

NINE  
MARKS  
OF A  
HEALTHY  
CHURCH

FOURTH EDITION

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*Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*

## INTRODUCTION

God, in His goodness and love, has not called us to be Christians alone. Though we individually sin, and are called out of the world individually, we are also called to come together in a local assembly. This assembly is called, in the New Testament, a church.

Today many books on the market and speakers on the circuit are asserting that almost every conceivable attribute, worship style, computer program, book, sound system, seminar, ministry, education, program, group, philosophy, methodology, doctrine, virtue, spiritual encounter, parking lot design or management structure is the key to a successful church. Who is right? How can you tell if a church is healthy? How can you tell if your church is healthy? What can you do to encourage biblical, sustainable, God-glorifying growth?

This little book is a tool to change churches. In it I suggest nine distinguishing marks of a healthy church. These are not the only attributes of a healthy church. They are not everything one would want to say about a church. They are not even necessarily the most important things about a church. For example, baptism and communion are essential aspects of a biblical church, yet they are not directly discussed here. That is because virtually every church at least intends to practice them. The nine attributes discussed here are marks that may set a church apart, that may distinguish a sound, healthy, biblical church from many of its more sickly sisters. The nine marks discussed here are found too rarely today, and are therefore in special need of being brought to our attention and cultivated in our churches.

Of course, just as there are no perfect Christians in this life, so there are no perfect churches. Even the best churches fall far short of the ideal. Neither correct polity nor

## *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*

courageous preaching, neither sacrificial giving nor doctrinal orthodoxy can ensure that a church will flourish. Nevertheless, any church can be healthier than it is. In our own lives, we never see complete victory over sin, but as true children of God we do not therefore give up the struggle. Churches must not give up the struggle either. Christians, particularly pastors and church leaders, desire and labor to see healthier churches. The goal of this booklet is to encourage just this health. To that end I write, and to that end you read, both so that God may be glorified in His people.

Our American addiction to pragmatism, particularly to obvious success, must be replaced by a humble, trusting reliance on faithfulness to God, particularly in following His commands regardless of the immediate response. We must have categories to recognize and encourage the labors not only of a church planter in demographically growing areas, or in the midst of revival, but also of faithful pastors in demographically settled or declining cities or rural areas. We must be able to encourage the work of God as it was seen in the labors of William Carey or Adoniram Judson, not just in crusades or missions with large numbers of immediate responders.

One cautionary note: on this re-calibration of our churches' aims and practices, we must not rely on seminaries as the agents of change and biblical reform. Seminaries (whether denominational or otherwise) are institutions which have their own stewardships from their constituencies, and they must be faithful to them, or perish. This is as it should be. We must, therefore, work for a longer, slower, deeper change, as we work to change our churches.

Again, even the best churches fall far short of the ideal, but we must not, therefore, cease to work. We are united in our desire for healthier churches, where God will be glorified in His people. May this book be used to that end.



*Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*

# 1

## EXPOSITIONAL PREACHING

- I. Definition of Expository Preaching
- II. Expository Preaching Not Fundamentally a Style
- III. Submission to the Word of God, Not a Preacher's Own Knowledge
- IV. God Has Always Created His People By His Word
- V. Centrality of the Preached Word of God
- VI. Questions for Reflection

# 1

## EXPOSITIONAL PREACHING

The place to begin is God's beginning with us--His speaking to us. That is how our own spiritual health has come, and that is how our churches' health will come, too. Especially important for anyone in leadership in a church, but particularly for the pastor of the church, is a commitment to expositional preaching, one of the oldest methods of preaching. This is preaching whose object is to expound what is said in a particular passage of Scripture, carefully explaining its meaning and applying it to the congregation (see Nehemiah 8:8). There are, of course, many other types of preaching. Topical sermons, for example, gather up all of Scripture's teaching on a single subject, like prayer or giving. Biographical preaching takes the life of someone in the Bible and portrays it as a display of God's grace and as an example of hope and faithfulness. But expositional preaching is something else--an explanation and application of a particular portion of God's Word.

Expositional preaching presumes a belief in the authority of Scripture, but it is something more. A commitment to expositional preaching is a commitment to hear God's Word. Even as Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles were given not just a commission to go and speak, but a particular message, so Christian preachers today have authority to speak from God only so long as they speak His words. Thus the expositional preacher's authority begins and ends with Scripture. Sometimes people may confuse expositional preaching with the style of a favorite expositional preacher, but it is not fundamentally a matter of style. As others have observed, expositional preaching is finally not so much about how we say what we say, but

Definition of  
Expositional  
Preaching

Expositional  
Preaching Not  
Fundamentally  
a Style

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about how we decide what to say. It is not marked by a particular form, but by a Biblical content.

Submission to  
the Word of  
God, Not a  
Preacher's  
Own  
Knowledge

Someone may happily accept the authority of God's Word and even profess to believe in the inerrancy of the Bible; yet if that person in practice (whether intending to or not) does not preach expositionally, he will never preach more than he already knows. A preacher can take a piece of Scripture and exhort the congregation on a topic that is important without really preaching the point of the passage. When that happens, the preacher and the congregation only hear in Scripture what they already knew.

By contrast, when we preach a passage of Scripture in context, expositionally--taking the point of the passage as the point of the message--we hear from God things we did not intend to hear when we began. From the initial call to repentance to the area of our lives the Spirit has most recently convicted us about, our whole salvation consists in hearing God in ways which we, before we heard Him, would never have guessed. This very practical submission to the Word of God must be evident in a preacher's ministry. Make no mistake here: it is finally the congregation's responsibility to ensure that this is so. (Witness the responsibility that Jesus assumes for the congregation in Matthew 18, or Paul does in II Timothy 4.) A church must never charge a person with the spiritual oversight of the flock who does not in practice show a commitment to hear and to teach God's Word. To do so is inevitably to hamper the growth of the church, practically encouraging it to grow only to the level of the pastor. In such a case, the church will slowly be conformed to his mind, rather than to God's mind.

God Has  
Always  
Created His  
People By His  
Word

God's people have always been created by God's Word. From creation in Genesis 1 to the call of Abram in Genesis 12, from the vision of the valley of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37 to the coming of the living Word, God has always creat-

ed His people by His Word. As Paul wrote to the Romans, “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ,” (10:17). Or, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe,” (I Cor. 1:21).

Sound expositional preaching is often the fountainhead of growth in a church. In Martin Luther’s experience, such careful attention to God’s Word was the beginning of reformation. We, too, must be committed to being churches that are always being reformed according to the Word of God.

Once, when I was teaching a day-long seminar on puritanism at a church in London, I mentioned that puritan sermons were sometimes two hours long. At this, one person gasped audibly, and asked, “What time did that leave for worship?” The assumption was that hearing God’s word preached did not constitute worship. I replied that many English Protestant Christians would have considered hearing God’s word in their own language and responding to it in their lives the essential part of their worship. Whether they had time to sing together would have been of comparatively little concern.

