

January 2012

Tim Sprankle:

I get the phrase "who want to be a church" because I've heard Tom Julien stress the importance of "commitment," but I think it's implied in the "space" and "mission" statement. The phrase sounds cumbersome and redundant; the definition would flow better AND lose nothing without it.

Tim

Tom Julien:

Since you have sent me a copy of the email concerning the definition of a church, I thought it might be interesting for you to see the 1994 and 1999 Charis definitions. The 1994 definition is meant to be a definition of a Grace Brethren church. The 1999 definition is a more general expression of the essential elements of a local church, as distinguished from what we have called "Points of Light." (an emerging church with a Three-fold Commitment: Biblical Truth, Biblical Relationships, and Biblical Mission.) Both of these definitions grow out of the *metaphors* of the church, which are *prescriptive*, rather than the *practices* of the early church, which are *descriptive*. The basic difference between a group of people gathering in the name of Jesus, and a local church, is found in their *commitment*. Every metaphor emphasizes commitment of the parts to its unifying factor and to each other. Just as a couple is not married until the defined commitment to each other, a group of Christians is not a church until they make a formal commit to the Lord and to each other to become a local church.

We found in Europe that it was impossible to work as a team in church planting until we had agreed on what we were planting. I believe that the same will be true of the EVLC church-planting team.

Charis definition, France 1994:

A local church is:

1. a group of believers committed to being a church,
2. fellowshiping under the authority of an elder or a pastor (and preferably more than one),
3. holding to the Grace Brethren statement of faith of their country,
4. worshipping together,
5. celebrating the ordinances,
6. obeying the Great Commission,
7. following the guidelines of that country's constitution policy, when necessary.

Charis definition, Argentina 1999 (adopted from the ACT Strategy):

A local church is:

1. an organized body of baptized believers,
2. led by a spiritually qualified Shepherd,
3. affirming their relationship to the Lord and each other by regular observance of the Lord's Supper,
4. committed to the authority of the Word of God in doctrine and practice,
5. gathering regularly for worship and the study of the Word,

6. practicing mutual ministry, and
7. turned outward to the world in witness.

Randy Smith:

I really like the overall simplicity of the message in that definition. It shows the kind of simple statement from the back side of complex thinking and thorough discussion. I applaud the effort as I did before.

I have only one caution, as I did in the earlier discussion, about the phrase "committed to the Gospel as its one message" part. Obviously (Tom, roll your eyes now) I am a discipleship guy. Since only about 15% of the Bible is about "finding God" and the other 85% (according to my unscientific survey) is about "following God" in the practical life of a disciple, the phrase can reduce the message of the church to the smaller part of Biblical understanding. For the sake of clarity, I just preached in a Baptist church in town that reduces every message to John 3:16. In part because of that (so says the committee of me alone), they have an incredible number of carnal believers who are wholly satisfied, sermon after sermon, that they have accomplished what God wants - a relationship with the Father through Jesus' work at Calvary. They qualify well for the "committed to the Gospel as its one message" but would fail a test of "making disciples" in the "mathetouseite" sense of the term.

Of course, one could well argue that the real preaching of the Gospel should include an emphasis repentance and be followed the practical surrender of life into Spirit-led transformation, but that isn't the normal thinking of an average believer when they hear the term Gospel. I think we have seen nearly 100 years of post revivalist emphasis on "closing the sale" in response to the message as an end in itself - whether there is practical surrender or transformation. I hope that caution is at least acknowledged and perhaps discussed. I believe the issue of the Good News to this generation is different than before. In the wake of the Irish immigration, Billy Sunday may have been worried about people trying to get to heaven by works. Today, a reduction of the Gospel appears to me to be offering people heaven without any work - be in repentance or transformation. I don't find people trying to work their way to heaven, I just see people that want to make a decision that costs them nothing in practice but guarantees heaven when they die, after a life of self-consumption.

Jim Hocking:

This looks good to me...thanks for the reminder.

Tony Web:

Thank Tom for inquiring and reminding!

I like the definition - I would suggest the following to make it more effective:

“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.”

first phrase: great - defines location geographically; Gospel message - great; On mission - great - this hits a combination of concepts we use in VO - in VO I measure two things;

1. church starts - this is when there is 1. ownership - I have a name of who is responsible for doing the planting work; 2 spiritual activity has begun in that place (but not see "fruit" yet);

2. new churches - I move church starts to the new church category when 1. there are at least 3 families (beyond the initial worker(s)), and an intentional adoption of the 5 functions of church (leitourgia; diakoneo; didasko; kyrusso; koinonia).

I use these 5 functions because 1. they are expansive - I see the definition above not expansive enough - biblical commitment to leadership and ordinances plus mission - great; but we can ask for more and if we ask for more we just might get it.

In my experience the "who" church is cares for itself (1. Apostolic mission; 2. koinonia relationships; 3. Jesus' mission) but the "what" church does does not care for itself - the 5 functions above. There is a lot of cloudy thinking here and things we hope happen do not always happen. We are seeing through the regional oversight roles that when we ask for the 5 functions and those are taught to the group in question and they say "yes" - we have something worthwhile.

