

Is One Church As Good As Another?

Barry O'Dell

One of my favorite quotes on this particular question comes from **Queries and Answers by Lipscomb and Sewell**. The subtitle of the book is “*A Compilation of Queries with Answers by D. Lipscomb and E.G. Sewell, covering a period of forty years of their joint editorial labors on the Gospel Advocate.*” The book was published in 1921 and was edited by M.C. Kurfees. While the following is a bit of a lengthy quote, it well articulates a sound response to the question:

The claim that one church is as good as another is based upon the assumption that the doctrines and practices of one are as good as the doctrines and practices of another. But the question is: What is the standard by which such a claim is made? Evidently the claim is based upon the outward appearances of men, in their outward manifestations of earnestness, zeal, devotion to their systems of religion, and their general manifestations of morality and piety. Such an estimate as says one church is as good as another is not made by comparing these churches and their creeds with the word of God, and thus deciding that all these harmonize with that word; for if the estimate were made in this way, all would fall behind. There is not one denomination extant that could stand the test of such comparison, for all these denominations have things in their creeds and in their practices that are plainly contradictory to the word of God.

E.G. Sewell continued, for three-and-a-half pages to answer the question with specific examples from the Presbyterian Confession of Faith, the Methodist Discipline, and Cumberland Confession.

Asking if one church is as good as another is a legitimate question and the faithful Christian must be able to give a biblical answer. From big cities to small towns and everywhere in between, the confusion and frustration that exists regarding Christianity and “church” is common. “How can I know which one is right?” “Does it really matter, as long as I’m sincere?” “But I was raised _____.” “I’ve tried a bunch of different churches and I’ve found problems in each.” If you’ve had this conversation with someone, you’ve likely heard one of these questions or statements. How do we answer?

First, we must be clear that Scripture is the final authority. We need a word from God. Jesus, the Son of God, had this very mentality. “*He that rejecteth Me, and receiveth not My words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day. For I have not spoken of Myself (NKJ - “on My own authority”); but the Father which sent Me, He gave Me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak. And I know that His commandment is life everlasting: whatsoever I speak therefore, even as the Father said unto Me, so I speak*” (Jn. 12:48-50). When Jesus promised to build His church, He spoke in the possessive and singular - “*I will build My church*” (Matt. 16:18). He possesses all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18). As Balaam said, we cannot go beyond the word of God, to do less or more (Num. 22:18; 23:26).

Second, to those who may ask us this question, we must be clear that our answer will not be a personal attack against them. It may be that a person feels “attacked” or insulted by a strictly biblical answer. That is not the Christian’s goal at all. Truth, by its very nature, is exclusive and our culture feels mandated to be all-inclusive all the time. We are pressured to feel that every belief or life-style is just a matter of personal choice or based off of one’s own lived experience. However, when it comes to questions of the church, a personal choice or lived experience is not a part of the equation. “*If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God*” (1 Pet. 4:11). Our goal should be to give a biblical answer and not be concerned with trying to “soften the blow.” Our task is not to make truth more palatable. God does not need me to apologize for His truth. “*I’m sorry, but...*” is not the right response. Just speak the truth without being unnecessarily harsh or thoughtless while, at the same time, being uncompromising with God’s word.

Third, the Christian must be firmly grounded in the truth and able to answer properly. “*Isn’t one church as good as another, as long as I’m sincere?*” The wrong answer might be something like, “*Are you kidding me?! What kind of a silly question is that? Have you never read your Bible?!!*” We need to understand that there is a difference in being uncompromising with the truth as opposed to just being rude. A good passage to remember...

***“...we cannot go beyond
the word of God, to do
less or more.”***

...continued on bottom of page 3...

An Ontological Contradiction. Reformed Theology advances the doctrine of meticulous providence. It teaches that God predetermined and controls every detail of history. Nothing occurs apart from His eternal decree. This doctrine is said to protect divine sovereignty, yet when carried to its logical end it destroys the holiness of God, removes human accountability, and renders prayer meaningless. The Scriptures affirm that God is sovereign. He rules heaven and earth, and nothing can stand against His will. The Bible also affirms that man is a responsible agent who can obey or disobey. Meticulous providence collapses both truths into a rigid determinism that Scripture does not teach. It creates contradictions that cannot be reconciled.

The Reformed Position. John Calvin wrote: "There is nothing that happens but what God has knowingly and willingly decreed." Calvinism depends on that principle. Every event, from the sparrow that falls to the decisions of kings, is said to be fixed from eternity. The doctrine holds together unconditional election, limited atonement, and irresistible grace. Without meticulous providence, the system unravels. The weight of the claim is total. Every sin, every action, every moment in history is declared to be part of God's eternal decree. That is the heart of the problem.

The Logical End - God as the Author of Sin. If every act is predetermined, then sin is predetermined. The fall in Eden, the flood of Noah's day, the idolatry of Israel, and the betrayal of Judas would all be traced back to God's decree. James 1:13 forbids such a thought: "*Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man.*" To attribute sin to God's will is to deny His holiness.