Our churches must recover the centrality of the Word to our worship. Hearing God’s Word and responding to it may include praise and thanks, confession and proclamation, and any of these may be in song, but none of them need be. A church built on music--of whatever style--is a church built on shifting sands. Preaching is the fundamental component of pastoring. Pray for your pastor, that he will commit himself to study Scripture rigorously, carefully and earnestly, and that God will lead him in his understanding of the Word, in his application of it in his own life, and in his application of it to the church (see Luke 24:27;

Centrality of  
the Preached  
Word of God

Acts 6:4; Eph. 6:19-20). If you are a pastor, pray these things for yourself. Pray also for others who preach and teach God's Word. Finally, pray that our churches would have a commitment to hearing God's Word preached expositively, so that the agenda of each church will be increasingly shaped by God's agenda in Scripture. Commitment to expositional preaching is a mark of a healthy church.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Read Nehemiah 8:7-8. What does the Bible say that the Levites did for the people as they read the Book of the Law to them? In verse 12, it is recorded that after the assembly, the people went away celebrating with great joy. According to the passage, why were they celebrating?

2. The author defines expositional preaching as "an explanation and application of a particular portion of God's Word." Restate that definition in your own words. What distinguishes expositional preaching from other types of preaching, like topical and biographical?

3. In Acts 20:27, Paul tells the Ephesians that he has labored to preach to them "the whole will of God." Recognizing that our job as church leaders is to do the same for our people, how can expositional preaching benefit us in our own labor of presenting the whole counsel of God to our people? What is the danger if we do not "take the point of the passage as the point of our message?"

4. From Genesis 1 to the New Testament, God has always created His people by His Word. Read Romans 10:17 and I Corinthians 1:21. What does God use to bring His people to saving faith in Christ? What does this tell us

about the esteem in which we should hold the Word of God in our churches? How should that esteem practically show itself in our preaching?

# 2

## BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

- I. "Sound Doctrine"
- II. Unity, Diversity, and Charity
- III. Dealing with Complex or Controversial Doctrines
- IV. Resistance to God's Sovereignty
- V. Leaders Should Embrace God's Sovereignty
- VI. Questions for Reflection



# 2

## BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Expository preaching is important for the health of a church. Yet every method, however good, is open to abuse, and therefore must be open to being tested. In our churches, our concern should be not only with how we are taught, but with what we are taught. We should cherish soundness, particularly in our understanding of the God of the Bible and His ways with us.

"Soundness" is an old-fashioned word. In Paul's pastoral writings to Timothy and Titus, "sound" means reliable, accurate or faithful. At root, it is an image from the medical world meaning whole or healthy. We read in I Timothy 1 that sound doctrine is shaped by the gospel and that it is opposed to ungodliness and sin. Even more clearly, in I Timothy 6:3, Paul contrasts "false doctrines" with "the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and . . . godly teaching." So in his second letter to Timothy, Paul exhorts Timothy to "keep what you heard from me as the pattern of sound teaching" (II Timothy 1:13). Paul warns Timothy that "the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear" (II Timothy 4:3).

When Paul wrote to another young pastor, Titus, he had similar concerns. Anyone whom Titus would appoint as an elder, says Paul, "must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Titus 1:9). Paul urges Titus to rebuke false teachers "so that they will be sound in the faith" (Titus 1:13). Paul charges Titus saying, "You must teach what is in accord with

"Sound  
Doctrine"

## *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*

Unity,  
Diversity, and  
Charity

sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1).

If we were to lay out everything that constitutes sound teaching, we would reproduce the whole Bible. But in practice, every church decides the matters in which there needs to be complete agreement, can be limited disagreement, and can be complete liberty.

In the church I serve in Washington, DC, we require each person who would be a member to believe in salvation through the work of Jesus Christ alone. We also confess the same (or very similar) understandings of believer's baptism and of church polity. Uniformity on these second two points is not essential for salvation, but agreement on them is both helpful practically and healthy for the life of the church.

We can allow some disagreement over matters that seem necessary neither for salvation, nor for the practical life of the church. So, for instance, though we all agree that Christ will return, we are not surprised that there is disagreement among us about the timing of His return. We can enjoy entire liberty on matters still less central or clear, such as the rightness of armed resistance, or the authorship of Hebrews.

In all of this, the principle should be plain: the closer we get to the heart of our faith, the more we expect to see our unity expressed in a shared understanding of the faith. The early church put it this way: in essentials unity, in non-essentials diversity, in all things charity.

Dealing with  
Complex or  
Controversial  
Doctrines

Sound teaching includes a clear commitment to doctrines often neglected yet clearly biblical. If we are to learn the sound doctrine of the Bible, we must come to terms with doctrines that may be difficult, or even potentially divisive, but that are foundational for understanding God's work among us. For example, the biblical doctrine of election is often avoided as too complex, or too confusing. Be that as it may, it is undeniable that this doctrine is biblical, and that it is important. While it may have implications we

do not fully understand, it is no small matter that our salvation ultimately issues from God rather than from ourselves. Other important questions which the Bible answers have also been neglected:

- Are people basically bad or good? Do they merely need encouragement and enhanced self-esteem, or do they need forgiveness and new life?
- What did Jesus Christ do by dying on the cross? Did He make possible an option, or was He our substitute?
- What happens when someone becomes a Christian?
- If we are Christians, can we be sure that God will continue to care for us? If so, is His continuing care based on our faithfulness, or on His?

All of these questions are not simply matters for bookish theologians or young seminary students. They are important to every Christian. Those of us who are pastors know how differently we would shepherd our people if our answer to any one of these questions changed. Faithfulness to Scripture demands that we speak about these issues, with clarity and authority.

Our understanding of what the Bible teaches about God is crucial. The Biblical God is Creator and Lord; and yet His sovereignty is sometimes denied, even within the church. For confessing Christians to resist the idea of God's sovereignty in creation or salvation is really to play with pious paganism. Many Christians will have honest questions about God's sovereignty, but a sustained, tenacious denial of God's sovereignty should concern us. To baptize such a person may be to baptize a heart that is in some ways still unbelieving. To admit such a person into membership may be to treat them as if they were trusting God, when in fact they are not.

As dangerous as such resistance is in any Christian, it is more dangerous in the leader of a congregation. To appoint

Resistance to  
God's  
Sovereignty

Leaders Should  
Embrace God's  
Sovereignty

a person as a leader who doubts God's sovereignty or who seriously misunderstands biblical teaching on these matters is to set up as an example a person who may be deeply unwilling to trust God. Such an appointment is bound to hinder the church.

Too often today our culture encourages us to turn evangelism into advertising and explains the Spirit's work in terms of marketing. God Himself is sometimes made over in the image of man. In such times, a healthy church must be especially careful to pray for leaders who have a biblical and an experiential grasp of the sovereignty of God and a commitment to sound doctrine, in its full, biblical glory. A healthy church is marked by expository preaching and by a biblical theology.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Read I Timothy 6:3-5. How does Paul describe a person who teaches "false doctrine?" Why do you think it was so important to Paul that Timothy give his people "sound instruction" and "godly teaching?"