I can say more but will stop here.

Neil Cole (This was sent to Mike Yoder after Neil sent his first response. Neil sent it to me as additional discussion that might be helpful. I have already provided Neil's initial email to the membership team.)

I did read the entire statement and do not think that the phrase "Christ-followers" helps, in fact it raises other issues. I considered mentioning them before but the list was already too long, but since you brought it up I will go on...

Are we saying that a believer who is not following Christ is not part of the church? At which point does he/she stop becoming part when he/she disobeys one command or three or seventy times seven? Is church membership to be determined by our level of devotion and how do we measure that? Would the carnal Corinthians or the luke warm Laodiceans qualify as a church? How about the Galatians who were obviously following the Law rather than Christ? I think that the universal church is a bit easier to describe this way than the practicality of a local church and is best done in hindsight because we are not able to correctly separate the wheat from the tares this side of heaven.

I do think that the phrase "Christ-followers" still assumes Christ rather than including him. It is not just his commands or his written word but his imminent presence that makes the difference. His character is as important to us as his dictates, and his character is more than simply his reputation (i.e. stories about his character, but in the way he still responds to us and our world).

Church is not just those who follow Him but includes Him just as a body includes a head. He, in fact, is the best part of us and the thing that truly makes us any different than a religious club or another world religion. It is not just his written word but his presence and His voice (John 5:39), which is our very life.

Bro, I am sorry but I am very passionate about this and believe that the continued usage of this same theological "definition" of church is perpetuating problems. Why do we land on these same ingredients every time? Why not include others? None of the "one anothers" in the NT are included, certainly those commands have relevance to the church. None of the spiritual gifts are mentioned. The fruit of the Spirit isn't included, should it be? There are so many commands in the NT why are these the ones we stick with? Some add church discipline. Some add preaching/teaching. I think adding all these doesn't help. More ingredients or less ingredients will not

make the list better or worse, more biblical or less. The Bible doesn't make such a list, and perhaps for a reason. In the end, I think the problem is not in the ingredients on the list but in the lenses that create the list in the first place. I think we never really took off the Roman Catholic lenses with the reformation we simply "reformed" catholic doctrine with a protestant tint to the lens. We non-creedal anabaptists ought to be more sensitive to this problem but instead we just perpetuate the same stuff that our reformed brothers give us.

We are striving too hard to define what we already have and make it biblical rather than simply taking what the NT says and letting it define us. Our own description of church BTW includes the DNA that Tom Julien has brought to our attention...

"The presence of Jesus among His people (Biblical Truth), called out as a spiritual family (Biblical Relationship) to pursue His mission on this planet (Biblical Mission)."

For us this is the DNA of the church (Divine Truth, Nurturing Relationships and Apostolic Mission) and is likely the place we ought to stay rather than venture too deep into nitpicking through all the NT commands to create a concise list. If the NT is silent on a church definition than perhaps we should be...or at least strive to be as open and as broad as we can be.

It seems to me that the Greatest commandment--Loving God with heart, mind soul and strength (Divine Truth); The second greatest--loving our neighbor as ourselves (Nurturing Relationships); and The Great Commission--make disciples of all the nations (Apostolic Mission) is the best place to settle. Paul did. He said these three things are most important: Faith (response to truth) Hope (response to mission) and love (response to relationship).

At least understand that this is important to me and I have given a lot of time studying this and living with it, so when I see people that I love continuing to stay in the same trap I get amped up a bit. In the previous email (and likely this one) I have pressed too hard, but I did so out of passionate concern.

I imagine it is easy to write this off as Neil just being Neil again, and then move on without really considering what I am saying. I hope not, but couldn't blame you if you did. It is likely tempting to just say this is for practical consideration and move on with a "working definition that we can all agree on for the sake of our discussion/strategies," but I think my concerns are practical as well. I think there is at least some merit in what I am raising, but we are all entitled to our own thoughts and opinions and you do not have to accept mine. I just hope that you at least consider them.

Pressing on,

Neil

George Bullard (Consultant):

Guys:

Speaking as one outside the Grace Brethren movement, but keenly interested in your vitality and vibrancy, this definition works well for a denominational movement for multiple reasons. I like the fact that it is Christ-centered, calls for primary face-to-face relationships, is Gospel-focused, affirms Biblical authority, speaks to worship [ordinances], and highlights a missional focus supported by a discipling process. It works for me!

I also affirm the movement that Neil is part of and would call those situations something like "new works", "new clusters", "new fellowships", "emerging congregations", etc., but the vast majority do not fit a denominational movement definition of an ongoing, organized congregation on which a sustainable core of a denominational movement can be built. They do, however, represent an important initiative into the unchurched, preChristian, and dechurched world without which a denominational movement could lose its cutting edge and have less zeal as a missional movement.

I hope these are helpful affirmations.