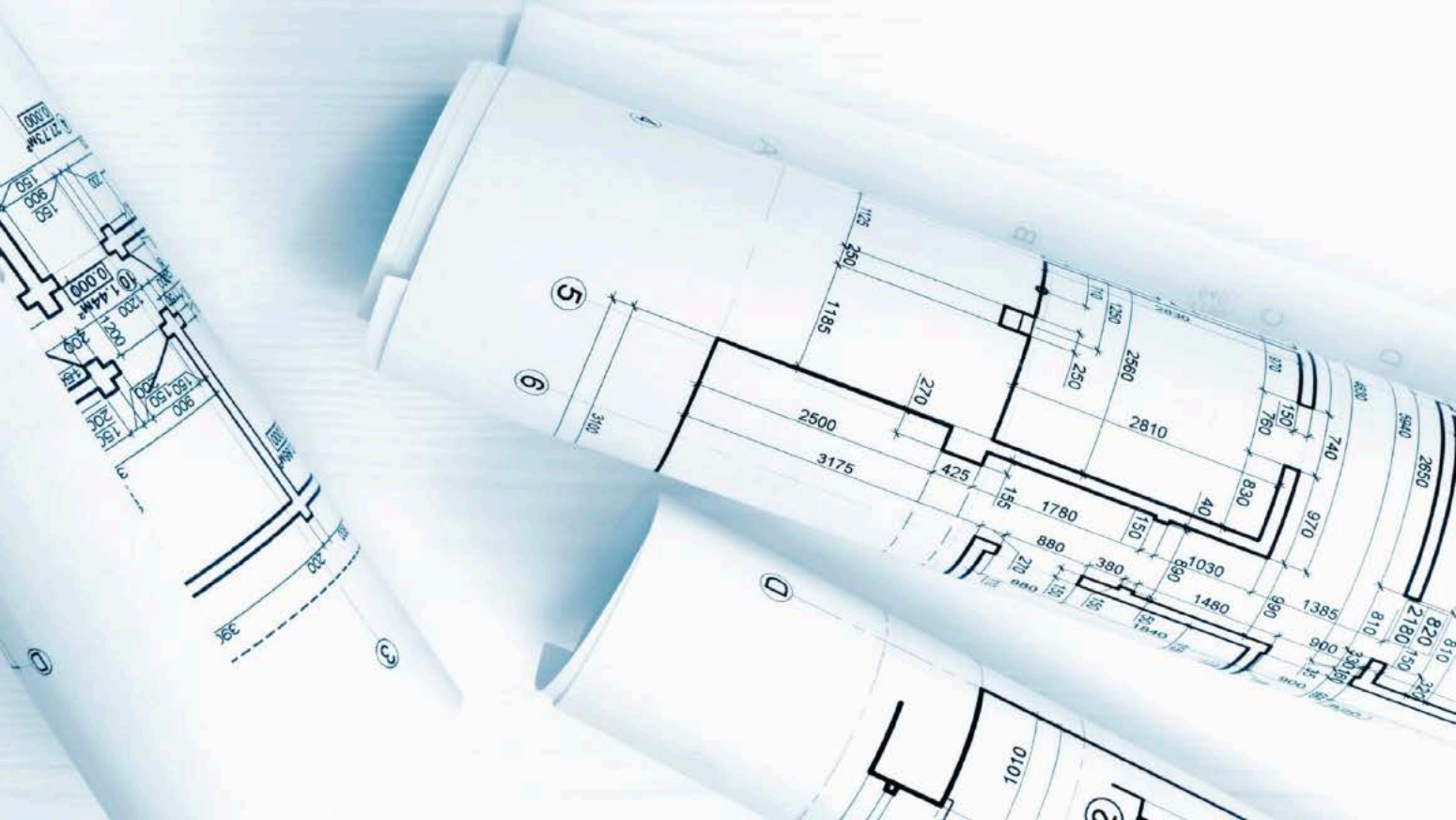


The **New Testament Pattern**

God's Plan for Christians
and Their Churches

Chad Sychtysz



The New Testament Pattern:
God's Blueprint for Christians and
Their Churches

By Chad Sychtysz

© 2023 Spiritbuilding Publishers.
All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any
form without the written permission of the publisher.

