

Church Planters Corner**Keys and Issues in Planting the Local Church**

What are the Marks of a Biblical Church?

by Missionary David R. Cox

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See also

David Cox - [Marks of a False Prophet](#)David Cox - [Marks of a Biblical Church](#)David Cox - [Marks of a unbiblical Church?](#)David Cox - [Before you Join a Church](#)

Introduction

These pages are really unnecessary if people would only think. Almost everything that I have written on these pages is simple common sense if you think about it. It is my hope that putting them down in writ that you will keep them in mind, and be able to take guidance from them in discerning God's will in your churches and personal life. I do not attack any person, group, organization, nor practice except where I see it against my understanding of Scriptures. If you do not like what you read, sit and meditate on it with an open Bible to see if perhaps you are wrong before you write me.

Exclusivity of a Local Church

Let's focus on what is a church for a moment. A "church" is simply a group of redeemed people who according to the will and instruction of God, get together and form a religious group in a single locality in order to do the work of God, making the will of God their objective. See [What is the Work of God?](#) We cannot understand the formation and structure of a local church without first going to the biblical, divine purpose given by God.

But having said that, there are a lot of groups or organizations which are religious in nature, which supposedly are "good". I have even dealt with a number of people involved in Alcoholics Anonymous which essentially treat AA as their "church". They cannot come to church very often because AA organizes retreats over the weekend.

There are a lot of things going around today that is not of God's design, but it pretending to act like churches. Some of these monsters are calling themselves "churches" and others are calling themselves "schools", "universities", "Christian camps", "fellowships", "counseling centers", etc.

See [God's Pattern of the Local Church as the Method of God.](#)

But let's cut through the bull and reveal these things for what they are. God has made only one creation which God's will for doing God's work, and that creation is a local church like what we see in the NT. When it comes to evangelism, discipleship, counseling, or anything else God gave the local church to do, the church is what is God's will.

If we want to know what is a "good" church, then it has to look like what a church looks like in the New Testament. For as much as some people want to twist and distort the NT picture, a church was a group of people like sheep, with a shepherd over them caring for them, and making a vast majority of the decisions for them. In the NT we see that the pastor, elders, or leaders all wanted the people to get involved in some decisions, especially involving charity to needy brethren.

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Definition and Purpose of a NT Church

We should start off that there is no such thing as a "good" church if it is not "biblical". The bottom line here is not what you or I define as "good" or "biblical" or "bad", but rather what God has defined for us. So our foundation for thinking about a local church has to be before anything else has to recognize the Authority of God over the church. See [Refusing to recognize the Authority of Scripture](#). The church exists solely because God has commanded that it exists. The church therefore HAS to exist according to why and how God desires it to exist.

We can therefore clearly begin with ...

1. A good church follows the commands and authority of God.

Beyond this being in the Pastor's head, it must be a theme in everything that the church does, as well as a recognizable part of the structure of the local church, as well as a constant element or theme in the preaching and teaching of the local church. We must always hold "what does the Scripture say about ..." as a strong and overwhelming element of our local church.

How to tell: One way to check for this quality is to study the authority structure of the church. What is the authority behind what the church wants me to do? Every religious group wants us to do something. When my church asks me to do something, what is the reason for doing it? Here we must understand that not everything needs to have a Scripture verse (even though that is not bad). For example, it is not necessary to have a Scripture verse when a church asks their members not to park their cars across three parking spaces. That is more something that is courteous and maintains order. It gets into another problem is a church over uses this principle and because there may not be a specific verse somewhere, they begin to twist Scriptures in order to "always have a verse". Give them a break. Some things you just need to do to maintain order and propriety.

Here we must insert our second characteristic of a biblical church.

2. A good church exalts the Bible as the primary communication of God's will to us.

I hesitate at adding "primary" in the above sentence, but I think in our day it is necessary. If the Scriptures is the primary instrument of revelation of the will of God, what are the rest? I think that second is the activity of the Holy Spirit within the believer. I do not believe that God is in the business of giving new revelations equal to Scripture to people today, but we must understand and emphasize and defend that God guides EACH AND EVERY INDIVIDUAL believer through the work of the Holy Spirit in his own life. We recognize this as the priesthood of each believer, and Paul touches on it as Christian liberty.

