

# **A Believer's Bible Booklet**



***The Principles Of The New Testament Church***

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# Principles of the New Testament Church

In a city that is overgrown with churches, one of the most difficult and perplexing tasks for a young married couple, for a new family, or for a disillusioned church member is the task of choosing a church. Take a look at your neighbors. How do they choose churches?

The insurance man up the street chose his church because it looked as though it were good for business.

That older couple around the corner chose the church that their parents and their parents' parents attended. It would be nothing less than ungrateful to leave it. They would feel as though they were betraying the family.

Consider the young, dynamic Christian couple across the street. They selected a church where they saw a wonderful opportunity for ministry. There was a Sunday School class where they could work and do a real service for God.

Then there is the new family who moved in just down the street. They have told you they are looking for a warm friendly church. They need to meet some new people. They want to feel as though they belong.

Your child's music teacher chose her church because of its music program. There she has an opportunity to play the organ, and they have such a lovely choir and a beautiful music program for her children.

The socialite family up on the hill has not decided on a church yet. They declare far and wide that they have not been able to find one that has an adequate social program.

I have heard of many whose choice of a church is based upon the pastor of the church. They belong to the cult which worships the pastor and his preaching.

And so it goes. Yet, as we examine these reasons, we sense that none of them provide an adequate basis for choosing a church. But, before we criticize, what are our reasons for choosing our church?

One who is well instructed in the scriptures and is spiritually sensitive to the leading of God in his life surely will ask: "Is it doctrinally sound?" He will see that this is a church that believes and teaches the Bible. It stands squarely upon the great fundamentals of the faith, such as the inspired inerrancy of the Word of God; the Deity of Jesus Christ; the virgin birth of our Lord; his substitutionary death; His bodily resurrection and His second coming. Such a church is doctrinally sound.

Actually, there are many such churches. Thus those who are spiritually sensitive and instructed in the Word will further ask: "Is it a church that will meet our spiritual needs and the needs of

our family?" Is it a place where I will sense that I am meeting with God? Is it a place where God will meet with me? Will my need for spiritual teaching be met and my need for spiritual fellowship be satisfied? Will there be an opportunity for Christian service? Can my needs be met? That is a very important question to ask.

However, there is a third consideration, which is just as important and, strangely, is generally overlooked. We must also ask: "Is it a church that is true to the principles and practices of the New Testament for the church?"

I am often appalled by Christians who are meticulous about their Christology (the doctrine of Christ), and very careful about their pneumatology (the doctrine of the Holy Spirit), and are able to cross their "t's" and dot their "i's" in their eschatology (the doctrine of future things); but when it comes to ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church), they are very careless. This, to me, is an amazing inconsistency. Perhaps it indicates the value or lack of value we place upon the church.

The church is a divinely ordained institution (Mt. 16:18). It is Christ's Bride (Eph. 5:25), His Body (Eph. 1:23), and His Building (Eph. 2:21-22). It is the pillar designed by God to uphold the truth (I Tim. 3:15). The church is surely a major concern of Jesus Christ; thus the doctrine of the church ought to be a major concern of ours.

What are the principles of the New Testament for the church? How were these principles practiced in the early church? Do they apply today? Can they still work? What are the marks of a New Testament church today? Those are questions that need to be answered.

There is an urgent need for such answers. We are often asked about the ecclesiology of Believers Chapel. "What denomination are you?" "Who is your pastor?" "What do you believe about baptism and the Lord's Supper?" "What about this strange type of meeting you have on Sunday evening?" "What is your policy on finances?" "How is the church ruled?" These are only representative of the host of questions you are asking.

This booklet is a modest attempt to answer some of those questions. Our answers will be derived from the great principles of the New Testament for the church.

The first principle is probably the most obvious of all.

## **There is One Church**

This is taught in numerous passages of Scripture. In one of the most explicit, the apostle Paul says:

There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling;  
*Eph. 4:4*

There is ONE Body, ONE Church. This surely is implicit in the words of the same apostle where he asks:

Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

*I Cor. 1:13*

When Paul asks: "Has Christ been divided?" he is asking: "Has the body of Christ been divided?" The answer to the question obviously is "No". Paul is implying that there is a oneness, a unity, to the body of Christ. There is one church. There is one body. It is that invisible body that includes all those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ as personal Savior. In spite of the forces and circumstances that militate against it, the fact is that from God's perspective there is one body, one church, alone on the earth today, which is the invisible church that includes every believer in Jesus Christ.

Now if the local church is to be a miniature or a replica of the universal church of Jesus Christ, then the local church ought to be nothing, or do nothing, that would contradict this great principle. How can the local church testify to the fact that there is one body and only one body?

## The Practice of the Apostolic Church

A silent but strong witness to the oneness of the body of Christ was the peculiar practice of using descriptive names which included every member of the body and excluded none. As one reads through the book of Acts, he discovers that five such words were commonly used. Each of these words includes all who were in the Church.

1. In Acts 11:26 there were called *Christians*, a word of reproach which labeled those despicable followers of Jesus.
2. The Christians who dwelt at Lydda were called *saints* in Acts 9:32 (see also 9:13, 41, 26:10). Saints were those persons "set apart" for His use and as His possession. This is the calling, the position, the standing of every Christian. Even the carnal Corinthian Christians were saints (I Cor. 1:2).
3. The apostles referred to early Christians as *brethren* in Acts 6:3, a term that suggests the family relationship into which they had all been brought when they became believers in Jesus Christ.
4. On thirty-one occasions they were called *disciples* (Acts 9:1, 11:26, 14:22, etc.) because they were "learners" of our Lord.
5. Perhaps the most appropriate term used in the New Testament is *believers* (Acts 5:14) because they had trusted in Christ for their salvation.

In the early Apostolic church, you see, names were used that did not divide the body of Christ, but rather, each term testified to the oneness of the body of Christ. However, such a situation did not continue long.

## The Departure

The first sign of a break in this practice appeared in Corinth:

Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ."

*I Cor. 1:12*

The Apostle's point in this passage is that such a spirit, such a practice, divides the one body. This mentality has multiplied and matured through the history of the Christian church until today we have a fractured, divided, segmented church.

Some call themselves after the name of a great reformer, while others are known by the name of the particular country in which their church is the state church. There are still others who have taken to themselves the name of one of the ordinances, or of the form of government adopted by their church, or of a prominent day in church history or of a major doctrine in their creed.

What have they done? In our estimation, by dividing the body, they have denied in a practical way the oneness of the body of Christ. In the apostolic period groups of believers identified themselves by names that did not fracture the church, but rather testified to the oneness of the church, the oneness of the body of Christ.

## **Distinctive #1**

This brings me to the first distinctive of Believers Chapel. When I use the word "distinctive" I do not mean a practice which is unique to Believers Chapel. It is, however, a practice to which we are deeply committed. We believe it is important, not insignificant; crucial, not optional.

The first distinctive is that we at Believers Chapel *are an undenominational church, which has taken a name that testifies to the oneness of the body of Christ.*

Some time ago a visitor asked one of my colleagues what denomination we were at Believers Chapel. Without hesitation he answered: "The same as the Apostle Paul." The visitor's surprised response was, "But there wasn't any in Paul's day." That is just the point! Paul believed in the Holy Spirit, but was not a Pentecostal; ordained elders in every church, but was not a Presbyterian; practiced baptism, but was not a Baptist; observed the Lord's Supper, but was not Plymouth Brethren; believed in sanctification, but was not a Holiness member; feared God, but was not a Quaker.

Denominationalism was not part of the apostolic church, nor is it a part of Believers Chapel. Such a practice denies the one body.

Do not misunderstand me. We are not isolationist. We recognize that there are believers in many other churches and denominations, and we desire fellowship with any church, regardless of its name and designation, that is honoring Jesus Christ and is preaching the Gospel. We can be in fellowship with all such churches, while we ourselves are undenominational.

We at Believers Chapel are not part of any group of churches, nor do we have any link with any other local church. As strictly autonomous church, we are totally undenominational in our affiliation.

More than that, we have taken a name that testifies to the oneness of the body of Christ. We are Believers Chapel and "believers" is all we are. The name is our witness to the oneness of the body of Christ, since it excludes none who are in the Body, but includes any and all who belong to the Lord. Individually we wish to be known as believers or Christians or saints or disciples or

brethren. Any of these designations are acceptable and biblical since each testifies to the oneness of the body.

By the way, this is not the view of a few radical Christians; it has all the weight of the great reformers behind it. For example, Philip Schaff in his *History of the Christian Church* (Vol. VII) quotes these remarkable words from Martin Luther:

"I pray you, leave my name alone, and do not call yourselves Lutherans, but Christians. Who is Luther? My doctrine is not mine. I have not been crucified for anyone. St. Paul would not that anyone should call themselves of Paul, nor of Peter, but of Christ. How, then, does it befit me, a miserable bag of dust and ashes to give my name to the children of Christ? Cease, my dear friends, to cling to those party names and distinctions, -away with them all! and let us call ourselves only Christians, after Him from whom our doctrine comes. (It is quite proper that the Papists should bear the name of their party; because they are not content with the name and doctrine of Jesus Christ, they will be Papists besides. Well, let them own the Pope, as he is their master.) For me, I neither am, nor wish to be, the master of anyone. I and mine will contend for the sole and whole doctrine of Christ, who is our sole master."

