

Series: *What Does It Mean to be a Scripture-Driven Church?*

Title: "Seven Marks of a Scripture-Driven Church" (part 1)

Speaker: Rev. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 3/15/2009

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Today we begin the final phase of this series of ten messages on the subject, "What Does It Mean to Be a Scripture-Driven Church?" And as we begin today I want to call your attention to 2nd Corinthians chapter 11, beginning at verse 2. So please turn with me in your Bibles to 2nd Corinthians 11, beginning at verse 2. The apostle Paul is writing to the church at Corinth, and he says this: "For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted—you may well put up with it!"

As we have seen in our first six messages, this passage really summarizes the condition of the Evangelical church today. We've seen, first of all, that there is a spiritual crisis in the church. We looked at the evidence. Thousands of Evangelical churches where the Bible is rarely taught. Thousands of Evangelical churches where the genuine Gospel is rarely if ever proclaimed. And, thousands of Evangelical churches where the congregations are made up more and more of people who come to church to feel good about themselves, but

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they leave the church just as eternally lost as when they walked in the door, because they never hear the Word of God properly explained, and they never hear the genuine Gospel of salvation from the wrath of God that we deserve for our sins, based only upon the great price that God Himself paid for sinners by sending His own Son to shed His blood on Calvary's cross for them.

And secondly, we've seen that the cure for that crisis is for the church to recognize, once again, that there is only one supernatural Book in the entire universe, and that Book is God's Word, the Bible. We saw this in Second Peter chapter one. The Bible is revelation from God, given to us through human penmen, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This Book is our sole authority. And we saw from Second Timothy chapter three that God prescribes a fourfold use of Scripture – doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness, so that the Christian can be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. Nothing else can take the place of God's Word.

But in the Evangelical church today, many things have. The Bible has become "the greatest story never read." The church is unplugged from the Word of God, and uncertain of what it really believes. High percentages of evangelical church members simply don't know what the Bible says. And as a result, high percentages of evangelical church members no longer hold the fundamental

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beliefs of the faith that are found in the Word of God. And today, most evangelicals cannot defend Christian moral positions on abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia, sex outside of marriage, etc., *from Scripture* – the Book that is supposed to be their source of authority.

Instead, we have human philosophies. Man-centered authority structures. The purpose-driven church is going out and asking the unbelieving world to define how the church should look, what we should preach, and what the service should be like, instead of looking to the authority of almighty God in His Word.

And thirdly, we saw in First Corinthians chapter two, that in order for human beings to properly understand and interpret the Word of God, we need the illumination of the Holy Spirit. The natural man, the unsaved man, cannot properly understand this Book. It is spiritually discerned.

And we also saw from First Corinthians chapter two that it is necessary for the Christian to interpret the Bible according to sound principles. And the foremost of those principles is that the Bible, because it is the only supernatural Book, must be its own interpreter. Scripture interprets Scripture. We cannot – we dare not – go to the unbelieving world to interpret the Word of God for us,

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or to tell us what the church of Jesus Christ should look like, or how it should operate.

And last week, from Second Timothy chapter 4, we saw the vital importance of sound doctrine. Pure doctrine. Literally, in the original language, hygienic doctrine. Doctrine unmixed with error.

Dear friends, the evangelical church has lost its spiritual power. To regain its lost spiritual power, Christ's church must once again become *the Scripture-driven church*. The Bible must be its sole source of doctrine and authority. The Bible alone must be its infallible critic in all things. And Christ must be the undisputed Head of the church.

The people and leadership of your church need to truly understand what the Bible has to say about its authority. The people and leadership of your church need to continually compare everything the church says and does against the Bible. It is the standard. There is no other standard.

The people and leadership of your church need to understand how easily, other things can take the place of the Bible's authority. The people and leadership of your church need to understand how easily these other things can take the church off-message and off-mission, how easily these other things can

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put the church in spiritual danger. The people and leadership of your church need to understand how easily these other things can damage its testimony to the unbelieving world.

With that in mind, I want to bring us back to a question that we asked in the very first message of this series. The question is this: Has there been a takeover in your church? Is the Bible your supreme authority, or has it been pushed aside? Have other things taken first place? We must answer that question very carefully, very honestly, because the stakes are high. Souls are at stake.