2. The author mentions several doctrines that a person must believe in order to become a member of the church where he serves. He also lists several issues in which the members enjoy considerable liberty of belief. What does a person need to believe in order to become a member of your church? How do those beliefs distinguish your church from others in your area? On what issues does your church allow a measure of liberty?

3. Some doctrines that are unmistakably present in Scripture are often ignored or neglected because they have proven to be difficult, controversial, or even divisive. Is

potential controversy a good reason for us to avoid conversation and instruction about these doctrines in our churches? Why or why not?

4. The author lists four questions on page 19 that have often not received the attention that they deserve. How do you think the Bible answers these questions? Give scriptural references for your answers.

5. Paul writes in Titus 1:9 that the leader of a congregation "must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught." Do you think that it is important for a pastor or elder to understand and embrace God's sovereignty in salvation? What is the danger of a church leader who doubts God's sovereignty in this area or who misunderstands biblical teaching on this matter?

# 3

## A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE GOOD NEWS

- I. The Gospel is the Heart of Christianity
- II. God, Man, Christ, Response
- III. The Gospel is a Radical Offer of Salvation
- IV. Questions for Reflection

# 3

## A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE GOOD NEWS

It is particularly important to have a biblical theology in one special area of a church's life--our understanding of the good news of Jesus Christ, the gospel. The gospel is the heart of Christianity, and so it should be the heart of our faith. All of us as Christians should pray that we would care more about the wonderful good news of salvation through Christ than we do about anything else in the church's life. A healthy church is filled with people who have a heart for the gospel, and having a heart for the gospel means having a heart for the truth--for God's presentation of Himself, of our need, of Christ's provision, and of our responsibility.

The Gospel is  
the Heart of  
Christianity

When I present the gospel to someone, I try to remember four points--God, man, Christ, response. Have I shared with this person the truth about our Holy God and Sovereign Creator? Have I made it clear that we as humans are a strange mixture, creatures made in the image of God and yet fallen, sinful and separated from Him? Does the person I'm talking with understand who Christ is--the God-man, the only mediator between God and man, our substitute and resurrected Lord? And finally, even if I've shared all this with him, does he understand that he must respond to the gospel, that he must believe this message and so turn from his life of self-centeredness and sin?

God, Man,  
Christ,  
Response

To present the gospel as an additive to give non-Christians something they naturally want (joy, peace, happiness, fulfillment, self-esteem, love) is partially true, but only partially true. As J. I. Packer says, "a half truth mas-

The Gospel is  
a Radical  
Offer of  
Salvation

querading as the whole truth becomes a complete untruth." Fundamentally, everyone needs forgiveness. We need spiritual life. To present the gospel less radically than this is to ask for false conversions and increasingly meaningless church membership, both of which make the evangelization of the world around us all the more difficult.

Our church members scattered in our homes, offices and neighborhoods will, this very day, see far more non-Christians, for far longer, than they will ever spend with Christians on a Sunday. Each of us has tremendous news of salvation in Christ. Let's not barter it for something else. And let's share it today! George W. Truett, great Christian leader of the past generation and pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas, said:

The supreme indictment that you can bring against a church . . . is that such a church lacks in passion and compassion for human souls. A church is nothing better than an ethical club if its sympathies for lost souls do not overflow, and if it does not go out to seek to point lost souls to the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

A healthy church knows the gospel, and a healthy church shares it.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. The author believes that we as Christians should care more about the good news of salvation through Christ than we do about anything else in the church's life. Do you agree? Read I Corinthians 2:2. Why is the message of Jesus Christ so important?

2. To have a biblical understanding of the gospel, what does a person need to understand about God? What does a



person need to understand about man and his state under sin? What must a person understand about Christ? According to Jesus in Mark 1:15, what should be man's response to the good news? What is involved in each of the two main parts of that response?

3. The author writes that "to present the gospel less radically than this is to ask for false conversions and increasingly meaningless church membership." What is this "radical" message of the gospel? How does that differ from the way the gospel is sometimes presented as a way for non-Christians to be happier and to feel better about themselves?

4. How does your church measure up to George W. Truett's challenge on page 24? How passionate is your church to share the good news of salvation through Christ with lost people?

# 4

## A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF CONVERSION

- I. Repentance and Faith
- II. Conversion is God's Work in Us
- III. "You're Not One of the Lord's!"
- IV. "Reverse Witness" of the Church
- V. Conversion Evidenced by its Fruits
- VI. Questions for Reflection

# 4

## A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF CONVERSION

At our church's first meeting, back in 1878, we adopted a statement of faith. It was a strengthened version of the 1833 New Hampshire Confession of Faith. This confession became the basis for the Baptist Faith and Message, adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1925 and again, in a revised and weakened version, in 1963. In our statement of faith, Article VIII reads:

Repentance  
and Faith

We believe that Repentance and Faith are sacred duties, and also inseparable graces, wrought in our souls by the regenerating Spirit of God; whereby being deeply convinced of our guilt, danger and helplessness, and of the way of salvation by Christ, we turn to God with unfeigned contrition, confession, and supplication for mercy; at the same time heartily receiving the Lord Jesus Christ as our Prophet, Priest and King, and relying on Him alone as the only and all sufficient Saviour.

Notice what this statement says about our conversion, our turning. We turn because we are "deeply convinced of our guilt, danger and helplessness, and of the way of salvation by Christ." And how does that turning--which is composed of repentance and faith--happen? It is "wrought in our souls by the regenerating Spirit of God." The Statement then cites two Scriptures to support this idea: Acts 11:18, "When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, God has even granted the Gentiles repentance unto life'" and Ephesians

Conversion is  
God's Work in  
Us

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2:8, "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God."

If our conversion is basically understood to be something we do ourselves instead of something God does in us, then we misunderstand it. Conversion certainly includes our action--we must make a sincere commitment, a self-conscious decision. Even so, conversion is much more than that. Scripture is clear in teaching that we are not all journeying to God, some having found the way, while others are still looking. Instead, it presents us as needing to have our hearts replaced, our minds transformed, our spirits given life. None of this we can do. We can make a commitment, but we must be saved. The change each human needs, regardless of how we may outwardly appear, is so radical, so near the root of us, that only God can do it. We need God to convert us.

"You're Not  
One of the  
Lord's!"

I'm reminded of Spurgeon's story of how he was walking in London when a drunken man came up to him, leaned on the lamp-post near him and said, "Hey, Mr. Spurgeon, I'm one of your converts!" To which Spurgeon responded, "You must be one of mine--you're certainly not one of the Lord's!"

"Reverse  
Witness" of  
the Church

One result of misunderstanding the Bible's teaching of conversion may well be that evangelical churches are full of people who have made sincere commitments at one point in their lives, but who evidently have not experienced the radical change which the Bible presents as conversion. According to one recent study by the Southern Baptist Convention, Southern Baptists (my own denomination) have a divorce rate actually above the national average in America. The cause of such a "reverse witness" among the reputed followers of Christ must be, at least in part, unbiblical preaching about conversion.

