hours—had elapsed, Jesus rose from the dead late Saturday afternoon. When Mary came to the grave while it was still dark (John 20:1) on Sunday morning, she found that Jesus had already risen (Matthew 28:1, 6).

So Sunday was not the day Jesus rose from the grave. For a more detailed explanation, see the article "**How Do You Count Three Days and Three Nights?**" and our infographic "**Chronology of Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection.**"

As for Christ's resurrection, Christians have a reminder of this important event when they are baptized. Romans 6:3-5 says, "Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection."

The weekly Sabbath, which is on Saturday, the seventh day, has a different meaning. This is the day God blessed and sanctified (Genesis 2:3). It commemorates God's work as Creator (Exodus 20:8-11; 31:17), and its observance by faithful Christians anticipates their eternal spiritual rest with God (Hebrews 4:1-9).

- The dead in Christ will be **resurrected** to life eternal at Jesus' return (1 Corinthians 15:21-23).
- Faithful members of God's Church who are alive at Christ's return will be changed into spirit (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).
- Christ will return to reign on earth for **1,000 years** (Revelation 20:1-4).
- Others will be **resurrected** 1,000 years after Christ returns to earth (Revelation 20:5).

For further study on these doctrinal teachings, see the articles on these subjects on the [LifeHopeandTruth.com](http://LifeHopeandTruth.com) website.

### **Doctrinal continuity**

The members of Jesus' Church today will continue believing and teaching these same doctrines. Jude reminded members in the first century and us today that this faith "was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3).

Jesus did not intend for Christianity to evolve and change what He had established. Commenting on people who accepted changes in worship in the first century and left the Church of God, John told the remaining members that "they [the ones who left] went out that they might be made manifest [clearly visible], that none of them were of us" (1 John 2:19).

Although there were many variations of beliefs among people claiming to be Christians in the first century, faithful adherence to Christ's teaching clearly identified those who were truly part of the Church Jesus founded. The same principle applies today. The Church of God will continue to believe and teach the same doctrines.

### **Benefits of attending church**

Some people today don't think it is all that important to attend services at a church. In fact, it is a growing practice for people who claim to be Christians to not attend church services at all.

Those who are called by God the Father to be part of the Church Jesus built have a different perspective. They understand that the Sabbath is a "holy convocation" (Leviticus 23:3)—a day on which God says there is to be a sacred assembly—and that they aren't to forsake the assembling of themselves together, "as is the manner of some" (Hebrews 10:25).

So Christians called to be part of Jesus' Church today make it their practice to meet every Sabbath in obedience to God's command. Of course, it is also important to understand that meeting together on the Sabbath is more than just a matter of obedience. There are also a number

of important benefits that we receive when we gather with fellow believers on the Sabbath.

The benefits of assembling with fellow believers include hearing God's enduring truth (1 Timothy 3:15), which bolsters our faith (Romans 10:17). This biblical guidance is given by those Jesus has selected to teach His people faithfully and care for them (Ephesians 4:11-16). We should also note that our acceptance of God's truth sanctifies us—sets us apart as special in God's eyes (John 17:19).

Being together with God's people also gives us the opportunity to encourage fellow believers to love and serve one another (Hebrews 10:25; John 13:34-35). This interaction between His people is both pleasing to God (Malachi 3:16-17) and beneficial for us.

God calls us to be His children, and so His Church is a family (Romans

## How God Calls People: You?

The New Testament includes the names of many more first-century Christians. These include John Mark, Aquila and Priscilla, Apollos, Dorcas, Titus and Timothy, to name a few.

These people of the first century each had their own stories and circumstances related to their calling. What they had in common was "the goodness of God" leading them to repentance (Romans 2:4) and their willingness to respond to the calling they were given.

What about you?

If God has opened your heart to understand the Christianity Jesus established for His Church, will you respond to this invitation from God? Will you find the Church Jesus founded and become part of it?

We hope you will answer "yes" to these questions. If we can be of help, we'd be pleased to assist you.

Learn more in our online article "**God Calling!**" and our booklet ***Change Your Life!***

8:14-17; 1 John 3:1). Through Christian fellowship, we learn to love, serve and care for one another; to grow in unity; to work together in fulfilling the mission of preaching the gospel; to become a supportive, vibrant church family. (Learn more in our online article “[Christian Fellowship](#).”)

