

A Distinguishing Characteristic of a True New Testament Church

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NT Church - There is no division between clergy and laity.

As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God (1 Pet. 4:10). So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another (Rom. 12:5). But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as He will. For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ (1 Cor. 12:11,12). There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling....But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ (Eph. 4:4,7).

As we examine the above verses, and then look at the Christian churches about us today, the honest soul is exceedingly troubled. Through the centuries, man has divided the church into two distinct classes: clergy and laity. Is there really Scriptural authority for such a division? One searches in vain for such evidence in the Holy Scriptures. Instead one finds that we are all members of the body of Christ and no one holds a position that would make him the head over the rest of the body. Christ alone is the Head of the Church and no man can even be an earthly representative of this position which belongs only to Christ. Our Head is invisible and He sovereignly controls the church through the working of the Holy Spirit. The seeking soul is also troubled when he discovers that this man-made clergy is actually ordained and trained by institutions that have

been established by man. As we examine the New Testament, we discover that God gives the gifts to the church as He will and man has entered into God's sovereign territory when he appoints and formally trains his own leaders. Man has made the stewards of the church, the body of Christ, into a paid profession, which is chosen as a job career for those so inclined to go that way.

As we honestly examine the above verses and the chapters in which they are contained, we must come to the definite conclusion that this division of the body of Christ could not have existed in the early church of the New Testament.

A distinguishing characteristic of a true new testament church is that there is no division between clergy and laity. This would mean that within the church there cannot be a leader with the title of Reverend, Pastor, Minister, Bishop, Elder or any other title. As soon as anyone is given this place, he holds the position of the head of the body and we are all equally members of the same body.

Obviously, this leads to an important question. Does this mean that the local church has no earthly leadership? In 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, we have listed the qualifications of elders, shepherds, or overseers of the local church. They are always mentioned in the plural and there is absolutely no indication that they received specialized training in institutions for this position. "And from Miletus he (Paul) sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church" (Acts 20:17). The New Testament local church had a plurality of elders, not one single man. These men served the church; they were not lords

of the church. They sought to lead, feed, and protect the sheep. They were to be obeyed as spiritual leaders ought to be, but they never took the position of a singular head over one congregation.

The questions then to be asked in looking for a New Testament church are: Is there one person with a title and salary directing the church or is there a plurality of elders leading and guiding the church? Is there an absence of leadership displaced by majority consensus without the guidance of spiritually exercised men?

No leadership is without Scriptural warranty just as is one-man leadership. Sometimes to avoid one extreme, a church may go to another extreme. "Obey them (plural) that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves; for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief; for that is unprofitable for you" (Heb. 13:17).

NT Church - God's Order of Headship Is Practiced

But I would have you know that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God....For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man (1 Cor. 11:3,8,9).

Herein is revealed a truth to which very few are willing to submit. We live in a day in which the equality of the sexes has become a testing ground for so-called "bigotry and narrow-mindedness." Never mind the fact that God has designed a special order since the day of creation, man has set his own standards and our culture refuses to accept that which is taught in the Word of God. We no longer believe in creation; therefore, it is no surprise that we reject God's order that was established at creation and ought to be exhibited in the church. The church is able to be a living testimony to our belief in God's creation by practicing the headship order established by the Creator..

God most certainly could have created the woman out of dust in the same manner and at the same time that He created the man. Instead He created the woman out of the rib of the man after He had created the man. "And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; and the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made He a woman, because she was taken out of man." (Gen. 2:21,22) Thus God began an order from which He has never deviated

during the history of mankind. The fall of man into sin at the garden of Eden, illustrated the consequences of not following this order. "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression" (1 Tim. 2:11-14).

A distinguishing mark of a New Testament church is that God's order of headship is practiced in the public gatherings of the church. This order is demonstrated in two ways: (1) The woman is silent; that is, she does not orally participate in the public gatherings of the church. "Let your women keep silence in the churches; for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home; for it is a shame for women to speak in the church." (1 Cor. 14:34,35) (2) The woman wears a head covering in the public gatherings of the church. She does this to demonstrate her submission to the man in God's order. "But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head; for that is even all one as if she were shaven. For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn; but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered. For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of the man." (1 Cor. 11:5-7)

The questions then to be asked in looking for a New Testament church are: Do the women remain in silence and the men willingly accept the role of leadership at the public gatherings? Do the women cover their heads

at public gatherings with a hat, veil, or appropriate head covering in order to show submission to the man?

