

WHY THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH?

James W. Garrett

As we survey the landscape of 21st Century Christianity, the view before us is filled with many kinds of churches: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Episcopal, Evangelical, Methodist, Presbyterian, many different kinds of Baptist, Charismatic, Pentecostal... the list could go on and on and on.

With so many options before us, why should anyone be concerned about developing a “New Testament Church”? Why not pick one of the existing brands and be satisfied with that?

This short paper will address that question, and in essence, this is a brief journal of my own personal quest. Let me state clearly, that I do not pass judgment on those who have considered the same evidence that I have considered and have reached a different conclusion than that which I have embraced.

The two oldest existing churches are the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Churches. Both of these have an unbroken history, going back to New Testament times. Both of them grew from the same stem. The Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church were a single church until the East/West schism of 1054. From that time onward, they have been two separate churches, with their separate priests, structure, doctrine, and practices.

Why not pick one of these two as our model and become a part of one of these two ancient churches? Both of them claim to be the original Church. Of course, if we were to pick one of them, we would have to consider their separate claims and decide which one of the two, truly is the original Church.

Roman Catholicism looks to two things as authority: Scripture and Tradition. The Roman Catholic website, beginningcatholic.com, states,

“Remember that Catholics view the Bible as one of **two** (emphasis in the original) definitive witnesses to divine Revelation. Christ taught many other things to the Apostles that are not recorded in Scripture; we call this *Catholic Tradition*, literally meaning “that which is handed on”. Tradition is the full, living faith of the Apostles as received from Christ.”¹

In Roman Catholicism, tradition guides the understanding of Scripture. I recently heard one former Assembly of God pastor, who had converted to Roman Catholicism, state that one thing he appreciated about his Catholic faith was the fact that he did not have to wrestle with the interpretation of Scripture or theological issues – the church told him the meaning of any passage of Scripture and defined theological truth.

Eastern Orthodox Churches look to Scripture and the seven Ecumenical Councils (held between the 4th and 8th Centuries) as being of primary authority. An Orthodox website states,

“All Orthodox creedal formulas, liturgical texts, and doctrinal statements affirm the claim that the Orthodox Church has preserved the original apostolic faith, which was also expressed in the common Christian tradition of the first centuries. The Orthodox Church recognizes as ecumenical the seven councils of Nicaea I (325), Constantinople I

¹ *Church Authority in Scripture*, beginningCatholic.com

(381), Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451), Constantinople II (553), Constantinople III (681), and Nicaea II (787) but considers that the decrees of several other later councils also reflect the same original faith (e.g., the councils of Constantinople that endorsed the theology of St. Gregory Palamas in the 14th century). Finally, it recognizes itself as the bearer of an uninterrupted living tradition of true Christianity that is expressed in its worship, in the lives of the saints, and in the faith of the whole people of God.”²

These councils convened when there was a rising theological idea that challenged the Orthodox faith. Eastern Orthodox Churches believe that the Holy Spirit has mediated and imparted the truths affirmed by these councils and preserved these truths through the development of traditions. Thus, for doctrine, practice, and church structure, Eastern Orthodox look to the councils, as well as to Scripture, as valid authority in these essential matters. There also is a degree of mysticism in the Eastern Orthodox view of truth.

“What is particularly characteristic of this attitude toward the faith is the absence of any great concern for establishing external criteria of truth [which is] a concern that has dominated Western Christian thought since the Middle Ages. Truth appears as a living experience accessible in the communion of the church and of which the Scriptures, the councils, and theology are the normal expressions. What is particularly characteristic of this attitude toward the faith is the absence of any great concern for establishing external criteria of truth a concern that has dominated Western Christian thought since the Middle Ages. Truth appears as a living experience accessible in the communion of the church and of which the Scriptures, the councils, and theology are the normal expressions.”³

What about one of the Protestant churches? When Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant movement, was excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church, the excommunication came about because Luther was advocating doctrines that were at odds with Roman Catholic doctrine. Luther was labeled a heretic and would have been declared an outlaw, imprisoned, and probably executed, had it not been for Luther's powerful sovereign, Elector Friedrich the Wise of Saxon. Friedrich demanded that Luther not be outlawed and imprisoned without a hearing. The result was Luther's being invited to the Imperial Diet (assembly) of the Holy Roman Empire, to be held at Worms, Germany, in 1521.

Both the Roman Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, wanted Luther to recant his teachings. The German princes who supported Luther, had political reasons supporting Luther. They hoped that through the forthcoming events the political power of Rome over Germany would be weakened.

