

THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST

SPREADING THE SOUL-SAVING MESSAGE OF JESUS

ANSWERING DENOMINATIONAL DOCTRINES “The Cowboy Church”

Introduction by narrator accompanied by a cappella singing:

THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST. Spreading the soul-saving message of Jesus. And now, Ben Bailey.

Jesus prayed that “they all may be one, as You, Father, *are* in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me“ (Jn. 17:21). Welcome to our study of answering denominational doctrines. In this series of lessons we are taking various doctrines and teachings of religious groups in the world today, and we are examining them under the scrutiny of God’s Word to see if they are true, and to see if they will help a person, or hinder him from going to Heaven. Today we will be examining the Cowboy Church and its various doctrines.

Someone might ask initially, “What is the Cowboy Church?” Each Cowboy Church has the following similarities in common. Each congregation is surrounded by a cowboy atmosphere, including a barn as a church building, which often is referred to as “the barn of the Lord.” Congregations have a roping or riding arena, and a cattle tank for a baptistery. Each congregation focuses on the cowboy atmosphere, and is very ecumenical in nature, which means that the congregation accepts everyone regardless of what a person might believe or teach. The congregations are very open in such matters. Here’s an example. Silverado Cowboy Church in Weatherford, Texas, which is one of the largest cowboy churches, has the following as its statement of faith: “Silverado Cowboy Church, where Jesus is King of the cowboys, and everyone is welcome.” In fact, the Cowboy Church network further says, “Our purpose is to impact the cowboy culture with the Gospel of Jesus Christ by planting cowboy churches in every county.” There is nothing wrong with having a cowboy-type atmosphere in which people wear boots or go to a rodeo. But the initial problem is this: Why select a certain social group and focus solely on it? Why a cowboy church? Why not a doctor’s church, a lawyer’s church, or a banker’s church? Why select a specific group and focus on its members? Isn’t that contradictory to the purpose of Christ? Jesus prayed “they all may be one [not cowboys], as You, Father, *are* in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.“ If we focus only on one group, then we are limiting the power of the Gospel, and we are limiting what God wants us to do. Jesus built one church (Mt. 16:13-18). He wants everyone from various social and economic backgrounds to come into that group. He does not want us to plant various social groups in every county. That is contradictory to what Jesus intended for us to do. So the first problem is that the Cowboy Church selects a single group and then identifies that group as its main purpose, when Jesus said that we are to go “into all the world and preach the Gospel [not just to cowboys] to every creature” (Mk. 16:15; Mt. 28:18).

When did this denomination start? The Cowboy Church began somewhere around the time frame of the late 1980s or early 1990s. It likely began around cowboy atmospheres like rodeos or things of that nature. Someone might ask, “What does it matter when it started?” Here is why it matters. The church that Jesus built did not start in the late 1980s or early 1990s. The church that Jesus built started some two thousand years before that. If we come along two thousand years later after Jesus established His church, and we establish another church, can it be the church that Jesus built? Think about the words of Acts 2:47.

After men and women had obeyed the Gospel and had been baptized, the Bible says that they were “praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” When did Jesus build His church? The church began in the first century on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem right after Christ had been resurrected and gone back to the Father. The church did not start in this current era; it began two thousand years before the Cowboy Church began. This means that this group cannot be the church about which we read in the New Testament because it arrived far too late.

Where did the Cowboy Church start? It depends on whom you ask. There are two views regarding where the Cowboy Church started. It either started in Billy Bob’s, Texas (in the Forth Worth stockyard), or in Nashville, Tennessee. It really doesn’t matter where the Cowboy Church started because both are unacceptable places for the Lord’s church to have started. What do I mean by that? When and where did the church about which we read in the New Testament start? Did it start in Fort Worth, Texas? Did it start in Nashville, Tennessee? No, not at all. In Isaiah 2:2-4 we read,

”Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. any people shall come and say, ‘Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

The word of the Lord shall forth from where? Jerusalem! When would that occur? It would occur when the mountain of the Lord’s house is established. What is that? Paul spoke of this temple in 1 Timothy 3:15 when he said that he was writing so that the Christians “may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.” The church is God’s kingdom today. That kingdom was prophesied to start in Jerusalem. If a church started thousands of miles from Jerusalem, thousands of years from when the New Testament church began, can it be the church that Jesus built? And more important, can it be the church that Jesus is coming back to save?