Conversion  
Evidenced by  
its Fruits

Certainly conversion need not be an emotionally heated experience, but it must evidence itself by its fruit if it is

to be what the Bible regards as true conversion. Understanding the Bible's presentation of conversion is one of the marks of a healthy church.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Read Acts 11:18. What does this passage teach about the ultimate origin of repentance? Is repentance ultimately a result of man's unilateral decision to turn to God, or is it a result of God's regenerating work on the human heart?

2. Read Genesis 6:5 and Romans 8:7. Describe the state of the human heart under sin. How does the Bible represent man's ability to please God or to decide on his own to turn to him?

3. Read Ephesians 2:1-10. God effects a great change in our hearts upon conversion. How does this passage represent that change? Is this something that man could, by great effort, produce in himself?

4. Recent polls report that professing evangelical Christians in America today have a divorce rate that is higher than the national average. What could be one reason for this? What does the Bible teach are some of the evidences, or "fruits," of a regenerating work of the Spirit of God in a person's life?

5. In previous centuries, believers were baptized more normally as they began adulthood (e.g., ages 17-20). What might account for the drop of that age among baptistic Christians in this last century? Why would that be significant?

# 5

## A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF EVANGELISM

- I. Consequences of Neglect
- II. Evangelism Shaped by Understanding of Conversion
- III. Definition of Evangelism
- IV. It is God Who Converts People
- V. When Membership Outstrips Attendance
- VI. Three Truths to Convey
- VII. Resources
- VIII. Questions for Reflection

# 5

## A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF EVANGELISM

To review, we have so far considered among the marks that set a healthy church apart: expositional preaching, biblical theology, and a biblical understanding of the gospel and conversion. One way we can tell how important these are is by considering the consequences for congregations that lose them. Sermons can too easily become trite repetitions of truths already known. Christianity can become indistinguishable from the surrounding secular culture. The gospel can be recast as little more than spiritual self-help. Conversion can degenerate from an act of God to mere human resolve. But such congregations--with shallow preaching, secular thinking, and a self-centered gospel that encourages little more than one-time verbal confessions of Christ (often by misapplying Romans 10:9)--cannot well herald the tremendous news of salvation in Christ.

Consequences  
of Neglect

For all members of the church, but particularly for leaders who have the privilege and responsibility of teaching, a biblical understanding of evangelism is crucial. How someone shares the gospel is, of course, closely related to how someone understands the gospel. If your mind has been shaped by the Bible on God and the gospel, on human need and conversion, then a right understanding of evangelism will naturally follow. We should be more concerned to know and teach the gospel itself, than simply trying to teach people methods and strategies to share it.

Evangelism  
Shaped by  
Understanding  
of Conversion

Biblically, evangelism is presenting the good news freely and trusting God to convert people (see Acts 16:14). "Salvation comes from the Lord" (Jonah 2:9; cf. John 1:12-

Definition of  
Evangelism

## *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*

13). Any way in which we try to force spiritual births will be as effective as Ezekiel trying to stitch the dry bones together, or Nicodemus trying to give himself the new birth. And the result will be similar.

It is God Who  
Converts  
People

If conversion is understood as merely a sincere commitment made once, then we need to get everyone to that point of verbal confession and commitment any way we can. Biblically, though, while we are to care, to plead, and to persuade, our first duty is to be faithful to the obligation we have from God, which is to present the same Good News that He's given to us. God will bring conversions from our presenting this Good News (see John 1:13; Acts 18:9-10).

It is heartening how new Christians often seem innately aware of the gracious nature of their salvation. Probably you have heard testimonies, even in the last few weeks or months, which remind you that conversion is the work of God. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

When  
Membership  
Outstrips  
Attendance

If a church's membership is markedly larger than its attendance, the question should be asked: does that church have a biblical understanding of conversion? Furthermore, we should ask what kind of evangelism has been practiced that would result in such a large number of people who are uninvolved in the life of the church, and yet consider their membership in good standing an evidence of their own salvation? Has the church objected in any way, or has it seemed to condone this situation by silence? Biblical church discipline is part of the church's evangelism.

Three Truths  
to Convey

In my own evangelism, I want to convey three things to people about the decision they must make about the Gospel:

- first, the decision is costly (and therefore must be carefully considered, see Luke 9:62);
- second, the decision is urgent (and therefore must be



made, see John 3:18, 36);

- third, the decision is worth it (and therefore should be made, see John 10:10).

That's the balance we should strive for in our evangelism among our family and friends. That's the balance we should strive for in our evangelism as a whole church.

There are some excellent resources in print about evangelism. For considering the close connection between our understanding of the gospel and the evangelistic methods we use, I recommend Will Metzger's *Tell the Truth* (InterVarsity Press), and Iain Murray's *The Invitation System and Revival and Revivalism* (Banner of Truth Trust).

Resources

Another mark of a healthy church, then, is a biblical understanding and practice of evangelism. The only true growth is the growth that comes from God.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. The author defines evangelism as "presenting the good news freely and trusting God to convert people." How is our evangelism affected by an understanding that it is God who does the work of conversion? What can happen to our evangelism if we convince ourselves that it is ultimately necessary for man to make the choice to convert himself?

2. Is your church's membership much larger than its attendance? If so, what do you think could be the reasons? Does your church's evangelism present the gospel in a balanced, healthy way? What could be done to improve balance?

3. What does the author mean when he says that the decision to follow Christ is "costly?" What does he mean when he says that it is "urgent?" What does he mean when he says that it is "worth it?" What are some scriptural passages that teach these three truths?

# 6

## A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

- I. Membership in the Bible
- II. Membership is Commitment
- III. Big Gap Between Membership and Involvement
- IV. Membership is a Responsibility
- V. Membership is a Corporate Testimony to Salvation
- VI. Meaningful Membership
- VII. Questions for Reflection

# 6

## A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

In one sense what we know today as "church membership" is not biblical. We have no record of first-century Christians who lived, say, in central Jerusalem deciding to become involved in one particular assembly of Christians rather than another. From what we can tell, there was no church shopping because there was only one church in a community. In that sense, we know of no list of church members in the New Testament. But there are lists of people connected with the church in the New Testament. These are either widows supported by the church (I Timothy 5) or the names in the Lamb's Book of Life (Philippians 4:3; Revelation 21:27). And there are passages in the New Testament which imply definition and clear boundaries to a church's membership. Churches knew those who composed their membership. For example, Paul's letters to the Corinthian church show that some individuals were to be excluded (e.g., I Cor. 5) and that some were to be included (e.g., II Cor. 2). In this latter example, Paul even mentions a "majority" of people (II Cor. 2:6) who were referred to as having "inflicted the punishment" of exclusion from the church. This "majority" could only be referring to a majority of the group of people who were recognized as the church's members.