Here we must be quick to clarify first that nothing which you think God reveals to you can contradict what Scriptures say. Simply put, the priority is first on Holy Scriptures over anything else. People misunderstand God's will, and our absolute authority is Holy Scriptures. Secondly let's clarify that like Paul explains in some brethren with bad previous experiences with meat offered to idols, each person has an individual understanding of God's individual for their lives, what is sin, what is not sin, and what is God's gifts, will, mate, and vocation for them, and God does not reveal these things except to the Christian who seeks it for his own life. The only person to really know and believe all this as the will of God, is solely the person whose life it is. Thirdly let's say that outside of Holy Scriptures, we have NO AUTHORITY to force these good and right convictions on other people. They (and we) are under Christian liberty, therefore, a fundamental sign of a good church is a recognition and honoring of Christian liberty.

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3. A good church recognizes and defends Christian liberty.

Here another term used for this is soul liberty. I am going to be frank. Some of these things are part of the Baptist Distinctive. I do not make apology for this, because I am baptist (small "b") and I am Baptist because of Baptists officially promote these exact points. I feel no blush at this. Likewise I am going much beyond this to view out aspects such as things identified with cults to base some things here.

While I am on the issue, let me bash some Baptists. Some guys out there are really big on the Baptist and don't have a clue as to what being a Baptist is. This is not according to just me, but anybody (read big B Baptists) who has written on the Baptist Distinctive. I find an overwhelming popish element among a lot of the Baptists of our day. This Baptist Distinctive is a recognition of what's wrong in local churches, and a stand against that, and proclaiming boldly they are Baptists, they break every principle that true Baptists believe in.

Likewise they bash anything without the "Baptist" label, and in actuality, there are a lot of other churches without the Baptist label (I am thinking here of Bible Churches) which are more Baptist in principle than the majority of Baptist Churches out there. In reality, all of this is not about a label (a "denomination" if you will, which is a calling a thing by a proper and indicative label), but the heart of this matter is practice and doctrine. So they destroy all they proclaim they are but living a ministry which is highly, "what I want, what I say, what I am going to do no matter what or who says different". So these types of guys simply are Baptist popes, but please rub out the word "Baptist" please and leave them with their mentors, Rome.

How to Tell: I think among fundamental churches the most important failing is in Christian liberty. The carnal Christian always gravitates towards a list of things that he can comply with so that he can be spiritual. These lists that they make are always external, and especially "doable" by unsaved people or carnal Christians. *"A spiritual Christian reads at least 10 chapters of his Bible every day."* Any unsaved or carnal person can do that. But *"A spiritual Christian loves his enemies from his heart."* Nobody wants to deal with that kind of internal, spiritual marks because (1) they are too hard to do, and (2) they are too hard to easily recognize and beat everybody else with saying you are more spiritual than they are. Read [Galatians 5:22-23](#). These are the fruit of the Holy Spirit's indwelling in a believer. They are extremely difficult to reduce to an outward observable act. Sometimes they can be seen in outward acts, but it is not what can be reduced to a single particular outward action.

The indications here of a good church is that they refuse to fall into this trap of externals defining salvation or spirituality. They clearly acknowledge that a good, spiritual Christian should live a good life, but they hesitate on putting lists up, and they hesitate on bragging rights of those who supposedly are spiritual or getting near there. Always remember, spirituality is being like Christ, meek and humble. When a person tells you he is humble, he never is. The declaration in itself is bragging, pride, arrogance. Do not believe him, and do not honor him as somebody who has

something spiritual that he can give you.

Let me jump to our other page (marks of a bad church) and say that all cults have a common element of trying to control excessively their members. That is probably the singular distinctive element of a cult according to secular psychologists. For Christians, the singular distinctive element has to be separation (heresy means separation or schismatic) over a doctrine they believe is biblical but is in fact a false interpretation of the Bible.

