

WHAT IS A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH?

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Throughout the centuries, various groups and movements have declared themselves to be or in the process of becoming New Testament churches.

- The Anabaptist movement, which began in the Sixteenth Century, is the oldest surviving movement dedicated to the reproduction of the New Testament Church. This movement has as its heirs today, Mennonites, Amish, Hutterites, Mennonite Brethren, Brethren in Christ, and other lesser known groups.
- The Campbell-Stone Restoration Movement is the best known American movement that endeavors to reproduce the New Testament Church. This movement's heirs are the Churches of Christ, the Christian Churches, and the Disciples of Christ.
- The mid-20th Century Latter Rain Movement, which impacted the Charismatic Movement, saw itself as restoring the New Testament Church.
- Watchman Nee's movement attracted world-wide attention in the 20th Century.
- One also cannot fail to note how many Baptist Churches have on their marquee, *A New Testament Church*.

Although these and other similar movements have certain things in common (for instance, all are *believer's churches*, *i.e.* those that require personal faith as a pre-requisite for baptism), there are sharp differences between them. In this study, we list several characteristics of the church described in the New Testament that may or may not be found in contemporary churches. However, if a church is a New Testament church, all of these characteristics will be present.

ASSUMPTIONS

Any honest researcher must be aware of his underlying assumptions. This study is based on seven foundational assumptions:

1. Prior to the close of the First Century, the Holy Spirit led the Church from its Pentecostal infancy, through a Jerusalem evolutionary period, and then into an established church form.
2. The Holy Spirit caused to be recorded in Scripture those characteristics of the Church that are important for us to perpetuate.
3. *The Acts of the Apostles* is an accurate historical record of the Church's development and its established form.
4. The Epistles serve as a commentary on the historical record contained in *The Acts of the Apostles*.
5. The Church, influenced by various cultures, began to depart from New Testament patterns in the ensuing centuries.
6. By using a responsible scientific-historical hermeneutic, the abiding characteristics recorded in the *Acts* and the Epistles (as contrasted with cultural and situational, characteristics) can be discovered.
7. The patterns and models so discovered are the authority for church structure, church life, and doctrine.¹

¹ For a discussion of the appropriateness of unbiblical elements in the church (as contrasted with anti-biblical), see, James Garrett, *The Question of Unscriptural Practices in the New Testament Church* (<http://www.tulsachristianfellowship.com/doulos-press---papers.html>)

What is a “Church”?

Before discussing the question, “What is a New Testament Church,” we first must define the term, *church*. What is a church? The word, *church*², is the term used by English translators to render the Greek term, ἑκκλησία (*ekklesia*), literally meaning, *called out ones*.³

Origin and Etymology of the Term, ἑκκλησία

In the Greek city states, ἑκκλησία referred to those who had been called together by the herald. When a decision had to be made in the community, a herald was sent through the streets calling the citizens to a town meeting. Various sorts of individuals would be found in the streets of the city – travelers who just happened to be passing through, slaves, merchants who were in town to sell their wares, visitors who were in town for one reason or another, dwellers who were not citizens, etc. – but only the citizens were summoned to the meeting. The ἑκκλησία, therefore, were the citizens who had been called to assemble.⁴

Evolution of the Term and Its Usage in the New Testament Era

In time, this restricted use of the term passed and ἑκκλησία came to mean any assembly, especially an official one.

An illustration of this usage is seen in Acts 19.

Paul and his coworkers had experienced unusual success in their evangelistic endeavors. Their success was so great that the men who made the idols that were associated with the worship of the goddess, Artemis, realized that their trade was being threatened. These silversmiths stirred up a mob that rushed into the amphitheatre, many of them having no idea why they were there – they just followed the mob. The town clerk, realizing that they were in danger of bringing Roman censure on their city, dispersed the crowd. In his description of the scene, Luke displayed the common use of the term, ἑκκλησία.

Verse 32: *So then, some were shouting one thing and some another, for the assembly (ἑκκλησία) was in confusion and the majority did not know for what reason they had come together.*

Verse 39: *But if you want anything beyond this, it shall be settled in the lawful assembly (ἑκκλησία).*

Verse 41: *After saying this he dismissed the assembly (ἑκκλησία).*

² *Church* is the evolution of the Middle English term, *chirche*, which was brought into English through the German, *kirke*. The German term, *kirke*, was derived from the Greek, *kyriake* (the Lord’s possession) which was derived from the Greek term for Lord, κύριος, (*kyrios*).

³ ἐκ – out of; κάλειν to call

⁴ Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Volume III (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company) 1965 page 513; See also Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, Clarendon Press) 1992, page 509

In verses 30 & 33 Luke also used the term, δῆμος (*demos*) to describe the same crowd that he had described as an ἐκκλησία. δῆμος is another term that means simply, “an assembled crowd of people.”⁵

Acts 19:30 *And when Paul wanted to go into the assembly (δῆμος), the disciples would not let him.*

Acts 19:33 *Some of the crowd concluded it was Alexander, since the Jews had put him forward; and having motioned with his hand, Alexander was intending to make a defense to the assembly (δῆμος).*

Thus, Luke used the two terms, ἐκκλησία and δῆμος as interchangeable synonyms to describe the crowd that had gathered in the amphitheatre. This is a clear illustration of the meaning of the term, ἐκκλησία, as it was used at the time that the New Testament was written – *an assembled group of people*. Ἐκκλησία, which originally was a technical term referring to the town meeting of the Greek city states, had evolved into a general term denoting any assembly.

The Technical Use of the Term in reference to Christ’s Kingdom

Significantly, Our Lord chose this common term, ἐκκλησία, to describe those whom He had called into His Kingdom.⁶ When so used, the term once again becomes a technical term for a particular group of people. This, of course, reflects the origin of the term as it was used in the Greek city states – a meeting of those who are citizens – in this case, citizens of the Heavenly Kingdom.

Many who have written books and articles about the Church have emphasized the literal etymological meaning of the term, ἐκκλησία, *the called out ones*. This is appropriate, since the disciples of Christ to whom the term is applied are those whom God has called out of the world. Yet, to stop with the literal etymology, and not proceed to an examination of how the term had evolved, and the understanding attached to it in the New Testament era, is to miss an important aspect of the term’s meaning. Not only are these referenced individuals *called out*, but they are

⁵ Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, (Peabody, MA, Hendrickson Publishers) 2000, page 132

⁶ The Emergent Church guru, Rob Bell, in *Velvet Elvis*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan) 2005, page 162, states, “Throughout the Roman Empire the caesars called on people to worship them as divine saviors of humankind, and a city that acknowledged Caesar as Lord was called an *ekklesia*.” Commenting on the name by which Christian gatherings were called, he states, “And what did they call their gatherings? Ekklesias.” As authority for these statements, Bell cites Ethelbert Stauffer’s, *Christ and the Caesars*, but he does not indicate where in the book this information is to be found. In an effort to evaluate Bell’s citation, I scanned through the book more than once, looking for the reference. Failing to find any such reference by merely scanning the book, I then read the book page by page, paragraph by paragraph. I did not find any statement by Stauffer that the emperors applied the term, *ekklesia* to those cities that recognized them as being divine. I must conclude that Rob Bell’s explanation of the origin of the term is unfounded and motivated by some sort of agenda that is not clear to me. Even if it could be proven that *ekklesia* was a label that deistic emperors gave to cities that recognized them as deity, it does not remove the well-documented origin of the term, which was the descriptive term for the citizens of the Greek city-states. Neither does it negate the origin of the term for those called into the Kingdom of Our Lord. Christ choose the term, the early Christians did not do so.

called to something – an assembly. They are *the assembled*, and they are assembled because they have been called to be a part of *the assembly*.

The term, ἐκκλησία, is used in the New Testament with modifiers such as, *Churches of Christ*,⁷ *Church of God*,⁸ *Church of the Living God*,⁹ etc. but the term rendered in English as, *church*, always is a translation of the Greek term, ἐκκλησία, singular or plural.

- In some of the examples just cited (footnotes 7, 8, 9), the term refers to local congregations – *churches*.
- In the other footnote cited examples, the term is singular, (i.e. *the Church*), and refers to an entity that is larger than any local congregation, (i.e. the *Universal Church*).

The Universal Church

The first universal use of the term occurs in Jesus' response to Peter's declaration that Jesus is *the Christ, the Son of the Living God*.¹⁰ Following Peter's "good confession," Jesus replied, *I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church (ἐκκλησία); and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.*¹¹

In this instance, and elsewhere, the term is used to describe the eternal Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. Everyone in every generation who has been called into the Kingdom of God is a part of the *ekklesia* to which Jesus referred, i.e. The Universal Church.

Hebrews Chapter 12 presents a comprehensive picture of the Universal Church. In contrasting the experience of the Jews at the foot of Mount Sinai with the heavenly reality that belongs to the participants in the New Covenant, Hebrews 12:18-24 states,

For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them.

For they could not bear the command, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it will be stoned." And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, "I am full of fear and trembling."

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels in festal¹² assembly¹³, and church of the firstborn

⁷ Romans 16:1 Acts 20:28; 1 Co. 1:2; 10:32; 11:22; 15:9; 2 Co. 1:1; Gal. 1:13; 1 Tim. 3:56

⁸ Singular: Acts 20:28; I Corinthians 1:2; 10:32; 11:22; 15:9; II Corinthians 1:1 ; Galatians 1:13; I Timothy. 3:5; Plural: I Corinthians 11:16; ; I Thessalonians 2:14; II Thessalonians 1:4; 2:14

⁹ I Timothy 3:15

¹⁰ Matthew 16:16

¹¹ Matthew 16:18

¹² Some versions render the Greek term πανήγυρις (*panegurus*), as *the general assembly*. , The term refers to more than just an assembly, it is a *festal gathering*. The term pictures an assembly of individuals in a celebratory mood.

