

The Bible teaches us that God has given Jesus Christ to be “head over all things to the church, which is His body” (Eph 1:22,23). This word “all” has a very special significance. It means everything! In another place we read that in ALL things He is to have the pre-eminence (Col 1:18). Every believer should take this point seriously. Christians must be extremely careful never to displace or nullify Jesus’ authority. This is not an insignificant consideration. This concept is crucial for a genuine church experience! The body of Jesus Christ can no more function properly when His authority is replaced or limited than a human being can who is paralyzed or decapitated. I can think of no other truth that has been more neglected and abused in our modern “churches.” I am afraid that if Jesus asserted His rightful authority over many Christian assemblies today, almost every “table” would be overturned.

A discussion of the headship of Christ over His body will of necessity involve two different aspects: His authority over each individual believer and, His leadership of the church meetings. To simplify our investigation, we will consider each of these items separately. To begin, Jesus must be Lord of every Christian. This means that He is to have full control over every aspect of their lives. No area of living should be withheld from Him. Since in this age, Jesus is not forcibly asserting His authority, we must be willing to let Him reign over us. The only proper position for a believer to be in is one of full submission to the Holy Spirit. When this element is lacking or not completely understood by those with whom we are meeting, our church experience will suffer proportionately.

Serious problems can also be caused by unscriptural human authority. When Christians begin to rely too much on a man or group of men for guidance, their relationship with their true Head is damaged. While we should all be open to receive fellowship, direction and advice from others (especially those who lead), if we become dependent upon them or if we follow them instead of our Lord, we are in serious spiritual danger (Jer 17:5). God’s authority flows from the Head to His body. Those who are intimate with Him are often used as channels of this authority. However, no one ever becomes that authority themselves. That position is eternally reserved for the Head. Therefore, while it is important to be sensitive to the voice of God speaking through others, it is essential that no human being ever takes His rightful place in our lives.

Another difficulty which I fear is very common is that the structure of many Christian groups does not allow for diversity among the individual members. Many times believers are permitted to function only in ways which fit in with the predetermined pattern or format. Perhaps this situation exists because people feel more secure with such uniformity. However this kind of behaviour greatly restricts the authority of Jesus. The result is paralysis and inactivity among the members of His body. How many Christians are now pursuing other things because they have not been allowed to find spiritual fulfillment in the church! How many groups are filled with overfed, yet immature believers who have never learned how to serve others! This sad situation cannot be blamed wholly upon these individuals. All too often such people have been greatly hindered by an earthly, inflexible organization they consider to be the “church.”

CHURCH MEETINGS

These same truths also apply to our church meetings. Jesus wants to lead us in everything we do. When He comes into our midst, He comes as our High Priest to lead us in our worship. If His authority to do so is limited this will dramatically affect the spiritual reality of our gatherings. Some of the things which can hinder or confine the leadership of our Lord are: preplanned meetings, “platform led” services, religious formalities and the domination of the group by the ministry of one individual. All these things are extremely common in the Church today. Yet all of them serve only to

restrict the authority of the Head and stifle our church experience. Unfortunately many Christians do not realize that Jesus actually could lead church meetings. It may be that the idea has never occurred to them. Possibly some are unsure that such an important task could be done by someone who is . . . uh, well, invisible. Unfortunately many seem to think it safer to organize something or let someone “qualified” do the leading.

That fact is that Jesus Christ is infinitely capable of directing the meetings of His church. We simply haven’t given Him the opportunity. Another possibility is that “we” collectively have so little real touch with Him that we are unable to sense His authority and are therefore unable to follow His leading in our gatherings. A scriptural church meeting is run by the Holy Spirit and provides the opportunity for every member to function. In I Corinthians 14:26 we read that when the church comes together each one can have a psalm, teaching, tongue, revelation or interpretation. Ephesians 4:16 teaches that it is from the life supply of every part that the body is built up. During a proper church gathering, the Holy Spirit moves among His people and prompts each one to minister their portion of God to the others. In this way every need can be met. If only the talented ones function it will greatly limit our experience. On the other hand, when all have the opportunity to share, we can enjoy tremendous fullness.

