

Characteristics of the New Testament Church:

Defining the solution

This list describes the characteristics of the New Testament Church listed in the diagram on the previous page. These are things Jesus and Paul included in their teaching. There is no leaven here.

Benevolence (vs. Business): Far from possessing property and making a flashy show of its own legitimacy, the New Testament Church was hunted down, persecuted and made an example of. The deaths of Stephen and James were only the beginning. Hiding out in upper rooms or meeting secretly in houses, believers tried to postpone the inevitable tests of faith they knew would come. And though many individuals made valiant attempts to preach the good news (and were ultimately quite successful), they were hardly well received by the powers that be, both political and spiritual, whose reigns were threatened by this surging sect. Pentecost was a wonderful beginning to what became a nightmarish existence for many. And such persecution continued to be the lot of the true Church well into the fourth century (and of course ever after). It wasn't until the Church became sanctioned by Constantine and was taken under the state's wing that it began to sprout lovely buildings paid for with state funds. And today we have a similar situation, churches ensconced in ivory towers and sanctioned by tax exemptions and government permits. But this was never God's intent. Jesus' Bride was to be an alien in the world, focused on spreading the news of our common hope, and that amounted to a giant mandate for missionary outreach. The Church has taken that mandate into many spheres of influence, but in many cases has also traded the offense of the gospel (with its resulting persecution) for a tweaked message that embraces the world and mimics its goals and values. The Church has done everything in its power to become respectable and acceptable by the mainstream of society, and though it has not wholly succeeded, it has gone a fair distance down that path, at least in the West. It has done this by insisting that tithing is still due the institutional churches, just as it was the Temple, and thus has been able to create mini-temples, often with various forms of state support, throughout Christendom, lavishly appointed and supported by all those dollars that were intended to fund the Church's main commission, evangelism. We've eschewed the uncomfortable assignment of being like Christ in favor of the notion that we can somehow make dying to self and embracing the cross pleasurable and entertaining. The Lord's declaration, asserted by Paul, that those who preach the gospel should get their living from the gospel¹ has been used to rationalize a host of practices, most of which produce the very things that Jesus railed against: elitism, hirelings, factions, self-promotion and blindness.

¹ 1 Cor. 9:14 We believe the Lord's statement was based on the concept embodied in His instructions to the 70. They were to be fed, housed and supported by those they ministered to.

Paul's example is instructive. He encouraged missionaries to follow his lead by working with their own hands to provide for their own needs (in order to protect the Church from slander and themselves from compromise),² though he and they were often helped on their journeys by the saints. He also accepted monies for those in need back home, particularly in Jerusalem where the persecution was most intense. But besides helping to support evangelists, itinerant teachers and the persecuted, sharing with the poor or dependent was the thrust of giving in the Church. There was a common understanding in the first-century era that those who *had* should voluntarily share with those (primarily within the Church) who were lacking, that there should be equality among the brethren. Granted, a man who refused to work would not be supported, but desperate widows without family or other means would be taken care of. Without mortgages, salaries and all the accoutrements of business, the Church was free to allocate its disposable funds in ways that spoke directly to the temporal needs of the people and the work of evangelism. Thus one could posit that Christianity's entrance into acceptability via external legitimacy was a wrong turn. Though *true* Christianity and the true gospel are maligned and ridiculed wherever they show up in the West, the churches are by and large exempted from persecution. This is a red flag that should alert us all that something is amiss. Jesus said basically, "If they persecute Me, they will persecute you." If we are not raising the devil's ire and his active resistance, chances are we are either not doing God's work, or we are impotent in the spirit realm.³

Equality (vs. Hierarchies): Though necessary for proper functioning of the Church, elders, deacons, prophets, apostles, teachers and overseers were to exercise their leadership with servant-hearted humility. There was to be no "lording it over the flock" or self-exaltation. Jesus spoke this principle to His own followers in chastisement of the Pharisees. His prescription, if you can call it that, is repeated here: "But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted." (Matthew 23) There should be no divisions and no "clergy class" in the Church though there are elders (overseers) and deacons. Elders and deacons were not to be prestigious (and paid) positions, but roles or, at most, offices given to those of demonstrated maturity and character. The primary assignment of church elders is to shepherd the flock, preserve the gospel, and promote pure-hearted childlikeness in the brethren, by *example* as well as word: trust of God, humility, willing submission to the Holy Spirit, worship,