¹³ By the placing of commas, The King James Version, The New King James Version, and The New American Standard Version, cause the terms, *general assembly* and *church of the firstborn*, to refer to the same group. In my opinion, The New International Version, The Holman Christian Standard Bible, The Revised Standard Version, The New Living Translation, among others, adhere more closely to the Greek syntax of this verse. These versions present *general*

who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.

Note the entities named in this glorious statement:

1. Mount Zion and the City of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem
2. Myriads of angels in festal assembly
3. Church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven
4. God, the Judge of all
5. The spirits of the righteous made perfect
6. Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant
7. The sprinkled blood which speaks better than the blood of Abel

This list interweaves thoughts, truths, and ideas, but for our purposes, the focus is on two of the phrases:

3. The church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven
5. The spirits of the righteous made perfect.

These two phrases, (numbers 3 and 5) describe redeemed humans – both those who are still in the world and those who have died and are in the very presence of Christ¹⁴ – all whose names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life (see next section). These constitute the glorious company destined to spend eternity with God.

The church of the firstborn, is the ἐκκλησία that Christ built upon the rock. At the present time, this ἐκκλησία exists in two realms:

- local congregations all over the world
- members of the Church who have departed this life.

Those who have departed this life are biding their time with Christ,¹⁵ waiting for the moment in which He will return to the earth to catch up the portion of His Church that dwells upon the earth.¹⁶

Note the language of Hebrews 12:22.

- It is not, *you will come* (someday when you die, or someday when Jesus comes for His Church),
- Hebrews states, *you have come*.¹⁷

The condition of which the author speaks is a present reality for all who are a part of the Church.

assembly as a description of the myriads of angels, not a description of the church. The seven elements in the list are separated from one another in the Greek text by the conjunction, καί (*kai*). There is no conjunction between *angels* and *festal assembly*. However, there is a conjunction between *festal assembly* and *Church*. Therefore, *festal assembly* would be a description of the angels, not a description of the Church. For this reason, we have altered the quoted NAS text to read *angels in festal assembly*.

¹⁴ Luke 23:43; II Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:23

¹⁵ II Corinthians 5:1-9; Philippians 1:3;

¹⁶ I Thessalonians 4:13ff

¹⁷ Προσεληλύθατε (*proseleluthate*) - indicative perfect active 2nd person plural of προσέρχομαι

This Universal Church is more than a theoretical entity. It is reality in the here and now.

The understanding that the Universal Church consists of both the heavenly Church and the earth-bound Church is a proper basis for the doctrine of the *communion of the saints*. We empathetically identify with our fellow Christians who live on the other side of the globe, even though we cannot see them. In the same manner we empathetically identify with our brothers and sisters who have departed this life, even though we cannot see them. This is reminiscent of Peter's comment on our relationship with Christ,

*and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory.*¹⁸

The Universal Church consists of all who have been called out of darkness into His glorious light,¹⁹ whether they are in this life or in the next. All who are in the Church are a part of that holy band described as *the spirits of the righteous made perfect*. This perfection is the result of the sprinkled blood, mediated by Jesus who is the mediator of a new covenant.

Another descriptive title in Hebrews 12:23 reinforces the concept of a universal Church - *who are enrolled in heaven*. Two thoughts immediately spring to mind as we read this description:

1. The Lamb's Book of Life
2. Our citizenship is in heaven

Having one's name in the Book of Life is the primary concern of all who understand eternal matters. When the seventy returned to Jesus, following their evangelistic tour, they rejoiced because even the demons were subject to them in Jesus' name. Jesus told them that He had given them authority to tread upon all of the power of the enemy, but He then declared that they possessed something greater than the ability to exercise spiritual authority,

*Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven.*²⁰

Paul referred to this heavenly membership-roll in Philippians 4:3

Indeed, true companion, I ask you also to help these women who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel, together with Clement also and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

In *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, John mentioned this important book six times: Revelation 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27. The last two of these references demonstrate the importance of having one's name inscribed in heaven's roll-book.

Revelation 20:15 *if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*

Revelation 21:27 *and nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.*

Whether in this life or the next, there is no more important question to be considered than the one posed in Mary A. Kidder's well-known hymn poem,

¹⁸ I Peter 1:8

¹⁹ I Peter 2:9

²⁰ Luke 10:20

Is my name written there,
 On the page, white and fair?
 In the Book of Thy Kingdom,
 Is my name written there?²¹

Those who have their names inscribed in this all-important book are the ones whom God has called out of the world and into His Kingdom, the Divine Assembly, which we call, *Church*.

All who comprise God's Church are citizens of heaven, even though they may be living upon the earth. Paul referred to this reality in his Epistle to the Philippians,

*For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ;*²²

*Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel;*²³

The Greek word rendered, *conduct yourselves*, is πολιτεύεσθε (*politeuesthe*), which literally means, *fulfill your obligation as citizens*. The New Living Translation conveys well the sense of the Greek in this passage,

Above all, you must live as citizens of heaven, conducting yourselves in a manner worthy of the Good News about Christ.

Paul reminded the Ephesian, Gentile ἐκκλησία, that both Jews and Gentiles are citizens of heaven,

*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household,*²⁴

Thus, the Bible presents a Church that has two identities:

- A local assembly of believers;
- A spiritual assembly, consisting of everyone who has been called into that spiritual assembly and made righteous by the sprinkled blood of Christ. Some of these are physically alive among the nations of the earth; the rest have departed this life and dwell in the presence of Christ.

The first of these is the focus of this paper – a local assembly of believers. Christians living in this world have a responsibility for the configuration and the health of local assemblies. The spiritual assembly, and all that pertains to it, is out of our arena.

The Essential Presence of the Local Church

Sadly, some contemporary movements assume that a truly spiritual person will find his identity in the Universal Church – but will avoid being a committed member of a local church. “Jesus and me,” devoid of any attachment to a local church is being put forth as some sort of spiritual superiority. Such declarations may have popular appeal, but they are at odds with the biblical picture. If this non-attached view be true, then Paul's epistles make no sense, because they were written to local churches and give instructions for local church government and conduct.

²¹ Mrs. Mary A. Kidder, “Lord I Care Not for Riches,” *Great Songs of the Church Number Two* (Cincinnati, Standard Publishing Co.) 1937, page 142

²² Philippians 3:20

²³ Philippians 1:27

²⁴ Ephesians 2:19

We cannot close the discussion of the question, “what is a church,” without injecting an important caveat. Defining the term, ἐκκλησία, is not sufficient for determining the elements that must be present before a local group can be called a “church.” Some of the elements discussed in the following pages must be present for any group to be called “a church.” All of these elements must be present for a group of believers to be a New Testament Church.

CHARACTERISTIC ONE: **A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH ACKNOWLEDGES** **THE LORDSHIP OF JESUS CHRIST**

The most important characteristic of a New Testament Church is its insistence that Jesus Christ is the Lord of the Church. Every dimension of a local New Testament church is an expression of His Person. In the next few pages we will explore the evidence of this fact and the reasons why this is true.

Christ is the Lord of the Church because it is His Church

Following Peter’s good confession, Jesus declared,

...upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. (Matthew 16:18)

In this statement, Our Lord foretold four things about the Church:

1. He will be the builder
2. The Church will be His
3. He will build His Church upon the truth that He is the Christ, the Son of the Living God
4. The gates of Hades will not win a victory over Christ’s Church²⁵

Points 1 & 2 have special relevance for the topic before us.

The Greek syntax of Matthew 16:18 emphasizes **Christ’s ownership of the Church.**

The possessive pronoun μου (*mou*), is placed in an emphatic position in the Greek text, thus indicating that Christ said, *I will build MY Church.*²⁶ He created the Church and the Church belongs to Him.

As all of creation belongs to God because He is the creator, so the Church belongs to Christ because He is the one who brought it into existence.

²⁵ Κατισχύω (the term rendered as “prevail,” or “overpower” in most modern versions), when used with the genitive (αὐτῆς) means *win a victory over*. See Arndt & Gingrich, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Christian Literature*, (University of Chicago Press) 1957, page 425

²⁶ Alexander Balmain Bruce, *The Expositor’s Greek New Testament*, Volume I, “The Gospels” (Grand Rapids, Wm. E. Eerdmans Publishing) 1976, page 225. JWG comment: Normally, the phrase would be written, τὴν ἐκκλησίαν μου (the church of me). Matthew quoted Jesus, μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν (my the church). By placing the μου before τὴν ἐκκλησίαν, the emphasis is on the fact that it is **my** church.

After He brought the Church into existence, Christ did not give ownership of the Church to any created being.

Everyone who has oversight of a local church must realize that he is an under-shepherd who is taking care of someone else's sheep.²⁷

As a wise builder assembles the tools, the materials, and the skilled crew needed to undertake a construction project, so Christ spent more than three years preparing the building site, gathering the elements needed to build His Church, and training those who would be employed in the endeavor.

Christ chose and trained those who, under His guidance and oversight, would be His hands-on crew

Early in the second full-year of Jesus' ministry, just before He delivered the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus chose those who would be His primary human agents in building His Church. A harmony of the Gospel records of this event results in the following scenario.²⁸

After facing down his enemies by healing a man on the Sabbath, Jesus went to the shore of Galilee. He was at the height of popularity and from all directions huge crowds flocked to him.²⁹ Those in need of healing and deliverance pressed through the crowd, trying to touch him.