Membership  
in the Bible

The practice among Christians of church membership has developed as an attempt to help us grasp hold of each other in responsibility and love. By identifying ourselves with a particular church, we let the pastors and other members of that local church know that we intend to be com-

Membership is  
Commitment

## *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*

mitted in attendance, giving, prayer and service. We increase others' expectations of us in these areas, and we make it known that we are the responsibility of this local church. We assure the church of our commitment to Christ in serving with them, and we call for their commitment to serve us in love and to encourage us in our discipleship.

In this sense, church membership is a biblical idea. It comes from, among other things, Paul's use of body imagery about the local church. It comes from Christ's saving us by His grace and placing us in churches to serve Him in love as we serve others. It comes from our mutual obligations as spelled out in Scripture's "together" and "one another" passages. All of these are encapsulated in the covenant of a healthy church (see appendix).

It should come as no surprise that bringing our understandings of evangelism, conversion and the gospel more in line with the Bible has implications for the way we conceive of church membership. We will begin to view membership less as a loose affiliation useful only on occasion and more as a regular responsibility involving us in one another's lives for the purposes of the gospel.

It is not uncommon to find a big gap between a church's membership and the number of those actively involved. Imagine a church of 3,000 members with only 600 in regular attendance. I fear that many evangelical pastors today would be more proud of the stated membership than distressed by the attendance. According to one recent Southern Baptist Convention study, this is normal in Southern Baptist churches. The typical Southern Baptist church has 233 members and 70 at the Sunday morning worship service. Is our giving any better? Which congregations have budgets that equal--let alone exceed--10% of the combined annual incomes of their members?

Except where physical limitations prevent attendance or financial burdens prevent giving, wouldn't this situation

Big Gap  
Between  
Membership  
and  
Involvement

Membership is  
a Responsibility

suggest that membership has been presented as not necessarily entailing involvement? Yet what do such numbers of members mean? Written numbers can be idols as easily as carved figures--perhaps more easily. But it is God who will assess our lives, and He will weigh our work, I think, rather than count our numbers. If the church is a building, then we must be bricks in it; if the church is a body, then we are its members; if the church is the household of faith, it presumes we are part of that household. Sheep are in a flock, and branches on a vine. Biblically, if one is a Christian he must be a member of a church. Leaving aside the concrete particulars for a moment--whether membership lists are kept on white cards or on computer disks--we must not forsake our regular assembling (Hebrews 10:25). This membership is not simply the record of a statement we once made or of affection toward a familiar place. It must be the reflection of a living commitment, or it is worthless, and worse than worthless, it is dangerous.

Uninvolved members confuse both real members and non-Christians about what it means to be a Christian. And “active” members do the voluntarily “inactive” members no service when they allow them to remain members of the church; for membership is the church’s corporate endorsement of a person’s salvation. Again, this must be clearly understood: membership in a church is that church’s corporate testimony to the individual member’s salvation. Yet how can a congregation honestly testify that someone invisible to it is faithfully running the race? If members have left our company and have not gone to any other Bible-believing church, what evidence do we give that they were ever part of us? We do not necessarily know that such uninvolved people are not Christians; we may simply be unable to affirm that they are. We don’t have to tell them that we know they’re going to Hell, only that we can’t tell them that we know they are going to Heaven.

Membership is  
a Corporate  
Testimony to  
Salvation

For a church to practice biblical church membership requires not perfection, but honesty. It calls not for bare decisions, but for real discipleship. It is made up not of individual experiences alone, but of corporate affirmations by those in covenant with God and with each other. Personally, I hope to see the membership numbers of the church I serve become more meaningful, as all who are members in name become members in fact. For many, this has meant having their names leave our rolls (though not our hearts). For others, it has meant a renewed commitment to the life of our church. New members are being instructed in the faith and in the life of our church. Many of our current members need similar instruction and encouragement. As we have sought to become the healthy Baptist church we were historically, our number in attendance has once again exceeded the number of members. Surely this should be your desire for your church as well.

A recovered practice of careful church membership will have many benefits. It will make our witness to non-Christians more clear. It will make it more difficult for weaker sheep to go straying from the fold, while still considering themselves sheep. It will help to give shape and focus to the discipleship of more mature Christians. It will aid our church leaders in knowing exactly who they are responsible for. In all of this, God will be glorified.

Pray that church membership may come to mean something more than it currently does, so that we can better know those for whom we're responsible, so that we can pray for them, encourage them and challenge them. We should not allow people to keep their membership in our churches for sentimental reasons. Considered biblically, such membership is no membership at all. In our church's covenant we also pledge that "We will, when we move from this place, as soon as possible unite with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the

principles of God's Word." This commitment is part of healthy discipleship, particularly in our transient age.

Church membership means being incorporated in practical ways into the body of Christ. It means traveling together as aliens and strangers in this world as we head to our heavenly home. Certainly another mark of a healthy church is a biblical understanding of church membership.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Does the Bible make explicit mention of membership rolls in a local church? Where is it implicit? Read I Corinthians 12:14-26. How can church membership help us as Christians to live out these obligations we have to one another as Christ's body?

2. The author writes that we should view church membership "less as a loose affiliation useful only on occasion and more as a regular responsibility involving us in one another's lives for the purposes of the gospel." In light of that statement, how do most of your members view their membership? What are the responsibilities of a church member? How can the fulfillment of those responsibilities contribute to the work of the gospel?

3. The author believes that church membership must be the reflection of a living commitment to Christ, or else it is worthless and even dangerous. Why might that be true? What does a living commitment to Christ and His church look like?

4. Church membership, the author writes, is a church's corporate testimony to an individual member's salvation. Read Hebrew 13:17. The Bible teaches that church leaders will be required to "give an account" for those under their

*Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*

care. Do you think this "account" will simply be a statement that a person once made a decision for Christ, or is it a knowledgeable testimony that a person is faithfully bearing fruit in the gospel? How does this affect our understanding of who should be on our membership rolls?

5. The author lists several benefits of carefully guarding our church membership rolls. How would a biblical understanding of church membership make our witness to non-Christians clearer? How would it make it more difficult for weaker Christians to stray while still considering themselves Christians? How would it help to give shape and focus to the discipleship of mature Christians?



*Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*

# 7

## BIBLICAL CHURCH DISCIPLINE

- I. God Demands Holiness
- II. Judging
- III. God Expects the Church to Judge
- IV. Close Front Door, Open Back Door
- V. Bringing in New Members
- VI. Doing Discipline Responsibly
- VII. Five Reasons for Corrective Discipline
- VIII. Questions for Reflection

# 7

## BIBLICAL CHURCH DISCIPLINE

The seventh mark of a healthy church is the regular practice of church discipline. A biblical practice of church discipline gives meaning to being a member of the church. Though it has been commonly practiced by churches since Christ, it has now faded out of regular, evangelical church life in the last few generations.