² Acts 20:33-35; 2 Thess. 3:7-15

³ The other possibility is that we are very clear on how to battle the spirit realm and are actively binding their efforts to retaliate against our work. But this kind of knowledge and proficiency is rare among Christians.

faith, accountability. Arrogance, pretence and self-exaltation are barriers to Christlikeness *and* childlikeness. Childlikeness is the starting gate to maturity. Though we are gradually transformed from babes into responsible sons, we must keep a trusting, deferent attitude toward the Father.

In addition, in the New Testament Church there was to be equality among the brethren at-large, socially and spiritually. Every member of the Body was to be equally valued, as all are needed to play their part in the functioning whole. The poor and lowly are to be treated equally with the prosperous and socially elevated. Those with the more-public ministries and gifts (apostleship, evangelism, prophecy, teaching, miracles, healing) are not to be elevated as persons above those with the more hidden gifts or ministries. Even though some gifts, according to Paul, are greater than others, all individuals are of equal value to God, and thus should be to us also. The Church, in many of its permutations today, unfortunately has evolved a caste culture, and those with talent, means and ambition strive to reach the highest caste, where they gain notoriety, influence, prestige, and even, in some cases, a superior standard of living. Equality has flown the coop and is resting in the top-most branches, far out of reach of most Christians.

Participation (vs. Performance): It is the Holy Spirit who gives gifts to men and Paul makes it clear that each one receives from the Spirit as the Spirit decides. “But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good....There are many members, but one body...the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’; or again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’....But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, that there should be no division in the body....What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification....For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted...”⁴ In other words, the Church was to operate like a symphony in which each member contributed his part to the functioning whole. But today’s churches, more often than not, function like spectator sports, with fans and “players,” or performers and spectators. The fans watch the players perform and contribute their admiration and respect and the occasional dutiful response but little else. This was not God’s plan for His Bride. She was to be a fully functioning, growing and growth-producing Body. Sadly, today’s Church is like a talking head, or a quadriplegic body hamstrung by its non-functioning members.

Character (vs. Credentials): The qualifications for the ministry of overseer or elder in the New Testament Church revolve almost entirely around godly character: wisdom, self-control, faithfulness, love of the brethren, gentleness, discernment, perseverance, respectability, dignity, maturity in the faith, blamelessness. One who aspires to leadership must be *able* to teach, manage his own family appropriately, and not be quarrelsome or contentious. He must

⁴ 1 Cor. 12:7,20,21,24; 1 Cor. 14:26,31

not love money or be selfishly ambitious. And he must be tested and proved suited to the task, via direct observation of his life. There is no room for strangers here to creep in and overtake the flock. We are to know our leaders.⁵ Paul himself was known, even by those who had never seen him in the flesh, as one who had made a radical conversion. But even he had to prove his trustworthiness and his claim to authority with the brethren via his character and life. He did not offer his previous credentials as proof of his legitimacy, but called them dung. He constantly exhorted the saints to follow his example as he followed Christ, (see Philippians 3), intimating that they knew what his example was. He also expected them to seek out individuals of personal integrity among themselves to help settle their disputes,⁶ indicating that they should know one another and defer to those with demonstrated integrity.

Unfortunately, in the Church, too often we substitute credentials for character, eschewing the idea that a person in our own circle who has lived an upright life in pursuit of godliness is qualified to shepherd the flock. And yet this is God's criterion for leadership, rather than an academic degree and an impressive resumé. This does not mean that academic degrees or pedigrees entirely disqualify one for leadership, but they must be viewed the way Paul viewed his: as worthless, and must not be relied upon as the source of credibility. Nor should they be considered important in the selection of elders. The life, demonstrated character and commitment of an individual are what matter, along with the *ability* to teach.