Another great leader, John Wesley, once was much troubled in regard to the disposition of various sects, and the chances of each in reference to future happiness or punishment. A dream one night transported him in its uncertain wandering to the gates of hell.

"Are there any Roman Catholics here?" asked thoughtful Wesley.  
"Yes," was the reply. "Any Presbyterians?"  
"Yes," was again the answer. "Any Congregationalists?" "Yes."  
"Any Methodists?" by way of a clincher, asked the pious Wesley.  
The answer, to his great indignation, was again, "Yes."

In the mystic way of dreams, there was a sudden transition, and he stood at the gate of heaven. Improving his opportunity, he again inquired:

"Are there any Roman Catholics here?" "No," we replied.  
"Any Presbyterians?" "No."  
"Any Congregationalists?" "No."  
"Any Methodists?" "No."  
"Well, then," he asked, lost in confusion, "who are they inside?"  
The jubilant answer came quickly: "Christians!"

May God help us all to testify by our practice that we believe in the oneness of the body of Christ as a principle of the New Testament Church.

## **Every Believer is a Member of the Church**

Observe carefully:

Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it.

*1 Cor. 12:27*

The Apostle is saying that every individual who becomes a believer in Christ is a member of the body of Christ. The moment an individual is converted he becomes a member of this body. This is a membership that transcends all boundaries. It transcends the bounds of race, of color, of temperament, of culture, of social caste, of denominations. It transcends all bounds. Every believer is a member of that church.

Now, if the local church is to be a miniature or a replica of the universal church, then it ought to do nothing and be nothing that would contradict this principle. But how? How can we testify in our daily practices to the fact that we believe that every Christian is a member of the one Church?

## The Practice of the Apostolic Church

By **esteeming every believer equally** as a member of the body of Christ the early church practiced this principle (Eph. 3:6, Jas. 2:1). The Christian who esteemed one believer above another believer because of the color of his skin, or because of his ecclesiology, or because of his doctrine concerning future things, or because of the church that he attended was denying in a practical way that all believers were members of the body of Christ. By esteeming them all equally as members, the early Christians testified to that great principle. Also, by **caring for them all equally**, they testified to the fact that they were all members of the body of Christ (I Cor. 12:15). As they came in contact with a fellow Christian who had a particular need, the question was not, "Do you go to my church?" The question was not, "Are you pre-millennial?" The question was not "What is your view on the gift of tongues?" The only question was "Are you a Believer?" As they cared for all believers, they were testifying (in a practical way) to the fact that all believers are members of the body of Christ.

The early Christians also testified to this great principle by **receiving all believers equally** into the fellowship of their churches. They received them because they were believers and members of His church. It is very clear as one reads through the New Testament that believers were received into the fellowship of the church because they were believers. It was not on the basis of how much doctrine they knew. If that were so, few would have been accepted. Similarly, it was not on the basis of whether they had been baptized or not, nor on the basis of the particular type of ministry in which they were involved, nor on the basis of their previous life. Paul would never have been accepted if that were the basis. What was the basis? The early Christian church received into the fellowship of their church those who had been received by Christ into His church.

Wherefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the "glory of God."  
*Romans 15:7*

But this did not continue for long.



## The Departure

The departure is most evident in some of the "standard operating procedures" in our churches today.

Have you heard of the graduate of a particular university in Texas who wanted to join a church? He went to one church and said he would like to become a member. The minister said, "We have just one question we ask prospective members."

"Do you know where Jesus was born?" The graduate thought for a moment and then said, "Waxahachie"

The minister said, "No, I'm sorry you don't qualify."

But our graduate friend was not discouraged so he went to another church. The second minister said: "We would love to have you as a member, but we do have a question that we generally ask. Do you know where Jesus was born?" He thought carefully and then said, "Nacogdoches?" He failed a second time.

However he was determined, so he went to the third church. Lo and behold he was readily accepted without any questions. Curious, he turned to the minister and said, "I've got a question. Where was Jesus born?" The minister said, "Why, it was in Palestine." The young man said, "I knew it was some place in East Texas!"

The standard modern routine of joining a church is antithetical to the apostolic practice. Joining a local church, the membership roll, the several conditions for membership are all our innovations. In the New Testament Church they welcomed into the fellowship of their church those who had been received by Christ into His church. That was the only basis, the only condition. The only membership they knew was membership in the universal church.

## Distinctive #2

"How many members do you have in Believers Chapel?" "We would like to join your church. How do we go about doing this?" "When will a membership class be held?" Hardly a week goes by without a question of this kind. What is the policy of Believers chapel regarding church membership? It is stated succinctly on the Sunday church bulletin:

"The policy of Believers Chapel with regard to membership is to acknowledge all who have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ as fellow members of the body of Christ, the church; as in the New Testament, no other membership than this is recognized. We welcome all genuine believers into the fellowship we enjoy with Him and with one another.

**We welcome into our fellowship as members anyone who is a believer and therefore a member of His church.** If you are a member of the invisible universal church, and you have

been led by God to fellowship with us at Believers Chapel, we recognize you as a member of Believers Chapel. You are a member by virtue of your membership in the church of Jesus Christ. We have no membership other than participation in the body of Jesus Christ.

Why not? We recognize that every believer is a member of the church of our Lord and the local church is to be a replica of the universal church. We can do nothing or be nothing that would contradict this great principle.

These principles lead us naturally into a third one, which is perhaps the most beautiful one of all.

## Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church

Paul says explicitly:

For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body.

*Eph. 5:23*

He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything.

*Col 1:18*

Surely the headship of Christ is implied in the metaphor of the body used by Paul in I Corinthians 12:

For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ, For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

*I Cor. 12:12-13*

Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it.

*I Cor. 12:27*

The analogy seems to imply that just as the body is controlled and directed by the head, so the church is controlled and directed by its Head, Jesus Christ. By using the analogy of the human body the Apostle Paul is telling us that Christ, who is the Head of the church, is controlling the church which is His body here on earth. Who would contest this? Of course Christ is the head of the church. Remember, however, the local church is a miniature or a replica of the universal church. It can be nothing that would contradict this principle. But how can we testify in the local church to the fact that Christ is the head of our church?

## The Practice of the Apostolic Church

The church of the first century witnessed to this principle by acknowledging that He was also the Head of each local church. If the local church is but a miniature of the universal, this naturally follows. Christ is Head of each local church as well.

Whereas the universal church is described as His body in Eph. 1:23, the local church is described as His body in I Cor. 12:27. The apostles, then, viewed the local as a miniature, or local expression, of the universal church. As such, Christ is its Head.

The acknowledgment of Christ's headship over each local church is evident in that no individual man was recognized as head of any local church.

This is clear from the New Testament. For example, who was the head of the church at Corinth? You may study I Corinthians in detail, going verse by verse through the book and you will never discover any man designated as the head. Who was the head of the church at Ephesus? The church at Rome? At Philippi? The amazing thing is that there was no human head organizing, ruling and administering in any of the local churches. As the apostles retraced their steps over the churches which they had established, they ordained elders (plural - Acts 14:23). In the New Testament we see only and always a plurality of elders (Acts 11:30, 15:2,4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4; 21:18; 20:17; 28:31; Titus 1:5, Phil. 1:1, Jas. 5:14). They functioned as undershepherds, under the great Shepherd of the flock (I Peter 5:1-5). This, however, did not continue for long.

## **The Departure**

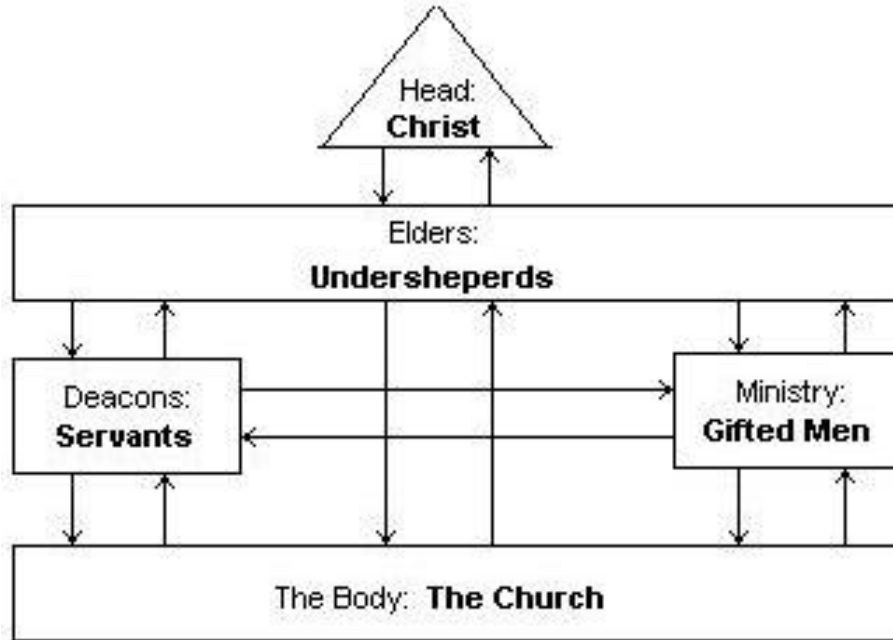
In the second century there arose the local bishop. We read in church history of Ignatius, bishop of Antioch; and Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. Then came the monarchical bishop, an overseer over a geographic area of several churches. The hierarchy, ordination and the whole clerical system emerged. There is no such system in the New Testament. To have had any such individual over a local church surely would have been to contradict the principle that Christ is the Head of the church.

