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INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1

EXPOSITIONAL PREACHING

I. Definition of Expositional Preaching

II. Expositional Preaching Not Fundamentally a Style

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

IV. God Has Always Created His People By His Word

V. Centrality of the Preached Word of God

VI. Questions for Reflection

1

EXPOSITIONAL PREACHING

Definition of Expositional Preaching

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

Expositional Preaching N Fundament a Style

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

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

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

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

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

God Has Always Created His People By His Word

God's people have always been created by God's Word. From creation in Genesis 1 to the call of Abram in Genesis 12, from the vision of the valley of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37 to the coming of the living Word, God has always created His people by His Word. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ," (10:17). Or, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe," (I Cor. 1:21).

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

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

Centrality of the Preached Word of God

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

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

Questions for Reflection

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

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

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

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

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

2

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

I. "Sound Doctrine"

II. Unity, Diversity, and Charity

III. Dealing with Complex or Controversial Doctrines

IV. Resistance to God's Sovereignty

V. Leaders Should Embrace God's Sovereignty

VI. Questions for Reflection

2

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

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

"Sound Doctrine"

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

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

sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1).

Unity, Diversity, and Charity

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

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

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

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

Dealing with Complex or Controversial Doctrines

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

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

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

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

Resistance to God's Sovereignty

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

Leaders Should Embrace God's Sovereignty

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

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

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

Questions for Reflection

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

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

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

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

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

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

3

A Biblical Understanding of The Good News

I. The Gospel is the Heart of Christianity

II. God, Man, Christ, Response

III. The Gospel is a Radical Offer of Salvation

IV. Questions for Reflection

3

A Biblical Understanding of The Good News

The Gospel is the Heart of Christianity

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

God, Man, Christ, Response

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

The Gospel is a Radical Offer of Salvation

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

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

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

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

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

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. The author believes that we as Christians should care more about the good news of salvation through Christ than we do about anything else in the church's life. Do you agree? absolutely! Read I Corinthians 2:2. Why is the message of Jesus Christ so important? It is the very foundation upon which the church is built Matt. 16: 16-18

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

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

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

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

4

A Biblical Understanding of Conversion

I. Repentance and Faith

II. Conversion is God's Work in Us

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

IV. "Reverse Witness" of the Church

V. Conversion Evidenced by its Fruits

VI. Questions for Reflection

4

A Biblical Understanding of Conversion

Repentance and Faith

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

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

Conversion is God's Work in Us

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

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

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

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

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

"Reverse Witness" of the Church

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

Conversion Evidenced by its Fruits

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

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

Questions for Reflection

1. Read Acts 11:18. What does this passage teach about the ultimate origin of repentance? Is repentance ultimately a result of man's unilateral decision to turn to God, or is it a result of God's regenerating work on the human heart? P
Ps. 27:7-8 we must respond to God's commands & promptings Is

2. Read Genesis 6:5 and Romans 8:7. Describe the state of the human heart under sin. How does the Bible represent man's ability to please God or to decide on his own to turn to him? Rom. 3:10-20

3. Read Ephesians 2:1-10. God effects a great change in our hearts upon conversion. How does this passage represent that change? Is this something that man could, by great effort, produce in himself? no-we were dead in sins we cannot affect our own resurrection

4. Recent polls report that professing evangelical Christians in America today have a divorce rate that is higher than the national average. What could be one reason for this? What does the Bible teach are some of the evidences, or "fruits," of a regenerating work of the Spirit of God in a person's life? Gal 5:22-25 Eph. 4:1-3 Col 3:1-10

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

5

A Biblical Understanding of Evangelism

I. Consequences of Neglect

II. Evangelism Shaped by Understanding of Conversion

III. Definition of Evangelism

IV. It is God Who Converts People

V. When Membership Outstrips Attendance

VI. Three Truths to Convey

VII. Resources

VIII. Questions for Reflection

5

A Biblical Understanding of Evangelism

Consequences of Neglect

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

Evangelism Shaped by Understanding of Conversion

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

Definition of Evangelism

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

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

It is God Who Converts People

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

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

When Membership Outstrips Attendance

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

Three Truths to Convey

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

- first, the decision is costly (and therefore must be carefully considered, see Luke 9:62);
- second, the decision is urgent (and therefore must be made, see John 3:18, 36);
- third, the decision is worth it (and therefore should be made, see John 10:10).

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

Resources

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

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

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

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

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

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

6

A Biblical Understanding of Church Membership

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A Biblical Understanding of Church Membership

Membership in the Bible

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

Membership is Commitment

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

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

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

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

Big Gap Between Membership and Involvement

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

Membership is a Responsibility

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

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

Membership is a Corporate Testimony to Salvation

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

Meaningful Membership

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

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

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

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

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

Questions for Reflection

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

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

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

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

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

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