

CHARACTERISTICS OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

by Bob Allgood

When we speak of a New Testament Church we mean a local assembly of born again (or born of God) believers who have followed the Lord Jesus Christ in scriptural water baptism, and worship God in Spirit and in truth, according to the pattern set forth in the New Testament. This does not mean that the New Testament Church members believe only what is written the New Testament. The true church of God believes "All scripture (both the old and new testament) is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: --" (II Tim. 3:16). For brevity sake we will often refer to the New Testament Church in this article simply as the church.

The word "Church" is translated from the Greek word "ekklesia" which means "a called out assembly". The word "ekklesia" is translated "assembly" three times, Church thirty six (36) times, and Churches seventy nine (79) times. With few exceptions the words church or churches always refer to a local visible body of believers. The local church or assembly should not be confused with the "invisible body of Christ" which is made up of all of God's chosen and redeemed people. These people are also referred to in the Bible as "the elect". Our primary concern in this article is with the local church or assembly and not with all of God's elect. The local church in the Bible was usually identified by location, such as the church at Jerusalem, at Corinth, at Ephesus, at Philippi, at Colosse or the churches of Galatia or Asia. Letters were sometimes written to "the saints" in a particular location. Today, because we have so many different kinds of churches, we must identify them by names and denominations.

Jesus Christ called out the first church in Jerusalem from the disciples that had been baptized by John the Baptist. Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God, said, "Upon this rock (speaking of Himself as the Rock) I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:13-18). Jesus used the word "church" three times and two of them were definitely referring to the local church (Matt. 17:15-17). The first church (singular) in Jerusalem was scattered because of persecution (Acts 8:3-4) and afterward the scripture begins to speak of churches (plural) in Acts 9:31. The true New Testament Church belongs to Jesus Christ, and not to man or man-made denominations. There have been many "denominations" founded by man and some even bear the name of man, but the church has Jesus Christ as her founder and head.

The purpose of the church is to provide a refuge or sanctuary for God's people where they may receive spiritual comfort, rest, peace and instructions in righteousness. The church is a home on earth for the Lord's disciples while they are waiting for their home in heaven. "For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (II Cor. 5:1). The church is referred to in scripture as "the bride of Christ", "the city of the living God", "the heavenly Jerusalem", "Mount Zion", "the church of God" and "the church of Christ", just to name a few synonyms. Neither Jesus Christ nor the apostles ever gave the church a denominational name. The church is identified by her design, doctrine and practice.

When you first visit a true New Testament Church, you will notice a simple form of worship consisting of singing of hymns, prayers and the preaching of God's word. This form of worship is as close to the pattern established 2000 years ago as possible. The absence of musical instruments, choirs, Sunday schools and other man-made inventions and programs is in keeping with the teachings of the New Testament. God says, "For I am the LORD, I change not; --" (Mal. 3:2). The Bible says, "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8). Since God does not change, and Christ does not change, and Truth does not change, we believe that the church should remain as original and unchanged as possible even though we live in the 21st century. Each individual New Testament Church is autonomous, controlled by the members, but under the authority of her head Jesus Christ. The church is to be submissive to Him in all things (Eph. 5:23-25). Therefore, the church should not reflect the whims of the world, nor the will and ways of man, but ought to reflect the pattern set forth in the Bible.

The New Testament Church must be "Primitive" in nature by design, and it must be "Baptist" in practice by commandment from Jesus. These two words are adjectives describing the origin and practice of the church. The word Primitive means "First or Original; and pertaining to origin has not changed much in time." Historians use the term "Primitive" to describe the first churches of the New Testament era. All churches were "Baptist" in practice until about 251 AD. The combining of the words Primitive and Baptist has been traced back to about 63 AD and a church found in Olchon, Wales. That church became very influential on other churches in England prior to the Protestant Reformation. True New Testament Churches are not "Protestant" churches.

Another name given to the Primitive Churches in the 4th Century was "Anabaptist." This name was given to those churches that refused to accept or practice "infant baptism" and "baptism by sprinkling". Anabaptists were known throughout the dark ages by many names, such as Donatists,

Paulicans, Waldenses and Lollards. Cardinal Hosius, President of the Council of Trent, wrote in 1524, (seven years after the start of the Protestant Reformation), "Were it not that the Baptist have been grievously tormented and cut off with the knife during the past twelve hundred years, they would swarm in greater number than all the Reformers". After the Protestant Reformation, the term Ana was dropped and the primitive name Baptist was retained. The word Baptist means "one who baptizes by immersion." The name originates in the New Testament with John the Baptist who was sent by God to baptize in water.

