

# WHAT IS A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH?

James W. Garrett

## ASSUMPTIONS

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Throughout the centuries, various groups and movements have declared themselves to be or in the process of becoming New Testament churches.

- The Anabaptist movement, which began in the Sixteenth Century, is the oldest surviving movement dedicated to the reproduction of the New Testament Church. This movement has as its heirs today, Mennonites, Amish, Hutterites, Mennonite Brethren, Brethren in Christ, and other lesser known groups.
- The Campbell-Stone Restoration Movement is the best known American movement that endeavors to reproduce the New Testament Church. This movement's heirs are the Churches of Christ, the Christian Churches, and the Disciples of Christ.
- Watchman Nee's movement has attracted world-wide attention in this century.
- One also cannot fail to note how many Baptist Churches have on their building signs, *A New Testament Church*.

Although these and other similar movements have certain things in common (for instance, all are *believer's churches* - those that require personal faith as a pre-requisite for baptism), there are sharp differences between them. What is a New Testament church? In this study, we list several characteristics of the church described in the New Testament that may or may not be found in churches today. However, if a church is a New Testament church, all of these characteristics will be present.

## ASSUMPTIONS

This study is based on some foundational assumptions. Here are seven:

1. The Holy Spirit led the First Century Church from Pentecostal infancy, through a Jerusalem evolutionary period, into an established church form, prior to the close of the First Century.
2. The saga of this development and its culmination is recorded, accurately, in *Acts* and the Epistles.
3. The Church, influenced by various cultures, began to depart from New Testament patterns in the Second and Third Centuries.
4. The Holy Spirit caused to be recorded in Scripture those facets of the Church that are important for us to perpetuate.
5. By using a responsible scientific-historical hermeneutic, these abiding facets (as contrasted with cultural facets) of the Church can be discovered.
6. *The Acts of the Apostles* is our basic text, with the Epistles serving as a commentary upon the historical record.
7. The patterns and models so discovered are the authority for church structure, church life, and doctrine.

In the light of these assumptions, we now list the characteristics that mark a church as being a New Testament Church.

## I. A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH EMPHASIZES THE LORDSHIP OF

## JESUS CHRIST.

The word normally used in the New Testament for the Master/servant relationship existing between God and the believer is *doulos*, meaning, "slave." This word is used 125 times in the New Testament and in most of those instances the term refers directly or indirectly to Christians.<sup>1</sup>

The word, *despotes*, (one who own's slaves), is used for Jesus four times<sup>2</sup> and once for God the Father.<sup>3</sup> New Testament Christians considered themselves to be slaves or bond-servants, owned by God. Paul reminded the Corinthians, *You have been bought with a price, you are not your own.* (I Cor. 5:19)

Realizing the **absolute lordship** of Jesus, the New Testament Church seeks to be **absolutely obedient** to the will of Christ. In response to this truth, individual members seek to live holy lives that reflect the character and will of their Lord<sup>4</sup>

In making decisions, New Testament church leadership does not ask, *What do the people want*, nor *What do we want*, but the question asked is *What is the will of God?* The guidance of the Holy Spirit is considered to be necessary. Although *sanctified judgment* has its place,<sup>5</sup> more than this is sought and assumed to be reality in the decisions made by a body of prayerful elders. Along with the Jerusalem leaders, elders of New Testament churches describe their decisions, *it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...*<sup>6</sup>

## II. A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH IS AN ORGANISM, NOT AN ORGANIZATION.

In an *organization*, separate entities are brought together into some order so that certain things can be accomplished. These separate entities often have no relationship beyond the organization or activity that brings them together.

An *organism*, on the other hand, is a living being composed of interdependent organs. They are bound together and depend on one another for continued life.

- Paul pictures the church as an organism.<sup>7</sup> Church life in the New Testament is called, *koinonia*, which we translate as *fellowship*. *Koinonia* is an assumed *sine qua non* in the New Testament Church. *Koinonia* may be illustrated by the relationship between the heart and the lungs. The lungs cannot live without blood pumped from the heart. The heart, on the other hand, cannot live unless the lungs oxygenate the blood. Neither the heart nor the lungs can live without the other. This giving and receiving of life is *koinonia*. This is New Testament church life. I John 1:7 assures us, *If we walk in the light, as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship, one with another.*
- This description of church life is in sharp contrast to the life of many traditional churches, in which members meet their ritual obligations and pursue their separate lives. There is a covenantal mentality that exists between members of a New Testament Church.
- The Church in Jerusalem expressed *koinonia* by having all possessions in common (Acts 2:44-47). This is the only New Testament Church that had a *communal*

*existence*. Their communal life style was the result of their situation. Thousands of people from other lands, in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost, became Christians in a matter of days. This large group had neither jobs nor housing in Jerusalem. So, the Jerusalem Christians sold their real estate, emptied bank accounts, etc., and provided a common treasury from which a daily stipend was provided. They had a unique situation and met it in a unique way. Even though other New Testament Churches did not have a communal life style, they still viewed the Christian life as a shared life; the strong and prosperous made their resources available to the weak and needy.

