

THE BIBLICAL BASIS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH.

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It is a vital for Christians to determine what they believe about the church and why they believe it. Christians learned what they believe about the church from the practices and teachings of the churches they attended. They have looked to their pastors and church leaders to tell them about the church.

The question is this: "Can we rely on what we have been taught as being Biblical? Are the beliefs and practices of our churches what God would have them to be?" It should be every believers responsibility to know "what saith the Lord" on the matter of His church. We need to scripturally determine what is a church, how it began, what is its importance and function, and who are the Head, leaders and members of the church?

An initial question we must ask ourselves is "what is the authority for what we believe about the church?" The problem is that you can go to ten denominations and you will get ten different answers. How can you know the beliefs of your church are correct? There are many denominations and each to some degree differs from the others in what it believes.

What then is the answer? In a world in where there is so much confusion and difference of opinion, can we know for sure? The answer is yes, a resounding yes! We have a way, a sure and absolute way. That way is the Bible, God's Word. The problem is **not** that we can not know what is correct. The problem is some have declined to accept the Bible as the absolute authority. Others are confused because of not "rightly dividing the Word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).

The Bible is God's Holy Word. The Bible tells us the church was established by Christ Himself. (Matt. 16:18) He did not leave us in the dark as to what the church should be. He left His Word and complete instructions to deal with every aspect of the church. But there is a problem: although most claim that their views of the church were taken from the Bible, it can be easily shown that many beliefs are not based on what the Bible says at all.

Many of the practices of churches today come from a mixture of the Bible and their tradition. What they believe has been passed down through time and developed over their history. Infant baptism is a good example. You do not find infant baptism in the Bible. Yet, the Catholics and many Protestant denominations practice infant baptism. Why? In their past some of their church leaders established it based on their misunderstanding of Bible passages such as Acts 16:33. In Acts 16:33, the verse says the jailer (who had received Christ) was baptized, "he and all his, straightway." They conclude this would mean adults and children alike or all his household. But verse does not say infants were baptized. In truth we do not even know if the jailer had children.

Those who teach infant baptism use this as a verse to justify their practice, but is this proper? Do we find other places in the Bible that says infants were baptized? The answer is no! So their practice is based on an assumption not supported by Scripture. Those who practice infant baptism believe the church is the means of salvation and baptism is a sacrament and necessary for salvation. They falsely conclude that baptizing an infant puts it under the protection of the church and assures it will go to heaven. Their doctrine is based on a misinterpretation of a passage of Scripture and upon falsely applied logic. Today these religions do not even question such teaching! The "church fathers" established the practice as doctrine . . . so today it accepted without question. Their "church fathers" are their authority for what they practice and not the Bible.

The mode of baptism as practiced by many churches is another example of following man's opinion and not God's Word. The Greek word in the New Testament is "baptisma" (bap'-tis-mah). The word means "to immerse" or dip under the water. There is no record of any church "sprinkling" or

"pouring" in the New Testament. They get their practice from the opinions of man, not from what God has clearly stated in the Bible. In the author's library is a booklet written by a Protestant preacher who states the reasons his denomination sprinkles. He stated he believed the early church sprinkled even though he admitted there is no mention of the practice. One reason he gave for sprinkling was that there was not enough water in Jerusalem to have baptized five thousand people on the day of Pentecost. He said water in Jerusalem was too scarce and too precious to be used for baptism. He also falsely concluded that Philip could not have immersed the eunuch because there was no water in the desert (Acts 8:26-39). So, he concluded, if there was not enough water they must have sprinkled the converts. This Protestant pastor has a poor understanding of God's ability to communicate what He wants done. If they sprinkled those saved at Pentecost, God made a mistake and used the wrong word in recording the event. What then does he base the practice on? Clearly, the practice of sprinkling is man's opinion or human reasoning, and not the Bible.

God, the Holy Spirit, inspired the writers of the New Testament to use the Greek word that meant to immerse. There are other Greek words that meant to sprinkle or to pour that the writers could have used if that had been what they wanted to convey. For the churches who sprinkle, the word of God is not their final authority.

The Bible is the Sole Authority for the Faith and Practice of a True New Testament Church

What does the Bible say is the sole authority for the faith and practice of the New Testament church?

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

"Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake *as they were* moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:20-21).

In all matters of faith and practice the New Testament church has but one authority and that authority is the Bible, the very word of God.

The Bible also is free from error. This called, "verbal plenary inspiration," meaning every word God used was inspired of Him and is without error (2 Timothy 3:16). Some might conclude that since we do not have the original copies of the Books of the Bible that this makes today's Bible suspect. Nothing can be further from the truth. Note that God says He preserves His Word: "For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled" (Matthew 5:18). God not only gave us His Word He promised to preserve it for all eternity. God absolutely keeps His Word and we have it completely today. His Word is preserved in the Traditional Text (Byzantine) as represented by the "Textus Receptus" and translated into our King James Bibles.

Note the warning to those who would attempt to add or subtract from the Bible.

"For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book" (Revelation 22:18-19).

The Bible says It is the Source of Salvation Pointing to Jesus.

"You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me" (John 5:39).

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek" (Romans 1:16).

"So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17).

". . .and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15).

The Bible instructs believers and sets the model for the New Testament church.

"These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:14-15).

"I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables" (2 Timothy 4:1-4).