Published by
Spiritbuilding Publishers
9700 Ferry Road, Waynesville, Ohio 45068

THE NEW TESTAMENT PATTERN:
God's Blueprint for Christians and Their Churches
By Chad Sychtysz

ISBN: 978-1955285-60-5

Spiritbuilding
P U B L I S H E R S

spiritbuilding.com

Table of Contents

Author's Preface	1
Introduction	3
Part One: God Has Given Us a Pattern to Follow	
Chapter One: What Does It Mean to Be a "Christian"?	12
Chapter Two: Why Do Christians Need Churches?	23
Chapter Three: "According to the Pattern"	34
Chapter Four: Why Many People Do Not Follow the Pattern	49
Part Two: The New Testament Pattern	
Chapter Five: The Pattern for Fellowship with Christ	61
Chapter Six: The Pattern for Becoming a Christian	71
Chapter Seven: The Pattern for Church Organization	84
Chapter Eight: The Pattern for Collective Worship	97
Part Three: Policies, Expedients and Departures	
Chapter Nine: Human Policies within a Church	109
Chapter Ten: What Expediency Is and Is Not	121
Chapter Eleven: The Danger of Unwarranted Interpretations	139
Chapter Twelve: Departures from the Pattern	153
Chapter Thirteen: Denominationalism	164
Endnotes	178
Sources Used	208

Author's Preface

There is a great need for a book like this. Whether I was the right person to have written it, time will tell. But the need is present, and it is an urgent one. The modern assault against Christianity—ironically, from people who claim to be “Christian”—needs to be exposed for what it is: a departure from God’s blueprint. Nothing less than a return to the New Testament pattern of teaching, conversion, and church organization is desperately needed.

A mind-numbing, heart-dulling, and soul-blinding *spirit of deception* has been cast upon the religious world. The wide path of least resistance has never looked so much like the seemingly noble path of sincerity and “God knows my heart” religion as it does today. This deception can be difficult to resist since, on the surface, it appears to be good, loving, and harmless. Yet, feelings are being put on par with divine truth; personal convictions are posing as heavenly doctrine; and people are doing whatever seems right in their own eyes, despite the clear instruction otherwise. As a result, many are being duped into thinking they are pleasing to God even as they trample underfoot His pattern and dismiss His apostles’ teaching.

The assault of religious error is not new, of course, nor are those who have spoken out against it. I have been reading for decades the writings of Christian ministers, historians, and apologists who have exposed the errors of those who use the Bible as a prop rather than a blueprint. Through my own in-depth studies of the Scriptures, I have come to many of the same conclusions as these writers did. Yet, it seemed time for a fresh approach, a different style, and a new voice to identify modern errors as well as a biblical response to them. I don’t believe that I am “the” new voice of reason, for I am hardly alone in my endeavor, but I certainly am “a” voice.

In my opinion, this message is not limited only to those caught up in systematic religious error. The errors of drifting away from the pattern are diverse and widespread: anyone who claims to be a Christian can succumb to them. In other words, it’s not just people “out there” in their religious beliefs who have drifted, but it can be members of churches that have for many decades been stalwart defenders of the faith—or even my own congregation. Because of this, I would strongly recommend this book to anyone who is *already* a Christian, *thinks* he is

already a Christian, or is seeking to *become* a Christian. The intention of this book is not to stand on its own merit, but to lead the reader to *God's* book (the Bible). The better we are armed with God's word, the better we can expose any errors we might have and practice His truth.

This book has its roots in a series of lessons I wrote in 2013 on promoting the New Testament of the Bible as a divinely revealed pattern rather than a humanly amendable document (as it is often treated). The core “pattern” chapters herein are derived from lessons in that series. Other chapters are based on lessons or classes that came later. A few chapters were written from scratch, so to speak, because I felt they were needed for further explanation or clarification. My intended approach is a “Come, let us reason together”-kind of narration, but I will let you judge how well that worked. It is always my intention not to appeal to one's emotion, tradition, or religion, but to that person's intellect. God's word is consistent and reasonable regarding fellowship with Him; therefore, it will always appeal to those seeking consistency, reason, and His fellowship.

