

## WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH?

By Forrest Erickson

Many of the customs and practices adopted by today's church were passed down to us from previous generations of believers. While some of these practices were never taught by Jesus or his apostles, many Christians cling to them as if they came directly from the Scriptures. Perhaps it is time for the Body of Christ to take a fresh look at what the Bible says about the functioning of the church. Is the manner in which we lead the church supported by the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles? Did Jesus intend the church to build temples or to be his Temple? Has the emphasis on land and buildings sapped the church of energy, focus and money? Have we added layer upon layer of rules and customs to something that God intended to be simple and uncomplicated?

While no one is suggesting we try to re-create the culture of the first century, we should ask ourselves if abandoning the manner in which the New Testament church functioned—and in its place substituting our own ideas and customs—has hindered more than helped the advancement of the gospel around the world. Is the church free to organize and function as it desires, according to the customs and dictates of the current culture in which it finds itself, or did Jesus and his Apostles describe and teach certain truths that were intended to ensure that the church would function simply, effectively, and in the power of the Holy Spirit in every *setting*, every *environment*, every *culture*, every *generation*, among every *people* and with every *language*?

The following is an attempt to outline ten basic ways today's church, particularly the American church, might learn from the New Testament church. To borrow Jesus' analogy of new wine skins for new wine, these principles allow the Body of Christ to think and function in a way that is new for most believers today.

- 1) Remember that Jesus is the *functioning* Head of his Church. While most of us would heartily agree in our theology that Jesus is Head of the church, in practice we prefer—as ancient Israel did when they clamored for a king—that our functioning head be someone else. Yet the New Testament Scriptures show us quite clearly that Jesus intended to function daily and in every circumstance as the very real Head of his Body and that he would administrate his Headship through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in the church. If Jesus is allowed to truly function as Head of his church, no other person, group or entity is needed to function in his place. This means no one—not a pastor, a board, even a group of elders--should ever assume top spot in the church. The role of leaders is to help everyone in the church to become mature followers of Jesus (Ephesians 1:10;22; 4:15; 5:23; Colossians 1:18; 2:10; 2:19).
- 2) While Jesus is the real and functioning head of his church, he intends for his church to be carefully led by a plurality of elders whose ministry consists of *overseeing* the church, *guarding* it against false teaching, and making sure it is *equipped* for ministry. Elders serve under the direction and headship of Jesus, the Lord of the church. Paul says (Acts 20:30) they are appointed by the Holy Spirit. They make decisions by consensus, paying close attention to God's Word and keeping an attentive ear to the directions of the Holy Spirit. They are to be servant-leaders, shepherding God's people without arrogance, selfishness, or a heavy hand. When necessary, they are to initiate discipline, being very careful to follow the Spirit and teachings of the Scriptures in this matter. They are also to pay close attention to their own hearts, actions and motives, making sure they do not *distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after themselves* (Acts 20:30).
- 3) The church does not need professionals or professionally educated persons to lead it. The church is utterly *radical* in its conception, function, teaching and results. To launch his church Jesus picked twelve unsophisticated, uneducated men, who were capable of doing what he asked of them solely because *they had spent time with him and were filled with*

*the Holy Spirit!* What makes us think God now needs a professional class of people (the clergy) to lead his church? While the New Testament teaches that leaders in the church must be qualified, the qualifications, with the exception of the ability to teach, are all related to Christ-like character. Nothing else! (See 1Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9)

Being educated is not of itself the problem. God does not glorify ignorance! Many highly trained and educated persons—including the Apostle Paul—have been used by God. And many such persons exist in the church today. They are humble, wise, educated and trained. They bring great blessings to the Body of Christ through their teaching. We are deeply grateful for them.

The problem is a basic assumption of fallen mankind (an assumption Christians too frequently accept) that anything good and great must be authored and managed by persons widely considered to be intelligent, knowledgeable, highly educated, powerful and wealthy. Typically, these are the ones most resistant to the God of the Bible. They are the ones least likely to acknowledge their need of a Savior (1Corinthians 1:20-31). They are also the least likely to accept the authority of the Scriptures. And more often than not it is the highly intelligent and highly educated church leaders and teachers who introduce or welcome heresy into the church.

Jesus had no interest in feeding the assumptions of sinful men that their wisdom was necessary to accomplish his purposes. To make sure no one could take credit for the church, he chose to birth it—and keep it growing—through the message of the cross and through humble, ordinary people who are willing to trust him and the power of his Spirit.