While some may think that I am speaking against the ministry of gifted men, I am not. However, much of the ministry currently done in church meetings, such as extensive preaching and teaching, probably ought to take place somewhere else. Separate times and places can easily be arranged for such purposes. Although there certainly is room for preaching and teaching in the church, it should be kept in check so that it does not crowd out the portion of others. (Please read I Cor 14:30,31). No individual should dominate the assembly with his or her ministry. The Apostle Paul did his teaching in the synagogue, in a school, in his own hired house and elsewhere (Acts 19:8,9; 28:30,31). There is no indication that he took up the majority of every meeting with his messages. His preaching at Troas, which evidently lasted all night, should be understood as an exception created by circumstances. Since he was leaving the next day, he wanted to have as much time as possible to share with them (Acts 20:6-11). Yes, the ministry of specially anointed individuals should be exercised, but only with due regard for the proper functioning of the regular church meetings.

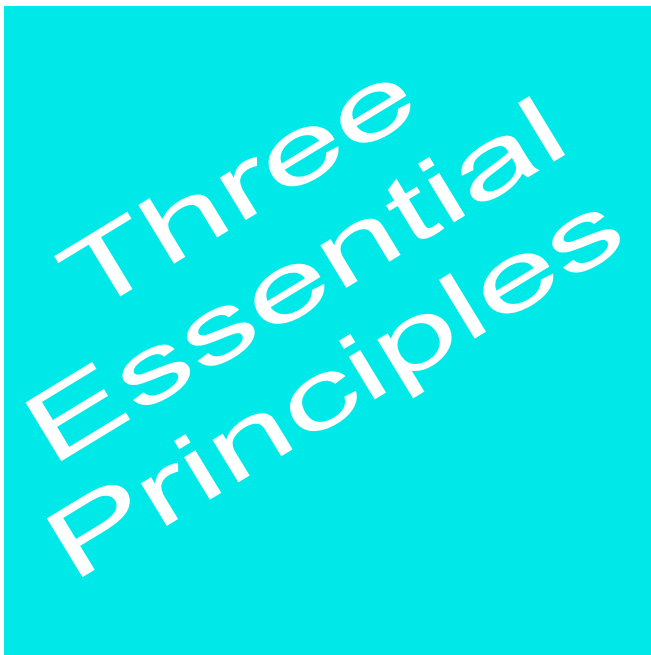
In conclusion let me say that the church has strayed a long way from God’s intention over the years. A brief comparison of today’s situation with the church in the New Testament gives us ample evidence of this fact. However, this does not mean that our goal of truly spiritual meetings is unattainable. I am confident that to the degree to which we practice the above principles our church experience will be greatly enhanced. Conversely, to the extent that we fail to implement these things we will be limited in our experience of God in our midst.

The church certainly is a spiritual reality. It is equally certain that we can and should be experiencing it as such. The ends which God has in view can only be achieved by His methods. Everything else, no matter how good it may appear from a human point of view is only wood, hay and stubble. Please remember that success from an earthly standpoint means nothing to God. Large numbers, eloquent preaching, dynamic entertainment and many other things so common among us today do not impress Him. Only that which He Himself initiates will stand the test on Judgment Day. May God have mercy upon us that we could enter into true spiritual reality in our church meetings.

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This message is designed to put forth three basic truths concerning the church. Therefore, it seems expedient to begin with a discussion of exactly what we mean when we use the word “church.” Most Christians would probably define church as “the body of Christ.” By this they mean that the church is not a building but rather consists of people. While it is true that the church is “the body of Christ” and that it is made up of men and women rather than bricks and mortar, even this concept falls short of the Biblical meaning conveyed by the word. Consequently, as it is with so many other spiritual truths, our experience of the church has often been severely limited by our understanding of it.

In an attempt to overcome this problem and to start afresh in our search for a deeper understanding of this subject, let us define church in this way: “the church is a spiritual reality.” The church is a spiritual reality and this reality should be our experience! When the Bible uses the word “church” it is referring to much more than a number of believers gathered together in one place. While it is true that the church does consist of two or more individuals, still the fact remains that simply getting a few Christians together does not constitute the church. Believers might meet together for many different reasons. They may gather for the sake of entertainment, they might meet to enjoy each others’ company, they may even congregate to hear inspiring preaching and wonderful singing. But unless these people are actually experiencing the reality of the body of Christ, what they are doing does not qualify as being “church”. The fact that many readers will probably not understand what I mean here only serves to underline the scope and severity of the problem at hand.

The church experience happens when Christians come together and the presence of Jesus Christ is manifested in their midst. The church experience occurs when real believers enter into the Spirit together. The church experience is realized when men and women are raised up and made to sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:6). The church experience consists of God ministering Himself to and through

every member of His body. Such meetings are not meant to be a rare or even nonexistent happening. In the early church, these things appear to have been taken for granted. Genuine spiritual gatherings like this are essential if we are to have what the New Testament calls “church.” If these things are not your experience, then I would urge you to take a prolonged, serious, prayerful look at what you are doing which you have thought to be “church.”