In order for a church to call itself a church in the true Biblical sense it must base its faith and practice solely on God's Word the Bible. No mortal man founded the New Testament church; it was Christ who instituted the church.

"And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).

Christ says He built the church and says He died for it as Ephesians 5:25 clearly states, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it"

Although the church is organized and administered by an assembly of believers the church is not their possession. Believers establish a church based on Christ's instruction. It is Christ who owns the church. He purchased it with His blood (Acts 20:28).

God cannot bless error or be party to false teaching. A church that is based on false doctrine is not a biblical church and God can have no part in it. Paul, in Galatians 1:7-9, says that anyone who would pervert the Gospel, "let him be accursed." No man or congregation that claims to be a church of God has the right to change anything God has said for any reason. A biblical church is one whom Christ is the Head, and follows the word of God. If a church does not follow the Bible, then it is not a church that belongs to God, because in refusing to obey the scriptures they separate themselves from God.

In Matt. 16:18, Jesus said He would build His church. How then did Christ proceed in establishing His church? He began to instruct His disciple and entrusted them with carrying out His instructions. The Bible is clear that they did exactly that. They followed His instructions to the letter.

Christ's has not changed His instructions to His church. The way He left it is the way He intended it to remain. Any man or denomination who establishes a church on any other basis is not a Biblical church. If a church allows tradition or the opinions of men to establish its doctrine and practice it is in grave error. It is also not establishing a true New Testament church. Jesus said, "**For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Christ Jesus**" (1 Corinthians 3:10-11).

Jesus said the "gates of hell would not prevail against" the church. This applies to the church He founded and assures us there are sound biblical churches today. Our responsibility to the Lord is to make sure that we are part of a church that follows the Bible.

What Does the Word Church Mean?

In order to establish a New Testament church we must first know what the word "church" means in Scripture. In the world it means different things to different people. The word, in English usage, is commonly used to refer to a building or a denomination. Today it may mean the whole of all Christians of all time or the so called universal church. It is of little significance as to what the word means today. It is essential that we understand its original meaning as established by Christ in the New Testament. It biblically refers to a **local** group believers meeting in a particular geographical location.

The Greek word, "ekklesia" is translated in most places in the New Testament "church." The word "ekklesia" is found in one hundred and fifteen places in the New Testament. It is translated in English one hundred and twelve times "church." Three times it is translated "assembly." In classical Greek the word "ekkleisa" meant "an assembly of citizens summoned by the crier, the legislative assembly." (R. Scott, and H. G. Liddell, "A Greek-English Lexicon", p.206) The word as used in the New Testament is taken from the root of this word, which simply means to simply, "call out." The New Testament uses the word exclusively to represent a group of people assembled together for a particular cause.

A careful examination of the word "ekklesia" reveals that the word means "assembly." It is used in regard to a group of persons that are organized together for a common purpose and who meet together. The normal usage of the Greek word in New Testament times was understood by all to simply mean simply "an assembly." It could refer to different kinds of assemblies. A town meeting would be called an assembly. The English word, "church," cannot be translated back into Greek because there is no word in New Testament Greek that is the equivalent of the understanding of the English word. More will be said on this later.

The word in itself does not tell you who is meeting, but only that a group is to assemble. The context of the passage tells you who is meeting. For example, the word "ekklesia," is used in Acts 19:39,41 and demonstrates this word was used to refer to a civil assembly of local townspeople of Ephesus which included idol makers. In most places in the New Testament, it refers to a local assembly of believers in Jesus Christ. These believers met in rented halls and in the homes of people and they had "elders" or bishops which were called of God and given the oversight of the congregation (Acts 20:28).

The word "church" is normally used to refer to an assembly (church) of believers. For example: "the assemblies (ekklesia) of Asia" (1 Corinthians 16:19). The KJV translates the passage, "the churches of Asia." However, in Acts 7:38, the word refers to the group of assembled Israelites in Moses' day at Mt. Sinai. This is evidence that the word was not used exclusively of New Testament believers.

The context of the use of the word determined who was meeting together. In Acts 19:32, 39, and 41, we know the "ekklesia" or assembly was a group of idol makers. Acts 19:24-25, states that a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made idols, called all workman of like occupation together for a meeting. In verse 39, it says, "the **assembly** was confused." The word "assembly" is the Greek word "ekklesia." This is the same word that is translated "church" in other places. There is no grammatical reason to do so. The context of each usage of the word tells us what kind of assembly was meeting. The Bible does not make a distinction in the use of the word.

Few know today why the word "church" was used in the King James Bible instead of the word "assembly" or "congregation." When King James authorized the translation of the Bible in 1611 he

made three rules which the translators were to use. Following are the two rules that dealt with this matter:

1. The ordinary Bible read in the Church, commonly called the Bishops Bible, to be followed, and as little altered as the truth of the original will permit.
3. The old Ecclesiastical Words to be kept, viz. the Word Church not to be translated Congregation etc.

The Bishops Bible was used as the immediate foundation for the KJV, and it had used the term "church" instead of "congregation." King James or the officials of the Church of England (1604) required the translators to use the word "church" instead of congregation or assembly.

A look at any English dictionary will reveal the English word church is taken from a Late Greek word "kyridakon" not "ekklesia." The word "kyridakon" is not found in the New Testament and came into being in the 16th Century long after New Testament times.