## **Distinctive #3**

### **We recognize Jesus Christ alone as head of Believers Chapel.**

It may surprise some of you who have been coming to Believers Chapel for just a short period of time to discover that I am not the pastor of Believers Chapel. I have never been ordained. I do not have any official title. I am not the head of Believers Chapel.

We do not have any individual who occupies such an office in the New Testament. Pastoring is a gift (Eph. 4:11) and a work (I Pet. 5:2). But it is no more an office than "showing mercy" or "giving" or "exhorting." Thus we do not have anyone in Believers Chapel who occupies the office of Pastor. The organizational structure of a New Testament local church has been diagrammed by Dr. S. L. Johnson, Jr. as follows:



The New Testament speaks of only four offices in the local church: The Head (Col. 1:18, Eph. 1:22). Elders (I Tim. 3). Deacons (I Tim. 3) and Priests (I Peter 5:9). Christ alone is Head. Several may be elders and deacons. All believers are priests.

The government of Believers Chapel is under the rule of a group of elders who function under Christ the Head. They are the decision-making body.

I am offended when you refer to this as Bill McRae's church. You do a great disservice to Dr. Johnson to refer to it as Dr. Johnson's church. It is a great affront to the Lord to refer to it as Dr. Blum's Church. Why? In each case, you are putting a man in the position that Christ alone can and does assume in his church. He is the Head and we recognize only Him in His position of Headship.

I have often been told: "I don't care what you say Bill, you are still the pastor." I am frequently called "Pastor McRae" or introduced as the pastor of Believers Chapel.

In response I must speak forthrightly. First of all, this is *incorrect*. I am not the pastor. We have several men who are as much pastors as I am. I am not their superior nor their senior, nor do I have any jurisdiction over them. In no sense am I the pastor.

Second, this is *misleading*. Persons who speak this way are using a very legitimate biblical term in a way the scriptures do not use it. They are using it in reference to an office. The person occupying this office is often considered to be the head of the church. Against the background of these meanings it would be very misleading to concur with them. I could not agree because I am not the, or even a pastor in the sense that they are using the word. It is strange, indeed, that those who use "pastor" this way do not use the other gifts this way. Have you ever heard of "Giver Smith", or "Administrator Brown", or "Helper Jones?"

Third, this is *offensive*. Jesus Christ alone is the Pastor, the Shepherd of the flock (I Pet. 5:4). What an offense to our Lord to speak of any man as the pastor of a local church! Christ alone occupies that position.

Now, I do not mind being referred to as a pastor in Believers Chapel. That is what I hope I am, by God's grace. The gift that God has given to me is that I am pastoring in Believers Chapel. So I do not mind being introduced as a pastor in Believers Chapel so long as you realize that it is a gift, not an office, and that I am one of several such pastors. Every elder is to be doing the work of pastoring (I Peter 5:1-5). Others with the gift are also pastors, doing the work of pastoring in this church, but Christ alone is the Head.

There are some further implications of the principle of Christ's Headship which are difficult to avoid. For example, if we are to acknowledge His Headship in our local church, we must permit Him to superintend every department of the local church. Is this possible? Certainly! He never fails to make His will known concerning any matter in the church to the church that patiently waits and prays. It is true, of course, that this takes spiritual exercise. In our pragmatic ways, too often we take matters into our own hands to organize, structure, and delegate. Mark this well: the church which knows nothing of patiently waiting and depending upon Him, will experience little of the Head practically superintending in all of the areas of the church.

More than this, if we are to acknowledge His Headship we must recognize heaven above as our headquarters. William MacDonald has well said:

*The word headquarters speaks of the center of operations and of authority. The headquarters of the church are where the Head is - in heaven. A local church can not consistently recognize any controlling organization such as a synod, presbytery, or council where control is exercised over a single church or a group of churches. Each assembly stands directly responsible to the Head of the church, and should be nothing and do nothing that would deny that truth.*

Although Christ, the Head of the Church, is in the headquarters yet His representative is here on earth dwelling in the church. This brings us to our next principle.

## **The Holy Spirit is Christ's representative in the church**

This is undoubtedly true of the universal church, as the following passage shows:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

***Eph. 2:19-22***

But it is also true of the local church:

Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?

***I Cor. 3:16***

The local church, the temple of God, is the subject of I Cor. 3. The Spirit of God is dwelling in that temple, in the local church. The head of the local church is Jesus Christ who now is in Heaven; but upon His ascension He sent to earth a representative, the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God has been sent into the church and indwells it as the representative of Christ the Head of the church. As such:

- He empowered the preaching of the Word of God - I Thess. 1:5
- He appointed the elders - Acts 20:28
- He guided their activities - positively Acts 13:2
- He guided their activities - negatively Acts 16:6,7
- He bestowed spiritual gifts - Eph. 4:11
- He guided them into all trust - John 16:13

Here is a glorious reality. The Holy Spirit indwells the local church as the representative of its Head. But how did the early church testify to this?

## The Apostolic Practice

To our sophisticated age these ideas will sound simplistic, but don't be misled. Each one is a humble recognition of the Spirit's role in the church and a silent confession of Christ's headship. The apostolic church followed the Holy Spirit's guidance in their decisions (Acts 13:2, 16:6,7). They recognized the elders that the Holy Spirit appointed for the church (I Cor. 16:15, 16). They valued, cultivated, developed, and exercised the gifts that the Holy Spirit gave to the church (Eph. 4, I Pet. 4, Rom. 12, I Cor. 12). But most of all, in the meeting of the church, there was freedom for the Holy Spirit to guide and to superintend.

This is the distinct impression we gain from "the most intimate glimpse we have of the early church at worship" (Morris):

What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and let one interpret; but if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God. And let two or three prophets speak, and let others pass judgment. But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, let the first keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.

*I Cor. 14:26-33*

Of this section Barclay notes "there was clearly no settled order at all." What a contrast to the inflexible and formal meetings of today. The Holy Spirit, the Vicar of the Head, was superintending the meeting. He had perfect freedom to guide and to lead in that meeting of the church. There was no stereotyped program, form, nor ritual. He was in sovereign control. By such a practice the church was confessing that Christ was their Head, and the Representative of their Head presided at the church meeting! But that did not last for long either.

## The Departure

The first indication of a problem came in Thessalonica. To the church Paul writes:

Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good;

*I Thess 5:19-21*

The context indicates that verse 19 refers to the local church meeting, not to individual Christian lives. The church was beginning to quench the Spirit in the meeting of the church. Perhaps some of the sophisticates looked upon that Spirit-led, Spirit-filled young man as he gave a word or an exhortation, and disgustedly whispered to themselves: "Sit down!" "What immaturity!" "How inconsistent with the rationale of men."

Perhaps it was some of the older people who looked down upon the younger men, and with a scornful glance or a contentious word or a solemn silence ignored them after they had taken part in the meeting of the church. They were quenching the Spirit!

Eventually came the hierarchy and the liturgy, the formulae, the rituals, the time limits, and man-made rules for the meeting of the church. Any similarity between the traditional meeting of a church in America today and the new Testament church meeting is purely coincidental. We have quenched the Spirit. In the New Testament church meeting there was freedom for the Spirit of God to lead and direct the church.

Throughout the centuries there have been many protests of the Holy Spirit against the authority of men which would quench Him. There were the Montanists of the second century, the Quakers and Independents of the British Commonwealth, the Plymouth Brethren, the Salvation Army and, today, the Jesus Movement. We, too, protest.

## Distinctive #4

Every Sunday evening, following the pattern of the New Testament church, we gather together for the meeting of the church in which **we give the Holy Spirit freedom to superintend the meeting of the church**. There is no officialism, no liturgy, no rituals, no stereotyped program, no man made rules, no time limitations.