Many women and wives would refuse to fellowship at a church where these truths are being practiced, yet the Word of God is very clear and explicit. It is in direct contradiction to our society and thus we try to avoid the truth by making allowances which are in direct contradiction to the Scriptures. Centuries ago, it was not as difficult for women to accept these truths because our culture was different. Today it stands as a real challenge to obedience. God will honor those men and women who seek to live by His precepts and those churches who seek to practice His order.

NT Church - Evangelism and Missionary Outreach Is Emphasized

But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Spirit is come upon you; and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth (Acts 1:8). And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ (Acts 5:42). Therefore they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word (Acts 8:4).

The early church began witnessing immediately after the coming of the Holy Spirit. It was only a brief time until their witnessing spread from Jerusalem to all Judea and into Samaria. Peter, John, Stephen, and Philip became leading examples of the faithful witness of the early church. Then Paul was raised up by God to begin the final clause of that commission which would for many centuries mark the endeavor of the church to witness to the uttermost part of the earth. The church at Antioch by the Holy Spirit sent forth Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-3). This began a church movement that has never ceased through the centuries and thousands of missionaries have been sent by local churches into every continent of this globe.

Evangelism, whether local or far away, has always been, until this century, an outreach ministry of the church. That is, they did not seek to bring the unsaved into the church, but they went out from the church to the unsaved. There was no need to make the activities of the church agreeable to the unsaved. Until they heard and believed the Gospel, the church held no attraction for

the unsaved; in fact, in many cases, they persecuted the church. After they were saved, they were brought into the fellowship of the church. But the church was never to cease in its efforts to reach out to the unsaved that were all around them. Once they lost this vision, they would begin a slow death. The church that ceases to have interest in outreach to the unsaved is a dying church. It loses its testimony to the world and becomes "ingrown" in its thinking. Its only growth is from families within and those from without are seldom added. This results in a complacent and smug attitude that soon leads to a lazy, cowardly and self-satisfied attitude. "Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ; that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel....For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His sake" (Phil. 1:27,29).

A distinguishing characteristic of a true new testament church is that emphasis is placed on reaching out to the neighborhood, the outlying communities, and the lands beyond. This means that individual members of the body should be active as witnesses to Christ in their own neighborhoods and at their own places of work. They should be witnessing to their relatives and using every opportunity to pass out tracts wherever they may go. Collectively, the local church ought to be going door to door with the Gospel in its immediate neighborhood. It should be holding "open air" meetings on the streets or "tent meetings" on open lots. It should be sending forth teams to local institutions in nursing homes, hospitals, prisons, and downtown missions. The local church

should be active in prayer for missionaries. There should be many who correspond with missionaries on a regular basis and a group of sisters who meet regularly to prepare packages for the missionaries and their family. The church budget ought to include gifts to missionaries. It is not enough to hold evangelistic meetings for a week once or twice a year and then neglect the personal and collective evangelism that should be taking place on a daily basis.

The questions then to be asked in looking for a New Testament church are: Is systematic instruction given to urge each one of the body to be active in evangelism? Is there a response to this urging? Does the church collectively engage in reaching out to the unsaved or is the major emphasis on trying to bring the unsaved to the church? Are there missionary prayer meetings and work groups that are well attended?

NT Church - There is liberty for the exercise of gifts by the Holy Spirit.

And He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11,12).

Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching; or he that exhorteth, on exhortation; he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence, he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness (Rom. 12:6-8).

From the verses above, and other passages in the New Testament, it becomes clear that the local church is the gathering wherein there ought to be opportunity for the local gifts of each believer to be exercised. It is not a gathering where one or two exercise all the gifts. There is a plurality of ministers, but not every man in the church ministers. There is a plurality of teachers, but not every man in the church teaches. "And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healing, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles? (1 Cor. 12:28,29). The Holy Spirit is given the opportunity to use those whom He has gifted for the edification of the body of Christ. All gifts are exercised for the growth of the body so that the body may grow together in Christ. Thus we learn from these

verses another dynamic character of the local church which enables it to be a gathering at which the power of the Holy Spirit is able to operate.

A distinguishing mark of a New Testament church is that a plurality of brethren, gifted by God, are given opportunity to exercise their gifts for the edification of the body. In many local churches today this characteristic has been so widely abused that it is practically impossible to recognize the multiplicity of gift in the church. One extreme is to place the responsibility in the hands of the pastor and appointed assistants. The other extreme is to allow teaching, preaching, and pastoring to be done by those who are obviously not gifted by God. It is this latter abuse through the years that led to the professional training and choosing of a selected pastor to carry out these responsibilities.

The questions then to be asked in looking for a New Testament church are: Does one man and his assistants control all of the ministry or is there opportunity for other gifted men to participate? Does every man minister and consequently the ministry is often not edifying and the body is not growing in Christ?

