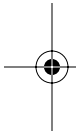




# 1

## ESSENTIALS

### God's Vision for His Church

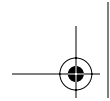


As we begin to consider the essential marks of a living church, I am making three assumptions.



First, I am assuming that we are all committed to the church. We are not only Christian people; we are also church people. We are not only committed to Christ, we are also committed to the body of Christ. At least I hope so. I trust that none of my readers is that grotesque anomaly, an un-churched Christian. The New Testament knows nothing of such a person. For the church lies at the very center of the eternal purpose of God. It is not a divine afterthought. It is not an accident of history. On the contrary, the church is God's new community. For his purpose, conceived in a past eternity, being worked out in history, and to be perfected in a future eternity, is not just to save isolated individuals and so perpetuate our loneliness, but rather to build his church, that is, to call out of the world a people for his own glory. Indeed, Christ died for us not only "to redeem us from all wickedness" but also





“to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (Titus 2:14). So then, the reason why we are committed to the church is that God is so committed. True, we may be dissatisfied, even disillusioned, with some aspects of the institutional church. But still we are committed to Christ and his church.

Second, we are all committed to the mission of the church. We believe that the church has a double identity. On the one

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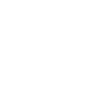
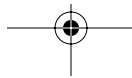
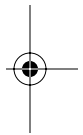
*The church lies at the very center of the eternal purpose of God.*

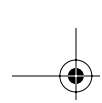
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hand we are called out of the world to belong to God, and on the other we are sent back into the world to witness and to serve. Moreover, the mission of the church is modeled on the mission of Christ. He himself said so. “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21). His mission meant for

him the incarnation. He did not stay in the safe immunity of his heaven. Instead, he emptied himself of his glory and humbled himself to serve. He actually entered our world. He took our nature, lived our life, and died our death. He could not have identified with us more closely than he did. It was total identification, though without any loss of identity, for he became one of us without ceasing to be himself. He became human without ceasing to be God.

And now he calls us to enter other people’s worlds, as he entered ours. All authentic mission is incarnational mission. We are called to enter other people’s social and cultural reality: into their thought-world, struggling to understand their misunder-





standings of the gospel, and into the pain of their alienation, weeping with those who weep. And all this without compromising our Christian beliefs, values and standards.

Third, we are all committed to the reform and renewal of the church. In many parts of the world, especially in significant regions of Africa, Asia and Latin America, the church is growing rapidly, although often the growth is in size rather than in depth, for there is much superficiality of discipleship everywhere. Nevertheless it is growing. In other parts of the world, however, especially in the West, if I may generalize, the church is not growing. Its development is stunted. Its waters are stagnant. Its breath is stale. It is in a state not of renewal but of decay. We long to see it continually being reformed and renewed by the Word and the Spirit of God.

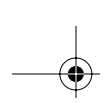
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*What is God's vision  
for his church?*

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Having considered our threefold common commitment (to the church, to its mission and to its renewal), we are ready to ask a basic question: what is God's vision for his church? What are the distinguishing marks of a living church? To answer these questions we have to go back to the beginning and take a fresh look at the first Spirit-filled church in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. Mind you, as we do so, it is essential that we are realistic. For we have a tendency to idealize or romanticize the early church. We look at it through tinted spectacles. We speak of it in whispers, as if it had no blemishes. Then we miss the rivalries, the hypocrisies, the immoralities and the heresies which troubled the first-century church as they trouble the church today.






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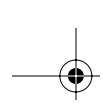
Nevertheless, one thing is certain. The early church, in spite of all its excesses and failures, had been radically stirred by the Holy Spirit. So what did that early church look like? What evidence did it give of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit? If we can answer these questions, noting carefully the essentials which Luke mentions in Acts 2, we will be able to discern the marks of a living church today. Luke focuses on four marks:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

#### A LEARNING CHURCH

The first characteristic Luke selects is very surprising; I do not think we would have chosen it. It is that a living church is a learning church. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42).





One might say that the Holy Spirit opened a school in Jerusalem that day. The schoolteachers were the apostles, whom Jesus had appointed and trained, and there were three thousand pupils in the kindergarten! It was a very remarkable situation.

We note that those new Spirit-filled converts were not enjoying a mystical experience which led them to neglect their intellect, despise theology or stop thinking. On the contrary, “they met constantly to hear the apostles teach” (REB). So I do not hesitate to say that anti-intellectualism and the fullness of the Holy Spirit are mutually incompatible. For who is the Holy Spirit?