The Holy Spirit is free to exercise one to stand and give a hymn, then another to read a passage of the Word of God, another to pray, or to give a word of exhortation, to give thanks for the bread, or to give thanks for the wine, or to pray for the president and for those in authority over us, or to pray for that unsaved neighbor down the street, or to share a particular prayer request or to praise God for something He has done in his life last week. It is a meeting with a three-fold purpose:

1. Edification of believers -I Cor. 14:26 This may be achieved through hymns (Eph. 5:19, I Cor. 14:26), ministry of the Word (I Cor. 14:26), and personal testimonies (Acts 14:27, 15:4, 12).

2. Worship of the Lord. This may be expressed in hymns, prayer, ministry of the Word, the observance of the Lord's Supper (I Cor. 11:23-34), and the offering of our gifts to the Lord (I Cor. 16:1-2).
3. Evangelism of the Unsaved. Those unbelievers present may be evangelized by the proclamation of the Lord's death in the observance of the Lord's supper (I Cor. 11:26). For those unbelievers who are absent we are instructed to intercede for their salvation (I Tim. 2:1-8).

Although there is a three-fold purpose with a large variety of possible elements, yet there is no structure or format. The Representative of our Head presides. How better could we bear witness to the Headship of Christ in Believers Chapel?

This is not the only way, however. We do it by seeking His guidance in all our affairs; our building program, our speakers' schedules, the disbursing of our funds, the program of meetings etc. We do it by recognizing as elders only those whom He has appointed. We do it by recognizing, developing and using and appreciating the gifts He has given to our church. We do it by resisting the control of any church, organization, or group of Christians outside our church. To be sure, there is much failure here! But our earnest aspiration is to testify to the Headship of Christ in Believers Chapel by allowing His Representative freedom and by following His leadership.

## **The Church of Jesus Christ is holy**

"If any man destroys the temple Of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy and that is what you are."

*I Cor. 3:17*

Paul is speaking of the objective holiness or sacredness of the church. In view here is the local church. It is called the temple of God and is described as holy. What are the implications? How can a local church testify to the fact that it is holy?

## **The Apostolic Church**

According to the context of I Corinthians 3, its primary implication is the imperative of teaching pure doctrine in the church. To be properly interpreted, the materials mentioned in this passage (gold, silver, precious stone, wood, hay and stubble) must be taken to represent the doctrine taught by the ministers of the Gospel. Four reasons for this are apparent:

1. The entire context deals with preachers and their duty. The work of a minister is to teach doctrine.
2. Just as the foundation is the doctrine of Jesus Christ, the materials of the superstructure are also doctrine.
3. It will surely be agreed by all that doctrine is what buildup a church to maturity.
4. Finally, the materials mentioned are appropriate symbols for true and false doctrine Gold, silver and precious stones were extensively used for adorning ancient temples. Thus they are appropriate symbols for pure doctrine. However, wood, hay and stubble were perishable materials out of which ordinary houses were built - not temples. These materials which were unsuitable for a temple appropriately symbolize false doctrine.

Those churches which were careless about the teaching of pure doctrine or taught false doctrine were corrupted and brought the judgment of God upon themselves. On the other hand, churches



which were meticulous about the teaching of pure doctrine confessed to the world that they recognized that the church was holy and they dared not corrupt it with the teaching of false doctrine. Even today we testify to our conviction that the church is holy by teaching pure doctrine alone in the local church.

According to a number of passages, the early church also testified to its holiness by exercising discipline in the church. Both moral evil (I Cor. 5) and doctrinal evil (Titus 3:10) were subject to discipline. The procedure was straight-forward. Four steps were taken against one that was guilty of either moral or doctrinal evil.

- Private Rebuke -Matt. 18:15
- Plural Rebuke -Matt. 18:16
- Public Rebuke -Matt. 18:17a
- Official exclusion from the Lord's Supper -Matt. 18:17b, I Cor. 5:17, I Tim. 1:19-20, Tit. 3:10.

The purpose for such a procedure was twofold. Often it was designed to expose and expel unregenerate persons from the local church (I John 2:19). On other occasions, it was designed to effect a restoration on the part of the erring brother (I Cor. 5; Matt. 18). But in either case, the New Testament church exercised church discipline because they recognized that the church was holy and its holiness must be preserved. It is obvious, however, that such discipline did not continue for long.

## The Departure

The toleration of moral evil is first seen in I Corinthians 5. A man who was living in incest was actually tolerated in the church at Corinth. Today moral evil is not only tolerated but it is condoned in the church at large. For example, the general conference of one of the major denominations recently announced:

*"We declare our acceptance of homosexuals as persons of sacred worth and we welcome them into the fellowship of the church."*

This is only one of many indications that moral evil is not only being tolerated but condoned. When was the last time you heard a church discipline a person for adultery or fornication or drunkenness or homosexuality? Modern churches have abdicated their responsibility to exercise discipline.

Doctrinal evil also came to be tolerated in the early church. When Paul writes to young Titus he exhorts him to rebuke the teachers of false doctrine and if they did not respond, after the first and second admonition, to reject them (Titus 3:10).

Today doctrinal evil, like moral evil, is condoned. One of the great evangelical denominations of America recently surveyed its constituents and determined that three out of ten doubt the deity of Christ; four out of ten doubt the existence of God; three out of ten doubt life after death; seventy

percent believe that all religions lead to the same God; forty percent believe that all religions are equally important; and fifty-four percent of them deny that Jesus Christ created everything. Part of the academic freedom in our seminaries and in our churches is to permit the teaching of false doctrine. When was the last time you heard of a church disciplining a man for teaching false doctrine? Moral evil and doctrinal evil were not to be tolerated in the New Testament church.

## **Distinctive #5**

We at Believers Chapel **exercise and practice church discipline regarding both moral and doctrinal evil** because we believe the church is holy and ought not to be defiled. If a person were to stand up in our Sunday evening meeting of the church and teach false doctrine, if he were a heretic who would come in as a wolf among the sheep to teach heresy, then it would be the responsibility of the elders to discipline him. We ought to pray for the elders that they will have the wisdom and the courage to exercise discipline, that false doctrine never be tolerated, let alone condoned, in our church.

On a number of occasions individuals have been rebuked privately, sometimes plurally, and even publicly for erroneous teaching. I know of two who have been excommunicated from the Lord's Supper. We believe that church discipline for moral or doctrinal evil must be exercised to maintain the holiness of the church.

## **Every believer is a priest of God**

In the Old Testament, the Law of Moses clearly distinguished a certain group of men to function as priests. They were the sons of Aaron of the tribe of Levi. They wore distinctive garb and had special privileges; they alone could enter the Holy Place, approach the altar and offer a sacrifice. They were the priests of God, a distinctive class between God and the rest of the people.

But the New Testament did away with this system. Every believer is now a priest of God:

You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ

*1 Peter 2:5*

But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR GOD'S OWN POSSESSION, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light

*1 Peter 2:9*

And from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood, and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father; to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

*Revel. 1:5-6*

Thus, a prominent doctrine of the New Testament church is that every believer in Jesus Christ is a priest of God. This principle was one of the great battle cries of the reformation period. Martin Luther contended for it boldly when he wrote,

All believers are all together priests. And let it be anathema to assert that there is any other priest than he Who is a Christian, for it will be asserted without the word of God, on no authority but the sayings of men or the antiquity of custom or the multitude of those that think so.

As we have noted, the local church is to be a miniature or a replica of the universal church, and it ought to do nothing or be nothing that will contradict this principle. How, therefore, can we testify in our practice and in our experience to this principle?

## The Apostolic Practice

The uniform testimony is that the apostles rejected any priesthood that did not include every believer and encouraged every believer to assume his responsibilities and privileges as a priest of God. This was most evident in the meeting of the early church. Of that meeting it is said:

How is it then, brethren, when ye come together everyone of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation.

*1 Cor. 14:26*

This clearly states that everyone was free to participate in the service. They gathered together as a priesthood in which every believer was ready to function as a priest in the meeting of the church. Furthermore, this priesthood was not limited to the church meeting. It applied seven days of the week, twenty-four hours a day, sixty minutes in every hour. It included the whole man in his whole life. As a priest, every child of God was to be offering up as sacrifice to the Lord:

- himself -Rom. 12:1-2
- his praise -Heb. 13:15
- his material goods -Heb. 13:16
- his prayers

What an exciting position and privilege! Unfortunately, that condition did not continue for long.

## The Departure

Within a century, the church turned back to the priesthood of the Old Testament. While professing that every believer is a priest of God, the church hypocritically set up its own priesthood, which continues even today. It is patterned after the Mosaic system. We have a separate class of men who are set aside for the work of God. I have heard them referred to as "professional Christians." They have elaborate titles which distinguish them from the laity and sometimes wear garments which distinguish them from the other people of God. This is pure Judaism - a revival of the Old Testament priesthood!

