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What is the "Real" Church? Part 2

by Tal Davis

In the previous installment I mentioned how, in the 19th century, one very intense debate among Christian groups was over the answer to the question: What is the real church? One denomination would claim it was the true New Testament Church. Another would say it was the true inheritor of "Apostolic Succession." Thus, it was the only right church. Actually all exclusivist claims to be the one true, or even the very best, church cannot be sustained either biblically or historically. We have to look carefully at how Jesus and the New Testament defined the real church, not at people's assumptions or opinions.

In this two part series we examine four qualities by which we can identify the real church of Jesus Christ. In part one, we examined the first two and in this installment we will look at two others. Let's review briefly the first two elements. (To read the entirety of Part 1, click here: <http://www.marketfaith.org/2014/11/what-is-the-real-church-part-1/>)

To begin with, we considered the basis upon which Jesus founded His church.

1. The real church is characterized by its absolute declaration of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

In Matthew 16: 13-20, Jesus responded to Peter's great confession of faith in Him as the Messiah. That statement was the beginning or foundation of Jesus' church. He declared... "upon this rock I will build My church." As we said, the "rock" to which Jesus referred was Peter's great confession of Jesus as the Christ.

2. The real church is characterized by the fellowship and building up of its members.

The Bible uses several analogies for what the church should be.

In 1 Peter 2:4-5, Peter uses the metaphor of "living stones" in a spiritual temple. Paul used the same concept in Ephesians 2:19- 22. He says the apostles and prophets were the foundation stones, but Jesus was the all-important cornerstone.

In John 15, Jesus says His followers are like branches on a vine. He, of course, is the Vine and we are the branches that produce fruit.

In 1 Corinthians chapters 12-14, Paul uses the metaphor of the church as like a human body. Every body part (church member) has a function and purpose. The Head of the body is Jesus (Ephesians 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Colossians 1:18; 2:10).

These metaphors have several common implications about what constitutes the real church.

(1) All emphasize that the church is a living thing. It is a living spiritual temple, branches on a vine, and the body of Christ.

(2) They all affirm that Jesus is the leader of the church. He is the Cornerstone of the living temple, the Vine, and the Head of the body. The leader of the church is not a man – but God Himself in Christ!

(3) They all indicate that people in the churches are mutually dependent on one another for growth and support.

So then, these are two essential elements of the "real church". In this installment we examine two other key indicators.

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3. The real church is absolutely committed to spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ – both at home and around the world.

In the New Testament are recorded the words of Jesus establishing the fact that His church was to take His message to the ends of the earth and make disciples of all peoples.

18 And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28: 18-20 NASB)

45 Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, 46 and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, 47 and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24: 45- 49 NASB)

7 "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; 8 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 1:7, 8 NASB)

Throughout the book of Acts, Luke records the early church's urgency to fulfill Jesus' requirement. And just what was that message we call the Good News or the Gospel? Jesus defined it in the Luke passage above (Luke 24: 47).

The Apostle Paul also defined the Gospel clearly in 1 Corinthians 15:1-8. 1 Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, 2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep. 7 Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 And last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. (NASB)

Notice Paul says this was the most important thing he taught them. He says it is the same message and statement of faith he had received from Jesus by revelation and confirmed by the disciples in Jerusalem (see Galatians 1:18-2:10). This statement (verses 3-7), quoted by Paul, is considered by scholars to be one of the earliest recorded attestations of the death and resurrection of Christ and may be traced back to eye-witnesses within three or four years of that event. (see: Gary Habermas, Chapter 11 in *To Everyone an Answer: A Case for the Christian Worldview*, Francis J. Beckwith, ed.)

So it is clear that perhaps the most important element of any church that claims to be a real Church is that it is heavily involved in reaching lost people with the Gospel both in the local community and around the world. The converse also appears to be true. Any Church that does not desire and is not actively seeking to win the lost to salvation in Christ is simply not a New Testament church.

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I remember many years ago, when I was a young Christian, I was involved in promoting an inter-denominational youth evangelistic concert in my home town. Several of my friends and I went to the pastors of various churches in the area to ask if we could put up posters in their youth buildings advertising the free event. Most of the pastors were quite willing and encouraging, but I will never forget being somewhat shocked by the negative responses of some them. As one said to us rather tersely, "We just don't do that kind of thing here." I had to wonder to myself, "Then, just what do you do?"

Sad to say, many churches and denominations have lost their zeal for evangelism and missions. The influence of liberal theology, extreme biblical criticism, and the naturalistic worldview has poisoned the spirit of even some denominations that were born out of great evangelistic movements. Consequently, some denominations no longer see any reason for doing missions in unreached areas of the world. What mission forces they still have are rapidly being diminished (along with their membership numbers).

Again, I would say, any local congregation or denomination that does not seek to reach lost souls is completely out of touch with what Jesus intended for His church to be and to do. It is ignoring what Paul declared was "of first importance."

This, then, leads us to the last significant quality of the real church and its influence in the nation and world.

4. The real church promotes righteousness among all people.

Obviously, Jesus Christ was devoted to human welfare. He was concerned about people's physical, spiritual, and moral well-being. Therefore, we must not forget our obligations and not defer to others in these matters.

I once toured a Christian Children's Home with a group from a church. One lady in the crowd asked the director: "Why do you not accept government subsidies to support your work?" She answered that government subsidies usually come with strings attached about what you can say and do with the children. They did not want to risk losing the freedom to hire who they want, to teach children the Bible, and to take them to church.

Christian groups have established hospitals, schools, disaster relief organizations, etc., for God's glory and ministry. We must not rely on the government to provide for people's needs. We must be willing to share and care in Jesus' name.

Christian churches also must take stands on moral issues in society. It does matter how people conduct themselves and what society allows them to do. The current controversy over gay marriage is a perfect example. The church must maintain a biblical standard for itself on homosexuality and strive to keep society's laws reflective of it. The same can be said of other moral and ethical issues including human sexuality, gambling, alcohol, drugs, race relations, marriage and divorce, economics, citizenship, and other relevant matters.

As Jesus said, we are to be both "salt and light."

"You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house." (Matthew 5:13-16 NASB)

The point is, the real church is involved in the community and nation to encourage high moral and cultural standards of behavior. Any church that fails to stand solidly for biblical values and simply bends to current societal mores and trends (which constantly change) is not an authentic church of Jesus Christ. While it is true that culture inevitably changes over time, there are certain absolute standards that are unalterable from generation to generation. The real church promotes those unchanging truths and values.

Conclusion

So, what is the "real church"? We have shown that it is not just some organization that claims to be the exclusive reservoir of divine truth and authority. No such entity exists. And while there are thousands of fine local churches and hundreds of good denominations, none may assert to have a monopoly on the Kingdom of God.

We have, however, looked at four essential elements that should characterize any congregation, denomination, mission group, para-church organization, or institution (college, university, school, hospital, etc.) that calls itself Christian. Here they are in review.

1. The real church is characterized by its absolute declaration of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.
2. The real church is characterized by the fellowship and building up of its members.
3. The real church is absolutely committed to spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ – both at home and around the world.
4. The real church promotes righteousness among all people.

Now all that being said, one final point needs to be made. None of the above qualities are of any value at all without one key ingredient: AGAPE LOVE. As Paul says: 1 If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1-4 NASB)

So then, is your church a "real church" of Jesus Christ?

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