I would like to thank Matthew Allen, owner of Spiritbuilding Publishers, for his great support for this book. Upon receiving the manuscript, he was eager to publish it—and I am deeply grateful for his enthusiasm. I would also like to thank my son, Logan (who has a bachelor-of-arts degree specializing in English and literature) for editing the original manuscript and calling attention to my grammatical flaws. I also appreciate my fellow preacher, Darrell Beane, for reading the manuscript and offering his response to it. And many thanks, as always, to my wife, Honey, for her unfailing love and concern for me and my passion for writing.

I also thank all of you who have supported my “other ministry” through your genuine interest, personal encouragement, and purchasing my books. Hopefully, over time, much good will come from all of this.

Chad Sychtysz

November 24, 2022

Introduction

This book is both a biblical and critical-thinking approach to the New Testament pattern for Christians and their churches. The numerous biblical references provided within are meant to underscore the need to rely upon the Bible as the highest and final source of all matters pertaining to God, salvation of the human soul, and the future disposition of *all* human souls. This book is not meant to equal or replace the Bible. It is meant only to expound upon what it teaches for the purpose of understanding, clarity, and explanation of topics or terminology.

A proper respect for the Bible is necessary to engage in a study of it. The Bible should not be regarded as merely a book on religion, since this undersells and misrepresents its original intent. Instead, it should be taken as God's revealed message to all of humankind. Since every person is made in God's "own image" (Gen. 1:27), He wants every person to hear what his Creator has to say to him. Because of this innate connection between Him and every human soul, God's message to *all* souls is a sacred book of *relationships*. In this revealed word, He explains what ruins this relationship, what is needed to restore it, what is required from those who are in it, and its ultimate outcome.

The Bible was written over a 1,500-year span of time by more than forty authors from all walks of life—prophets, priests, scribes, psalmists, kings, a tax-collector, a doctor, a rabbi-turned-Christian, etc. It is a compilation of sixty-six books, letters, prophetic oracles, legal documents, historical records, genealogies, character studies, homiletics (sermons), doctrinal treatises, psalms, moral philosophies, and visions. Despite such diversity in factors and subjects, the Bible has one consistent and united message: God's redeeming love for "the world" (John 3:16), meaning, all of humankind. With no central earthly committee, human planner, or single human editor, the Bible is united and completely interconnected.

The Bible is a book of history as well as sacred religion. It is a book of literature—all *kinds* of literature: historical narrative, poetry, artful rhetoric, formal documentation, prophetic writing, elaborate discourses, collections of proverbs and philosophic perspectives, and formal writing. It is a book of law, containing codified, organized collections of legal ordinances. It is a book of prophecy and revelation:

it is the record of predictions and promises both given and fulfilled. It is also a book of origins, life, love, grace, hope, and promise.

The Bible has consistently been proven to be authentic through archaeology, history, science, and eyewitness accounts. It has had every opportunity to be ridiculed, distorted, corrupted, and destroyed—yet it has survived all of this, its text amazingly preserved and its message perfectly intact. Noted biblical scholar R. K. Harrison writes:

No book has ever been so minutely studied, has had so many books written on it, has founded so vast a literature of hymns, liturgies, devotional writings, sermons, has been so keenly assailed, has evoked such splendid defenses, as the Bible. Its spiritual influence cannot be estimated. To tell all the Bible has been and done for the world would be to rewrite in large part the history of modern civilization.¹

The Bible is divided into two major parts: Old Testament and New Testament. “Testament” is usually a word associated with the written will of one who has died (e.g., “The last will and testament of ...”), but God the Father has not died and *cannot* die. Its second meaning, and the one that applies in this case, is that of a covenant relationship between God and certain people.² The Old Testament focuses upon God’s covenant relationship with Israel, a nation descended from Abraham, his son Isaac, and *his* son Jacob (whose name God changed to “Israel”—Gen. 32:24–29). God made a personal covenant with Abraham that would eventually affect all of humankind (Gen. 12:1–3). He made a separate covenant with the nation of Israel, however, that was limited in scope and duration (Deut. 5:1–3).

The New Testament describes God’s fulfillment of His covenant with Israel *and* the establishment of a new covenant with all who seek His fellowship (regardless of race or nationality). God’s Son, Jesus Christ, accomplished all this: He fulfilled the first covenant by His perfect obedience to it, and His blood ratified (or, brought to life) the second covenant that God has with each follower of Christ. The first covenant emphasized God’s authority, human sin, and the process of atonement *for* sin through literal blood sacrifices. The second covenant emphasizes God’s love (as expressed through the giving of His Son—1 John 4:9), the redemption of sinners, and the once-for-all blood sacrifice that Christ provided for that redemption. Having died as a sacrifice for our

sin, then raised from that death, and then ascended into heaven, Christ now sits at the right hand of God, having received “all authority” over all that has begun to exist (Mat. 28:18).

