
“Come, Let Us Reason Together About the Bible”
What Is the Church of the New Testament?
Bible Study Series

And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”—(Matthew 16:18)

LESSON TEN — How Do Churches Compare to the New Testament Church?

Part 1. Traditional, Mainline Churches

Estimated Reading Time: 45 minutes

In the first eight lessons, you have discovered what the Bible teaches about the church Jesus built—its origin, purpose, authority, organization, membership, and worship. What becomes clear is that the New Testament church followed a distinct pattern given by Christ and His apostles. That pattern wasn’t open to revision, and God has always expected His people to follow His instructions carefully (Exodus 25:40; 2 Timothy 1:13).

So, what about all the churches we see today? The religious landscape is filled with churches that differ in name, doctrine, worship, and leadership. Are they following the New Testament pattern? In this lesson, a respectful, honest look is taken at several well-known churches comparing them to the church found in Scripture.

PART 1. TRADITIONAL MAINLINE CHURCHES

Roman Catholic Church
Episcopal Church
Lutheran Church
Methodist Church
Orthodox Church
Presbyterian Church
Southern Baptist Church
United Church of Christ (UCC)

The Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church today, is a vast, global institution with deep roots in religious history. It presents itself as the original church founded by Jesus Christ and claims an unbroken line of leadership from the apostle Peter to the current pope. But does the teaching and structure of the Roman Catholic Church match what is written in the New Testament?

Take a closer look at its **origin, organization, teachings, and worship**—and compare each of these to the pattern of the New Testament church.

Origin and Historical Development

The Roman Catholic Church claims that Peter was the first pope, and that he held supreme authority over the early church. However, this idea is not supported by Scripture. In fact, the term "**pope**" (meaning 'father' or 'head') is never applied to Peter or to any other apostle in the New Testament.

In **Matthew 16:18**, Jesus says:

“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”

Catholicism interprets "this rock" as referring to Peter himself. But Jesus was not placing Peter as the foundation—He was pointing to the truth of Peter’s confession that **Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God”** (Matthew 16:16). In other places, Christ is clearly called the **only foundation** of the church:

“For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 3:11)

Peter never claimed to be the head of the church. In fact, he referred to himself simply as **a fellow elder** (1 Peter 5:1), and he pointed to **Christ as the Chief Shepherd** (1 Peter 5:4). When controversy arose in Acts 15, it was **James**, not Peter, who gave the final word of judgment (Acts 15:13–21), showing there was no single ruling apostle in charge.

The office of the **pope** did not exist in the first-century church. Historical records show that the structure of a single bishop ruling over others developed over time and was **not fully established until several centuries later**—with **Leo I (AD 440–461)** being the first bishop of Rome to claim universal authority. The official doctrine of **papal infallibility** was not declared until **1870** at the First Vatican Council.

Organization and Leadership

The New Testament church was organized **locally and autonomously**. Each congregation had a plurality of **elders (also called bishops, overseers, or shepherds)** and **deacons** serving under the headship of Christ.

“So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord...” (Acts 14:23)

“Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.” (Philippians 1:1)

There was no indication of a **universal head** on earth. Instead, the church is described as a body with **Christ alone as the head**:

“And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead...”
(Colossians 1:18)

“And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church...”
(Ephesians 1:22)

By contrast, the Catholic Church has developed a **worldwide hierarchy**—pope, cardinals, archbishops, bishops, monsignors, and priests—all answering to Rome. This hierarchy is nowhere found in the New Testament, and its very structure violates the principles of local church autonomy and scriptural leadership.

Worship Practices and Doctrinal Differences

Consider some key practices of Catholicism and compare them to New Testament teaching:

1. Prayers to Mary and the Saints

Catholic doctrine encourages praying to Mary and other “saints” for intercession. But the New Testament teaches that there is **only one mediator** between God and man:

“For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.” (1 Timothy 2:5)

There is **no example** in Scripture of believers praying to anyone other than God, and no instruction to pray through Mary or departed Christians.

2. Veneration of Images and Relics

Catholic churches are filled with **statues, relics, and images** used in worship and veneration. However, God explicitly forbade the use of such things in worship, beginning with the Ten Commandments:

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image... you shall not bow down to them nor serve them.”
(Exodus 20:4–5)

Paul also warned about **idolatry** creeping into worship through the traditions of men (Romans 1:22–25).

3. Transubstantiation and the Mass

The Catholic Church teaches that in the Mass, the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Christ (transubstantiation), and that the Mass is a repeated sacrifice of Christ. But Hebrews teaches that Christ's sacrifice was **once for all**:

"By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." (Hebrews 10:10)

"For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified." (Hebrews 10:14)

The New Testament Lord's Supper is a **memorial** (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24–25), not a re-sacrifice of Jesus.

4. Infant Baptism and Sprinkling

The Catholic Church baptizes infants, usually by sprinkling. Yet in the New Testament, **baptism is always preceded by belief, repentance, and confession**—something infants cannot do.

"Then those who gladly received his word were baptized..." (Acts 2:41)

"He who believes and is baptized will be saved..." (Mark 16:16)

"See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?" ... "If you believe with all your heart, you may." (Acts 8:36–37)

Additionally, the mode of baptism was **immersion**, not sprinkling:

"And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him." (Acts 8:38)

5. The Doctrine of Purgatory

Purgatory, a temporary place of purification for souls, is a concept foreign to the Bible. The Scriptures teach that after death, one's destiny is fixed:

"And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment." (Hebrews 9:27)

"There is a great gulf fixed... so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot." (Luke 16:26)

The idea of a second chance after death contradicts the immediacy and certainty of divine judgment.

