

The church of the Living God

(Part IV)

For almost 2,000 years now, there is one entity that has been in existence, transcending empires, nations, peoples, social classes, political philosophies, cultural and physical distinctions, industrial and technological advancements, and even geographical boundaries.

It has not been under the control of a human leader, or centralized organization. It has not been organized or administered from a particular geographical location, or under the direction of a single nation, or a special group of nations.

It has no governing body of directors, board members, or centralized group of authorities determining its program, plans, or structure and function.

There is no human explanation for the continuing existence and growth of this entity – it is utterly unique, infused with a power beyond anything residing in the natural man – and that is because it is;

The church of the Living God.

There are, and always have been counterfeits which have required a centralized organization and leadership in order to achieve even a small measure of similar success.

But the real thing is what it is, because the Lord Himself is the foundation, the architect, the builder, and the One to whom it belongs – having paid a price beyond human comprehending.

The Lord is determined to bring His church to triumphant glory, and nothing will keep Him from accomplishing His purpose – because, greater is He who is in us, than he who is in the world.

We have been considering the N.T. assembly from the perspective of what the Lord Himself has revealed concerning the mission of the church, and also its structure and function.

- We have seen that God has ordained that the church is to be the pillar and support of the truth – in a world that distorts and suppresses the truth in unrighteousness.
- We have also seen that the Lord has charged the assembly with the task of making disciples of all the nations – sending and supporting those who will go to the ends of the earth bringing glad tidings of good things.
- And then there is the accompanying responsibility of equipping the saints for the work of service, and in the process preparing God's children for the day when we will be presented to our Lord.
- There is also – in including all peoples in the N.T. church – a bringing to light the administration of the mystery which for ages had been hidden in God, in order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

*** In the assembly then, God is ultimately bringing glory to Himself, in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever.

Fortunately God has not left us to our own creative ideas and fleshly abilities to somehow figure out how we are going to accomplish what He has given us to do.

Our Lord has graciously and sufficiently provided us with the supernatural spiritual enablement, through the unique manifestation of His Spirit in the gifts He has given to the church.

He has also provided a clear and concise revelation of the structure and function through which His purpose will be accomplished in the N.T. church.

There are several basic necessities in the structure and function of the local assembly, that we can glean from God's word to us in the N.T. When the church has been careless in these areas, there has been serious failure.

- First, there is the necessity of the preeminence of Jesus Christ in the assembly

It is not enough to agree to this in theory – it is crucial to work it out in the details. Jesus must be preeminent:

- in the authenticity, in the authority, in the abilities, in the vitality, and in the expectancy of the N.T. assembly.

- Second, there is the necessity of spiritually authentic, and Scripturally qualified leadership in the N.T. church.

- Every N.T. assembly in the Scripture had elders.
- Elders are appointed by God.
- Elders have been given a solemn responsibility by the Lord.
(guarding, guiding, and feeding)
- Elders have been given gifts to fulfill their responsibilities.
- God has provided specific qualifications for elders.
- Elders are equal in authority, different in contribution.
- Godly elders encourage others to emulate them

There is a third necessity which we want to consider today.

- It is the necessity of genuine and committed members

- Genuine and committed members are crucial – without them, there is no church – even though you may have large numbers of people assembled together in the name of Christianity
- Genuine members are the church. Everyone, and anyone else is not in fact a part of the church;

_ even if they attend regularly, and have for a long time
_ even if they are on a membership roll
_ even if they give offerings

We need to look more carefully at this third necessity for the N.T. assembly.

First we need to ask the question;

What makes someone a genuine member of the N.T. church?

The answer to this important question is seen most clearly in the passages that use the metaphor of the human body to describe certain important characteristics of the church.

I Corinthians 12:27 --- I Corinthians 1:1-2
Ephesians 4:1-4

I Corinthians 12:13 --- Titus 3:3-7
John 3:3

It is also seen quite clearly in Ephesians chapter 2 where the building metaphor is used.

*** It is those who have been born from above – of the Spirit – who are genuine members of the N.T. church.

Can we then say – more specifically – that someone (or anyone) who has been born again is a genuine member of a particular local assembly where they are in fellowship?

I believe that the answer has to be – yes. To answer – ‘no’ – would, of necessity, do serious damage to a literal understanding of the passages we have just briefly considered.

Before we go any further, we need to make a very important observation – it is esp. important at the present time.

The N.T. assembly is comprised of those (and only those) who have been born again – made alive together with the Lord Jesus Christ.

This ought to be esp. clear in reference to the previous **necessities** of the **preeminence of Christ**, and **spiritually authentic leadership** in the church.

But it ought to be even more clear in the **mission** of the N.T. assembly. Apart from a supernatural transformation in **each** of those attending the church, a clear understanding, and unified zeal for the God-ordained mission of the church would be greatly compromised, and in many cases lost altogether.

Is this not exactly what we are seeing in so many ‘churches’ today? This basic concept of the N.T. church is completely ignored as the main thrust for many churches today is to do whatever it takes to draw as many unsaved (‘un-churched’) into the life of the church as possible – hoping to then get them interested in christianity.

The problem with this is quite simple – this is not the way God designed the church to function.

The structure and function of the N.T. assembly is to be centered exclusively on Christ, and it is only His saints who are going to be interested or even able to tolerate and maintain this narrow focus.