As the crowd continued to grow, Jesus walked away from the sea shore and ascended a short distance up a nearby mountain. He stopped, turned to the crowd below, and called certain ones to come to Him.³⁰ Jesus then turned around and ascended further up the mountain alone, leaving the chosen group on the plateau to which He had called them.

He spent the night in prayer. This all-night prayer-watch marked a major turning point in Jesus' ministry. The following morning He rejoined those whom he had left waiting on the plateau. From these men, Jesus chose twelve to become his close companions. For the next thirty months (more or less), these men would be with Him night and day. Everything that He experienced, they would experience. From the moment of their selection, Jesus' main activity was the "Training of the Twelve."³¹ In the last hours before his betrayal and crucifixion, Jesus reminded the eleven that He had chosen them and prepared them for the task that lay ahead.

No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of

²⁷ Acts 20:28; I Peter 5:1-4

²⁸ Matthew 12:15-21; Mark 3:7-19; Luke 6:12-16

²⁹ Mark 3:7-8; Matthew 12:15

³⁰ From comments in Acts 1, it would not be unreasonable to speculate that those whom he called to that plateau had been with him from the beginning. Matthias and Barsabas (Acts 1:15-23) probably were among them.

³¹ One of them would betray Him and become the instrument used by His enemies to initiate the series of events that led to His crucifixion. The rest would become "the Apostles." After His ascension, Matthias would be added to that circle, filling the position vacated by the traitor (Acts 1:24-26)

*the Father in My name He may give to you... and you will testify also, because you have been with Me from the beginning.*³²

The Master Builder was preparing His crew for the construction of His Church. The point of this narrative is that Christ sovereignly chose those who would be His chief human instruments for building His Church.

Christ's Sovereign Lordship is displayed in the manner in which He launched the inauguration of the Church

After many post-resurrection appearances, Our Lord met with His apostles to give them final instructions. They were not to undertake anything on their own. He told them to tarry in Jerusalem until they were immersed in the Holy Spirit – they were to tarry until they “received power.”

*Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," He said, "you heard of from Me; for John immersed with water, but you will be immersed with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."*³³

*...but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.*³⁴

Ten days after giving these instructions, Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit upon the apostles and the work of building the Church began.³⁵

*Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear.*³⁶

Christ is the one who poured out the Holy Spirit – He was taking the first step toward the building of His Church.

From Pentecost onward, the apostles were empowered by, informed by, and directed by the Holy Spirit. They were not independent contractors.

Paul emphasized the exclusive role of Christ in building His Church

The Corinthian Church came into existence through Paul's Holy Spirit empowered preaching.³⁷ After Paul left Corinth, itinerant teachers came into the church and achieved places of

³² John 15:15-16, 27

³³ Acts 1:4-5

³⁴ Acts 1:8

³⁵ The fact that the Holy Spirit fell 10 days after the ascension of Christ is ascertained by the fact that Scripture states that Jesus appeared to the disciples during a 40 day period following his resurrection. His resurrection occurred on the first day of the week following the Passover. In the Jewish calendar, Pentecost, was fifty days after that day. Thus, Jesus ascended 40 days after His resurrection and the Holy Spirit fell 50 days after His resurrection – 10 days passed between the ascension and Pentecost.

³⁶ Acts 2:33

³⁷ See Acts 18, I Corinthians Chapters 1 & 2

prominence. Divisions developed in the church when church members began aligning themselves with one or another of these teachers. It seems that each person chose the teacher whose style or doctrine he liked the best. Some of these teachers began to denigrate Paul, indicating that they, not he, were true apostles. Although some in the congregation did not elevate these new teachers, they did elevate the apostles Paul, Peter, and Apollos.

Paul's two letters to the Corinthian Church (as well as a third that has been lost) attacked this situation. The first three chapters of I Corinthians address the immediate situation. Note the flow of thought that moves through this section:

*Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?*³⁸

*For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.³⁹ For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not mere men? What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but **God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.***⁴⁰

*According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.*⁴¹

Even though Paul likened himself to a "wise master builder," he asserted that he and the other apostles were agents of Christ - they were Christ's construction crew, but Christ was the builder. Not only were they just a part of Christ's crew, but all of their labor came to naught unless Christ produced some result. Thus, Christ ultimately was the one who was doing the building.⁴²

Christ purchased the Church with His own blood

When Paul delivered his charge to the Ephesian elders, he emphasized the gravity of their responsibility. He did this by reminding them that the Ephesian Church for which they were responsible had been purchased by the blood of Christ.

*Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.*⁴³

³⁸ I Corinthians 1:12-13

³⁹ I Corinthians 2:2

⁴⁰ I Corinthians 3:4-7

⁴¹ I Corinthians 3:10-11 The foundation to which Paul referred was/is the foundation, the "rock" referred to in Matthew 16:18.

⁴² Even when they were hard at work, the true work was done by the Holy Spirit who labored through them (see ADDENDUM).

⁴³ Acts 20:28

The price that Christ paid for the Church was the greatest price ever paid for anything. No other being, no council, no denomination, nor any other entity can take possession of the Church without committing thievery – stealing from God.

The frequently heard description of a church as being, *brother xxxx's church*, might be disregarded as being no more than convenient terminology to identify a particular local church. However, such language usually indicates more than that. Sadly, for all practical purposes many “pastors” do own a kingdom – their local church. If it is *brother xxxx's church*, then it is not Christ's church. The church that Jesus built has only one owner – the one who paid for the living stones⁴⁴ with his blood, and built His Church upon “The Rock.”

In each locality, the Church exists as a local congregation of committed believers – committed to Christ and to one another.

New Testament Christians emphasized the Lordship of Christ by the terms they used to describe their relationship with Him.

The word normally used in the New Testament for the Master/servant relationship existing between God and the believer is *doulos*, meaning, "slave." This word is used 125 times in the New Testament and in most of those instances the term refers directly or indirectly to Christians.⁴⁵

The word, *despotes*, (one who own's slaves), is used for Jesus four times⁴⁶ and once for God the Father.⁴⁷ New Testament Christians considered themselves to be slaves, owned by God. Paul reminded the Corinthians, *You have been bought with a price, you are not your own.*⁴⁸ As slaves, the concern of New Testament Christians is the will of the Master.

CONCLUSION

Realizing the **absolute lordship** of Jesus, the New Testament Church seeks to be **absolutely obedient** to the will of Christ. In response to this truth, individual members seek to live holy lives that reflect the character and will of their Lord⁴⁹

In making decisions, New Testament church leadership does not ask, *What do the people want*, nor *What do we want*, nor, *What does culture expect*, nor, *What will work*, but the only question New Testament Church leadership asks, is *What is the will of God?* Leaders in New Testament Churches make decisions through the study of Scripture, through prayer, through prayerful dialogue, and sometimes in response to prophetic words. Although *sanctified judgment* has its place,⁵⁰ more than this is sought and assumed to be a reality in the decisions made by a body of prayerful elders. Along with the Jerusalem leaders, elders of New Testament churches describe their decisions, *it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...*⁵¹

⁴⁴ I Peter 2:5

⁴⁵ . Garrett, James W., *The DOULOS Principle*, (Tulsa, Oklahoma, Doulos Press, 1999)

⁴⁶ . II Timothy 2:21; II Peter 2:1; June 4; Revelation 6:10

⁴⁷ . Acts 4:24

⁴⁸ I Corinthians 6:19

⁴⁹ . Luke 17:7-10; Romans 1:1; Galatians 1:10; II Peter 1:1; Rev. 1:1

⁵⁰ . Philippians 2:25-26; I Thess. 3:1-2

⁵¹ . Acts 15:28

CHARACTERISTIC TWO: **A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH IS AN ORGANISM, NOT AN ORGANIZATION.**

In an *organization*, separate entities are brought together into some sort of order so that certain things can be accomplished. These separate entities often have no relationship beyond the organization or activity that brings them together.

An *organism*, on the other hand, is a living being, composed of interdependent organs; they are bound together and depend on one another for continued life.

Church life in the New Testament is called, *koinonia*, which usually is translated as *fellowship*. *Koinonia* is an assumed *sine qua non* in the New Testament Church. *Koinonia* may be illustrated by the relationship between the heart and the lungs. The lungs cannot live without the heart's pumping blood to the lungs. The heart, on the other hand, cannot live unless the lungs oxygenate the blood. Neither the heart nor the lungs can live without the other. This giving and receiving of life is *koinonia*. This is New Testament church life. I John 1:7 assures us, *If we walk in the light, as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship (koinonia), one with another.*

Paul described the local church as an organism.⁵²

Paul described the *koinonia* principle in Ephesians 4:15-16

...we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

The Greek term rendered, *joint*, is ἀφῆς (*aphes*) which literally means, *ligament*. Paul pictures a body in which each organ is dependent on the other for life. There are ligaments that cause the various parts to function in harmony. The result is a healthy growing body.

The *koinonia* principle is demonstrated in the exhortation of Hebrews 10:24-26.

and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near. For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,⁵³

The emphasis in this passage is avoiding willful sin. One of the things that aids us in avoiding such sin is the mutual encouragement/exhortation of one another. New Testament Christians are faithful in meeting together so that they can encourage one another – *koinonia*.

In Romans 12 and I Corinthians 12, Paul describes the Church as being a body of interdependent organs. He concludes his description in Romans with this exhortation, *Rejoice with those who rejoice; and weep with those who weep.*⁵⁴ “What happens to you, happens to me,” is the attitude among New Testament Christians. This is the stuff of which New Testament church life is made. It is a *shared life*.