William MacDonald has isolated other concepts the church has borrowed from Judaism. The consecrated building with its elaborate altars, its ecclesiastical adornments and its material aids

to worship are all carried over from the Mosaic system. The impressive ritual, the religious calendar with its holy days and seasons are also a hangover from the Old Testament. Dr. C. I. Scofield perceived this strange mixture of Judaism and Christianity when he said:

*It may safely be said that the Judaizing of the church has done more to hinder her progress, pervert her mission and destroy her spirituality than all other causes combined.*

More than this, such Judaisms deny in a practical way the priesthood of all believers. But in the New Testament church there was no such distinction.

## **Distinctive #6**

Because every believer in Jesus Christ is a priest of God, **we recognize no other priesthood than that which includes every believer.**

We have no separate class of men set apart by title, office, or apparel for Christian service. No distinction is made between "clergy" and "laity". We refuse the use of titles such as "Reverend" and "Pastor" , which are contrary to the spirit of the Word of God. Our Lord said to his disciples:

But do not be called Rabbi, for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ.

*Matt. 23: 8-10*

Look again at these verses in their context. There are three reasons why such titles are forbidden:

1. Such titles belong to God, who is teacher, father and master (v. 8, 9, 10). Assigning them to men gives to man the place of God.
2. Also such titles elevate one man above another. We are all brethren (v. 8). Therefore they destroy the body concept.
3. Finally, the seeking of such titles is a manifestation of pride (v. 9).

Calling a man "Pope" (Papa, Father) violates these words. Using "Priest" as a title surely does also. The word "Reverend" is only used in Ps. 111:9 as an adjective to describe God's name. The primary root of this Hebrew word is the verb meaning "to fear" or "to reverence." To use it as a title certainly puts it in the category of the titles in Matt. 23: 8-10. It belongs to God alone and when applied to man, elevates one above the others. The use of "Pastor" as a title is no less unbiblical. It establishes a class distinction that denies the priesthood of all believers and the Leadership of Christ. In today's churches, it is used to designate an office - an office which is nowhere part of the New Testament church structure. Certainly there are pastors in the New Testament but the usage refers to a gift, not an office or title.

We recognize every believer as a priest with equal standing before God. In the church meeting there is no officialdom. We meet as priests with equal privilege and responsibility. We encourage you as a believer to function as a priest in your daily life, in your prayer time, in your witness with your neighbors and in offering your spiritual sacrifices to your Lord.

# The ordinances of the church were instituted by Christ, its head

This is precisely what we would expect. The Head of the church, Jesus Christ, instituted the ordinances of His church. An ordinance is simply a ritual or practice that was

1. instituted by our Lord,
2. given to the church, and
3. obligatory upon every believer.

We may also say an ordinance was

4. prescribed by Christ in the Gospels,
5. practiced by the early church in the book of Acts, and
6. expounded by the apostles in the epistles. Two ordinances were prescribed by our Lord for His church

## Believers Baptism

We have no hesitation in saying baptism is an ordinance of the church. It was instituted by our Lord:

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

*Matt. 28:19-20*

It was practiced by the early church:

And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch; and he baptized him.

*Acts 8:38*

It was expounded by the apostles:

Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin.

*Rom. 6:4-6*

According to the scriptures the apostolic church baptized only believers (Acts 2:41, 8:12, 8:36-38, 9:18, 10:44-48, 16:30-34, 18:8, 19:1-5). Every indication is that they were baptized by immersion (Acts 8:38-39). Their baptism was for the purpose of publicly identifying themselves with Jesus Christ. It was a public confession of faith in Him (Romans 6:4-6).

The practice was soon corrupted. In the second and early part of the third century, the baptism of infants emerged. With the reign of Constantine came the baptism of unbelievers. In the middle ages, unbelievers were forced to be baptized at the point of a sword. They were being baptized by sprinkling and by pouring as well as by immersion. Some were being baptized in order to

become a Christian; others were being baptized as a sacrament as a means of conveying grace to them; where still others were being baptized as an act of dedication to God. The distance we have strayed from the New Testament in our practice of the ordinance of baptism is astounding.

## The Lord's Supper

This is the second ordinance instituted by our Lord.

And having taken some bread, when He had given thanks, He broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood."

*Luke 22:19-20*

It was practiced by the early church.

And on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them intending to depart the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight.

*Acts 20:7*

It was expounded by the apostles.

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me." In the same way the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

*I Cor. 11:23-26*

Because baptism emphasized the believers initiation into the Christian Life, it was done once. Because the Lord's Supper emphasized their continuation in the Christian Life, it was done repeatedly. It was celebrated weekly, by believers, primarily to commemorate His atonement.

Soon, however, there came the practice of the people taking only the bread and not the wine; and then the less-than-weekly observance of the Lord's Supper. It later became a sacrament to some groups - a means of conveying grace - a condition for salvation.

## Distinctive #7

As the ordinances were instituted by Christ, the Head of the Church, **we observe only the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper.** We practice believers baptism, baptizing only born-again believers in Jesus Christ, by immersion, and as a public confession of their identification with Christ. We observe the Lord's Supper weekly and welcome any, but only believers, to participate as we commemorate our Lord's death for our sin.

The reason why we reject all other ordinances (ordination, penance, confirmation, matrimony and divine unction) is obvious. None of these were instituted by our Lord, nor in any way given

to the church as something to be observed by Christians. As a result, we reject them and accept only the two ordinances which our Lord instituted and gave to the Christian church, and we endeavor to observe them as they were practiced in the New Testament church under the guidance and direction of the apostles. This is our seventh basic principle.

## The work of God was supported by the people of God

This is both stated and implied in the New Testament.

### The Apostolic Practice

For they went out for the sake of the Name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles.

*3 John 7*

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week let each one of you put aside and save, as he may prosper, that no collections be made when I come.

*I Cor. 16:1-2*

There is no hint in the New Testament that unbelievers contributed to the work of God. In the New Testament giving is an act of worship. Paul speaks of the gift that the Philippians had sent to him as "a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice pleasing to God" (Phil. 4:18). If that is giving, then it is obviously limited to those who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ because only these can engage in the worship of the Lord.

Careful attention should be given I Cor, 16:1-2 for several principles regarding the collecting of funds.

1. *Paul did not solicit funds for himself.* Furthermore, there is no indication that any of the apostles collected for themselves.

Mr. Spurgeon was interviewed once and asked if he had modified his views in any way upon the efficacy of prayer. He replied:

*Only that my faith grows stronger and stronger. It is not a matter of faith, but of every-day experience and knowledge. I am constantly witnessing the most remarkable answers to prayer. I could no more doubt the efficacy of prayer than the law of gravitation. Look at my orphanage. To keep it going entails \$10,000 a year expenditure. Only \$1,400 is provided by endowments, the remaining \$8,600 comes to me in answer to prayer. I do not know where I shall get it day by day. I ask God for it and it comes.*

2. *The Apostle did not hesitate to mention the needs of others.* He made known need of the saints in Jerusalem, and exhorted the Christians in Crete to "diligently help Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way so that nothing is lacking for them" (Titus 3:13).

3. *He solicited only from believers.*

4. *He did not use pressure tactics*; rather he desired that the money be collected before they arrived. According to II Cor. 9:5, this was so that all pressure would be absent.

So I thought it necessary to urge the brethren that they would go on ahead to you and arrange beforehand your previously promised bountiful gift, that the same might be ready as a bountiful gift, and not affected by covetousness

*II Cor. 9:5.*

Paul desired that their giving be done willingly, not "wrung out of them."

5. *He was scrupulously careful in handling the Lord's money.* In fact, he did not personally handle any of it. If Paul considered it wise to avoid any opportunity for calling his integrity into question (II Cor. 8:19-20), it surely would be wise for those who have followed him to act with equal caution!

A second look at these same verses will disclose some principles for the giving of funds:

1. They were to give regularly - every Lord's day.
2. They were to give individually, all were to give. Rich and poor, all were to give.
3. They were to give proportionately. No exact proportion was stated; this was left to the conscience of each individual. A person's giving, however, was to be in direct proportion to the way he is prospering.
4. Perhaps we can infer from the scriptures that they were also to give directly to the Lord. Whatever we do, we are to do it heartily, as unto the Lord" (Col. 3:20).

Andrew Fuller, a fine man of God, once visited a businessman at his office in England. As Fuller was about to leave the businessman wrote out a check and said: "Here is five pounds for you." Fuller ripped the check up and said: "If it is for me, I can not take it." The obvious point was that the gift should have been for the Lord.

One may also glean from these same verses in I Cor. 16 certain principles regarding the distribution of funds in the early church.

1. They were distributed to meet specific needs. Widows (Acts 6:1-6, I Tim. 5), the poor (Gal. 2:10 Rom. 12:13) and ministers of the gospel (I Cor. 9: 4-14, I Tim. 5:17-18) were the most common recipients.
2. They were generally distributed through the local church. Perhaps this was not done exclusively, but it certainly seems to have been the usual pattern.
3. They were distributed by men approved by the church on the basis of spiritual qualification (I Tim. 3).

History has testified to the wisdom of these early principles concerning the collecting, giving and distribution of financial resources. But it is a lesson in negative teaching!