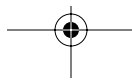
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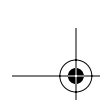
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He is “the Spirit of Truth”; that was one of Jesus’ favorite descriptions of him. It stands to reason, therefore, that wherever the Spirit of truth is at work, truth matters.

Notice something else about those first Christian believers. They did not suppose that, because they had received the Holy Spirit, he was the only teacher they needed, and they could dispense with human teachers. Not at all. They acknowledged that Jesus had called the apostles to be the teachers of the church. So they sat at the apostles’ feet. They were eager to learn all they could. And they submitted to the apostles’ authority which, incidentally, was authenticated by miracles. For if Acts 2:42 alludes to the teaching of the apostles, Acts 2:43 refers to their many signs and wonders; indeed the main purpose of miracles throughout Scripture was to authenticate each fresh stage of revelation, especially the prophets in the Old Testament and the



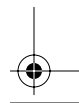
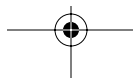
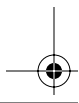


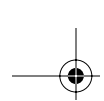
apostles in the New. Thus the apostle Paul could refer to his miracles as “the signs of a true apostle” (2 Corinthians 12:12 RSV).

What then is the application of all this to us? How is it possible for us to submit ourselves and our churches to the teaching authority of the apostles? For we must insist that there are no apostles in the church today. To be sure, there are bishops and superintendents, church planters and pioneer missionaries, and perhaps we could call their ministries “apostolic,” giving them the adjective. But we would be wise to reserve the noun for the Twelve, Paul and perhaps James. At least my Pentecostal friends, some of whom claim the title “apostle,” agree with me that there is nobody in the church today (nor has been since the apostle John died) who has an authority comparable to that of the apostles Paul, John, Peter and James. If there were, we would have to add their teaching to that of the New Testament.

The early church understood this well. Take Ignatius, Bishop of Syrian Antioch, whose death scholars date at about A.D. 110. Condemned to death as a Christian, he was traveling to Rome to be executed, and during his voyage he wrote seven or more letters to such churches as those in Rome, Ephesus, Smyrna and Tralles, in which he several times expressed this conviction: “I do not issue you with commands like Peter and Paul, for they were apostles; I am but a condemned man.” He was a bishop, one of the earliest evidences of the rise of the monarchical episcopate, but he was not an apostle.

So I repeat my question. If there are no apostles comparable to Peter or Paul in the church today, how can we submit to apostolic teaching authority? The answer is obvious. The teaching





of the apostles is found in the New Testament. It is here that their teaching has been bequeathed to us in its definitive form. This is the true “apostolic succession,” namely a continuity of apostolic doctrine, made possible by the New Testament.

Something similar was stated by the bishops of the Anglican Communion during their 1958 Lambeth Conference. In their statement on the Bible they wrote:

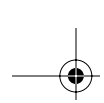
The church is not “over” the Holy Scriptures, but “under” them, in the sense that the process of canonization was not one whereby the church conferred authority on the books, but one whereby the church acknowledged them to possess authority. And why? The books were recognized as giving the witness of the apostles to the life, teaching, death and resurrection of the Lord and the interpretation by the apostles of these events. To that apostolic authority the church must ever bow.<sup>1</sup>

So we affirm first of all that a living church is a learning church, a church submissive to the teaching authority of the apostles. Its pastors expound Scripture from the pulpit. Its parents teach their children out of the Scriptures at home, and its members read and reflect on the Scriptures every day in order to grow in Christian discipleship. The Spirit of God leads the people of God to honor the word of God. Fidelity to the teaching of the apostles is the first mark of an authentic and living church.

#### A CARING CHURCH

If the first mark of a living church is study, the second is fellow-





ship. “They devoted themselves . . . to the fellowship.” “Fellowship” is the well-known Greek word *koinonia* which expresses our common (*koinos*) Christian life, what we share as believers. As we will see more fully in chapter five, *koinonia* bears witness to two complementary truths: both what we share in together and what we share out together. And it is on this latter that Luke lays his emphasis here:

All the believers were together and had everything in common (*koina*). Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. (Acts 2:44-45)

These are disturbing verses, the kind we jump over rather quickly. What do they mean? Do they teach that every living

church will become a monastic community and that every Spirit-filled believer will follow the example of the first believers literally?

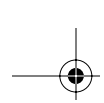
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*A living church is a learning church.*

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A few miles east of Jerusalem at that time the Essene leaders of the Qumran Community were committed to the common ownership of their property, and new members handed over all their money and possessions when they were initiated. So then, did Jesus intend all his disciples to follow their example, selling their property and possessions and sharing the proceeds? The Anabaptists of the sixteenth-century “Radical Reformation” talked much about Acts 2:44-45 and Acts 4:32-37 and “the community of goods,” although only the Hutterite Brethren in eighteenth-century Moravia made common ownership compulsory.