⁵². I Cor. 12:12-27; Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 2:19

⁵³ Hebrews 10:24-26

⁵⁴. Romans 12:15

The Jerusalem Example

The Church in Jerusalem expressed *koinonia* by having all possessions in common (Acts 2:44-47). This is the only New Testament Church that had a *communal existence*. Their communal life style was the result of their situation. Thousands of people from other lands, in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost, became Christians in a matter of days. This large group had neither jobs nor housing in Jerusalem. So, the Jerusalem Christians sold their real estate, emptied their money boxes, etc., and provided a common treasury from which a daily stipend was provided. The Jerusalem Church had a unique situation and met it in a unique way. Even though other New Testament Churches did not have a communal life style, they still viewed the Christian life as a shared life; the strong and prosperous made their resources available to the weak and needy.

***Koinonia* is the fruit of love**

One of the earliest surviving documents of the Church, written in 96 A.D., describes heroic actions that express love-based *koinonia*.

*We know that many among ourselves have delivered themselves to bondage, that they might ransom others. Many have sold themselves to slavery, and receiving the price paid for themselves have fed others.*⁵⁵

The kind of love that would cause someone to sell himself into slavery so that he could obtain the freedom of another, or in order to obtain funds to feed hungry fellow Christians is true *koinonia*. Such love reminds us of the words of Jesus, *Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.*⁵⁶

CONCLUSION

This description of church life is in sharp contrast to what is experienced in many traditional churches. All too often church life consists of members' meeting their ritual obligations and then pursuing lives totally detached from their fellow believers. Independence and self-reliance can be either an admirable trait, or a negative trait, depending upon how it is manifested in the corporate setting.

A living covenantal relationship exists between believers in a New Testament Church.

⁵⁵. *The Epistle of St. Clement to the Corinthians*, paragraph 55, translated by J. B. Lightfoot. *The Apostolic Fathers*, Lightfoot, Part 1, Vol.II, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Mass. (reprint of 1889,1890 edition)

⁵⁶ John 15:13

CHARACTERISTIC THREE

A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH HAS A NEW TESTAMENT LEADERSHIP PATTERN.

Several distinctives define the New Testament view of church leadership.

New Testament Church leadership displays the *principle of plurality*

As we have stated in an earlier paper,

Teams rather than solo ministries dominate the New Testament record. There are exceptions, of course. Exceptions would include, among others, Philip (Acts 8), Peter's tour of Judaea (Acts 9:32ff), Apollos (Acts 18:27), and Paul's time in Athens and Corinth (Acts 17:15-18:4).⁵⁷

Even though there are exceptions for trans-local ministry, local church leadership always is described in the New Testament as plural; there are no exceptions. For that matter, the norm for both trans-local and local ministries in the New Testament is a ministry team.

- Initially, the Jerusalem Church was led by the apostles. As the church grew, elders were chosen (Acts 11:30) and the church was led by a council consisting of apostles and elders (Acts 15). In time, the apostles left, one by one, and the church was led by elders, with James, the half-brother of Jesus, being the only apostle remaining in Jerusalem.
- When the first Gentile church was birthed in Antioch, it initially was led by a leadership council consisting of five men who were prophets and teachers (Acts 13:1-3).

Thus, even in the embryonic state of the Jewish church in Jerusalem and the first Gentile church in Antioch, the church was led by some sort of a council, not by a solo leader, called *pastor* or *bishop*.

After the inaugural years of the Jerusalem church and the inaugural years of the church in Antioch, all churches were led by a council of *elders*. There is no New Testament example of a church's being led by a *pastor*.⁵⁸ Here are some pertinent passages:

Acts 14:23 *When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.*

Acts 20:17, 28 *From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.... "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (Old English – "bishops"), to shepherd (Old English – "to pastor") the church of God which He purchased with His own blood...".*

Philippians 1:1 *Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons:*

1 Timothy 5:17 *The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.*

⁵⁷. Garrett, James W. "Church Planting Transitions: From Team to Council," *New Testament Church Leadership* (Tulsa, Oklahoma, Doulos Press) 1996, 2000, pp.31-44

⁵⁸ *Ibid* for a full treatment of this subject.

Titus 1:5 *For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you,...*

1 Peter 5:1-2 *Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness...*

Note that in all of these passages, and others that could be noted, church leadership always is plural leadership. There is not even the slightest hint of a *pastor*. *Shepherding (pastoring)* is a duty assigned to a council of elders.

A New Testament Church has a non-professional view of ministry.

The professional view of ministry holds that certain ones are *ordained clergy* and these are the professionals. Usually, the professional is seminary-trained and licensed/ordained/certified by an institution. When a church has a professional view of ministry, certain functions can be performed only by the professionals (preaching, teaching, baptism, etc.), and any professional is qualified to perform the restricted functions. Therefore, professionals are interchangeable. If a professional clergyman leaves the church, another professional is brought in (often described as, “hired”) to function in his place. Professionals can be exchanged the same way that the spark plugs are changed in an automobile.

The New Testament has a different view of local church leadership.⁵⁹ Relationships are of primary importance, second only to correct doctrine and godly conduct. This is one of the ways in which a New Testament Church functions as an organism, not an organization. Leadership routinely emerges from within the local church, rather than through the transplanting of a professional minister. The New Testament church is an organism that does not get its leadership through organ transplants.

This does not mean that seminary training or any other training is disparaged in a New Testament Church. Education in certain subjects and training in certain functions can greatly enhance the effectiveness of most leaders. However, such education/training is not necessary for one to be an elder or any other leader in the church – nor does such education/training make one qualified to be an elder.

The concept of *clergy* and *laity* is foreign to a New Testament church

This is an application of the just discussed non-professional view of ministry. In one sense, all are clergy, since all believers are a part of a *Royal Priesthood*.⁶⁰ In another sense, all are laity, since there is no special *clergy class* of believers. This does not negate the validity of ordination, in which a person, at the direction of the Holy Spirit, is given a life-time responsibility for a particular work.⁶¹ Ordination implies God’s designating the ordinate as one whom He has equipped and called to a designated role in the Kingdom. They are individuals to whom God has given a special calling and which the church recognizes and receives. This responsibility becomes the focus of his life. However, such individuals do not become a *holy class*.

⁵⁹ In this section, we are speaking of local church leadership. Trans-local ministries are another topic and will be discussed in the next section.

⁶⁰ I Peter 2:5; Revelation 1:6

⁶¹ Acts 13:1-3; 14:23; Titus 1:5

New Testament elders make decisions by consensus, rather than by popular vote

New Testament elders assume that when men with submissive hearts approach God together in prayer, they will find unity of heart in their decisions.⁶² This is in contrast to voting, in which a majority wins and a minority loses. Although this may seem to be a minor point, it is a major departure from how organizations normally operate. By seeking consensus, and dialoguing and praying until that is achieved, the Mind of Christ is most likely to be discovered, rather than each man's voting his opinion, his point of view, or his conviction.⁶³

CONCLUSION

New Testament Churches, after being established by an apostolic team or an evangelist, will be led by a council of elders – who are responsible for overseeing and shepherding the congregation, i.e., the flock of God. Deacons (servants) will be chosen to function in designated ministry roles in the church.

CHARACTERISTIC FOUR NEW TESTAMENT CHURCHES RECOGNIZE TRANS-LOCAL MINISTRIES.

In addition to the local eldership, God raises up ministries that move from church to church. For convenience sake, we label these, *trans-local ministries*.⁶⁴

Ephesians 4:11 mentions three trans-local ministries: apostles, prophets, and evangelists. A number of examples of these ministries are found in *Acts* (Paul, Barnabas, Silas, Apollos, John Mark, Agabus, etc.). These ministries help the local church to understand God's purposes, they assist local church leadership in equipping the saints for ministry, they often are a key to resolving leadership issues, they have an important role in confronting false doctrine, and setting things in order.⁶⁵ Some trans-local ministries are called of God to plant churches and evangelize unevangelized regions.

The individual churches described in *Acts* and the epistles seemed to have related to one another through an apostle. It was the relationship each of them had with the apostle that gave them a functional relationship with one another. This partially is explained by the limited means of communication at that time and the itinerant nature of apostolic ministry. In his travels among the churches, Paul brought reports of the sister-churches and greetings from one church to another.

⁶² This is the model displayed in the Acts 15 Jerusalem council.

⁶³ See Garrett, "What should be done when a council of elders cannot come to a consensus...." *New Testament Church Leadership*, page 122

⁶⁴ For a rather full treatment of this topic, see James Garrett, *Translocal Ministry in the New Testament Church*, (doulospress.org) 2005

⁶⁵ . Garrett, James W. *New Testament Church Leadership*, page 2ff

The need for accountability among trans-local ministries

It is important for contemporary trans-local ministries to be accountable to a group of mature leaders. Many sad tales could be told of the tragic results of trans-local ministers who operated as autonomous lone rangers (sometimes resulting in great harm to the churches among which they had ministered, as well as tragedy to the ministers, themselves). Usually, these sad events could have been avoided or lessened if the minister had been in submission to an accountability group. Usually, an apostle, prophet, or evangelist is accountable to the elders who oversee the church which is his home base. In such an arrangement, the trans-local minister should keep his overseeing elders advised of what he is doing and where he is doing it. These elders also can be a source of counsel and advice when a trans-local minister is dealing with a difficult situation. It is not unusual for a trans-local minister to be accountable to the elders of the church which he is visiting – he comes as a servant to the local leadership.

Some trans-local ministers are accountable to a committee or counsel that has been assembled for the specific purpose of overseeing that particular ministry. If that is the case, it is important that the constituents of that council not be “yes men.”

