

# Biblical Distinctives for a Local Church

**Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-23).**

**Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above all the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem (Isaiah 2:1-3).**

**O**ver the years (since the 1950s), I've encountered many different local expressions of Christ's universal body. I was reared in the conservative Anabaptist tradition (Mennonite Brethren). Since the 1970s, in God's providence, I've intermingled with churches that were independent (charismatic), Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Baptist. My wife was reared in a Roman Catholic church. When asked about my church background, I respond with a relative degree of tongue and cheek, "I was reared in a Mennonite Brethren church, my wife was reared in a Roman Catholic church, I attended a Lutheran Bible College, served one year with Youth With A Mission (YWAM), we were married in a Presbyterian church, and we are training our children in the Jewish faith!" Wearing these many hats, along with a life-long study of God's word, has given me a perspective on church issues (and government) that I think might be of assistance to the interested reader.

In essence, what are the defining Biblical characteristics of a local church? What distinctives should drive the Biblical vision of a local church and the outworkings therein? Recognizing the fine doctrinal nuances that exist in various church traditions (e.g., Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, etc.), I humbly submit five points in this regard.

First, a local church should consciously commit itself to historic, orthodox<sup>1</sup> Christianity. A local church should have a priority commitment to understanding and practicing sound (healthy) doctrine. A local church should draw deeply from the wells of 2,000 years of church history. God has gifted the body of Christ with a glorious corpus of instruction. We deny or ignore this gift to our peril. Every local body should encourage its members to read and study the lives and writings of men who have had a solid understanding of the "first things" of the Faith; i.e., those who have glimpsed, in grace, past the portals of this temporal existence into the vastness of the absolute greatness of the Godhead.<sup>2</sup> If I wanted to, I would not begin to list these men (you will find many of them on this web site). Suffice it is say that we will not agree with all these men taught (i.e., in some of the detail<sup>3</sup>), but if they have "touched the Glory," we shall know it by their fruits. Continuing this line of thought, the leaders of every local church should take the time to write a basic "confession of faith." This confession should follow the line of thought delineated by the great, historic creeds. They should detail the nature and character of the triune God, a commitment to the authority and inerrancy of Holy Scripture, a clear explanation of the Gospel, and entail a commitment to live by "every word the proceeds from the

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mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). Concerning this commitment to Scripture, none can state it better than that great 19th century Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon:

“I will follow the Scripture wherever it may lead me, and I will renounce the most cherished opinion, rather than shape or alter a single syllable of God's Book. It is not mine to make God's Word consistent, but to believe that it is so. When a text stands in the road I drive no further. The Romans had a god they called Terminus, the god of landmarks. Holy Scripture is my sacred landmark: woe is me if I remove it.”

Creeds can become dry expressions that cover up dead men's bones. Creeds are meant to be confessed and lived in the power of the Holy Spirit of God. Dr. Glenn R. Martin (1935-2004), my mentor and friend, with his typical flair for English vocabulary, once said:

“Intellectual content [i.e., orthodox beliefs] without experiential commitment [i.e., a life lived in the power of the Spirit of God] generates immobilizing scholasticism [i.e., you dry up]. Experiential commitment without intellectual content generates impotent mysticism {i.e., you blow up}.”

May I add this to Dr. Martin's profound insights: *Intellectual content plus experiential commitment γενηρατες cultural reformation*. God's word promises that in the last days (i.e., the Age of Messiah) all nations shall come to the household of the Living God to be taught and walk His ways. The nations will follow the universal Church to this extent *only* when each local church understands and lives in “the inescapable weight of the sheer Godness of God.”<sup>4</sup> Sound, Biblical theology must not only be understood, it must be lived in the power and grace of God.

Second, the New Testament teaches that local churches are to be governed, not by just one man<sup>5</sup>, but by a plurality of godly men (Hebrews 13:17; Titus 1:5). These men are called elders and they are responsible to teach and apply the Word of God to a local congregation. These men are not a business council; they are in business to hear and apply God's counsel. As an adjunct, deacons (Acts 6; I Timothy 3:8-13) are appointed by God and the local body to oversee the physical needs of the congregation. These men (and their wives) don't just mow the lawns and change the light bulbs; they are God's agents of Biblical welfare, doing good first to the household of faith, and then to all in the local community (Galatians 6:10).

Third, every local church should be committed to evangelism (on a local scale) and to world missions (on a global scale). Matthew 28:18-20 contains our Lord's final command. If a local church is not endeavoring to actively obey this commission, then it should close its doors. See my essay entitled *Evangelism unto Discipleship and Dominion* for further ramifications and applications.