Jesus began his earthly ministry by coming to John to be baptized of him (Matt. 3:13-17). We learn from Acts 1:21-22 that the first disciples whom Jesus called out, and named Apostles, had been baptized by John the Baptist. We learn from John 3:22-26 and 4:1-2 that the Disciples whom Jesus "called out" baptized more disciples than did John the Baptist. Jesus himself commanded his Apostles to baptize "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matt. 28:19-20). We learn from Acts 2:41-47 that on the day of Pentecost, following the preaching by Peter, "They that gladly received his word were baptized". We therefore must conclude that the first Church was a Baptist church and that all New Testament Churches must be Baptist in practice.

The Church must not only be "Primitive" in nature by design, and "Baptist" in practice by commandment, but the church must also be "sound in doctrine" with her teachings. In the United States all Baptist Churches held pretty much to the same beliefs until about 1800 when a major division began to take place. Then, those who began to believe in the false doctrine of a General Atonement, and that human efforts are necessary for the dead sinner to obtain eternal life, departed from the "primitive faith" of the New Testament Church. After 1832 the churches that had departed from the "primitive faith" in order to adopt Arminian doctrines and practices were called New School Baptist. Those that held true to the doctrine of Grace and the "old paths" were called Old School or Old Line Baptist churches. These are not denominational names, but names that denote a desire and intent to preserve the identity of the true New Testament Church.

Following is a brief introduction to the beliefs of a true New Testament Church:

The Scriptures are the inspired, infallible words of God, without error and contradiction, preserved by God, and are profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness. The purpose of the Scriptures is to make Gods children wise unto salvation by informing and educating them about eternal life through the finished work of Jesus Christ. We prefer the Authorized King James translation to any other

English version, and use the KJV in our Bible studies, worship services, the preaching of the gospel and the teaching of God's word (I Cor. 15:1-4; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21).

The purpose of the Gospel was never to bring eternal life to anyone. The gospel means nothing to the sinner who is spiritually "dead in trespasses and sins" for he cannot hear nor receive the word in a spiritual sense. The dead sinner must first be quickened or made alive by God in order to receive the things of the Spirit of God. But the gospel is good news and glad tidings to the born again child of God. The gospel brings to light life and immortality and the eternal blessings which God has given us in Christ Jesus according to his own purpose and grace (II Tim.1: 7-11). Therefore, the gospel is preached to feed the souls of God's children, to comfort, edify and instruct them. There is no greater message to a child of God, who feels himself to be poor and needy and unworthy of God's mercy and grace, than to hear that Jesus paid his sin debt, saved him from his sins and that he is kept by the power of God unto salvation. As Paul said, "Unto us which ARE saved, it is the power of God" (Isaiah 40:1, 9; 52:7; John 5:39; I Cor. 2:9-14; Eph. 2:1-9; 2 Tim. 1:7-11; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 1:2-5; 5:1-3) .

The main difference between the doctrine of Grace taught by New Testament Churches as compared to most other churches or religious orders, may be seen in the principal of cause and effect. What others say is the cause of eternal salvation, such as belief, faith, repentance, baptism or other acts by an individual, we believe are the effects or evidence of spiritual life and can only be performed sincerely by those already possessing eternal life. In other words, eternal salvation is totally by The Sovereign Grace of God - which is explained briefly as follows:

The Fall of Man Resulting in Depravity.

When Adam transgressed God's commandment, he and the whole human race (Adam's posterity) fell under the law of sin and death. Adam's transgression brought sin and death to all mankind. God concluded them all to be in sin. No one is able to recover himself from this fallen condition by his own will or ability. All men are sinners by nature and WITHOUT GOD'S GRACE and MERCY will remain under the penalty and condemnation of sin (Genesis 2:17; Romans 3:10-23; 5:12; Psalms 14:1-3; 51:5; 58:3) .

Unconditional Election and Predestination.

God, according to His own purpose and will, in the everlasting covenant, made by Himself with Himself, chose an innumerable people in Christ, out of every kindred and tongue and people and nation, before the world began and predestinated them unto the adoption of children, to be conformed to the image of

Jesus Christ and to obtain an eternal inheritance in heaven (John 17:1-3; Eph. 1:4-11; 1 Peter 1:1-5; Rom. 8:29-30; Rev. 5:9-10).

Redemption: The Work of Christ for the Elect.