Conclusion: A Church Different from the One Jesus Built

When the teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church are compared to the New Testament, the differences are stark. While Catholicism claims apostolic continuity, its doctrines developed gradually over centuries—often in contradiction to Scripture.

The church that Jesus built was **simple, spiritual, and scriptural**—not centered in Rome, not governed by a pope, and not adorned with traditions of men.

“These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” (Matthew 15:8–9)

Follow Christ, not councils. Be part of the church you can read about in the Bible—the one Jesus built, purchased, and leads as Head.

The Episcopal Church

The **Episcopal Church** is the American branch of the **Anglican Communion**, which began as the Church of England in the 1500s during the English Reformation. It inherited many practices from Roman Catholicism, retained a hierarchical form of government, and later developed distinctive beliefs and cultural positions, especially in modern times.

But when the Episcopal Church is held up to the light of the New Testament, how does it compare to New Testament scripture? Explore the **origin, structure, teachings, and worship** of the Episcopal Church juxtaposed to Scripture.

Historical Background and Origin

The **Church of England** began when **King Henry VIII** broke from the Roman Catholic Church in **1534**, primarily because the Pope refused to annul his marriage. While it distanced itself from the Pope, the Church of England retained many Catholic traditions—such as the concept of sacraments, the role of priests, and the use of a structured liturgy.

After the **American Revolution**, Anglicans in the United States formed what is now called **The Episcopal Church**. It maintains allegiance to the theology and traditions of Anglicanism, while adapting to American political and social contexts.

Despite its claim to continuity with apostolic Christianity, the Episcopal Church was founded **over 1,500 years after the church was established in Jerusalem in Acts 2**. Jesus promised:

“I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18)

The church Jesus built was not nationalized or political. It was born in Jerusalem, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and spread by apostolic teaching—not government edict or reform councils.

Organizational Structure and Leadership

The Episcopal Church operates under a **hierarchical structure** which includes **bishops, archbishops, priests, and deacons**, with final authority in many cases residing in a **General Convention** and **Presiding Bishop**.

While the term “bishop” is found in the New Testament, it is not used to refer to a separate, elevated office over multiple congregations. In fact, the New Testament uses several terms **interchangeably** to describe the same role within a local church:

- **Elders (presbyters)** (Acts 14:23)
- **Bishops/Overseers** (Acts 20:28; Titus 1:7)
- **Shepherds/Pastors** (1 Peter 5:1–4)

“To the elders among you... shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers...” (1 Peter 5:1–2)

These elders were **plural** in number, served **within a single congregation**, and were appointed based on **strict spiritual qualifications** (1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9). There is **no mention** of archbishops, presiding bishops, or a centralized decision-making body governing multiple churches.

The New Testament pattern is that of **local, autonomous congregations**, each shepherded by its own elders and served by deacons, under the supreme headship of **Jesus Christ**:

“And He is the head of the body, the church...” (Colossians 1:18)

Worship and Practices

1. Formal Liturgy and the Book of Common Prayer

Episcopal worship is rooted in tradition and formal structure, guided by the **Book of Common Prayer**. Services include ritual prayers, creeds, and a high degree of ceremony—many of which stem from Catholic origins.

While reverence in worship is commendable, Jesus emphasized that worship must be according to **truth**, not tradition:

“God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:24)

Jesus also warned against **vain worship**:

“And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” (Matthew 15:9)

The New Testament presents a much simpler model of worship: singing, praying, teaching, observing the Lord’s Supper, and giving—all conducted by the **whole congregation** without clerical ritualism (Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 14:26; Acts 20:7).

2. Infant Baptism and Sprinkling

The Episcopal Church practices **infant baptism**, typically by **sprinkling or pouring**, and treats it as a sacrament of initiation into the covenant community.

However, biblical baptism was consistently:

- **For believers** (Mark 16:16; Acts 8:36–37)
- **Involving repentance** (Acts 2:38)
- **By immersion** (Romans 6:4; Acts 8:38–39)

There is no example in Scripture of an infant being baptized, nor any command to sprinkle. Biblical baptism required an individual to **hear, believe, repent, and confess Christ** (Acts 2:41; Romans 10:9–10).

3. Women in Clergy and Same-Sex Marriage

In recent years, the Episcopal Church has adopted highly controversial positions that further depart from New Testament teaching:

- The **ordination of women** as bishops, priests, and deacons
- The **affirmation of same-sex relationships and marriage**

While these may reflect cultural shifts, they do not reflect apostolic doctrine. The New Testament is clear on the roles God has assigned in the church:

“And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence.” (1 Timothy 2:12)

Paul’s teaching was not cultural or temporary; he based it on the **created order** (1 Timothy 2:13). Likewise, Scripture teaches that marriage is a union between **a man and a woman** (Matthew 19:4–6; Romans 1:26–27).

When churches abandon Scripture to align with modern trends, they no longer speak “as the oracles of God” (1 Peter 4:11).

Conclusion: An Imitation, Not a Restoration

While the Episcopal Church may claim historical roots, its doctrines and structure are **not rooted in the New Testament**. It mimics many elements of Roman Catholicism and adds human tradition to divine truth.

The church that Jesus established was:

- **Built on His authority** (Matthew 28:18)
- **Organized with simple, local leadership** (Titus 1:5)
- **Focused on spiritual worship** (Hebrews 12:28)
- **Guided solely by His Word** (2 Timothy 3:16–17)

We must not be drawn to formality or ritual at the expense of biblical truth. The question is not, “Does it feel sacred?” but, “Is it what God commanded?”

“Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it...” (Psalm 127:1)

Let us be content with the church Christ built and revealed in Scripture—not with a substitute constructed by tradition.

The Lutheran Church

The **Lutheran Church** was born out of a desire for reform. In the early 1500s, **Martin Luther**, a German monk and theologian, courageously challenged many abuses within the Roman Catholic Church—especially the selling of indulgences and the corruption of clergy. His bold stand launched the **Protestant Reformation** in 1517 when he nailed his **95 Theses** to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany.

Luther’s desire was to restore Christianity to the teachings of Scripture. He emphasized salvation by faith and the authority of the Bible—both of which were essential corrections. Yet, despite these efforts, the church that formed around his name retained many unscriptural traditions and introduced others that do not align with the church we read about in the New Testament.

Take a closer look at the **origin, doctrine, worship, and practices** of the Lutheran Church, and see how it compares to the New Testament pattern.

Origin and Development

The Lutheran Church emerged during the **16th-century Reformation** as a reaction against Roman Catholic corruption. It was not an attempt to restore the New Testament church, but to **reform** the existing church structure. Over time, Lutheran churches organized under various synods, adopted confessions (notably the **Augsburg Confession** of 1530), and established theological systems and traditions.

But unlike the church Jesus built—which began in **Jerusalem around A.D. 30** (Acts 2), guided by the Holy Spirit and established by the apostles—Lutheranism began over **1,500 years later**, as a man-made effort to correct man-made religion.

“Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.” (Psalm 127:1)

Doctrinal Teachings

1. Justification by “Faith Alone”

Luther's central doctrine was **sola fide**—salvation by **faith alone**. While faith is indeed essential, the phrase “faith alone” is used **only once** in Scripture, and it is **explicitly rejected**:

“You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.” (James 2:24)

New Testament salvation is not by **faith alone**, but by **an obedient faith** (Romans 1:5; Hebrews 5:9). When people on Pentecost asked what to do to be saved, Peter didn't say “just believe”—he said:

“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...” (Acts 2:38)

Saving faith includes **belief, repentance, confession, and baptism** (Mark 16:16; Romans 10:9–10; Acts 22:16). Teaching “faith alone” ignores essential components of obedience that God requires.

2. Infant Baptism and Sprinkling

Lutheran churches practice **infant baptism**, typically by **sprinkling or pouring**. They treat baptism as a “means of grace” that washes away sin, even in infants.

However, New Testament baptism:

- Always followed personal belief and repentance (Acts 8:36–38)
- Was intended for those capable of understanding and choosing to follow Christ
- Was done by **immersion**, symbolizing death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6:3–4)

There is **no biblical command or example** of infants being baptized. And the Greek word for baptism, *baptizō*, means “to immerse.” Sprinkling and pouring came centuries later as a matter of convenience, not divine instruction.

3. Use of Creeds and Confessions

Lutherans accept the **Augsburg Confession**, the **Book of Concord**, and other creeds as authoritative summaries of their faith. But the New Testament teaches that the church should be governed by **Scripture alone**:

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine... that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16–17)

“Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God.” (2 John 9)

Creeds and confessions, even if well-intentioned, can lead to division and elevate human words above God's. The early church simply **continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine** (Acts 2:42), not in man-made summaries.

Worship and Practice

Lutheran worship services are **liturgical**, formal, and often include:

- Recitations of creeds
- Responsive readings
- Instrumental music
- Sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper
- Vestments, candles, and rituals

Much of this mirrors Roman Catholic practice and lacks New Testament precedent. In the early church:

- Christians **sang** without instruments (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16)
- Worship centered on **teaching, prayer, the Lord's Supper, and fellowship** (Acts 2:42)
- The Lord's Supper was observed **weekly** on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7)
- There was no special priesthood; all Christians were part of a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9)

Adding rituals, creeds, and instruments—however traditional—goes beyond what God authorized.

Conclusion: A Reformation, Not a Restoration

The Lutheran Church played a significant role in calling attention to abuses and pointing people back toward the Bible. But its attempt was to **reform Catholicism**, not to **restore the New Testament church**.

The Lord's church is not built on human reformers or theological systems. It is built solely on **Jesus Christ**, and it follows the **pattern of sound words** given in Scripture (2 Timothy 1:13). Any doctrine or practice not found in the New Testament must be set aside—no matter how respected its origin.

“And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” (Matthew 15:9)

Our aim is not partial reform but full restoration. Our plea is to return—not to Luther—but to the Lord.

The Methodist Church

The **Methodist Church** traces its roots to the **18th-century revival movement** within the **Church of England**, led by **John and Charles Wesley**. The Wesleys were devoted to spiritual renewal and emphasized disciplined Christian living—thus the name “Methodist” was originally given to describe their methodical religious habits. Though their intentions were sincere, the movement eventually evolved into a separate denomination with its own **creeds, structure, and theology**—one that today differs significantly from the church described in the New Testament.

Now, you can examine its **origin, leadership, teachings, and practices**, and compare them to the Lord's church built by Christ.

Origin and Historical Background

John Wesley never intended to start a new church. His goal was to reform and revitalize the Church of England. But by the late 1700s, his followers in America and England had organized into a distinct group. The **Methodist Episcopal Church** was formally established in the **United States in 1784**, and over time, Methodism became one of the most widespread Protestant denominations in the world.