Certainly Jesus calls some of his disciples to total voluntary poverty. This was evidently the calling of the Rich Young Ruler in the Gospels, whom Jesus told “sell everything you have and give to the poor” (Mark 10:21). This was also the vocation of Francis of Assisi, and of Mother Teresa and her sisters—perhaps in order to witness to the world that a human life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions (see Luke 12:15).

But not all the followers of Jesus are called to this. The prohibition of private property is a Marxist, not a Christian, doctrine. Besides, even in Jerusalem the selling and the

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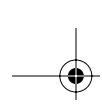
*Generosity has always been a characteristic of the people of God.*

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giving were voluntary. We read in verse 46 that “they broke bread in their homes.” In their homes? But I thought they had sold their homes together with their furniture and their possessions? No, apparently not. Some still had homes in which they met. And when we come to the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, their sin was not greed but deceit. They kept back part of the proceeds of their sale, while pretending to give it all. The apostle Peter was clear about the situation: “Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold?” And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal?” (Acts 5:4). Just so all Christians have to make a conscientious decision before God what to do with our money and our possessions.

Nevertheless, although we may breathe a sigh of relief that we have not been called to total poverty, we must not avoid the challenge of these verses. Those early Christians loved one an-





other, which is hardly surprising since the first fruit of the Spirit is love (Galatians 5:22). In particular, they cared for their poor sisters and brothers, and so shared their goods with them. This principle of voluntary Christian sharing is surely a permanent one. According to UN statistics, the number of destitute people (who survive on less than 1 U.S. dollar a day) is about a billion, while the average number who die every day of hunger and hunger-related causes, is said to be about 24,000. How can we live with these statistics? Many of the poor are our brothers and sisters. The Holy Spirit gives his people a tender social conscience. So those of us who live in affluent circumstances must simplify our economic lifestyle—not because we imagine this will solve the world’s macroeconomic problems but out of solidarity with the poor.

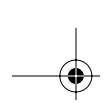
So then a living church is a caring church. Generosity has always been a characteristic of the people of God. Our God is a generous God; his church must be generous too.

#### A WORSHIPING CHURCH

The third characteristic of the early church was its worship. They devoted themselves (literally) “to the breaking of the bread” (surely a reference to the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper, though probably with a fellowship meal included) “and to the prayers,” meaning not private prayer, but prayer meetings and prayer services. What strikes me about this summary of the early church’s worship is its balance in two respects.

First, their worship was both formal and informal. According to Acts 2:46 “they continued to meet together in the temple





courts” and “they broke bread in their homes.” We note therefore that they did not immediately abandon the institutional church. Doubtless they became anxious to reform it according to the gospel. And already they understood that the sacrifices of the temple had been fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ. But they continued to attend the traditional prayer services of the temple (see Acts 3:1), which had a degree of formality, and they supplemented these with the more informal meetings in their homes, which evidently included their own distinctively Christian worship, the Eucharist.

There is an important lesson to learn here. Young people tend to be impatient with the inherited structures of the church. Understandably so, for some churches are too conservative, too resistant to change. One might say that they are stuck in the mud, and the mud has set like concrete. Their favorite formula seems to be “As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end, Amen.”

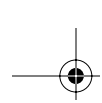
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*The early church's  
worship was both  
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We must of course listen to young people. But the Holy Spirit's way with the institution of the church is more the way of patient reform than of impatient rejection. So don't let's polarize between the structured and the unstructured. If I may generalize, older people prefer the more formal and dignified services in the church, whereas younger people prefer the more spontaneous and liberated meetings in the home. We need to experience each other's preferences. The early church had both, and we need both. Every church of any





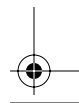
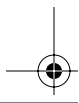
size should break itself down into small fellowship groups (see chapter 5).

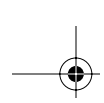
Second, the early church's worship was both joyful and reverent. There is no doubt of their joy. The Greek word at the end of Acts 2:46 is *agalliasis* which is an exuberant expression of joy. God had sent his Son into the world, and now he had sent his Spirit into their hearts. How could they not be joyful? "The fruit of the Spirit is . . . joy," and sometimes a more uninhibited joy than our ecclesiastical traditions encourage.