## **The Departure**



Few things have brought more reproach on the name of Christ, more disillusionment to Christians and more disgust to unbelievers than our modern methods in area of finance. What a disgrace it is Christian institutions make appeals to secular foundations for grants to support them. Far and wide in Christian churches the offering plate is passed to a mixed congregation and funds are solicited from unbelievers. Christian workers "arrange" for their support. Some even directly solicit it.

## **Distinctive #8**

Following the principles and practices of the apostolic church. **We do not solicit funds from unbelievers, and all that is contributed by the people of God is used to promote the work of God.**

One reason we do not take an offering on Sunday morning is that we obviously have a mixed congregation of believers and unbelievers at such meetings. It is an outreach service, and we do not want to solicit any funds from unbelievers. The work of God is to be supported by the people of God.

All that is contributed here in Believers Chapel is used for His work. We send some to missionaries. We use some for people in our congregation who have particular needs on given occasions. We use some for the support of those who are involved locally in the service of God. But we can assure you that it is all used for the work of God.

On the first day of every week at the Sunday evening meeting of the church we take an offering. This is the opportunity for believers to worship the Lord by bringing their financial gifts to Him. No pressure tactics are ever used. Needs are occasionally made known, but there is no effort to coerce.

Recently, I heard of a pastor in South Texas who asked a new deacon to assist him in taking up the offering. The deacon was anxious to do a good job and was thrilled as the plate filled up with money. In the next-to-last row sat a woman who passed the plate without putting a thing in it. After the last row he passed it to her a second time. Again she put nothing in it. Frustrated, the deacon pushed the plate at her and said, "If you're not going to put something in, take something out. It's for the heathen, anyway!" This is not the spirit of the New Testament church.

The last principle is really foundational to all the others. It is unquestionably the most critical one.

## **The New Testament is the sufficient and authoritative constitution of the church**

A reading of the New Testament will disclose three areas from which the church derived guidance.

### *1. Apostolic Principles.*

For example,

- There is one body (Eph. 4:4)
- All believers are members of the church (I Cor. 12:13)
- The church is holy (I Cor. 3:17)
- The priesthood of all believers (I Peter 2:9)
- Christ is the Head of the Church (Eph. 1:22, Col. 1:18)
- The Holy Spirit is the vicar of Christ (I Cor. 3:16)

### *2. Apostolic Precepts.*

For example,

- The regulation of spiritual gifts (I Cor. 14)
- The silence of women in the church meeting (I Cor. 14, I Tim. 2)

### *3. Apostolic Practice.*

For example,

- The observances of the ordinances.
- The place of finances.

It is important to note that all practices of the early church are not necessarily obligatory today. Some were certainly cultural. Practices that are unrelated to principles for the church need not be followed necessarily. For example:

The early church met in homes. This was convenient and unrelated to any biblical principle for the church. Hence we are free either to meet or not meet in a home today, whichever is more convenient.

If you put those three together, the apostolic principles, precepts and practices, you have the constitution of the early Christian church, as well as a valid basis for organizing our modern local churches. However, these ideas were corrupted long before modern times.

## **The Departure**

In the words of the Reformers, the church fell just as man had fallen. The apostolic principles practices and many of the precepts were abandoned. In the sixteenth century the reformers sought to restore the church. The crucial questions were: "When did the church fall?" and "To what stage should it be restored?"

Martin Luther was convinced that the church fell with Gregory the Great, the first worldly pope in the sixth century. As a result, he sought to restore the form of church government and organization which had existed just prior to Gregory the Great. Zwingli believed that the church fell with Hildebrande in the eleventh century. He therefore attempted to restore the organization and practices as they were just before Hildebrande's reign. The Anabaptists located the fall at the union of the church and state by Constantine. Accordingly, Anabaptists attempted to restore the organization, principles and practices of the church which had existed just prior to the fourth century.

Of all the reformers only one dared to say, "Let us go back to the New Testament." All of the reformers were moving back to the New Testament for the doctrine of salvation. Of course salvation is by faith! The doctrine of salvation must be based on the New Testament. But only one of the reformers said that the doctrine of the church should also be based on the New Testament. His name was Menno Simons, from whom the Mennonite Movement eventually emerged. Simons faced such tremendous persecution and opposition that even he eventually abandoned his position.

But the question for today is, why not go back to the New Testament? If we base what we believe about future things on the New Testament, if we base our convictions about Christ on the New Testament, if our doctrine of the Holy Spirit is based on the New Testament, why not go back to the New Testament also for what we believe about the church? Why not make it our sufficient and authoritative constitution?

Some will respond, "The New Testament is vague on the church." That is not true. It is as clear on ecclesiology as it is on any other doctrine. Others will protest, "But there are seemingly contradictory verses as you study the New Testament. There appears to be the possibility of different positions on church government or order." But that is also true of the doctrine of Christ or of the Holy Spirit. Shall we abandon the New Testament on these too, because there are apparent contradictions? Of course not. Just as we seek for a reconciliation of the texts in those doctrines, we shall do the same thing with ecclesiology.

Perhaps the most difficult argument to deal with is from the person who says, "But as you read through the New Testament, there is an evolution or a development of ecclesiology. You see its beginning stages in Acts, its further development in the prison epistles and when you come to the pastoral epistles it seems to have reached still a more advanced development. It developed according to the rise of needs in the church. As new needs arise, then, after the first century, there is no reason why the development may not continue." Such reasoning has a serious deficiency. Of course there has been developing revelation, or progressive revelation through the New Testament. That is true of every doctrine, including the doctrine of the church. But in each case, when the revelation in scripture ceases, the progress also ceases. By the end of the New Testament we say that the progress of revelation regarding the doctrine of Christ has ceased and there is no further development. The same thing is true of the church. When the New Testament was completed, the development of the church had reached maturation. In every area of doctrine the progress stopped when the revelation of the scriptures was completed. Therefore we conclude that the New Testament is the sufficient and authoritative constitution of the local church

## Distinctive #9

We have had numerous letters from people in churches around America asking for a copy of our constitution. **We recognize the New Testament as our sufficient and authoritative constitution.** Our answers have always stated that we have no other constitution than the New Testament, which we consider to be authoritative and sufficient for all our beliefs and practices. If you were to ask why we do things the way we do, in most cases the answer would be because it was done that way in the New Testament. If you were to ask why we do not do certain things, we would never respond by saying, "That is against our constitution." We are not bound by any humanly designed constitution. We are committed to the sufficiency and the authority of the New Testament which is why the previous eight principles have led to the belief that these principles, precepts and practices of the apostles are not optional, but obligatory. They are not alternatives, but imperatives. Because the content of the New Testament was the constitution of the apostolic church, surely it is to be the sufficient and authoritative constitution of the church today.

We are deeply concerned that the people who are attending Believers Chapel develop some convictions concerning their ecclesiology - the doctrine of the church. We are deeply concerned because we have men and women who are exceedingly well taught in the Word of God in every area of doctrine but the church. I do not understand why people look lightly upon the doctrine of the church and bury themselves in prophecy when the church is at the top of God's priority list. He gave His Son to purchase it. It is His institution, and it means more to Him than anything else that is happening today. There is nothing on earth more important to God than His church and His program for it. I can not understand a Christian who is indifferent and without conviction in the area of ecclesiology. It is not necessary that your convictions agree with mine. Of course, I'd like you to be right, but that is not necessary! What is very important is that you have convictions, and that those convictions be based upon the Word of God.

## Conclusion

But there is something even more important. Some time ago, I was counseling with a young couple before marriage. As I often do, I reminded them of the fact that the Scriptures make it very clear that a believer is not to marry an unbeliever. I turned to the young man and asked him why he thought the young lady was a believer. He said, "She attends Believers Chapel." I cannot ever remember feeling so depressed in my Christian life. I am well aware of the fact that there are many non-Christians who attend Believers Chapel every Sunday morning. A Christian is not one who attends Believers Chapel.

What is a Christian? Spell the word in English and you will note that there is an "I" in Christ and an "I" right after Christ: C-H-R-I-S-T-I-A-N. When speaking to young people it has been helpful to point out that a very Biblical definition of a Christian comes from the occurrences of the two letters in that English word. A Christian, first of all, is one who is IN CHRIST and then, one who

is FOLLOWING CHRIST. You can not follow after Christ until you are in Christ. That is the first step toward being a Christian.

In the ark, Noah was safe and secure from the judgment of God and entered into a whole new sphere of life. So the person who is IN CHRIST is safe and secure from the judgment of God upon him as a sinner and enters into an entirely new sphere of life. Just as that ark bore the fury of God's wrath for Noah, so Jesus Christ has borne the fury of God's wrath against our sin. When He went to the cross to die, the wrath of God fell upon Him for our sin.