The importance of creating trans-local relationships

Because New Testament Churches usually are non-denominational, it is important for them to have a trusting relationship with trans-local ministries. In order for a trusting relationship to exist between local church leadership, the congregation, and trans-local ministries, those ministries should be invited to come and minister in the local church in advance of need. Should problems arise in the church that the local elders cannot resolve, trusted trans-local ministers (especially those who have the callings of apostle and/or prophet) can be asked to come and help in resolving problems. If a relationship has not been built in advance, the trans-local minister is handicapped because trust has not been established in advance of his intervention.

CONCLUSION

God has called and equipped spiritually gifted and experienced men to serve beyond the borders of a single local church. These men are a gift to the Church from Christ Himself.

Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high, he led captive a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men." ...¹ And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;⁶⁶

A local church is wise to take advantage of these gifts that Christ has provided for His Church.

⁶⁶ Ephesians 4:8, 11-12

CHARACTERISTIC FIVE

A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH ACKNOWLEDGES AND EXPERIENCES UNSEEN SPIRITUAL REALITY

Peter, writing about the believers' faith in Christ, wrote,

...and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory,⁶⁷

The reality of Christ, who is unseen by human eyes today, is representative of many unseen realities which the New Testament Church accepts by faith, and in some instances, experiences.

The Holy Spirit, given by God to each believer,⁶⁸ is an acknowledged participant in the life of a New Testament Church

Next to the Lordship of Christ, this is the most distinctive characteristic of the New Testament Church. Here are some of the essential elements of the Holy Spirit's involvement in the Church:

- The Church was birthed through the immersion in the Holy Spirit.⁶⁹
- The reception of the Samaritans, the first non-Jews (half-breed Jews) received into the Church, was credentialed by their receiving the impartation of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁰
- The reception of the first Gentiles was credentialed by the immersion in the Holy Spirit.⁷¹
- The reception of the Holy Spirit is promised to all who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and are immersed in water.⁷²
- The Gift of the Holy Spirit is a guarantee of one's salvation.⁷³
- The Holy Spirit empowers and guides believers.⁷⁴
- Through the Holy Spirit, each believer is endowed with spiritual gifts to be used in ministry.⁷⁵
- The New Testament Church is a *Temple of the Holy Spirit*.⁷⁶
- Individual believers are a manifestation of the *Temple of the Holy Spirit*.⁷⁷
- Thus, the New Testament Church is the Body through which the Holy Spirit accomplishes the Will of God in the world, even as a man's physical body is the means whereby his human spirit accomplishes his human will in the world.

⁶⁷ I Peter 1:8

⁶⁸ Acts 2:38

⁶⁹ Acts 1:4-8; 2:1-4

⁷⁰ Acts 8:14-17

⁷¹ Acts 10:44-48; 11:15-18

⁷² Acts 2:38

⁷³ Ephesians 1:13-14

⁷⁴ Acts 1:8; I Corinthians 12-14; Romans 8

⁷⁵ Romans 12:3ff; I Corinthians 12 - 14

⁷⁶ I Corinthians 3:16-17; Ephesians 2:19-22

⁷⁷ I Corinthians 6:19

- The Holy Spirit was the active agent in producing the Scriptures.⁷⁸
- One important ministry of the Holy Spirit to the Church is prophecy. Prophecy was important under the Mosaic Covenant and prophecy is an important aspect of the life of the church under the New Covenant. The Hebrew and Greek terms translated, *prophecy*, mean *to speak forth*. Thus, prophecy is the speaking forth of something that the Holy Spirit has given to someone. Sometimes prophecy is predictive, but usually it is not. Paul wrote that the purpose of prophecy in the New Covenant is *edification, exhortation, and consolation*.⁷⁹ Prophecy primarily is for the edification (building up) of the Church.⁸⁰
- In our present generation, much attention has been given to *speaking in tongues*. Paul clearly endorsed speaking in tongues, but gave guidelines for this activity in the assembly. Three chapters of I Corinthians, Chapters, 12, 13, and 14, have this as their central topic. Even as he urged the Corinthians to desire manifestation of prophecy in their services, he instructed them to not forbid speaking in tongues, within the guidelines given.⁸¹

Miracles and providential events are an assumed reality in a New Testament Church

It is important that a distinction be made between miracles and providential acts. Miracles are events that cannot be explained by anything other than the intervention of God. Providential acts, on the other hand, are unusual natural phenomena which God uses to achieve his purposes.

Picture, for example, an automobile stalled at a railroad crossing in the path of an oncoming locomotive. The driver calls out, *God, help me!* Suddenly, a strong gust of wind blows the automobile through the crossing and the collision is avoided. That would be a providential act. On the other hand, if the driver of the car called out, *God help me*, and the locomotive suddenly took flight, flew over the automobile, came down on the other side and proceeded on its way as if nothing had happened, that would be a miracle.

In a providential act, an unbeliever could explain away the event as an unusual *coincidence*. In a miracle, no such explanation is possible. Of course, the person of faith sees the hand of God both in providence and miracle. Most of the interventions of God in our lives will be providential, rather than miraculous. Both providence and miracle are accepted as reality in the New Testament church.

⁷⁸. II Peter 2:19-21; II Timothy 3:16-17;

⁷⁹. I Corinthians 14:3

⁸⁰. I Corinthians 14:4-5

⁸¹. I Corinthians 12:10-11; 13:1, 8; all of Chapter 14 Note that in this section, Paul is *proscribing*, rather than *prescribing*.

New Testament Churches understand that there is an evil hierarchy of demonic forces, led by Satan, seeking to discourage and defeat the Church

*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.*⁸²

The warfare between these evil forces and the Church is relentless. Individual believers must resist these evil forces.

*Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world.*⁸³

In their attack, these forces use every means, including man's susceptibility to temptation.

*But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then, when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.*⁸⁴

Paul described the armor that God has given for believers as a protection against Satanic attack.

*Finally be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil... Therefore, take up the full armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the Gospel of Peace; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God. With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints.*⁸⁵

The New Testament Church experiences the ministry of angels

*But to which of the angels has He ever said, "Sit at My right hand, until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet"? Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?"*⁸⁶

The ministry of angels usually is experienced by the Church and by individual Christians without the recipients of the ministry's being aware of it. However, there are times when such contact with angels is conscious. There are several examples recorded in *Acts*.

⁸². Ephesians 6:12

⁸³. I Peter 5:8-9

⁸⁴. James 1:14-15

⁸⁵. Ephesians 6:10-11, 13-18

⁸⁶. Hebrews 1:13-14

- Angels spoke to the disciples at the ascension of Christ (1:12)
- An angel released the apostles from prison and led them forth and exhorted them to zealous ministry (5:19-20)
- An angel instructed Philip to leave Samaria and go to the desert road where he encountered the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26)
- An angel instructed Cornelius to send for Paul (10:3-7)
- An angel freed Peter from prison and led him forth (12:5-11)
- An angel struck Herod and he was eaten by worms and died (12:23)
- An angel encouraged Paul, during a storm at sea (27:23-24)

The Biblical teaching that heaven and hell are the known destinies of mankind is accepted by the New Testament Church

*And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment,*⁸⁷

Many Scriptures dealing with this topic could be cited. Here is a sampling:

*But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats;*⁸⁸

Then the King will say to those on His right, "Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

*Then He will also say to those on His left, "Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels;"*⁸⁹

*And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds.*⁹⁰

*And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*⁹¹

There are no biblical alternatives to heaven or hell as the destinies of all mankind.

CONCLUSION

The unseen spiritual dimension is as much of a part of the New Testament Church as is the physical existence of those things seen by all humanity.

⁸⁷ Hebrews 9:27

⁸⁸ Matthew 25:31-32

⁸⁹ Matthew 25:41

⁹⁰ Revelation 20:12

⁹¹ Revelation 20:15

CHARACTERISTIC SIX

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH IS A PRAYING CHURCH

It would not be far afield to say that a New Testament Church considers prayer to be like breathing - life cannot be experienced without it. Through prayer, things are changed and the Church hears from God.

Acts records the Church's consistent prayer life.

On every occasion of triumph or concern, the Church prayed.

- The Church was born in a prayer meeting.(Acts 1:14 - 2:4)
- The Church was continually devoted to prayer. (Acts 2:42)
- The Church prayed with rejoicing and intercession for boldness when Peter & John were released from prison (Acts 4:23ff)
- The apostles, Peter and John prayed for the reception of the Holy Spirit upon the first non-Jewish converts and the Gentiles acceptability to God was credentialed by God's bestowing the Holy Spirit upon the Gentile converts (Acts 8:15-17)
- Upon Peter's imprisonment, the Church began an uninterrupted prayer meeting until his release (Acts 12:5-12)
- It was the custom to pray when bidding farewell to traveling trans-local ministries (Acts 20:36; 21:5)
- The inception of new ministries always was accompanied by prayer.
- Prayer preceded the choosing and installation of the first *deacons* (Acts 6:1-6)
- Prayer preceded the launching of the first apostolic team (Acts 13:1ff)
- Prayer preceded the installation of the first elders in Gentile churches (Acts 14:23)
- The Apostles considered prayer and teaching to be their main priorities. (Acts 6:2-4)
- Prayer was the means whereby healing was ministered. (Acts 9:40; 28:8; see James 5:13ff)
- Daily prayer was the practice of apostolic teams. (Acts 10:9; 16:16; 16:25)

The Epistles provide abundant evidence that prayer was a vital part of New Testament Church life

The Epistles contain many exhortations to prayer. Here are three examples:

1 Thessalonians 5:17 *pray without ceasing;*

Philippians 4:6 *Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*

Ephesians 6:18 *With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints,*

CONCLUSION

If prayer is not a "way of life" in a local church, then that church is not a New Testament church.