- *Koinonia* is the fruit of love. One of the earliest surviving documents of the Church, written in 96 A.D., describes heroic actions that express love-based *koinonia*.

*We know that many among ourselves have delivered themselves to bondage, that they might ransom others. Many have sold themselves to slavery, and receiving the price paid for themselves have fed others.*<sup>8</sup>

- In Romans 12, Paul describes the Church as being a body of interdependent organs. He concludes his description with this exhortation, *Rejoice with those who rejoice; and weep with those who weep.*<sup>9</sup> This is the stuff of which New Testament church life is made. It is a *shared life*.

### III. A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH HAS A NEW TESTAMENT LEADERSHIP PATTERN.

Several distinctives define the New Testament view of church leadership.

- The first distinctive is the **principle of plurality**. As we have stated in an earlier paper,

*Teams rather than solo ministries dominate the New Testament record. There are exceptions, of course. Exceptions would include, among others, Philip (Acts 8), Peter's tour of Judaea (Acts 9:32ff), Apollos (Acts 18:27), and Paul's time in Athens and Corinth (Acts 17:15-18:4).*<sup>10</sup>

Even though, as noted above, there are exceptions to the team pattern in apostolic and trans-local ministry, teams are the normal pattern. Local church leadership always is described in the New Testament as plural; there are no exceptions. Churches always were led by a council of *elders* rather than a lone *pastor*.<sup>11</sup>

- Another characteristic of New Testament church leadership is the **non-professional** view of ministry.

The professional view holds that certain ones are *ordained clergy* and these are the professionals. Certain functions can only be performed by the professionals (preaching, teaching, baptism, etc.), and any professional is qualified to fulfill the functions. Therefore, professionals are interchangeable. If the professional clergyman leaves the church, another one is brought in to function in his place. Professionals can be exchanged the same way that the spark plugs are changed in an automobile. The

professional's worth and identity are tied to his function.

The New Testament has another view of leadership. It is not what one is in the local church, but who he is. The New Testament church is an organism that knows nothing of organ transplants.

- The New Testament church makes no distinction between **clergy** and **laity**. In one sense, all are clergy, since all of us are a part of a Royal Priesthood.<sup>12</sup> In another sense, all are laity. This does not negate the validity of ordination, in which a person, at the direction of the Holy Spirit, is given a life-time responsibility for a particular work.<sup>13</sup>
- New Testament leaders make decisions by **consensus**, rather than by popular vote. The assumption is that when men with submissive hearts approach God in prayer to guide them in decisions, they will find unity of heart in those decisions. This is in contrast to voting, in which a majority wins and a minority loses.

#### IV. A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH RECOGNIZES TRANS-LOCAL MINISTRIES.

In addition to the local eldership, there are ministries that God raises up which move from church to church, often serving under the authority of the local elders.

- Ephesians 4:11 mentions three trans-local ministries: apostles, prophets, and evangelists. A number of examples of these ministries are found in *Acts* (Paul, Barnabas, Silas, Apollos, John Mark, Agabus, etc.). These ministries help the local church to understand God's purposes, and assist in equipping churches for ministry.<sup>14</sup>
- The churches described in *Acts* and the epistles seemed to have related to one another through an apostle. It was the relationship each of them had with the apostle that gave them a relationship with one another.

#### V. NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH LIFE INCLUDES THE UNSEEN SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS.

**The Holy Spirit, given by God to each believer,<sup>15</sup> is an acknowledged participant in the life of a New Testament Church.** This is the most distinctive characteristic of the New Testament Church. Here are some of the essential elements of the Holy Spirit's involvement in the Church:

1. The Church was initiated through the baptism in the Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup>
2. The reception of the Samaritans, the first non-Jews (half-breed Jews) received into the Church, was credentialed by the reception of the Holy Spirit.<sup>17</sup>
3. The reception of the first Gentiles was credentialed by the baptism in the Holy Spirit.<sup>18</sup>
4. The reception of the Holy Spirit is promised to all who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and are baptized in water.<sup>19</sup>
5. The Gift of the Holy Spirit is a guarantee of one's salvation.<sup>20</sup>

