

DISTINCTIVE MARKS OF THE CHURCH OF GOD

Even if we know the true designated name of God's church, that is, the Church of God, and are also affiliated with such a group, how can one be sure that particular assembly of the Church of God is the true church when there are numerous denominations using the same name? For the answer, we have to turn to the scriptures. As we progress through this study, it will be pointed out that the first noticeable attribute is that there is one God and he made his Son, Jesus, the head over all things pertaining to the church (Mark 1:11: **"And there came a voice from heaven, saying, Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."**; Ephesians 1:22: **"And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head overall things to the church"**). We are further told that there is only one flock (church) or body.

The first characteristic that will be in the true church is that Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God will be the sole foundational cornerstone of that church. Read Ephesians 2:20: **"And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone."** The position of Christ as the head of the church does not exist with someone else sharing the same order or equal rank with him. The only foundational cornerstone of the true church is the Christ. There is no president, pope, or chief priest to preside over the Church Of God.

A second and equally distinctive mark of identity will be the church's doctrine. It will be committed only to the truth revealed in the Holy Scriptures. The first of these truths is the acceptance of the Ten Commandments (the laws of love towards God and man). We must abide by all ten, not nine or eight, but the complete ten. In addition to keeping to the Ten Commandments, we must also adhere to the testimony of Jesus the Christ: Revelation 14:12: **"Here is the patience of the saints; here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus."** Revelations 14:12; **"And the dragon was wrath with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ."** Revelations 12:17. In the true Church of God, there is no adherence to man's doctrine or his traditions. And if we abide in God's truth, we can be sure that Jesus will keep his promise that, through the Holy Spirit, he will give his church and its adherents that spiritual food of truth, the Word.

We can consider ourselves fortunate when we find a group that adheres to the biblical name of the church and teaches the keeping of the commandments and testimony of Jesus by the correct biblical interpretation. What if you find a church that meets the previous criteria except you have found the behavior of certain individual members of the congregation not becoming that of a true Christian? It would be natural to begin to doubt if this church can be part of that true spiritual Church of God. But we must be careful not to prejudge the Church of God by its individual members, but rather, we should judge the church by its scriptural standards. If you prejudge the Church of God by the individuals within it, you do Christ's church an injustice, because you will find in every church those that are weaker in their moral behavior and faith. So let us not pass a conclusion upon the Church of God because of those individuals of little faith. Judge it by the pouring out of that spirit of truth from the Word of God. In His church there will be those that will be ready to meet Jesus the Christ when he returns and it is sad to say that there will be those that will not be ready on the Lord's Day of return. **"For the time is come that judgment MUST BEGIN AT THE HOUSE OF GOD, and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?"** I Peter 4:17.

Do you remember the parable that Christ spoke regarding His church by using the sower and seeds to represent it? It went like this: **"And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow. And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up. Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up because they had no deepness of earth. And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And some fell among the thorns; and the thorns sprung up and choked them. But other fell into good ground and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold."** Matthew 13:3 to 8. Verses 18 to 23 of the same chapter gives the meaning of the parable: **"Hear ye therefore, the parable of the sower. When anyone heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side. But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; Yet, hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or**

persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended. He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful. But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word and understandeth it: which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty."

Even despite the fact that a church teaches the scriptural Commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus, it does not necessarily mean that all the adherents within her are saints. As it was in the early church, so it is in today's church: **"Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity."** Matthew 7:21 to 23.

There are many religious groups using the name "Church of God". This is because the various sects are aware of the scriptural texts referring to the name of God's church. But because so many groups use this name, it has caused an uncertainty among truth-seekers as to which of those churches is teaching the true scriptural doctrine of the Messiah.

The true church, however, can be distinguished from the other sects by the doctrine they teach. **"But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways, by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of."** II Peter 2:1,2.

You might be thinking now, "But I personally don't know enough about the scriptures to be able to distinguish the true church from the false ones." The Bible tells us how we will know the truth. **"Jesus answered them, and said, My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself. He that speaketh of himself seeketh his own glory: but he that seeketh his glory that sent him, the same is true, and no unrighteousness is in him."** John 7:16 to 18. Is it not satisfying to know that those who earnestly try to do the will of God, and not their own, will know the doctrine of God? Be aware that obtaining such understanding is not immediate. In Proverbs 4:7, we are told: **"Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding."** Through the understanding of these fundamental facts, the true church will be made known by the Spirit of God (the Word). Sometimes there are individuals who come upon the scriptural teaching completely by chance and fellowship with the true church for a short time. Then in time they learn that to become a faithful Christian, they have to end some of their traditional customs and habits that they have observed throughout their lives. It most frequently occurs when the person who reaches this stage of having to give themselves or make sacrifices, such as by relinquishing traditional customs, that they no longer want to affiliate with Christ's church. It is during this period of time they begin to find excuses to conceal their outward disobedience to the inspired teaching of Jesus and also for severing their fellowship with the body of Christ. It is also a time they should remember the parable of the Sower and the seeds.

