

8 Principles of n.t.church

by William MacDonald

The New Testament teaches that there is only one church, and all true believers are members of that church, with Christ as the gathering center of His people.

Duration: 37:48

Scripture: Revelation 1:12

Topics: "Church Practice"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker shares a personal experience of a missionary study class that had a profound impact on his friend's life. The friend's regrets were transformed into a desire to serve the Lord, leading him and his family to move to Brazil for missionary work. The speaker also recounts a recent missionary conference where he felt the presence of the Lord in a powerful way. He emphasizes the importance of Christians bearing fruit in old age and highlights the role of Christ as the gathering center of His people. Additionally, the speaker discusses the gifts given to the church for the edification of the saints and the work of the ministry, as described in Ephesians chapter four.

Transcript

Well, tonight I'd like to speak to you on Eight Principles of the New Testament Church. Eight Principles of the New Testament Church. I'm sure much of this will be very familiar to you, but I think it's very important for us to go over these truths again and again.

Suppose you just had the New Testament tonight. What would you believe about the church? Well, that's what I'd like to go over. Eight Principles of the New Testament Church.

The first principle is this. There is one body. There is only one church.

And we read that in Ephesians chapter 4 and verse 4. Ephesians chapter 4 and verse 4. It says in verse 4, So there is one body and one spirit even as ye are called in one hope of your calling. One Lord, one faith, one baptism. One God and Father of all who is above all and through all and in you all.

So the New Testament teaches that there is only one church. Now, everything about us in the world today seems to deny that fact. You have Christendom divided up into a myriad of denominations, don't you? And this has caused great confusion in the world.

People say, well, even the Christians can't agree among themselves, and they've split up into all these denominations. But the truth remains, and the truth is very real, that there is only one body of Christ. There is only one church.

So, the question is, when people come to a true believer and say, what denomination do you belong to, what should you say? How do you answer that question? When people come to you and say, well, what church do you belong to? And incidentally, I should say that people never rest satisfied until they can get you in a denominational pigeonhole. They never rest satisfied until they can classify you in some way. Well, of course, the right answer, what church do you belong to? Well, I belong to the church, which is the body of Christ.

And they'll say, of course, everybody who's a believer belongs to the church, which is in the body of Christ, but what else do you belong to? What denomination do you belong to? Well, you say, I don't belong to any denomination. I'm just a believer in the Lord Jesus, and there's just the one body of Christ, and that's the body I belong to. And people will pepper you and pepper you with questions, trying to get you to take some label that the Scripture doesn't give you.

And I personally don't think we should. I don't think we should take any label. Sometimes after people have harassed me for five minutes, they say rather triumphantly, I know you're a Plymouth Brethren.

Well, I certainly deny the fact I'm not a Plymouth Brethren. I hate, loathe, abominate, and despise the name because it's a denial of the body of Christ. In fact, the name itself is a paradox because Brethren is a very nice word.

It's a very wide word. It takes in all true believers, but Plymouth classifies you, and so the Plymouth denies the Brethren, doesn't it? People say to me, I know what you are. You're a Brethren.

Well, I say I'm a Brethren in the same way you're a Brethren if you're a born-again believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. But people say, look, level with me. What denomination do you belong to? Well, I like to say, what denomination did Paul belong to? Once again, if you just had your New Testament, what denomination would you be in? Well, the answer is you wouldn't be in any.

You don't read about any of these denominations in the New Testament. These are all things that have arisen since the foundation of the church, and they didn't exist in New Testament Christianity. As far as the New Testament is concerned, there was just the body of Christ, local expressions of the body of Christ, and believers calling themselves Christians, Saints, Disciples, Brothers, and so forth.

Names that belong to, really, all true believers in the Lord Jesus. You know, this truth is a very precious truth because you go throughout the world. I don't care where you go in the world.

You find fellow believers in the Lord Jesus, and you realize you're members of the same church. So, we should try to look down on the world the way the Lord Jesus looks down on it, the way God the Father looks down on it. What does He see when He looks down on it? What is the truth that's dear to Him? And that's the truth that should be dear to us as well, the truth of the one body.

And we should do nothing or say nothing that would deny that truth. Now, it's very, very difficult. Very, very difficult.