- 4) Jesus intends his church to function in a simple and uncomplicated manner, always depending fully on God's grace, the merits of Jesus, and the power, presence and provision of the Holy Spirit. Jesus desires a simple and uncomplicated church so that it can *exist and thrive* at any time, in any nation, in any culture, among any people or tribe, and under any circumstances, and so it is *obvious to all watching that the very existence of the church is the work of God*, not of men and women (See 1Corinthians 1:18 – 2:16).
- 5) According to 1Corinthians 14, the Spirit of God intends the meetings of the church to *typically* incorporate a high level of participation from a variety of believers, in contrast to the current and common practice of tightly-orchestrated services controlled largely by professional ministers. The gathering described by Paul offers remarkable freedom and spontaneity in the Holy Spirit, with little formality or repetitive order, although he makes clear everything is to be done in an orderly fashion and for the edification of everyone present. This kind of freedom requires deep trust in the Jesus, Lord of the church, and in his Spirit. Many of us in the church seem to struggle with that level of trust in God and in the freedom that comes with it. We are more comfortable keeping our meetings nice and tidy and predictable.
- 6) The church does not need its own special buildings to function effectively. For most of the first three hundred years of its existence, the church gathered predominantly as small groups in the homes of believers. It functioned well and grew rapidly. While the Scriptures do not tell the church where to meet, there are several NT references to churches meeting in homes. Obviously, the Lord of the church considers the private dwellings of his people to be appropriate places to gather. Today, the church in China is made up of millions of believers who gather in thousands of homes. When the Samaritan woman alluded to the then-current argument that one location was preferred over another as a place of worship, Jesus told her the time was coming when temples and locations would not matter because true worshipers would worship God in spirit and truth. Note: There may be particular ministries of the church that require buildings (hospitals, schools, shelters for the hungry, homeless, addicted, etc.), but we must be careful not to assume that all gatherings of

believers must spend large amounts of money on meeting structures.

Part of the problem is that we love our temples! Great edifices make us look good. We feel proud of what our money, hands and skills can accomplish. We like it when others admire our buildings. And buildings may give us power and credibility with the popular culture of the community. But buildings easily become encumbrances that stifle the church's dependence on God and limit our ability to send out missionaries and help the poor. Land and buildings also introduce unnecessary complexity because they involve great amounts of time and energy. Unfortunately, church buildings also help make spectators and consumers of the majority of God's people, and rob us of our true identity by allowing the community—and sadly, many Christians—to think of the building, the worship center, or the campus as the church. The NT Scriptures, on the other hand, never equate a meeting location with the church. The church is always and only God's people.

While the Bible does not dictate where the church should meet, we should be aware that there are several advantages to meeting in homes. Here are a few examples:

- The people of God (not the meeting location) retain their identity as the church.
  - There are no expensive facilities to rent, own, operate and maintain. When a group outgrows its meeting place, it can spread out to more homes in the community. Or, if persecution arises believers can easily move from one house to another.
  - Because the size of each group is relatively small, believers get to know each other well, which helps them care for each other and love each other as Jesus teaches the church to do.
  - Because of the family atmosphere, it can be a good place for new believers to grow.
- 7) The church needs all the gifts mentioned by Paul in Ephesians 4:11-14, not just one or two of them. Paul writes, *It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.*

Nowhere does Paul teach that only some of these five gifts (such as evangelist, pastor, and teacher) would continue past the early days of the church. Nor does he teach that these gifts are *offices* to be held in the church or that people gifted in one of these five ways are *necessarily* paid professionals, that is, educated and trained persons who earn their living in the church by utilizing their gift. He doesn't even say they are necessarily leaders in the church, although some of them may well be.

People gifted by the Holy Spirit as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors or teachers are gifted in these particular ways for one reason: To prepare God's people to be active and mature participants in Kingdom living and Kingdom serving. According to Ephesians 4 *all* of these gifted persons are needed in order for the church to be adequately equipped and truly mature.

Unfortunately, the church picked one of the five gifts—the gift of pastor—and elevated this particular gifting to something unrecognizable and unknown in the New Testament church. Nowhere in the NT is a pastor referred to as leader of a church. Nowhere is he given the present-day responsibilities of visionary, CEO, preacher, teacher, visitor of

the sick, and a dozen other things. Someone gifted to serve as a pastor simply cares deeply about the people of God, just as a good sheep herder cares about his sheep. He feeds them, gets them to a watering hole, binds up their wounds, and sometimes disciplines them. He doesn't necessarily preach or teach or evangelize or serve as a missionary or start new churches. If he could do all these things, God wouldn't need to give the church the other four gifts.