In this world the church is not an end in itself but only the means to an end. It is precisely at this point that many people make a serious mistake. They often suppose that if their “church” is successful from an earthly standpoint (having crowded meetings, good preaching, a new building etc.) that God is pleased with their efforts. However, God’s pleasure can only be gained when we are accomplishing His purposes. To the extent that what we are doing fulfills His desires, it is approved. To the degree that our activities fail in this area, they are completely useless and are a waste of time. What then is God’s purpose for the church? What is the end He has in view? It is twofold. Firstly, it is to change human beings into His likeness and secondly, to evangelise a perishing world. The spiritual experience of church which we have been describing is the Divinely instituted vehicle to accomplish both of these purposes. The fact that we see so many other methodologies being employed to achieve the same results is simply a further testimony to how far our church experience has fallen from God’s original intention.

Concerning the first purpose, the spiritual experience of the body of Christ is the best environment for spiritual growth. God has designed this context as the one which will be the most helpful to us as we grow to maturity. The presence of Jesus being manifested among us as we meet together this will truly change our lives. As He moves within His church, ministering Himself to and through each one, the body is built up properly. It is the supply of “every joint” which “causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love” (Eph 4:16). This life flow between the members is of purely heavenly origin. Natural, human efforts can never achieve the required results. Therefore, such true, spiritual “church” is essential if the job is to be done effectively.

As for the second objective, such an environment is also the best place for evangelism. When believers actually have the presence of God in their midst, when they genuinely enter into the Spirit, when each one has the opportunity to “prophesy,” then unbelievers are easily convinced of God’s reality (I Cor 14:24,25). Such an experience puts the gospel beyond the realm of intellectual argument. It can no longer be regarded simply as a fairy tale or theory. Its reality is viewable in the lives of those in the church. What I am advocating here is not a hopeful suggestion. This is something which myself and many others have experienced.

With all these things in mind, it seems important to take a little time here and look at three essential principles which, if followed, will go a long way towards producing a true church experience. Since this subject is so crucial and its impact, both upon ourselves and the unbelieving world is so profound, it stands to reason that we should carefully and seriously examine how we can more closely approach God’s intention. As we do so I beg you, open your heart and your mind to God and allow Him to speak to you through these things. There is no doubt that the truths which we are discussing here have eternal consequences.

PRINCIPLE NUMBER ONE - LIFE

In order for any body to function it must be living. The members of the body of Jesus Christ therefore must be full of life. This implies several things. Firstly, the people who are considered to be part of church must be born of the Holy Spirit (Jn 3:5). They must be real Christians. When Jesus came, He manifested God’s life to man (I Jn 1:1). After His resurrection

from the grave and His ascension to the right hand of the Father, He poured out the Holy “Spirit of life” (Rm 8:2) into all who believe in His name. If anyone does not have the Holy Spirit within them, they are not a true believer. It is only by the Holy Spirit that anyone can receive God’s life.

Secondly, every church member should know what it means to be filled with the Holy Spirit. It is God’s will for every Christian to be filled to overflowing with His Spirit. He desires this for us as much as an earthly father wants to feed his own children (Lk 11:11-13). This is not an experience for a select few. It is the normal, Biblical standard. In fact, we are commanded to be so filled (Eph 5:18). I do not intend here to get involved in a controversy over “the baptism of the Holy Spirit.” Neither do I wish to discuss how this “filling” might be manifested. I only present the following two facts which should be self-evident. Number one, it is God’s intention to fill every believer with the Holy Spirit. And number two, it is impossible to be filled with the Spirit of the Most High God and not know it. Therefore, if your life is devoid of the Spirit, either you have not been truly converted or you have not opened your life sufficiently to God to enjoy what He has for you. If this is your situation, I urge you to humble yourself before Him and seek His face until you know that you are experiencing all that Jesus came to give.

Thirdly, every Christian should be continually refilled with the Holy Spirit. This should be our daily, hourly, minutely - in fact our constant - experience. We should walk and live in the Spirit (Gal 5:25). Far too many believers are resting their relationship with Jesus on something which happened to them many years ago. Our past experiences may be very good but they will not support us today. Yesterday’s manna will not feed anyone. For our church experience to be truly living, it is absolutely essential that each of the members fill themselves daily with God’s life. This means being continually filled with the Holy Spirit.

