



Part Two in the series: *"Towards a Christocentric Ecclesiology, or A Christ Centered Church"*

What makes a Church A Biblical Church?

Obviously we live in a day where the term "Pluralism" describes the many and varied approaches to philosophy, morality, politics and religion. This is no where more evident than in the way we do Church. The problem with this is that God doesn't appear to share a pluralistic value system. He is what many would derogatively refer to as "bigoted," meaning He believes He knows "The" truth, "The" way, and "The" life, and promotes His way exclusively. For many this feels arrogant, controlling and unduly narrow in perspective. To this I'm certain He has little concern, since He "knows" what is right and what is wrong, in the many pluralistic approaches to life.

We on the other hand are not God, and while we attempt to access the mind of Christ for all of life, we recognize our ability to do so, with perfect accuracy, is limited by our carnality, our maturity, our failure to fully embrace the cross, and the struggle we have in following Him daily to the fullest extent. Yet, and this is such an important "yet," we are called to do things "His" way. We are not given the luxury of deciding which parts of the bible we will obey and which one's we will adjust to suit our preferences or enhance our comfort zones.

With this in mind, as we consider Jesus' perspective on what a biblical Church would look like, we are attempting to do so in more or less absolute ways, as His ways are not subject to variation, yet in doing so we recognize it is always possible we have "missed God" in some aspects and do our best to remain humbly open to His continued guidance, while believing there is "a way" to do Church that most closely reflects His thinking on the matter.

Towards these ends you will find an approach we believe He is showing us, to which we are rather rigidly committed to, yet wanting to remain open to Him for adjustment.

Here are the distinctive elements that we see that make a Church a biblical Church:

1. The Headship of Christ.

The Headship of Jesus Christ and His central position in the Church's life, is the singular key element of true Church, as defined by Christ and His apostles. According to the apostles the headship of Jesus is only possible in an environment where non hierarchical human government exists, and full divine hierarchy is honored. Each fellowship committed itself to the Lord and to each other, and desired, in every aspect to understand what Jesus' desire was for the development of His Church, and became accountable to Him and each member towards those ends. The Headship of Jesus Christ is the supreme issue of true Church. (Those comfortable in any way with the approach that utilizes human headship, will not be comfortable with the strong emphasis we will make, in this study, regarding Jesus' headship alone. All other forms of headship are at best human error and at worst full heresy.) Ephesians 4:15

His headship is theologically defined by recognizing that each Church is His Church, and according to apostolic design we see Jesus functioning as its heavenly and local authority.

His headship is practically defined by acknowledging that when the body comes together He is more than willing and able to guide each aspect of the gathering, and as each member consciously submits every aspect of the gathering to Him He will bring forth scripture, exhortation, and spiritual gifts, and thus edify them through His Spirit. Each member simply needs to acknowledge His presence and His desire to do so, and then attempt to bring forth only that which they truly believe to be initiated by His Spirit. Of course our accuracy in this process will falter at times, but as we are dedicated to this process His presence will guide with greater consistency.

2. Met in Homes.

They generally met in homes, and at times for special training purposes rented a hall to gather larger numbers, though when it came to defining where the Church gathered it was always expressed as being in the homes of believers. The general pattern for the gathered Church was in the home. They built no Church buildings and established a concept of Church that would be violated by such an approach to Church. The very nature of Church, as established by the apostles was small family oriented gatherings of brothers and sisters knowing one another, growing to know Christ, contributing to the times of gathering, eating together, and caring for each others needs. Home gatherings required no hierarchy, whereas Churches in buildings end up requiring hierarchy, due to utilizing the corporation business model with all its complexities and financial dimensions, which violates the direct rule of Jesus in their midst. The moment that Church mortgages are entered into, staff is hired, and salaries established, then human policies, human rules of business practice, and human agendas are set in place. In each of these elements human hierarchy is necessitated and at that point divine hierarchy begins to be driven further into the recesses of Church life.