The term "church" was first used by Theodore Beza, a Protestant, in 1556, who followed John Calvin at Geneva. It would be normal for a Protestant, who followed a hierarchical "Presbyterian" (elder rule) form of church government to use the word "church" instead of "assembly." ⁽¹⁾The use of the word "congregation" or "assembly" would not support his church's hierarchical government. ⁽²⁾ William Whittingham's Testament of 1557 followed Beza's usage of "church." ⁽³⁾ This was actually the first edition of the Geneva Bible and was a revision of the Tyndale New Testament. The Tyndale (1526) translation had used the term "congregation." The Matthew's Bible (1537), translated by John Rogers, who used the pen name of Thomas Matthew, used the term "congregation." He was an assistant and friend of William Tyndale. The Matthew's Bible was the first entire Tyndale Bible. Tyndale completed the New Testament and part of the Old Testament before he was martyred. Matthew completed the translation of the Old Testament (using some work from Coverdale) and published the first entire Tyndale Bible under the name "Thomas Matthew." The Great Bible (1539) also used the term "congregation." The Geneva New Testament of 1557, produced by William Whittingham, used the term "church" (note the Protestant source of the translation). The Bishops Bible (1568) which was a revision of the Geneva Bible and continued the use of the term "church."

This shows that the use of the word "church" instead of "assembly" or "congregation" came from those who had a hierarchical and unscriptural form of church government. To have translated the word "ekklesia" accurately into "assembly" or "congregation" would have exposed their form of church government as being in error.

What then does the Biblical word, translated church, really mean? It simply means an assembly of people. The New Testament knows nothing of using any formal word to refer exclusively to the assembly of believers.

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NEW TESTAMENT'S USE OF THE WORD EKKLESIA?

This has great and far reaching implications. First it means there is no Biblical basis for a church hierarchy outside the local church or local assembly of believers. The only "ekklesia" the New Testament knows is a local assembly of believers. It could not be used in a universal sense referring to all believers everywhere or what some call the "universal" or "invisible" church. A universal church cannot meet in one place together and assemble, therefore, the word cannot be used in referring to all believers of all time all over the world. The New Testament refers to believers universally only once. In Rev. 21:9, New Testament believers are called not a church, but "the bride

of Christ." At the Second Coming, there are no assemblies on earth. They were all Raptured, at the beginning of the Tribulation and judged during the following seven years preceding the Second Coming. At this point in time of Rev. 21:9, we see the body of Christ, coming with the Bridegroom to earth to reign with Him.

Some conclude that the term "body of Christ" (1 Cor. 12:27, Eph. 4:12) refers to a universal church. In 1 Corinthians 12, the whole of the chapter is referring to the makeup and relationship of individual members of a local assembly using the analogy of the human body. In 1 Cor. 12:13, the verse reads, "For by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body." I believe this is referring to water baptism and is not referring to the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. The Baptism of the Holy Spirit is an individual matter with the individual believer receiving the indwelling of the Holy Spirit at conversion. Water baptism is another matter. It is a public declaration of a born-again Christian, obeying the Lord and by baptism and identifying with the Christ and the local assembly of believers. Clearly, when a believer was baptized he was baptized into a local assembly (Acts. 2:41,47). A believer becomes a member of the local church when he identifies with Christ and the local church through his baptism. No believer is baptized into all churches worldwide. In Verse 24-25, Paul says the reason for this instruction was that there not be "any schism in the body" and "that the members should have the same care one for the other." This phrase limits the body to a local church and precludes it referring to a "universal" or "invisible" church. It is beyond human ability to govern a world wide church. The overseeing of all believers on earth is an individual thing done on a local level and is the sole responsibility of Christ Himself. Even if you ignored the context and preclude this is referring to the all believer, you must also equally conclude that the apply of these verse can only be done on a local level and this verse are not teaching the concept of a universal church.

In Verse 26, it reads, "And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it" (1 Cor. 12:26). Clearly this statement can not apply to a universal world wide church. Churches in Africa are at this moment are suffering gross persecution, but the effects of it are not known in America or other parts of the world. Yet, when a member of a local assembly suffers, other of that assembly know and share the burden for a brother in the Lord.

If there is a "universal" church then why did not God give clear instruction as to its government. In the Bible, God always gave some degree of organization to everything he created. There is no reference or event hint of an organization of a "universal" church. God clearly did not establish a hierarchical system of government over the churches (plural). Each church rules itself following the New Testament example and principles. God in Rev. 2:6, 15, said he "hated" the Nicolaitanes who sought to set up a hierarchy to rule over the people. I believe that it would be against God very nature to sanction human government over a universal church as it would violate the autonomy of the local assembly of believers which He clearly established. The "ekklesia" that Christ established had organization. It met together, had pastors, it took the Lord Supper, it baptized new converts into its assembly, it supported missions, administered and edified the members of the church. A so called "universal" or "invisible" church can do none of these things.

The Importance of the Local Church to the Believer

It is Christ who established the church and He has said to us that the scriptures are given by God to instruct us. They teach us doctrine, reproof, correction and righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). Why? That we might be fully equipped to do the works of God.