Responsibility Without Choice. If decisions are fixed, man cannot be accountable. Yet the Bible consistently calls men to choose. "*I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live*" (Deuteronomy 30:19). Joshua said, "*Choose you this day whom ye will serve*" (Joshua 24:15). God promised blessings in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 if Israel obeyed and curses if they disobeyed. Those chapters mean nothing if the choices of the people were eternally fixed. A fixed decision is no decision at all.

The Collapse of Prayer and Morality. Prayer becomes empty if all things are predetermined. When Hezekiah prayed, God added fifteen years to his life (Isaiah 38:5). That extension either mattered or it did not. The warning to Cain also illustrates the point. God said: "*If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted?*" (Genesis 4:7). Cain's choice was real, and God's warning carried weight. Meticulous providence empties such passages of meaning.

"Meticulous providence strips obedience of meaning, turns submission into compulsion, and makes salvation a hollow display."

The Ontological Contradiction. Meticulous providence requires God to decree the sinful actions of men, which makes Him both lawgiver and lawbreaker. That is impossible. James 1:13 establishes that God cannot originate sin. A God who authors sin would cease to be holy. A being who ceases to be holy ceases to be God. Psalm 138:2 strengthens the point: "*Thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name.*" God has exalted His word as the standard of His will. His will is that all men be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). His word declares that only those who obey will be saved (Hebrews 5:9). To decree salvation for the disobedient would set His will against His word. That is contradiction. God cannot violate His word by His will. To rob men of the ability to obey would be tyranny. To force men to obey would be empty and foolish, for coerced obedience is not obedience. Obedience requires volition and self-determination. Faith must come from the heart. Meticulous providence strips obedience of meaning, turns submission into compulsion, and makes salvation a hollow display. The contradiction runs deeper. If God decrees sin, He becomes the agent of the very acts He condemns. If He decrees obedience, He eliminates the choice that gives obedience substance. The result is a system that cannot define God as holy and cannot define man as responsible.

The Biblical Alternative - Sovereignty Without Determinism. The Bible affirms God's sovereignty without meticulous determinism. "*Our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased*" (Psalm 115:3). "*Of him, and through him, and to him, are all things*" (Romans 11:36). Sovereignty means that God rules creation and directs history to His ends. It does not require Him to decree every detail. The crucifixion illustrates this truth. Peter declared Jesus was "*delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God*" (Acts 2:23). God purposed salvation through the cross, yet Peter condemned those who crucified Jesus with wicked hands. God's purpose stood, but their responsibility remained. Sovereignty and freedom existed together.

Providence as Oversight and Care. Providence is God's care and governance of creation. He feeds the birds

...continued on next page...

About Meticulous Providence

and clothes the lilies (Matthew 6:26–30). He changes times and seasons and removes kings (Daniel 2:21). He answers the prayers of His people (James 5:16). He allows “time and chance” to occur in human affairs (Ecclesiastes 9:11), yet He sees and knows all things (Hebrews 4:13). Providence is oversight and provision, not meticulous control. Joseph expressed this truth clearly. His brothers sold him into slavery by their own choice. Later he said: “*Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive*” (Genesis 50:20). God worked through their evil to accomplish His purpose without being the cause of their evil.

The Gospel Invitation. The gospel reveals the harmony of God’s sovereignty and man’s volition. “*The Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely*” (Revelation 22:17). The invitation is genuine. It is extended to all. God does not lose sovereignty when men accept or reject. His sovereignty is magnified in His righteous judgment and gracious salvation.

The True Comfort in Suffering. Meticulous providence fails most clearly in the face of tragedy. A grieving mother stands over the casket of her sixteen-year-old son killed by a drunk driver. A well-meaning individual consoles her: “It was his time. God called him home.” That statement makes God the cause of sin and shifts the guilt of the drunkard onto the holy God of heaven. Psalm 90:12 is often cited to defend that claim: “*So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.*” Many interpret the verse to mean that each death is fixed by decree. The psalmist’s meaning is different. To number our days is to recognize their value. We count what is precious. The days already lived are written off and cannot be reclaimed. The days ahead are not yet real. The only days that matter are the days we live now with wisdom. The psalmist calls for awareness, not fatalism. Meticulous providence twists that plea into determinism. It tells the brokenhearted that every evil event was decreed from eternity. True comfort comes from knowing that God is present, that He sees, that He cares, and that He can work good even out of evil. “*All things work together for good to them that love God*” (Romans 8:28). God does not decree sin, but He sustains His people in the midst of it. That is the comfort of Scripture.