A person gifted as a pastor might be a capable leader (shepherds *do* lead), but nowhere do the Scriptures suggest that a pastor should be the primary leader of a church or that he should function as most present-day pastors are expected to function. And nowhere does the Bible teach that the gifting of pastor is an office to be officially held, or that a person with this gift must or should be seminary-trained, or that he should be ordained, or that he should be given a title of any kind (see Matthew 23:7-8 for Jesus' caution about titles).

While many church leaders give *great* attention to what they assume are the duties of a pastor (much of it without Biblical support), and somewhat less attention to the gifts of teacher and evangelist, they often entirely dismiss the gifts of apostle and prophet. If the Apostle Paul indicates so clearly that these two gifts are also needed for the maturity of the church, who are we to conclude that these gifts are no longer operational in the church? Consider that the NT Scriptures reference both apostles and prophets several times in the context of the functioning of the church, and by no means are all these references to the twelve Apostles, to the Apostle Paul, or to the prophets of the Old Testament.

At the very least, should not the gift of apostle be identified with today's missionaries and church planters? And does the church no longer need prophets, whose special mission from the Lord—both in the Old Testament and the New—is to warn, alert, strengthen and encourage God's people? If we are going to be faithful to the Word—as we profess to be—and if we are going to be a strong, healthy church, we need to welcome all the gifts of the Holy Spirit, not only the ones commonly accepted by our particular theological traditions (see the following references to prophets functioning in the NT church: Acts 11:27; 13:1; 15:32; 1Corinthians 12:28-29; 14:29; Ephesians 3:5).

- 8) The church consists of all followers of Jesus—people who by faith accept Him as Savior and Lord and who by His grace and the power of the Spirit, obey His Word. When it comes to membership in the local gathering of believers, the church must be careful not to set standards or criteria other than those set by the Word (often done in various requirements for membership).

At Pentecost Peter told the crowd, *"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."* When many in the crowd responded to Peter's call, they immediately became members of the church. More teaching followed, but no additional requirements were set to be members of Christ's body.

If, for example, we believe that regular attendance and participation in the gatherings of the church are important reflections of our faith and growth in Christ, or if we feel that regular or proportional giving should be practiced by all believers, let such things be taught as part of discipleship training. We help new believers become mature in their faith by teaching them how their new-found faith in Jesus has implications for every area of life, but we go beyond the teachings of the Bible if we establish entry requirements greater than those established by Jesus and the Apostles.

- 9) It is inappropriate and contrary to the teaching of the Scriptures (1Corinthians 1 & 3) to create divisions in the body based on some person (past or present) we have chosen to

follow or some label by which we wish to be identified. When followers of Jesus refuse to fellowship with one another because of differences in non-essential doctrines, the body is unnecessarily fractured. 'Non-essential' does not mean unimportant or insignificant. 'Non-essential' in this context merely means that if followers of Jesus hold differing views on certain doctrines, it does not mean they somehow have a faulty or inferior relationship with Christ or that they do not belong to Christ.

For example, among equally dedicated and committed Christians, there are a variety of interpretations or understandings relative to the subjects of predestination, the security of the believer, the meaning and modes of baptism, the purpose of the Lord's Supper and how often it is to be celebrated, the use of spiritual gifts, whether the church will be caught up to be with the Lord before the tribulation begins, after it ends, or some time in between. Yet, thankfully, most followers of Jesus who hold opposing views on these doctrines don't think they are the only ones who will enter Heaven.

While it may be a good thing when a believer is convinced in his or her own mind concerning these things—and certainly a local gathering of believers may choose to hold a particular position on these non-essential doctrines—we must remember that humility, grace, and love allow us to accept one another even when we don't see eye-to-eye on every detail of our faith. If someone has been accepted by Christ himself, it is inappropriate for us set a 'higher' standard of acceptance or of fellowship. Followers of Jesus seek to preserve the unity of the Body, not create strife or divisions. God's people should always be free to humbly search the Scriptures for answers to these sorts of questions. Christians who differ in their understanding of non-essential doctrines should love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ and should be able to worship and fellowship alongside one another.