Fellowship (vs. Membership): The New Testament Church is characterized by intimate and growing fellowship. Learning to love one another deeply, as family, requires commitment, effort, transparency, time and sacrifice and does not come easily to humans. But it is required if the Church is to function as the Body it was intended to be. After all, a Church with true love and fellowship is the thing that Jesus said would testify of Him. Honesty, humility and love are the values that foster this highest of virtues in the Church. This includes learning to confront, confess, and repent when necessary, sometimes publicly. It means spending quality time together, talking, learning, sharing our testimonies and common journey, as well as our resources. It means helping the weak, the downtrodden, the broken and despised. It means meeting one another's needs when burdens grow too large to carry; and praying and warring for each other. It doesn't exclude a handshake or hug at Sunday services, but certainly extends far beyond this, and far beyond what most churches are able to effect at an all-church potluck, picnic, or even retreat. Too many believers experience profound and painful alienation and/or isolation in their church experience, because the masks we wear keep each other at arm's length. This should not be. Church gatherings should be a place where we can bare our souls and

⁵ This is implied in the description given by Paul to Timothy (1 Tim. 3) for the selection of elders. The traits listed cannot be discerned through an interview process, nor even by a background check.

⁶ 1 Cor. 6:5 Paul says to the Corinthians: "I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren..."

find mutual solace, encouragement, acceptance and wise counsel; where we all participate in giving and in receiving and no one is a second-class citizen. Unfortunately, too often the leaders themselves foster division in the churches by hiding their own weaknesses or one-upping those who risk transparency. Small groups go a fair distance to try to rectify this deficit in the churches, but too often they are simply small versions of big church where the Sunday message is parsed and one again, teaching is the main focus rather than fellowship.

And unfortunately people seldom attend neighborhood churches anymore where they could find others in close proximity with whom to fellowship. We are scattered geographically as well as relationally, and over-committed in many cases as well, which makes this a challenging goal for all of us.

Unity (vs. Sectarianism): Obviously Jesus desired to see His Church dwell in unity.⁷ Paul admonished the Corinthians for identifying themselves as followers of Peter or Apollos or himself, asking “Has Christ been divided?”⁸ It grieved him to think that, so early on, his spiritual children would fall into factionalism, taking sides on peripheral doctrinal issues or on the basis of personality.

Jesus told His disciples they would be known by their love,⁹ but in fact the opposite is true in the churches. We are known more for our infighting and division and cliques, at least in the West. We seem to be far more interested in keeping our kingdoms intact and our walls in place than in finding and celebrating our common ground. Unity of mind takes work, love, patience, mercy, gentleness, authenticity, honesty, understanding, mutual respect and real desire. It is not easy. Nor is it easy to distinguish between unity and uniformity. They are not the same. Different nations and cultures may express their faith differently and should have the freedom to do so. We are not advocating conformity to one standard of dress, music, or worship, for example. God loves variety. Nor are we advocating blind-faith acceptance or “group-think,” but a genuine effort to understand and to come to agreement as much as possible, wrestling through divisive issues, yet granting each other the freedom to disagree in love.¹⁰ Unfortunately, the very existence of denominations and sects exposes our unwillingness to grant such freedom, and at the same time all but rules out the achievement of this lofty goal.

Some are actively pursuing the reunification of Protestants of different sects and/or Protestants with Catholics, but it is a difficult business fraught with peril given the long-standing and

⁷ John 17:20-21

⁸ 1 Cor. 1:12-13

⁹ John 13:34-35

¹⁰ Phil. 2:1-2, 12

entrenched divisions over peripheral issues. Agreement is hard to come by. When unity does finally come to the churches, it will more than likely be at the expense of truth.¹¹

Freedom (vs. Forms): By freedom we are not, of course, advocating license or the abandonment of order in our gatherings. On the contrary, true freedom comes only as we genuinely submit to the Holy Spirit in everything. But the Holy Spirit is not One who can be controlled by men and their prescribed practices, even if those practices intend to exalt God. He will not be mastered, and those who wish to access His power must yield to His Lordship in everything. He will decide the order of service. He will prompt various individuals to share revelations, or teach or pray. He will inspire songs of worship and scriptures to be shared. He will expose and convict hearts as He sees fit. And it will be done with exceptional precision when His Church responds to Him like a symphony to a maestro.