It is not that we should never invite the lost to come meet with us. But when they do, they ought to be impressed with the real presence and holiness of the Lord – not with how cool / worldly Christians can be.

(I Corinthians 14:25) "...he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you."

Many churches today have become little more than a christian club, or community center.

They focus on anything and everything, except the consistent proclamation of the truth as it is in Jesus!

Numbers has become the goal – big numbers – or at least rapidly increasing numbers. This is what gives many saints today a confidence in the legitimacy of their church.

I have become increasingly skeptical of assemblies where everyone can tell you exactly how people attended their Sunday service on a given week.

Numbers **can** be a measure of the working of the Spirit of God – Acts 2:41 & 4:4 in which case God's glory is demonstrated.

But, when as a result of shrewd religious marketing – putting together the whole contemporary church package (the charismatic leaders, the motivational speaking, the big-screen talking heads, the talented worship teams, the spell-binding drama, the big-name concerts, the self-serving programs, the coffee-shop atmosphere...)

and the numbers get really big – who gets the glory?

But we need to move on to another important question.

If those who are born from above are genuine members of the local assembly of saints where they are attending, is there some formal way of making this known, and for them to openly declare their commitment to the Lord and His church?

I believe that there is a Biblical formality by which the genuine member is to make known their spiritual relationship to the Lord Jesus, and therefore to all of His saints. It is **believer's baptism**.

Water baptism is a simple and clear picture of what Jesus has done for us, how we are now legitimately identified with Him, and an open declaration of our loyalty and devotion to the Lord, above all others.

I spoke earlier of the necessity of genuine and committed members in the N.T. assembly.

This is where Biblical commitment needs to begin. If we are unwilling to be obedient to the Lord Jesus in this basic commandment, we have not declared our commitment to the Lord – as genuine members of His body/the church.

Granted, there are those who have been quite committed to the local church, who have not submitted to believer's baptism – but they have not been obedient in publicly declaring what the Lord has done for them, and their steadfast allegiance to Him.

This is the first of only two formalities we are specifically commanded to participate in as N.T. saints.

The second is the Lord's supper. If you have not yet been obedient in openly identifying with our crucified Lord – through believer's baptism – then you are not in the right position to partake with us together of the elements that openly declare the only means by which we have been saved from sin, joined to Christ, and therefore to one another in Christ.

For many local assemblies there have been any number of formalities that have been added to these two Biblical ones.

As it happened with the Pharisees, I believe it has always been, and will continue to be a serious danger to the church – that is to come up with additional formalities beyond what the Lord Himself has commanded us to do.

I believe that church membership is a good example of this continuing problem. We have not been commanded to add any conditions beyond what the Lord has given us – those who have been saved according to God's mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit – are genuine members of the body of Christ.

Those who have submitted themselves to believer's baptism, have openly declared their loyalty to Christ, and therefore to His assembly.

I believe there are a number of dangers in adding various rules and regulations regarding church membership.

- 1.) It is inevitably used to distort the gospel of grace by unbelievers.

For many unregenerate people this is the measure of Christian legitimacy. It has become their most prominent assurance that they are going to heaven.

When someone asks us which church we belong to – it can provide a unique opportunity to proclaim Christ – as long as we don't get caught in the strong tendency to provide them with a man-made proof of our spiritual legitimacy.

- 2.) It makes it difficult to know how to treat those believers who continue to attend for years, but never go through the process of 'membership'

To what extent are we to treat these believers with the intimacy that God describes as belonging to the relationship between all the members of Christ's body?

- 3.) It tends to diminish the full sufficiency and authority of the Word of God by adding further requirements for saints to be recognized (for what they already are) in a process that has no Scriptural precedent or procedure.

Does 'making disciples' require going through a church membership class?
How should a church membership class be different than the consistent teaching of Biblical principles relating to the structure and function of the N.T. assembly?

- 4.) It tends to politicize the structure and function of the assembly. One of the most important reasons most often given – is that you need to have a membership roll in order to determine who is eligible to vote in major decisions facing the local church.

Because the church has embraced a political means of determining spiritual issues – there must be a means of making sure that in the case of a controversial vote – there will not be an illegitimately large voter turnout.

- 5.) It can also tend to create a divisive mentality – an upper-class of Christians, and a lower class of Christians in the church -- “he’s not actually a member”.

We should have a very deep affection, respect, and appreciation for each and every member of the body -- (I Corinthians 12)

- 6.) It can provide a safe haven for those who are more than happy to accept a lower level of expectation in respect to their responsibility to the body.

Church membership when practiced as an additional formality tends to contribute to the un-Biblical perception of there being a separate class of Christians who are sometimes called ‘nominal’ or ‘carnal’ -- those who are saved, but will not inherit the kingdom of God.

- 7.) It can have a diminishing effect on the new covenant in Christ’s blood.

Reaffirming – being reminded – of the new covenant in Christ’s blood is Scriptural, adding another one can be counter-productive, even diminishing to the original.

Israel had to often re-affirm their commitment to the covenant, but making further amendments and addendums would have, and did, detract from the original.

How seriously do you and I take our position in Christ?

How seriously do we take our position in Christ – in relation to His church?

If – by the riches of God’s mercy, kindness, and love – I have been forgiven, justly justified, and made a legitimate child of the living God, how can I do anything less than give of my best to bring Him glory in the church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever?