**A New Testament Church
by Don Hooton**

A major problem in evangelism is a shared problem we all have in communication. Just like words my generation uses for a bird’s song is to the younger generation a communication or *tweet* on Twitter; or just like the fried meat my mom made in a pan is now the same word for what fills our email inboxes with unwanted mail – *spam,* the word ‘church’ now means many different things to different people in different generations. At the sound of church, some think Sundays, stained glass, robed worship leaders and candles. Even the term ‘New Testament church’ is often lost to and meaningless for an unbeliever like a ‘monkey wrench’ is to most women and a “colander” is to most men. So where can we begin?

We should begin this conversation about the *New Testament* in “New Testament church.”

With this series I am not trying to evangelize unbelievers, but train believers. *Un*believers come to faith, not with the New Testament teaching about church but rather, what the New Testament says about the good news of Jesus. An *un*believer develops faith, indeed by the word of Christ (Romans 10:17) but first by what is declared about God in Creation (Romans 1:19-21). This staging point brings belief there is one God through reasoning much like Paul did in Athens (Acts 17:16-34). *Faith builds on the reason for a Creator and the Word builds trust in the Redeemer who Created us*. So while the New Testament is indeed *the source* for this faith building of faith, faith should grow from belief in the Creator and then the Redeemer and then, who believers should be as the church.

So, this series is about what *Christians* need to understand about what the New Testament church is.

What is a New Testament church? Who is a church like this? How does a church like this operate? What is the worship a New Testament church engages in? And last, what is the work a New Testament church fellowship partners in?

Let’s begin with this idea of the *New Testament* church. What truly defines a church in the New Testament is the Lord Jesus. The authority of all teaching begins with Him. God has spoken to us in these last days through Him (Hebrews 1:1-3); Christ has brought the message of truth His Father wanted to the Apostles (John 17:17-24) by the power He promised them in the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 15:13; 16:12-13). That promised Spirit came to them personally and visibly in Acts 2 and as a result, Peter was able to say that they had been given “everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called” them (2Peter 1:3) and Paul was able to say that “when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ… as it has been revealed to his holy Apostles and prophets by the Spirit” (Ephesians 3:4, ESV).

These “words,” spoken and written by inspired men, are the once and for all revealed message from Christ – about Christ – and for Christ’s people. Jude said that this “faith was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) and Peter said that “this word is the good news that was preached to you” (1Peter 1:25). So emphatic was it that John would say that “everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ does not have God” (2John 9) and Paul would say that “even if we are an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you [and] contrary to what you received, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:6-8).

So, the only writing we have from Christ, about Christ, and for Christ’s people, is the New Testament. If we are aiming to please Him “in every respect” (Colossians 1:10) then, we are to be people who want our lives as individual Christians to radiate His light and as a church committed to serving Him, we are equally obligated to please Him “in every respect.”

Therefore, “church life” is something Christ is sovereign over. He alone speaks how churches should worship, should organize, should work – and frankly – should just “be.” We are His. He is the Head (Ephesians 1:22-23) and we are the body.

Yet, some say that the New Testament sheds no light on the life and practice of the church today. For example, Donald G. Miller stated: “No particular structure of church life is divinely ordained” (*The Nature and Mission of the Church*, p. 82). And goes on to say that “any form … which the Holy Spirit can inhabit and to which He may impart the life of Christ, must be accepted as valid for the church. As all forms of life adapt themselves to their environment, so does the Life of Christ by His Spirit in the church.”

Even respected church leader, Dr. Gene Getz, wrote: “He (Paul) was ‘a free man’—not locked into patterns and structures, either in communication or in organization and administration” (*Sharpening the Focus of the Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. 109). He added that “Paul was not consistent in the instruction he gave regarding the appointment of elders and deacons. … It is impossible, of course, to arrive at conclusive reasons as to why there is a disparity in Paul’s approach to church leadership from church to church. But, is this not part of the genius of the New Testament? Once again, we see freedom in form and structure, means and methods, patterns and programs.”

This may sound good to today’s world except for the painful fact that Paul equated his practices with the principles that he taught: “I exhort you therefore, be imitators of me. For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, **and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church”** (1 Corinthians 4:16,17). Paul said the practice *came from* his teaching after reminding them that “you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written that none of you may be puffed up against one another” (1Corinthians 4:6). Paul instructed his readers to imitate his ways because they conformed with what he had taught and urged them to follow in what was also “written.”

Therefore, to be a New Testament church, we must adopt this Pauline view that the writings of the New Testament were given to the church to be a New Testament church. We must be drawn to, directed by, and determined to follow fully what we do from the New Testament.

You see there is no other way to be a Christ follower or a church that follows Christ than to be among a New Testament church because the New Testament points the way of Christ – because – it is His way.