

Reviewing Some Fundamental Principles

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Introduction

The church as God planned it and as Christ built it is revealed in only one place: the New Testament. It is a Divine institution. It was no mere man – not even an angel or an archangel – who said, “I will build my church” (Mat. 16:18), and then erected it on a bloody foundation. The Son of God built the church of Christ. In this fact rests the reason why men dare not tamper with it.

The New Testament is filled with exhortations both to adhere to it faithfully and warnings against departing from the Truth as it is in Christ Jesus. Behind every exhortation and warning is the implication that men can and do easily drift away from the Way. Even in the apostolic era one can see seeds of sectarianism and not a few cases of outright heresy. Uninspired church history is rife with records of apostasy upon apostasy.

If the church is to be faithful to its Founder in any age or clime, she (that is to say, those who constitute that sacred spiritual body of Christ) must hold certain principles inviolable. As surely as any of these principles are forgotten or abandoned, just that surely will the church drift again into apostasy.

Commitment to the Absolute Authority of Christ

He claimed all authority in Heaven and on earth (Mat. 28:18). His claim came after three and one-half years of powerful public life during which He demonstrated His irresistible sovereignty over every physical, psychic, and spiritual force. His mighty signs and wonders not only demonstrated God’s approval of Him (Acts 2:22), but proved that He was The One He claimed to be – the authoritative Son of God (John 20:30–31). The authority of Jesus is continually emphasized in the New Testament by the many times He is called the “Lord.” He is the “blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and the Lord of lords” (1 Tim. 6:15). God placed the risen Christ at his right hand, far above all rule, authority, power, and dominion, subjected all things to Him, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church (Eph. 1:20–22).

This commitment to the authority of Christ includes the recognition that the church belongs to Him and that He alone has the right to determine every feature of it. His authority

cannot be shared with any man, legislative body (religious or political), school, or any others who would seize it or aspire to it. Until all men who claim to follow Christ honor Him alone as their head, religious confusion must reign.

Commitment to the New Testament as the Only and Final Authority in Religion

The way in which Christ expresses and exercises His authority is through His “last will and testament” – the New Testament, made effective upon His sacrificial death (Heb. 9:16–17). This Gospel, the implanted Word, is so powerful it can save the soul (Rom. 1:16; Jam. 1:21). It is that rule by which we all are to live (Phi. 3:16) because it is the standard by which we all shall finally be judged (John 12:48). It is the living, active, sharp, and piercing message from God (Heb. 4:12), the “sword of the Spirit” (Eph. 6:17).

Therefore, the New Testament contains warnings – plain, strong, and numerous – that men dare not change the message. The Gospel must be received as the Word of God, rather than as the word of men (1 The. 2:13). The “gospels” of men, or even of angels, must be received as damnable words, rather than as the Word of Christ (Gal. 1:6–9). In order to reject the authority of Christ we do not have to see Him personally and blaspheme Him: “He that rejecteth **me**, and **receiveth not my sayings**, hath one that judgeth him” (John 12:48a, emph. DM). When one rejects anything the New Testament teaches, He rejects the authority of Christ, and therefore, Christ Himself. For all of these reasons and more we dare not add anything to the Word, nor diminish ought therefrom (Rev. 22:18–19).

Men have never long been content to abide by New Testament authority. Church history from the second to the present century is strewn with the religious wreckage men have created in their selfish ambitions. Even the exciting plea for restoration in young America had not long been championed until some within its ranks could no longer abide New Testament authority. First came the missionary society, then the mechanical instruments of music – which opened the Pandora’s box that was never to be shut by the openers and their posterity.

If the authority of Christ cannot be shared by anyone, then neither can the instrument of His authority – the New Testament.

Commitment to the New Testament Plan of Salvation

There is one – and only one – plan of salvation, period. All others are sorry counterfeits, miserable imitations, and cruel hoaxes against which rest the anathema of Heaven (Gal. 1:8–9). Jesus’ plan is the only plan that ever was or ever will be empowered through the sufficient sin

offering of His sinless blood on Calvary. It is that form (pattern) of teaching the inspired apostles and their first century converts spread throughout their world (Rom. 6:17-18).