While Wesley's commitment to Bible study, charity, and evangelism is commendable, the Methodist Church was not founded by Christ or His apostles. It began more than **1,700 years after the church of Christ was established in Acts 2**. Jesus said:

"Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted." (Matthew 15:13)

The church that belongs to Christ is not the product of revival movements, conferences, or religious innovations. It began at Pentecost (Acts 2), and it is sustained by the apostles' doctrine, not human tradition.

Leadership and Church Government

The Methodist Church is governed by a **hierarchical structure** involving:

- **Bishops** who oversee large regions
- **Annual and General Conferences** that vote on doctrine and church policy
- **Ordained ministers and pastors** who are appointed rather than selected by local congregations

This structure sharply contrasts with the New Testament model. The Bible teaches that each congregation was **self-governing**, led by **a plurality of elders (also called bishops or overseers)**, and served by deacons:

"To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons." (Philippians 1:1)

"So when they had appointed elders in every church..." (Acts 14:23)

There is **no biblical example** of a regional bishop or a conference that dictated church doctrine. Christ is the **sole head of the church** (Ephesians 1:22–23), and He governs His people through **His Word** (Colossians 3:16; 2 Timothy 3:16–17)—not through denominational legislation.

Doctrinal Teachings and Practices

1. Women in Leadership Roles

The Methodist Church permits **women to serve as pastors, bishops, and elders**, a practice that contradicts the New Testament’s teaching on spiritual leadership.

“And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence.” (1 Timothy 2:12)

“Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak... as the law also says.” (1 Corinthians 14:34)

This teaching was not cultural, but grounded in **creation order** (1 Timothy 2:13). While women have important roles in the church (e.g., teaching other women and children, serving in benevolence), **preaching and public leadership over men** is not among them.

2. Changing Moral and Doctrinal Positions

In recent years, the Methodist Church—especially in its more liberal branches like the **United Methodist Church**—has adopted **progressive stances** on issues such as:

- **Same-sex marriage**
- **Ordaining LGBTQ+ clergy**
- **Questioning biblical inspiration and moral absolutes**

Such doctrinal fluidity is foreign to the New Testament. The apostle Paul warned:

“Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort... For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine...” (2 Timothy 4:2–3)

God’s Word is **unchanging truth** (John 17:17). Morality is not determined by cultural trends or church votes but by divine revelation.

“Forever, O Lord, Your word is settled in heaven.” (Psalm 119:89)

3. Teaching on Salvation and Baptism

Methodism generally teaches a salvation that combines **grace, faith, and good works**—but does **not emphasize baptism as essential to salvation**. Baptism is treated as a sign of grace already received, not as a condition for receiving forgiveness.

However, the New Testament is clear:

- Baptism is for the **remission of sins** (Acts 2:38)
- Baptism is when we **wash away sins** (Acts 22:16)
- Baptism is when we are **united with Christ** (Romans 6:3–4)
- Baptism is when we are **saved** (1 Peter 3:21; Mark 16:16)

Peter did not say, “Pray a sinner’s prayer” or “Just trust in grace.” He said:

“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...”
(Acts 2:38)

Worship Practices

Methodist worship includes:

- Hymns and liturgy (sometimes with instrumental music)
- Use of creeds such as the **Apostles' Creed** or **Nicene Creed**
- A rotating schedule for communion (monthly or quarterly in some places)
- Emotional appeal and personal testimonies

While these may seem uplifting, we must ask: **Are these things authorized in the New Testament?**
The early church engaged in simple, spiritual worship:

- **A cappella singing** (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16)
- **Weekly observance** of the Lord's Supper (Acts 20:7)
- **Preaching the Word, prayer, giving, and fellowship** (Acts 2:42)

There's no command or example of using instruments in Christian worship, no endorsement of man-made creeds, and no indication that worship was designed around emotionalism or theatrical presentation.

Conclusion: A Movement that Missed the Pattern

While the Methodist Church began with good intentions—a revival of religious life and a call to deeper commitment—it ultimately became **another denomination**, organized by human authority, governed by conferences, and altered by modern thinking.

The Lord's church is:

- **Built on Christ alone** (Matthew 16:18)
- **Guided by the apostles' doctrine** (Acts 2:42)
- **Organized locally and simply** (Titus 1:5)
- **Fixed in truth and not blown about by every wind of culture** (Ephesians 4:14)

“Stand in the ways and see... ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it...” (Jeremiah 6:16)

Don't settle for revival when Christ calls us to **restoration**. Return to the pattern revealed in Scripture and be the church that belongs to Him.

Orthodox Church

The Orthodox Church, also known as the Eastern Orthodox Church, claims ancient origins and continuity with the apostolic church. It separated from the Roman Catholic Church in the Great Schism of 1054 A.D., largely over disputes about church authority, doctrinal wording, and worship practices. Today, it consists of various national churches (e.g., Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox) that are united in doctrine but organizationally independent.

Despite its historic claims, how does the Orthodox Church compare to the church described in the New Testament?

Origin and Historical Development

The Orthodox Church traces its heritage back to the early church but formally separated from the Western (Roman) Church in 1054. This division—called the Great Schism—centered on disagreements including:

- The authority of the pope
- The addition of the *filioque* clause in the Nicene Creed
- Church governance and liturgical differences

The *filioque* clause is a Latin term meaning “and the Son.” It was added by the Western Church to the Nicene Creed to state that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son*. The Eastern Church rejected this change, insisting that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone, as originally written. This theological disagreement contributed to the eventual break between East and West.

The Orthodox Church continues to uphold the original Nicene Creed (without *filioque*) as a central summary of its faith. For Orthodox Christians, the Nicene Creed is not just a historical document—it is a standard confession recited in nearly every worship service and viewed as a faithful expression of the apostolic faith.

However, Scripture teaches that the church Jesus built was established in the first century in Jerusalem—not through councils or splits centuries later:

“And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:47)

The New Testament church did not form through theological councils or regional power struggles. It began by the preaching of the gospel through the apostles, not by tradition handed down through bishops and synods.

Organization and Leadership

Each Orthodox church operates with a degree of independence, but the structure includes bishops, metropolitans, archbishops, and patriarchs. The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople is considered “first among equals,” though he does not have the supreme authority like the pope in Roman Catholicism.

The New Testament, however, presents a simpler form of church leadership. Each congregation had a plurality of qualified elders (also called bishops or overseers) and deacons:

“So when they had appointed elders in every church...” (*Acts 14:23*)

“To all the saints... with the bishops and deacons.” (*Philippians 1:1*)

There was no hierarchy of archbishops or patriarchs. Christ alone is the head of the church:

“And He is the head of the body, the church...” (*Colossians 1:18*)

Creating layers of authority among men adds a structure not found in the church of the Bible.

Worship and Practices

Orthodox worship is rich in tradition, using incense, icons, chants, and elaborate liturgy. While this form of worship feels deeply reverent, the New Testament emphasizes simple, spiritual worship focused on truth:

“God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (*John 4:24*)

Some key Orthodox practices include:

1. Use of Icons in Worship

Orthodox churches use icons (painted images of Jesus, Mary, and saints) in worship, often kissing them, bowing before them, or carrying them in processions. Yet Scripture warns: **“You shall not make for yourself a carved image... you shall not bow down to them nor serve them.”** (*Exodus 20:4–5*)

The New Testament gives no example of Christians using images in worship. Instead, it warns against idolatry and emphasizes a faith based on hearing the Word, not seeing images (*Romans 10:17*).

2. Instrumental Music in Worship

Although traditional Orthodox worship includes rich choral singing and chanting, instrumental music is generally not used. Orthodox churches rely on the human voice alone in praise to God, which is closer in form to the New Testament pattern:

“Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.” (*Ephesians 5:19*)

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly... singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.”
(Colossians 3:16)

However, the Orthodox Church’s justification for a cappella worship is more tied to tradition than to New Testament authority, which is the true foundation for Christian practice.

3. Infant Baptism and Triple Immersion

The Orthodox Church baptizes infants, typically by **triple immersion**—dipping the child three times in water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. While this form retains the biblical mode of immersion, it is administered to infants who cannot yet believe, repent, or confess Christ.

Yet, in the New Testament, baptism always followed a personal response to the gospel: **“He who believes and is baptized will be saved...”** (Mark 16:16)

“Then those who gladly received his word were baptized...” (Acts 2:41)

**“If you believe with all your heart, you may.”* (Acts 8:36–37)

Baptism is not for infants but for those who can respond in faith. Even triple immersion, though symbolically accurate in form, is scripturally invalid when performed on those who are incapable of belief.

4. Apostolic Tradition and Church Fathers

Orthodox theology places heavy emphasis on the “Holy Tradition” of the church and the writings of early church fathers. However, Jesus rebuked placing human tradition on par with or above God’s Word:

“In vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” (Matthew 15:9)

The apostles urged Christians to hold to the revealed Word—not evolving interpretations or councils: **“Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me...”** (2 Timothy 1:13)

Conclusion: Ancient Roots, but Not the Apostolic Pattern

The Orthodox Church holds deep historical and cultural significance and claims a connection to early Christianity. However, its dependence on tradition, icons, hierarchy, and infant baptism shows that it has deviated from the simplicity and purity of the New Testament church.

Jesus said:

“He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day.” (John 12:48)

Our goal should not be to preserve ancient traditions, but to follow the original pattern found in Scripture. Let us return to the church that Christ established—founded on His Word, governed by His authority, and worshiping Him in spirit and truth.

The Presbyterian Church

The **Presbyterian Church** traces its heritage to the Protestant Reformation, particularly the teachings of John Calvin in the 1500s. It emphasizes God’s sovereignty, predestination, and rule by elders (presbyters). But does its structure, doctrine, and worship match the pattern of the church described in the New Testament?

Historical Origin and Development

Presbyterianism emerged in **16th-century Switzerland and Scotland**. John Calvin (1509–1564) developed a detailed theology known as *Reformed Theology*, and John Knox later established Presbyterianism in Scotland. The first American Presbyterian congregation was organized in the early 1700s.

Unlike the church of the New Testament, which began in **Jerusalem on Pentecost (Acts 2)** through direct apostolic preaching and the power of the Holy Spirit, Presbyterianism was born over **1,600 years later** through reform movements in Europe.

“I will build My church...” (Matthew 16:18)

Organization and Leadership

The term "Presbyterian" comes from the Greek *presbuteros* meaning "elder." Presbyterian churches are governed by:

- **Sessions** (local elders)
- **Presbyteries** (regional bodies)
- **Synods** (broader groups of presbyteries)
- **General Assembly** (national leadership)

This hierarchy stands in contrast with the New Testament church, where each local congregation had **autonomous oversight** by a **plurality of elders** and **deacons**, not by regional or national councils:

“So, when they had appointed elders in every church...” (Acts 14:23)

“The elders who are among you I exhort... shepherd the flock of God which is among you...” (1 Peter 5:1–2)

The New Testament shows **no evidence** of governing bodies like presbyteries or synods. Instead, decisions were made locally under Christ as head (Colossians 1:18).