We ourselves lapse into manners of speaking that really wouldn't bear the light of Scripture. I've noticed Interest Magazine describes so many states that have no assemblies. What does that mean? So many states that have no assemblies.

Does that mean there's no believers in those states? Well, if you take a place like Reno, Nevada, there's a lot of other things. But as God looks down, He sees believers in the Lord Jesus Christ in Reno. And some total of the believers in Reno would really be the assembly in Reno, wouldn't it? You say, but they don't gather together as such.

I know that's true. But God sees them there just the same, those who belong to Him. So, that's the first truth I want to emphasize tonight.

The truth of the one body, Ephesians chapter 4 and verse 4. There is one body. And if you're a born-again believer in the Lord Jesus, you belong to that body, and that's enough. You don't have to belong to anything else.

And I would advise you not to take any other name. Some have adopted the name in more recent years as Christian Brethren. They like that name, Christian Brethren.

Well, I don't like it either, and I'll tell you why. Because if you mean by that we're Christian Brethren and other believers aren't, well, you've denied the whole thing. If you mean we're Christian Brethren in some special, exclusive way, I don't want it.

I don't want anything that separates me by name or in heart from the body of Christ. But I will say that it's very, very difficult to walk today in the light of this truth. There is one body.

For one thing, every one of us has enough sectarianism in our hearts to think a battleship. You have to fight it all the time. We really do.

Sectarianism is a weed that grows native in the human heart, and we like to think that we are something that other people aren't. Well, I have to guard against this all the time. The second great truth, the second great principle of the New Testament church is this.

All true believers are members of that church. All true believers are members of that church, and the verses are 1 Corinthians, chapter 12, verses 12 and 13. I'll read them to you.

1 Corinthians, chapter 12, verses 12 and 13. 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 the Christ. It really should read, 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 spirit.

Now, that tells it very clearly. It says that the body has many members, and all the members belong to the Lord by one spirit were we all baptized into one body. When a person trusts the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior, I think about over 30 things happen in that instant.

Over 30 different things happen in that instant. He's born again, he's redeemed, he's reconciled, he's regenerated, he receives the indwelling Holy Spirit, he's baptized by the Spirit in the body of Christ, he's sealed by the Spirit, he receives the earnest of the Spirit, he receives the anointing, and you could go and you could list. I think Schaeffer lists well over 30 different things that happen the moment you're born

again, and one of those is here, by one spirit were we all baptized into one body.

The baptism of the Spirit is not some mystical work that takes place subsequent to salvation. It's a work that takes place at the time of salvation. That means that no matter where I go in the world and find a person who's genuinely born again, that man or woman, brother or sister in Christ.

I was thinking of that the other day. I was driving across the San Mateo Bridge, and there was a car in front of me, and there were all kinds of Christian stickers on the back of it, and I was kind of racing along, and this car was just going a little more slowly in front of me. Commonly, I might have been sputtering at that point, but I wasn't this particular occasion, because I was thinking, well, isn't that wonderful? I don't even know who's in that car, but that person's a believer, and that person's a brother of mine.

It happened to be Dean Allen, but I didn't know it. But this is a wonderful truth, and those of you who have been in the service, for instance, you who are believers and you've been in the service, or you've traveled to other countries, and you meet believers, you meet those who love the Lord Jesus Christ, you'll realize what a tremendous bond it is. I think we all feel something of it just driving around and seeing those signs, I found it, you know.

I don't know. There's a warmth that comes to your heart. Just think, in that car is a person who's been redeemed by the blood of Christ, and I'm going to spend eternity with that person.

Generally speaking, I think that's true. There may be exceptions. Of course, we don't know.

All believers are members of the body. Now, this is true, but I just want to add a word of caution here. It is true, all believers are members of the body.

I love all these true believers in the body of Christ. I love them. I have a responsibility to them, and I'd like to say this, too, that I don't think there's any believer in Christ that I can't learn something from.

I've never met one yet that I can't learn something from. You say, they don't agree with you doctrinally on everything. That may be true.

That may be true, but I can learn from them. But I want to add this, too. Just because they are believers in the Lord Jesus and because I can learn something from them and because I love them, that doesn't mean I can do everything they do.

