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Understanding the New Testament Church

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Contents

The Gospel message -----	9
The Gospel written in human history -----	10
Abraham and the promise -----	11
Israel and the law -----	12
Jesus Christ the Savior -----	13
The new testament church and grace-----	14
Baptism and the new testament church -----	15
The Lord's Supper and the new testament church -----	16
Leadership in the new testament church -----	17
Discipline in the new testament church -----	18
Unaffiliated, new testament churches -----	19
Christ and the new testament church-----	20
Choosing a biblical church -----	22

*Unto him be glory in the church by Christ
Jesus throughout all ages, world without end.
Amen.*

—Ephesians 3:21

The reality and presence of God in the course of human history is convincingly evident by the existence of the new testament church. This institution completes the Gospel message of Jesus Christ which has been written in and with human history spanning hundreds of generations and four thousand years. Some of the ideas shared in the following first few paragraphs are better appreciated by those who have an understanding of the Bible and who are familiar with old testament stories. Nonetheless, this lesson is beneficial to everyone and will become increasingly enlightening with spiritual maturity.

The Gospel message

Before the foundation of the world and the creation of man, God decreed that salvation would be available by means of grace through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ to everyone who by freewill believes in Christ, repents of their sins, and calls upon His name¹. Man is in need of salvation and help from God because he is sinful by nature, depraved and unholy (Romans 3:10). Further, man's relationship with God is governed by Law, which makes him accountable and punishable for his sins (Romans 7:9). However, because of love and the desire to be gracious and merciful, Jesus Christ sacrificed Himself to pay for humanity's sins and thereby make it possible to offer both salvation from condemnation and hope of eternal

¹Ephesians 2:8—9; Luke 13:3; Romans 10:9—13

life (First Corinthians 15:3). Those who accept Christ's invitation (believing in Him and repenting of their sins) are mercifully forgiven of their sins and miraculously changed spiritually. The moment salvation occurs, the relationship that a believer has with God is no longer governed by Law but is established by grace. Thus, the Bible speaks of believers being no longer under the Law but under grace (Romans 6:14). Every believer's previous relationship with God was governed by Law, but the present and new relationship with God is governed by grace. A Christian's life begins under the Law in sin and death and ends under grace in righteousness and life. Jesus Christ makes this passage from sin to righteousness and from death to life possible (Acts 4:12). A sense of awe accompanies the fact that God announced this plan of good news before Adam was created (Titus 3:5).

The Gospel written in human history

The sequence of events beginning with God's promise and ending with the grace of salvation are recorded in history as a testimony of God's intimate involvement in human affairs. The new testament church derives its name from its role in this historical presentation of the Gospel and assumes an awesome responsibility in fulfilling its role in history. To appreciate the typological role of the new testament church in history, four major events involved in salvation should be kept in mind: (1) God's promise of salvation before the world began, (2) the Law of sin and death, (3) the personal acceptance of Jesus Christ, and (4) the grace of forgiveness and righteousness. The historical representations that depict these four major events have nothing to do with the personal salvation of souls and, therefore, are typologies of the events involved in salvation. God has chosen to record the Gospel message of salvation in historical events spanning hundreds of generations to show that He is in control over events that are otherwise beyond the control

of man. The four historical events that parallel and represent the four events of the Gospel message are: (1) God’s promise to Abraham to bless all families in the earth, (2) the covenant of law between God and Israel, (3) the presentation of Jesus Christ as Savior, and (4) the covenant of grace between God and His church (see table one below).

Table one. Comparison of the Gospel and its historical typology

<u>The Gospel of Salvation</u>	<u>The Typology in History</u>
1. God’s promise	1. God’s promise to Abraham
2. The law of sin and death	2. Covenant of law between God and Israel
3. Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior	3. Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior
4. Grace	4. Covenant of grace between God and His church.