If a person discovers a church's articles of faith contradicts the writings of the scriptures, they are certainly free to leave, and should do so if their conscience guides them to that conclusion. But on the other hand, if a person finds the doctrines that are taught are according to the Word of God and cannot dispute them, yet they still reject that Word, then the love and truth of God is not in them. **"He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day."** John 12:48.

The keeping of the Ten Commandments is a sure way to eternal life, which was confirmed when the young ruler who asked Jesus how to obtain life eternal, received his answer from Jesus. **"And behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?...but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments."** Matthew 19:16,17b. There was more to the event of this story, but we are concerned only with the commandments at this time. Now, when the ruler asked "which" commandments Jesus was referring to (verse 18), Jesus replied by naming a few of the Ten Commandments, so that the ruler would know he spoke of God's Law and not Moses'. A number of prominent religious sects have stated that Jesus, by only mentioning a few commandments, proves that we do not have to

observe all ten. This is not true; their real objection is the keeping of God's seventh-day Sabbath. But Jesus tells us: **"For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever, therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven."** Matthew 5:18 to 20. Jesus teaches us just the opposite of those religious sects, by stating that we must live by all ten of the commandments – we should not break even one of the commandments. Further, James 2:10 has this to say on the same subject; **"For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all."**

It should be obvious to us by now that if we are the children of God and belong to that one fold, we will live by all ten of His commandments. The only mind that conflicts with God, is the worldly mind: **"Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God; neither indeed can be."** Romans 8:7. **"Whosoever committeth sin, transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law."** 1 John 3:4. Again, it needs to be pointed out that the law of God should be followed, but the law of Moses had no equivalence to God's law, which Paul points out when speaking on the Jewish practice of circumcision: **"Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God."** 1 Corinthians 7:19. What does the scriptures say about those people who say they are of God, but will teach their flock, they are not bound by the law (i.e. the Ten Words) any longer? The downfall with these teachers is that they lack the knowledge to differentiate between the law of Moses and the law of God so they look upon them as one law. Yet, they also continue to use certain principles of the Laws of God in their teachings. **"By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous."** 1 John 5:2,3. These same opponents of keeping God's law often tell us Jesus did away with the law. I believe we have already disproved this by quoting Matthew 5:18 to 20, and James 2:10, but we'll further quote Jesus from Matthew 5:17: **"Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets, I am not come to destroy but to fulfill."**

It is not always those outside the church that abuse the law of God; it is sometimes her very saints that do the same. Church elders, for example, may desire the position of teaching only for the sake of satisfying their vanity. **"For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law. (For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified..."** Romans 2:12,13; **"Desiring to be teachers of the law; understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm. But we know the law is good, if a man use it lawfully."** 1 Timothy 1:7, 8. How common it is today for groups to present the law of God unlawfully for their own device or their group's conception of what is truth. It is a regular practice of religious groups to extract segments from scriptural texts for the purpose of establishing their own doctrine as "truth", while distorting the actual meaning of the segment by severing it from other verses in a Biblical passage, thus distorting its context. Deceitful? Yes, it is.

Have all the elders in the Churches of God been fulfilling their duties in emphasizing the learning of the Ten Commandments in their assemblies? No, not at all. In fact, parents have also been negligent in their duty of this matter towards their children. Deuteronomy 6:7 tells us what the duty of the parents is in respect to the teaching of God's law to their children: **"And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up."** In addition: **"For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people."** Hebrews 8:10; **"And he gave some apostles; and some prophets; and some evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers."** Ephesians 4:11. Quite often, the Ten Commandments are not being taught in the churches and the homes as they should be. The oracles of God should be entrenched within our mind, for by them do we recognize and are made aware of sin. **"What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet ... Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good."** Romans 7:7, 12.

Are there other teachings that we are to follow besides the oracles of God? Yes, there are. These are the teachings (testimony and faith) of Jesus, the Anointed of God. In most of Jesus' teachings, there are no new commandments, but Jesus gave us a broader and more meaningful understanding of God's sayings. Jesus, in his teachings never spoke of his own, but let his utterings be those of only God speaking in him. John 14:10, ***"Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? The words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works."*** John 14:10; ***"And I know that his commandment is life everlasting: whatsoever I speak therefore, even as the Father said unto me, so I speak."*** John 12:50. Jesus is the anointed of God, and is God's witness and we Christians should bare this witness. ***"He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself, he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son."*** 1 John 5:10.

The most distinctive marks of the true Church of God are adherence to the commandments of God and to the teachings of Jesus. Obey these commandments and we have life everlasting. Remember the verses from Revelations: ***"Here is the patience of the saints, here are they; that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus."*** Revelations 14:12; ***"And the dragon was wroth with the woman and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ."*** Revelations 12:17. So if in search of an assembly of the true Church of God, look for these qualities.