Conclusion - Meticulous providence stands as the centerpiece of Calvinism, but it cannot survive examination. It makes God the author of sin, strips man of responsibility, removes the meaning of prayer and warning, and collapses into self-contradiction. It portrays a God who decrees sin and obedience alike, a God whose will contradicts His word, a God who robs man of freedom and replaces obedience with coercion. Such a system cannot describe the holy God of the Bible. The Scriptures reveal a better way. God is sovereign. He has magnified His word above His name. He desires all men to be saved and has declared that only those who obey will be saved. He rules the world with perfect providence, guides history to His ends, and invites every soul to come to Christ in freedom. Meticulous providence is an ontological contradiction. Biblical providence is the harmony of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility. God rules. Man chooses. Obedience has meaning. Faith is real. Comfort is true.

...would be First Timothy 2:24-26. Paul wrote, “*And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; and that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.*” While it is true that the truth may offend, it is also true that I don’t have to be intentionally offensive.

Finally, answer the question! “*Is one church as good as another?*” No! Why? It is a matter of, as E.G. Sewell pointed out, comparing the “doctrines and practices” of any church with Scripture. Not with personal preference or lived experience. Not with historical church documents. “*And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus*” (Col. 3:17). Jesus promised to build His church. While He ascended back to the Father before that happened, the apostles were baptized in power from the Holy Spirit and through their preaching, churches were established. Acts is the inspired history book of the establishment of Christ’s church. The letters, from Romans to Revelation, were written to both congregations and individuals regarding the church existing and at work in the world. Paul wrote to Timothy for the express purpose of discussing conduct within “*the house of God, which is the church of the living God*” (1 Tim. 3:15). When those outside the body of Christ come to those within the body of Christ with a legitimate question, we must be well studied enough to give the proper answers in the proper way! No. One church is not as good as another.

November/December 2025 Contributors

Churches of Christ

Pilot (Mammoth Spring, AR)	\$700.00
Mammoth Spring	\$600.00
Troy Road (Obion, TN)	\$600.00
Crossroads (Gepp, AR)	\$300.00
Bellefonte (Harrison, AR)	\$200.00
Bakersfield (Bakersfield, MO)	\$200.00
Cottage Grove (Cottage Grove, TN)	\$200.00
Lowell (Springdale, AR)	\$200.00
Main St. (Troy, TN)	\$200.00
Moody (Moody, MO)	\$200.00
Poughkeepsie (Poughkeepsie, AR)	\$200.00
Clarkridge (Clarkridge, AR)	\$150.00
Agnos (Agnos, AR)	\$100.00
Elizabeth (Elizabeth, AR)	\$100.00

Individuals

James & Laurel Parsley Trust	\$4,586.19
Norman Montgomery (Viola, AR)	\$100.00
Anonymous	\$100.00
The Paces (Hendersonville, TN)	\$100.00
R.B. Watts (Gilmer, TX)	\$100.00
Gordon Barnett (Salem, AR)	\$90.00
The Davises (Mountain View, MO)	\$40.00

Contribution Total **\$9,066.19**

Postage Cost \$1,752.79

Printing Cost \$1,185.00

Total Cost **\$2,937.79**

Difference **\$6,128.40**

The Churches of Christ

- Bible only (2 Pet. 1:3)
- Name of Christ (Rom. 16:16)
- Began in Jerusalem (Isa. 2:2-3; Acts 2:1-4)
- Established by Jesus (Matt. 16:18)
- Purchased with Jesus' blood (Acts 20:28)
- Married to Christ (Rom. 7:4)
- Established in the 1st century (Acts 2:47)
- Jesus the Head of the One Body (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:4; 5:23)
- Added to the church by God (Acts 2:41, 47)

Salvation

- Saved by grace, through faith (Eph. 2:8-9)
- Not by faith alone (Jas. 2:14-26)
- Not by grace alone (Matt. 7:21)
- Belief and baptism (Mk. 16:16)
- Repentance and baptism (Acts 2:37-38)
- Belief, confession, and baptism (Acts 8:37-38)
- Heard, believed, baptized (Acts 18:8)
- Baptized into Christ's death - raised to a new life (Rom. 6:3-4)
- Baptism - faith in God's working/operation (Col. 2:12)
- Faith and baptism (Gal. 3:26-27)
- Baptism does save us (1 Pet. 3:21)

Scan the QR code to
get access to all of our
online content!



Fulton County Gospel News (USPS Publication #211780) is a periodical publication issued bimonthly by the church of Christ at Third & Bethel (PO Box 251), Mammoth Spring, AR 72554-0251. **POSTMASTER: Please mail all changes of address to the above address.** FCCGN is mailed free of charge to any who care to receive it. If you send in a name we must have a complete address, including number and street name, or RR, or HCR number, plus box number, or a PO Box number and the **NINE DIGIT ZIP CODE**. This paper is supported by voluntary contributions for which we are grateful. Financial information will be furnished upon request.

Mail address corrections to: Fulton County Gospel News, PO Box 251, Mammoth Spring, AR 72554

Editor - Barry O'Dell - Office Phone - (870) 625-3217