- 10) There *are* truths that are essential to our faith. On these we must stand firm. The deity of Jesus, his virgin birth, his sacrificial and atoning work on the cross, his bodily resurrection, the fact of his return, the reality of Heaven and Hell, the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, salvation by grace through faith, the sinful condition of mankind, Jesus as the only way to salvation (this is not an exhaustive list)—what we believe about these things determines what we do with Jesus or how we respond to his call to follow him. On them our faith and salvation depend. With them we draw a line in the sand. For these truths we will stand strong and give our very lives, if necessary. We don't sacrifice these truths in order to gain acceptance or to be approved by others. The Apostle Paul writes that there are those who “preach a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached” and there are those who espouse “a different gospel” (2Corinthians 11:4; Galatians 1:6). Jesus and the Apostles repeatedly warn against deceptive teachings and false teachers. Every teaching, every teacher and prophet is to be tested by the standard of God's Word. Leaders in the local gathering of believers must constantly teach and affirm these truths so that the followers of Jesus have a solid foundation for their faith. Paul's words to the Ephesian elders are powerful: *Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. (Acts 20:28-31).*

It is time for Christians everywhere to take a more exhaustive look at the example and teachings of the NT church in matters of church leadership, structure and practice. While many in the church are deeply committed to the teachings of Scripture in matters such as faith, grace, repentance, justification, gifts of the Holy Spirit, holy living, and many other things connected to our relationship with God, they dismiss or ignore the example and teachings of the Word when it

comes to God's design for church leadership, church structure, and church practice. What makes us think we can ignore God's plan in these matters and escape the negative effect our choices will have on the church? Why, for instance, do we insist on turning the gift of pastor into an official office of the church, making the pastor the primary leader of the local church, ordaining this person, and teaching that the local church is not complete without this "office" being filled—when the Bible provides no such teaching and in fact contradicts it by clearly teaching that elders are the shepherds and overseers of the church? Are we not like the Pharisees who preferred their long-standing traditions to the teachings of the Word? Or, why do we expect—and even teach—that a group of Christians meeting together must have a building—rented or owned—to be worthy of the status of a church? Does the Word teach that? Where did we get the idea that the typical gatherings of believers consists of an audience listening to a single speaker or teacher Sunday after Sunday when Paul paints a very different picture of the meetings of the church in 1 Corinthians 14?

While not all traditions are bad, too often we adopt them without thinking about whether or not they conform to Biblical principles or are ultimately healthy for the church. Our bias regarding these things more often than not is tied to teachings passed down to us from our particular theological stream or favorite seminary instructor, systematic theology text book, or even our favorite podcast pastor. But shouldn't we be asking ourselves if what we are doing is supported by the Word of God? For example, why do some of us pick and choose which gifts of the Spirit we allow in the church, when Paul clearly teaches that such a decision is God's business? Do we really need boards, committees, constitutions, and membership classes? Does institutionalizing the church really make it more effective? Where does the NT say anything about ordaining pastors? Did Paul encourage the church to establish seminaries to train a professional class of church leaders? Should we have Sunday Schools, youth groups and catechism classes ("farming out" Biblical training to others), or should we be equipping and encouraging believing parents to teach their own children the Word of God?

Church leaders need to carefully consider the ramifications of accepting and promoting traditions in the church which are not supported by the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles. When we determine that the example and teachings of the NT regarding the church are inadequate and must somehow be replaced or supplemented with our own ideas, wisdom and practices, we introduce layers of complexity that detract from utter dependence on Jesus and the power of His Spirit. Ultimately, any deviation from the teachings of the Word of God diminishes the effectiveness of our witness.

We live in a complex world, but that doesn't mean church has to be complicated. The message of Bible is simple, clear, uncluttered, and deeply profound: There is one God, one Savior, one Gospel, one Church. This church is utterly dependent upon the Great Shepherd Jesus who works mightily through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Let's resolve by the grace of God to let the church be as simple, powerful and effective as Jesus intended.

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If you wish to respond to the above article with comments or questions, you may contact Forrest at [forrest@azgeneration.com](mailto:forrest@azgeneration.com). Forrest served for thirty-three years in the traditional role of pastor but now serves as a preaching and teaching elder (1Timothy 5:17) with two small churches in the greater Phoenix, AZ area. Both churches practice elder leadership where all the elders actively serve as overseers, shepherds (Acts 20:28) and teachers (1Timothy 3:2). One group of believers meets Sunday morning in its own facilities. The other group meets Saturday or Sunday evenings in a home in Gilbert.