

# G R A C E

Reformed Baptist Church

Soli ♦ Deo ♦ Gloria

## THE MARKS OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

### Sermon Notes

January 1, 2006

#### INTRODUCTION / OVERVIEW

- Nearly every Evangelical church in existence will claim that it is a “New Testament” Church. However, what does that mean? What are the *Biblical* marks of a healthy, New Testament Church?

#### Proper Definition

“Our word ‘church,’ like its cognate forms, *kirche*, *kerke*, *kirk*, comes from the Greek adjective, *to kuriakon*, used first of the house of the Lord, then of his people. The New Testament word, *ekklesia*, is used of a public assemblage summoned by a herald (Acts 19:32, 39, 40); in the LXX [the Septuagint, or Greek Old Testament], however, it means the assembly or congregation of the Israelites, especially when gathered before the Lord for religious purposes. Accordingly, it is used in the NT for the congregation which the living God assembles about his Messiah Jesus. Thus the church is the spiritual family of God, the Christian fellowship created by the Holy Spirit through the testimony to the mighty acts of God in Christ Jesus...All its members are in Christ and are knit together by a supernatural kinship. All their gifts and activities continue the work of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, originate from Christ, and are coordinated by Him to the final goal. Then the church will appear in the age to come as the one people of God united in one congregation before the throne, as the one celestial city – the New Jerusalem.” R.G. Clouse

“[F]rom the Old Testament perspective, [the church] is the redeemed ‘assembly’ standing reverently in the presence of God and his holy angels to worship and serve Yahweh. From the New Testament perspective, the church, also God’s ‘assembly,’ is specifically founded on Jesus Christ as the Messiah and Son of the living God and on his confessing apostles as his authoritative teachers of doctrine.” Dr. Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, p. 836

- In short, the “church” is the gathering of believers.
  - This is of vital importance when trying to understand the Biblical marks of a healthy church.
- So, what defines “the church”? What are its marks or characteristics?
  - For the Reformers, there were three primary characteristics of a true church: (1) the proclamation of the Word of God; (2) the administration of the sacraments [ordinances]; and (3) the exercise of church discipline.

- ❑ As we begin to examine the marks of a healthy New Testament church, it should be apparent that the primary role of the church is profoundly simple: **to teach** – to the believer and to the non-believer [what is often referred to as evangelism]. Unfortunately, in a society that is so prosperous and consumer-driven, the church has abdicated this responsibility in favor of more exciting techniques. Let us return to the basics of Scripture that we may gain better insight into our role as a local body of believers.

**I. SOUND THEOLOGY**

- a. Word of God is our Final Authority
- b. Word of God is Sufficient
- c. Defining and Defending Orthodoxy
- d. Challenging

**II. MEANINGFUL MEMBERSHIP**

- a. Regenerate
- b. Discerning
- c. Discipleship
- d. Unity
- e. Discipline

**III. GOD-HONORING WORSHIP**

- a. Centrality of the Proclamation of the Word of God through Expository Preaching
- b. Worship Reflective of the Character and Nature of God
- c. Ordinances

**IV. BIBLICAL CHURCH GOVERNMENT**

- a. *Qualified* Church Officers
- b. Plurality of Leadership

**V. BIBLICAL MISSIONS AND EVANGELISM**

- a. Local/Regional/National
  - i. Local Evangelism
  - ii. Care for the poor [widows/orphans/homeless/etc.]
- b. Foreign

**VI. SEMPER REFORMATA**

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**I. SOUND THEOLOGY**

“Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted you.” 2 Timothy 1:13-14

“It is true that theology has deep and necessary roots in the academy [the seminary], but its fundamental connection is with the Church. The question, therefore, is whether the Church has a mind for theology. Without this mind, theology cannot take root where by nature and purpose it must take root...The Church is the place where biblical knowledge must be learned, developed, and applied. The Church is the context in which God and His Word should receive their most serious thought...without theology there can be no Church, because theology holds the key to Christian identity, to Christian continuity, to genuine piety, to serious worship, and to the sort of Christian thought that seeks to bring the import of God’s Word into our world.” David F. Wells, *No Place For Truth*, p. 292

### a. Word of God is our Final Authority

“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”  
2 Timothy 3:16-17

### b. Word of God is Sufficient

- ❑ The battle to preserve the sufficiency of the Scriptures is one that is, quite possibly, the most difficult engage in.
- ❑ Virtually every evangelical church in America will affirm this doctrine; however, do they practice it?
- ❑ I have been a part of “conservative” Southern Baptist Churches where it was a requirement that any candidate for deacon meet the following qualifications [in addition to those listed in 1 Timothy 3]:
  - Cannot drink alcohol
  - Cannot smoke
  - Must tithe regularly
- ❑ Although these *may* seem acceptable qualifications at first glance, how do they reflect upon these church’s’ view of the *sufficiency* of Scripture?

**It is the responsibility of the teachers in the church to not only proclaim the significance of the sufficiency of Scripture, but to demonstrate how this doctrine is applied in the life of the church and in the life of the individual believer.**

### c. Defining and Defending Orthodoxy

“Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints. For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.”  
Jude 3-4

- ❑ This passage, however, presupposes one thing: that the reader **know** what “the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints” is [see again also 2 Timothy 1:13-14].
- ❑ So, what are those **fundamental truths** that separate true believers from “ungodly persons?”
- ❑ My *personal* belief is that they are, at least, the following [taken from the GRBC *Perspectives* Class Notes]:

- **The Doctrine of the Trinity**
  - *God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God.*  
Millard Erickson
- **Two Natures of Christ**
  - Fully God
  - Fully Man
- **Salvation by Grace ALONE through faith in Jesus Christ ALONE**
- **Justification by Faith ALONE in Jesus Christ** [the IMPUTATION of the righteousness of Christ – a FOREIGN righteousness]
- **Affirm the Bible as the Word of God**

#### d. Challenging

- R.C. Sproul recently commented on his radio program that his Homiletics professor in Seminary told him never to preach above an Eighth Grade learning level.
- A healthy, New Testament church should *regularly* challenge you to grow in your spiritual walk.
- When getting into the realm of “deep” theological discussion, I often hear Christians reply, “Well, that is not a salvation issue.” However, such a statement reveals the willingness of the individual to *categorize* and then *prioritize* Scripture; to discuss what is deemed by them to be “salvation issues.” All other portions of Scripture are then ignored, at least for the time being.
  - Read John 10:35b [“and Scripture cannot be broken”] and Matthew 5:18: “For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”
  - We must challenge one another to study and embrace ALL of Scripture – not just the portions we deem “non-Salvation issues.”
- Read 1 Corinthians 3:1-3
  - How would a child grow who only drank milk from the time he was born, and never ate solid foods?
  - Let us not forget that when we read the New Testament, we are reading what the first century church depended upon for their spiritual nourishment. Paul never “dumbed down” the Gospel or the doctrines presented in his writings.

## II. MEANINGFUL MEMBERSHIP

### a. Regenerate

On July 6, 2005 [this past summer], Jim Eliff, in an article entitled *Southern Baptists, An Unregenerate Denomination*, reported that only 37% of the 16,287,494 members of churches in the Southern Baptist Convention attend church on a given Sunday morning.

NOTE: Church attendance does not necessarily equate to regeneration; however, the statistic is still quite troubling.

### b. Discipleship

- ❑ John 8:31, 47
- ❑ John 14:23
- ❑ 2 Timothy 3:16-17

### c. Discerning

- ❑ Read 1 Peter 3:15

### d. Unity

“For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”  
Romans 15:4-6

- ❑ Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-13
- ❑ Read Ephesians 4:3-6
- ❑ Biblical unity within the church is always based upon “our common salvation.” In too many churches today, cliques and circles exist that are based on anything but a shared passion for knowing God.

“[Churches today] subdivide their congregations down into marrieds and sings, single parents and divorced, “thirty-something” and “twenty-something,” teens, unemployed, the child-abused and the chemically dependent, attempting to arrange programs for them all. And once a person joins such a church, conventional wisdom has it, the church and the minister must meet his every felt need. Accordingly, ministers have become managers, facilitators, and motivators – everything but heralds of the whole counsel of God – and this all because they have lost confidence in the preaching of God’s Word as the primary means for the growth of the church and the individual Christian...One must wonder if the perception that this is what one must do [subdivide the church] in order

to minister effectively is not itself a manifestation of waning confidence in the universal appeal and power of the gospel.”

*A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Robert Reymond, p. 883

- The only “subdivisions” that seem to appear in the early church were based upon gender – the older women teaching the younger, and the older men teaching the younger men [Titus 2].

#### **e. Discipline**

- Read Matthew 18:17
- Read Acts 20:28-31a
- Read Romans 16:17-18a
- Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, 13

“Every healthy local church has a strong commitment to biblical standards for membership and a pastoral and faithful practice of biblical church discipline. Membership must be the reflection of a living commitment to a local church in attendance, giving, prayer and service or it is worthless. To be a member is knowingly to be traveling together as aliens and strangers in this world as we head to our heavenly home. But we live and minister in a day of unparalleled lack of commitment, so we must restore a high view of what it means to be a church member... This mutual accountability is visibly manifested in the way we care for, look after, encourage and challenge one another to the life of godliness in the local church. The whole church has an interest in the spiritual health of every individual member.”

Ligon Duncan

### **III. GOD-HONORING WORSHIP**

#### **a. Centrality of the Proclamation of the Word of God through Expository Preaching**

“I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.”

1 Timothy 4:1-2

“We can only guess how well the apostle Paul might have fared had he sought pastoral employment among evangelicals today, but we would not be risking much to suppose that he would start out with a few strikes against him... Indeed, his preaching, judged by contemporary standards, would be considered by many a failure because the brief summaries that we have of what he did show no penchant for telling stories at all. Besides, Paul was apparently in the habit of extending his discourses long beyond the twenty minutes to which many churches would limit him. He would probably end up provoking a churchly insurrection – for all the wrong reasons... His passionately theological mind would get him into trouble on two counts: his preaching would be judged hopelessly irrelevant because its

theological focus would put it out of step with modern habits, and his passion would simply prove embarrassing.” *No Place for Truth*, pp. 290-291

If God is not supreme in our preaching, where in this world will the people hear about the supremacy of God? If we do not spread a banquet of God’s beauty on Sunday morning, will not our people seek in vain to satisfy their inconsolable longing with the cotton candy pleasures of pastimes and religious hype? If the foundation of living water does not flow from the mountain of God’s sovereign grace on Sunday morning, will not the people hew for themselves cisterns on Monday, and broken cisterns that can hold no water...?

We are called to be ‘stewards of the mysteries of God’...And the great mystery is ‘Christ in you, the hope of glory’...And that glory is the glory of God. And ‘it is required of stewards that they be found faithful’ – faithful in magnifying the supreme glory of the one eternal God, not magnifying as a microscope that makes small things look bigger; but as a telescope that makes unimaginably great galaxies of glory visible to the human eye.”

John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, pp. 108-109

#### **b. Worship Reflective of the Character and Nature of God**

“God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

John 4:24

- ❑ Worship is for God, not for man. We must focus on what HE desires, not what we do. If the Incarnate Christ stood before us in our Sunday worship, how would it change?
- ❑ Leonard Greenway states, "The aesthetic trend in our modern Churches is, in plain language, a menace to genuine forms of worship. It seems to localize the whole experience of worship within the orbit of man's psychological states. It put the worshipper in bondage to the fascination of massive pillars, lofty arches, long aisles, costly carvings, imposing ritual and impressive music.”
- ❑ [O]ur worship of God includes all Persons of the Trinity, and of necessity that means Jesus Christ in all the fullness of His being and His work. The true character of Christian worship thus corresponds to God's revelation of Himself. Further, the Christian believes that the inspired Word of God is adequate for everything from doctrine to righteous living, and this therefore includes worship! John MacKenzie
- ❑ God himself is pure Spirit, and the worship in which he takes delight is accordingly spiritual worship – the sacrifice of a humble, contrite, grateful and adoring spirit. This affirmation of our Lord’s was not entirely new; it but crowns the witness of psalmists and prophets in earlier ages, who saw that material things could at best be the vehicle of true worship but could never belong to its essence. Sincere heart-devotion, whenever and wherever found, is indispensable if men and woman would present to God worship which he can accept. F.F. Bruce