And as we've seen, the evidence points to the fact that for most evangelical churches today, the honest, careful answer must be, "Yes, there has been a takeover in our church. We've created a spiritual vacuum by neglecting the Word of God. Other things have filled that vacuum. We are following other authorities. We are letting other things, other people, other purposes, have preeminence over the Word of God."

The first step in solving any problem is admitting you have a problem. But if you, if your church need to make that kind of honest admission, we can take comfort in the fact that God tells us what to do about it. God's Word shows us that although this is the most serious kind of a problem, is not a new problem

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for the church. The Apostle Paul wrote the books of First and Second Corinthians to a church where there had been a takeover. And God's Word gives us the answers. God tells us what to do.

In the book of Acts chapter 18, we read that Paul himself had planted the church at Corinth. He spent eighteen months with them. And during that time, he instructed and established them in the Word. The Corinthian church had gotten off to a good start.

But not long after Paul left Corinth, other things began to take over. Other things supplanted the authority of the Bible in the church. And the Corinthian church quickly got off-message, and off-mission, and it was on the shelf as far as God's purpose was concerned.

The church at Corinth two thousand years ago was in many ways like the church in America today. The similarities are really striking.

Corinth was a lot like most major cities and even many small towns in America today. Every nationality was represented among the people who lived and worked in Corinth. Every language was spoken in Corinth. Every culture was represented. You could find every kind of religion in Corinth. You could

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find every kind of philosophy in Corinth. And, you could find every kind of immorality in Corinth.

And the church at Corinth, the church that had started out so well, made a terrible mistake with terrible consequences. The church at Corinth became the church unplugged from the Word of God. It became the church uncertain of what it believed. It became a church that lost the will and the power to confront evil with the truth.

The church embraced elements of the worldly philosophies that abounded in Corinth at that time, and it mingled them with Christianity. The results were terrible. Soon there was open immorality among the membership, and the church didn't see this as a particular problem. People did not take their marriage vows seriously. People were living in relationships that God's Word condemns. The church brought worldly practices into its worship, and with those worldly practices came confusion and disorder. People partook of the Lord's Supper in a pagan manner. The church took a pridefully wrong approach to the matter of spiritual gifts. There was preacher worship, factionalism, internal strife, and materialism. The Corinthian church actually forgot the content of the Gospel message, and they had to learn it all over again. Sadly, it sounds like many evangelical churches today.

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All of these problems resulted from one thing – neglect of the study and preaching of the Scriptures. The words that Paul said to the church at Corinth could well be said to the evangelical church today. Listen again to these words from 2nd Corinthians 11: "But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted—you may well put up with it!"

And that is exactly what the church did. There was a takeover in the church at Corinth. The church had mingled man's error with God's truth. Neglect of the Word of God created a spiritual vacuum, and the influences of the unbelieving world rushed in to fill that vacuum.

So what did Paul do? He did the only thing that can be done, the one thing that must be done: He pointed them back to Scripture. And one by one, the Apostle Paul dealt with their problems, from Scripture. He employed the fourfold use of Scripture that we find in 2nd Timothy 3:16. He called them back to sound doctrine. He reproved them from the Word of God. He corrected them. He instructed them, and pleaded with them and encouraged them to follow the righteous path once again. And near the end of his first letter to the

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church at Corinth, Paul summed up his message by saying this in chapter 14 and verse 20: "Do not be children in understanding...but in understanding be mature." Preventing a takeover in the church, or recovering from a takeover once it happens, requires spiritual maturity.

Like the Corinthian church, many evangelical churches in our time have experienced a takeover, often without realizing it or understanding it. A takeover often begins with a change of thinking that forgets these four critical facts from God's Word:

- Fact number 1: Christ is Head of the church, we are not.
- Fact number 2: Christ owns His church, we do not.
- Fact number 3: Christ has defined His church's purpose. We do not.
- Fact number 4: Christ has defined success. We do not.

Neglecting these truths places the church on a slippery slope. When we think that we own the church, when we remove Christ and His Word from their rightful place, very soon we begin thinking that we must do things to make the church successful. And as that becomes our focus, we begin to neglect the Word. Very soon *we* are defining the terms of success.

