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What is the "Real" Church? Part 1

By Tal Davis

I have been privileged to participate in worship services in various parts of the United States and around the world. I have been amazed by the diversity of cultural styles that characterize Christian churches. Some churches are "high church" with meticulously prescribed rituals. Others, at the other end of the spectrum, have virtually no order of service and simply allow the Spirit to lead. Of course there are many others between those two extremes.

Often music in worship reflects the cultural tastes of the community. For example, many people who like country music attend services that use fiddles and steel guitars. Others like western music so they go to "Cowboy" churches. Many people today like contemporary worship that features electric guitars and drums. Then, of course, some folks still favor traditional worship with organs, choirs, and time-honored hymns.

This diversity of churches is nothing compared to what, in the 19th Century, was a sometime virulent debate among Christian groups. They fiercely disputed the question: What is the real church? One older denomination's leaders argued they were the true New Testament Church claiming they could actually trace their direct lineage all the way back to the twelve Apostles. Another movement's ministers audaciously declared they had essentially restored true Christianity to the world so they were the only true church (since all other denominations are in a state of total apostasy).

But what does the Bible say is the "real church"? Is any specific movement, denomination, or orga-

nization the only (or best) church in the world today? In this two part article we examine four qualities by which we can identify the real church of Jesus Christ. In part one we will look at the first two and in the next installment we will look at two others. To begin with, let's look at the basis upon which Jesus founded His church.

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

In Matthew 16:13-20 Jesus responded to Peter's great confession of faith in Him as the Messiah.

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. 18 I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." 20 Then He warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ. (NASB)

This confession, we could say, was the beginning, or foundation, of Jesus' church. He declared... "upon this rock I will build My church." Roman Catholics historically have maintained that the "rock" to which Jesus

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referred was Peter (Petros, a stone) as the first Pope. The problem with that argument is that the Greek word Jesus used for Peter is a different word than He used for the "rock" (petra, large rock; bed-rock) of the church. It makes more sense to understand that greater "rock" as referring to Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ, not to Peter himself or to any man or organization.

Actually the real Issue is not which church goes all the way back to Jesus, but how much of Jesus is now in the church! The real church does not say, "Look at us!" But rather says, "Look at our Lord!" That being said, let's look at the second essential characteristic of the "real" church.

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

I am often amazed by people's perceptions of what constitutes a "church." Many (if not most) individuals think of it as a building of stone, like a huge cathedral, or a wooden structure with a steeple on top. Other people conceive of the church as a large bureaucratic institution, organization, or non-profit corporation. Still others think the church is like a club to join where they pay dues and enjoy the social life (unfortunately, some churches function just that way).

A growing number of people see the church as a location to see and hear a celebrity preacher. In some cases the church is built around the personality and authority of the pastor. For example, I know of the pastor of a large mega-church in our area who requires his staff and board members to stand whenever he enters the room. He also personally preaches at two different locations each Sunday, one on the east coast and the other on the west

coast. He actually leaves the morning Georgia venue and catches a plane to California to preach that same day out there.

So are those models the qualities of the real church? I really don't think so. In fact, I don't think they are anything close what Jesus and the New Testament writers had in mind. The Bible uses several analogies for what the church should be. That is, it uses picture words to describe it in common ways we can imagine in our minds.

In 1 Peter 2:4-5, Peter uses the metaphor of "living stones" in a spiritual temple.

4 And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, 5 you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (NASB)

Paul used the same concept in Ephesians 2:19- 22. Notice he says the apostles and prophets were the foundation stones, but Jesus was the all-important cornerstone. In ancient times, the cornerstone was the architectural nucleus for the construction of a building or temple.

19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit. (NASB)

In John 15 Jesus says His followers are like branches on a vine. He, of course, is the Vine and we are the branches that produce fruit. In John 15:1- 8 He says:

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Contact Information

If you wish to contact us directly, you may do so by the following methods:

321 Anton Dr., Tallahassee, FL 32312

E-mail:

info@marketfaith.org

Phone: 850-383-9756 (Tallahassee, Florida)

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1 "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. 3 You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. 7 If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. (NASB)

In 1 Corinthians chapters 12-14, Paul uses the brilliant metaphor of a human body. 1 Corinthians 12:12-14 says:

12 For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. 13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 14 For the body is not one member, but many. (NASB)

The Head, naturally, is Jesus:

Ephesians 1:22

And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church. (NASB)

Ephesians 4:15

But speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ. (NASB)

Ephesians 5:23

For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. (NASB)

Colossians 1:18

He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. (NASB)

Colossians 2:10

And in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority. (NASB)

All those different metaphors have several common implications about what constitutes the real church.

(1) All emphasize that the church is a living thing. Even Peter and Paul, with their building or temple analogy assert that it consists of "living stones", not inert boulders, bricks, or dead wood. And, obviously, a vine and a human body are viable life forms. The point is that the real church is not a constructed building or even an organization or institution. It is a living organism. It is made of living stones, living branches and living members who are the people of God redeemed through Jesus Christ.

(2) They all affirm that Jesus is the leader of the church. He is the cornerstone, the vine, the head. The leader of the church is not a man – but God Himself in Christ! No human, past or now living, can claim to be the exclusive divinely appointed leader of the church. Certainly, local churches, denominations, missionary groups, and evangelistic organizations have called and spiritually gifted leaders. Nonetheless, no person may assume to have some special intrinsic status in God's Kingdom that places him or her above other Christians either in authority or spiritual eminence.

As Paul warns in Romans 12:3:

"For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith." (NASB)

(3) They all indicate that people in the churches are mutually dependent on one another for growth and support. Living stones need living water to bind together for mutual strength and reinforcement. Branches on a vine need food and water mutually to produce fruit. A human body must be fed sustenance, usually provided by others, to grow. It also must exercise to maintain overall strength and health. (Note, however, if either food or exercise is out of proportion or extreme it will lead to malnourishment, obesity, weakness, or exhaustion).

So then, two essential elements of the "real church" are (1) its absolute declaration of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and (2) the mutual fellowship and building up of its members. In the next installment we will look at two other key indicators of the "real church."

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