One would understand then that in a properly conducted New Testament church there needs to be a plurality of elders who watch for and promote the kind of ministry that will edify the church. They will not permit one man to dominate the ministry and they will not allow those to minister whose ministry obviously does not edify the saints.

"Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Spirit hath made you

overseers, to feed the church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28).

NT Church - The church is financed by free will offerings.

But this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity; for God loveth a cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:6,7).

This is another area of the church that is very important in meeting New Testament specifications, yet it is seldom addressed. It is a sensitive area because many churches have very large budgets. The construction and maintenance of large buildings have increased them. The larger the "membership" becomes, the larger the building becomes. With a large building comes increased activities. These activities add to the costs. With increased activities comes the need for more "staff personnel" who are often hired at stipulated salaries. As the budget increases, the need for gathering more funds becomes more demanding. This brings about various tactics for raising funds. A favorite one is to assess an annual amount to each "member" and to assign a numbered envelope to each one so that an annual accounting is available. This can become a subtle means of pressuring the "members" into increasing their annual giving. There are a host of other tactics that can be and are used. It seems clear that New Testament giving is to be purposed in the heart, without any man-made pressures or tactics. The giver is not to give out of a feeling of necessity which often causes him to give grudgingly.

A distinguishing mark of a New Testament church is that the church trusts the Lord to supply the needed funds for its support. Its budget is determined by the giving of the Lord's people rather than the budget making demands on the people to give. The modern techniques of raising money in the church contradict several premises laid down by the Word of God.

1. The amount given should be known only by the giver. "Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men....But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth; that thine alms may be in secret" (Mt. 6:2-4).

2. The amount given is not as important as the motive of the heart for giving. "And He (Jesus) looked up, and saw the rich men casting their gifts into the treasury. And he saw also a certain poor widow casting in thither two mites. And He said, Of a truth I say unto you, that this poor widow hath cast in more than they all; for all these have of their abundance cast in unto the offerings of God; but she of her penury hath cast in all the living that she had" (Lk. 21:1-4).

3. Only those who are saved and in the fellowship should be giving to the servants of the Lord and His service. "Because for His name's sake they went forth, taking nothing of the Gentiles" (3 Jn. 7).

The questions then to be asked in looking for a New Testament church are: Is the budget set first and then appeals made to the people or does the church determine its expenses by the amount given by those in its fellowship? Are their public appeals made for more

money and pressures used to get more money from the congregation? Is money received on a regular basis from those who are not in the fellowship? Are the amounts given publicized or made known to the congregation?

These matters are important for the New Testament warns us of the danger of improper attitudes toward money in the church. The first sin committed in the church revolved around money (the sin of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5). Salaries paid to staff members (a large part of church budgets in these days) can lead to varying acts of covetousness on the part of the staff members.

NT Church - Its gatherings are surrounded by prayer.

And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together.....(Acts 4:31). Peter therefore was kept in prison; but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.....Peter came to the house of Mary the mother of John, where many were gathered together praying (Acts 12:5,12). Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17).

If prayer indicates our dependency on God, the Father, as His children, and if the church is dependent on Christ, the Head of the Church, for her subsistence, then the church must be filled with those who want to pray. As a person cannot live physically without air, so the church cannot live without prayer. Every meeting should begin and end with prayer. There should be gatherings for the sole purpose of praying as we note was the case in the verses above from the book of Acts. Prayer brings us together and it lifts us up into the presence of our Living Head. It brings together all the pieces of armor that we need to fight the enemy. "Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit..... (Eph. 6:16-18). The early church prayed without ceasing and we must pray without ceasing. We must pray perseveringly if we are going to see the power of God working in our midst. Prayer is the least complicated mark and yet the most vital mark of a New Testament church.

A distinguishing characteristic of a true New Testament church is that its atmosphere is filled with prayer. In writing to the church at Rome, Paul tells them that they should be "continuing instant (steadfast) in prayer" (Rom. 12:12). How long, how long, will it take the church of our day to learn the vital importance of prayer! Our weakness is not traced to weak programs. Our weakness is traced to our failure to pray earnestly and continuously.

The questions then to be asked in looking for a New Testament Church are: Are there as many saints at the prayer meeting as there are on Sunday morning? Are those responsible for leadership given to prayer? Is prayer given a vital place in all the meetings of the church?

These are questions everyone of us should be asking and we should be deeply exercised to change the answers of each of these questions to "Yes" if it is presently "No."

NT Church - All true believers are welcomed into the fellowship.