Too often in the churches, men have taken over the job of the Holy Spirit, creating repetitive and rote rituals as a substitute for the improvisational theater of godliness, in which the Holy Spirit writes the script and thus gets the glory. Church under the Holy Spirit's direction is like Christmas, full of excitement, delight, anticipation and surprises. You never know what's in the package until you open it. How superior to the stale rehearsal of manmade rites, ceremonies and structures. Our freedom from forms is a gift, if we will but let it flow without fear.

The Gospel (vs. Traditions of Men): The Good News of Jesus Christ is our ultimate tradition and it should be the backbone of our faith. We believe it is the foundation of the "traditions" that Paul spoke about and delivered to the saints, along with his instructions on the administration and function of the Church. The Gospel is the one tradition that must remain unchanged. Paul admonished Timothy to hold fast to the Gospel and to convey it in all its purity to those under his care; to deliver it to faithful men who were able to teach and who would themselves protect it and pass it on unaltered.¹² Two other traditions, baptism and breaking bread together are vehicles that carry the message of the Gospel without the need for Scripture or literacy. They easily cross all cultural boundaries and language barriers. They are God's designated tools of evangelism in the Great Commission. Jesus told His disciples go out into all the world and teach others how to follow His commands and to baptize them into His name. Simple and powerful illustrations are embodied in these two traditions, just as they are in the seven feasts of Israel. Manmade traditions are like fences built around the Gospel and ultimately the Church, and they don't always serve it well. In fact, they often distort, hinder or burden the very essentials they

¹¹ We expect that the apostasy spoken of by Paul in 2 Thess. 2:3 will come immediately post-Rapture via a downgrading of Jesus to the level of a prophet, thus fostering unity between apostate Christianity, Judaism and Islam. This is not the kind of unity Jesus was talking about. Sacrificing foundational truths for the sake of unity or uniformity is not godly. But forsaking unity because of peripheral disagreements is not either.

¹² 2 Tim. 2:2

claim to promote. Easter and Christmas, with their infusion of pagan religious symbols, are only two of many such traditions.

Prophecy (vs. Orthodoxies): Revelation, words of wisdom and words of knowledge should be normative in the Church, at least among those so gifted. Prophecy, on the other hand, is a function of relationship with God. We can and should all seek to prophesy.¹³ The Spirit of God should instruct us and teach us and we should all get to know Him intimately, not only through the Word, but through experience with Him in daily life. Our spirits should know the Author of the Gospel as well as we know the Word, well enough to detect error, and we should, as Paul said, “desire earnestly to prophesy.” Prophecy is not a synonym for bible teaching. It is the fruit of experience and relationship with God and serves a contemporary purpose of edification, exhortation and/or consolation in the churches.

Orthodoxies, on the other hand, represented by codified creeds that we are required to accept in toto in order to call ourselves bona-fide Christians, preclude individuals from searching the Scriptures for themselves as the Bereans were commended for doing. Signing onto a prescribed list of doctrines without truly wrestling with their veracity fosters passivity and immaturity in the brethren. It also institutionalizes error. Any mandated or forced unity is artificial and it only works with a robotic decoy that purports to be the real Body of Christ.

It is not sufficient that supposed “authorities” in times gone by should dictate to us the correct interpretation of the Scriptures, in effect robbing us of the delightful experience of wrestling with God as Jacob did so many millennia ago. Though it helps to have companions in the journey who are farther along in their understanding, as well as to have a basic gospel message that has been passed down through the ages, that does not mean we should be entirely spoon-fed and never encouraged to pick up a fork, dive in and chew our own food. Paul did leave us with a basic “common confession,” but that confession did not obliterate “the mystery of godliness”¹⁴ as subsequent creeds attempted to do. In many ways, the various creeds and confessions that developed over the years hardened the divisions in the Church and made it impossible for believers to ever unite into one Body again. Rather than allowing honest debate and agreeing to disagree, factions arose and hostilities in the churches escalated to obscene proportions. Though it may have been a well-intentioned effort at the outset to codify the gospel, probably aimed at preventing heresy and producing unity among a mostly illiterate population, it was actually uniformity, conformity and violent division that these creeds achieved. And as a consequence, in the centuries since, many people have become, on the one hand, passive consumers of truth