Here is one overly simplified example of why the business model fails the Church. In the business world, when I establish a business and hire employees, to be a good steward of that business I must set salaries, establish a set of business codes and practices, require a set number of hours for full or part time employment, and clear policies for running that business. This works well in a standard business but fails in the purely spiritual environment of Church. For example, what if a given employee of the Church was hired to work from 8:00 AM to 3:00 PM, Monday through Friday, but the Holy Spirit needed them to arrive at 10:00 AM and still get off at 3:00 PM and still receive full income, because He needed them to disciple a new believer who was struggling in the ways of God, from 8:00 AM to 9:00 AM? Obviously we are going to have conflict. At every point where a Church is run like a business such conflicts arise again and again, with continual requirements for modification, yet always leaving the final decision up to the hierarchical employer (Senior Pastor) rather the Holy Spirit. Because of this we believe the apostles established an environment in the Church that purposely did not utilize any of the traditional business models for its approach, thus leaving Jesus as the functional and practical head of all details of His Church. Romans 16:3-5; Acts 19:9

3. Often met from House to House.

They tended to meet from house-to-house, rather than always in just one home, though surely this varied at times and in certain areas. It strengthens community as well as a wide variety of good purposes. Because the evidence of the early Church is that they experienced community with one another, met daily from house to house, the concept of the ritualization of Church on one specific day of gathering was avoided by them. Those who labor to prove that Sunday was

their chosen day of gathering favor this approach due to religious and ceremonially ritualistic reasons, from very obscure passages in the New Testament, rather than the clear teaching of Scripture. The clear pattern was “daily” and “from house to house.” For 1850 years the Church has gathered according to the concept of a “service time,” rather than as a living family that relates to each other daily. The notion of a single day, as opposed to daily, is due to the professionalization and corporatization of Church, and the loss of intimate family relations. We believe the Lord very much desires to restore the element of family and brotherhood to His Church. Acts 2:46; 5:42

4. Shared Life Community.

They experienced “Shared life Community” with one another. In other words, whereas the traditional church tends to meet on Sunday or perhaps one more day a week, the early church practiced a host of “one anothers” by developing a shared life experience with one another that spanned far beyond just a formal meeting they attended. They grew to know one another, serve and love one another, and spent time between meetings deepening relationships and caring for one another. Romans 12:10

In the traditional Church “commitment” tends to be defined by “commitment to attend a specific Church service with great regularity.” In biblical Church, “commitment” relates to the commitment each member of the local body expresses first and foremost to a dedicated life of a disciple before Christ, and then flowing from that a deep relational and spiritual commitment to each member of the local body. One of the defining elements of true biblical Church is this aspect of commitment. Those who favor a free floating approach to Church, where location and time of gathering, as well as strong ties to one specific group of believers, is de-emphasized, do so at the expense of honoring the clear apostolic design evident in the book of Acts and Pauline literature.

5. Open Meetings.

Their gathering times were completely open and spontaneous, with no one leading from the front. All were encouraged to participate - no spectators, which again evidences the need for small gatherings so all will be able to participate. Their understanding was that the Holy Spirit would direct their times together, and it was their job to give way to His leadership and the manifestations of Christ that He chose to bring among the body. Undoubtedly there were exceptions to this approach, and a guest speaker would likely have been accorded a higher degree of freedom to share a complete teaching without much interruption, but even in those cases we believe dialogue would have followed such times of teaching. 1 Corinthians 14:26; Acts 20:7, as well as the entire ministry example of Jesus with His disciples.

Their gatherings were characterized by at least 7 regular elements:

- 1) Spirit led prayer - Acts 12:12
- 2) Spontaneous flow of the Spirit - 1 Corinthians 14
- 3) Eating the Lord’s supper as a full meal - 1 Corinthians 11
- 4) Singing in Psalms, hymns, and spiritual new songs - Ephesians 5
- 5) Teaching doctrine, revelational truth, and reading scripture - 1 Timothy 4 & 5
- 6) Exhortations - 1 Timothy 4 & 5
- 7) Water Baptisms - Romans 6

6. Lord’s Supper as a Full Meal.

They ate the Lord's Supper as a full and shared meal. Again, the elements of small and family

orientation are evident in this approach. This understanding alone, of the manner in which the early Christians gathered, tells us so much of how they valued community and family. 1 Corinthians 11