Abraham and the promise

Typologically, Abraham represents God the Father, and Isaac represents Jesus Christ. Abraham received the divine promise that a multitude of generations would come from him (Genesis 12:1—3, & 7). His son Isaac came by miracle and promise, and through him, the nation of Israel and heirs to Abraham’s promise came forth. To complete this typology, God told Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. Just as God offered His Son to be a sacrifice before the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8), Abraham offered his son before the existence of Israel. However, the sacrifice of Isaac was only a typology, so God stopped Abraham from completing the sacrifice before Isaac was killed. Nonetheless, the typology of

Abraham and Isaac as God the Father and Son was fulfilled. Following these events, Isaac married Rebekah and they had two sons, Esau and Jacob. The birth and events that transpired in the lives of Esau and Jacob depict how salvation is personally realized. Esau's life shows how that salvation is available and, in fact, intended for us but that it is lost when we reject it and despise its worth. Jacob's life shows how that we are chosen by God to receive salvation by grace, though undeserved, because we believe in His promise. Jacob's name change to Israel illustrates how that we are changed by God after yielding to Him (Genesis 35:10). From Jacob was born the nation of Israel, which was identified by Jacob's new name.

Israel and the law

The role of the nation of Israel in history was to represent the condition of being lost or condemned when one's relationship with God is governed by Law. Their time in Egypt was one of bondage, suffering, and death. When they followed Moses to the desert, they met God at Mt. Horeb. Because they were fulfilling the historical typology of a person condemned in sin, their relationship with God was governed by law (also known as the law of Moses)². If they obeyed God, they would be blessed. If they disobeyed God, they would be cursed. This law is referred to as the old covenant or the old testament. The events and conditions of this covenant are recorded in the old testament of your Bible. Because the Law is the means whereby we are condemned for our sins, the presentation of God to the tribes of Israel at Mt. Horeb was with smoke and fire, loud thundering, fear, and the threat of death to anyone who touched His mountain (Exodus 20:18). When our relationship with God is governed by Law, death and condemnation are certain (Romans 3:20). It is not possible to establish a good relationship with God based on Law. This is why throughout the history of Israel God was always punishing them and condemning them. They could not keep the law of Moses any more than a person

²Exodus 24:3—8

can keep the Law of God and expect to go to heaven. Thus, the lesson of Israel in history is to show that the lost are condemned in their sins because their relationship with God is governed by Law. Failure and doom are inevitable.

Jesus Christ the Savior

About fifteen hundred years after Israel made their covenant of law with God, Jesus Christ came to fulfill the prophecies telling of the Messiah that would save them from their enemies. Though Jesus Christ had been slain from the foundation of the world to make salvation possible for everyone from Adam to the end of the world, He came to earth at a critical time in history to fulfill the historical typology of the Gospel message. Without Jesus Christ, salvation from the Law and condemnation, and deliverance to righteousness and life are not possible. Jesus presented Himself to Israel as their Savior, and Jesus' crucifixion showed that death is the only way to make salvation possible. Also, Jesus did not use a typology substitute for Himself in this historical representation of the Gospel in order to emphasize that He is the only qualified sacrifice. During Jesus' time in Israel, He ended the old covenant of law with Israel and established a new covenant of grace with His church (Matthew 23:37—38). This change of covenants depicts the change that takes place when Jesus comes into a person's life—being removed from law into grace and passing from death to life. Though the historical change of covenants began in Israel exclusively with the Jews, the new covenant is open to everyone, just as salvation has been available to everyone from the beginning. The events of this new covenant are recorded in the new testament of your Bible. Thus, the appearance of Jesus in history marks a change from law to grace just as when He comes into a believer's life marking a change from Law to grace. Whereas Israel was responsible to represent one's relationship governed by Law, the new testament church is responsible to represent a believer's relationship governed by grace.