¹³ Prophecy is a gift available to all. Paul wished that all would earnestly desire to prophesy. (1Cor. 14:1) A prophet, on the other hand, is an office or role, given to certain individuals by the Holy Spirit. “All are not prophets, are they?” Paul asks in 1 Cor. 12:29.

¹⁴ 1Tim. 3:16

rather than avid explorers of it, and on the other, reflexive and vigorous challengers of opposing views they may hardly understand. Creeds are now a fixture of the Christian culture in churches as well as parachurch organizations. And, as part of Christian tradition, they survive despite the wide availability of the scriptures and literacy.

Discipleship (vs. Formal Education) is the method the Church uses to bring individuals and groups into maturity. But not primarily via didactic instruction. Sitting individuals down and taking them through a program or book or Bible study does not produce the same degree of heart change that integrated discipleship and incarnational or experiential learning do. We are thankful to have the New Testament with its record of Jesus' teaching and of the early Church, because it is doubtful those stories would have survived intact otherwise, but discipleship was meant to be a hands-on, person-to-person proposition as it was in the New Testament.¹⁵ Walking alongside an individual or group, encouraging, giving counsel, admonishing, and instructing in the course of everyday experiences as Jesus did are potent agents of change. Spontaneous Spirit-initiated and directed lessons rather than preprogrammed religious instruction make for deep impact on new believers' hearts. Time spent in fellowship with more mature brothers and sisters conveys not only the facts and features of our common faith, but love in a way that no program can. And the Holy Spirit must be at the helm, always leading and guiding the process.

The task of discipleship then is to introduce a person to the living, risen Savior so that they, too, can have an ongoing personal relationship with Him. Though experiences with God have often been viewed as dangerous in the modern Church or something to be suspicious of, rejected or suppressed, Paul took pains to make sure that his converts had received the promised Holy Spirit and this was *not* assumed to have happened without evidence. When he met up with some disciples from Ephesus and asked them if they had received the Holy Spirit, they said they had not. They had not even *heard of* the Holy Spirit. So he baptized them a second time, this time into Christ Jesus, and finally laid hands on them that they might receive the Spirit, after which they spoke in tongues and prophesied.¹⁶ This was an indication to them and to Paul that the Spirit had indeed come into them and validated their faith as authentic. Christian baptism is of water *and* the Spirit. This does not, of course, mean that tongues are required for authentic salvation. It simply indicates that individuals who received the Spirit in Paul's day knew it and so did everyone else and not just "by faith." This is something we have not apprehended very well in the Church. Can Jesus Christ come into a person's heart and they not know it? Is He so impotent? And yet we are satisfied with a rote prayer and no evidence that anything has changed. This should not be. If there is no evidence, we need to find out why and rectify the

¹⁵ We are talking about discipleship here, not evangelism.

¹⁶ Acts 19:1-6

problem. Experience with God is our inheritance as members of Jesus' family and we should expect it if we are truly born again.