Worship and Doctrinal Issues

1. Infant Baptism and Sprinkling

Presbyterian churches baptize infants by sprinkling, calling it a sign of the covenant. Yet Scripture teaches:

- Baptism is for believers who **hear, believe, repent, and confess** (Acts 2:38; Mark 16:16).
- Baptism is an immersion (Acts 8:38–39; Romans 6:4).

2. Salvation by Faith Alone

Following Calvinist theology, Presbyterians teach that salvation is by **faith alone**. But Scripture clearly states:

“You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.” (James 2:24)

Obedient faith, including baptism, is required (Hebrews 5:9; Acts 2:38).

3. Predestination

Presbyterians emphasize unconditional election and predestination. But the Bible teaches that God desires **all to be saved** (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9), and that salvation is conditioned on response to the gospel.

4. Instrumental Music and Creeds

Worship in most Presbyterian churches includes instruments and creeds (Apostles' Creed, Westminster Confession). Yet the New Testament church:

- Sang a cappella (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16)
- Continued in the apostles' doctrine, not man-made creeds (Acts 2:42)

Conclusion: Guided by Reform, Not Restoration

While Presbyterianism corrected many errors of Roman Catholicism, it still reflects the theological systems of reformers rather than the simple pattern of the New Testament church. Its hierarchy, doctrines, and worship practices go beyond the authority of Scripture.

“These were more fair-minded... they searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.” (Acts 17:11)

Southern Baptist Church

Among Protestant denominations, the **Southern Baptist Church** stands out for its emphasis on **believer's baptism** and **local church autonomy**. These principles come closer to the New

Testament pattern than many other groups. However, significant doctrinal departures—especially concerning the **role of baptism, the plan of salvation, and worship practices**—still set it apart from the church Jesus built.

Carefully explore the **origin, strengths, and differences** of the Southern Baptist Church in light of Scripture.

Origin and Historical Context

The **Southern Baptist Convention (SBC)** was officially formed in **1845**, when it split from northern Baptists primarily over the issue of slavery and missionary support. Today, it is the largest Protestant denomination in the United States.

Baptist churches, including the SBC, trace their heritage back to English Separatists in the 1600s who rejected infant baptism and emphasized **believer’s baptism by immersion**. Over time, various Baptist groups emerged, each with their own associations, confessions of faith, and leadership structures.

However, it’s important to remember that the church of the New Testament began in **Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2)**, not in England or the American South. Any church that **did not originate in the first century**, under apostolic guidance and with Christ as its founder, **is not the church Jesus built**.

“Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.” (Psalm 127:1)

Strengths and Similarities to the New Testament Church

1. Believer’s Baptism by Immersion

Southern Baptists correctly teach that baptism should be administered to **penitent believers**, and they practice **immersion**, which aligns with the biblical word *baptizō* (meaning to dip or immerse).

“So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him.” (Acts 8:38)

“We were buried with Him through baptism into death...” (Romans 6:4)

This is a strong point of agreement with New Testament teaching. Baptism is not sprinkling or pouring—it is a burial, symbolizing the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

2. Local Church Autonomy

Baptist congregations are **autonomous**—self-governed without a centralized denominational structure. This, too, resembles the **organizational structure of the New Testament church**, where

each congregation was led by a **plurality of qualified elders** and was independent from other congregations.

“So when they had appointed elders in every church...” (Acts 14:23)

“The elders who are among you I exhort... Shepherd the flock of God which is among you...” (1 Peter 5:1–2)

While Baptists often refer to their ministers as “pastors,” the New Testament uses the term interchangeably with **elders** and **bishops**, always referring to multiple qualified men in a local body (Titus 1:5–9; 1 Timothy 3:1–7).

Key Differences from the New Testament Church

1. Baptism Not Taught as Essential for Salvation

While Southern Baptists practice immersion, they typically teach that baptism is **only an outward sign of an inward grace**—not essential to salvation. This contradicts the plain teaching of the New Testament.

Jesus said:

“He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” (Mark 16:16)

Peter said:

“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...” (Acts 2:38)

Ananias told Saul:

“Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” (Acts 22:16)

Baptism is **not a symbol of salvation already received**, but the **God-given point at which sins are washed away** and the sinner is united with Christ.

“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” (Galatians 3:27)

To teach that baptism is unnecessary or merely symbolic undermines its **God-ordained purpose** in the salvation process.

2. Salvation by “Faith Alone”

The Southern Baptist tradition often emphasizes **salvation by faith alone**, using phrases like “accept Jesus into your heart” or “pray the sinner’s prayer.” Yet, **none of these phrases appear in Scripture**.

James wrote:

“You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.” (James 2:24)

Jesus taught obedience:

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father...” (Matthew 7:21)

Faith is vital—but saving faith must act in obedience. That includes repentance, confession, and baptism.

“Though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.” (Hebrews 5:8–9)

3. Infrequent Observance of the Lord’s Supper

Many Baptist congregations observe the **Lord’s Supper monthly or quarterly**, viewing it as a memorial without a set schedule. However, the New Testament shows that the early church **came together on the first day of every week to break bread**:

“Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread...” (Acts 20:7)

This phrase, “came together,” implies a regular, intentional gathering, and “breaking bread” refers to the Lord’s Supper (cf. Acts 2:42). Like singing and praying, the Lord’s Supper is a **central element of Christian worship**—not an occasional ritual.

Conclusion: Close in Form, But Not in Foundation

The Southern Baptist Church shares some practices that resemble those of the New Testament church—especially baptism by immersion and local autonomy. However, the differences in core doctrine—particularly regarding **salvation, baptism’s purpose, and worship**—are significant.

A church may look close to the original in some ways, but if it **teaches another gospel**, it is not the church Jesus built.