When I attend some church services, I almost think I have come to a funeral by mistake. Everybody is dressed in black. Nobody talks or smiles. The hymns are played at the pace of a snail or a tortoise, and the whole atmosphere is lugubrious. If I could overcome my Anglo-Saxon reserve, I would want to shout, "Cheer up!" Christianity is a joyful religion, and every service should be a celebration. I am told that Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher said before he died: "The longer I live, the more convinced I am that Christianity is one long shout of joy!"

At the same time the early church's worship was never irreverent. Yet today, if some church services are funereal, others are flippant. But if joy should characterize our worship, so should reverence. So Luke writes, "Everyone was filled with awe" (Acts 2:43). The living and holy God had visited Jerusalem. God was in their midst, and they bowed down before him in that mixture of wonder and humility which we call worship.

Thus the early church's worship was both formal and informal, both joyful and reverent. We need to recover this biblical





balance in our Christian worship today.

### AN EVANGELIZING CHURCH

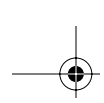
So far we have considered the study, the fellowship and the worship of the early church, for it is to these three activities that Luke says “they devoted themselves.” Yet these three are aspects of the church’s interior life. They tell us nothing about its compassionate outreach to the world.

This illustrates the great danger of textual preaching, that is, of isolating a text from its context. Millions of sermons have been preached on Acts 2:42 as if it gave a comprehensive account of the church. But on its own verse 42 presents a disastrously unbalanced picture. It gives the impression that the early church was interested only in studying at the feet of the apostles, caring for its own members, and worshipping God. In other words it was living in a ghetto, preoccupied with its own domestic life, and ignoring the plight of the lost and the lonely outside.

But this was not the case. They were also committed to mission, although it is not until Acts 2:47 that we learn this. Verse 47 corrects the imbalance of verse 42, for verse 47 implies that they were engaged in evangelism: “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” This verse teaches us three truths about the early church’s evangelism.

First, the Lord himself (that is, the Lord Jesus) did it. Doubtless he did it through the preaching of the apostles, the everyday witness of church members, and their common life of love. But he did it. For he is the head of the church. And although he delegates to pastors the responsibility of admitting people into the





visible church by baptism, he reserves the prerogative of admitting people into the invisible church by faith. In our self-confident age we need to return to this truth. Only the Lord Jesus Christ by his Holy Spirit can open the eyes of the blind and give life to dead souls, and so add people to his church. We need humbly to acknowledge this.

Second, the Lord did two things together. He “added to their number . . . those who were being saved.” He didn’t add them to the church without saving them, and he didn’t save them without adding them to the church. Salvation and church membership went together; they still do.

Third, the Lord did both these things “daily,” or day by day. Those early Christians did not regard evangelism as an occasional activity. They were not content to organize a quinquennial mission. No, their witness was as continuous as their worship. And the Lord honored it. Converts were being added daily.

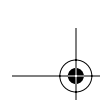
We urgently need to return to this eager expectation. I know some churches which haven’t had a convert for ten years or more. And if they got one, they wouldn’t know what to do with him, her or it, so extraordinary would this phenomenon appear to them! But the early church anticipated the arrival of new believers, and made provision for their nurture.

Looking back over the four marks of a living church, it is apparent that they all have to do with the believers’ relationships.

First, they were related to the apostles. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching. A living church is an apostolic church.

Second, they were related to each other. They loved each





other. A living church is a caring and sharing church.

Third, they were related to God. They worshiped God in the breaking of bread and in prayers, with joy and with reverence. A living church is a worshiping church.

Fourth, they were related to the world outside. They reached out in witness. A living church is an evangelizing church.

Some years ago, visiting a large Latin American city, I was told of a group of Christian students who had dropped out of the church and called themselves *Cristianos descolgados*, “unhooked Christians.” The reason they had dropped out was their disillusionment with the churches in their city. The churches lacked biblical teaching, social concern, authentic worship and compassionate outreach, in fact the very marks which the early church exhibited and young people are looking for today.

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*A living church is an evangelizing church.*

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We don't have to wait for the Holy Spirit to come, for he did come on the Day of Pentecost, and he has never left the church. Indeed, there is a sense in which the Day of Pentecost cannot be repeated, any more than Christmas Day, Good Friday, Easter and Ascension Day can be repeated. For Jesus was born once, died once, rose once, ascended once and sent the Holy Spirit once. But what we do need to do is to humble ourselves before God, and seek the fullness, the direction and the power of the Holy Spirit. For then our churches will at least come close to the essentials of a living church in apostolic doctrine, loving fellowship, joyful worship and outgoing, ongoing evangelism.