Who started the Cowboy Church? Again, it depends on whom you ask. There are two possible founders. Some believe that Johnny Cash’s sister, Joanne Yates Cash (who is an “ordained minister” at the Nashville Cowboy Church) started the Cowboy Church. Others believe that Jeff and Sherry Copenhaver (who started a Cowboy Church at Billy Bob’s in the bull-riding arena in January 1986) were the church’s founders. No one knows for sure because there are various divisions on this matter. But it does not matter whether Joanne Yates Cash or the Copenhavers started the Cowboy Church because neither had the right to start any church. How do we know that? In Matthew 16:18 Jesus said to Peter, “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.” Who started the church in the first century? Jesus did. And he is the only One Who has the right or power to start any religious group. How do we know that? Paul said in Acts 20:28 that Jesus shed His blood to purchase the church. No one else paid that price. No one else had the authority from God to do such a thing. And no person has the right to start his own church today. Do you know one of the quickest ways to get rich in America today? It probably won’t surprise you for me to say that it is to start your own church. Think of all the people who have started their own religious group, who have taken advantage of others, and who have appealed to this class or that class—when Jesus intended there to be only one church, and for all people to come to that group (the church of the Lord Jesus Christ) for salvation.

Where is the headquarters of the Cowboy Church? If there was one, it would be in Nashville, Tennessee, or in Weatherford, Texas. Again, herein lies the problem. The Lord's church has its headquarters in Heaven itself. There is no earthly locale where a person can go to say, "This is the physical headquarters of the church." The headquarters of the church of Christ emanate from the throne of God in Heaven itself. Ephesians 1:22-23 tells us that Jesus is the Head of the church. He is seated at the right hand of God. And notice what Psalm 119:89 says: "Forever O Lord, Your word is established in heaven." There is no need for an earthly headquarters because when Jesus gave His will, and when the apostles were inspired by the Holy Spirit, that was it. The once-for-all Faith was given (Jude 3)! We have everything we need in God's Word for "life and godliness" (2 Pet. 1:3). There is no headquarters on Earth for the Lord's church. The will of God is found only in Heaven, and emanates from the voice of God Who reigns from Heaven itself.

What would a Cowboy Church be like if you were to attend one today? Here's an apt description. The *Tennessean* newspaper describes the Cowboy Church as a place where

"...honky-tonk and the Holy Spirit collide. Here, a live country band provides music, crooning twangy gospel tunes. The pastor dresses in a cowboy hat, boots, and string tie. And a giant neon-lit jukebox—rather than a cross—hovers behind the stage. It's how this non-denominational church reaches out to Nashville's tourists and entertainers."

It would be like walking into a honky-tonk, except it is where "the honky-tonk and the Holy Spirit collide"? Can you imagine people taking that blasphemous atmosphere and applying Christ to it? We do not need to combine those two ideas. We need to teach people to come out of such things and live a pure live for Christ and for Christianity.

What is the authority in the Cowboy Church? It is the Bible—as long as it paints Jesus, worship, and Christianity in a cowboy atmosphere. In the minds of those in the Cowboy Church, Jesus probably looked a lot like John Wayne. And the disciples were a part of the first James gang. That's the way those in the Cowboy Church want the Bible to paint Jesus and His disciples. Thus, the idea is to paint a picture of a cowboy atmosphere—when, in reality, we do not need to focus on a single atmosphere when teaching the Gospel. Rather, we need to bring everyone into the church for which Jesus died.

Now let's take a minute to examine some of the doctrines of the Cowboy Church. The doctrine about salvation in the Cowboy Church is much like that of many Protestant denominations because it suggests that salvation comes through faith alone. The Silverado Cowboy Church, which is a model for many such congregations today, says, "Salvation of man comes only from accepting Jesus as Savior and being spiritually born again." By that, the Silverado Cowboy Church means, "If you will just say, 'I accept Jesus as Lord and Savior,' and then say the 'sinner's prayer' and accept that at that point you were born again, that is all you have to do to be saved." There is no doubt, of course, that Jesus is the only way to salvation. Acts 4:12 says, "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." There is no doubt that Paul said, "With the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Rom. 10:10). There is no doubt that a person must believe in Jesus. John 3:16 says, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." But to draw the line there and say that all a person has to do is say, "I accept Jesus," does not even begin to tell the entire story. Must a person repent? Jesus said that he did. Must a person make the good confession that Jesus is Christ and Lord? Absolutely! Jesus said so in Matthew 10:32-33. Must a person be baptized in water? Absolutely! So when the Cowboy Church says that all a person has to do is "accept Jesus and put your faith in Him," the truth is that there is so much more to it than that. Titus 3:5 says that we are saved by the mercy

of God. Romans 5:1-4 says that we are saved by love in hope. Ephesians 2:8-9 says that we are saved by the grace of God through faith in the workings of God's plan of salvation. Two essential parts of salvation that often are omitted are that a person must repent and be baptized. Acts 2:38 says, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins." Here's what's amazing. There is one passage in the Bible that mentions "faith only," and it says the exact opposite of what millions of people believe and have been taught that they must do in order to be saved. When the phrase "faith only" occurs in the New Testament, it does not say that it saves. James 2:24 says, "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only." Are we saying that we can earn our salvation? No! But are there things that a person must do to be saved? Absolutely! Notice that a man is **not** justified by faith only.