To say that the Bible is important in our understanding of God, human souls, and the future destination of all souls is an immense understatement. We could know nothing about *any of these things* unless God (through the Bible) had revealed them to us. We are completely dependent upon the Bible for any factual knowledge of these subjects. While we could know that God existed through deductive reasoning, based upon the design, complexity, engineering, and massive scope of the physical creation (as the apostle Paul argues in Rom. 1:18–20), we could not know anything *personally* about Him. We could know by deduction that God is all-knowing and all-powerful, but we could not know that He is loving, merciful, forgiving, patient, kind, and longing for our fellowship unless He had disclosed this information to us.

Now that we *know* these things—or at least have access to this knowledge—we can enter a relationship with Him through His Son. “In Christ” is a phrase repeatedly used in the New Testament to refer to a covenant relationship with God through Christ. All those who have agreed to the terms of this covenant (as revealed by Christ’s apostles) are disciples of Christ, or “Christians,” which means “followers of Christ.” Such people enjoy all the blessings and privileges of this new relationship, if they remain faithful to what they first agreed to and continue to grow in their faith in God and His Son. Collectively, these followers are all brought into the same spiritual sanctuary, Christ’s church (“the body” of Christ—Col. 1:18). Thus, once people are Christians, they are “fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph. 3:6). “Gospel” means “good news”: it refers to the good news of God’s grace and forgiveness offered to all humankind. Yet only those who are “in Christ” receive this grace and forgiveness.

The Bible reveals but also magnifies God’s authority (and the authority He has delegated to His Son) and our subordination to that authority. We have no *right* or *ability* to fix the problem of our own sin once it has been committed; we become completely reliant upon God’s authority and power to rectify this. If we choose to decline God’s help, for any reason, we remain condemned by God and separated from

His fellowship because of our sins. In the hereafter, we will experience condemnation in the form of punishment, inconsolable regret, and awful misery. God, because of His love for us, wants to *spare* us from all of this and has thus invited us into fellowship with Him through His Son, Jesus Christ, and the mediation that He (Christ) provides for us. This *good news* is all spelled out in the New Testament of the Bible.

Citing the Sacred Record

Yet today, what passes for “Christian religion” has been steadily drifting and sometimes even aggressively speeding away from the Bible. This is bizarre since every “Christian” group claims to derive its identity and belief system *from* the Bible. So then, the Bible is honored for establishing credibility and legitimacy, but is almost immediately dismissed as being out of touch, outdated, antiquated, irrelevant, and in need of updating and modernizing. This is not only contradictory but holds God and His word in contempt. In Acts 13:45, while Paul and Barnabas were preaching in Antioch of Pisidia, some of the Jews there “began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming.” To blaspheme is to speak evil of what God says is holy. The Holy Spirit was speaking through Paul—an apostle appointed by Jesus Christ—and the allegedly God-fearing Jews were rejecting it. Today, some men are preaching exactly what Paul wrote to Christians, and allegedly God-fearing Christians are rejecting it. This, too, is blasphemy.³

It is impossible to claim allegiance to God while at the same time resisting, in any manner, what He has said in His word (the Bible). This is especially true of those who identify as Christians: of all people, Christians should be defending the Bible’s authority more passionately and simply *better* than anyone else. Yet today, a great deal of those who call themselves Christians are turning aside from biblical authority and stepping out into the unknown.

Genuine Christians do not only *sometimes* use the Bible for their authority to act in God’s name. They do not claim that “all Scripture is inspired by God [lit., God-breathed] and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness,” but then deem it out of touch, outdated, in need of revision, etc.⁴ Christ has already made His decision as to what will be the blueprint for His church; we cannot make any different decision and still claim allegiance to Him.

