

Tom Avey

From: Neil Cole
Sent: Monday, November 12, 2012 11:05 PM
To: Tom Avey
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Subject: Re: Definition of Church

Gentlemen,

I have a few observations on this even though jury duty has prevented me from joining you. I hope it is okay that I am so bold as to reply in this way even though absent.

1. There isn't any biblical support that believers have to consider themselves church to be a church. That is simply a logical statement included among Biblical ones, which is dangerous practice. Are we simply trying to separate parachurch from local church? There isn't any biblical support for the idea of parachurch either, so a reactionary theological statement that has no grounds in Scripture will come to haunt us later.
2. While I am a staunch proponent of baptism and communion and becoming more so with each passing year, I am not willing to make the statement that those who do not practice them are not a church. My Quaker brothers and sisters as well as my Salvation Army family would take issue. This sort of thinking actually promotes the idea of parachurch as well. If a group of Christians that fellowship, worship, do evangelism and discipleship together (i.e. Campus Crusade Group on campus) simply avoid getting wet and eating crackers and grape juice they avoid being a church...I don't buy it. Sorry.
3. There are examples of churches without elders in the NT. While it is not a great example of churches (Galatians), they were churches nonetheless. Paul and Barnabas started churches on their first journey and then went back to visit them later to appoint elders. You would be very hard pressed to say biblically that they are not churches prior to the second visit.
4. There are examples of churches in the NT that also have other messages and/or lacking in mission but which are still called churches by Jesus himself. See Revelation 2-3
5. I think the worst part is not what is in your definition but what is lacking: Jesus didn't make the list. His presence via the indwelling HS is the first and most essential part of church. All the ingredients listed in your definition were present in the upper room (Acts 1), but church started in Acts 2 when God dwelt among them. It is the threatened removal of the church of Ephesus from His presence in Rev that is it's threatened demise.

The NT doesn't define church but merely describes it with pictures or metaphors (as Dave would say). But one thing that they almost all emphasize is the presence of Jesus. What's a body without a head? A corpse. What's a bride without a groom? A widow. What's a branch without a vine? Firewood. What's a building without a foundation? Rubble. What's a flock without a shepherd? Wolf chow. These metaphors all show us that our connection to Jesus is what defines us as church.

We may be inclined to simply assume Jesus' presence but then spell out that qualified elders such as ourselves are essential, but I think this a mistake that betrays an unhealthy bias: that church is more about us and what we do for Him than it is about Him and what He does for us. If we can define church without Jesus than we can do church without Jesus, and that is an awful proposition for all involved.

Here is our working understanding of church in CMA:

"The presence of Jesus among His people, called out as a spiritual family to pursue His mission on this planet."

I am sorry if this seems like I am ripping this work, but this is something I have spent decades working through so I do have some rather firm thoughts. I hope this is at least a little helpful.

Wish I could be with you.

Pressing on,

Neil

Sent from my iPad

On Nov 12, 2012, at 5:59 PM, Tom Avey <tomavey@fgbc.org> wrote:

"A local church is a group of Christ followers in a specific location who want to be a church, committed to the Gospel as its one message, under the oversight of Biblical leadership (elders), practicing the ordinances, and on mission to the world by discipling and sending its people."