The word **redeem** declares a price to be paid and prior ownership of that which is to be redeemed. The price of eternal redemption (Heb. 9:12) is the blood of Christ. Christ died for all that the Father chose in Him before the world began; ALL that the Father has given to Him; and NOT for ALL MANKIND in general. All that Christ died for SHALL live in heaven and immortal glory, for God has reconciled them unto Himself in Christ (John 6:37-39; 8:42-47; 17:9; Rom. 5:8-19; 1 Cor. 1:26-21; II Cor. 5:17-21; Heb. 9:24-26; 1 Peter 1:2-5 with 18-21).

Regeneration, Quickened (made alive), Born Again.

These various terms define what happens when God gives "eternal life" to one whom he has chosen in Christ. Eternal life is imparted according to the power, purpose and will of God, and not by the will of man. The calling of God unto eternal life is always effectual and irresistible on the part of the individual being called. It is accomplished separate and apart from the preaching of the gospel and without the help or aid of man. When compared to the natural birth of man in which one has no choice or voice to be born – the chosen of God likewise have no choice or voice when it comes to their spiritual birth. "Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God –" (John 3:6-8; 5:25; 6:37; Rom. 8:30; Eph. 2:1; 2 Tim. 1:9).

Preservation or Eternal Security.

The comforting aspect of the doctrine of eternal salvation by grace is that ALL whom Christ died for shall be eternally saved without the loss of one. They shall never perish, and can never be separated from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. They are preserved by His blood and kept by His power (John 6:37-39; 10:27-30; Rom. 8:28-39; 1 Peter 1:1-5; Heb. 10:14).

Brief Comments About New Testament Church Practices

Musical Instruments.

Our worship service is patterned after the New Testament examples and authority and consists of congregational singing, prayer and preaching. Musical instruments are not used in the services since there is no New Testament command or example for them. We do not believe we should bring Old Testament practices of worship into the New Testament Church. We

believe in singing and making melody in our heart to the Lord (Ephesians 5:19; Col. 3:16).

Sunday School - Teaching.

We have no Sunday Schools for lack of New Testament authority. Sunday School is a recent invention, begun in the 18th century in England, and then only to teach reading, writing and arithmetic to underprivileged children. This does not mean that the Church does not believe in teaching children. The Bible instructs parents to teach their children at home, and the minister to teach them in the church assembly (Eph. 6:4; 2 Tim 2:1-2).

Tithing or Financial Support.

New Testament Churches do not teach "tithing" as a New Testament requirement. Tithing was an Old Testament law fulfilled in Christ. Some remind us that "tithing" was before the law. We answer, so was "animal sacrifices", but we do not bring them into the New Testament Church. We do believe in giving by laying aside upon the first day of the week as God has prospered, and as one purposes in his heart, cheerfully supporting the ministry of the church (1 Cor. 16:2; 2 Cor. 9:7; Acts 20:35).

Rejecting Sin - Living Godly Lives.

New Testament Churches teach that God's children should deny ungodliness and worldly lusts and live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world. We should live unto Him who died for us and called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. Some claim that our doctrine of Grace allows us to sin all we want. We answer, the knowledge of God's grace causes us to realize we sin more than we want (Titus 2:12; 2 Cor. 5:14-15; 1 Peter 2:9; Rom. 6:1-2).

Love Fuels and Motivates the New Testament Church

True Biblical love, as Jesus taught his disciples to love, drives the New Testament church toward obedience to his word. He said, "If ye love me, keep my commandments". Jesus taught us to love one another AS he loved us. Brotherly love is evidence that we have passed from death unto life. True brotherly love is not love in word only, but in deed and in truth. Many orders use contest, campaigns, gimmicks and inventions of men to promote their efforts. The true church is motivated by real Christian love.

In Conclusion

We believe the true Church with her "Primitive" design, "Baptist" practice and "Sound Doctrine" has an identity found

in the New Testament. We believe that God's children should worship Him in Spirit and in Truth, believing and observing the doctrine and commandments of Jesus Christ. This will bring a peace above all understanding, joy unspeakable and full of glory, to the child of God who walks in His ways, and glory and honor unto God by His Son Jesus Christ in the Church throughout all ages (John 4:23; Matt. 15:7-9; John 14:15-18; Philippians 4:7; 1 Peter 1:8; Eph. 3:21).

Truth will withstand the most intense scrutiny and examination. When separated from the traditions and ego-driven doctrines of men, the true Gospel of Christ shines clear. We encourage you to "search the scriptures," to see whether these things be so (Acts 17:11).