Power (vs. Programs): The Church went forth with power to win the lost. Paul told the early churches that his message and his preaching “were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.” (1 Cor. 2:4-5) He knew that anyone can talk a good line, but only God can raise the dead, heal the blind, and validate His own Word with miracles. He also said he did not come to them “in cleverness of speech, that the cross of Christ might not be made void.” What did he mean? He meant that man’s talent, eloquence and charisma can draw away attention to itself, obscuring the true worth and glory of the Gospel. His intent was that they see Christ, not him, and though some were contemptuous of his oratory, he responded with the truth: their faith was not to rest on words alone or on cleverness of speech but on the power of the Holy Spirit—something we have all but lost in the Church today. We have more often than not elevated speech and actively resisted the power of God in the churches, saying it’s not for today, or sought it for the wrong reasons. We substitute talk, talk and more talk. Our own impotence condemns us. We emphasize didactic instruction, eloquence and programs, in contrast to Paul’s emphasis on power, revelation, inspiration and opening the eyes of our hearts that we might know “the love of God that surpasses knowledge.” He is on a different playing field in many respects. He does not emphasize learning the Bible so much as knowing God and getting instruction and power from Him. The Bible may be an instruction booklet on how to know and reconcile with God, but everyone stops with the instructions. Paul intended us to go on and do and be led by God. To be filled with the Spirit. To walk by the Spirit. He says things like “you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another.”¹⁷ This is a big hint that God is capable of instructing, healing, and empowering us Himself in our relationships with each other. Why don’t we trust Him to meet us in our weakness and demonstrate His mighty power? Instead, we protect our image from any embarrassing potential failures, and consign God to a textbook faith and a manmade program.

Evangelism (vs. Politics): Our battle is not with flesh and blood, Scripture tells us, and yet so often we fall into the enemy’s deception, thinking that Democrats or liberals are our enemy and that we need to fight against them in the political battle for our nation. Truth be told, the battle would be won so much more easily if we spent more time on our knees asking the Lord of heaven and earth to send more workers into the harvest and indeed went ourselves. Winning men and women to Christ is the only way this nation can hope to sustain any sort of moral character or authority. Liberals and conservatives alike need the love of Christ and they can only see that in our eyes and hear it in our voices. We are the spokesmen for our Lord and if we speak loud and

¹⁷ 1 Thess. 4:9

shrill, He will be diminished in their eyes and we will lose our country and very likely our freedom. The Church is commissioned to share with the lost the fullness of the life of faith, not primarily by aggressive head-on confrontation (though that may be appropriate at times), but rather by meek and yet powerful testimony of who it is who healed us. Jesus, our Redeemer and Friend, deserves to be conveyed in humility, with the same spirit of love and mercy that prompted Him to come and deliver us in the first place. He did tell us not to cast our pearls before swine (those who hate Him and His truth) lest they turn and trample us underfoot and tear us to pieces, so we should heed His words. But when we are given an opening (and we should pray for such), we can share the Good News along with our own testimony of the changes He has wrought in our life and the way that knowing Him intimately has blessed us. People love stories and if we approach them with something personal, being willing to share our own journey in all its weakness, they will be disarmed and perhaps touched enough to allow us to fill in some of the gaps in their own personal understanding of who this God is. This kind of witness goes straight to the heart rather than getting waylaid in the ever-analyzing, ever-rationalizing, ever-objecting brain and making it no farther.¹⁸

The Great Commission is our mandate as believers. We are called to “go out into all the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name (singular) of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” That one name is “Jesus,” as clarified by Peter in Acts 2:38. Our calling is to spread the good news, and to do it with vigor and sacrifice if necessary. Exactly how this looks for each of us is a matter of personality, style, gifting, life experience, passion, calling and sense of mission. But it is given to all of us to one degree or another, not relegated to a select few who are the “evangelists” among us. Though they may be more motivated and more gifted for the task (and thus more responsible to act), all of us have friends, acquaintances, co-workers and family who need to know the Lover of their souls. It is our privilege to speak of the One who gave Himself for the world and we dare not let shame or fear of rejection keep us from our great calling. By the same token, we should strive to be Spirit-led in all our endeavors.

On the following page, we have put together what we call the True Church/False Church Chart. What we are trying to show here are the extreme ends of a continuum that defines how Church is done and has been done throughout history, from true New Testament Christianity on one end to the other extreme, all-out Pharisaic Christianity. Try not to over-analyze it. It’s just our attempt to make this strikingly clear in a simple, one-page format that you can print off and use in your discussions with friends and with those in professional ministry. The idea, of course, is to be practicing Christianity as close to the items in the left column as possible.

¹⁸ Not that everyone will respond to our experience or our witness. Far from it. But they can’t really deny it either, especially if we share it from the heart. They will see how real He is to us. A canned approach is often seen for what it often is – a fleshly effort to effect a spiritual outcome.