We humans were originally made to bear God's image, to be witnesses of God's character to His creation (Genesis 1:27). So it is no surprise that throughout the Old Testament, as God fashioned a people for Himself, he instructed them in holiness, that their character might better approximate His own (see Leviticus 19:2; Proverbs 24:1, 25). This was the basis for correcting and even excluding some from the community in the Old Testament (as in Numbers 15:30-31), and it is the basis for shaping the New Testament church as well (see II Corinthians 6:14-7:1; 13:2; I Timothy 6:3-5; II Timothy 3:1-5).

God Demands  
Holiness

Yet this whole idea seems very negative to people today. After all, didn't our Lord Jesus forbid judging in Matthew 7:1? Certainly Jesus did forbid judging in one sense in Matthew 7:1; but in that same gospel, Jesus also very clearly called us to rebuke others for sin, even to the extent of rebuking them publicly (Matthew 18:15-17; cf. Luke 17:3). So whatever Jesus meant by forbidding judging in Matthew 7:1, He certainly did not mean to rule out everything conveyed by the English word "judging."

Judging

God Himself is a judge. He was in the Garden of Eden, and we remain under His just judgment as long as we remain in our sins. In the Old Testament, God judged both

nations and individuals, and in the New Testament we Christians are warned that our works will be judged (see I Corinthians 3). In love God disciplines His children, and in wrath He will condemn the ungodly (see Hebrews 12). Of course, on the final day, God will reveal Himself as the ultimate Judge (see Revelation 20). In all of this judging, God is never wrong, He is always righteous (see Joshua 7; Matthew 23; Luke 2; Acts 5; Romans 9).

God Expects  
the Church to  
Judge

It comes as a surprise to many today to learn that God intends others to judge as well. The state is given responsibility to judge (see Romans 13). We are told to judge ourselves (see I Corinthians 11:28; Hebrews 4; II Peter 1:5). We are also told to judge one another in the church (though not in the final way God judges). Jesus' words in Matthew 18, Paul's in I Corinthians 5-6, and many other passages clearly show that the church is to exercise judgment within itself and that this judgment is for redemptive, not revengeful purposes (Romans 12:19). In the case of the adulterous man in Corinth, and of the false teachers in Ephesus, Paul said that they should be excluded from the church and handed over to Satan so that they might be taught better and so that their souls might be saved (see I Corinthians 5; I Timothy 1).

It's not surprising that we should be instructed to judge. After all, if we cannot say how a Christian does not live, how can we say how he or she does live? One of my concerns about many churches' discipleship programs is that they are like pouring water into leaking buckets--all the attention is given to what is poured in, with no thought for how it is received and kept.

Close Front  
Door, Open  
Back Door

One church growth writer has recently summed up his advice on helping a church to grow: "Open the front door and close the back door." By this, he means that we should work to make the church more accessible to people and do a better job of follow-up. Both of these goals are good. Yet,

most pastors today already aspire to have churches with such front doors open and back doors closed. Instead, attempting to follow a biblical model should lead us to this strategy: “Close the front door and open the back door.” In other words, make it more difficult to join on the one hand, and easier to be excluded on the other. Such actions will help the church to recover its divinely intended, winsome distinction from the world.

This discipline should be first reflected in the way we as churches take in new members. Do we ask that those becoming members be known to us to be living Christ-honoring lives? Do we understand the seriousness of the commitment that we are making to them and that they are making to us? If we are more careful about how we recognize and receive new members, we will have less occasion to practice corrective church discipline later.

Of course, any kind of church discipline can be done badly. In the New Testament, we are taught not to judge others for the motives which we impute to them (see Matthew 7:1), or to judge each other about matters which are not essential (see Romans 14-15). This issue is fraught with problems in pastoral application, but we must remember that the whole of the Christian life is difficult, and open to abuse. Our difficulties should not be used as an excuse to leave either unpracticed. Each local church has a responsibility to judge the life and teaching of its leaders, and even of its members, particularly in so far as either could compromise the church’s witness to the gospel (see Acts 17; I Corinthians 5; I Timothy 3; James 3:1; II Peter 3; II John).

Biblical church discipline is simple obedience to God and a simple confession that we need help. Here are five positive reasons for such corrective church discipline. Its purpose is positive (1) for the individual disciplined, (2) for other Christians as they see the danger of sin, (3) for the health of the church as a whole and (4) for the corporate

Bringing in  
New  
Members

Doing  
Discipline  
Responsibly

Five Reasons  
for Corrective  
Discipline

witness of the church. Most of all, (5) our holiness is to reflect the holiness of God. It should mean something to be a member of the church, not for our pride's sake, but for God's name's sake. Biblical church discipline is another mark of a healthy church.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Read John 5:27-30. To whom has the Father granted authority to judge? Now read Matthew 18:15-17. To whom has Jesus delegated the authority to judge in this world? Has the church faithfully administered this charge that our Lord has given us?

2. Read I Corinthians 5:1-2. What action does Paul say the Corinthian church should have taken regarding this sinful church member? Now read verse 3-5. By whose authority (in whose name) is the church to act? What is the ultimate hope of such action? Do you think Paul thought of church discipline as a heartless and cruel action, or a loving action that would benefit a person's soul?

3. One writer has said that Christians should "Open the front door of the church and close the back door." What does that statement mean? The author says that instead we should "Close the front door and open the back door." Which do you think is the more biblical idea? Which idea do you think would more readily tend toward a healthy church membership?

4. Read Romans 14:1-4. What are some ways that church discipline could be open to abuse? Spend some time thinking about how your church could faithfully and carefully fulfill our Lord's charge in Matthew 18:15-17 while guarding against abuses.

*Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*

# 8

## A CONCERN FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP AND GROWTH

- I. Christian Growth
- II. Holiness is Evidence of Growth
- III. Neglect of Discipline Impedes Growth
- IV. A Community Growing Together
- V. Appearances of Growth
- VI. God is Glorified in Growth
- VII. Questions for Reflection



# 8

## A CONCERN FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP AND GROWTH

Another distinguishing mark of a healthy church is a pervasive concern with church growth—not simply with growing numbers, but with growing members. Some today think that one can be a “baby Christian” for a whole lifetime. Growth is seen to be an optional extra for particularly zealous disciples. But growth is a sign of life. Growing trees are living trees, and growing animals are living animals. Growth involves increase and advance. In many areas of our experience, when something stops growing it dies.

Christian  
Growth

Paul hoped the Corinthians would grow in their Christian faith (II Corinthians 10:15). The Ephesians, he hoped, would “grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ” (Ephesians 4:15; cf. Colossians 1:10; II Thessalonians 1:3). Peter exhorted some early Christians to, “like newborn babes, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation” (I Peter 2:2). It is tempting for pastors to reduce their churches to manageable statistics of attendance, baptisms, giving and membership, where growth is tangible; however, such statistics fall far short of the true growth which Paul describes and God desires.

In his *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, Jonathan Edwards suggested that true growth in Christian discipleship is not finally mere excitement, increasing use of religious language, or growing knowledge of Scripture. It is not even an evident increase in joy or in love or concern for the church. Even increases in zeal and praise to God and con-

Holiness is  
Evidence of  
Growth

## *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*

vidence of one's own faith are not infallible evidences of true Christian growth. What is? According to Edwards, while all these may be evidences of true Christian growth, the only certain observable sign is a life of increasing holiness, rooted in Christian self-denial. The church should be marked by a vital concern for this kind of increasing godliness in the lives of its members.