The new testament church and grace

The church's role in history and typology is awesome in significance. The church has the responsibility to testify of God's perfect and permanent work in the lives of believers. Whereas Israel's testimony was to show the inevitable failure of a relationship with God governed by Law, the church's testimony is to show the success of a relationship with God in grace. A believer's relationship with God is successful because of love, forgiveness, and righteousness. Thus, the new testament church is responsible to exhibit these qualities. Every believer who commits himself to membership in a new testament church bears personal responsibility to uphold and to protect the testimony of the Gospel of Jesus Christ not only individually but also as typology in history. Carnal Christians in a church threaten the integrity of Christ's message, shame Him openly, and contribute to falsifying the Gospel message (Hebrews 6:6). Corrupt lives corrupt the Gospel testimony. Fortunately, God does not require perfection to participate in His church, however, He does expect every member to be responsible to the covenant. Our frequent failures and struggles with sin exemplify the importance of the love, grace, and mercy God has for us. The church, while exhorting and encouraging righteous living, must, therefore, also show no less love, grace, and mercy than God does. Further, because God humbled Himself to serve man, believers in His church should do no less. Other qualities that church members should possess because they are attributes of God include forgiveness, holiness, purity, faithfulness, trustworthiness, honesty, and peace. Being associated with a church is a big responsibility that should be taken seriously.

Baptism and the new testament church

Membership into the new testament church is preceded by baptism. This act on the part of a believer is a public proclamation that he is identified with Christ and desires to uphold the testimony of the Gospel and bring others to Jesus Christ. Submission to baptism should be a believer's first step after being saved to announce his belief that God's will is the right and best way to live (Luke 7:29). Baptism is a vital link to the succession of authority that God gives to His church. Through baptism, believers are divinely authorized and empowered to participate and conduct the ministry of the new testament church (Acts 1:8). Thus, it is of critical importance that every member be baptized in conformance to biblical instruction. Without acceptable baptism, a believer lacks the associated gifts. Such baptism is called alien baptism. A church full of well-meaning, but unscripturally baptized members lacks the power and promise of God associated with proper baptism. The well-being and longevity of such a church is threatened because of the intense spiritual warfare Satan is waging against new testament churches. Acceptable baptism requires an authorized official of the church to do the baptism, a believer to be baptized, and water for the complete immersion of the believer. Churches who fail to practice baptism by these guidelines or accept into membership believers not properly baptized are filling their pews with people who are not authorized or empowered to participate in a new testament church. Eventually, these churches develop a corrupt message of the Gospel and are diverted from God's work. Fortunately, though individual churches may fail, new testament churches will continue to exist until the end of the world because of Christ's promise (Matthew 16:18).

Some are confused about the legitimacy of ministries because of the good that so many parachurch organizations and ministries do. There are many organizations and unauthorized churches where many sincere and talented believers are serving

the Lord. Many are reaching the lost with the Gospel, and many are helping to equip the saints in the faith. However, these groups are not new testament churches. Regardless of the activity and good done by a ministry, inclusion into the new testament church is by authorized baptism alone. It is God's desire that every believer choose to participate in His church and contribute to the fulfillment of the historical typology of the Gospel. Just as saints in times past had a choice to join Israel or to remain separated from Israel, so likewise, saints have the same choice today with regard to the church. This has nothing to do with salvation or being in the family of God. To distinguish His church from all other organizations, God refers to it as His bride (Ephesians 5:23—32). The reason for this is that as in marriage, God has a covenant with His church. This covenant is permanent—a commitment to be faithful to each other. Every believer should desire to be in the bride of Christ, and every believer should view his association in the church like a marriage commitment. In addition to demonstrating the relationship Christ establishes with believers; strong, faithful commitments result in strong churches. The success of churches requires commitment on the part of the members to be faithful and to fulfill their role in the ministry for Christ. Church hoppers do not make for good, dependable churches.

The Lord's Supper and the new testament church

Though baptism is a one time event when done in accordance to biblical instruction, God gives the new testament church another ordinance to serve as a special time of publicly declaring identity with Christ, remembering Christ's work, and renewing commitment to Christ. Proper observance of the Lord's Supper involves unleavened (no yeast) bread and unleavened (no fermentation) fruit juice. The unleavened bread and juice indicate that Jesus' body and blood were acceptable offerings of sacrifice for our sins because there was no sin in