The plan, first proclaimed on Pentecost, involved the sinner's hearing the Gospel (Acts 2:22-36), believing in and confessing the Christ (v. 37), repenting of sins (v. 38), and being baptized unto the remission of his sins (i.e., salvation) (v. 38). The inspired men preached this plan and none other from the beginning; its continued proclamation and results may be traced through the remainder of the New Testament. What began that day has continued "day by day" to the present (v. 47).

Commitment to the Identity of the New Testament Church

The Lord built the church according to His own wise plan. He has a pattern for it, which He revealed in the New Testament, just as surely as Jehovah had a pattern for the Old Testament tabernacle (Heb. 8:5-6). Would it not be passing strange were He less concerned about following His pattern for the superior antitype (the church) than He was for the inferior type (the tabernacle)? Indeed, reason and Scripture alike argue that He is even more concerned, if possible.

The New Testament specifies every characteristic of the church (i.e., its organization, its worship, its designations, its work, and the way men enter it). The church cannot be identified, recognized, or discovered apart from these traits. If the identity of the church is unimportant then why is anything about it important? How can one know when he enters it, if he is in it, near it, or far from it, if he cannot identify it? Faithful saints are totally committed to the Scriptural identity of the church.

Commitment to the Foremost Task of the Church

Jesus had one great work, concerning which all else that He did was supportive, but secondary: "For the Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). No lesser work could have compelled Him to assume mortality in the ultimate example of self-denial (Phi. 2:5-8). Yes, He had abundant compassion on people in every imaginable kind of suffering, and He miraculously relieved many of them. However, He could have done all of those through His emissaries without ever leaving Heaven. The purpose of the signs and wonders was more basic than relief of physical suffering. These mighty deeds were the proof of His identity as the great Spiritual Doctor, their Savior (John 20:30-31).

He sent His apostles into the world, not with a “gospel” of physical good health and prosperity. He sent them to preach the Gospel, the power to save their souls from sin (Mat. 28:19; Mark 16:15–16; Rom. 1:16). Incorporated in that commission was the charge to teach their converts to do the same work (Mat. 28:20; cf. 2 Tim. 2:2). Is not the work of the spiritual body of Christ implied by the work He did in His physical body? If the church gets sidetracked to lesser (or worse, unauthorized) causes and fails to preach the Gospel, no one else will do it.

Conclusion

It is bad enough that all of the denominational churches fail the above commitments (which is the reason they are what they are). It is somehow worse to see those who pretend to be faithful disciples abandoning these fundamental commitments on every hand. Many are leading (and some have already led) their congregations away from emphasis upon preaching the Truth to lost men. They have become wrapped up in social, entertainment, and recreation programs. These types preach such a watered-down message that sinners are left with little to help them find the way. They have lost their commitment to the principal work of the church.

The church is suffering greatly because many are ashamed of the church of Christ. Some silly preachers have issued public apologies for ever preaching on the identifying marks of the church and have promised never to do it again. To be ashamed of the identity of the church is to be ashamed of the church. While ridiculing the distinctive characteristics of the Lord’s church, they often praise the unauthorized doctrines and practices of the denominations. Their agenda is to destroy the bride of Christ by corrupting it from within. These long ago lost their commitment to the identity and distinctiveness of the church.

The plan of salvation is under attack. Some are seen attacking the Biblical requirements of repentance. Some deny (by implication) the Scriptural purpose of baptism. At least one (Max Lucado) has taught that mere prayer can save sinners wholly apart from baptism. Apostate brethren increasingly echo the denominational declaration of salvation by grace alone. All such have given up whatever commitment they once had to the New Testament plan of salvation.

Why have a host of brethren so egregiously compromised in these and many other ways? At some point they stopped asking the fundamental question, “Is it authorized?” about every new idea and proposed practice. Had they done so they would have unhesitatingly rejected the gimmicks and contrivances they have foolishly embraced. These faulty practitioners simply do not honor the Lord’s exclusive religious authority.

The overriding commitment the Lord's people must ever honor is an unflagging allegiance to the authority of the Son of God and to His Word. Once this commitment is sacrificed, there is no stopping place. The nineteenth-century innovators who introduced unauthorized organization and worship amply demonstrate this fact. The church is overflowing with liberals of an even worse stripe and with the same spiritual malady. They have no respect for the authority of Christ. They just do not care what the Bible says. Such are bereft of all hope unless and until they repent.

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