CHARACTERISTIC SEVEN

NEW TESTAMENT CHURCHES PLACE A HIGH PRIORITY ON CORRECT DOCTRINE

Luke informs us that immediately after the birth of the Church, the community devoted itself to four things. The first thing on his list is *the teaching of the apostles*.

*They were continually devoting themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.*⁹²

From these inaugural days onward, teaching, or indoctrination, was and always has been a major responsibility of church leadership.

The Greek noun, διδάσκαλος (*didaskalos*), sometimes is rendered by the English term, *teaching*, and sometimes by the term, *doctrine*. The verb, διδάσκω (*didasko*), sometimes is rendered to *teach* and sometimes, *to indoctrinate*. Teaching is indoctrination – the impartation of doctrine.⁹³

When a teacher is fulfilling his role in the Body of Christ, he is functioning as God’s spokesman.⁹⁴ False doctrine is misrepresenting God. It is important that truth, not error or speculation, be taught in the Church. Teachers will have to answer to God for what they have taught. Therefore, James warned,

*Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.*⁹⁵

The New Testament is replete with exhortations to proclaim sound doctrine and to refute bad doctrine. This especially is true in those scriptures that are addressed to church leaders. Here are but a few:

- *For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward... holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.*⁹⁶
- *But as for you, speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine.*⁹⁷

⁹² A literal rendering of Acts 2:42

⁹³ The apostles’ doctrine consists of truths about God, God’s relationship with His creation, the Kingdom of God, God’s purposes, the unseen spiritual world, the relationship between God and mankind, and truths related to man’s salvation.

⁹⁴ The difference between prophets and teachers is seen in what they are imparting. Teachers are delivering known facts to their hearers. Prophets are delivering words that God has given to them – often things that they have not pondered and thought through. The manner in which preaching takes place in the contemporary local church, can be either teaching or prophetic in nature – or a blend of these. Evangelism, on the other hand, is proclamation and is intended for an audience beyond a body of believers.

⁹⁵ James 3:1

⁹⁶ Titus 1:7, 9

⁹⁷ Titus 2:1

- *in all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, with purity in doctrine, dignified, ...*⁹⁸
- *In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following.*⁹⁹
- *If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he is conceited and understands nothing; but he has a morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words, out of which arise envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions,*¹⁰⁰
- *Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching.... Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.*¹⁰¹
- *I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.*¹⁰²

In a similar vein, Paul gave a warning concerning those who teach false doctrines as a means of gathering a following and for personal gain.

- *who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach for the sake of sordid gain.*¹⁰³
- *I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.*¹⁰⁴
- *Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them.*

Paul declared that one mark of a church's maturity is its doctrinal stability.

*As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ,*¹⁰⁵

⁹⁸ Titus 2:7

⁹⁹ I Timothy 4:6

¹⁰⁰ I Timothy 6:3-4

¹⁰¹ I Timothy 4:13, 16

¹⁰² II Timothy 4:1-4

¹⁰³ Titus 1:11

¹⁰⁴ Acts 20:29-30

¹⁰⁵ Ephesians 4:14-15

Correct doctrine is that which Christ initially imparted to the apostles and then was explained and enlarged by the Holy Spirit

John Chapters 13 – 17 record intimate details of Christ’s final meeting with the apostles prior to His crucifixion. Chapter 13 describes the “Last Supper,” and Judas departure. Chapters 14 – 17 record Jesus’ conversation with the remaining eleven, concluding with His High Priestly Prayer. John’s record of this conversation contains important information concerning the apostles and their role in the building of Christ’s Church.

The statements in these chapters contain some truths that apply to all Christians. Statements that begin with, *he that* and *if a man*, are examples of truths that apply to all believers.

Other statements were made specifically to the apostles. In most cases, when the pronoun, *you*, is used, that indicates that the statement made applies to the apostles. However, there are some *you* statements that apply to all Christians. We know which *you* statements apply to all Christians when elsewhere in Scripture they are applied to all believers. An example is John 15:12.

This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.

I John 4:7-12, as well as other passages make clear that this commandment is a general truth for all believers, not just the apostles.

Clearly, most of the *you* statements in John Chapters 13-17 describe the special role that the apostles were going to have in the inauguration and building of the Church. Here are some of these statements.

- *But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.¹⁰⁶*
- *No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you.¹⁰⁷*
- *When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me, and you will testify also, because you have been with Me from the beginning.¹⁰⁸*
- *But these things I have spoken to you, so that when their hour comes, you may remember that I told you of them. These things I did not say to you at the beginning, because I was with you.¹⁰⁹*
- *I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come.¹¹⁰*

¹⁰⁶ John 14:26

¹⁰⁷ John 15:15-16

¹⁰⁸ John 15:26-27

¹⁰⁹ John 16:4

¹¹⁰ John 16:12-13

All of these statements relate to the apostles' role in declaring the truth about Christ and His Kingdom – the Church. The Holy Spirit would cause the apostles to remember the things that Christ said to them, things that Christ had acted out before them, and even how these related to the future. As already noted, for about 30 months He had been disclosing things to them. They often didn't get the point of what He said, but when the Holy Spirit came they would understand. They were the ones who would be responsible for passing on these truths which would be the doctrines of the Church.

The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, who would cause them to remember and to understand everything, would overcome this human deficiency. An example of this refreshed memory is recorded in John 2:19-22.

Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews therefore said, "It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?" But He was speaking of the temple of His body. When therefore He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this; and they believed the Scripture, and the word which Jesus had spoken.

In His High Priestly Prayer, recorded in John 17, Jesus continued to emphasize the apostles' role.

- Verses 1-5 record Jesus' prayer for Himself.
- Verses 6-19 record Jesus' prayer for the apostles.
- Verses 20-23 record Jesus' prayer for those who would believe through the witness of the apostles (fulfilling that of which he had spoken earlier).
- Verses 24-26, record the conclusion in which Jesus returned to praying for the apostles.

Thus, when the members of the brand-new Jerusalem Church devoted themselves to the apostles' doctrine, they were devoting themselves to the fulfillment of what Jesus had promised to the apostles.

John wrote that the spirit of truth could be distinguished from the spirit of error by whether or not the authority of the apostolic teaching was recognized.

We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.¹¹¹

Because of this unique role of the Twelve, and later of Paul, who received his doctrine from the glorified Christ,¹¹² the New Testament Church is faithful to proclaim only the doctrine passed on through the apostles.

Jude, making comment on this nature of settled doctrine, wrote,

*Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith **which was once for all** (τῆ ἅπαξ παραδοθείσῃ) **to the saints.** (Jude 1:3)¹¹³*

¹¹¹ I John 4:6

¹¹² Galatians Chapter One

¹¹³ The Greek terms, τῆ ἅπαξ παραδοθείσῃ (Jud 1:3 BGT), are unambiguous. The term, ἅπαξ means "once," or "once for all" (see II Corinthians 11:25; Hebrews 9:27; 10:2; I Peter 3:18; Jude 3, 5) unless it is preceded by qualifying terms. Examples of the term associated with preceding terms: Hebrews 12:26, ἔτι ἅπαξ. *once more* = for the last time; Philippians 4:16; I

The question has to be asked by contemporary Christians, *If the apostles doctrine is what is to be taught in the Church, and anything that disagrees with that doctrine is error, how can we who live two millennia after the death of the apostles know for certain that we are teaching what they taught?*

The answer is to be found in the apostolic writings – The Scriptures. Today, the Church is informed by the apostles through the Scriptures. Elsewhere we have written about the canon and how we know that the Scriptures are authentic,¹¹⁴ so we will not engage in that discussion here. Rather, we will make the assumption that the 27 books that we have in the Protestant Scriptures are apostolic doctrine. All of these documents were written by apostles or those associated with apostles. All Scriptures are of dual authorship – ultimately the Holy Spirit is the author, but the Spirit used human penmen as His amanuenses.

Furthermore, Jesus and the apostles recognized the 39 books of the Old Testament as authentic. Both Paul and Peter claimed Divine inspiration for the Old Testament Scriptures.¹¹⁵

The New Testament Church Considers Scripture To Be God's Objective Revelation Of Himself, His Will, And Spiritual Truth.

General truths concerning God can be discerned from observing the creation

- David wrote, *The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.*(Psalm 19:1)
- Paul echoed this sentiment in his letter to the Romans, *For the invisible things of him, from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead;* (Romans 1:20)

Even though the greatness and power of God can be seen in the creation, the Character of God and His Will cannot be deduced by such observation. This is why religions all over the world and through all the ages have had different concepts of God. The various pagan religions have worshipped God in many forms, because they saw evidence of Him but did not know Him. The Bible, therefore, is given as the objective revelation of God. Through Scripture we learn about God's Character - the character of love and righteousness - as well as His Divine Will.

CONCLUSION

Scripture is the only rule of faith and practice in a New Testament Church.

- What Scripture teaches clearly, must be taught and be obeyed.
- When Scripture is silent on a subject, or when it is not clear, freedom of opinion and interpretation must be allowed, as long as nothing is taught or practiced that contradicts Scripture.¹¹⁶

Responsible exegesis is required in understanding and teaching Scripture – especially the *principle of context*.