**c. Ordinances**

- Read 1 Corinthians 10:14-17, 21
- Read 1 Corinthians 11:23-30
- Our Lord has given us two ordinance by which to remember Him: (1) baptism, and (2) the Lord’s Supper.

**IV. BIBLICAL CHURCH GOVERNMENT**

**a. Qualified Church Officers**

- Read 1 Timothy 3. The Lord has given the church two offices, with specific qualifications:
  - i. Elders
  - ii. Deacons

**b. Plurality of Leadership**

“When they had appointed elders for them in every church...” Acts 14:23a

- In 1874, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Professor, William Williams wrote:

“The elders of the New Testament were all equal in rank and authority, and discharged the same duties, - the ministry of the gospel and the oversight of the government and discipline of the church.”

- In his book *Biblical Eldership*, author Alexander Strauch writes:

“...biblical eldership guards and promotes the preeminence and position of Christ over the local church...Because the apostles knew that Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit, was uniquely present with them as Ruler, Head, Lord, Pastor, Master, Overseer, High Priest, and King, they chose a form of government that reflected this distinctive, fundamental, Christian truth. This concept was no theoretical idea to the early Christians – it was reality. The first churches were truly Christ-centered, Christ-dependent churches.

...in the first century, no Christian would dare take the position or title of sole ruler, overseer, or pastor of the church. We Christians today, however, are so accustomed to speaking of “the pastor” that we do not stop to realize that the New Testament does not...There is only one flock and one Pastor (John 10:16), one body and one Head (Col. 1:18), one holy priesthood and one great High Priest (Heb. 4:14ff.), one brotherhood and one Elder Brother (Rom. 8:29), one building and one Cornerstone (1 Peter 2:5ff.), one Mediator, one Lord. Jesus Christ is “Senior Pastor,” and all others are His undershepherds (1 Peter 5:4).”



- This is not to say that the elders in the church do not have authority, for they do Biblically. However, that authority does not rest in the hands of one man. Rather, it rests in the body of men called to lead the church...the body of elders. NOTE: Every mention of elders in the church in the New Testament is in a plural context.

## V. BIBLICAL MISSIONS AND EVANGELISM

“but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”  
Acts 1:8

Missions is not the ultimate goal of the Church. Worship is...The most crucial issue in missions is the centrality of God in the life of the Church...Mission is not first and ultimate: God is. And these are not just words. This truth is the life blood of missionary inspiration and endurance.  
John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*

God is pursuing with omnipotent passion a worldwide purpose of gathering joyful worshipers for himself from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. He has an inexhaustible enthusiasm for the supremacy of his name among the nations. Therefore, let us bring our affections into line with his, and, for the sake of his name, let us renounce the quest for worldly comforts, and join his global purpose.  
John Piper

- a. Local/Regional/National
  - i. Local Evangelism
  - ii. Care for the poor [widows/orphans/homeless/etc.]
- b. Foreign

## VI. SEMPER REFORMATA

“Now these [the Bereans] were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things [that Paul said] were so.”  
Acts 17:11

“The purest churches under heaven are subject to mixture and error.”

Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689

- As a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, as a part of a “royal priesthood” it is the responsibility of every believer to examine every teacher in light of the Word of God.
- As a Church, we must constantly ask the question “Why?” Why do we do what we do in light of Scripture? We, then, must be willing to change in order to become more biblical.
- The Reformers had a motto: “Semper Reformata” – ALWAYS REFORMING. This is what we should be.