6. The Holy Spirit empowers and guides believers.<sup>21</sup>
7. Through the Holy Spirit, each believer is endowed with spiritual gifts to be used in ministry.<sup>22</sup>
8. The New Testament Church realizes that it is a *Temple of the Holy Spirit*.<sup>23</sup>
9. Individual believers also are a manifestation of the *Temple of the Holy Spirit*.<sup>24</sup>
10. Thus, the New Testament Church is the Body through which the Holy Spirit accomplishes the Will of God in the world, even as a man's physical body is the means whereby his human spirit accomplishes his human will in the world.
11. One important ministry of the Holy Spirit to the Church is prophecy. Prophecy was important under the Mosaic Covenant and prophecy is an important of the life of the church under the New Covenant. The Hebrew and Greek terms translated, *prophecy*, mean *to speak forth*. Thus, prophecy is the speaking forth of something that the Holy Spirit has given to someone. Sometimes prophecy is predictive, but usually it is not. Paul wrote that the purposes of prophecy in the New Covenant is for *edification, exhortation, and consolation*.<sup>25</sup> Prophecy is for the edification (building up) of the Church.<sup>26</sup>
12. In our present generation, much attention has been given to *speaking in tongues*. Paul clearly endorsed speaking in tongues, but gave guidelines for this activity in the church service. Three chapters of I Corinthians, Chapters, 12, 13, and 14, have this as their central topic. Even as he urged the Corinthians to desire manifestation of prophecy in their services, he instructed them to not forbid speaking in tongues, within the guidelines given.<sup>27</sup>
13. Another activity of the Holy Spirit was the production of the Scriptures.<sup>28</sup>

**Miracles and providential events are an expected part of the New Testament Church experience.** Miracles are events that cannot be explained by anything other than the intervention of God. Providential acts, on the other hand, are unusual natural phenomena which God uses to achieve his purposes.

- Picture, for example, an automobile stalled at a railroad crossing in the path of an oncoming locomotive. The driver calls out, *God, help me!* Suddenly, a strong gust of wind blows the automobile through the crossing and the collision is avoided. That would be a providential act. If, however, the driver of the car called out, *God help me*, and the locomotive suddenly took flight, flew over the automobile, came down on the other side and proceeded on its way as if nothing had happened, that would be a miracle.
- In a providential act, an unbeliever could explain away the event as an unusual *coincidence*. In a miracle, no such explanation is possible. Of course, the person of faith sees the hand of God both in providence and miracle. Most of the interventions of God in our lives will be providential, rather than miraculous. Both providence and miracle are expected experiences in the life of the New Testament church.

**New Testament Churches understand that there is an evil hierarchy of demonic forces, led by Satan, seeking to discourage and defeat the Church.**

*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the*

*spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.*<sup>29</sup>

- The warfare between these evil forces and the Church is relentless. Individual believers must resist these evil forces.

*Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world.*<sup>30</sup>

- These forces use every means, including man's susceptibility to temptation, in their attack. (James 1:12-15).

*But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then, when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.*<sup>31</sup>

- Paul describes the armor that God has given to His church and its members to be a protection against Satanic attack.

*Finally be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil... Therefore, take up the full armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the Gospel of Peace; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God. With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints.*<sup>32</sup>

**The New Testament Church experiences the ministry of angels.**<sup>33</sup> The ministry of angels usually is experienced by the Church and individual Christians, without the recipients of the ministry being aware of it. However, there are times when such contact with angels is conscious. There are several examples recorded in *Acts*.

1. Angels spoke to the disciples at the ascension of Christ (1:12)
2. An angel released the apostles from prison and led them forth and exhorted them to zealous ministry (5:19-20)
3. An angel instructed Philip to leave Samaria and go to the desert road where he encountered the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26)
4. An angel instructed Cornelius to send for Paul (10:3-7)
5. An angel freed Peter from prison and led him forth (12:5-11)
6. An angel struck Herod and he was eaten by worms and died (12:23)
7. An angel encouraged Paul, during a storm at sea (27:23-24)

**The Biblical teaching that heaven and hell are the known destinies of mankind is accepted by the New Testament Church.** There are no alternatives.<sup>34</sup>

The spiritual dimension is as much of a part of the New Testament Church as is the physical existence of those things acknowledged by all humanity.