This means we either accept the entire New Testament at face value or we reject it altogether. It is an all-or-nothing package. If we accept it, then this means we let *it*—not conventional wisdom, social pressure, technology, or modern expectations—have the final say. We let *it* determine who Christians are, what they believe, what they do collectively (as churches), and how they are to respond to internal and external threats to all these things. If we will not accept this position, then the only thing left to do (without contradicting our claim) is to reject its authority, strike out on our own, and hope that we will somehow win Christ’s favor in the process—a hopeless and guaranteed-to-fail plan if there ever was one.

Christ’s “Plan A” is for us to accept biblical authority as our *only* authority for all things related to God and salvation. He has no “Plan B” for His people or their churches. Will this be popular? Hardly. Worldly thinking has made serious inroads into all religious thinking; it is not going to just evaporate in the event of a noble decision. Will this be easy? Likely, no. Years, decades, even centuries of traditions, rituals, deeply ingrained doctrines, etc., are part of our collection of baggage that must be left behind. Many churchgoers are simply not going to do this; many church leaders, who make their living from and pride themselves on their elevated positions in the “Christian religion,” will balk at the very idea. Will this be doable? Absolutely, if we trust in Christ’s leadership and the Holy Spirit’s instruction. But this requires great faith, a lot of work, time, and sacrifice—things that are typically not expected of or seen in the typical contemporary churchgoer.

Getting back to the Bible—I’m speaking to any of us who have indeed *left* the Bible behind for any reason—is exactly what God wants us to do. I know this confidently because: 1) He never wanted us to leave it behind in the first place; 2) the New Testament is His revealed instructions to His people and their churches; 3) there is no better, higher, or more important source of information for such people; and 4) there are serious consequences—namely, divine curses—for anyone who sets aside His commandments. Let the world mock, ridicule, stereotype (“Fundamentalists!”), and criticize all it wants; this is irrelevant to the Christian’s allegiance to Christ. Let all the pseudo-Christians mock, roll their eyes, spew bitter condemnations, and walk away from us all they want; they, too, are not our master, but Christ is. Such people “went out from us [i.e., the apostles], but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out,

so that it would be shown that they all are not of us” (1 John 2:19, bracketed words are mine).

“Back to the Bible!”

When people get off-track from an original cause, movement, teaching, or discussion, someone will likely say, “Let’s go back to the drawing board.” The “drawing board” represents where the cause, movement, etc., began, and what the original ideas, intentions, and direction for this were first defined and put down on paper, so to speak. The Bible serves as the “drawing board” for all those who humbly and earnestly are seeking God by faith (Heb. 11:6). To seek Him properly requires a return to what *He* said and leaving behind whatever conflicts with this. In effect, we must return to the blueprint of what it means to be a Christian and how groups of Christians are to work together. “Back to the Bible” is not a call to *move* backward but just the opposite: we are always to be moving *forward* according to the pattern given to us (Phil. 3:13–17). No one can move forward with a plan who does not *know* what the plan is supposed to be.

This is not a new call, however. For the last five hundred years, groups of Christians (and those who thought themselves to be Christians) have been issuing a “Back to the Bible!” proclamation. Some of these groups have done this better than others; some have had good intentions but not great follow-through. Some groups, under the banner of “conservatism,” have meticulously studied the New Testament with such rigidity and legalistic fervor that they have allowed for no other conclusions other than their own.⁵ Other groups, under the pretense of “liberalism,” have viewed the New Testament as a moral guide, or a loosely prescribed general code of ethics and basic procedure, but not to be taken too seriously.⁶

The Reformation (16th century) provided a watershed of long-lost information, ideas, and access to God’s word.⁷ For the first time in over a thousand years, men had the entire text of the Bible in its original languages (Hebrew and Aramaic for the Old Testament; Greek for the New Testament), which allowed for translation into predominant languages—English being the first. The invention of the printing press (15th century) made duplication of these translations available to more people than ever before in human history. Before this, for a thousand years, virtually the only ones who had access to the Bible were Catholic

priests, monks, and theologians. They purposely kept the New Testament in Latin (translated by Jerome, early 5th century), which was no longer a viable language, so that they alone could read it. This, as well as a high rate of illiteracy, kept the masses in the dark as to what God's word said. This also allowed for a considerable number of customized interpretations, creative explanations of biblical passages, and outright abuses of power and authority.