Christ established the church for His disciples or those who trust in Him as their Lord and Savior. There are many reasons why Christ established the local church. Believers are edified (built up) in the faith by the leaders and teachers of the local assembly (Eph.4:11-13). God uses the local church as a training ground to teach others the word of God. (2 Tim. 2:2) It is a place where the child of God gives his tithes and offerings to the Lord for the support of local church and missions (Acts 4:32-37; 1 Cor. 8:1-6; 9:6-15; Phil. 4:15-19). The local church provides a place where believers come together

to pray one for the other and work of the Lord (2 Cor. 1:11). The local church sends missionaries (Acts 11:19-30, 13:1-3, 14:27).

One thing is clear, if Christ established the local church then no believer should ignore it or refuse to be a part of it. The church is a vital and necessary part of a disciples life. A believer outside the church would be like a fish out of water. Christ established the "ekkleisa" for individual believers to band together in carrying out God's purposes.

All Believers are Placed in the Local Church upon their Baptism.

The Bible says that after Pentecost those who were saved were added to the assembly of the original one hundred and twenty believers gathered in the upper room (Acts 1:15).

In Acts 2:47, the New Testament says that those who were saved "were added to the church daily." The Bible knows nothing of believers who are not a part of the local church. The word "added" in the verse is the Greek word `pros-tith'-ay-mee'; it means "to place additionally, i.e. lay beside, annex, repeat: -add, again, give more, increase, lay unto, proceed further." (4)

Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words gives this information on this word:

"to put to" (pros, "to," tithemi, "to put"), "to add, or to place beside" (the primary meaning), in Luke 17:5 is translated "increase," in the request "increase our faith"; in Luke 20:11-12, "he sent yet" (KJV, "again he sent"), lit., "he added and sent," as in 19:11, "He added and spake." In Acts 12:3, RV, "proceeded," KJV, "proceeded further" (of repeating or continuing the action mentioned by the following verb); in Acts 13:36, "was laid unto"; in Heb. 12:19, "more... be spoken," (lit., "that no word should be added"). In Gal. 3:19, "What then is the law? It was "added" because of transgressions, there is no contradiction of what is said in V. 15, where the word is epidiatasso (see No. 4), for there the latter word conveys the idea of supplementing an agreement already made; here in V. 19 the meaning is not that something had been 'added' to the promise with a view to complete it, which the apostle denies, but that something had been given "in addition" to the promise, as in Rom. 5:20, "The law came in beside." See GIVE, INCREASE, LAY, PROCEED, SPEAK. (5)

The verse is saying that God added to or increased the local church each time a person received Christ. In addition to being saved the believer became a member of the church in Jerusalem when he was baptized. We have seen in this study that the word "church" never refers to a "universal church" but always to a "local assembly of believers." These new believers were added to the church in Jerusalem. Later when believers returned to their cities, they became members of the local churches in the town in which they lived. For example:

"the church which was at Jerusalem" (Acts 8:1)

"the church which was at Antioch"(Acts 13:1)

"the church which is at Cenchrea" (Rom. 16:1)

"the church that is in their house" (1 Cor. 16:19),

speaking of the church which met in the home of Aquila and Priscilla),

"Nyumphas, and the church which is in his house" (Col. 4:15).

When a person is saved he should immediately submit to Scriptural baptism and become a member

of a local church. The "Church Covenant" accepted by Baptist churches recognizes this Biblical Truth and makes this statement in the last paragraph:

"We moreover purpose that when we remove from this place we will as soon as possible unite with some other church of like faith in order where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's Word. If there is not such church, we shall seek, with the Lord's help, to establish one."

Believers are to Learn Doctrine in the Local Church.

The Bible says doctrine is to be taught in the local church. Note what Paul says in Ephesians 4:11-16:

"And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ: That we *henceforth* be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, *and* cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, *even* Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love." (Eph. 4:11-16)

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul in giving instruction on the local church says, "But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased." (V18) Note in V28, the same truth is presented, that God set believers in the local assembly and gave all the spiritual gifts in the context of the local church. "And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues." (1 Corinthians 12:28) The gifts that are given to believers are to be used in relation to the local church. Nowhere in the New Testament do you find believers serving God apart from the local church. Never do you find believers who are not a part of a local assembly of believers.

Believers are Instructed Not to Forsake the Assembling of Themselves Together.

Hebrews 10:24-25, the Bible commands us to, ". . . consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting *one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching." God clearly instructs us not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together. When the church meets we should be there and support the work and worship of the local church.

Believers are to be Under the Leadership of the Pastor and Church.

Pastors are called of God to oversee the local assembly of believers. "**Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.**" (Acts 20:28) "As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, 'Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'" (Acts 13:2)

Believers should be members of a local church and under the care of the pastor called by God to shepherd that local church. God's plan is that they be under the supervision (overseeing) of God's under-shepherd. God says in Hebrews 13:17, that the members of a local church should be submissive and follow the local pastor as he follows the Lord. "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so

with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you." (Hebrews 13:17) Believers who are not a part of a local church are not obeying God by putting themselves under the leadership of God's pastor and the local church.