Neglect of  
Discipline  
Impedes  
Growth

As we saw in the seventh mark, one of the unintended consequences of a church's neglect of proper discipline is increased difficulty in growing disciples. In an undisciplined church, examples are unclear and models are confused. No gardener sets out to plant weeds. Weeds are in themselves undesirable, and they can have bad effects on the plants around them. God's plan for the local church does not allow us to leave weeds unchecked.

A Community  
Growing  
Together

Good influences in a covenant community of believers can be tools in God's hand for growing His people. As God's people are built up and grow together in holiness and self-giving love, they should improve their ability to administer discipline and to encourage discipleship. The church has an obligation to be a means of God's growing people in grace. If instead they are places where only the pastor's thoughts are taught, where God is questioned more than He is worshipped, where the gospel is diluted and evangelism perverted, where church membership is made meaningless, and a worldly cult of personality is allowed to grow up around the pastor, then one can hardly expect to find a community that is either cohesive or edifying. Such a church certainly will not glorify God.

Appearances  
of Growth

God is glorified by churches that are growing. That growth can appear in many different ways: through growing numbers being called to missions; by older members beginning to get a fresh sense of their responsibility in evangelism; by funerals many of the younger members of the congregation attend simply out of their love for the older

members; by increased praying, and desire for increased preaching; by church meetings characterized by genuinely spiritual conversation; by increased giving, and by givers giving more sacrificially; by more members sharing the gospel with others; by parents rediscovering their responsibility to educate their children in the faith. These are just a few examples of the kind of church growth Christians pray and work for.

When we do see a church that is composed of members growing in Christ-likeness, who gets the credit or glory? “God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow” (I Corinthians 3:6b-7; cf. Colossians 2:19). So Peter’s final benediction to those early Christians he wrote to was a prayer couched in the imperative: “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen” (II Peter 3:18). We might think that our growth would bring glory to ourselves. But Peter knew better. “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (I Peter 2:12). He obviously remembered Jesus’ words, “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds”—and surely here we would think that it would be only natural to fall into the trap of self-admiration, but Jesus continued—“and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). Working to promote Christian discipleship and growth is another mark of a healthy church.

God is  
Glorified in  
Growth

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Read I Peter 2:1-3. What is Peter’s hope for these Christians? What does he mean by “grow up” in salvation?

## *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*

2. Some people believe that "church growth" means only growth in numbers. Read Acts 2:41. Why do you think the number of converts was recorded? Now read the rest of chapter 2. Would the great numbers of converts have been glorifying to God if they had not also been growing in holiness? Why or why not?

3. The author writes that weeds can have bad effects on the plants around them. In what ways can undisciplined, sinful church members negatively affect the growth of Christians around them? How can good influences in a church be tools in God's hand for growing His people? Can you think of some examples in your own church?

4. What are some ways that God is glorified by a spiritually maturing church? How many of these things do you see consistently in the life of your own church?

*Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*

# 9

## BIBLICAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP

- I. The Biblical Office of Elder
- II. Brief History of Elders
- III. The Congregation is the Final Authority
- IV. All Elders are "Teaching Elders"
- V. Plurality of Elders
- VI. Distinct Role of the Pastor
- VII. Benefits of a Plurality of Elders
- VIII. Confusion of Elders and Deacons
- IX. Questions for Reflection

# 9

## BIBLICAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP

What kind of leadership does a healthy church have? A congregation, committed to Christ, gifted to serve? Yes. Deacons who are models of service in the affairs of the church? Yes. A pastor who is faithful in preaching the Word of God? Yes. But biblically, there is something else as well that is part of the leadership of a healthy church: elders.

The Biblical  
Office of Elder

As a pastor, I pray that Christ will place within our fellowship men whose spiritual gifts and pastoral concern indicate that God has called them to be elders or overseers (the words are used interchangeably in the Bible; e.g., Acts 20). I pray that God will grow and gift such disciples for the work of the pastoral oversight of our congregation and its teaching. If it becomes clear that God has so gifted a certain man in the church, and if, after prayer, the church recognizes his gifts, then he should be set apart as an elder.

All churches have had individuals who performed the functions of elders, even if they've called them by other names. The two New Testament names for this office were *episcopos* (overseer) and *presbuteros* (elder). When evangelicals hear the word "elder," many immediately think "Presbyterian," yet the first Congregationalists back in the sixteenth century taught that eldership was an office in a New Testament church. Elders could be found in Baptist churches in America throughout the 18th century and into the 19th century. In fact, the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention, W. B. Johnson, wrote a treatise in which he called for the practice of having a plurality of elders to be recognized as biblical and to be followed in more Baptist churches. Johnson's plea went unheeded. Whether through inattention to Scripture, or the pressure

Brief History  
of Elders

of life on the frontier, where churches were springing up at an amazing rate, the practice of cultivating such textured leadership declined. But Baptist papers' discussion of reviving this biblical office continued. As late as the early twentieth century, Baptist publications were referring to leaders by the title of "elder."

The  
Congregation  
is the Final  
Authority

Baptists and Presbyterians have had two basic differences in their understandings of elders. First and most fundamentally, Baptists are congregationalists. That is, they understand that the final discernment on matters rests not with the elders in a congregation (or beyond, as in the Presbyterian model) but with the congregation as a whole. Baptists, therefore, stress the consensual nature of church action. So, in a Baptist church, elders and all other boards and committees act in what is finally an advisory capacity to the whole congregation.

A further note is in order about the authority of the assembled congregation. Nothing other than the local, assembled congregation is the final court of appeal under Christ. Again and again in the New Testament, we find evidence for what seemed to be an early form of congregationalism. In Matthew 18 when Jesus was teaching his disciples about confronting the sinful brother, the final court is not the elders, nor a bishop or pope, nor a council or convention. The final court is the congregation. In Acts 6, the apostles gave the decision for the deacons over to the congregation.

In Paul's letters, too, we find evidence of this assumption of the congregation's final responsibility. In I Corinthians 5, Paul blamed not the pastor, elders or deacons, but the congregation for tolerating sin. In II Corinthians 2, Paul referred to what a majority of them had done in disciplining an erring member. In Galatians, Paul called on the congregations to judge the teaching they had been hearing. In II Timothy 4, Paul reproved not just the



false teachers, but also those who paid them to teach what their itching ears wanted to hear. Elders lead, but they do so, biblically and necessarily, within the bounds recognized by the congregation.

The second disagreement is over elders' roles and responsibilities. Presbyterians have tended to stress Paul's statement to Timothy in I Timothy 5:17, "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching." The last phrase, some argued, clearly suggested that there would be elders whose main job was not to preach or teach, but rather to govern or rule. This is the origin of the distinction between "ruling elders" (lay elders) and "teaching elders" (ministers) among Presbyterians.