## **VI. THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH IS A PRAYING CHURCH**

**A reading of *Acts* reveals the fact that the Church in the New Testament lived a life of prayer.**

1. The Church was born in a prayer meeting.(Acts 1:14 - 2:4)
2. The Church was continually devoted to prayer. (Acts 2:42)
3. On every occasion of triumph or concern, the Church prayed.
  - When Peter & John were released from prison (Acts 4:23ff)
  - When the first non-Jewish converts were received into the Church and their acceptability to God was credentialed by the reception of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:15-17)
  - Upon Peter's imprisonment, the Church began an uninterrupted prayer meeting until his release (Acts 12:5-12)
  - Upon the bidding farewell to traveling trans-local ministries (Acts 20:36; 21:5)
4. The inception of new ministries always was accompanied by prayer.
  - When the first *deacons* were chosen (Acts 6:1-6)
  - When the first apostolic team was launched (Acts 13:1ff)
  - When the first elders were installed in Gentile churches (Acts 14:23)
5. The Apostles considered prayer and teaching to be their main priorities. (Acts 6:2-4)
6. Prayer was the means whereby healing was ministered. (Acts 9:40; 28:8; see James 5:13ff)
7. Daily prayer was the practice of apostolic teams. (Acts 10:9; 16:16; 16:25)

**The Epistles reveal even further examples.**

A New Testament Church considers prayer to be like breathing - life cannot be experienced without it. Through prayer things are changed and the Church hears from God.

## **VII. THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH CONSIDERS SCRIPTURE TO BE GOD'S OBJECTIVE REVELATION OF HIMSELF, HIS WILL, AND SPIRITUAL TRUTH.**

**Scripture is the standard by which all teaching must be tested.** The Holy Spirit has given Scripture to the Church so that the things that need to be known about God can be known.

- David wrote, *The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork.*<sup>35</sup>
- Paul echoed this sentiment in his letter to the Romans, *For the invisible things of him,*

*from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead;*<sup>36</sup>

- Even though the creative greatness and power of God can be seen in the creation, the Character of God and His Will cannot be deduced by such observation. This is why religions all over the world and through all ages have had different concepts of God. The various pagan religions have worshipped God in many forms, because they saw evidence of Him but did not know Him. The Bible, therefore, is given as the objective revelation of God. Through Scripture we learn about God's Character - the character of love and righteousness - as well as His Divine Will.

**Thus, Scripture, for the New Testament church, is the only rule of faith and practice.**

- What Scripture teaches clearly, must be taught and be obeyed.
- When Scripture is silent on a subject, or when it is not clear, freedom of opinion and interpretation must be allowed, as long as nothing is taught or practiced that contradicts other Scriptures.<sup>37</sup>

## **VIII. THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH HAS AN UNDERSTANDING OF MISSION**

*Jesus said, All authority is given unto me, in heaven and on earth, go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I command you, and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.*<sup>38</sup>

This is the mission of the Church - to make disciples of all races, nations, and cultures. Everything that the Church does should be in response to this commission.

## **IX. THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH ACCEPTS THE NEW TESTAMENT PATTERN OF SALVATION.**

**The normal "pattern of salvation" in the New Testament is as follows:**<sup>39</sup>

1. A person hears the Gospel
2. He believes
3. He repents
4. He confesses faith in Christ
5. He is immersed in water
6. He receives the Holy Spirit
7. He remains faithful unto death.

**This is the normal pattern. We must follow it, but God is free to violate this pattern in any way that He sees fit.**<sup>40</sup> It is foolish to argue at what point a person's sins are removed (at point 1., point 2., point 3., etc.). This is God's business. Our responsibility is to adhere to the pattern displayed in the New Testament.

**Thus, the New Testament Church is a *believers church*.** One cannot be saved until he is old enough to believe. For that matter, it is generally held that one does not need to be saved until he is old enough to believe - the time that he reaches what is known as *the age*

*of accountability.* That age will vary from person to person.

**Baptism is by immersion, following a profession of faith.**

1. When Philip presented the Gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch the eunuch asked Philip if there were any reason why Philip could not baptize him. Philip answered, *If you believe with all of your heart, you may.* The eunuch replied, *I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.* Philip immediately baptized him.<sup>41</sup>
2. The Greek term, *baptidzo*, (which we Anglicize into the term, *baptize*) means *to immerse*. Immersion was the practice of the New Testament Church. Baptism is an acting out of the death of the old man and the resurrection or birth of a new man.<sup>42</sup> Because of the symbolism and the significance of the act of immersion, this is one of the most important moments in the life of the new believer.