The Pastor is the leader of the church not the "lord" of the assembly. The New Testament instructs pastors to, **"Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock."** (1 Peter 5:2-3) "Feeding the flock," means to teach them the Word of God. "Taking the oversight," refers to providing spiritual and administrative leadership. The pastor is to do this willingly which refers to his calling to the position and responsibility from God. He is not to choose being a pastor as a vocation because of its financial benefits. A man does not choose to be a pastor as one chooses an occupation. The pastor is to serve the church because God called him to shepherd the flock and he wants to do God's will for his life. It does not mean he is not to live by the ministry and receive financial support. (See 1 Tim. 5:17-18, 1 Thess. 5:12-17, 1 Cor. 9:14, 2 Cor. 11:7-9) He is not to "lord over" a flock as a dictator, but to lead by teaching and setting the example before them.

A Believer's Responsibility to Missions as part of a Local Church.

A believer ought to be a part of and support missions through their local church. It was the local church which sent forth missionaries, not individuals Christians. Missionaries were supported spiritually and materially by the assembly of believers collectively. (Acts 15:3, 20:38, 21:5, Rom. 15:24, 1 Cor. 16:6,11, 2 Cor. 1:16, Titus 3:13, 3 John 6) Missionaries were ordained and sent out by the local church. (Acts 13:2-3) To be a part of God's plan for the propagation of the Gospel it is important to be a part of the local church. Christ himself commissioned His disciples and commanded them to: "Go ye therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:19-20)

Believers are Given the Responsibility and Privilege of Supporting the Local Church Financially.

God's instructions concerning the believer's responsibility to support the work of God are given to the local church. In the Corinthians, he tells them, "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: On the first *day* of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come" (1 Corinthians 16:1-2, 2 Cor. 8-9). Paul is commanding the Corinthians as well as the Galatians to, in the church, on Sunday (the day they met) take the collections for the saints at Jerusalem. The use of God's tithe and offerings was a matter for the local church. An individual believer can support any ministry or cause he desires. However, he is not to do it with God's tithe or offerings. The church collectively has that responsibility. Tithes and offerings were commanded by God to carry on the work of God.

Believers have a Responsibility in Helping Govern the Local Church.

Christ in establishing the church was instituting order and organization by which believers would carry on His work. This government of the local church was by simple democracy under the direction of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 6:5, 13:1-3, 15:22) More will be said about this later.

Believers who Need Discipline are Disciplined by the Local Church.

The disciplining of the unruly or believers in open sin is to be done by a local church. (Matt. 18:15-17, 2 Thess 3:6, Titus 3:10, 1 Cor. 5:1-13) The Bible lists many "public offenses:"

False doctrine. Gal. 1:9, 2 John 10
 Disregard of authority. Matt. 18:17
 Contention and strife. Rom. 16:17, 1 Cor. 11:16
 Immoral conduct. 1 Cor. 5:11
 Disorderly walk. 2 Thess. 3:6, 11
 A covetous walk. Eph. 5:5, 1 Cor. 5:11
 Arrogant deportment. 3 John 9-10
 Going to law. 1 Cor. 6:5-7

Clearly when Jesus said in regard to trying to correct an erring brother, to "tell it to the church," He was giving this responsibility to the local assembly of believers.

Believers who need Healing are to Call the Elders of Their Local Church for Prayer.

The prayer for the sick was also clearly a function of the local church. James says, "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven." After the church was begun in Acts 2, those who received the miracle healings were always a part of the local church. Peter and John who preformed the first miracles after the church was begun were Apostles and elders in the church at Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas were missionaries ordained and sent out by the church at Antioch. Everywhere you find miracle healings after Pentecost, it was always related to the ministry of a local church.

Clearly, God's plan is that born again Christians be a part of a local church. Nowhere in the New Testament do you find believers serving God outside the authority or rule of the local church. Those who served the Lord were sent out and supported in prayer and materially by the local churches. The New Testament gives no example of any ministry outside the local church and that is an important and vital truth everyone who professes Christ should understand. Present day ministries should be directed from or responsible to local churches. The biblical example is that God always organizes everything he begins and establishes clear lines of responsibility. For example in the first missionary work the church at Jerusalem sent Barnabas to organized the believers at Antioch into a church (Acts 11:19-24). Later Paul and Barnabas were sent from the church at Antioch (Act 13:1-3). They reported back the to Antioch the results of their missionary travels. The biblical principle is that any ministry should be under the care and supervision of a local church.

The church is at the very center of Christ's plan for each believer. Christ is to have absolute first place in the believer's life. (Col. 1:18) Christ, through the Holy Spirit administers to His sheep through the local church.

THE DISTINCTIVES OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

These are the distinctives of true Baptist churches. Traditionally it has been Baptist churches who practiced all these Bible principles. A church must believe and practice all of these distinctives to establish if it is truly a New Testament church. If it fails to accept even one of these principles it is not a New Testament church and certainly not a Baptist church.

I. THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH ACCEPTS ONLY THE NEW TESTAMENT AS IT SOLE AUTHORITY IN ALL MATTERS OF FAITH AND PRACTICE.

This means that a true Biblical church does not accept any authority for its faith and practice, outside the New Testament Scriptures. This in no way lessens the importance of the Old Testament Scriptures. The church is not found in the Old Testament because it is the record of God's dealing with Israel. Only in the New Testament do you find the pattern and instructions from God concerning the church. It also means that the true New Testament church does not

accept for doctrine or practice the councils of men, dominations or tradition.