Most Cowboy Churches also believe in Holy Spirit baptism for today. For example, the Nashville Cowboy Church says, "baptism with the Holy Ghost is an experience subsequent to conversion, bringing spiritual power for the Christian life." But what does the Bible teach about Holy Spirit baptism? We see it occurring two or three times in the New Testament. In Acts 2 we see the baptism of the Holy Spirit taking place with some on Pentecost. The door then is opened to the Jews to become members of the kingdom. In Acts 10, we see Cornelius, the first Gentile convert, undergoing Holy Spirit baptism. And possibly Holy Spirit baptism occurred later in the case of Saul (Paul). But when you look at the examples you will see that Holy Spirit baptism is always associated with the opening of a door for the Jew or for the Gentile.

But what about Holy Spirit baptism today? Are people today being baptized with the Holy Spirit? Not at all. In 1 Corinthians 13:8-10 we are clearly taught that when "the perfect" came, then the miraculous knowledge, powers, and signs that were present in the first century would be done away with. What is "the perfect"? It is the Word of God. James 1:25 tells us that we now have in God's Word "the perfect law of liberty." God said that when it finally came, then we would have no more need for miraculous knowledge, powers, signs such as tongue speaking, or the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The Cowboy Church is heavily influenced by the miraculous (Holy Spirit baptism, healing, etc.), when the Scriptures clearly teach that we no longer are living in a day and age when such things are available. Let me illustrate. Look at 1 Corinthians 13:8-10 and notice what God says about the miraculous.

"Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. "

What is "the perfect"? Jesus is perfect, of course, but He had already come by the time Paul made those statements. Anytime Jesus' Second Coming is mentioned, it is a time when Christ comes **again**. What else is there that is "perfect"? It is the Word of God. In James 1:25 the exact same word is used in the Greek language to describe "the perfect law of liberty" that was used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:10. Miracles were given for the purpose of confirming God's Word. Let me illustrate. Supposed two people stood up to speak. The first said, "I've got a message from God." The second man said, "I've got a message from God." Yet the messages contradict each other because they are not even close to being the same. How could a person tell which message was correct? If one of those two men could heal the sick or raise the dead (i.e., do miracles), while the other man could not, then we would know for sure that God had confirmed the message of the man who was performing the miracles. Someone might ask, "Well, don't we need miracles today?" No, because we have the accounts of those miracles in God's Word. We can use the Bible to confirm any message spoken by any person so that we can know whether he is speaking the truth or not. We no longer are living under the age of the miraculous.

Are we saying that God does not answer prayer? No, because God does answer prayers. Are we saying that God is “dead”? Not at all! But we no longer are living in the age of first-century miracles. People’s withered arms are not being healed. People are not being raised from the dead. Miracles simply are not occurring.

One doctrine that really bothers me from the Cowboy Church is that it often promotes a “health-and-wealth” Gospel. One of the church’s tenets is “total prosperity—spiritual, physical, mental, and financial.” Jesus never promised that we would have everything we want financially or that we would be wealthy in this life. Jesus did say that those who put first the kingdom of God would not have to worry, because God would provide for them such things as shelter, food, and clothing. David said in Psalm 37:25, “I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his descendants begging bread.” The Bible clearly teaches that righteous people will not go hungry. But the Bible never teaches a “health-and-wealth” Gospel. The Bible never says anything like, “Come to Christ, and God will bless your pocketbook and increase your bank account.” The Bible does say that we have “all spiritual blessings in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:3). The Bible also says that we have an inheritance in Heaven that is incorruptible and undefiled, and that cannot be taken away. But does the Bible say that when we obey the Gospel we will receive total prosperity? No, it does not. In fact, the Bible promises trials. In 2 Timothy 3:12 we read that “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.” The Bible says that we may not be prosperous financially or physically, but that we will be rich beyond measure in Jesus Christ.

Another doctrine of the Cowboy Church that is contradictory to the New Testament is its skewed view of the purpose of baptism. The Cowboy Church says that believers are baptized only “to keep the commands of God.” The church’s statement is, “We believe that after accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior, one needs to be obedient to Scripture and be water baptized.” Notice the correlation of events. **After** “accepting Jesus as Savior,” **then** a person needs to be baptized? A person cannot be right with God without first having been baptized. Baptism does not come **after** salvation. It does not come once a person has “accepted Jesus.” Baptism is essential to salvation. A person cannot be saved one second before he is baptized. That is a bold claim. How do we know it to be true? Look at what Jesus Himself said in Mark 16:16—“He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” Notice the order of those things in Jesus’ teaching on salvation. A person believes, is baptized, and then is saved. A person must believe, and he must be baptized, in order to be saved. If a person does not believe, then he is not even a candidate to obey God by being baptized in order to be saved. When we think about Jesus’ plan of salvation, the importance of baptism becomes very clear.