When churches and religious groups start doing the thinking for you, and they demand doing and thinking in the way they outline as THE ONLY BIBLICAL way, be careful. Listen to their explanation from Scriptures, and if the explanation has unanswered questions, if it is not very obvious from the Scriptures they use, if it is confusing, or if they rely heavily on non-biblical sources or explanations, then it is probably a cult in formation if not an outright cult.

Above all, if your religious authority in your church insists on the only authority you need is "because I say so" (his own inherent authority), then smile, turn, and run away for life. This is Satanic. Satan insists on his inherent authority as being a challenge to God's authority. Any human minister or pastor that does the same is following in Satan's path, get away, and get away fast.

Next we touched on this issue above, but ...

4. A good church is composed of good, mature, Christian believers.

2 Timothy 2:22 Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

Another extremely important element is that a good church is composed of good, spiritually mature believers. We cannot emphasize this point enough I believe. This problem is very acute in our churches. It is essentially, there are spiritual success stories clearly and abundantly visible. I have seen Hollywood type promotional stories that just stink. The Universal Church of Christ from Brazil does this on TV. They have daily commercials here in Mexico, where they promote their church. Their only point is that everybody gets a blessing from sacrificing for God. Therefore THEY are that church where you should give to, and the deeper the sacrifice, the greater blessing. So you must give until it hurts.

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Living, breathing, real people that are have had their lives changed by Christ is what we are talking about here. No promotional gimmicks, frauds, or things that are arranged for public consumption. One of the most important things in a person's spiritual life is to really grasp what is salvation. Salvation is a life changing relationship with the Savior.

Let me just put out a simple principle that is true. When God's people understand God's will, there is no need for promotional gimmicks nor begging for finances for any program nor building. If it is within the financial ability of these obedient members, they will give of their own free will without promotions, gimmicks, tricks, or begging. If it is outside of their ability, why is the church leadership pushing it then? Moreover the church growth gimmicks are a big problem also. Through church surveys, it is well established that most people join and stay as members in a church because of the other people they have relationships there (family and friends). If that is true, then we will see church growth when our members realize their testimony and ministry of reconciliation, and undertake to be friends with other people and use those friends to first bring them to Christ, and then secondly to bless their souls through the experience of living within the community of faith. Nothing can substitute a shining Christian testimony of your people who tell others of Christ and invite them to join their church.

Be especially wary of churches composed mainly of problematic people who are heavy laden with spiritual, social, and emotional problems who are not trying to overcome them, and especially when

these are the key people in a church. A bad church is one where the leadership cannot discern these types of people and/or cannot keep them out of public positions (pulpit, leadership, oversight, service) within the church.

5. A good church practices church discipline.

6. A good church stresses separation.

Consider God's illustration of the redeemed and Christ, the Savior. We are part of the body of Christ. Within every body there is an immune system which has the task of identifying, attacking aggressively, and expelling what is harmful or alien to the body. Spiritually within the body of Christ, this task falls to the work of the Holy Spirit through separation.

A good church will always teach, preach, and stress holiness and separation. There is no other way. The leadership of the church especially will constantly be watching and vigilant against things that are deviants. Here the idea is that people, doctrine, or conduct that is not correct biblically. Especially on the radar scope is false prophets who pretend to be good spiritual men of God who bring in secretly false and damming doctrines).

You may talk about love all you want, but true love is to protect your loved ones from those that cause damage and harm. There is always a defensive position true love takes, and eventually when your loved ones are threaten, then an offensive position is absolutely necessary.

7. A good church insists on spiritual, exemplary leadership.

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8. A good church has a constant emphasis on evangelism.

A good church has a definite affinity towards biblical evangelism. Biblical evangelism

9. A good church has a constant emphasis on and sacrifice for world missions.

10. A good church focuses on the Fundamentals of the Christian faith.

11. A good church focuses on serving the saints, and the saints serving.

Requirements for Christian service in a local church: Faithful testimony, Good Doctrine.

Some churches have a policy of using service obligation to trap members so that they cannot leave or have another life outside that church. See my discussion, [psychological traps to get, retain, and punish their members](#), for more on this subject.

12. A good church has fervency because of their expectation of the soon return of Christ.

13. A good church has God centered worship and praise.

14. A good church believes in the power of prayer, and practices praying as the most important, essential, and powerful aspect of their ministry.