The Reformers, as they have come to be known, challenged many of the Roman (Catholic) Church's unbiblical teachings. Sadly, the Reformation also produced new *versions* of Christianity, each with its own slant on the New Testament, and its own doctrines, creeds, chains of command, and church organization. Some of these were close to what the New Testament teaches; others were just tangents from Roman Catholicism. These different religions—defined as “denominations”—all claimed “unity” with God, legitimacy for their existence, and (of course) a “Back to the Bible!” rally cry. Yet, their plea for Christian unity was immediately undermined by their having divided into separate groups, each with their own distinctive name, doctrine, and practice. Most denominations in existence today are the products of the Reformation experience.

In the 19th century, an undertaking began in the eastern United States to abandon all denominationalism and get “back to the Bible.” Many good men and women devoted a great deal of time, energy, and sacrifice to it. This became known as the Restoration Movement, with the idea that Christ's church had to be restored, true Bible study had to be restored, or that Christians and their churches needed to be restored to the genuine teachings of the Bible. By this time, the Bible was well-known, particularly the King James Version (1611), also known as the Authorized Version (AV) because its production and publication were authorized and commissioned by King James I of England. Therefore, people in the United States (mid-19th century) were quite familiar with the Bible in general, but not necessarily how to study it or implement its teachings.

The American Restoration Movement accomplished two major things. First, it exposed denominationalism for what it is—a humanly-manufactured system of church organization rather than a Christ-ordained one. Second, it brought great attention to the need to *study the Bible* to know what Christ wants for His people (*the church*) and

their congregations. In all this, however, it is important to keep in mind exactly *what* needs restored. People can be restored, and individual congregations can be restored. But Christ's church—the sanctuary of genuine believers in Him and His authority—has *never fallen away from Him* and needs no human restoration efforts. To say that Christ's *church* has apostatized [lit., departed from the truth] is to speak derisively about His ability to govern, protect, and preserve it. The best that the Restoration Movement did was to bring people back to the pattern of authority for Christians and their churches: the written instructions of Christ's hand-picked apostles.⁸ These apostles were guided not by other men, earthly circumstances, or the times in which they lived, but by the Holy Spirit Himself (1 Cor. 2:10, Gal. 1:11–12, Eph. 3:5, and 2 Peter 1:21).

The Restoration Movement produced a tremendous amount of writing on numerous biblical subjects. These writings were not limited to preachers but were intentionally made available to Christians everywhere. The mid-19th century was also a time of great stress, as the country entered a bloody Civil War (1861—1865) just as this movement was gaining momentum. And, despite a strong emphasis on New Testament doctrine, social innovations and human teachings began creeping into the churches and had to be addressed. Often, divisions occurred as some members tried hard to maintain the purity of doctrinal teaching, as they understood it, while others embraced a more permissive view of the Scriptures.

Every generation of Christians has faced the “issues” of its day, whether doctrinal or social, and this is no less true today. Sadly, the greatest issue faced today is not over which church doctrine to believe, or which human innovation to reject, but a widespread *indifference* to biblical and spiritual concerns altogether. Indifference (an “either way works for me” attitude) often gives way to apathy (an “I just don't care anymore” attitude). I am not talking about attitudes found among non-Christians, but among Christians (and those who claim to be Christians but are not) and their churches. During the Reformation, striving to draw near to God was supremely important to most people; during the Restoration, striving to learn and understand God's word was paramount. But now, many “Christians” are often not striving for anything except their own customized, creative, and emotional “take” on the Christian religion in general.

The erosion of respect for New Testament authority is the reason for this indifference and apathy. When people do not respect what Christ *said*, it becomes easy not to respect who Christ *is* or why anyone should do anything *for* Him. The emphasis turns inward: “What am *I* getting out of this?” “How can this ‘Christian religion’ make *me* feel better about *myself*?” “What will the church do for *me* (regardless of whether *I* do anything for the church)?” “I already have *my* beliefs; I just need someone—preferably an entire congregation—to validate them.” Such sentiments are increasingly common. As a result, modern “Christian religion” wants to dabble in what it calls “Bible study” but largely caters to the modern churchgoer’s insatiable desire for entertainment, self-worship, and feel-good therapy.

It is impossible to develop a sincere and accurate love for God when fixated on ourselves, our families, our culture, social concerns, or even technology. Surrendering ourselves to God, worshiping His Son, proclaiming the “word of the cross” (1 Cor. 1:18), and working together with fellow Christians with a Christ-like attitude (Phil. 2:1–5) are decisions and lifestyles that do not come easily and need regular reinforcement. The instruction Christ has given us has not changed, has no need to change, and will not tolerate changes. We are forced to choose between faithful compliance and preferential customization: we cannot do them both equally.