They might see certain scriptures one way, and I might see them the other. I'm obligated to follow the Lord and what he shows me in the Word of God. And I believe the best policy for us as Christians is to be very strict with ourselves in obedience to the Word of God and very loving to all the household of faith.

In other words, I draw a very narrow circle around myself as far as personal obedience to the scriptures is concerned, but I draw a very wide circle around other believers as far as loving them and caring for them is concerned. They're my brothers in Christ. I love them.

I can't always do the things they do. I don't always agree with them. For instance, the dear Pentecostal Christians.

I don't agree with the Pentecostal Christians, but I can love them. And I can learn from them. They teach me something about earnestness in prayer.

They teach me something about warmth and zeal in the Lord. And they have a way of welcoming people from the lower classes economically of Christianity. That's why, in many ways, they're moving ahead so rapidly today, numerically.

I don't agree with them in many, many things. I do on the fundamentals of the faith. On many other things I don't, but I still love them.

And as I say, I can learn from them. It says that here, we're all members of the body of Christ. Well, we need the members of the body, don't we? We really need.

And that's what's so cruel about so many of the denominations and senses that people have put up. We really separate ourselves from one another and fail to benefit from this fellowship in the body. The third principle of the Christian church I'd like to mention to you tonight is what we call the plurality of elders.

Plurality of elders. And I'd like you to turn to Philippians chapter 1 and verse 1 for this. What is the government, what is the composition of a local church as far as the New Testament is concerned? Well, we see that one of the basic principles of the New Testament church, as far as the composition of the church, is found in Philippians chapter 1 verse 1. It says, Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus, which are at Philippi with the bishops or elders and deacons.

Now, you'll notice that Paul mentions three classes there. He's writing to a local church in Philippi, in Greece. And he mentions the saints, and he mentions the bishops or elders, and he mentions the deacons, and that's all he mentions.

That's all he mentions. And he mentions the bishops or the elders in the plural. And what I'd like to point out here is that God's will for the local church is that it be made up of the saints, of course, and bishops or elders who are under-shepherds of the sheep, and deacons who have the care, servants of the church, but not elders.

Now, is there something missing in that verse? For instance, in Christendom today, largely, we have what is known as the one-man ministry. We have the pastoral system. We have one man who takes the place of leadership in the church.

The minister, the pastor, the reverend. Where was he in Philippi? The answer is he wasn't there. Paul was a Christian gentleman, and if there had been such a man in Philippi, Paul would have mentioned him in verse 1. He didn't mention him.

Why didn't he mention him? Because such an office just didn't exist. But I don't have to labor that point, because almost all Christian writers, commentators admit that. They admit that in the earliest days of the church, in the primitive church, there was no one-man minister.

Don Norby wrote a little booklet called New Testament Organization, and he quotes from sources all over, showing this point, showing it very conclusively. All of these men will admit that this was a development that didn't come until the second century. Then the clerical system arose.

The clerical system, as we speak of it. In other words, man has added a lot to the New Testament, hasn't he, down through the years? He's added great church hierarchies, you know, with ministers and with bishops and archbishops and so forth all the way up. But it lacks New Testament support as far as this hierarchical system is concerned.

It was never God's will. But what really probably happened is that people got so engaged in the performance of their daily duties that they didn't want to become involved in spiritual life, and so they would reach into their wallets, if they had wallets in those days, and they would take some man that was perhaps a little exceptionally gifted, and they'd say, Look, you do the work, and we'll pay you to do it. And this is the way the system probably arose, and it's the way it arises today a lot.

But it's not New Testament. God never intended you to pay somebody else to perform your religious duties for you. Never.

It was never the will of God. And this system didn't exist. And I'd like to say that as long as the clerical system does exist, the world will never be evangelized the way God intended it to be.

You ever think of that? As long as the work of the Lord depends on a few people who are, shall we say, seminary graduates or whatever you want to say, a few more people who are set apart in a special way, ordained, or all the rest, the world will never be evangelized. The work of world evangelism belongs to every member of the church. And for instance, you folks sitting here in the pews tonight, you can reach people that nobody else in the world can reach.