Him. The significance of the new testament church and the importance of each member's responsibility to protect the church's testimony is indicated by the consequences resulting from carnality and sin of unrepented church members participating in the Lord's Supper (communion). First Corinthians 11:30 records that many members were sick, weakly, and even dead because of failing to take the church seriously especially during the time of special renewal and remembrance at communion. Because the Lord's Supper is a time of publicly declaring commitment and obedience to Christ, members who are unrepented of a carnal lifestyle are unworthy to participate in the Lord's Supper (First Corinthians 11:29). For this reason, a church is responsible to remove from membership unrepented members in violation of their covenant to God and to their church and to practice closed communion (First Corinthians 5:7—13). Closed communion defines the boundary of special relationship, responsibility, and accountability that each church member has to a particular body of believers. It also emphasizes the special relationship between the new testament church and God and the importance of membership in a church. Believers in obedience to God are members of a local church and participants in communion. The new testament church belongs to God, it has a special relationship to Him, and it is of great importance to Him. He expects every believer to consider their church membership important.

Leadership in the new testament church

Because the new testament church is of such importance to God and to the historical typology of the Gospel, God has given specific instruction to protect it. Leaders in the church bear responsibility to guard the spiritual well-being of the members, to educate them, to oversee spiritual growth, and to ensure that ministry activity is in conformance to God's will and instruction. Therefore, the Bible gives criteria for selecting leadership and cautions against approving ordination for inex-

perienced men (First Timothy 3:1—13). The emphasis for leadership is on godly character and selection by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28). The pastor ultimately shoulders the responsibility for the spiritual well-being of the church. He and the other ministers of the Gospel on staff in a church are instructed to spend time in prayer and fasting in order to discern God's direction and counsel for the church (Acts 6:4). Because of this important commitment of time with God required of ministers, other leaders in the church are designated to oversee the physical well-being of the church (Acts 6:1—3). These leaders are called deacons. God designates leadership in the church to ensure organization and efficiency to accomplish His work physically as well as spiritually. Ministers and deacons have an emphasis in their responsibilities, but not to the exclusion of other duties in the church. Likewise, all members in the church are expected to participate in all areas of ministry from prayer to decoration, to witnessing, to facility maintenance, to teaching (Hebrews 13:6&13). The ordained leaders in the church are given to the church to serve as rolemodels of what God expects from every member (First Corinthians 11:1). Every member should be concerned with improving his service to God and with his role in the new testament church (First Corinthians 12:18).

Discipline in the new testament church

Members who choose to forsake their responsibility to Christ and are unrepented concerning their sins, are a serious threat to the spiritual and physical health of the church. To protect the integrity of the new testament church, God has given guidelines for church discipline (Matthew 18:15—18). A member in violation of his commitment to God and to His church should be personally confronted and encouraged to repent of his sins. If he refuses this personal exhortation, he is to be confronted by several members. If he remains unrepented about fulfilling his responsibility to live worthy of the new

testament, then the church is responsible to remove that member from church membership to let God deal with him (First Corinthians 5:12—13). Removal from church membership emphasizes to the disciplined member that he has done wrong; acknowledges as a witness to the community that such behavior is unbecoming and dishonorable to Christ; maintains the integrity of the church's ministry, authorization and empowerment; protects the church's role in fulfilling the historical typology of righteousness in the new covenant; and reminds everyone that commitment to God should be taken seriously. The Bible says that God deals with members removed from the church rolls. The goal is to restore the member back to membership as soon as repentance is evident. As testimony to the infinite love and eternal forgiveness God has for each of us, Christ instructed His disciples that forgiveness should be shown without limit (Matthew 18:22). Restoration shows the love of God, His grace, His mercy, and His forgiveness, and the testimony of church discipline shows two important qualities of God: (1) His expectation for believers to live in the righteousness of a new life in Him, and (2) His love for and readiness to forgive those willing to repent.

Unaffiliated, new testament churches

To ensure that His church is well guided and protected, Christ wants to personally oversee each new testament church in the world. As head of the new testament church, He wants direct management without interference or competition (Ephesians 5:23). Direct supervision over every church enables Him to effectively coordinate a world-wide ministry. For this reason, man-made hierarchies and organized conventions external to churches should be avoided. Every new testament church should remain unaffiliated and independent of man-made organizations. While mission boards, conventions, and para-church organizations have noble intentions, they are in violation of biblical doctrine. Only the new testament church is designated

as God's personal ministry commissioned to: (1) fulfill the great commission, (2) fulfill the historical typology of the Gospel message, (3) receive empowerment from the Holy Ghost, (4) have divine appointed overseers, (5) have authority to baptize, (6) be called His body, and (7) be called His bride. The new testament church is God's idea, His creation, and His method of reaching the world. It is the only institution on earth with the promise that it will withstand the gates of hell (Matthew 16:18). All other organizations are inferior and less desirable. Also, they compete with the church for the resources, talents, and membership of believers. Further, they contribute to confusing believers about the importance and role of the new testament church.