Luther had to appear before the Emperor twice. Luther's books were placed on a table. He then was asked if they were his works and whether he wanted to recant any of the statements that he had made in his writings. Realizing the gravity of the situation, Luther requested time to think over his reply. The next day he answered with the well-known speech:

"Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason - I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other - my conscience is captive to the

² orthodoxinfo.com/general/doctrine1.aspx

³ *ibid*

Word of God. I cannot, and I will not recant anything; for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen”⁴

Luther had launched the Protestant Reformation.

For Luther, the primary question was one of authority. Although current English uses the term, *Protestant*, as a negative term, meaning “to be against something,” the origin of the term is just the opposite. The term is a combination of two Latin terms, *pro*, which means “for”, and *stare*, meaning “to stand.” Luther was standing for the authority of Scripture. For him, the authority of Scripture trumped the authority of the Pope, traditions, and councils. Thus, Protestantism began with the view that Scripture is the sole authority for the Church (*sola scriptura*).

Although Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy consign Scripture to a place under the authority of tradition and the proclamations of the councils, all three major representations of Christianity (Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant) view the authority of Scripture as being primary.⁵ They consider the New Testament Scriptures to be primary authority for the Church because of the acknowledged apostolic authorship of these documents.

From Scripture, we know that Jesus said, “I will build my Church.”⁶ On Pentecost, the building of that church began. The Book of Acts and the Epistles describe the efforts put forth in the building of the church. These documents also record the doctrines, practices, and governmental structure imparted by Christ through the apostles.

For me (since this is my personal narrative), Scripture is the authority by which I must test all doctrine, practices, and church structure.

Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodox fail that test in that both have introduced doctrines that, in my opinion, are contrary to Scripture. As an example, I do not find in Scripture the role that both the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Churches have given to Mary. Although they differ somewhat in their explanations, both believe that Mary and other venerated saints prayerfully intercede for us. I search in vain in Scripture to find any authority for this doctrine.⁷

⁴ The oft-quoted ending to Luther’s speech, “Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me,” in the view of most scholars was not how Luther ended his speech. The earliest printed version of Luther’s address contained these words, but the speech was not recorded on the spot. It is possible that they are genuine, but most Lutheran scholars believe that in all probability they were not in the original speech.

⁵ Exceptions to this statement would be those of liberal theological stance. Theological liberal theologians have a variety of views on authority.

⁶ Matthew 16:18

⁷ The closest I can come to finding such a biblical basis for this doctrine is in Hebrews 12:1, in which the believers in this life are described as being surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. This verse refers to the heroes of the faith, described in Hebrews 11, the preceding chapter. Even if this verse refers to the departed as being witnesses to our struggles (a point to be argued), it does not indicate that they have any role in interceding for us. Romans 8:26-27 speaks of the Holy Spirit’s role in intercession for us; Romans 8:34 and Hebrews 7:25 state that Christ intercedes for us. I Timothy 2:5 states that there is but one mediator between God and man and that is the man Jesus Christ.

Other Marian doctrines proclaimed by the churches also have no Biblical basis.

- Both Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox teach the perpetual virginity of Mary. This in spite of the fact that Matthew 1:25 states, concerning sexual intercourse between Joseph and Mary, *And knew her not until* (Greek term, ἕως) *she had brought forth her firstborn son...*⁸ Furthermore, Jesus' brothers are mentioned ten times in Scripture.⁹
- Mary's immaculate conception was declared dogma in 1854 by Pope Pius IX, in his papal bull *Ineffabilis Deus*. The doctrine is based on the idea of original sin, i.e. that every person born is born with the stain and guilt of the sin of Adam. According to the doctrine of immaculate conception, Mary was conceived in her mother's womb¹⁰ free from original sin and was free from sin for the rest of her life.¹¹ Because of her immaculate conception, and thus being free from the guilt and stain of Adam's sin, Mary was able to give birth to Jesus without passing on to him the guilt of Adam's sin.
- The assumption of Mary was declared Roman Catholic dogma, by Pope Pius XII, November 1, 1950. Pius XII indicated that he was exercising Papal infallibility in declaring the assumption as dogma, he stated that he did so because it always had been believed. The first existing record of a discussion of the death of Mary is in a 377 AD document, written by Epiphanius of Salamis, in which Epiphanius states that no one knows whether or not Mary died. In the Fourth Century there were apocryphal accounts of the assumption of Mary.

Surely, if Mary were to have the role given to her by Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Churches, the New Testament would have some statement declaring these matters. As it is, the last time that Mary is mentioned in the New Testament is her inclusion in the list of those who were present in the prayer meeting that resulted in the Pentecostal birth of the Church.¹²

The Marian doctrines are but one example of the many things that are found in both Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, for which there is no valid biblical authority. Because Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy proclaim as core doctrines matters that not only lack

⁸ The expression, "to know," is often used in Scripture to denote sexual intercourse (see for example, Genesis 4:1, which in the original reads, *And the man knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain*)

⁹ Matthew 12:46; 13:55; Mark 6:3; John 2:12; 7:3, 5, 10; Acts 1:14; I Corinthians 9:5; Galatians 1:19. In all of the instances, the Greek term describing these men is ἀδελφος, the Greek term for *brother*, and the context of many of these references make little sense unless they would refer to Jesus' biological brothers.