“But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.” (Galatians 1:8)

Do not settle for a partial resemblance or a sincere imitation. return fully to the **New Testament pattern, the apostles’ doctrine, and the church Jesus built with His own blood** (Acts 20:28).

The United Church of Christ (UCC)

The **United Church of Christ** is one of the most progressive Protestant denominations today. Formed by a merger of Congregational and Reformed traditions, it promotes inclusivity and social justice. But how does it compare to the church described in the New Testament?

Origin and Historical Background

The UCC was formed in **1957** through the merger of the **Evangelical and Reformed Church** and the **Congregational Christian Churches**—both descendants of European Reformation groups. Its motto is “That they may all be one,” drawn from John 17:21, yet its foundation rests on human mergers—not apostolic origin.

The New Testament church, by contrast, began in **Acts 2**, empowered by the Spirit and grounded in divine revelation—not ecumenical unions.

“For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 3:11)

Organization and Leadership

The UCC practices **congregational autonomy**, where each local church governs itself. This **resembles the biblical model**, in which each church had its own qualified elders and deacons (Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:5).

However, the UCC also has **associations and conferences** that guide doctrine and policy, which often depart from Scripture.

Worship and Beliefs

1. Progressive Moral and Theological Views

The UCC embraces:

- LGBTQ+ clergy and same-sex marriage
- Gender-inclusive language
- Moral relativism and pluralism

These beliefs directly contradict Scripture:

“For this reason, God gave them up to vile passions...” (Romans 1:26–27)

“Do not be conformed to this world...” (Romans 12:2)

2. Women in Leadership

The UCC fully ordains women as pastors, which is inconsistent with:

“I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man...” (1 Timothy 2:12)

3. Diminished View of Scripture

UCC statements often elevate personal experience and social consensus above biblical authority. Yet Scripture says:

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God... that the man of God may be complete...” (2 Timothy 3:16–17)

4. Flexible Teachings on Salvation and Baptism

The UCC does not consistently teach baptism for the remission of sins. It treats baptism (often of infants) as a symbol, not a requirement. Yet Scripture teaches:

“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized... for the remission of sins.” (Acts 2:38)

“He who believes and is baptized will be saved...” (Mark 16:16)

5. Worship Innovations

UCC worship varies widely and includes:

- Liturgical elements
- Instrumental music
- Inclusive creeds and social statements

None of these practices align fully with the simple, apostolic worship of the New Testament church (Acts 2:42; Acts 20:7; Ephesians 5:19).

Conclusion: A Church of Culture, Not of Christ

The UCC promotes tolerance and unity—but often at the expense of truth. Its foundation is based on compromise and cultural adaptation rather than restoration of New Testament Christianity.

“In vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” (Matthew 15:9)

To be part of the church Jesus built, we must return to the **apostles' doctrine**, not theological innovation, or human tradition.

Questions to Confirm Understanding

Estimated Time to Answer the Questions: 4 – 5 minutes; With Scripture Lookup:35 - 40 minutes

Answer the following questions by circling True / False and Yes / No. Look up the scripture references given to determine the answers, or refer back to the discussion. An answer key with explanations of the correct answers is provided below.

Roman Catholic Church

1. Peter was called the 'pope' and acted as the head of the church in the New Testament. (1 Peter 5:1) — **True | False**
2. The Catholic hierarchy of pope, cardinals, and bishops is found in the organization of the New Testament church. (Colossians 1:18) — **True | False**
3. The New Testament teaches that Jesus is the only mediator between God and man. (1 Timothy 2:5) — **Yes | No**

Episcopal Church

4. The Episcopal Church was founded in the first century alongside the New Testament church. (Matthew 16:18) — **True | False**
5. New Testament bishops and elders governed multiple congregations under a centralized hierarchy. (Acts 14:23) — **True | False**
6. The use of formal liturgy and creeds in worship is found in New Testament examples. (John 4:24) — **Yes | No**

Lutheran Church

7. The phrase 'faith alone' appears in Scripture and is affirmed as the sole means of justification. (James 2:24) — **True | False**
8. Infant baptism by sprinkling is demonstrated and commanded in the New Testament. (Acts 8:38) — **True | False**
9. The early church used creeds and confessions like the Augsburg Confession to summarize doctrine. (Acts 2:42) — **Yes | No**

Methodist Church

10. The Methodist Church began during the 18th-century revival and not in the first century. (Matthew 15:13) — **True | False**
11. In the New Testament, women were ordained to serve as pastors and bishops. (1 Timothy 2:12) — **True | False**
12. Baptism is taught in the New Testament as necessary for the remission of sins. (Acts 2:38) — **Yes | No**

Orthodox Church

1. The Orthodox Church teaches that tradition and church councils carry equal weight with Scripture.
2 Timothy 1:13 – **True | False**
2. In the New Testament, images and icons were commonly used in worship as aids to devotion.
Exodus 20:4–5 – **True | False**
3. The Orthodox Church practices infant baptism, even though biblical baptism always followed belief.
Acts 2:41 – **Yes | No**

Presbyterian Church

13. Presbyterian governance includes regional and national bodies not found in the New Testament. (1 Peter 5:1–2) — **True | False**
14. The New Testament teaches salvation by faith only, without obedience or baptism. (James 2:24) — **True | False**
15. Infant baptism by sprinkling was practiced in the New Testament church. (Romans 6:4) — **Yes | No**

United Church of Christ (UCC)