For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 4:3,4).

The practice of reception in the local church has been the source of many divisions within the body of Christ. Throughout the history of the church, it has often been necessary for true believers to leave the established church of their area because of doctrinal error or the failure to judge immorality. On the other hand, many local churches have split over issues that have been broadened beyond the intentions of the Scriptures. One of the basic contentions through the centuries has been the reception of believers into the fellowship of the church. Some local churches have no reception policy, putting full responsibility upon the individual. This is one extreme which eventually results in the local church being filled with unbelievers. Other local churches have very strict reception policies which result in the local church becoming a sectarian body that excludes true members of the true universal church of Christ. This is an extreme in the other direction. The verses above would indicate that every believer in Christ is a part of His body and our fellowship ought to be opened to all those who belong to His body. Obviously, we cannot read the hearts; therefore we must accept the outward

confession. This outward confession must be questioned if the individual is in error regarding the person and work of Christ. The daily walk also must be considered as evidence of the confession. If the individual is practicing immorality in his life, his confession of Christ is brought into question.

A distinguishing mark of a New Testament church is that it receives all believers into the fellowship unless there are outward indications in word or deed that their confession of Christ is doubtful. Being in fellowship in a local church is a term that is often not understood today. The term is used for the first time in the New Testament in Acts 2:42: "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers". The word itself implies "sharing in common". In many local churches one maintains his "membership" (a term not recognized in the New Testament) by contributing financially to the church and attending occasionally or spasmodically the "services" of the church. This kind of "attendance" only at the local church can hardly be construed as fellowship in the New Testament usage of the word. Fellowship not only involves sharing time and concern with one another, but also loving one another. "If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and His love is perfected in us" (1 Jn. 4:12). We want to share our lives with those we love. True fellowship also involves our behavior and walk. It implies that we have willingly put ourselves under the discipline of the local church. "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves; for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account....." (Heb. 13:17).

The questions then to be asked in looking for a New Testament church are: Does the church have a reception policy or does it permit anyone to be in fellowship without any inquiry or visitation? Has the church instituted requirements that forbid true believers in Christ from the fellowship of the church? In answering the second question, it is necessary to understand that certain limitations by the elders may be practiced through years of practical experience. The interpretation of what constitutes a "true believer" according to Scripture may vary to some degree from place to place. For example, baptism does not make one a true believer nor does the lack of baptism prevent one from being a true believer. But the question might be raised, why would a true believer not want to be baptized after he is taught the truth of baptism? Another example might be, if a "believer" keeps jumping from one church to another, would it be wrong to investigate the cause for his frequent changes? Thus it becomes important to know that the local church has a reception policy and to know that the practices of that policy do not exclude the reception of true believers into fellowship.

NT Church - The church is not ashamed to bear the reproach of Christ.

For ye, brethren, became followers of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus; for ye also have suffered like things of your own countrymen, even as they have of the Jews (1 Thess. 2:14).

It is not the name of a local church that distinguishes it as being a pattern of the New Testament. The church may have a very unique title such as "The New Testament Church of Jesus Christ" and yet it may not follow the pattern displayed in the New Testament. It is not even the creed formulated by a local church that gives it the distinction of being patterned after the New Testament. The creed, as far as it goes, may be very true to New Testament theology, but yet the church may be far from meeting in a New Testament manner. Obviously, no church would meet New Testament credentials if it did not teach the basic truths of the New Testament; however, it is not just the doctrine taught, but it is also the practices of the church that distinguish it as being New Testament in character.

In the verse above we are told that the Thessalonian believers became followers of the churches of God in Judea. These were the first churches of the New Testament. From this same verse we learn one of the distinguishing characteristics of the early New Testament churches.

A distinguishing mark of a New Testament church is that it its members suffer many things from their own

country men. It is not a popular gathering. The people of the community do not enjoy being with the members of the church. Those who meet together in a New Testament church understand that they will suffer ridicule, shame, and mockery. In some communities they understand that they may suffer physical harm, loss of property, or loss of jobs. Obviously, the degree of suffering varies under the provisions of the existing law in each community. NEVER in the New Testament is the local church portrayed as a gathering which is openly and warmly attended by the majority of the community. "And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria...." (Acts 8:1).

Consequently, a church that is truly practicing New Testament principles will not seek to be popular in the community. It will not be devising ways and means to make itself acceptable to the community so that people will feel comfortable to walk in off the streets. Certainly it will not seek persecution, but it will expect it. Those who come together will do so because they are willing to pay a price in order to meet and hear the Word of God proclaimed in truth. They are there because they hunger for true fellowship and the truth of God. In other words, God motivates their coming together. They are not brought in by the fanciful techniques employed by the attractive designs of modern society.