¹⁰ Saint Anne

¹¹ "the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin" (Encyclical *Ineffabilis Deus* of Pope Pius IX). The Council of Trent decreed: 'If anyone shall say that a man once justified can sin no more, nor lose grace, and that therefore he who falls and sins was never truly justified; or, on the contrary, that throughout his whole life he can avoid all sins even venial sins, except by a special privilege of God, as the Church holds in regard to the Blessed Virgin: let him be anathema.'

¹² Acts 1:14

biblical authority,¹³ but in some instances contradict a clear understanding of Scripture, I cannot choose either of them as my model for the Church.

Neither can I accept the papacy. The rise of the monarchical bishop in a local church did not happen everywhere at the same time, but in time, the position did develop and then followed an ecclesiastical structure that mirrored the governmental structure of the Roman Empire.¹⁴ This resulted in a church that had no resemblance to the Church displayed in the New Testament.

If neither of these can be my model, then what about one of the Protestant Churches? Every Protestant Church was birthed because in the eyes of those who founded the denomination (or the movement that resulted in a denomination), some element of Scripture was being ignored or disobeyed. In other words, they were looking to the New Testament as their authority, even if it remotely were so regarded.¹⁵ Some retained practices of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy – for example, the baptism of infants.¹⁶

Sprinkling, rather than immersion is another practice inherited from Roman Catholicism – a practice totally unknown in the early centuries of the Church. It is of interest that since Greek is

¹³ Some examples would be the priesthood clergy, the intercession of the saints, indulgences, purgatory, prayers for the dead, etc.

¹⁴ Ignatius (c35 – c108 AD) is the earliest known Christian writer to emphasize loyalty to a single bishop in each city, who is assisted by both elders and deacons. For instance, his writings on bishops, presbyters and deacons: “Take care to do all things in harmony with God, with the bishop presiding in the place of God, and with the elders in the place of the council of the apostles, and with the deacons, who are most dear to me, entrusted with the business of Jesus Christ, who was with the Father from the beginning and is at last made manifest” — *Letter to the Magnesians* 2, 6:1. Writing in 1886, Dr. William P. Killen regarded all the Ignatian epistles, beginning with that to the Romans, as having been pseudepigraphically composed in the early 3rd century. His reasons included their emphasis on the *episcopos* (bishop), which is otherwise unknown until the time of Callistus, the Bishop of Rome around 220.

¹⁵ We must note that in the various movements that grew out of Methodism (for example, the Holiness Movement and the Pentecostal Movement), experience is more of a divining element, without the restraint of the New Testament pattern. In many ways, some forms of modern Evangelicalism exhibits this influence.

¹⁶ When the Ethiopian Eunuch asked what stood in the way of his being immersed, Phillip said to him, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he answered and said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” (*Acts 8:37 NAS*). [NOTE: Acts 8:37 is not found in the early Eastern Family of manuscripts. It does occur in the Western Family. It is found in the Sixth Century Uncial, E, and many miniscules. It also is referenced by Irenaeus in the Second Century in his seminal document, *Against Heresis* (III.XII.8)].

On the Day of Pentecost, when the people cried out, “What shall we do,” Peter told them to repent and be immersed in the name of Jesus Christ. The Greek term rendered as, “repent,” is *metanoeo* (μετανοέω) which literally means, “to change one’s mind.” What Peter was exhorting them to do was to change their view about Jesus – they should believe that He is the Divine Son of God and that He gave himself on the cross for the remission of our sins. In the nine cases of post-Pentecostal conversion, belief/faith and immersion are the two elements that are present in each record. There is no instance of baptism that is not preceded by belief.

the liturgical language of the Eastern Orthodox Churches, these churches immerse infants, because you can't tell a Greek that *baptidzo* (βαπτίζω) means anything other than *immerse*.¹⁷

Be that as it may, almost all of the various movements that have come into existence since Luther launched the Reformation, came into existence through the efforts of sincere men, seeking to correct flaws in the churches of their day, or to emphasize doctrines that they thought were being neglected. Even so, they journeyed only part of the way down the path to the Church displayed in the New Testament. Most of them stopped someplace along the way.

For me, if the New Testament is my authority for what a church should be, what it is to do when it assembles, what it is to teach and practice, then I must seek to learn exactly what the apostles, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, brought into existence - the entity that Jesus said was His "Church." I must not stop along the way and be satisfied with a church that is only partly that Church.