Fourth, every local church should embrace a balanced view of the manifestation of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 12; Romans 12; Ephesians 4; I Peter 4:10-11). There has been and still is in some quarters a swirl of controversy over some of these manifestations (e.g., the gift of tongues).<sup>6</sup> Good, sound, and godly men disagree over some of the details of the manifestation of the Holy Spirit (there is *one gift*, the Holy Spirit, who ministers in and through the body of Christ in many, outshining [manifested] ways). Let us not allow this controversy to fog our minds that these manifestations are *administrations* from our loving Lord, gifts (Greek: *charis*) of grace intended to bring edification, exhortation, and comfort to the body of Christ; they are *God in dynamic action in and through His body*. In the light of God's final revelation in Christ and the completed canon of Scripture, any practice of any gift must be subjugated to God's objective Word and the

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discernment of the elders in a local body (I Corinthians 14; I Thessalonians 5:19-22). The Reformation cry of *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture only) should guide us in this context. *Warning*: let us not quench the Spirit of God by a blind, rigid commitment to *Sola Scriptura*. In these last days, God has spoken finally in His Son (Hebrews 1:1). Scripture is to be our guide, counsel, reproof, and correction (II Timothy 3:16). In the ascension of Christ, God has gifted His body with the His Holy Spirit, the comforter and guide (John 14-16; Acts 2). So, both the Word and the Spirit are to guide the Christian in his walk of obedient faith. In this walk, we need the fellowship of a local body to instruct, encourage, and pray for us. Let us not ignore the fact that God will speak to us by His Holy Spirit, not only in His Word, but by His Word through fellow believers. This relational context, I believe, is the Biblical context for the balanced practice of the manifestation of the Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup> I presuppose that all Christians are gifted by the Holy Spirit (i.e., in the Biblical sense, *charismatic*) and there exists no “second class” or “sub spiritual” Christians.

Fifth, every local body should be characterized by Biblical hope. This hope is three-fold: (1) hope for the present; i.e., Christ in you, the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27), (2) hope in the consummation, i.e., the blessed hope found in the Second Advent of Christ (Titus 2:11-14), and (3) hope in time and on earth in terms of the fulfillment of Christ's Great Commission; i.e., all nations shall be discipled and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against Christ's Church (Matthew 28:18-20; Matthew 16:17-19). For too many churchmen, their hope for the future in terms of time and the earth is not hope, but “rapture” escape. God has a wise and good redemptive purpose for planet earth, a plan that will engulf it in the glorious flood of the knowledge of God (Isaiah 11:9; Habakkuk 2:14). A Biblical Christian is pessimistic about man in sin, but optimistic about the promises and grace of God; i.e., “where sin abounds, grace abounds much more” (Romans 5:20). A Biblical Christian is pessimistically optimistic. Concerning man's programs, the Biblical Christian is pessimistic. Concerning God's program, the Biblical Christian is optimistic. A local church that embraces an eschatology of victory in terms of the **triumph of the Cross** (Colossians 2:15) - i.e., an optimistic and transformation view of the progress and impact of the Gospel in time and on earth (Matthew 13:31-33) - will find itself in blessed step with God's redemptive purposes.

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Orthodox literally means “straight talk” or “true glory.”

<sup>2</sup> In this context, all church programs should be *secondary*; learning and applying the faith is *primary*. In the words of James I. Packer, “Very few pastors today stress the learning of doctrine or 'learning the faith.' The emphasis is usually 'experiencing the faith' ... But the Reformers would say that learning your faith is the first expression of faithfulness to your Lord. First, evangelical Christians should accept the primacy of truth and, therefore, the need to learn their faith. They should get beyond the idea that Christianity is primarily an experience. The quality of their discipleship should also improve. Second, Christians should embrace absolute truth and live it out. Studies show that half of all evangelicals say they don't believe in absolute truth. People must quit making moral exceptions in their own favor. If we don't see reformation at these levels, nothing else we reform will matter. I believe that any new Reformation we see will begin as an improvement in the quality of discipleship among the Lord's professed people. He is sorting us out; the division between authentic Bible-based Christians and those who aren't such is going to get deeper and deeper as time goes on ... improved discipleship ... is the real key to a new Reformation.”

<sup>3</sup> Let us hold our detail distinctives (e.g., the meaning and mode of baptism, the manifestation of the Holy Spirit, etc.) with a “loose grasp” and let us not make these edges the center thereby creating unnecessary

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barriers and limits of the extent of our fellowship.

<sup>4</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 397.

<sup>5</sup> Many Protestant churches criticize the popery of the Roman Catholic church while engaging in the same on a local level; too many “one man” popes rule local churches.

<sup>6</sup> See my essay *Whither Charismaticis?* for further analysis of this issue. The “charismatic experience” (i.e., manifestation of the Spirit) must be placed into the grid of dominion thought and activity (Genesis 1:26-27). The manifestation of the Holy Spirit are meant to assist a dominion-oriented man who functions as a prophet, priest, and king under God in this world. Using the wisdom of Dr. Glenn R. Martin as a guide (see above quote), two truths must be kept in balance: (1) Power (the Holy Spirit) and (2) Purpose (sound doctrine). To absolutize point (1) produces subjectivism and existentialism (i.e., the search for new experiences or fads where the bottom line is to “obey the promptings of the Spirit”). The end result is disillusionment and a self-orientation that produces defeatism. The Word of God becomes in-sufficient and one must “add” to it via experience. Hence, one's experiences define the Faith. *There is power but no purpose.* To absolutize point (2) produces sterile intellectualism, a denial of the power of God and the manifestation of the Spirit with a resultant truncated worship and lifestyle. *There is purpose with no power.* Balance points (1) and (2): Seek to be Biblical in truth and charismatic in experience. *You now have purpose to the power* (i.e., world transformation).

<sup>7</sup>The manifestation of the Holy Spirit relate to the person of the Holy Spirit like technology relates to science. Technology is applied science. The manifestation of the Holy Spirit are “moments” of God's power, wisdom, and grace applied to specific circumstances or needs.