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We begin looking at how the world achieves and measures success. And soon we begin to apply the world's principles and methods to the church. The world's philosophies take the place of the Bible. The world's philosophies become the church's authority. The consequences for the leadership, the church membership, and the lost in our communities are disastrous, just as they were at Corinth.

Such a church may have many outward appearances of success, but in the ways that really count with God, it will be like the Laodicean church of Revelation 3:14-22. That church "went for the gold" — but it was the perishing gold of this world and its thinking, not the pure gold of God's truth in Christ. It was a church that accommodated itself so well to the world that eventually it didn't really stand for anything, at least not anything that mattered to God. It measured its success in terms of its own self-defined purposes, not God's purpose as defined in His Word.

Dear friends, what must we do? How can we prevent other things from supplanting the Word of God? How can we recognize the signs that a spiritual takeover has already happened? How can a church recover and remain true to its Christ-ordained purpose?

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The answer is that the church of Jesus Christ must become, once again, the Scripture-driven church. And the Bible points us to seven key characteristics, seven marks, of a Scripture-driven church. Seven things that characterize the people and leaders of a church that is true to the Word of God. I want to briefly list them for you first, and then in the next three messages, we're going to come back to each one in detail.

Characteristic Number One: The people and leaders of a Scripture-driven church are committed to Scripture alone as their authority – the sole and final authority.

Characteristic Number Two: The people and leaders of a Scripture-driven church understand God's purpose for the church. They understand why the church exists – and they also understand that the church exists only to do those things and not other things. The Scripture-driven church marches to God's agenda, not man's agenda.

Characteristic Number Three: The people and leaders of a Scripture-driven church rightly handle the Word of God. They know what the Bible says. They don't merely revere the Bible. They read it and study it as though their lives depend upon it – and they do! And they operate under the principle that

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Scripture interprets Scripture – not the bright idea of the moment, not the latest secular or religious fad.

Characteristic Number Four: The people and leaders of a Scripture-driven church operate under the Bible's authority. In everything the church is, and says, and does, the thing that is first and foremost in their minds is this: Is it Biblical? They understand the fourfold use of Scripture that we find in 2 Timothy 3:16.

Characteristic Number Five: The people and leaders of a Scripture-driven church identify and reject illegitimate authorities. It is not enough to embrace the right authority. The church must also reject wrong authorities. Submission to the right authority logically entails rejection of illegitimate authorities. This is where the rubber really meets the road, because it means lovingly but firmly confronting error. Confronting people about their loyalty to an illegitimate authority. There are many sources of such illegitimate authority. The source of that illegitimate authority may be a book somebody has read that mingles human philosophy with the Bible. It may be something that some other church is doing that appears to be successful, but is contrary to the Word of God. It may be the ideas and influences of some dominating personality within the church who is not operating under the authority of the Word. Beware of falling

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into the subtle trap of teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. Any authority that is not Biblical authority is illegitimate authority, and it must be rejected if a church is to be a Scripture-driven church.

Characteristic Number Six: The people and leaders of a Scripture-driven church practice Bible-based evangelism. They preach the one true Gospel in its fulness. Not a therapeutic "gospel." Not a pseudo-gospel that focuses on "acceptance" and "affirmation" but turns a blind eye to mankind's total depravity, turns a blind eye to the eternal consequences of sin, and devalues the immense price that the Son of God Himself paid to redeem sinners. Not a false "gospel" that leaves people feeling better about themselves, but still eternally lost. The word "Gospel" means "good news." The people and leadership of a Scripture-driven church proclaim the bad news about man's lost and hopeless condition, because it is only when you understand that bad news that the Gospel truly becomes good news.

Characteristic Number Seven: The people and leaders of a Scripture-driven church answer anti-Christian positions with apologetics – that is, a clear, Biblical defense of the faith – not with apologies. But in order to be able to answer anti-Christian positions, you have to know your own position. The missionary atheists, and the Roman Catholic apologists, and the Muslim

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missionaries who have come to this country often know more of the Bible than the average Bible-believing Christian. Sad but true. When you get in a discussion with them, they can tie you up in knots if you don't know your Bible. They know the right things to say, to make the average Christian who doesn't know his Bible as well as he should, look absolutely foolish. We need to be prepared – we need to be ready to give an answer for the hope that is within us. We need to be immersed in the Word of God. We need to take up the sword of the Spirit.