We ask again the question with which we began this paper, "Why should the New Testament Church be the pattern that we seek today? Why even bother with such a pursuit?"

For me, the primary reason is the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Jesus sent forth the apostles to be his construction crew in building His Church. It is His Church and He said that He would build it.¹⁸ Thus the apostles labored under the authority of Christ and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As stated earlier, the record of this activity is recorded in Acts and commented upon in the epistles.

A secondary reason is the possibility of unity. If all of the denominations would walk away from their creeds, their denominational history and loyalty, their adjustments to New Testament teaching, and unite around the simple New Testament Church, much of the division in Christianity would come to an end.

¹⁷ We have demonstrated in an earlier Conclave paper, *What Must I Do to be Saved?* the New Testament pattern of salvation. Available at <http://www.tulsachristianfellowship.com/doulos-press.html>. Of further interest is Pope Benedict XVI 's statements (writing as Joseph Ratzinger), in his *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York, Doubleday) 2006. There's a whole chapter in the book on Jesus' baptism, but here are a few of his key thoughts. **First, in antiquity water conjured up two distinct images:** death and life. Benedict notes: "On the one hand, immersion into the waters is a symbol of death, which recalls the death symbolism of the annihilating, destructive power of the ocean flood. The ancient mind perceived the ocean as a permanent threat to the cosmos, to the earth; it was the primeval flood that might submerge all life . . . But the flowing waters of the river are above all a symbol of life.. Even the physical act of baptism, especially baptism by immersion, represents death and new life: the descent into the waters is a form of death and burial; the rising to a new life is an icon of resurrection." (15-16)

¹⁸ Matthew 16:18 The Greek syntax of this declaration emphasizes Jesus' ownership of the church. The most common manner in which one would express the idea of *My Church*, would be, οἰκοδομήσω, τὴν ἐκκλησίαν μου, *oikodomeso ten ekklesian mou* – literally: "I will build the Church of Me." In Greek, one of the ways to emphasize something is to put earlier in the sentence the term that signifies what the writer wants to emphasize. Thus, Matthew 16:18 reads, οἰκοδομήσω μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν, *oikodomeso mou ten ekklesian*, - literally" "I will build My the Church." By moving the μου to a position before *the Church*, the emphasis is placed upon the fact of Christ's ownership of the Church.

A third reason for my not choosing one of the Protestant Churches as my pattern for a church, as I stated above, is that none are consistent in manifesting their claim that the New Testament is their only rule of faith and practice. They have perpetuated teachings and practices that are substitutes for, or in some instances, contrary to the pattern and teachings of the Church portrayed in the New Testament. I cannot, with good conscience, support such inconsistency.

On the other hand, both the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Churches are consistent in their being faithful to their views of authority. Thus, for me, the choice as to which church I must choose, boils down to three:

- Roman Catholic
- Eastern Orthodox
- the New Testament Church

For reasons stated earlier, I cannot choose the view of authority accepted by the Roman Catholic Church nor that espoused by the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

Therefore, for most of my adult life, I have sought to implement the patterns, practices, and teachings of the Church as it is described in the New Testament. My underlying reason for doing so is the Lordship of Jesus Christ, who launched His Church through the Apostles, and they, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, produced the Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ – the Church described in the New Testament.

For me to do otherwise, would be to deny the Lordship of Jesus Christ – the one who purchased the Church with His own blood.¹⁹

¹⁹ Acts 20:28

The earliest extra-biblical directions for baptism,^[8] which occur in the Didache (c. 100),^[9] are taken to be about baptism of adults, since they require fasting by the person to be baptised.^[10] However, inscriptions dating back to the 2nd century which refer to young children as "children of God" may indicate that Christians customarily baptised infants too.^[11] The earliest reference to infant baptism was by Irenaeus (c. 130–202) in his work Against Heresies.^[12] Due to its reference to Eleutherus as the current bishop of Rome, the work is usually dated c. 180.^[13] Irenaeus speaks of children being "born again to God."^{[14][15]} This reference has been described as "obscure."^[12] Three passages by Origen (185–c. 254)^[16] mention infant baptism as traditional and customary.^[17] While Tertullian writing c. 198–203 advises the postponement of baptism of little children and the unmarried, he mentions that it was customary to baptise infants, with sponsors speaking on their behalf.^[18] The Apostolic Tradition, sometimes attributed to Hippolytus of Rome (died 235), describes how to perform the ceremony of baptism; it states that children were baptised first, and if any of them could not answer for themselves, their parents or someone else from their family was to answer for them.^[19]

From at least the 3rd century onward Christians baptised infants as standard practice, although some preferred to postpone baptism until late in life, so as to ensure forgiveness for all their preceding sins.^[20]