16. The UCC teaches and practices baptism for the remission of sins according to Scripture. (Acts 2:38) — **True | False**
17. The UCC ordains women as pastors, a practice contrary to New Testament teaching. (1 Timothy 2:12) — **True | False**
18. UCC worship often includes practices not found in the New Testament church. (Ephesians 5:19) — **True | False**

Answer Key

Estimated Time to Read the Answers: 5 - 6 minutes; With Reflection and Contemplation: 30 - 35 minutes

Roman Catholic Church

1. Peter was called the 'pope' and acted as the head of the church in the New Testament. — **False**
“The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder... And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory...” (1 Peter 5:1, 4)
Peter never claimed to be head of the church; he referred to himself as a fellow elder and pointed to Christ as the Chief Shepherd.
2. The Catholic hierarchy of pope, cardinals, and bishops is found in the organization of the New Testament church. — **False**
“And He is the head of the body, the church...” (Colossians 1:18)
The New Testament teaches that Christ alone is the head of the church. No earthly hierarchical structure like that of the Catholic Church is found in Scripture.

3. The New Testament teaches that Jesus is the only mediator between God and man. — **Yes**
“For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.” (1 Timothy 2:5)
Prayers are directed to God through Christ alone. There is no scriptural precedent for praying to Mary or the saints.

Episcopal Church

4. The Episcopal Church was founded in the first century alongside the New Testament church. — **False**
“I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18)
The church Jesus built began in Jerusalem in Acts 2, not in England during the Reformation. The Episcopal Church was formed over 1500 years later.
5. New Testament bishops and elders governed multiple congregations under a centralized hierarchy. — **False**
“So, when they had appointed elders in every church...” (Acts 14:23)
Each local congregation in the New Testament had its own qualified elders. There is no centralized ruling body over multiple congregations.
6. The use of formal liturgy and creeds in worship is found in New Testament examples. — **No**
“God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:24)
The New Testament presents worship as simple and spiritual, not guided by human-developed creeds or ceremonial liturgy.

Lutheran Church

7. The phrase 'faith alone' appears in Scripture and is affirmed as the sole means of justification. — **False**
“You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.” (James 2:24)
The only time “faith alone” appears in Scripture, it is explicitly denied. Saving faith is obedient and includes actions like repentance and baptism.
8. Infant baptism by sprinkling is demonstrated and commanded in the New Testament. — **False**
“And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him.” (Acts 8:38)
Baptism was always by immersion and preceded by belief and repentance—requirements infants cannot meet.
9. The early church used creeds and confessions like the Augsburg Confession to summarize doctrine. — **No**
“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine...” (Acts 2:42)
The early church relied solely on the apostles’ doctrine, not man-made summaries, or creeds.

Orthodox Church

1. The Orthodox Church teaches that tradition and church councils carry equal weight with Scripture.

False

“Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.” (2 Timothy 1:13)

The apostles emphasized the pattern of teaching they received directly from Christ—not evolving traditions or decisions from later councils. Scripture is the standard, not church tradition.

2. In the New Testament, images and icons were commonly used in worship as aids to devotion.

False

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image... you shall not bow down to them nor serve them.” (Exodus 20:4–5)

God forbids the use of images in worship. There is no precedent for icons or visual aids in the worship of the early church. Worship was based on faith and truth, not physical representations.

3. The Orthodox Church practices infant baptism, even though biblical baptism always followed belief.

Yes

“Then those who gladly received his word were baptized...” (Acts 2:41)

Baptism in the New Testament was only administered to those who heard, believed, and responded. Infants are not capable of such a response, making infant baptism unscriptural.

Methodist Church

10. The Methodist Church began during the 18th-century revival and not in the first century. —

True

“Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted.” (Matthew 15:13)

The Methodist Church was founded by men long after the first-century church. It is not the church planted by Christ.

11. In the New Testament, women were ordained to serve as pastors and bishops. — **False**

“And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man...” (1 Timothy 2:12)

Paul clearly limits roles of public spiritual authority to men, based on creation order—not cultural context.

12. Baptism is taught in the New Testament as necessary for the remission of sins. — **Yes**

“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...” (Acts 2:38)

Baptism is explicitly stated as necessary for the forgiveness of sins, not simply as a symbol.

Presbyterian Church

13. Presbyterian governance includes regional and national bodies not found in the New Testament. — **True**

“The elders who are among you I exhort... shepherd the flock of God which is among you.” (1 Peter 5:1-2)

Each congregation was locally governed. Regional bodies like presbyteries and synods are not part of the New Testament structure.

14. The New Testament teaches salvation by faith only, without obedience or baptism. — **False**
“You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.” (James 2:24)
Obedient faith is required for salvation—not faith alone. Baptism and repentance are also necessary.
15. Infant baptism by sprinkling was practiced in the New Testament church. — **No**
“We were buried with Him through baptism into death...” (Romans 6:4)
Baptism was a burial following belief, not sprinkling of unknowing infants.

United Church of Christ (UCC)

16. The UCC teaches and practices baptism for the remission of sins according to Scripture. — **False**
“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized... for the remission of sins.” (Acts 2:38)
The UCC treats baptism as symbolic and often baptizes infants—departing from the New Testament purpose and pattern.
17. The UCC ordains women as pastors, a practice contrary to New Testament teaching. — **True**
“I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man...” (1 Timothy 2:12)
Scripture limits the role of public spiritual leadership to men, and the UCC’s ordination of women contradicts this.
18. UCC worship often includes practices not found in the New Testament church. — **True**
“Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs...” (Ephesians 5:19)
New Testament worship is simple and spiritual. The UCC often includes modern innovations and inclusive statements not authorized in Scripture.
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