And that's God's will. God's will is that every believer be a soul winner, every believer be a Bible student, every believer be a prayer warrior, every believer be a worshiper, and not pay somebody else to do it for you. And not alone that, but the fact of the clerical system means that gift is not developed in the body of Christ the way it should be.

In other words, people come and they sit in the congregation week after week, and they listen to a sermon, and they go on about their duties and come back again next week and put their dollar in the collection. Well, God's will is that the members of the body of Christ should be exercised. They themselves should be engaged in various forms of Christian work and not leaving it to somebody else to do it.

So, I just leave that for your consideration. As long as there is a clerical system in the world, the world will never be evangelized the way God intended it to be, and neither will the gifts be exercised in the church the way they should be. I wish this were a discussion meeting so that any of you have questions or objections, you might be able to raise them.

The next point I'd like to make is this. Number four. Christ is the gathering center of his people.

I'm going to explain this to you. Christ is the gathering center of his people. Matthew chapter 18 and verse 20.

Matthew 18, 20. It says, For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. I believe this.

I believe the scripture teaches, Unto him shall the gathering of the people be. Unto him shall the gathering of the people be. I believe that, for instance, when we here at Bethany gather together in church capacity, in assembly capacity, I believe the Lord is here.

Do you believe that? I believe the Lord is here. Oh, you say, the Lord is everywhere. The Lord is omnipresent.

That means he's in all places at one and the same time. That's true, too. That's true, too.

The Lord is omnipresent. He's in all places at one and the same time. But I believe there's a special sense in which the Lord is present when his people gather together.

And, frankly, that's why you find me here at the meetings of Bethany when I'm not engaged somewhere else, when I'm not preaching somewhere else. I come here because I really believe the Lord is here. And not alone that, but I have found through the course of the years that there are special times when the Lord reveals himself to us in a very unusual way when you come together.

But you never know when those times are going to be. For instance, a week ago last night at the missionary conference over in Belmont, when Brother John West spoke, I felt that the Lord really manifested himself in that message in a very special way. It's a message I'm glad I didn't miss.

Now, I didn't know when I went to that conference that there was going to be anything unusual, but it was. It was really unusual. He talked about how Christians can bring forth fruit in old age.

It was very unusual. We just felt that the heavens came down very low that night. I'm sure you've had that experience, too.

You've had experiences when you were in meetings that were unforgettable, have you? The most unforgettable meeting I've ever attended in all my life was at a missionary study class in Lombard years ago. It was a terrible night, and anybody who wanted an excuse for not coming, they had it. I mean, there was snow and there was gale and it was cold, but there was a big crowd there.

And they had a lot of speakers that night, too. Bill Deans was just back from Africa and not at all well. They gave a report on Africa, and somebody else gave a report on the Hawaiian Islands, and somebody gave a book review.

And then George Verwer got up as the last speaker. And I want to tell you that young man poured out his heart in an impassioned plea for world evangelization. There were tears all over that audience, and hearts were bowed and stirred beneath the influence of the word.

And nobody who was at that meeting will ever forget it. What was it? The Lord was there in a very special way that night. Three months later, I got a letter from a friend of mine, and he said, Brother, my life has never been the same since the missionary study class.

He said, when I think of my past life, oh, the bitter, bitter regrets. But perhaps the Lord can still salvage something from my life for his glory. And right after that, he and his family packed their bags and went off to Brazil to serve the Lord.

It was an unusual night. When the meeting was over, one of our friends got up to lead in the closing hymn, and his face was ashen. He could only stand long enough to lead in the first line of the first verse, and he sat down.

It was like an experience in the Old Testament where the priest couldn't minister because of the glory of the Lord. What was it? Well, the Lord was there, but you don't know. You didn't know at 7 o'clock that night it was going to happen, and you wouldn't have missed that meeting for anything.

But I feel this way about the meetings of the assembly of God's people. The reason I'm there is because I believe Jesus is. I don't come because some special speaker.

I don't come because Earl Freese is speaking or John West or anything like that. I'm just as happy to come as some of the local young brothers are speaking, trying their wings. I'm just as happy because I believe the Lord is there.

