

THE BIBLICAL TEST OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

BY ELDER BOBBY POE

The Scripture is the only infallible rule. If anything does not meet this test, it is to be rejected. Uninspired history, although valuable, is written by fallible men and cannot be trusted for the foundation of the Christian's faith.

There are at least three tests to measure whether a religious assembly can be called a New Testament church.

1. Does the church stand under and support the truth as delivered by Christ and the apostles? Is she committed to a defense of that truth? Is she committed to a spread of the truth?
2. Was the church established with members who had been disciplined by a New Testament church of Jesus Christ which is founded upon Christ and the teachings of Christ and the apostles?
3. Does the church keep the ordinances which were delivered to the New Testament church by Jesus Christ and confirmed to the apostles?

1.

Does the church stand under and support the truth as delivered by Christ and the apostles? Is she committed to a defense of that truth? Is she committed to a spread of the truth?

The New Testament church of Jesus Christ has been made the depository of truth. The teachings of Jesus Christ and the apostles have been entrusted to the church for safe keeping. This is seen in 1 Timothy 3:15: "But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." It is also seen in John 17: 14-21:

I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth: the word is truth. As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth. Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.

It is true that God has preserved the Old and New Testaments, but many have the inspired record in hand who have perverted its teachings and will not defend its truths. In fact, many who have the inspired Scriptures hate its truth and therefore pervert them. The New Testament church of Jesus Christ had been empowered by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, she is committed to the trust which has been given to her to keep the truth revealed in the Holy Scriptures pure. As is said in John 16:13: "Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come." It is also written in Acts 2:33: "Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear."

As long as the Holy Spirit abides in a church, there is every reason to hope that the church will continue in her support of the truth. If error, either in practice or in doctrine enters into the church and the Holy Spirit abides in her, there is hope

that the church will purge herself of the error. If she does not purge herself, the Holy Spirit or candlestick will be withdrawn and even though she continues for years and years to exist, she will cease to be a New Testament church of Jesus Christ. The Lord warned a church in Revelation 2:5: "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent." He warned another church in Revelation 3:16: "So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth."

Not only will the New Testament church of Jesus Christ believe the truth, she will also defend the truth with her blood. It is written in Jude 1:3: "It was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints." One of the most sobering things to note in reading church history is the unwavering dedication of the church to stand firm upon truth and not to be swayed from it, even though that meant the shedding of blood. The ordinances of the church, baptism and the Lord's Supper, have been the cause of more blood-shed, I suppose, than any other thing. The church would not accept unscriptural baptism from non-churches and refused to corrupt the Lord's Supper by allowing unbaptized people to partake of it.

It has been, and it is still today, God's revealed will that the "born again" ones should be set free from ignorance, false religion, traditions of men, fables, foolish and unlearned questions which gender strife. Truth will set them free! It is recorded in John 8:31,32: "Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." The truth has been given to the New Testament church of Jesus Christ which is charged with the responsibility of carrying the truth into all the world. The gospel of Jesus Christ does not give life, but it does bring spiritual life to light where it can be seen, and it does set God's children free. This is made plain in 2 Timothy 1:10 "But is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel..."

When God made the New Testament church of Jesus Christ the depository of truth, He did not purpose for her to keep it hidden nor to limit its dispersion. His revealed purpose was for the truth to be spread far and near. The church fulfills this trust given to her by God, when she keeps the truth in its purity, is willing to defend it with her life, and spreads it abroad.

2.

Was the church established with members who had been disciplined by a New Testament church of Jesus Christ which is founded upon Christ and the teachings of Christ and the apostles?

This is a most vital point! The inspired history of scripture reveals God's method of spreading the gospel and establishing churches. Does the inspired scripture teach that the New Testament church of Jesus Christ is spread by the self-taught method or by the discipleship method?

To set the stage for what I want to write, let me state what I believe to be a false view of how the New Testament church of Jesus Christ is spread. Some have advanced the idea that if God wanted a church in a heathen country that in His providence He would place a Bible into the hands of a man whom He would call to preach. The Holy Spirit would teach him the truth of scripture and he would begin to preach, gather a group of disciples, and start a New Testament church of Jesus Christ. Others hold to the view that God may start New Testament churches by calling someone in a false religious institution to preach, and teaching him the truth. He then gathers disciples out of the false religion and starts a New Testament church. Both of these views are in error according to God's revealed word. The inspired scriptures reveal that the ones who go out to spread the gospel and start New Testament churches of Jesus Christ are first established by an existing New Testament church. After Jesus had taught His disciples for a long time, He sent them forth to search out the lost sheep of the house of Israel. You will note He did not send them until they were first taught.

He did not send them alone, but two by two. (Matt. 10:1-42). In Matt. 28:18-20 Jesus commands His church to go into all nations. "And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world." After Jesus' resurrection, He again commands His church to spread the gospel. (John 20:21) "Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you." (Acts 1:8) "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."

When the church began to carry out this commission to spread the truth and establish New Testament churches of Jesus Christ, the inspired history of scripture reveals to us that the ones who did the work were those who had already been disciplined by the New Testament church of Jesus Christ. There isn't one case in the book of Acts where a church was started by someone who was self-taught.

