

How Biblical Is The Modern Evangelical Church?

What a ridiculous question to ask? All Evangelicals want to be Biblical or they would not call themselves by that name. But do they? Why is there such a diversity amongst Evangelical churches? Why are so many unorthodox practices tolerated? Why are so many heterodox doctrines preached? Why are so many contradictory teachings espoused by church members? In fact, many churches do not even claim to be Biblical. They openly accept that many of their practices have no scriptural foundation but they make a variety of excuses for this. Most often you will hear that practical reasons make such and such a matter impossible. Is this acceptable?

Why this study?

Christianity is defined by the Bible. This is basic logic. If Christians are those who follow Jesus, then Christians will do what Jesus commands. The Bible is the record of God's will, therefore, a true Christian cannot wilfully disobey that will without losing the testimony of being Christian. Someone who calls himself a Christian but who lives in opposition to the Bible is either not a genuine Christian at all, or is a believer who is in a state of backsliding and is thus an aberration of true Christianity.

A local church is the collection of Christians in a geographic area. If a church ceases to obey scripture, then it ceases to be a Christian testimony. It is a vital foundation of Christianity that it obeys the word of God as 'breathed out' in the Bible. Anything less may be attractive, enjoyable, popular, emotional, religious and many other things, but it cannot be truly called 'Christian'. Those who want to be labelled by this term must obey God as revealed in his word. All this is common sense.

My contention is that many modern churches are ceasing to have any Christian testimony and should now be termed aberrant or even anti-Christian; and as such avoided. This may sound strong but it was the apostolic method of dealing with this situation as revealed in: 1 Jn 2:18-22, 4:3; 2 Jn 1:5-11; Rm 16:17-18; Phil 3:18-19. The root of this problem is the desire to dilute, ignore, misuse or disobey God's word. The resolution to the problem is a decisive submission to God's word.

How bad is the problem? I intend to discuss this in the paper before you. This will only be a very cursory analysis to highlight any discrepancies. I have attempted more in depth evaluations of different aspects elsewhere.

Church Environment

Buildings

Here is the first shock, there is no mention of the purchase of any building for the use as a Christian meeting place in the New Testament; neither is there any command to buy premises in the future. This has nothing to do with difficult times of persecution as there were many years in the first century where the church knew peace. Furthermore, there were also many types of clubs in the Roman Empire, especially in Greece, and the Roman overlords were tolerant of indigenous people having their own religions, clubs, sects and buildings (e.g. temples) - as long as they were not seditious. It is only as the church began to decline that buildings were extensively used for Christian worship and the structural style was lifted from Roman basilicas (buildings for law-courts and assemblies).

Neither were buildings originally hired for worship purposes. The only occasion where a secular room was used at all was when Paul reasoned daily in the Hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus as a debating opportunity to preach the Gospel (Acts 19:9). The use of the temple portico (Solomon's porch) was exceptional and temporary. It was used for prayer at the time of prayer (they were Jews after all) in Acts 3:11 and for evangelistic preaching opportunities in Acts 5:42. Part of the reason for this use was the gradual, emerging light they perceived of the fulness of the Gospel.¹ As devout Jews they continued in Jewish devotions until the fulness of the church's separation from Judaism became clear to them, as explained by the letter to the Hebrews. After 70 AD use of the temple was impossible as it was destroyed. Furthermore, the priests and temple police would never have tolerated the worship of a crucified criminal within the temple courts.

There is no sanction for buying church buildings with all its costs, worry, administration and distractions. The church was always meant to worship in homes as the New Testament repeatedly states (e.g: Rm 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19).

So, the Bible shows that the church practice was to worship in homes with all the atmosphere of a family gathered together unto their father. The modern church never meets in homes (house-groups are not churches).

Platform / pulpit / pews / chairs in straight lines / order of service

The reason God instituted meetings in homes was to facilitate the contributions of all gifted people present and avoid any formalism and organisation. The church is a living organism, a family, the household of God, 'the church which is his body' and as such should not be run like a business, a university seminar, a lecture hall, a rock concert or a game-show. The use of a platform is solely to emphasise that some people are more special than others and any focus on man in the service, rather than Christ, is to be shunned and condemned.

Now the original purpose of a pulpit was to enable the preacher to be heard at the back, and this is a laudable idea; but it especially highlights the authority of one man, literally, over others. It is this elevation of a man which is to be avoided.

