

An Introduction to the Church of the United Brethren in Christ

Where Does the Church of the United Brethren in Christ Fit?

People often want to know where the Church of the United Brethren in Christ fits into the religious spectrum. Let's examine some of our distinctives. We'll start with broad descriptions and work our way down to more specific descriptions.

We are Christian

We are part of the *Christian religion*. As Christians, we believe in one God, not many gods as taught by some other religions.

Christianity centers on Jesus Christ. We learn all about Him through the Bible, which was inspired by the Holy Spirit. The Bible tells of Christ's virgin birth, ministry, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven.

Our "Confession of Faith" explains our basic beliefs about Christ. His importance to us is reflected in our denomination's name—Church of the United Brethren *in Christ*.

We are Orthodox

We are an *orthodox* church. Many of today's religious groups don't accept Christ as head of the church and also deny other crucial beliefs. Non-orthodox religious groups include the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mormons, the Christian Scientists, and the Unification Church.

As an orthodox church, we cling to the traditional and established beliefs. These include the virgin birth of Jesus, the death and resurrection of Jesus, the second coming of Christ, the necessity of forgiveness from our sins, salvation through faith in Christ, and the reality of heaven and hell.

We are Protestant

Orthodox Christian churches can be divided into three broad categories – Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestants. We are a *Protestant* church. As Protestants, we believe God works in a personal way with all believers, we believe in salvation by faith, and we believe the Bible has greater authority than tradition.

Our Confession of Faith states these beliefs about the Bible.

1. It is the Word of God.
2. It contains the only true way of salvation.
3. Every Christian must regard it as the ultimate rule and guide for life.

We are Evangelical

Within Protestantism, there are extreme fundamentalists on one side and liberals on the other. We lie somewhere in between.

We differ from the liberals, who are more interested in relationships than in doctrine. Yet we differ from extreme fundamentalists, whose interest in doctrine over relationships leads to their separatist attitudes (not wanting to associate with those who hold different views.) We hold many of the same doctrinal views as fundamentalists, yet we are not separatists.

As part of the National Association of Evangelicals, we are distinctive in that we hold to the orthodox fundamentals and beliefs. We are compelled by Scripture to cooperate

as one with all who hold similarly orthodox beliefs, but to avoid sacrificing doctrine in an effort to cooperate with other denominations.

In Summary...

- Among the religions of the world, we are part of Christianity.
- We are different from many other religious groups in that we are orthodox.
- We are Protestant, not Catholic or Eastern Orthodox.
- We differ from other Protestant churches in that we are evangelical.

What Makes Our Doctrines Distinctive?

In the previous section, we significantly narrowed our beliefs and positions as a denomination. Now we will discuss what distinguishes us from other evangelical churches.

Salvation: Predestination vs. Free Will

The Reformation of the 16th Century resulted in the Lutheran, Reformed, and Anabaptist traditions. *Lutherans* followed the teachings of Martin Luther, *Reformed* churches followed John Calvin, *Anabaptists* followed Menno Simmons (from whose name “Mennonite” comes.)

John Calvin, a reformer from Geneva, Switzerland, taught that nothing happens unless God allows it. This includes whether or not someone goes to heaven. A person will be saved only if he is *predestined* to be saved—if God decides in advance that salvation will be part of his destiny. Calvinists, such as the Presbyterians, teach that salvation is the work of the Holy Spirit alone, and that the human will is incapable of cooperating.

Jacob Arminius, a Dutch theologian, received strict Reformed training. However, he began doubting the Calvinistic teaching concerning predestination and salvation. He developed, through his reading of Scripture, a view which combines the sovereignty of God with the free will of man. His followers are called Arminians.

The United Brethren church, as an evangelical denomination, is Arminian in theology rather than Calvinist. We believe that God and man cooperate in the conversion experience. God offers salvation to man as a free gift, but the individual must respond with either “yes” or “no.” He can either accept the free gift, or he can reject it. This power to choose is known as free will.

Communion: Zwingli vs. Luther

While Martin Luther led the Reformation within Germany, Huldreich Zwingli’s voice arose in Zurich, Switzerland.

The central teaching of Lutheranism is that man is made righteous before God through faith in Christ, whose death paid for the world’s sins. But the sacraments—baptism and the Lord’s Supper—play a crucial role in offering and sealing the forgiveness of sins which Christ secured for all sinners.

Martin Luther taught that Christ was physically present in the bread and wine served during communion (the Lord’s Supper). He felt that actually partaking of Christ was the strongest pledge of our union with Christ and the forgiveness of sins.

Zwingli reached a different conclusion. He believed that Christ's words at the Last Supper—"This is my body" and "This is my blood"—actually meant "This *signifies* my body... blood."

As an evangelical Arminian denomination, we follow Zwingli's view. We remember Christ's suffering and death through the *symbols* of the bread and wine (or grape juice, which is commonly used in United Brethren churches).

Sanctification: Crisis or Process?

Another Arminian doctrine concerns sanctification, which involves the believer becoming like Christ.

Wesleyanism (which emerged from John Wesley's teachings) has traditionally taught that a person is sanctified instantly through an experience which occurs sometime after salvation. This "second work of grace" enables a person to resist sinning and live a more victorious Christian life. The Wesleyan and Nazarene churches hold this view.

The United Brethren church has predominantly taught that sanctification is *progressive*—that we gradually become more like Christ through a life-long process of growth which begins at conversion. We become perfect and complete only after we die and see Christ.

We allow for the possibility of a crisis experience of total devotion, but we do not insist that every Christian have such an experience.