Christ is the gathering center of His people. He's the attraction, and when we gather together in His name, I believe He's there with us. I remember old Mr. Harsha telling me about a meeting in Philadelphia years ago, a breaking of bread meeting, and it was one of those times when the Lord came very, very near.

And an old brother, I think it was Mr. McCandless, he got up. I told you this before. He got up to break the bread, and he went to the table in the middle of the room, and he just fell on his knees and gave thanks for the bread.

The only time it ever happened. Never happened again, but it was just the right thing to do on that occasion because the room was filled with the glory of the Lord. And, you know, I believe that when people see this, Christ is the gathering center of His people.

I think it changes the whole complexion of an assembly. What we have in Christendom today is people going because of men, and they'll frankly tell you that. Well, I go to such and such a church because so and so is the preacher there, and he's such a good preacher that we have three services on Sunday morning, and he preaches the same message three times Sunday morning.

Well, of course, I rejoice for every man that preaches the word of God, and every faithful servant of Christ, I just thank God for them. But I don't think we should go because of any man, any man being a great preacher. There's something better than that in the New Testament.

Christ is the gathering center of His people. If the Lord Jesus came to Oakland next Sunday, where would He go to church? Do you think He'd go to Covenant Church? I shouldn't mention names, should I? Do you think He'd go to Evangelical Free Church? I don't think so. Do you think He'd come to Bethany? I don't think so.

Where would He go? I think He'd call the people to Him, don't you? He might just go down to the park or to a field and just invite the people to come to Him because He is the gathering center, He is. And He'd invite all, all of those who've been redeemed by His precious blood to come to Him. Gather my people together unto me, those that have made a covenant by blood.

Okay, the next important principle that I see in the Word of God is the fact that gifts were given to the church for the edifying of the saints unto the work of the ministry. My time is going too fast tonight, but this is Ephesians chapter 4, Ephesians chapter 4 and verse 12. Now, God has given gifts to the church, and this chapter describes them.

Verse 11 says He gave some apostles and some prophets and some evangelists and some pastors and teachers. There are some men in the church who devote themselves to the ministry in a special way. That's true, that's true.

And it mentions them here. Why did He give them? Well, the crucial verse here is verse 12, and it should read like this, "...for the perfecting of the saints unto the work of the ministry, unto the edifying of the body of Christ." According to this passage of Scripture, who is to do the work of the service, the ministry? The saints. That's why I don't know how to describe it, but Christianity is a layman movement.

I don't like the word layman, but I don't know what else to say. Christianity is a layman movement. And God gave these men, evangelists, pastors and teachers, to go into an area and build up the saints to the point where the saints can carry on.

And this is what you see in the life of the Apostle Paul. Was Paul a settled minister in a church somewhere? Don't believe it for a minute. The longest the Apostle Paul ever stayed in one place was two years in Ephesus.

Throughout his ministry, he stayed a total of three years in Ephesus. But at any particular time, he only stayed two years at Ephesus. The same was true with Titus.

Titus went to Crete, as we studied a few weeks ago, and had a ministry among the... But it was a temporary ministry, and the idea was to get the saints to stand on their own feet to be able to carry on. Timothy. How did Timothy work? Did he try to get the saints perpetually dependent upon him so they'd come and listen to him for the rest of their lives? No, he didn't.

He'd go into a place, in Ephesus especially, and seek to get those saints so that they would be carrying on the work of the ministry. And that's why I'm very grateful for the elders here at Bethany and for the way they encourage younger brethren to take part. Younger brethren to try and exercise their gift, to stir up the gift that is in them, to see what ministry the Lord has for them.

Well, that's true for all Christians as well. This has been a very crucial verse in my life. When I was in the Navy over in Honolulu, it came to me, you know, What about your life, your life ahead of you? What will be your church association? And so I went to the Lord and I said, Lord, I want you to show me what my father believed will no longer do for me.

I want you to show me from the word what it's all about. And it seems to me the Lord led me to Ephesians 4, verses 11 and 12. And I saw that the gifts were given for the building up of the saints unto the work of the ministry and to the edifying of the body of Christ.

And when I saw that, it revolutionized my life. Now, I believe that when God shows us principles in the word of God, we should stick to them. Don't you? Mr. Alfred May said that to me years ago.