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

**Romans 5:8**

It is only the person who is IN CHRIST who is delivered from the judgment that is his by right of his sin and delivered into God's presence forever and ever.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

**Romans 8:1**

How does one come to be IN CHRIST? There is but one simple step. It is the step of trusting Him as your personal Savior. Come to Him and trust Him as the One who died for you, as the One whose death has satisfied God. Trust Him as the One who will forgive your sin and save you forever and ever. As Noah came and looked at that ark with its open door, it was one step that brought him from death to life, from outside to inside. My dear friend, the one step that takes a man from outside Christ to being IN CHRIST, safe and secure forever, is trusting Christ personally as Savior.

who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

**John 1:13**

Who are you trusting to deliver you from the judgment that you deserve as a sinner? What are you trusting as your ticket to God's Heaven? The one step that places a person IN CHRIST, safe forever, is trusting Him personally as Savior. Will you quietly turn to Him right now and thank Him for bearing the wrath for you? Thank Him for satisfying God's righteousness. Tell Him you will trust Him to forgive your sins and to save you forever. Then you will be IN CHRIST, saved forever.

Therefore if any man is IN CHRIST, he is a new creature; the old things passed away, behold, new things have come.

**2 Cor. 5:17**

Sometime ago in connection with a radio program that we produced at Dallas Seminary, we went down to the center of Dallas and stopped people on their busy round of life. We put a microphone in front of them and asked them two very simple questions. The first question we asked was, "Do you believe there's a heaven?" and the second question we asked was, "If so, who goes there?" We talked to all kinds of people, to bankers and to busboys, to teachers and to students, to men in overalls and to people in white collars. And of that group of people to whom we spoke, seventy-five of them told us they believed in a place called heaven.

It was when we asked our second question that we got into trouble. "Since you believe there's a heaven, who goes there?" The answers were as varied as the people to whom we spoke. Some folks just shrugged their shoulders and walked away. Others told us that they didn't know. One lady said that frankly it was none of our business. Of that group of people, about seventy-five in number, every single one of whom told us that they believed in a place called heaven, only two could give us any kind of clear-cut answer as to the kind of people who go there.

As a result, I would like to bring you a very simple message from what I believe to be one of the greatest gospel sentences in the Word of God. It is greater even than John 3:16. For it contains in its bosom all that John 3:16 proclaims and even more. It comes to us from Romans 4:5. "But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness." When you first read that sentence you may find it a bit difficult to believe. If you look at the sentence closely, however, you will see that the Apostle Paul is describing the people that God "justifies." These are the men and women that God declares are righteous and who have an acceptable standing with Him. These are the people that God will accept in heaven.

So you see, in this sentence Paul gives us the characteristics of the individuals that He justifies. Those characteristics have a way of turning our values upside down, and they demonstrate that the way God thinks is often quite different from the way we think.

The first characteristic of the people that God justifies is that without exception every single one of them has been an ungodly person. Notice the text, "But to him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness." If you missed it there you would find it in Romans 5:6. There we are told that the only people for whom Christ died are those who are described as "the ungodly." This is one of the shocking declarations of the Scriptures. God does not justify Bible readers. God does not justify praying people. God does not justify tithers or church members. God does not justify Baptists, or Methodists, or Roman Catholics, or Jewish people, or Episcopalians. God does not justify people who attend Believers Chapel. The only people that God justifies (that is, "declares righteous") are ungodly people.

Since that is the clear statement of this sentence, the question is, "what does the Bible mean when it says that we are 'ungodly'?"

Well, the term "ungodly" could simply mean to be unlike God. I suppose that all of us, in our better moments, would be willing to confess that that is true of us. After all, God is infinite, and we are finite. God is all-powerful, and we are weak. God is all-wise, and we are limited. Most of us would be willing to admit that in these ways we are unlike God. But this word is far more severe than that. It not only means that we are unlike God, but also that down deep inside we are opposed to God. It's very much like that word, "un-American." When you say that someone is "un-American," you do not mean that he lives in Canada or Mexico or Great Britain or France, but that deep inside that individual is given over to an ideology that is opposed to the principles on which the government of the United States was founded. That is the sense in which this word "ungodly" is used in the New Testament. Not only are we different from God, but we are opposed to God and to God's will in our lives. Again and again we say "yes" when God says "no" or we say "no" when God says "yes." For example, we know what we ought to do and yet we do things we know we ought not do. We know that we ought to be kind, but often we are

unkind. We know that we should be honest, but we are dishonest. We know that we should be pure, but often we are impure. We know that we should honor our parents, but often we dishonor them. Again and again by deliberate choice we have said "no" to God's "yes," and "yes" to God's "no."

In Romans 3, Paul, quoting the Old Testament, said that God looked down among the children of men and declared that "there is none righteous, no not one. There is none that seeks after God."

So you see, sometime in your life if you are going to be made right with God, you must admit that you are wrong with Him. If you are ever going to get to heaven, you must admit that you are ungodly - not because it's the pious thing to do, not out of false humility, but because you have recognized that it is true of you.

Every year the American Cancer Society spends thousands of dollars telling us about cancer's seven danger signs. By means of advertisements in the newspaper, motion pictures, through articles in magazines, the American public has become aware of the symptoms of cancer. Yet, every year thousands of Americans die of cancer who have recognized the symptoms in their bodies. Because of fear of the physician, or a fear of spending money, or worse, the fear of finding out that the disease is actually present, they do not seek out a doctor. As a result, they die of the disease.

In the same way, if we are ever to gain health with God, we must admit that the Bible speaks the truth about us. We have gone our own way. We have rebelled against what we know we ought to do. We, are ungodly people. Of course, since the Bible says that this is true of all of us, then it places all of us on exactly the same level before God. The prostitute and the preacher, the lawyer and the lawless, the gunman and the governor, the sophisticate and the savage, the doctor and the dunce - all stand before God as ungodly men and women in desperate need of God's salvation.

So the first characteristic of every person who ever gets to heaven is that some place in his life he has been willing to face the truth about himself and has admitted that he is ungodly.

Not only must every man who ever gets to heaven admit that he is ungodly, but, in addition, he admits that he is unworthy of being there. Again notice our sentence closely: "But to him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness." It is "to him that worketh not." This also cuts across the grain of human thinking. We grow up in a society that, in a thousand different ways, tells us that we are rewarded on the basis of what we do. The first day that you went to kindergarten and the teacher put a star up on the chart, she was teaching you that lesson. All the way through school when you did good work you received good grades. If you did the best work over the twelve years, on graduation night you were allowed to make the valedictorian address while everybody else sat in their seats and slept. And then later in life, when you do effective work you get the bonus; when you play well, you receive the medal. Wherever we touch life we are being taught that we are rewarded on the basis of what we do.

It actually is part of our folklore. The lesson has been set to music. Those of you who have seen *The Sound of Music* know that in the delightful musical Maria falls in love. Standing opposite a man who has fallen in love with her she sings a song to him.

*There you are, standing there loving me,  
Whether or not you should.  
Somewhere in my youth or childhood,  
I must have done something good.  
Nothing comes from nothing - Nothing ever could.  
Somewhere in my youth or childhood  
I must have done something good.*

Maria believes that she is being loved because in her teenage years or earlier she did something good. Now what she is receiving is the reward for that good deed. You see, we cannot escape being taught that we are rewarded always on the basis of what we do.

Therefore, it strikes us as strange when we turn to the New Testament to discover that God does not play that game; God changes the rules. He does not justify people on the basis of their conduct. Why does God decide to justify men on some other basis? The answer is found in Romans 4:4. In that sentence Paul has said, "Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace but of debt." You doubtless understand that principle. At some time or another you have probably worked for a wage. Most of us do it now. I'm sure that on the fifteenth and on the first when we get our paychecks very few of us throw our arms around the boss and thank him for what he has given us. If the truth were known we feel that we are worth about twice what we are getting. We recognize that what we get in that pay envelope is owed us. If you were to work and receive nothing in that envelope, every labor union in the land, every law court in the country would stand behind your right to collect. The principle is clear; when you work, what you receive is a wage owed to you as a debt. It is not a gift. It is not an act of grace or kindness. It is a debt owed to you.

All men understand that principle. God is not going to justify men on the basis of what they do because that would put God in a position of owing men heaven. When you work for something, what you receive is owed to you. It is no longer a gift. We have a friend who has a rather interesting hobby. She enters contests. Sometime ago she entered a contest in which, in twenty-five words or less, she described the virtues of a certain brand of carpet. As a result, she and her husband won a trip to Hawaii. It was a marvelous trip, but a few days after they returned, they were visited by an agent from the Internal Revenue Service. He informed them that Uncle Sam wanted his tax on the trip. My friends protested that they should not be expected to pay tax on the trip because all they had done was to write a mere twenty-five words. There was no labor involved in writing twenty-five words. But the agent reminded them that they had entered into a contract. What they had received was really not a gift given to them by the carpet company; it was actually a wage for writing the sentence. The government understood the principle of verse four. When a man works what he receives is a debt owed-to him, a wage paid. It is not a gift bestowed.