Thankfully, not every person who wants to be saved by God has succumbed to the siren call of contemporary religion. There are those of us—and I’m including you in this “us,” since you are reading this book—who desire to worship God “in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). We choose to honor Christ as the head of His church and follow the recorded instructions of God’s Holy Spirit. This means we need to know what the New Testament says for Christians and our churches. We also need to have the courage to study, internalize, and practice this information, even to our own hurt. And we need to make strenuous effort to teach these things to others (2 Tim. 2:2), so that they, too, will “understand what the will of the Lord is” (Eph. 5:17).

It is with this perspective that this book has been written.

Part One: God Has Given Us a Pattern to Follow

Chapter One: What Does It Mean to Be a “Christian”?

Before we can start examining objectively what the New Testament (NT) says about Christians and their churches, we need to identify who “Christians” are. A socially generated or popularly held definition will not work, since society and popular wisdom have little regard for divine authority or biblical teaching. To know how *Christ* defines a Christian, we need to investigate His word and let it speak naturally, objectively, and conclusively.

The word “Christian” occurs only three times in the NT: Acts 11:26, 26:28, and 1 Peter 4:16. However, the *definition* of a Christian is the subject of most of the NT letters to individuals or churches. “Christian” is from the Greek word *Christianos*, which literally means “follower of Christ.”⁹ (The word “Christ” is the Greek counterpart to the Hebrew word “Messiah,” both of which mean “anointed”—or, in the case of Jesus, “*the* Anointed.”¹⁰) A Christian, then, is not merely someone who believes that Jesus is the Christ. Instead, it identifies someone as a Christ-*follower*. To “follow” Christ means to be fully devoted to Him as His disciple, as He Himself says: “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me” (Mat. 16:24).

A Christian is one who has entered a covenant relationship with God through the mediation of His Son, Jesus Christ. The terms and conditions of this covenant are, in effect, the teachings and commandments of the NT. The agreement to this covenant is determined through one’s personal agreement to (or faith in) these teachings and his obedience to these commandments. Upon demonstrating this agreement (by acting in obedient faith), the person no longer lives for himself, but for Christ. The apostle Paul expresses this: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Gal. 2:20).

To *live* for Christ requires that one *dies* to the world. This “death” is symbolized by one’s burial in water (i.e., baptism). While being symbolic in nature (since this is not a literal death), this “death” is

both real and necessary. Teachings and commandments having to do with *becoming* a Christian are just as important as those having to do with *living* as one. When a person is “buried with Him [Christ] through baptism into death,” he is “united with Him in the likeness of His [own] death.” The “old self” had given its allegiance to sin; in dying to that allegiance, which is what baptism symbolizes, one gives a new allegiance to Christ. As a result, he no longer lives under divine condemnation for being a sinner, but in “newness of life” as a child of God (Rom. 6:3–7). This process is also identified as being “born again” (John 3:3, 5, 1 Peter 1:3) or being “born of God” (John 1:12–13). Thus, a Christian is one who has died to sin—thus severing his allegiance to its mastery—and now lives as an obedient servant of Jesus Christ.

Misconceptions and Clarifications

Unfortunately, “Christian” is one of the most abused, misunderstood, and hijacked words in the religious world today. People identify as “Christians” even when their beliefs, lifestyles, and worship of God bear little resemblance to those described in the NT. The term is sometimes so loosely applied that it defines only a God-fearing person rather than a loyal and duty-bound follower of Jesus Christ.

The NT speaks of God-fearing people as a separate group from Christians (or “disciples”). Cornelius was identified as a “God-fearing” man (Acts 10:22) before he became a Christian. In Antioch of Pisidia, the apostle Paul was warmly received by “many of the Jews and God-fearing proselytes [i.e., converts to the Jewish religion]” (Acts 13:43, bracketed words are mine). He met a similar group in both Thessalonica and Athens (Acts 17:4, 17). These people had not yet obeyed the gospel of Christ but were certainly interested in hearing about it, and (we assume) were considering whether to respond to it. God-fearing people are those who revere God, respect His people, and are receptive of His word, but have not (yet) decided to become permanently identified with Him. While all Christians fear God, “God-fearing” people are not yet Christians until they *obey* Him.