He said, Bill, when you find divine principles, stick to them. And we need men and women today with convictions about this subject who are willing to stick to it and pay the price. And there is a price to be paid.

Now, quickly, number six. Every local church is autonomous. Here I am using big words again.

I'll explain them. Revelation 1, verses 12 and 13. We believe from the New Testament that every local church, here's Bethany Gospel Chapel, an assembly that meets at Tompkins and Buell.

We believe that this assembly is an independent assembly responsible only to the Lord Jesus. Nothing in between. No denominational headquarters or anything else in between.

No elders of any other church can come here and tell the elders of this assembly what to do. Now, where do we get that in the Bible? Well, there are a lot of places where we get it, but I see it very clearly in Revelation 1, verses 12 and 13. It says, I turned to see the voice that spake with me, and being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks or a lampstand.

And in the midst of the seven candlesticks, one like unto the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and about to pass with a golden girdle, the picture is that the seven lampstands are the seven churches of Asia, the seven assemblies of Asia. Okay, the Lord Jesus is standing in the midst, and there's nothing between Jesus and each individual church. There's no bishop, archbishop, or any other clerical system in there.

The Lord Jesus is here, and each church is responsible to him. Now, we believe this is God's order, and I believe it with all my heart. I can see the wisdom of God in it.

For one thing, this really hinders the spread of liberalism and modernism and error. When you have a denominational headquarters and a seminary feeding ministers into that denomination, all the liberals and the modernists have to do is seize the headquarters and seize the seminary, and eventually they have the whole system. And this has been the story of the spread of liberalism and modernism in the United States.

Harvard University used to be a God-centered university, but the Unitarians and the liberals and the universalists, they got a hold of it, and now the ministers that go out from there are corrupting the churches. This is the same with North Park College in Chicago that trains the ministers for the covenant church. Today, it's liberal, and in a matter of time, they'll take over the whole denomination.

They don't have it all yet. Every local church is autonomous. Incidentally, also, in times of persecution, when every church is independent and not a member of a federation of any kind, the Christians can go underground better in communist countries.

Whereas, when there is a federation, all the government has to do is control the top, and they control the whole thing. This happened in Germany during the war. It happened in Poland.

The government said to the Christians, you've got to federate. You've got to belong to an organization. They said, what, so we can control the organization? Some of the Christians said, we won't do it, and they went underground.

God blessed them and honored them for it. Another great principle is the priesthood of all believers. 1 Peter 2, verses 5 and ... Is the time gone already? Well, just let me give you the last two.

The priesthood of all believers, 1 Peter 2, verses 5 and 9, and then the eighth principle is liberty for the exercise of the gift. Priesthood of all believers. All true believers in the Lord Jesus are priests.

In the Old Testament, only the tribe of Levi and the family of Aaron, they're the only ones who were priests. Not true today. We're all priests to God.

We're holy priests, and we're royal priests. We're holy priests to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God. We're royal priests to go forth and tell the excellency of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.

And then we believe that in the local churches, in the early days of the church, there was liberty for the exercise of the gift. The gifts weren't stifled. They weren't put down, but there was liberty, and we believe that there should be liberty today under the control of the sacred scriptures.

Well, I just leave these things with you to ponder and to search the word of God and see if these things are true. And I believe they are true. I believe they're divine principles, and they should be precious to us.

Shall we look to the Lord in closing prayer? Father, we do thank you for your precious word. We believe that it is sufficient in all matters of faith and morals. We believe it is the very word of God.

And so we lift our hearts to you in great thanksgiving tonight, Lord. We pray that you will write these truths deeply upon our hearts tonight, Lord, and help us to live them out. Help us to stand true to you in a day of declension and departure as the day in which we live.

We thank you for all those who are with us tonight. We think of Tom Flanagan and his wife Jan and how you've graced this home with a lovely little girl. And we just pray that this child might be a true mother in Israel in days to come.

That she might be saved at an early age and bring forth honor and glory to you. We think of some of those women down through the ages that you've used in such a signal way. And we pray that this might be another to add to that illustrious line.

We ask it in Jesus' precious and worthy name. Amen.

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