The idea of regimented lines of uninvolved people, whether in pews or chairs, is the very opposite of the idea of church gatherings. Such a custom virtually ensures that no one will ever participate individually without sanction from the order of service. Yet the Biblical instruction is that: '*you can all prophesy*' (1 Cor 14:31), '*each one has a psalm, has a*

¹ Note, for instance, that church elders are not mentioned until Acts 11.

teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification' (1 Cor 14:26), 'let two or three prophets speak (1 Cor 14:29), 'As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another' (1 Pt 4:10), 'let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel' (1 Cor 14:12). Such instructions could easily be multiplied.

The layout of the meeting is vital to ensuring that God is worshipped and edification of the saints is conducted in the way God desires. The persecuted, historical church has even met quite adequately in caves, catacombs (cemeteries in hewn out caves), mountains and forests because these did not elevate any man and did not hinder mutual encouragement. But platforms etc. cut right across the grain of Biblical meetings.

Big churches

Where do people get the idea that big is better or that God desires big things, expensive things, renown things? Doesn't 1 Cor 1:26-29 demolish such ideas? God even specifically chose Israel as a testimony because she was the smallest of nations (Deut 7:7). I challenge anyone to find a clear example of a large, local church in the New Testament. I wouldn't bother wasting your time because there isn't one. Paul even ministered at times to churches in homes with less than a dozen people present (e.g. Acts 20:7-11, this meeting in the third storey room of a harbour town house could not have been very large). Churches met in houses and most ordinary houses at this time were very small. Indeed, by comparison with our town, the populations of the ancient cities were very small. Corinth probably had a population about equal to the combined towns of Brighton and Hove (approx. 200,000), yet it was a major Greek city and trading centre.

We are never told to build big churches and the parameters of church ministry and leadership demand the constraints of smallness: the ability to know everyone well enough to admonish, the ability to share openly with ease, the ability to pastor people with care etc. Big churches pose huge problems, requiring difficult organisational methods to overcome. They are not scriptural.

Ministry

Minister, priest, vicar, bishop, senior pastor, official salaried hierarchies

Qualifications for church office

Titus, chapter one, gives very clear instructions regarding the selection of men to local church leadership. There is nothing confusing in this passage, nothing hard to understand - just difficult to obey. In 1:6-11 we note the following qualities demanded:

- a godly life (v6)
- a husband of only one wife (v6)
- having children who are faithful believers (v6)
- under no accusations of dissipation (being excessive, dissolute, profligate) or insubordination (disobedience, v6)
- not self-willed (v7)
- not quick tempered (v7)
- not a drunkard, violent or greedy (v7)
- hospitable, a lover of good, sober-minded, just, holy and self controlled (v8)
- well taught, able to teach and holding a sound (Biblical, apostolic) theology (v9)
- able to contradict heretics convincingly (v9) as well as idle-talkers, deceivers, and especially Jewish legalist deceivers (v10), so that unorthodox mouths are stopped, especially those who teach heresy for gain (v11).

In 1 Timothy 3 Paul essentially repeats these qualifications adding that the elder must not be a recent convert and must have a good reputation outside the church in the local community. So, we have at least two clear passages which lay out the necessary credentials of a minister in the local church. The church cannot water down these qualifications without damaging the body. Experience shows that the large majority of Evangelical congregations have a leadership of very mixed quality. Some leaders have even insisted that Paul's standards are too high for modern men to reach (we will ignore the question of women being involved in leadership). Others water down statements to mean something else. Now I grant that elders will grow into their gift and mature, and though some qualifications may be weaker than others, all the credentials must be there.

For instance, many elders have no ability to teach at all and even deny that they have a clear understanding of Biblical doctrine. Even some senior pastors (not a Biblical phrase by the way) or 'ministers' deride the need for solid, accurate theology. Some sermons offered by such are little more than amusing stories with a moral. I know of at least one elder who feels that his main gift is drama! Some churches have Biblical teaching only rarely, and never doctrinal or expositional, being based upon an arbitrary text or a train of thought.

It is now common for well known national church leaders to publicly express their quick temper, even pouring vitriol upon other church officers. Some famous denominational leaders were alcoholics. Many are divorced and remarried, some divorced their older spouse to marry a younger one. Perhaps the vast majority affirm the need for tolerance and refuse to combat heresies and heretics, even in the local community, and castigate those of us who try to uphold this Biblical practice with sobriety as being 'dogmatic' or 'legalistic'.