7. Church as a Family not a Business.

They understood each Church to be an extended family unit (the idea of churches being institutions, businesses, or organizations would have been completely alien to them). As such they referred to one another as brothers and sisters. There is not a shred of evidence they used anything like a “corporation” model to define their gatherings. Matthew 12:46-50; 23:8-12

8. Non-Hierarchical plural Leadership.

They practiced non-hierarchical plural leadership that had arisen from within the church they would subsequently lead. This indigenous oversight (elder, pastor/ shepherd, bishop/overseer being synonymous terms in the New Testament) sought to lead consensually, and was understood to be purely functional, and not in any way positional. Consensual government is a very workable form of government if, and only if, all agree to honor the place of the Living and written Word of Jesus coming forth as the sole authority for faith and practice among the saints. The Church was not led by congregational rule, but by “Agreement” rule. All sought to know the mind of Christ for their fellowships and to walk together in Agreement with Him. This was their understanding of “maintaining Holy Spirit unity and the resultant bond of peace.” (Eph. 4:3) Dictatorship was unnecessary and would have been seen as a usurping of Jesus’ authority. They had complete confidence in the authority of the Word. They did not use titles for their leadership, thus you would not have heard "Apostle Paul," or "Elder John," or "Bishop Aquila," or “Senior Pastor Apollos” used to introduce or reference individuals in leadership roles, because of their desire to honor the values of brotherhood and family, rather than a military, business, religious, or political approach of honoring via title and position. Jesus alone held titles and position among these early believers. 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Hebrews 13:7,17.

Leadership certainly existed, and submission factored into their relationship with the leaders, but such submission was not a forced concept, nor did it imply the right to “control” on the part of their leaders. Leadership was based on men and women manifesting the character, heart, and giftings of the Lord in mature expressions. Submission’s focus was on submission to the clear authority of Jesus’ Word, as accurately communicated through the mature saints called to lead. Such leadership was primarily evidenced through care, example, love, wisdom, and a seeing (overseeing) through the eyes of the Spirit as to the true needs of the saints. It did not include the most commonly valued element of leadership in the modern Church – control. It just isn’t necessary when the saints are trained to value the authority of Jesus’ Word in their midst.

Those who labored in church planting, church equipping, and regular teaching of the churches were considered worthy of financial support. Such support was never regulated according to any form of professional salary, or in being hired by any particular body of believers, but was simply a matter of those who received from their ministry contributing to their needs according to the leading of the Spirit, or in partnering with them for the furtherance of the Gospel in other places.

9. Giving as Led by the Spirit - Not under the Tithe Laws.

Technically speaking, the early Church made no direct reference to tithing, but as I have written

in other articles, they “appear” to have ascribed to what might be called “the principle of tithing.” By this we mean they stayed completely away from anything appearing to be a direct application of the law of Moses, and rather recognized the Mosaic recipients of the tithe and noted the New Covenant applications of each of these recipients, i.e. teaching ministries, the poor, the needy, the stranger, the widows, and the orphans, as well as for the purpose of the general gathering of the saints and their needs in such gathering. 1 Timothy 5:17; 5:3; Galatians 2:10

The terminology, rather than being “tithe” was “giving.” They believed in an approach to giving that was totally the result of the leading of the Spirit. Nothing in their teaching communicated a notion that the local Church was the sole legitimate recipient of any percentage amount of the believer’s giving. They gave as led by the Spirit, and that giving provided for the needs of their personal community, their teaching leadership, and the needy around them. They were renown for their giving.

Because of the influence of the Old Testament teachings, it seems biblically accurate to anticipate that they gave with at least some degree of consistency or regularity. As needs among the poor and leadership would have been more or less consistent, it is likely they gave with consistent regularity so that the poor would be cared for and the leadership could fulfill their callings to care for the flocks.

10. Manifestation of the Gifts of the Spirit.

While there was order and propriety in the manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit, there was a freedom for the Spirit to reveal Christ in a variety of expressions. When the behavior became that which was offensive or downright weird (i.e. excessive speaking in tongues without interpretation) they curbed such manifestations and desired a form of gathering that was edifying rather than crazy. 1 Corinthians 12 & 14; Romans 12:6-8.

Unfortunately, in our day and past generations, all too often the bizarre and weird has been valued, to the place of causing great offense, division, and negative testimony to those outside.