The questions then to be asked in looking for a New Testament church are: Does the local church seek to preach and teach the Word of God without any limitations or compromise? Does the local church put

more emphasis on being acceptable to the community than on being faithful to God's Word?

The answer to these questions are vital. These questions manifest a struggle that takes place in every congregation of God's people. We want to be liked and accepted. We want to be like other churches. We are often offended when the church is too different. We use other excuses for not meeting with them, but this is often the underlying cause.

"Let us go forth therefore unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach" (Heb. 13:13).

NT Church - The teaching is based on the truth of God's Word.

For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ; till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ; that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into Him in all things, which is the head, even Christ (Eph. 4:12-15).

The emphasis of teaching in the church ought not to be for entertainment nor should it even be the preaching of the Gospel to the unsaved. The emphasis needs to be on the edifying or building up of the body of believers. Twenty or thirty minute sermons once or twice a week, full of entertaining illustrations or stories, are not enough to build up the saints. The teaching ought to be Scriptural, systematic, clear, and all inclusive (not avoiding certain truths because they may cause offense). This is an issue that cannot be passed over lightly because it is an integral mark of a New Testament Church.

A distinguishing mark of a New Testament church is that the public teaching is based on the truth of God's Word and time is provided to teach it adequately so that the assembly grows strong in Christ. Entertaining messages and/or brief messages may have a certain appeal to the carnal Christian or to the unbeliever, but adequate

spiritual food is needed for the growing Christian. It is important to examine the contents of the messages that are being proclaimed week by week, not in a critical fashion, but to determine if the saints are really being fed adequately. The Word of God needs to be the diet for all Christians, whether they are mature or young in the faith. We are instructed, "As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby" (1 Pet. 2:2).

The questions then to be asked in looking for a New Testament Church are: Is the word of God preached clearly and systematically? Does the preacher use an opened Bible as he speaks? Does the preacher receive adequate time to teach the Word? Are the messages entertaining, but lacking in solid Bible teaching? Are some taking a turn at preaching who are not adequately preparing their messages or do not really have the gift of teaching?

These are serious questions which need serious answers. The body will not grow if the Word of God is inadequately taught. There is a vast difference between an audience that is being entertained and a body of Christians who are being fed so that they might grow and produce fruit for God. In these days when many are being tossed about by false doctrines of every kind, solid Bible teaching is a desperate need in any New Testament church.

NT Church - Open sin within the congregation is judged.

Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are (1Cor. 3:16,17). But now I have written unto you not to keep company with any man that is called a brother, who is a fornicator (guilty of immorality), or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler (slanderer), or a drunkard, or an extortioner (a swindler); not even to eat with such a person (1 Cor. 5:11).

We live in a society that has become very tolerant of sin. It is considered loving to tolerate sin in others in order to win their friendship. This outlook has twisted the attitude of many local churches toward sin. We have forgotten that the local body of believers is the temple of God and it must be kept holy. If we tolerate sin in the church, then the believers cannot be a light to a dark world. If we tolerate sin within our own body, it will soon spread to other members of the body. This applies to acts of immorality as well as false teaching. "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump". In 1 Cor. 5:6 this applies to immorality that is not judged; in Gal. 5:9 it applies to false doctrine that is not repudiated. A local church will not survive very long as an effective testimony unless evil is judged.

A distinguishing mark of a New Testament church is that immorality and false doctrine are brought to light and judged without hesitation or delay. The church at Corinth was actually proud of its toleration of evil. The

Apostle wrote to them: "And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you (1 Cor. 5:2). He left no doubt as to what he would have done were he present with them. "For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed" (1 Cor. 5:3). It is not possible to be an effective witness in your neighborhood if you are affiliated with a church whose reputation is marred by evil in its midst. It is also almost inevitable that your children will be influenced by this course of moderation toward evil behavior. In fact, given time, it is a certainty that in your own personal life you will begin to take the easy road of toleration. Confrontation is always harder than toleration.

The questions then to be asked in looking for a New Testament Church are: Does the congregation express shock and concern when one of its own falls into open sin? When open sin becomes known to those in the fellowship, do they make it known to the elders or do they seek to hide it and tolerate it? Do the elders take decisive action when they learn about open sin in the congregation?

The answer to these questions are vital in these last days. Without holiness in the church, we soon take on the characteristics of professed Christendom in the last days which is described as "having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof" (2 Tim. 3:5). We become like the church at Sardis of which it was written: "I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead" (Rev. 3:1).