Thessalonians 2:18 ἄπαξ καὶ δις = *more than once, repeatedly* (see Bauer/Arndt & Gingrich, Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Christian Literature, Second Edition* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press) Second Edition 1958, page 80

¹¹⁴ James Garrett, *The New Testament Church and Heresy* (available at dulospres.org) rev.2004

¹¹⁵ II Timothy 3:16; II Peter 1:20-21

¹¹⁶ . Romans 15:14; II Timothy 3:16; II Peter 1:20-21

CHARACTERISTIC EIGHT

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH HAS AN UNDERSTANDING OF MISSION

Jesus said,

All authority is given unto me, in heaven and on earth, go ye therefore and make disciples¹¹⁷ of all nations, immersing them in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I command you, and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.¹¹⁸

Here is an excerpt from a paper we presented at the 1995 Conclave, *The New Testament Church's Response To The Great Commission*.¹¹⁹

To grasp what Our Lord commanded on this occasion, we first must undertake a brief word study of these verses.

The main verb of the phrase is μαθητεύω (*matheteuo*) "to disciple, to teach, to instruct." In the passage before us, the verb is second person plural, first aorist tense, imperative mood, active voice μαθητεύσατε (*matheteusate*).

The aorist tense in the imperative mood signifies summary action, transient or instantaneous... something to be undertaken at once. It has the sense of either a command or an appeal to, "do it!" The imperative mood is used when the will of one person seeks to impact the will of another. Obedience or compliance is desired. **The primary command of the commission, therefore, is to *disciple all the nations*.**

The other three verbs in this passage, all participles, speak to the "how." We must understand the significance of these participles if we are to interpret properly Matthew's account of the Great Commission. The two participles, βαπτίζοντες (*baptizontes*), "immersing," and διδάσκοντες (*didaskontes*), "teaching," are both nominative plural, present tense, active voice. The use of the present tense in participles indicates that the described action takes place simultaneously with the action described by the main verb. Thus, "discipling" (the primary command) would be defined in this passage as, "immersing people and teaching them to keep the commands of Christ." In a departure from Classical Greek, the Koine Greek sometimes used a participle as an imperative, although the use is rare. Because these two participles are tied to the main verb, which is in the imperative mood, they would be examples of the imperative use of participles.

The remaining participle in this passage is the opening word of verse 19. This participle, πορευθέντες (*poreuthentes*), is the nominative plural, masculine, aorist participle of πορεύομαι (*poreuomai*), meaning, "to go." The aorist tense in a participle indicates that the action described occurs prior to the action of the main verb. So, the "going" precedes the "discipling."

¹¹⁷ μαθητεύσατε verb imperative aorist active 2nd person plural from μαθητεύω, a deponent verb meaning "to become a disciple."

¹¹⁸ Matthew 28:18 - 20

¹¹⁹ Available at doulopress.org

Of special importance to the topic of this study is the question of what Matthew intended to convey by the use of this participle (*poreuthentes*). Participles have varied uses in Koine Greek. There are several ways that this participle can be understood. The three most obvious are:

1. As a simple participle, *poreuthentes* would be translated, "going," or, "as you go," meaning that as one moves about in the natural intercourse of life, he should be discipling those about him, by immersing them and teaching them to observe the commandments of Christ. This understanding of the participle would imply that if every Christian did this in his own place of residence, then the nations would be discipled.
2. If this participle is translated as a conditional participle, it would be translated, "if you go," or "when you go." The idea being, "Should you go out among the nations, disciple them." This rendering of the participle says nothing about discipling in the routine intercourse of life, nor about a deliberate going forth for the purpose of discipling.
3. The third possibility would be that this participle, like the two other participles in this passage (*immersing* and *teaching*), is imperative. If the participle is so used here, it would be translated, "Go." As an imperative, it would be either a command or an appeal to go to the nations of the world and make disciples of them. This is the manner in which most English versions have rendered this passage.

Thus, verse 19 can be interpreted in two ways:

- as a command to go out for the explicit purpose of discipling nations;
- as a command to be involved in discipling in a "bloom where you are planted" sense - If one stays at home, he should be discipling; if he travels on business or holiday, he should be discipling.

Both of these models are seen in Luke's account of the New Testament Church. Paul and Barnabas fit the first model (Acts 13). Those scattered abroad through the persecution of Saul fit the second model (Acts 8:1-4, etc.).

CONCLUSION

The mission of the Church is to make disciples of all races, nations, and cultures. This is to be done by evangelizing, immersing converts into Christ, and then, *teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I command you.*

CHARACTERISTIC NINE

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH ACCEPTS THE NEW TESTAMENT PATTERN OF SALVATION.

The normal "pattern of salvation" from Pentecost onward presents this sequence:¹²⁰

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A person hears the Gospel 2. He believes 3. He repents 4. He confesses faith in Christ | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. He is immersed in water 6. He receives the Holy Spirit 7. He remains faithful unto death. |
|--|--|

This is the normal pattern. We must follow it, but God is free to violate this pattern in any way that He sees fit.¹²¹

It is foolish to argue at what point a person's sins are removed (at point 1., point 2., point 3., etc.). This is God's business. Our responsibility is to adhere to the pattern displayed in the New Testament.

Thus, the New Testament Church is a *believers church*. Immersion always follows a profession of faith.

One cannot be saved until he is old enough to believe. For that matter, it is generally held that one does not need to be saved until he is old enough to believe - the time that he reaches what is known as *the age of accountability*. That age will vary from person to person.

1. When Philip presented the Gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch the eunuch asked Philip if there were any reason why Philip could not immerse him. Philip answered, *If you believe with all of your heart, you may*. The eunuch replied, *I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God*. Philip immediately immersed him.¹²²
2. Every example of immersion in Acts is preceded by proclamation and acceptance of the Gospel.

Because the Greek term, βαπτίζω, has been anglicized, other practices have been substituted for immersion.

The Greek term, *baptidzo* (βαπτίζω), means, *to immerse*. As early as Tyndale's New Testament, translated in 1534, it had become the custom to anglicize some New Testament terms. By doing so, controversy was avoided with regard to Church of England established practices. *Baptidzo* is one of the the most obvious examples of this procedure.

¹²⁰. Mark 16:15-16; Romans 10:8-15; Acts 2:36-39; 8:35-38; 22:16; Rev. 2:10

¹²¹. The episode reported in Acts 10, for example, did not follow this sequential pattern

¹²². Acts 8:27-39 Although some manuscripts do not contain this verse, it can be shown that the tradition of the Ethiopian's confession of Christ was current as early as the latter years of the Second Century. Irenaeus refers to it in *Against Heresies*, III: XII: 8. See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (United Bible Societies) 1971, page 360

Immersion was the practice of the New Testament Church. Immersion in water is an act that portrays the death of the old man and the resurrection or birth of a new man.¹²³ Because of the symbolism and the significance of the act of immersion, this is one of the most important moments in the life of the new believer.

Most evangelicals have relegated immersion to a place of minor importance. Some even have made immersion optional.¹²⁴ For these, the “sinner’s prayer” (a practice without biblical warrant) has become the terminal act of conversion, rather than immersion. These groups usually make immersion optional because they have a fear of something being seen as a “meritorious work.”

Other groups have elevated immersion to an improper place of importance – making it a sacrament. Those who hold this view, if asked if they are saved, would point to their immersion, as if that answered all of the questions. As noted in the first paragraph of this section, although immersion is important, it is not the whole story.

CONCLUSION

A New Testament Church follows the conversion pattern displayed in Acts, i.e., hearing, believing, repenting, confession of faith, immersion, and reception of the Holy Spirit.

CHARACTERISTIC TEN

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH LOOKS FORWARD TO THE RETURN OF CHRIST AND THE RESURRECTION FROM THE DEAD.

All Christians possess hope. That hope is not related to one’s situation in this life, but in the events that will occur when Christ comes for His Church and the events that will follow.

Hope is not a wish

In contemporary English, we use “hope” and “wish” as synonyms. The Greek language makes a distinction. There are other Greek words for wish or desire.¹²⁵

The Greek noun, ἐλπίς (*elpis*) means *an anticipation, an expectation*. It is neither a wish nor a desire. The term refers to an expectation that gives no thought to the possibility of failure. This hope does not have a 90/10, or a 60/40, or a 50/50 chance of happening. There is 100% certainty and expectation of seeing hope’s becoming a reality.

The Greek verb, ἐλπίζω (*elpidzo*) means *to anticipate, to expect*. The same certainty is attached to the verb as is attached to the noun, ἐλπίς.

¹²³. Romans 6:3-11; Acts 2:38; Galatians 3:27; I Peter 3:21

¹²⁴ Two of the most popular and widely used tracts, *The Four Spiritual Laws*, and the more Charismatic tract, popularly known as *The Gusty Tract*, make no mention of immersion. In both of them, the convert is told to pray for Christ to enter his life, etc., and after that the tracts focus on Christian growth. Both of these tracts, as is true of many others, substitute an evangelical paradigm for the biblical one.

¹²⁵ The term used most frequently in the New Testament for *wish, or desire*, is θέλω, which occurs 209 times in the New Testament.

These two terms occur in 79 verses in the New Testament.

1. 26 of these verses refer to mundane expressions, such as, “I hope to visit you,” or “I hope to send Timothy to you.” Expectations of a routine nature.
2. 53 of the verses, however, refer to the unique hope that belongs to Christians.
3. Of these 53 verses, less than half dozen refer to things that relate to this life. Almost all of them refer to the end of the age and the blessed existence that will follow.

Every New Testament Christian cherishes the hope of the return of Our Lord. Church life reflects this hope.

*so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him.*¹²⁶

Not only will Our Lord return, but at His return there will be a wonderful gathering together and gathering up of all believers, both those still alive and those who have departed this life.

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.

*Therefore comfort one another with these words.*¹²⁷

The resurrection of the dead cannot be explained. It cannot be deduced logically. For that reason, Paul called it a *μυστήριον* (*musterion*).¹²⁸ In most English versions this term is rendered by the English term, *mystery*. The English term does not convey the meaning of the Greek and how the term is used in the New Testament. *Musterion* refers to something that God has revealed and that there is no way that it could be known if God had not revealed it.

The Corinthian Christians knew that Christ had risen from the dead, but from that fact they were not able to deduce that Christians would be resurrected. The bodily resurrection of humans seemed impossible, since the interred body decayed and the elements did not remain together in any fashion that would allow reassembly. Thus, Paul wrote that he was passing on to them something that neither he nor they could have known, without revelation – a *musterion*.

Behold, I tell you a mystery (musterion);

we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

¹²⁶ Hebrews 9:28

¹²⁷ I Thessalonians 4:13-18

¹²⁸ I Corinthians 15:51

For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.

But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "death is swallowed up in victory.

"O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.¹²⁹

CONCLUSION

A church that is not yearning for the return of the Lord is not a New Testament Church.

CHARACTERISTIC ELEVEN THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH ASSEMBLES ON SUNDAY TO PARTICIPATE IN THE LORD'S SUPPER, THE READING OF SCRIPTURE, TO PRAY, AND TO EXPERIENCE KOINONIA.

The New Testament contains only glimpses of the Sunday meeting of the New Testament Church. However, when all of these pieces are patched together, a consistent picture emerges. Acts 2:42, although not describing a Sunday service, lists four things to which the first Christians in Jerusalem were devoted, as a body.

A literal rendering of Acts 2:42 reads,

*And they were continually devoting themselves to **the** teaching of **the** apostles and to **the** fellowship, to **the** breaking of **the** bread and to **the** prayers.*

The use of the definite article with each of the four elements that were the object of devotion indicates that each of these terms refers to very specific items.

- Thus, *the teaching of the apostles* refers to a specific body of instruction imparted by a particular set of apostles. Obviously the expression refers to the activity of the Twelve. They were living up to their role of New Covenant scribes (see Characteristic Seven earlier in this paper for a discussion of the role of the apostles in imparting doctrine).
- *And to the fellowship*, as stated already, must refer to something definite, because of the definite article. It could not mean that these Jerusalem believers were devoted to the experience of fellowship, or just to fellowship in general. For one thing, the expression certainly conveys a commitment to the local body of believers, the community of the saints.

Interestingly, Paul uses the term, *koinonia*, (the term translated, "fellowship," in Acts 2:42) to refer to the collection and distribution of finances (Romans 15:26; II Corinthians 8:4; 9:13; Philippians 1:3,5;¹³⁰ Hebrews 13:16)

¹²⁹ I Corinthians 15:51-58

Certainly, being devoted to the fellowship means more than the weekly presentation of tithes and offerings, but it is one means of sharing life, being devoted to the fellowship.

- *The breaking of the bread* again refers to more than sharing a meal. Without the article, "to break bread," is an euphemism for eating a meal (cf. Verse 46). However, a definite event is signified by *the breaking* and a definite bread is signified by *the bread*. This expression became an euphemism for the Lord's Supper.

1 Corinthians 10:16 *Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?*

It should be noted that the early post-biblical church considered some of the passages where the definite article was missing also to refer to the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper also is another expression of *koinonia*: ...*the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing [koinonia] in the blood of Christ? ... the bread which we break a sharing [koinonia] in the body of Christ?* This is why the Lord's Supper also is called, *communion*.

- *And to the prayers*, refers to definite prayers. This does not refer to one who is "devoted to prayer," as is mentioned in Acts 1:14; 6:4; etc. The definite article infers that there either were set times of prayer, which would be consistent with those who were of Jewish background (Acts 3:1 *Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer*), or that there were prescribed prayers, similar to the lectionary of the Jewish synagogue.

In all probability, the expression, *the prayers*, refers to the prayers that were offered in the corporate gathering of the Church. These inaugural believers were faithful to be present when the church met for prayer.

These four elements, described in Acts 2:42, constituted the activity of the gathered Church:

1. The teaching of the apostles
2. The sense of community, including the reception of an offering for the community
3. The Lord's Supper
4. The Prayers

As stated above, an examination of post-biblical record confirms that these four elements continued to be the core elements in the Church's regularly scheduled meetings.

To the educated Greeks and Romans of the First and Second Centuries, Christian theology seemed to be the utmost nonsense. The moral sobriety and devotional piety of Christians made them appear unconventional and even politically dangerous. A number of Christian apologists wrote about the beliefs and practices of the early Church, in an effort to explain Christianity to the surrounding Gentile community. Their descriptions of the Sunday meeting are consistent

¹³⁰ As Lightfoot points out, the correct rendering of the Greek expression in Philippians 1:5 is not, "in the Gospel," but rather, "toward the Gospel" (Greek: εἰς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον *eis to euangelion*) Thus, it is apparent that the *koinonia* referred to in this verse was the money they had collected and sent to Paul so he could give himself fully to the preaching of the Gospel (cf. Philippians 4:15-16). Lightfoot, J.B., *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (Hendrickson Publishers, third printing 1995 [original 1868]) page 83

with one another. One of the most prolific apologists was Justin Martyr. Justin was a Greek philosopher who became a dedicated Christian and, wearing the philosopher's garb, he opened the first Christian school in Rome. He was beheaded because of his refusal to worship the Emperor. His defense of Christianity was very rational. Justin composed his writings between 120 and 150 AD. Here is a sample of his description of the Roman Christian's Sunday meeting.

Section 67 And on the day called Sunday [he uses the Roman name for the first day of the week] there is a meeting in one place of those who live in cities or the country, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. When the reader has finished, the president [the presiding elder]¹³¹ in a discourse urges and invites [us] to the imitation of these noble things. Then we all stand up together and offer prayers. And, as said before, when we have finished the prayer, bread is brought, and wine and water, and the president similarly sends up prayers and thanksgivings to the best of his ability, and the congregation assents, saying the Amen; the distribution, and reception of the consecrated [elements] by each one, takes place and they are sent to the absent by the deacons. Those who prosper, and who so wish, contribute, each one as much as he chooses to. What is collected is deposited with the president, and he takes care of orphans and widows, and those who are in want on account of sickness or any other cause, and those who are in bonds, and the strangers who are sojourners among [us], and, briefly, he is the protector of all those in need. We all hold this common gathering on Sunday, since it is the first day, on which God transforming darkness and matter made the universe, and Jesus Christ our Saviour rose from the dead on the same day. For they crucified him on the day before Saturday, and on the day after Saturday, he appeared to his apostles and disciples and taught them these things which I have passed on to you also for your serious consideration.¹³²

What about Paul's instructions to the Corinthians, concerning prophecy and prayers prayed in tongues in the public meeting?

With the exception of Paul's instructions in I Corinthians 12-14, there is no clear record in the New Testament or in any early post-biblical writings of a Sunday meeting resembling what Paul describes as taking place in Corinth. Early Christian writers do describe the presence of prophecy and tongues as being present among the believers, but not as a part of the Sunday service. Notable examples are Iraenus (185 AD), Tertullian (200 AD), and Novatian (257 AD).¹³³

A telling example is that of the Montanists. Around 200 AD, the Montanists became concerned that the church had become too structured and was not giving enough emphasis to the Holy Spirit. The African Christian lawyer, Tertullian, became a devoted Montanist. In one of his writings, Tertullian described a Montanist Sunday service. He said that there was a woman in their church who saw visions, received prophecies, etc., during the

¹³¹ Greek: προεστῶς - a derivative of προϊστημι, which conveys the idea of "standing before," or "leading."

¹³² *Readings in Christian Thought*, Hugh T. Kerr, Editor (Abingdon, Nashville)1978 pages 25-26

¹³³ See James Garrett, *The Role of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament Church* (http://www.tulsachristianfellowship.com/uploads/2/3/5/1/23513522/the_role_of_the_hs_in_new_testament_church.pdf)

Sunday meeting. However, she did not come forward and give these during the meeting. After the meeting had come to a close, she met with the elders and told them about the visions and “words” that God had given her during the meeting.¹³⁴ So, even in a movement that emphasized the Holy Spirit, a service similar to that described in I Corinthians 12-14 did not take place.

Since Paul’s instructions to the Corinthians concerned how to have order in a Sunday meeting when such phenomena did take place, we must conclude that Paul was not prescribing these as necessary elements in the service, but how to experience them in an orderly fashion, if they did occur – proscriptive rather than prescriptive.

Even if these charismatic elements do take place in the Sunday meeting, they must not replace the teaching of the word, prayer, and the Lord’s Supper – elements that Paul also addressed in his First Epistle to the Corinthians.¹³⁵

CONCLUSION

A New Testament Church will assemble on the first day of each week to hear the exposition of Scripture, to partake of the Lord’s Supper, and to pray. Other elements, such as singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, may be added to these essential components of the meeting, but they must not replace them.¹³⁶

THESE ELEVEN CHARACTERISTICS WILL BE FOUND IN EVERY CHURCH THAT IS A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH. OTHER CHURCHES MAY POSSESS SOME OF THESE TRAITS BUT ALL OF THEM WILL BE PRESENT IN A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH.

¹³⁴ See, *Antenicean Fathers* Volume III Latin Christianity – It’s Founder Tertullian “A treatise on the Soul” Chapter 9 Page 336-337 (The Master Christian Library, Albany, OR, AGES Software, 1997)

¹³⁵ For example, I Corinthians 11:2, 17-34

¹³⁶ For a full discussion of the content of the early church’s Sunday gathering, see: James Garrett, *The Meeting* (http://www.tulsachristianfellowship.com/uploads/2/3/5/1/23513522/the_meeting.pdf)