The Ethiopian eunuch had some of the Old Testament scriptures, but God sent Philip to teach and baptize him. (Acts 8:26-39). When Cornelius began to seek God, God sent Peter to teach him and his household and to baptize them. (Acts 10:1-48). Even the apostle Paul was sent to Damascus to Ananias who was already a baptized disciple. (Acts 9: 10, 18). There were a number of disciples at Damascus with whom Paul spent certain days. (Acts 9:19). The church at Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas out to preach the gospel. They went, they preached, they gathered believers, and they established churches. (Acts 13:1—14:28). The 13th and 14th chapters of Acts shows us the pattern for spreading the gospel and establishing churches. The Jerusalem church did evangelize, but their main focus seemed to be toward the Jews. The church at Antioch became the first center to spread the gospel to the Gentiles, and thereby establish New Testament churches of Jesus Christ. Since Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, and the Jews had rejected the gospel, the book of Acts turns its attention to the work of Paul among the Gentiles. One thing stands out very clearly in Acts: There was not one New Testament church of Jesus Christ started by a self-taught man from heathendom or from a false religion. Every church was started by disciples who had themselves been disciplined by a New Testament church of Jesus Christ.

In studying the book of Acts it is most evident that when disciples of Christ left the church in Jerusalem to spread the gospel they did not find one synagogue which had taught themselves the gospel according to Christ and the apostles and had started a New Testament church of Jesus Christ in their synagogue. Yet, in the synagogues they had the Old Testament scriptures. Many of them had been to Jerusalem to attend the prescribed worship according to the Old Testament. Some of them had been present at these feasts in Jerusalem when Jesus had been present. There had been much discussion on these occasions as to whether Jesus was the Messiah. Yet, the Holy Spirit did not disciple these Jews apart from the ministry of already established churches. If God's purpose was to start New Testament churches of Jesus Christ independently of already established churches, it seems this would have been a great time for Him to reveal His mind. However, He did not do so. Every new church we read of in the book of Acts was started by disciples from previously established churches. This pattern is confirmed by Paul to Timothy. In 2 Timothy 2:2, he said, "And 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."

The question sometimes is asked: Has there ever been recorded in uninspired church history where a church started which came out of a false religious institution? From the uninspired history which has come down to us, there seem to have been such cases. However, since such history is not inspired of God we cannot leave the inspired record given in the Holy Scriptures and take uninspired history for our pattern. Every practice and every doctrine must be measured by the Holy Scriptures. If it will not fit, it must be discarded. It matters not how much God used a man, nor how great he became. When his teaching or practice does not conform to the Holy Scriptures, we must not hold to his error.

For the New Testament church of Jesus Christ to recognize as true churches those who were started by disciples from a false religion is a dangerous venture. If those who came out of false religions will not come into the New Testament church of Jesus Christ they are to be suspect. Why would they not do so? Is there something they still hold which is unscriptural? Does their pride keep them from the lowly assembly of believers?

3.

Does the church keep the ordinances which were delivered to the New Testament church by Jesus Christ and confirmed by the apostles?

“The two practices of baptism and the Lord’s Supper or communion were called ordinances of the church, and were strictly observed.” (Hassell’s History, p. 283).

The New Testament church of Jesus Christ has been given authority to keep these ordinances and has jealously guarded this trust by refusing to accept baptism not administered by authority of the church. She has also refused to allow those not properly baptized to partake of the Lord’s Supper. Because of this position, the church has been called “narrow minded, hard-hearted, and sectarian.” The church has lost more members by their willingness to lay their lives down for this one issue than for all others. This issue is the watershed of them all! For many, church authority to baptize is a yoke they are unwilling to wear. The problem in our day of so many religious institutions calling themselves New Testament churches of Jesus Christ is renegade ministers who have started their own thing.

When Luther, the great reformer, broke with the Catholic Church, he seemed to hold the Baptists in high esteem. The Baptists rejoiced because they were now able to come out of hiding. There was limited fellowship between the reformer and the Baptists. When the Baptists began to flourish, he took up the old ways of the Catholics and began to persecute them.

The success and number of the Baptists ‘exasperated him to the last degree,’ and he became their enemy, notwithstanding all he had said in favor of dipping (while he contended with Catholics on the sufficiency of God’s word) but now he persecuted them under the name of re-dippers, re-baptizers or anabaptists. One thing troubled Luther, and he took no pains to conceal it, and that was a jealousy lest any competitor should step forward, and put in execution that plan of reformation which he had laid out: this was his foible: he fell out with Carlstadt, he disliked Calvin, he found fault with Zuinglius, who were all supported by great patrons, and he was angry beyond measure with the Baptists. (*Orchard’s Church History*-Page 345)

If those who came out of a corrupt religion claim their baptism is valid, by whose authority is it valid? It must be usurped authority because Christ only gave the authority to baptize to New Testament churches of Jesus Christ. In every instance in the book of Acts, the person who desired baptism was baptized by a representative of an already established New Testament church of Jesus Christ. When Jesus gave the commission in Matthew 28:19 to the church to preach the gospel in all the world, He also gave them the authority to baptize.