In order for this to be accomplished, each and every believer must cultivate an intimate, daily, association with Jesus Christ. We can do this by meditating in His word and by praying in the Holy Spirit. Just as we require food each day to live normally, so every Christian should spend adequate time daily communicating with God. It is not sufficient just to shoot up a quick prayer now and then. Neither is it good enough simply to sit back and get your nourishment from the ministry of others. No one else can carry you along spiritually. You must apply yourself and diligently seek God on your own. Each one of us should set aside a good, long, undisturbed time every day to commune with Him and enjoy Him. In this way we will be full of His life.

As you can imagine, the experience of each individual will affect all of the others. When each of the members applies himself to be filled with God, the whole church is benefited. When everyone partakes of this eternal substance and communicates it to the rest during their times of fellowship, the church experience of all is enhanced. Conversely, when the lives of the individual members are lacking, the whole assembly is adversely affected. All too often the solution to this problem has been to prop up the church with programs, new leadership or other outward things. God’s remedy on the other hand is for each one to repent of their deadness and return again to a living relationship with Himself.

PRINCIPLE NUMBER TWO - UNITY

The second principle about which we will speak, is that of unity. Again we will begin with the analogy of a human body. If you take a person and cut him into many pieces, this destroys his life. The same is true of Christ’s body. Unity is absolutely essential. Since this is such a vast subject and it is fraught with many difficult considerations, we will for the sake of convenience, break it down into two categories: unity between Christians who meet together and, unity among different meetings of the Church as a whole.

Let us begin our discussion of the first category by stating that unity is not optional. It is God’s commandment. We are commanded by God to love others as much as we love ourselves. Such love is only made possible by an intimate relationship with God. Since God’s love for the entire world and individuals in

particular is tremendous, as we are in touch with Him, He will supply us to love others. Love is the substance of true unity. While many groups may have uniformity, conformity or even unanimity, only love provides the reality which we are seeking here.

True unity expressed in brotherly love will manifest itself in several ways. Those who have it will be continually seeking to serve others. They will pray for others, build others up in the faith, look for opportunities to help others financially and practically, spend time fellowshiping with others and in general manifest the love which the Father has for them. Such activity will be their daily exercise. Also such loving people will never be quick to say anything bad about someone else, especially one of their brothers or sisters in Christ. It does not take much imagination to see how greatly our church experience would be elevated if every member practiced this kind of behaviour. Church, real church, is made up of this sort of life style. Nothing else qualifies.

Unfortunately, genuine love does not come easily. The fallen nature within man fights against it. Since the opposition to such unity from both within and without is tremendous, this kind of experience must begin with a commitment. It will be necessary for each member of the body to come to a conscious, deliberate decision to love and serve the others unconditionally. This is absolutely essential! If we leave love only as an option or if we allow our feelings to govern us, the devil will do his work, the flesh will prevail and the church will be damaged. Therefore, we must make a firm decision to love each other and never allow anything to change it. Once this decision is made, we will find the supernatural supply of God enabling us to follow through with our commitment. In this way, we will begin to experience more of the fullness of Christ in the church.

This then brings us to our second category under consideration which is unity among different church meetings. Here again the answer is brotherly love. To have success in this area we must first be brought by God to see the Church from His point of view. No doubt as Jesus looks down upon the many different “churches,” denominations and sects, He recognizes those who are His own within them. Although He certainly is aware of these divisions and I’m sure that they must grieve His heart, still He sees the members of His one body among all of them (Eph 4:4). While earthbound man’s vision may be clouded by the proliferation of various Christian groups, Christ from His heavenly vantage point, sees His people - His Church.

Therefore, if we can be brought by God to view His Church the way He sees it, we will no longer be limited by any schisms in the Body. Our love should transcend any man-made separations. Although in this life we will probably never see an end to all the divisions, we can end them in our own hearts. The more Christians who take this position of love towards all, the better the situation will become. I am not suggesting that we should go and join ourselves to groups with whom we cannot agree. I am only advocating that we love “with a pure heart fervently” those true believers who are in them (I Pet 1:22). As we have been seeing, the church is not a place or a group but a spiritual reality which we can experience. Such an experience can penetrate any outward barriers. We can have true spiritual relationships and fellowship with believers in all kinds of situations. This is the only real church.

THE THIRD PRINCIPLE - HEADSHIP

The third principle I would like to mention here is the headship of Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul warns us about some believers who were “not holding the head” (Col 2:19). What does this mean? Very simply it indicates that Jesus Christ was not the primary authority in every aspect of their church experience. In our present context it would mean that we have elevated other things (this could include leaders, rituals, doctrines, methods, traditions etc.) to a place which they should not occupy.