Spiritual Gifts

Another distinctive concerns our view of spiritual gifts. Pentecostalism is often associated with speaking in tongues. Churches such as the Assemblies of God and Four-Square Gospel have taught this gift. In some cases, speaking in tongues is regarded as proof of the Holy Spirit's fullness.

We don't hold that view. We believe that all spiritual gifts mentioned in the Bible are available today, but that people who never speak in tongues may still have the Spirit's fullness and power.

Baptism

We appreciate the emphasis our Baptist brethren place on baptism. However, we do not agree with them in accepting only one method of baptism: immersion (the whole body being submerged in water). We permit Christians to choose the mode of their baptism—by sprinkling, pouring and immersion.

In Summary...

- We are Arminian in our theology of salvation, rather than Lutheran or Calvinist.
- Within Arminianism, we are distinctive from the Wesleyans regarding sanctification, from the Pentecostals regarding spiritual gifts, and from the Baptists regarding baptism.

How Does the UB Church Function?

The previous section examined some of the doctrinal beliefs which distinguish us from other evangelical denominations. Here, we will look at our church government and how it differs from how other evangelical churches operate.

A Connectional Church

In its government, the United Brethren church is *connectional* rather than *autonomous*.

In an *autonomous* structure, the local congregation is the highest authority. Such congregations may belong to an association of churches with similar doctrines and practices, but that association does not impose binding requirements on local churches. The nation's largest denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, is an association of autonomous churches.

In our *connectional* system, local churches are connected under the authority of national bishops and denominational groups. Local churches cooperate to support Huntington College, missions work, church planting projects, camping, publications, and other ministries.

In a connectional church, ordained ministers are expected to be available for a fulltime assignment, and congregations are expected to accept the minister assigned to them by the denomination. Therefore, all congregations have a personal interest in the quality of ordained ministers, since theoretically, any of them could be assigned to their church in the future. This also means that all ordained ministers are concerned about the quality of the local churches, since any of these churches could, someday, become their own pastorate.

A Modified Episcopal Church

Basically, there are three types of church government: Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Congregational.

1. The *Episcopal* system places authority in ministers, the chief ministers being bishops.
2. The *Presbyterian* system places authority not only in ministers, but in lay-persons as well.
3. The *Congregational* system places authority in the church.

Probably none of these systems appear in pure form without some elements of the other forms. We are mostly Episcopal at the denominational level, somewhat Presbyterian at the conference level, and more Congregational at the local level—at least in attitude.

Since we are more Episcopal than we are Presbyterian or Congregational, we could say we use a “modified Episcopal” system. Authority is held by ministers and lay-persons together.

Our bishop is elected the National Conference, our governing body, and serves a four-year term, providing general oversight and setting the vision for the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, USA.

The Itinerant System

Most denominations use one of two methods for assigning ministers to churches.

1. Under the *call system*, churches find their own pastor. When the church needs a new pastor, a “search committee” is appointed to find one. Often, a prospective pastor preaches a “trial sermon” and goes through an interview process, after which the congregation or church leaders vote on whether or not to hire that person as pastor.
2. Under the *itinerant system*, ministers are assigned by the bishop.

The United Brethren church uses the itinerant system. Ministers are assigned by the bishop stationing committee, rather than chosen by the congregation. However, stationing committees consult with church representatives and ministers before making appointments.

The Stationing committee tries to find the right match between a pastor and congregation. This may involve considerable interaction with a church’s leaders in an effort to understand the church’s needs, and the vision of its people.

A church may be left without an assigned pastor until the right match can be found. Likewise, unassigned ministers may remain unassigned if they are not deemed to be a good match for the open churches. Generally, assignments are made from the list of ministers who are ordained or very near ordination.

In Summary...

The government used by the United Brethren church has three characteristics:

- Its is connectional, rather than autonomous.
- It is a combination of forms which can be described as a modified episcopacy.
- Pastors are assigned by the conference, rather than chosen by a local church.

What Distinguishes Our Standards?

We believe that genuine faith always shows itself in a transformed life. The following statements explain the standards expected of those who are part of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ.

Purity of Doctrine: Christ and Salvation

Members must accept our Confession of Faith. In addition, our view of salvation conflicts with the teachings of various lodges (such as Freemasonry), which claim salvation can be achieved through human effort or degrees. We do not say that a lodge member can’t be a Christian. But to uphold doctrinal purity, we do not allow a lodge members to join the church. That has been our stand since 1841. A number of other evangelical denominations share our position.

Purity of Life: How You Treat Yourself

The Bible implies that we should avoid any thing—whether heard, seen, eaten, inhaled, or injected—that would harm the body, mind, soul or influence. The “Standards of the Church” section in our *Discipline* lists our standards concerning purity of life.

Purity of Love: Social Behavior

We believe that a Christian's attitudes and behavior should be noticeably different than the example of the world. This includes avoiding things most people regard as sinful, but also displaying a spirit of love and compassion toward others. In the "Standards of the Church," the *Discipline* applies this spirit of love to certain social issues—war, peace, marriage, the family, sexual purity, and other issues.

For example, we believe that God created man and woman as sexual creatures (Genesis 1:27). He designed marriage to complement the spiritual, physical, and psychological needs of the couple. This includes sexual union. However, the Bible firmly limits sexual relations to marriage. We cannot condone premarital sex, adultery, or homosexuality, because these clearly contradict the will of God.

The United Brethren church fosters the ethic of love in our family relationships, extends that ethic to all other persons, and adheres to that ethic in pursuing national peace.

In summary...

- The Church of the United Brethren in Christ, like other evangelical denominations, requires members to be pure in doctrine, life, and love.
- But of greater importance, we feel that a responsible interpretation of the Bible firmly supports the stands we take on moral and social issues.