The term “Christian” is also commonly applied to a “good person” who exhibits godly virtues. Yet, calling someone a “good person” is not the same as identifying him as a “Christian.” Good people can exist regardless of, or even apart from, the Christian belief system. Atheists,

for example, may be considered “good people” by their families, friends, and peers, but they remain what they are—unbelievers. Moralists are people who have a fairly solid values system that is, most often, based upon NT teaching, but they have not committed themselves to its obligations.¹¹ Those who often self-identify as a “good person,” even if they know some Scriptures and have a general idea of the gospel of Christ, are in fact moralists at best. If they were genuine Christians, they would conform to the image of Christ Himself, since He is the point of reference for all morality.

When I talk to people who visit our congregation’s assemblies, I often ask, “Are you a Christian?” A common response is, “I’m a Catholic [or, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, etc.].” This tells me several things. First, they put their denominational status *ahead* of any identification with Christ. While likely they did this unconsciously, it still reflects their priorities. Second, they obviously assume that being part of a denomination is equivalent to having an identity with Christ. (Even “non-denominational” people do this regarding their church membership.) Third, they probably know very little of the Bible, otherwise they would not be making these first two assumptions. I’m not saying this in ridicule or with reproach but with concern. People never benefit from spiritual ignorance, and it is my strong desire that they would turn to God’s word to become enlightened.

Others will freely use the word “Christian” as an adjective rather than a noun. In some cases, this is nearly inescapable, as I did earlier in referring to the “Christian belief system.” I don’t know what else to call it so that everyone will know what I’m talking about. But in so many contemporary cases, the word “Christian” is applied to things that have nothing to do with God, Christians, or the gospel of Christ. A “Christian college,” for example, leads one to believe that every Christian (and Christ Himself) endorses everything taught at that college, and that every person who teaches or attends there is also a genuine Christian. A “Christian bookstore” leads one to assume that every book sold there is accurately based upon and promotes the genuine gospel of Christ. In my decades of experience in visiting these stores, this has never been the case. A “Christian radio station” leads one to believe that every song proclaims the gospel, every singer (and disc jockey) is a Christian, and the sole aim of that station is to lead people to Christ. This, too, is not the case. All radio stations are in business to make money; when the money stops coming in, the station

disappears. The same can be said for most performers of so-called “contemporary Christian music” or CCM, for short.

Colleges, bookstores, and radio stations cannot become Christians. Putting the “Christian” adjective in front of these businesses does not make their participants, supporters, or material right with God. Even a belief system, simply because it claims to honor Christ, cites verses from His gospel, and loosely adheres to His teachings, is not necessarily a “*Christian* belief system.” The only way for a belief system to be “Christian” in its design, content, and objective is for it to follow the NT teachings completely, not just partially or by giving a token nod to it. No doubt every “Christian denomination” (a self-refuting phrase, if you just think about it) makes a claim to teach the “Christian belief system.” Yet, this is impossible to maintain because if its followers did teach this, they would cease to identify and operate as a denomination. (Denominational systems are devoted to *separatism*, not unity; see chapter 13, “Denominationalism.”) Instead, they would simply teach Christ and His message of salvation apart from their own brand of religion.

I have so far repeatedly used the word “identify” or “identity” to describe where people are at regarding their beliefs. People identify with other people by shared values, convictions, conclusions, and (in some cases) delusions. People who identify with each other also can have fellowship with one another. “Fellowship” can be defined across the board—in religious and non-religious circles—by those who have common goals, a shared effort toward achieving those goals, and their own individual devotion to that shared effort. This is true in business, sports, and marriage as in religion. People cannot have fellowship who do not have commonality. I cannot have *spiritual* fellowship with someone whose spiritual goals and efforts are not common to my own. On the other hand, just because we *do* have fellowship does not mean we are right with God. Just because two people enjoy spiritual fellowship does not necessarily mean that they are Christians.

For us to have fellowship with Christ, we must properly be identified with Him. (I will explain this in detail in future chapters.) I cannot choose *how* or to what *extent* I will identify with Him; He has the authority to define these things, not me. All I can do is either agree with His terms or reject them; I have no right to modify or re-write them. (This does not stop people from doing this, but human modifications