The New Testament church believes the Word of God, the Bible is complete and it solely, "...is given of by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God many be perfect, thoroughly furnished (equipped) unto all good works." II Timothy 3:16-17

The New Testament church rejects the idea that God is giving supposed "new" revelations, believing that God forbids any adding to or taking away of the canon of Scriptures (John 14:26, 16:13, I Cor. 13:8-10; Heb. 1:1-2, Jude 3, Rev. 22:18-19) We do not accept any authority over the local New Testament Church, but Christ Himself, including any hierarchy to include popes, councils of churches, priests or any other group of men outside the local church. Christ is our Head, and the New Testament Scriptures are the true churches sole authority.

II. THE AUTONOMY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

"...I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the assembly (church) of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. (1 Timothy 3:15)

"Autonomy" means: self-governing, and independent from its other parts. The autonomy of the local church means that the church governs itself. The Biblical example of a New Testament church is one that is not ruled by any board, hierarchical system or another church.

The local church has been defined as: "A body of believers immersed upon credible confession of faith in Jesus Christ, having two officers (pastor and deacon), sovereign in polity, and banded together for work, worship, the observance of the ordinances and the world-wide proclamation of the Gospel."

FORMS OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT IN PRACTICE TODAY:

1. **Papal:** The Roman Catholic church practices totalitarian authority beginning with the Pope.
2. **Episcopalian:** The word means "bishop". The authority of the church government rests with its bishops. The bishops make up a board which rules the churches under them. Episcopal and Methodist use this system.
3. **Presbyterian:** The word means "elder." A board of elders elected by the congregation rule the church as well as the denomination. These elders may or may not be preachers.
4. **Congregational: The Biblical form of church government.** The final authority in a church rests with the congregation. Each member has a vote and the rule is democratic. The church does not answer to any authority outside of itself. The Pastor is the administrative and spiritual leader of the congregation being called and appointed by God to the position. The membership after seeking the leading of the Holy Spirit issue a call to the pastor. The church recognizes that Christ is the Head of the local church and the Bible is God's instruction and authority. Its owns its property. It appoints committees and individuals to take certain responsibilities. The Book of Acts gives two clear examples of congregational government. In Acts. 6:1-7, the appointment of the first deacons was by done by the apostles who presented the chosen men to the whole church to be elected. In Acts 15, there arose a dispute over whether Gentile believers should re required to keep the Law of Moses and be circumcised. The two churches involved were

the assembly at Antioch and Jerusalem. The pastors from Antioch were sent to Jerusalem and held a council with the church there. The pastors, apostles and the whole church met together and made the recommendation (Acts 15:7, 12, 22, 25).

III. THE EARLY CHURCH ELECTED ITS OWN OFFICERS

Acts 6:1-7, records that the early church elected special men to do a particular task. These men were the first deacons. They were not officers or leaders in the church, but men chosen by the congregation to perform a particular administrative menial task that needed to be done. The apostles and pastors were the leaders of the church. (For further reference you might like to read my article, "The Biblical Role of Deacons")

IV. THE LOCAL CHURCH IS THE FINAL AUTHORITY IN DISCIPLINE.

In Matthew 18:15-17 the Lord Jesus taught the local church had the final authority in disciplining an erring member. 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, and 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15, teach that it is the local church that has the responsibility to discipline members.

V. THE LOCAL CHURCH HAS THE ABSOLUTE RIGHT OF SELF-GOVERNMENT.

In Acts 1:23, Jesus's disciples chose two men from among them, Barsabas and Matthias to replace Judas who betrayed Christ. The Greek word used for "appointed" is "histemi." It means to put forward or "to propose."

They proposed two men and then sought God's choice by casting lots. We do not cast lots today for two reasons. First, we have the complete Bible with instructions as to how we are to chose men for service. Second, they were choosing an apostle. We do not have apostles today. Christ called each apostle. There is no record of the assemblies after the death of the apostles appointing men to replace them. God gave Paul instructions as to qualifications of pastors and deacons. 1 Tim. 3:1-7, 3:8-13, Titus 1:5-9.

But they did begin the procedure of choosing men from among themselves. In Acts 1:6 they chose seven men as special servants (deacons). The assembly was instructed to chose from among them seven men of good report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom to elect to the position of administering over the distribution of food to the widows.

In Acts 15:2, the Antioch assembly elected Paul and Barnabas with several other men to go to Jerusalem and question the apostles about the matter of the Gentiles.

After the matter was decided, the Jerusalem church sent men of their assembly with Paul and Barnabas, to convey the message. The message was that the Holy Spirit had directed them in their decision and the local church agreed. It was not a command. It was a recommendation.

The local church is to discipline its members (1 Cor. 6:13. 2 Thess. 3:6,14-15).

It is scriptural for local churches to associate with each other for fellowship and the propagation of the Gospel (Romans 16:1-2, 1 Cor. 16:1-2, Acts 15:2-4, 22-27, 30-33, 18:27).

The local church sends out missionaries. In Acts 13:1-4, the local church at Antioch under the direction of the Holy Spirit commissioned and sponsored the first missionaries. In Acts. 14:26-27, they returned and reported to the church what God had done.

The local church is pictured in Scripture as autonomous, meaning it governs itself under the direction of the Holy Spirit. The local congregation rules itself led by the Holy Spirit with no

hierarchy of individuals or organization over it in or out of the local assembly.

VI. THE PRIESTHOOD OF BELIEVERS

The New Testament church is made up of individual born-again believers who can go directly to God in prayer without the intercession any man. Christ is our only Intercessor and is our High Priest.