Can we ignore Biblical lists where God clearly specifies the type of people he requires to lead the church? 'But we have no choice', comes the riposte, 'we have to work with the men available and put up with it'. Why? In the past churches often cried out to God repeatedly to send them a man, or some men, with the qualifications to lead them and were eventually sent men from God in providential ways. The real problem is the lack of determination of the church to be Biblical. Instead of pouring out intercession to God for the right leaders, congregations simply accept what is available - even if they are really unsuitable for the task. It would be better to establish a caretaker leadership with the clear goal of waiting on God for qualified men, rather than ordaining to office the wrong people.

If God can send sound leaders to persecuted, poor, oppressed churches throughout history, he can certainly send the right gifts to churches today where there is more educational Biblical resources and training available than any previous time in history. It starts with a corporate desire to obey God's word.

Office

There is only one governmental office in the Biblical church and that is the function of the elder. No other man holds permanent authority in the local church. The office of deacon is an administrative help to the eldership team to enable them to concentrate on prayer, teaching and counselling. This is so clear it needs no argument (Titus 1:5; 1 Tim 5:17; Acts 20:17; 1 Pt 5:1,5). Church leadership is a plurality. Elders work as a team specifically to avoid one man gaining the domination over the flock, which Peter condemns (1 Pt 5:3). The normal church thus has both elders and deacons (Phil 1:1).

A bishop (*episkopos*, = overseer) is simply another word for elder (*presbuteros* = elder man). Titus 1:5-7 and Acts 20:17-28 use them interchangeably. There is no scriptural sanction for a man having church authority over a widespread area containing several

churches. Neither is there support for the 'senior pastor'. Nowhere do we see this term or anything like it. In fact the emphasis is upon shared responsibility and authoritarianism is condemned repeatedly in the New Testament.

Another fallacy is that the Bible sanctions salaried offices. No such thing is found. Church leaders should be supported and gifts should be given to them as people feel led by God, but the main idea is that they should live by faith and constantly look to God for their support. This is to keep them from complacency. In fact, most church leaders are not 'full-time' anyway; this is exceptional. Many small churches can be led very well by a team of working elders sharing the responsibility.

Apostles, apostolic teams

The idea that an apostle is a man with superlative authority over large numbers of churches is a fallacy and quite modern, mainly seen in the Charismatic Movement and New Churches. It is another name for monarchical bishops, a false and fleshly practice which arose in the early church after Cyprian. Bishops (in the Anglican sense) and Archbishops are not scriptural; there is no Biblical sanction for them at all. No man has authority over any church, only God has. Elders are under-shepherds, pastors of the flock which belongs to God and which is directed by him. Only Jesus builds the church. The concept of one man dominating many, even hundreds of churches, is scandalous.

There is a place for apostles but only in the true sense. An apostle is someone sent out from a church with authority and support to plant new churches. As these emerging churches grow he will obviously have a key foundational role. But the job description of an apostle is to develop and appoint local elders as soon as possible. Paul sometimes appointed local elders only months after their conversion because all the qualities of leadership were clear in them. An apostle may continue to encourage and support young churches for some years but never overrules local authority. Even in the aberrational Corinthian church Paul pleaded, persuaded and argued his case, only speaking harshly against clear wickedness in the midst. Elsewhere he describes his ministry as a 'father' (1 Cor 4:15) or as a 'nursing mother' (1 Thess 2:7). The idea of a man having sovereign authority over churches he never even planted is so heretical and dangerous it is beyond belief. Even Paul refused to do this (Rm 15:20). It is even worse for a modern 'apostle' to delegate someone in his team to take charge over a distant church he never planted, or worse still to dissolve the local eldership and appoint men sympathetic to his role.

Housegroup leaders

The whole concept of the house group is a hybrid of ideas: the local prayer meeting, a place of informal fellowship, a place of local discipleship etc. If it was simply an informal, ad hoc gathering for encouragement, nothing would be wrong with it, but the modern idea is that house-groups are fully constituted formal church meetings led by a delegated authority: the house-group leader.

In this sense the house-group is acting as a church in all but name and as such is unbiblical. A church is a community of committed believers who gather to function in all the ways a church should under godly elders, exercising sound discipline. House-groups are neither one thing or another.

