

FAITHFUL MEN · A LIBRARY OF CHRISTIAN CLASSICS

Distinctives of the New Testament Church

O. J. (Jean) Gibson

Faithful Men

PlymouthBrethren.org · KEE Philippine Missions

Original edition: Fairhaven Bible Chapel, San Leandro, California (written January 17, 2006).

Published by permission of O. J. (Jean) Gibson. Copyright is held by Fairhaven Bible Chapel, San Leandro, California.

Faithful Men, from PlymouthBrethren.org and KEE Philippine Missions. Free to read and share; not for sale.

“The things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.” (2 Timothy 2:2)

Virtually every Christian organization and church has what is called a “statement of faith”. Unfortunately, very few of regular attendees ever read them. Among evangelicals there is a common denominator among the creeds centered in the basics of true salvation. They usually cover elements in what is called “the Nicene Creed”. This was based on an agreement among leaders of the church at that time (4th century) as to what must be believed by true Christians. They did not create any items listed. They simply formalized what was believed since the apostolic era. This creed has guided other statements and is solidly Biblical.

There is one area which they did not cover until the twentieth century. This refers to the organization and function of the local church. Why is there a need for its inclusion? It is because of a considerable number of New Testament verses which tell us how the early church functioned. Why should it matter? First, because the Lord Jesus Himself is the Head and His work is to build this church (Matt. 16:18). We believe the pattern of local churches today should function under His headship according to the principles of that day, although not necessarily the details. The latter would cover such matters as Sunday School and timing of the meetings. Principles would include leadership or officials (elders, deacons), the central meeting (Breaking of Bread) and opportunity for use of all gifts by those in active fellowship.

What are the distinctives of the New Testament church? These are the major distinctives of the local church in New Testament times:

1. There is a celebration on the Lord’s Day called the Breaking of Bread (communion) which is the central gathering of

believers (Acts 20:7). There is multiple audible participation by the men (I Cor. 14:26) and silent worship by the women (I Cor. 14:34). Worship is addressed directly to God alone and consists of more than singing.

2. There is no distinction between so-called clergy and laity (clericalism). All believers are priests (I Pet. 2:5, 9). Leadership in the church is not limited to the head pastor. Leadership should involve more than one man (Phil. 1:1). There are no special religious titles according to Scripture, such as Reverend or Bishop. The latter word is a translation used in I Tim. 3:1-2, Titus 1:7, Acts 20:28 which is meant to include all elders (Acts 20:17, Titus 1:5). It also refers to pastors and shepherds (I Pet. 5:1-5). Another translation is overseers, referring to care of the flock. The word is familiarly used of God as the Shepherd of His people (Psalm 23, John 10:11, Heb.13:20). There is no Biblical authority for these men to wear special clothing (clerical garments) or wear crosses. Plain clothing such as worn by ordinary shepherds or even the Lord Jesus is the example.
3. No denominational names or sectarian labels are authorized in Scripture (Catholic, Orthodox, Baptist, Lutheran, Anglican, Episcopal, etc.). All Christians are called saints, believers, brothers and sisters. All true believers are the people of God, part of His family, not separated by divisive labels as sects (I Cor. 1:13).
4. There should be opportunity for those in fellowship to exercise whatever spiritual gifts, as given by God, exist within the local church (I Cor. 12:1-7). This obviously includes preaching or teaching the Word, pastoral

visitation, counseling and varied leadership roles. This should not be restricted to either one man or a hired staff.

Aside from these major distinctives, there are two other important doctrines that should be taught and practiced. These are:

1. Believer's baptism, rather than infant baptism is very important. This is commanded by the Lord Jesus and is part of what is called the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19). Its condition is that you believe in your heart in the Lord Jesus and trust alone in His substitutionary death on the cross (Acts 8:36-37). Everyone who believes the Gospel (I Cor. 15:1-4) and accepts Jesus as Lord (Rom. 10:9), which includes believing He was raised from the dead, ought to be baptized. No infant can believe this and there is no provision for such baptisms in the New Testament. There is no mention of such things as godparents making a commitment to guide you into the knowledge of God's way of salvation. There is no mention of a later catechism class (memorizing doctrinal statements). There is no such practice as a confirmation service in which a "bishop" lays his hands on someone's head and pronounces the person to be a Christian. Many people are trusting their hope of salvation on pre-conversion baptism. The manner of New Testament baptism is by immersion, not sprinkling water on the forehead. The act symbolizes the way of salvation by reason of His death, burial and resurrection, taken completely underwater and raised out of it (Acts 8:38-39). Believer's baptism is called being "buried with Him" (Rom. 6:4, Col. 2:12). It is a memorial of our identification with Christ in His burial and resurrection. Is baptism by water

required to wash away our sins (baptismal regeneration or the new birth)? No, only the blood of Jesus cleanses from sins (I John 1:7, Heb. 9:22). What is the purpose of believer's baptism? It is "the answer of a good conscience towards God" (I Pet. 3:21), not to cleanse away our sins, called "the removal of dirt from the flesh (sins)". It is our public confession of Christ as our Lord and Savior. If baptism helped to save us Paul would not have said that he personally baptized very few (I Cor. 1:14-17). Baptism still is commanded for a convert after conversion, although not essential when critical illness or like experiences makes it impossible (Luke 23:42-43).

2. The other doctrine which is important, although not required, is what is called eternal security. This means believing that once a person is truly converted, then his or her salvation is eternal (John 5:24, Heb. 10:14). The new birth takes us into the family of God (John 3:3-8, I Pet. 1:23). There is no such thing as being born again the second time, just as physical birth is not repeated.

There are other considerations to be borne in mind in functions of the local church.

1. How is the work of the Lord to be financed? Certainly it is not by the support of unbelievers who are often attenders at the morning preaching service on the Lord's Day. The Lord Jesus is never recorded as seeking funds from any observer coming to listen to his teaching. Monetary gifts were given to the Twelve for their support. (Judas was the treasurer) but never solicited. Paul worked to support his own ministry when funds were short (Acts 18:3). Many times the churches which he helped establish failed to

send money in fellowship (Phil. 4:11-12) but he did not complain or solicit. God's work should be supported by God's people, "taking nothing of the Gentiles" or unsaved (III John 7). Believers are to contribute regularly, proportionately, and systematically (I Cor. 16:1-2). There is no authority for seeking pledges or asking for money as commonly practiced today. To "live by faith" is to depend on God for support.

2. It is popular to copy the programs of nationally known mega-churches (Willow Creek, Saddleback). Imitating the style of well-known preachers' techniques and elaborate facilities are used for growth in attendance. Mostly these churches drain membership from small churches. They do not rely on the Spirit for power and blessing (Zech.4:6). People live on the spiritual food of one hour per week. There is great emphasis in special music rather than systematic and powerful teaching of the Word which challenges believers and wins souls for Christ. Unlike the prophets they give messages that show relevance to temporal issues with a large dose of what is called "psychobabble". MacDonald, Hunt and the Bobgans critique "the psychologizing of the church" (self esteem, positive thinking). There certainly is very little of crying out against the sins of the people and especially avoiding disturbing them by the thought of eternal punishment (never mention hell, although Jesus certainly did).
3. Missions emphasis especially on needy parts of the world should be an active concern of any New Testament church. Are workers being trained to go out to the unreached

billions of souls in the Muslim world, India and even in Europe where state churches have withered and died?

4. Is personal discipling (one on one) or leadership training emphasized? This creates new workers for the harvest field.
5. It is important to have a strong community emphasis in order to draw those needing salvation. Small group evangelistic studies can bring in people who do not go to church on the Lord's Day. This can be reinforced by a vigorous home visitation effort.

In summation, is the local church a key area of emphasis, emulating the preaching of the Lord Jesus, the Apostles and Old Testament prophets? Are you seeing souls saved, baptized, and added regularly to the local church (Acts 5:14)? Then you are truly a New Testament church.

OJG 1/17/2006

Published by permission of O. J. (Jean) Gibson. Copyright is held by Fairhaven Bible Chapel, San Leandro, California.



To God be the glory.