Listen to some other passages that teach about baptism. There is not just one quaint passage on this topic in the New Testament. Rather, there are multitudes of passages that teach the essentiality of baptism. For example, in Acts 2:38, on the Day of Pentecost in his first Gospel sermon, Peter preached, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins.” What is baptism for? It is for the remitting/removal of sin. Think about Saul. In Acts 9 we find Saul going down the road toward Damascus. He is wreaking havoc on the church, and is dragging men and women into prison. The Lord confronted him on the road to Damascus and asked him, “Why are you persecuting Me?” Saul replied, “Lord, what would You have me to do?” Christ told Saul to go into the city, where he would be told what he needed to do. In Acts 22:16 we read where Ananias came to Saul and said, “Why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” How does a person “call on the name of the Lord”? At what point are a person’s sins washed away? When

Saul arose and was baptized is when his sins were washed away. Someone might ask, "Are you saying that a person cannot get to Heaven without being baptized?" I'm not saying that. That is what **Jesus** said! In John 3:5 Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Unless [an "if-and-only-if" type of statement] one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Someone might ask, "Are you saying then that baptism is for salvation?" That is exactly what Peter said. Someone might respond, "No, the Bible never says that baptism saves us." Peter said in 1 Peter 3:21, "Baptism does now also save us."

The Bible makes it abundantly clear that in order to be saved, a person must hear the Word of God. Romans 10:17 says that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." Once a person has heard God's Word, then he must believe in Jesus as God's Son. In John 8:24 Jesus said, "Unless you believe that I am He, you will surely die in your sins." Once a person has believed, he must be willing to change his life by repenting of his past sins. Acts 3:19 tells us to "repent and turn again." Then a person must confess that Jesus is Christ and Lord (Acts 8:37; Rom. 10:10). And yes, a person must be baptized (immersed in water) to obtain forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38).

So today as we have examined various doctrines of the Cowboy Church, please realize that it is not the church about which you read in the New Testament. There is nothing wrong with the cowboy culture itself. There is nothing wrong with wearing cowboy-type clothes or going to rodeos. But the Cowboy Church is not the group about which you read in the New Testament. It started way too late. It started way too far away from where Jesus built His church. And its doctrines are contradictory to the teaching of the New Testament. But here is the good news. Jesus wants every culture and every person, regardless of skin color, social background, or economic standing to obey the Gospel, be saved, and become a member of His church. God wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. If you have been involved in religious error, we are begging and pleading with you today to put aside such error, obey the Gospel, and become a Christian (a member of the church of Christ) so that you can be nothing more and nothing less than a Christian. We hope you will do that today.

Narrator accompanied by a cappella singing:

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STUDY QUESTIONS FOR “THE COWBOY CHURCH”

1. For what did Jesus Christ pray in John 17:21?
2. According to the instruction contained in this lesson, what is the general thrust (or purpose) of the Cowboy Church?
3. Where did the Cowboy Church start?
4. According to Isaiah 2:2-4, where was Christ’s church prophesied to church?
5. According to Acts 2, where did Christ’s church actually start?
6. According to Matthew 16:18, how many churches did Christ say He would build?
7. According to Acts 2:47, was the church of Christ in existence in the first century A.D?
8. According to Ephesians 1:22-23, who is the head of the one church that Christ established?
9. According to Matthew 28:18, how much authority does Christ have over the church?
10. Why, according to Acts 20:28, does Christ have the authority over the church that He does?
11. According to the Cowboy Church’s doctrine of salvation, how is a person saved?
12. According to James 2:24, can “faith only” save anyone?
13. The Cowboy Church teaches that the miraculous baptism of the Holy Spirit is still available for people today. Yet in 1 Corinthians 13:8-10 the apostle taught that when that which “is perfect” arrives, the miraculous will pass away. What, according to the teaching contained in this lesson (especially James 1:25) is “the perfect”?
14. The Cowboy Church teaches a “health-and-wealth” Gospel. What does the Bible teach in 2 Timothy 3:12 that contradicts such teaching?
15. The Cowboy Church teaches that a person should “accept Jesus as Savior” (and thus be saved), and then be baptized in order to obey commands found within the New Testament. According to Jesus’ teaching in Mark 16:15, as well as Peter’s teaching in Acts 2:38 and 1 Peter 3:21, does salvation occur **before** baptism?
16. How, according to what the prophet Ananias told Saul of Tarsus (Acts 22:16), does a person get rid of his sins?
17. What, according to 1 Peter 3:21, does baptism do for a person?
18. According to the teaching of the New Testament, what steps must a person take in order to be saved.