Many churches institute them to breathe life into the stale, formalised life of the church - the real church has no intimate fellowship so we'll have a smaller mid week meeting in homes to get some. In fact, it would be better to evaluate what's wrong and fix it rather than establish something unbiblical. In the New Testament home meetings were fully fledged churches and form no pattern for what's practised today. Either the church should

split up into a number of home based churches or cease the practice.

Another great danger is that local house-group leaders (and worse still their wives) gain a huge amount of power as the first line of church authority. Local members have more to do with them than constituted elders. The sheer poverty of ability and leadership qualifications of many of these sincere folk is staggering and a huge amount of damage has been done by these people unwittingly. I have known house-group leaders encourage folk to move house, change their jobs or even marry someone. Sometimes this advice (authoritative counsel in reality) was followed with disastrous consequences.

Administrators

Deacons have the role of administering gifts and dealing with practical matters in the New Testament. If churches operate with such folk and call them administrators, it matters little if the effect is the same. But many Charismatic churches have a key administrator who wields great authority. Most apostolic teams have an administrator whose power is a little less than the apostle himself. This is wrong.

Firstly, there is no spiritual gift for administrating. When the RSV and NKJV translates *kubernesis* as administrator / administrations (1 Cor 12:28), they are wrong. It is rightly translated by the KJV as 'government'. The word originates with the concept of 'the power to steer' as in a ship. The person who determines the course of a ship is the captain. The gift mentioned by Paul relates to the leadership of the church.

Again, the only governmental authority in the local church is in the hands of the eldership. This is crucial to sound church life. No administrator has any power to affect church decisions or counsel church members.

Worship leaders, worship bands, organs & orchestras

The worship leader has a huge amount of influence in modern charismatic church life. A man with no eldership qualifications can be allowed to dominate 50% of the meeting life of the church. What's worse, most people leave such a church with recollections of the worship mood, a spiritual gift shared, an emotional atmosphere, a chorus - but with little remembrance of the sermon. This is potentially dangerous.

Firstly, there is no such ministry in the New Testament, in fact there is no mention of music being used in church services in the New Testament at all. Any use of music must first come to terms with this and have a ready explanation and defence for its use - though I have never met anyone who has. But to allow music and musicians to dominate church meetings to the extent that they do today is very serious if we can find no scriptural support for the idea. Furthermore, we see that such musical techniques are widely used in false religions and occult sects in order to soften up and prepare cult members for a later experience, which usually involves falling over, screaming, laughing or crying. This ought to concern us.

Older established churches have just as big a problem here as they use organs, pianos, or even choirs and small orchestras, all with no New Testament sanction. But it is the power of the worship leader which is most worrying. Frequently, such folk are frustrated rock stars and lead the worship along the lines of a rock concert. This is bringing the dross of the world right into the centre of the corporate worship of the Lord's people and is anathema to God. Lots of evangelical people know many modern choruses by heart but cannot recite any scripture, or very little, and never read any solid books of teaching.

Liturgy

Songs, hymns, choruses

One man ministry

Sermons

Communion, Breaking of bread, the Lord's Supper

Now no serious Bible student can deny that the New Testament teaching is clearly that this should take place when the body is gathered together for edification and worship. 1 Cor 11 is plain about this (especially in the context of chapters 12-14). One of the vital reasons the church gathers is to celebrate the memorial of the Lord's death until he comes. Knowing our weakness to stray from central issues, God instituted that a major focus of gathering would be the death of his Son. Other texts, like Acts 20:7 teach, or at least give a strong implication, that the day the church gathers together is the Lord's day (Rev 1:10) i.e. Sunday. Early church history confirms this practice as the norm. Breaking bread reminds us of the necessity of Christ's death as an offering for sin, Sunday speaks of the resurrection and the acceptance of his sacrifice and a new beginning. So, breaking of bread should be celebrated when the whole church gathers together for edification on a Sunday. For nearly 2000 years this practice was accepted as a foundational matter.