In 1 Tim. 1:20, Paul instructs that individuals to pray, and describes various subjects of prayer. In Verse 5, he states, "For *there is* one God and one Mediator between God and men, *the* Man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5). There is both private (Matt. 6:6) and public prayer (Acts 4:24-31).

Hebrews 4:14-16, states Christ is our High Priest who knows our every emotion and need personally. We are to boldly go to the throne of Grace (God the Father), to find help in a time of need.

In the Jesus's model prayer, Luke 11:1-4, Christ instructed us to pray to the Father. All prayer in the Bible is addressed to God the Father. When we pray to God the Father we are praying through Jesus Christ and being led of the Holy Spirit. We address our prayer to the Father because He is the Head of the Trinity.

Nowhere in Scripture are we instructed to pray to a "saint" or anyone but the Father. Christ is our sole Intercessor, no other exists. We are to confess our sins to God and personally ask Him for forgiveness (1 John 1:9).

In the Old Testament the priest offered sacrifices and interceded for the Children of Israel. Everything the did was a picture of the coming Messiah and Intercessor Christ Jesus. After Christ has come we no longer need the picture or symbol, we have the reality of Christ as Intercessor. Every believer is a priest.

"You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. . . But you *are* a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;" (1 Pet. 2:5,9).

The Holy Spirit leads us in prayer. "praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints" (Eph. 6:18).

"But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit" (Jude 20).

Every believer has the Holy Spirit, who leads him and enables him to know the things of God. 1 Corinthians 2:1-16. Tells us we can know nothing of God apart from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Rom.8:26, tells us that the Holy Spirit helps us in our weaknesses. The Holy Spirit himself makes intercession for us for things we do not know how to express. You may not know exactly how to pray or what to pray for, yet the Holy Spirit knows and intercedes for us. Note the phrase, "groaning which cannot be uttered." This is not verbal prayer, it is not our own prayer, this is the interceding of the Holy Spirit that we are not aware of. We are told this to help us to understand we are to pray as best we can, but it is the Spirit who knows our hearts. Even our prayers are purified and corrected by the Spirit. This has nothing to do with ecstatic speech.

The Bible knows nothing of praying without understanding what we are praying. We pray the

best we can and the Spirit intercedes.

VII. THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH HAS ONLY TWO ORDINANCES

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are the only two ordinances given to the local church. "Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added *to them*. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:41-42).

BAPTISM

In Acts 2:41, the three thousand souls who received Christ withdrew from the crowd and were baptized. In doing so they identified themselves with the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. They believed Peter's sermon and received "his word." Peter's word was the Gospel, the Good News that Christ was the Messiah and that He had died for the sins of the world, that He was buried and rose on the third day for the grave.

They were baptized which was a public dedication of their belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the Messiah. They showed by their submission to baptism that they believed in His death, burial and resurrection. Baptism always follows salvation. It is never presented as salvation or as a sacrament. A sacrament is defined as a religious act which has saving properties. In other words, an act which helps in saving a person. The Bible knows nothing of any sacrament. Men are saved by faith in Jesus Christ and salvation is the free gift of God. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

In Hebrews 11, the Old Testament saints presented as being saved because of their faith in what God told them to do. They trusted God and obeyed. The acts of the Old Testament sacrifices were understood as being a picture and symbolic looking forward till the day the Messiah would come and make the atonement for sin.

The Bible knows nothing of infant baptism. Only those who trusted in Christ were baptized. An infant can not understand and receive the Gospel by believing. Therefore an infant should not be baptized.

THE MODE OF BAPTISM

The word baptism means to immerse. Actually the Greek word is transliterated into an English spelling. If it was to be translated, it would mean to dip, bury, submerge or to immerse. There are other Greek words which mean to sprinkle or pour, but they are not used in reference to baptism. Romans 6:3, makes baptism a picture of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. Sprinkling or pouring does not symbolize this.

History records that all churches immersed until about 250 AD. After that time for the sake of convenience at a time of sickness, clinical baptism was practiced. Once allowed, others began to ask for sprinkling, including old people and later on it was allowed for any who ask for it. Most Protestant denominations will immerse if it is requested, however it is not taught or encouraged. The Roman Catholic church did not make sprinkling its mode of baptism until 1311. Those who sprinkle do so as a means of convenience and ignore the biblical teaching of the mode of baptism?

THE LORD'S SUPPER

Christ instituted the Lord's Supper the night before He died. (Matt. 26:26-30) The Lord's

Supper was a memorial act for believers. It was given to bring to remembrance Christ's sufferings and death for our sins. 1 Corinthians 11:26. When an assembly takes the Lord's Supper they show or proclaim their belief in Christ's death for the remission of sin, looking forward to the day when Christ will return.

The Lord's Supper is only for believers. It is mockery for an unbeliever to take the Lord's Supper. An unbeliever has not believed or received Christ as their Savior and thus has no part in salvation. In verse 28, a person is admonished to examine himself before he takes the Lord's Supper. It warns that one who eats and drinks unworthily eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.

The Lord's Supper is a picture of Christ's suffering and death for our sin. For a man to take the Supper and not receive Christ's is blatant sin. To have knowledge of Christ's suffering for one's sins and then to reject Christ as one's Savior is belittling and mocking Christ.

It also mocks Christ and belittles His suffering for a believer to have unconfessed sin in his life and still take the Lord's Supper which is a memorial remembering His suffering. The believer is to examine himself first, confess sin and then take the Lord's Supper. No one is "worthy" in himself to take the Lord's Supper. But it honors Christ when we confess our sins and receive His free gift of forgiveness. It shows a deep respect and regard for Christ's suffering when we repent of sin and turn from it.

"What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? . . . Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members *as* instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members *as* instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! (Romans 6:1-2,12-15)

The elements of the Supper, the bread and the cup are only symbolic of the body and blood of Christ. They do not, as practiced by Catholicism, magically become the actual body and blood of Christ. Nor do they become spiritually "blessed," as some believe, thus affording the taker some spiritual benefit. They bread and wine are only symbolic and the value in taking the Lord's Supper is in honoring and revering Christ for His suffering for us and for self-examination to judge sin in our own lives.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE ORDINANCES TO THE LOCAL CHURCH

We call these two symbolic acts "ordinances" because the Lord ordained or appointed them. They are not sacraments or a means of dispensing grace. Grace is only obtained by faith in Christ Jesus. Believers follow the ordinances because Christ commanded us too (Matthew 28:19-20). When Christ commissioned the disciples to baptize and observe all things that He had taught He also told them to wait until they were indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Acts 1:4-5. The church began when it was empowered by the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Christ forbade them to go before they received the Baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Christ commissioned the church to practice the ordinances, not individuals, schools, Christian youth groups, camps and etc. 1 Corinthians 11:20, states that this local church "came together" for the purpose of taking the Lord's Supper. Note V17,18, 33. The context is clearing in the setting of the local assembly which had come together.

A memorial is a public declaration or remembrance. Eph. 5:25, states Christ died for the

"ekklesia" the local assembly or church. The Lord's Supper was taken with all Christ's disciples present. The Lord's Supper is an act of public worship. Note 1 Cor. 11. There is no record in the Bible of an individual or anyone apart from the church taking the Lord's Supper.

How often it is to be done is left up to the church. The only instruction is in 1 Cor. 11:26, as "often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you claim the Lord's death till He come." The charge and instructions are given to the "whole church." Individual ministers are not given the authority to conduct the Lord's Supper at their discretion, but as the assembly desires.

VIII. THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH PRACTICES SOUL LIBERTY"

"But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him." (1 John 2:27)

Every believer has the responsibility and right to interpret the Scriptures, to hold and profess and to worship God as the Bible teaches. No church or religious organization has God's authority to direct believers to obey it or recognize it as their authority to any further degree other than directing them to follow the scriptures. The word of God is one's authority, not the church organization. A true New Testament church carefully teaches its members the Bible.

God deals with us as individuals. "But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift" (Ephesians 4:7). The gift of God are given to us as individuals, being used in the context of the local assembly. "But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit *of all*." (1 Corinthians 12:7) See Romans 12:3-8.

We are taught of the Holy Spirit as individuals. "But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him." (1 John 2:27)

Christians will be individually judged at the BEMA judgment of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10). Romans 14:10, says we shall all stand before judgment. 1 Corinthians 3:13-15, shows the examination of Christians is based on one's individual work.

2 Peter 1:20, states that ". . .no prophecy of Scripture is on any private interpretation." As believers we have the personal responsibility to God to know what the Bible teaches and to follow it alone. We can not at the judgment plead that we were misled by our church, pastor or anyone else. We have the right to believe the Bible without regard for the creeds or traditions of churches.

IX. THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH IS MADE UP ONLY OF SAVED INDIVIDUALS

"Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added *to them*. . . praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:41,47). The church is an assembly of people who have received Christ as their Lord and Savior. It is made up of those who have made a public declaration of their faith in Christ by being baptized.

The Bible teaches one should be a member of a local assembly of believers. This is demonstrated in the definite step the first Christian followed. This order is always the same.

1. Believers receive Jesus Christ as their Savior by believing the Gospel. The grammatical construction of the phrase "they gladly received his word" meaning the message of Peter,

teaches that "received the word" is an action that takes place before the action of the main verb "baptized." "Receiving the word" came first and based on that they were baptized.

2. Following salvation the believer gives a public declaration of his faith by submitting to baptism. Jesus said He would be ashamed before His Father of those who were ashamed of Him and His word before this adulterous and sinful generation. (Mark 8:38) Many other verses in the New Testament speak of the fact believers are not to be ashamed of Christ before men. (See Rom. 1:16, 5:5,9:33,10:11, 2 Tim. 1:8,12,2:15)

3. Following conversion and baptism the believers were "added" to the church. The fact that Christ died for the church (Eph. 5:25) shows the importance of the local church. The gifts were given in the context of the local church and are never shown as existing apart from the local church (1 Corinthians 12:7,11,18,28).

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End Notes:

1. The Bible in Its Ancient and English Versions, H. W. Robinson, Oxford Press, 1940, p199.
2. It should be well to note that this is the same church that murdered the Ana-baptists for refusing to practice infant baptism and preaching without a license from the Swiss church.
3. Ibid, p. 183
4. Strong's Exhaustive Concordance, James Strong, MacDonald Publishing Company, McLean, VA, p4369.
5. Vines Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, W.E. Vines, MacDonald Publishing Company, McLean, VA, p31.

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