### **What if you live far away from a congregation?**

Although the clear biblical instruction is for us to assemble with God’s people each Sabbath, sometimes people do not live close enough to a congregation of the Church Jesus founded to be able to attend. Under these circumstances, the question naturally arises as to whether we should attend church services with others who believe in Christ even though that church does not believe or teach the doctrines Jesus established.

Those who accept and embrace the truth of the Bible will find it uncomfortable to associate with a church that does not follow biblical doctrine. But Jesus prophesied that His Church would be small and that few in this age would find the way to eternal life (Matthew 7:14; Luke 12:32). Under these circumstances, one may not be able to assemble in person with fellow believers.

But in this modern age, there is another option for those who cannot be at a service due to distance or health. Via the Internet, people can connect to one of our congregations’ Sabbath services. If you need information on how to do this, feel free to contact us, and we’ll be pleased to respond.

### **For additional help**

The Church of God, a Worldwide Association, publisher of this booklet, is a continuation of the Church Jesus founded. We believe and teach the same doctrines that Jesus gave His Church in the first century, and we are trying to live by every word of God.

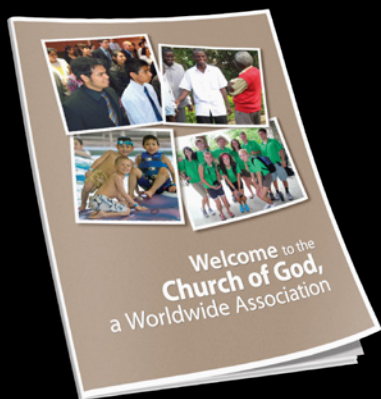
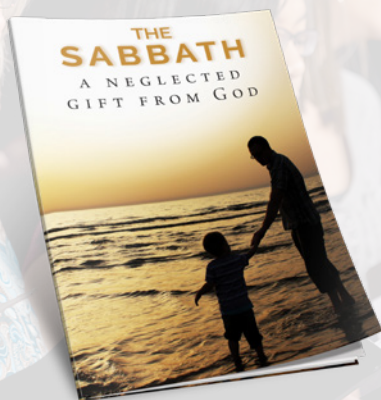
We are committed to fulfilling the commission Jesus gave His Church of making disciples of people throughout the world and teaching them to observe all that Jesus taught (Matthew 28:19-20). If you would like to know more about us, see our booklet [Welcome to the Church of God, a Worldwide Association](#).

If God is calling you to be part of His Church today, we would be pleased to hear from you. We have ministers and congregations throughout the world that can assist you in your relationship with God. Just let us know how we can help.

# The Sabbath is a gift.

From the beginning, God designed a day of rest as a special blessing for humanity. So why do so few Christians today observe the Sabbath? Explore the fascinating biblical story of the Sabbath and how you can enjoy the benefits of this neglected gift by downloading your free copy of our booklet:

## *The Sabbath: A Neglected Gift From God*



All of our booklets are made available free of charge by the Church of God, a Worldwide Association. Who are we? What are our beliefs, and what is our mission? Find out what you would like to know in our booklet:

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# About **LifeHope&Truth**

LifeHopeandTruth.com exists to fill a critical void in this world: the lack of understanding about the purpose of life, the lack of realistic hope for a better future and the lack of truth!

Neither religion nor science has satisfactorily addressed these issues, so people today are of divided opinions, confused or, worst of all, don't care anymore. The ancient words of the prophet Isaiah ring so true today: "Truth is fallen in the street." Why? Is it because God was right when He warned that humans are inclined to reject Him and usually choose not to know Him?

We are here for people who are searching for answers, who are ready to prove all things or who are hungry for more than what they've been taught most of their lives about God, the Bible, the meaning of life and how to live. We want to help you truly understand the good news of the gospel and fulfill Jesus Christ's admonition to "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness."

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The Church of God, a Worldwide Association, has congregations around the world in more than 50 countries, with headquarters in the United States near Dallas, Texas. To learn more about the Church, please visit our website **cogwa.org**.

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