Today very many churches have a variety of practices in this regard. Some never break bread at all. This is especially true in the 'New' (Charismatic) churches where the large numbers make it a logistic difficulty to conform to the Biblical standard. Charismatic teachers have openly confessed this to me and regard it as a minor technicality. Other churches delegate breaking bread to a week night where it is done in minor meetings or house-groups. Of course, these meetings do not contain the whole church and thus diverge from the scriptural precedent. One testimony of the Lord's Supper is the oneness of the body as it shares the one loaf; celebrating it in a plethora of house-groups destroys this testimony and symbolism. But why move it at all? Again some churches are large and logistics are a difficulty (perhaps the church should consider splitting and planting) but often the reason is to avoid causing a stumbling block for non-believing visitors. Such churches want to present a 'communal' feeling to their meeting with evangelistic overtones; and so such a statement of solidarity would be out of place. Strange that the early church felt entirely the opposite about the matter and was eminently successful in growing. Surely the scriptural emphasis is that when unbelievers see the genuine love of Christians for their saviour and for each other demonstrated in a meeting, they are convicted and are led to belief. Breaking bread is the best means of demonstrating the love of God shed abroad in the hearts' of believers. Why ditch the best evangelistic tool?

The church cannot ignore breaking bread on Sunday when the whole church is gathered. This is a clear command of Christ and the apostles and is a matter which cannot be disregarded.

Decency and order

Special Meetings

Conferences, conventions, celebrations and Bible Weeks

Now Bible conferences cannot be a bad thing if they are a means of focusing upon the word

of God to edify several local churches, or to combat a certain problem. However, powerful church leaders and various organisations use such things to develop their support base, control followers and gain money. Such a spectacular show is laid on that immature believers come away mesmerised by the atmosphere. Some believers literally live for the next major event and have little to do with active participation with local Christians on a regular basis. Many modern charismatic conventions involve large orchestras or bands to create the appropriate atmosphere for spiritual manipulation, sometimes using music as a backdrop for: congregational directions, preaching, 'commanding prayers' or even just simply to make a great deal of noise to drive away demons! Emotional, pleading messages are often given using a combination of: shouting, wild gestures and various platform antics. Testimonies are used to set examples for others to follow, and often the word of God has little place amongst the professional showbiz performances.

The problem is that none of these meetings have any scriptural support at all, and anyone dependent upon such meetings is not living the Biblical norm. The only time we see any large gathering of congregations in the New Testament is in Acts 15. This was a special meeting to discuss certain problems which had arisen and which required the verdict of the body. The emphasis is upon presentation of evidence, discussion, prayer and a leadership summary of the consensus decision. There is no focus upon self satisfaction through emotional worship, no healings, no mention of music - only serious consideration before God of a problem which troubled the churches and needed resolution. It is much more like a synod than a celebration. There is no other mention of large corporate gatherings in Acts. As stated earlier, Paul's meetings in the hall of Tyrannus were solely for evangelistic discussion with unbelievers; and though the early church met in Solomon's portico for a while, this could not have been for a formal worship or edification time in the name of Jesus or the Jewish temple authorities would have imprisoned them.

Some organisations depend upon celebrations and conventions for popular support; without them leadership control over strategy, oversight and direction of churches would be considerably reduced. It is a fleshly, business method of maintaining supervision and setting fresh targets for staff and has nothing to do with the Biblical autonomy of local churches under eldership government.

Drama / Seeker services

Evangelistic crusades

Healing meetings

Doctrine

This is such a large subject to cover since the modern church has widely drifted from the purity of its original theological stance, as is well documented in many books and pamphlets. We can only mention a small sample of topics.

The Gospel

Practical living

Separation from the world

Separation from heretics

Generating money from the world

Conclusion

Any idea, no matter how good it sounds, which drives the church away from clear Biblical practice and doctrine is not only to be despised, but it is always counter productive in the end. God knows what is best, he explained it to us in his word and our job is to obey it, when practised - it works. This is not legalism, it is the obedience of children to the commands of their Father.

It is a sad fact that most modern evangelical churches do not feel obliged to strive to be Biblical in all their doctrine and practice, even if they state in their constitution that they do. Very few even search the scriptures to come to firm conclusions as to what the Biblical basis of church practice should be. How else could the following be encouraged which have no scriptural basis at all: healing meetings, flag waving, dancing in worship, exotic practices like barking, shouting, falling over etc., individual deliverance ministries, seeking money from the world, partnerships with false religions (including Roman Catholicism), mysticism (e.g. in Celtic spirituality), sacramentalism (e.g. candles, stones, crystals), praying to the dead (endorsed on TV by Gerald Coates), praise marches, territorial spirit strategic warfare (attacking demonic strongholds in towns), visualisation (as in Yonggi Cho's prayer methods, 'name it and claim it' praying) and so on.

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