God is saying, "I will not owe men eternal life. I will not owe men heaven. I will give it to them as an act of love, as an expression of My grace, as a gift of My kindness."



Imagine that Bill McRae and I were good friends. (That's not imagined; we are.) Imagine that in order to express my love to him, my grace, I wanted to give him a beautiful sapphire ring. I say, "Bill, I want you to have this as an expression of my love and esteem for you." Then imagine that he says to me, "Now, I'd really like to have that ring, but I grew up in Canada. Up there one of the things they drilled into us is that you ought not receive charity. I wouldn't feel very comfortable just accepting that ring; I'd like to do something for it. I'm good with a shoe shine rag, and I'd like to shine your shoes. For the next four Sundays, if you get here early, I'll be glad to shine your shoes. As a result I give him the ring. I can also imagine that Bill, like a young lady who has just been engaged, walks around rubbing his nose, and his friends say, "Oh, you've got a ring, McRae." He would reply, "Yes, I earned it. I worked for it, and this is what I received." As silly as that sounds, Bill would be absolutely right. If we were to sign a contract that said that for four shoe shines he would receive a ring, he could take me to court and collect.

God is not in the business of giving sapphires for shoe shines. When we decide to work to get God's approval, we are asking God to give us heaven as a wage. God says "no." "It is to him that worketh not but believeth on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness."

The hymn writer took the first two characteristics and put them together when he said,

*Let not conscience make you linger  
Or of fitness fondly dream.  
All the fitness God requires  
Is that you sense your need of him.*

There is a third characteristic of the people that God justifies and declares fit for heaven. Not only has everyone of them admitted he is ungodly and realized that he is unworthy of what God bestows upon him, but any man who has right standing with God must take God at His word, believe God, put his faith in Jesus Christ. Look at our sentence. "But to him that worketh not but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness."

When you read this, one of the things you may do is ask questions. "Isn't there someone who has appeared upon the stage of history who was so personally qualified that God justified him on the basis of what he did?" The answer is no. Every man who has ever had right standing before God has received that standing by faith. Paul illustrates that in the first two verses. He singles out for special mention a man by the name of Abraham. Abraham was to the Jewish people what George Washington or Abraham Lincoln might be to us in the United States. He was the father of the faithful. He was the man in the Scriptures who is described as the "friend of God." He towers over ordinary men as Mount Everest towers over Death Valley. Early in his life he received a call from God and left his cultured home in Ur of the Chaldees and went out to a land that he did not know, simply following the command of God. Later on in his life he lived in that new land and dwelt in tents. The only land he owned was a place for his wife to be buried. Still later in his life when God challenged him to do it, Abraham was willing to slay his son in order to do what God asked.

Abraham was a man whose life was the epitome of virtue. He was filled with religious devotion. But when this man Abraham stands before God, will it be on the basis of what he has done? Will he be able to boast about his accomplishments, and expect God to accept them? The answer is no. In Genesis 15, what did the Bible say about this man who had so much to recommend him? "Abraham believed God and his faith was counted unto him for righteousness." Abraham stands before God on the basis of his faith. If that was true for a man like Abraham, then it must be true for all men.

If you and I are justified on the basis of faith, if that's what opens the door to heaven, then what does it mean to have faith? A most helpful definition of this term "faith" comes to us from the Anglican Bishop O'Brian. Rather than define faith he describes it: "He who knows what is meant by faith in a promise knows what is meant by faith in the Gospel. He, who knows what is meant by faith in a physician, faith in a lawyer, faith in a friend, knows what is meant by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. He who knows what is meant by faith in a remedy knows what is meant by faith in the blood of the Redeemer."

When I am ill I go to a physician who examines me and writes out a prescription. One qualification for being a doctor is that he has to have bad handwriting. A second qualification is that he writes out prescriptions in code that ordinary people can't understand. I take my prescription to a druggist who looks at it and then disappears behind a counter. Returning, he hands me a bottle. "Here, take two teaspoonfuls three times a day." When I take that remedy home, I do not simply set it on a shelf and look at its beautiful red color. Three times a day I take it. I trust that remedy to do what the physician says it will do. I appropriate it, If you know what it is to trust a remedy, then you know what it is to trust the blood of the Redeemer.

If you know what is meant by trust in a physician, you know what is meant by belief or trust in Jesus Christ. A patient had a growth on his windpipe. He described his position this way, "you know, I'd like to get up and walk out of this hospital, but if I do that, I'll die. I'd like to reach in and grab hold of that thing and pull it out of myself, but I can't. I've got to trust the surgeon." He did and he was healed. If you know what it is to trust a physician, you know what it means to trust Jesus Christ. If you know what it is to trust a lawyer, you know what it means to trust Jesus Christ. A friend of mine was accused of a very serious crime, I asked him what happened when he was first accused. He said, "The first thing that happened was that I got scared, and the second thing that happened was that I reached for the phone and called the best lawyer in the city." Then he said, "I had to trust him." That lawyer conducted an investigation. He went into court, and my friend simply sat by his side and allowed the lawyer to plead the case. Trusting the lawyer, he was acquitted. If you know what it is to turn your case over to a lawyer, you know what it is to trust Jesus Christ.

If you know what it is to believe a friend, you know what it is to believe the Gospel. A student came to my office at Dallas Seminary. He had some large debts, and he needed to pay his tuition. Things were getting pretty tough, but when he walked into my office his face was as bright as sunshine. I asked him what had happened. He replied, "Well, I got a call from a friend up in Iowa who told me not to be concerned. He promised to pay my bill." Now I didn't do this, but if I had said to him, "Have you seen any money yet? All you've got is a promise in your pocket," I think

the student would have said to me, "Look, I know that man and when my friend says he'll pay the tuition, I trust him." The student did trust his friend, and the tuition was paid.

So you see, "He who knows what is meant by faith in a promise, knows what is meant by faith in the blood of the Redeemer. He who knows what is meant by faith in a physician, faith in a lawyer, faith in a friend, knows what is meant by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ." When you place your faith in Jesus Christ, in God who justifies the ungodly, that faith is counted for righteousness.

Imagine that you owed a staggering amount of money and that a wealthy man decided to give to the people who came to this service access to several million dollars to pay their debts. All you had to do was to go down to the First National Bank. You would present your bills, and then from the rich man's account of several million dollars there would be put to your account money to pay all of your bills. You would walk out of that bank free of debt. In a sense that's what happens when you place your faith in Christ. You come to God admitting that you are a sinner, admitting that you can do nothing to justify yourself and relying on Jesus Christ to pay the debt of your sin. In the counting room of heaven, the righteousness of Jesus Christ is placed to your account, and you are forgiven all of your debt. In addition, you are given positively the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and God declares that the account is settled. You are as sure of heaven as though you were already there. You take God at His word and your faith is counted as righteousness.

Sometime in your life you have to make that decision. Faith is not something that, as an adult, you merely drift into. It is not just admiring the Bible, or even understanding the facts. There must come a time when a man ceases trusting everything else and trusts Jesus Christ alone and in that moment he is declared righteous.

Charlotte Elliott was a young woman who was deeply concerned about her relationship with God. She had been part of a church in which she had heard this message several times; yet somehow or another it was difficult for her to understand what she needed to do to be made right with God. One day an old Huguenot preacher visited their home. In the course of the conversation, in his rough, gruff way, he said, "Charlotte, when are you going to come to Jesus?" And Charlotte Elliott taken by surprise replied, "Oh, I don't know how." The old preacher said, "you don't know how? Why, you come just as you are." Later in the evening when Charlotte Elliott went to her room, those words of that preacher kept turning over in her mind. She knelt by her bed, and as best she knew how put her trust in Jesus Christ. From that experience Charlotte Elliott wrote a hymn that expressed that decision:

*Just as I am, without one plea,  
But that thy blood was shed for me,  
And that Thou bidst me come to Thee,  
a Lamb of God, I come.*

*Just as I am, and waiting not  
To rid my soul of one dark blot,  
To Thee whose blood can cleanse each spot,  
O Lamb of God, I come.*

*Just as I am, Thou wilt receive,  
Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;  
Because Thy promise I believe,  
O Lamb of God, I come.*

And it is to him that worketh not but believeth on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Would you share this prayer with me?

Our Father, here is a message that is so simple that wise men have missed it, yet so profound that wise men have never fully understood it. But we thank You that in that moment when we see the issue clearly, when we throw our deadly doing down and cast ourselves with a reckless abandon upon You, that in that moment we believe. In that moment, we are justified, and declared right with God. Dear Father, if there are friends who have never made that step of faith, grant that today in the quietness of their own soul they shall come to trust Jesus Christ completely.

And in this moment, may I have a word with you. Something wonderful wants to happen to you. Something wonderful is waiting to take place in your life. God wants to give you a right standing with Himself. And sometime you must come to that place where you put your trust in Jesus Christ for yourself. If you've never done that, I invite you to do it right now.