Christ and the new testament church

Understanding the significance of the new testament church and its purpose explains the Bible's exclamation in Ephesians 3:21, "to God be glory in the church." Man cannot improve on what God has organized, authorized, and empowered. Every church should desire Christ's personal supervision and oversight rather than the guidance of man-made mission boards and conventions, and every believer should desire membership in an unaffiliated, new testament church—the only ministry biblically recognized as being organized by Christ personally. Interestingly, the tendency of men is to form their own organizations thinking to improve how things are done, or for vanity and prestige, or for control. However, this is not the way Christ wants the ministry done. The new testament church is Christ's idea, and whatever He does should be respected. In fact, every believer should desire to participate in the ministry personally organized and approved by Christ. The failing of some churches to meet the needs of people is not due to failure on Christ's part in designing the church but is the failure of believers to follow Christ. Failure of churches does not justify abandonment of the new testament church or the

formation of man-made organizations with the noble intentions of helping churches. It is, instead, a call to awaken believers to be godward. It is an indication that believers are failing to listen to God and to follow His lead. It is an indication that believers need to renew their commitments to localized, new testament churches and focus their resources, talents, and energies into church ministries. This is not to say that conventions, para-church organizations, and believers not associated with a new testament church are not used by God or are not able to minister to the needs of people. Paul indicated in his letter to the Philippians that he was thankful that ministry was being conducted even though it was motivated wrongly (Philippians 1:15—18). Many groups have been a tremendous help to people and to churches. However, as in the case of the man who was casting out demons in the name of Jesus (Mark 9:38—40), non-church organizations are not a part of the inner circle of Christ or in the bride. The decision for a church to be unaffiliated and for a believer to insist on membership in an unaffiliated church is a choice of conforming to biblical doctrine. Many non-church organizations can argue their legitimacy by the good they do, however, they fail the test of doctrinal justification. The proper place for all ministries is inside a new testament church and not outside. The good that many conventions do confuses people about their doctrinal compromises and failings. For example, the Bible says to mark individuals that teach contrary to sound doctrine. Churches that would otherwise be considered biblically sound in doctrine and practice compromise their biblical integrity by affiliation with heresies in a convention. In fact, alliance with heresies for the sake of identity with a convention condones and is tacit approval of the heresies by association. Believers who would never think of supporting heresies do so by contributing to and supporting a convention. Ultimately, a convention's existence and benefits (retirement plan for ministers, training centers and materials, and financing for missions) eventually supersede doctrinal purity. Further, conventions, in turn, wield power and influence by finances and politics (regardless of intentions good or bad) over churches. Conventions literally make or break some missions and churches that depend

on it for financial support. Such influence external to churches interfere with and compete with the direct influence and control that Christ desires to have over His churches. Conventions are evidence of how man-made organizations can begin with good intentions but eventually interfere with the sovereignty of local, new testament church ministries.

Choosing a biblical church

Because decisions are only as good as your information, this lesson on the new testament church is very important. It shows that God expects believers to be members and participants in a local, new testament church; that each church should be under the direct headship of Christ and not affiliated with other organizations; and that the significance of the church places a great responsibility on the members to be committed, faithful, and exemplary in their witness of Christ.

For an informative lesson on the new testament church as localized, assemblies of believers bound by special covenant relationships request Dr. Briney's booklet, *The Local, Visible Church*. For information on the succession of Baptists from new testament churches by scriptural baptism, read Edgar J. Overbee's *Brief History the Baptists*, J.M. Carroll's, *The Trail of Blood.*, and John T. Christian's scholarly history book, *A History of the Baptists*.