**X. THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH LOOKS FORWARD TO THE RETURN OF CHRIST AND THE RESURRECTION FROM THE DEAD.**

- A. Every New Testament Christian cherishes the hope of the return of Our Lord and the resurrection of the dead.<sup>43</sup> Church life reflects this hope.
  - The resurrection of the dead cannot be explained. Paul called it a *mystery*.<sup>44</sup>
  - Christians in the First Century thought that Jesus would return in their lifetime. When He did not do so, they thought that their brothers and sisters who had died had missed the return of Jesus. I Corinthians 15 and I Thessalonians 4:13ff were written to address their concern.
- B. A church that is not yearning for the return of the Lord and lacks a passionate desire to see Him face to face, is not a New Testament Church.

**THESE TEN CHARACTERISTICS WILL BE FOUND IN EVERY CHURCH THAT IS A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH. OTHER CHURCHES MAY POSSESS SOME OF THESE TRAITS BUT ALL OF THEM WILL BE PRESENT IN A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH.**

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**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>. Garrett, James W., *The DOULOS Principle*, (Tulsa, Oklahoma, Doulos Press, 1999)

<sup>2</sup>. II Timothy 2:21; II Peter 2:1; June 4; Revelation 6:10

<sup>3</sup>. Acts 4:24

<sup>4</sup>. Luke 17:7-10; Romans 1:1; Galatians 1:10; II Peter 1:1; Rev. 1:1

<sup>5</sup>. Philippians 2:25-26; I Thess. 3:1-2

<sup>6</sup>. Acts 15:28

<sup>7</sup>. I Cor. 12:12-27; Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 2:19

<sup>8</sup>. *The Epistle of St. Clement to the Corinthians*, paragraph 55, translated by J. B. Lightfoot. *The Apostolic Fathers*, Lightfoot, Part 1, Vol.II, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Mass. (reprint of 1889,1890 edition)

<sup>9</sup>. Romans 12:15

<sup>10</sup>. Garrett, James W. "Church Planting Transitions: From Team to Council," *New Testament Church Leadership* (Tulsa, Oklahoma, Doulos Press, 1996) pp.15-26

<sup>11</sup>. Initially, the Jerusalem Church was led by a council of apostles. Then, the church was led by a council consisting of apostles and elders (Acts 15). In time, the apostles left and the elders were in leadership. In all other churches, a council of elders (plural) led the church: Acts 13:1-3; Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17ff; Philippians 1:1; I Timothy 5:17ff; Titus 1:5; I Peter 5:1ff.

<sup>12</sup>. I Peter 2:5; Revelation 1:6

<sup>13</sup>. Acts 13:1-3; 14:23; Titus 1:5

<sup>14</sup>. Garrett, James W. *New Testament Church Leadership*, pp. 27-43

<sup>15</sup>. Acts 2:38

<sup>16</sup>. Acts 1:4-8; 2:1-4

<sup>17</sup>. Acts 8:14-17

<sup>18</sup>. Acts 10:44-48; 11:15-18

<sup>19</sup>. Acts 2:38

<sup>20</sup>. Ephesians 1:13-14

<sup>21</sup>. Acts 1:8; I Corinthians 12-14

<sup>22</sup>. Romans 12:3ff; I Corinthians 12 - 14

<sup>23</sup>. I Corinthians 3:16-17; Ephesians 2:19-22

<sup>24</sup>. I Corinthians 6:19

<sup>25</sup>. I Corinthians 14:3

<sup>26</sup>. I Corinthians 14:4-5

<sup>27</sup>. I Corinthians 12:10-11; 13:1, 8; all of Chapter 14

<sup>28</sup>. II Peter 2:19-21; II Timothy 3:16-17;

<sup>29</sup>. Ephesians 6:12

<sup>30</sup>. I Peter 5:8-9

<sup>31</sup>. James 1:14-15

<sup>32</sup>. Ephesians 6:10-11, 13-18

<sup>33</sup>. Hebrews 1:13-14

<sup>34</sup>. John 14; Revelation 20:11-15; Mark 16:16

<sup>35</sup>. Psalm 19:1

<sup>36</sup>. Romans 1:20

<sup>37</sup>. Romans 15:14; II Timothy 3:16; II Peter 1:20-21

<sup>38</sup>. Matthew 28:18 - 20

<sup>39</sup>. Mark 16:15-16; Romans 10:8-15; Acts 2:36-39; 8:35-38; 22:16; Rev. 2:10

<sup>40</sup>. Acts 10, for instance

<sup>41</sup>. Acts 8:27-39

<sup>42</sup>. Romans 6:3-11; Acts 2:38; Galatians 3:27; I Peter 3:21

<sup>43</sup>. I Corinthians 15:12-19; Romans 8:18-25

<sup>44</sup>. I Corinthians 15:51