All Elders are  
"Teaching  
Elders"

But "especially" is a questionable translation of the word *malista*, which in this context is better rendered "certainly" or "particularly." Earlier in I Timothy 4:10, we read, "We have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially (*malista*) of those who believe." Paul seems to be saying that as many people will be saved without believing as will direct the affairs of the church without preaching and teaching: in other words, none.

Baptists have tended to stress the interchangeability of the terms "elder," "overseer," and "pastor" in the New Testament, and have pointed out that in I Timothy 3:2, Paul clearly told Timothy that elders must be "apt to teach." And he wrote to Titus that an elder "must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Titus 1:9). Baptists, therefore, have often denied the appropriateness of having elders who are not capable of teaching Scripture.

What eighteenth-century Baptists and Presbyterians often agreed upon, however, was that there should be a plurality of elders in each local church. Though it never sug-

Plurality of  
Elders

gests a specific number of elders for a particular congregation, the New Testament clearly refers to "elders" in the plural in local churches (e.g., Acts 14:23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; Titus 1:5; James 5:14). My own experience confirms to me the usefulness of following the New Testament practice of having, where possible, more elders in a local church than simply a lone pastor, and having them be people rooted in the congregation. This practice is unusual among Baptist churches today, but there is a growing trend--and for good reason. It was needed in New Testament churches, and it is needed now.

Distinct Role  
of the Pastor

This does not mean that the pastor has no distinctive role. There are many references in the New Testament to preaching and preachers that would not apply to all the elders in a congregation. So in Corinth, Paul gave himself exclusively to preaching in a way that lay elders in a church could not (Acts 18:5; cf. I Corinthians 9:14; I Timothy 4:13; 5:17). Preachers seemed to move to an area expressly to preach (Romans 10:14-15), whereas elders seemed to be already part of the community (Titus 1:5). (For more on this distinction, see *A Display of God's Glory*, [CCR: 2001].)

Benefits of a  
Plurality of  
Elders

We must, however, remember that the preacher, or pastor, is also fundamentally one of the elders of his congregation. This means that decisions involving the church, yet not requiring the attention of all the members, should fall not to the pastor alone, but to the elders as a whole. While this is sometimes cumbersome, it has the immense benefits of rounding out the pastor's gifts, making up for some of his defects, supplementing his judgment, and creating support in the congregation for decisions, leaving leaders less exposed to unjust criticism. It also makes leadership more rooted and permanent, and allows for more mature continuity. It encourages the church to take more responsibility for its own spirituality and helps make the church less dependent on its employees.

Many modern churches have tended to confuse elders with either the church staff or the deacons. Deacons, too, fill a New Testament office, one rooted in Acts 6. While any absolute distinction between the two offices is difficult, the concerns of the deacons are the practical details of church life: administration, maintenance, and the care of church members with physical needs. In many churches today, deacons have taken some spiritual role; but much has simply been left to the pastor. It would be to the benefit of the church to again distinguish the role of elder from that of deacon.

Confusion of  
Elders and  
Deacons

Eldership is the biblical office I hold as a pastor: I am the main preaching elder. But all the elders should work together for the edification of the church, meeting regularly to pray and to discuss, or to form recommendations for the deacons or the church. Clearly, this is a biblical idea that has practical value. If implemented in our churches, it could help pastors immensely by removing weight from their shoulders and even their own petty tyrannies from their churches. Indeed, the practice of recognizing godly, discerning, trusted laymen as elders is another mark of a healthy church.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Read Matthew 18:15-17. Whom does Jesus recognize as the final court of appeal in the judgment of an offending brother? Now read Acts 6:1-4. Whom do the apostles charge with choosing the seven deacons? Read also II Corinthians 2:6. By whom was the punishment of this man inflicted? What do these passages seem to imply about where final authority over church matters rests?

2. Read Titus 1:5. Understanding that final authority in the church rests with the assembled congregation, why

## *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*

do you think Paul nevertheless thought it wise to have elders in every church?

3. In I Timothy 3:1-6, Paul gives a list of the qualifications for an elder. Spend some time thinking about why those character traits are important in the leader of a church. Who in your church fits these qualifications?

4. Read Acts 6:1-4. What is the difference between the role of a deacon and the role of one who oversees the affairs of the church? Does your church recognize that difference in its government?

5. From Acts 6 we learn that the task of the deacons was to take care of the physical needs of the church, thus freeing the overseers of the church (apostles, elders, pastors) to attend to prayer and the ministry of the Word. What are some of the ongoing physical needs of your church that could be met by a deacon? What other roles might the deacons play in preserving the unity of the church or supporting the ministers of the Word in your church?

## CONCLUSION

When we can rightly assume that those within a church are regenerated, and that those who are regenerated are committed to the church, then the New Testament images of the church can be vividly illustrated in our congregations. In His goodness, God has called us to live out the Christian life together, as our mutual love and care reflect the love and care of God. Relationships imply commitment in the world: surely they imply no less in the church.

In the third commandment (Exodus 20:7; Deuteronomy 5:11), God warned His people not to take His name in vain. Far from simply prohibiting profanity, this command prohibited taking God's name upon oneself in vain, emptily, to no purpose, or to a wrong purpose.

This command is for us in the church. Many churches today are sick. We mistake selfish gain for spiritual growth. We mistake mere excitement for true worship. We treasure worldly acceptance rather than live so as to incur worldly opposition. Regardless of their statistical profiles, too many churches today seem unconcerned about the very biblical marks that should distinguish a vital, growing church.

The health of the church should be the concern of all Christians, particularly of those who are called to be leaders in the church. Our churches are to display God and His glorious Gospel to His creation. We are to bring Him glory by our lives together. This burden of display is our awesome responsibility and it is our tremendous privilege.

APPENDIX

## A TYPICAL COVENANT OF A HEALTHY CHURCH

Having, as we trust, been brought by Divine Grace to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and to give up ourselves to Him, and having been baptized upon our profession of faith, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we do now, relying on His gracious aid, solemnly and joyfully renew our covenant with each other.

We will work and pray for the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

We will walk together in brotherly love, as becomes the members of a Christian Church; exercise an affectionate care and watchfulness over each other and faithfully admonish and entreat one another as occasion may require.

We will not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, nor neglect to pray for ourselves and others.

We will endeavor to bring up such as may at any time be under our care, in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and by a pure and loving example to seek the salvation of our family and friends.

We will rejoice at each other's happiness, and endeavor with tenderness and sympathy to bear each other's burdens and sorrows.

We will seek, by Divine aid, to live carefully in the world, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, and remembering that, as we have been voluntarily buried by baptism and raised again from the symbolic grave, so there is on us a special obligation now to lead a new and holy life.

We will work together for the continuance of a faithful evangelical ministry in this church, as we sustain its wor-

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ship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines. We will contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the Gospel through all nations.

We will, when we move from this place, as soon as possible unite with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's Word.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

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