15. A good church exalts expositional preaching.

16. A good church equips, edifies, and empowers their members to serve Christ.

Discipleship.

17. A good church is independent and autonomous.

18. A good church fosters, promotes, and demands a loving and caring atmosphere between the members (and between members and leaders).

Unity

19. A good church hurts.

That may sound like a strange thing, but remember a good church steps on your toes. Church is about making you into a good Christian, and that means that (1) you come in as something less, and if you are already a good Christian, (2) a good church will demand that you sacrifice to help those who struggling spiritually.

Church is not a "spectator sport". Everybody has work to do. The immature has to grow. The mature has to teach and foster growth. Nobody can be lazy or unoccupied.

In a good church, the preaching needs to be such that it causes the members to reflect upon their lives and their sins, and see God's will, and change. Nobody is without sin ([1 John 1:8-10](#)), and the pastor's job is to find out about those sins of his people, and study God's word about those sins, and confront those sins publicly in the preaching and teaching. Moreover, the pastor's job is to know how God works his work and will, and establish those things firmly in the minds of his people. The pastor must understand how repentance, holiness, growth, evangelism, reproduction, discipleship, etc. all work, and present these teachings clear to his people.


When a person always feels good after the sermons, then the pastor has not touched on any of their sins. This type of preaching is exhortation too, because it firms up what they are already doing right. But even though it is right and good, the good preacher always is scouting for indications of sin he hasn't touched on yet, and presents God's word on those, as well as using a general shotgun method of hitting on a lot of sins mentioned in the Bible to see if he can rustle up some action on some of them.

Perhaps one of the most helpful things you can do for your preacher is to tell him when something has hit a soft spot in your life, has blessed your heart, or has caused you to struggle with a sin. These things are the things that really motivate and guide a good preacher. He yearns for them constantly. Let me also say that EVERY SINGLE GOOD PASTOR struggles with his own ego, and has to fight against a swelled head. Most pastors have a secret weapon against the swelled head

syndrome which is called a "frank wife" that puts you in your place, but sometimes they don't. It does me no good to have people brag on how great a preacher they have, or how great a pastor I am. The spiritual humble people in my congregation NEVER SAY ANYTHING LIKE THAT. The big spiritual headaches are the ones who always want to impress me somehow, and I just take it with a grain of salt considering what a spiritual disaster their lives are in. So don't just praise your pastor, it doesn't help. Be specific about a specific sermon or teaching or thing you see in his life that helps you spiritually. That gives praise to God's word and ultimately to God, and bypasses the preacher as simply a vessel used by God. That is what makes us really feel like good servants of the Almighty.

Consider for moment that if a good church stomps on my toes (presents rebuking teaching and preaching), then how can it even exist? The people come to get offended and cut by the sword of the Word of God, maybe they won't return? This is exactly the dynamic that God has placed in the structure of a local church. It is only the faithfulness of God's truly saved that keep them coming back for more of what really hurts them because it is repentance preaching, "You are sinful and wrong. Change." Some pastors have seen this element, and have taken it to an unhealthy and sinful extreme where they delight in hurting their people in their preaching. As a pastor, my point is not hurting my people, but seeing them as my children, that they walk in light, and live victoriously. This truly thrills my heart. The hurting part of it is necessary before the good comes. It is like pulling a decayed tooth. There is some hurt involved before the good happens, and the pain stops. But the dentist has to inflict some pain (pulling the tooth) before the real long-lasting and damaging (sometimes life threatening) pain stops.

Therefore a good church has a protective mentality of their pastor. They will not allow undue influences to bash their pastor. Some rich folks in the church sometimes threaten to cut the pastor's salary or their tithes if such and such is not done. What this tells me as a pastor is that the rest of the church is sitting on their wallets, and letting a few pay for everything, when all should be supporting the work of their church. Such threats against the preaching should not be allowed. I have seen pastors working secular jobs because their people refuse to pay them a livable salary, sometimes they are full-time and have their salaries cut to difficult levels. All of this is because of some offensive preaching that the pastor did. Good church members will not allow this, and a good church is based in a good pastor and members.

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