

Sermon to the saints which are at Topeka, Kansas – Sunday, January 4, 1959

Good morning this is Fred Phelps. My subject for today is New Testament church authority. This will be a plea for loyalty to the church which Jesus built. For, it is axiomatic that Jesus did build a church upon earth, that he built only one church, and that he promised that church perpetuity upon earth until his second advent. Elder Frank Beck once said, “In number, there are many expressions of Christ’s church and they all are the churches of Christ,” (**Romans 16:16.**) These churches are visible churches. They are not to be despised, nor lightly esteemed for they are true churches. Are they not the churches of Christ? These churches are also referred to in the sacred scripture as the “**Church of God,**” (**1st Corinthians 1:2,**) **the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth,** (**1st Timothy 3:15,**) and the “**body of Christ,**” (**1st Corinthians 12:27.**) And, these churches of God are in such an exalted position, that they’re spoken of being **in God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ,** (**2nd Thessalonians 1:1.**)

I repeat, these churches are real visible churches and not some imaginary invisible universal church. These churches are independent churches bound together only in the fellowship of the gospel. They are not bound together by presbyteries, general assemblies, senates, associations, or conventions. Each one of these churches is complete in itself as in Christ. These churches are made up of baptized believers on the lord Jesus Christ, (**Acts 18:8 and 1st Corinthians 1:2.**) To these churches, the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper were delivered, (**1st Corinthians 11:2.**) By these churches, missionaries are sent forth, (**Acts 13, 1-4.**) These churches choose their own officers, (**Acts 6, 1-5;**) receive their own members, (**Rom 14, 1;**) and dismiss their own members, (**1st Cor. 5:11.**)

No other organization existed in the new testament to do the will and work of God except the churches. I am blind to everything but the word of God in this matter. I say boldly that the large crop of independent mission boards and bible schools and radio broadcasts, evangelistic crusades and parties, and bible conferences and youth movements and so forth are not on New Testament ground in that they have not been authorized by the New Testament churches and in many cases take the place of the divinely instituted church of God. Therefore, enlightened Christians will refuse support to these extra church organizations. A conscientious and discerning Baptist, in particular, will have no part in such movements as youth for Christ, Gideon’s, child evangelism, Billy Graham crusades, back to the bible broadcasts and so forth.

There is a place upon Earth in this dispensation conceived in the Godhead where acceptable public worship and service may be performed. And that place is the local visible organized bible-preaching ordinance-administering self-governing discipline-exercising church: the New Testament church. And, if I may so say as it fits the pattern, a Baptist church. Wherever organized Christianity is found in the New Testament, it is found in this form, and in no other form. Who can gainsay this? You do not find it in the form of a youth for Christ rally or a Gideon’s camp. You do not find it in the form of a child evangelism fellowship, a Billy Graham evangelistic crusade, A Charles Fuller old fashioned revival hour, ad infinitum.

There is and I repeat, one and only one body or organization upon Earth in this dispensation with divine authority for its existence and its actions, and that body or organization is the church. It and it alone is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone in whom each several building **fitly framed together groweth unto a holy temple in the Lord,** (**Eph. 2,**

21-22.) Consider with me: a youth for Christ rally does not have a pastor called by the rally. It does not administer baptism and the Lord's Supper. It does not exercise discipline upon its members and in fact, it does not even have members. Therefore, it is not a New Testament church. Therefore, it is without divine authority to exist and function as a religious organization. And, the same argument could be applied and extended to the Gideon organization, child evangelism, Billy Graham, and every other religious institution on Earth that does not operate under the direct control and authority of a New Testament Church.

These are days of spiritual anarchy: every man doing that which is right in his own eyes. But I tell you plainly, that all the effort and time and money that you, my friend invest in support of these sensational extra-church movements will amount to but wood, hay, and stubble at the judgement seat of Christ. Christ built the local, New Testament Church. He recognizes no other organization. Therefore, if you are wise, and will heed the scriptural exhortation, you will become **"a servant of the church," (Rom. 16:1.)** Paul and Barnabas were not independent evangelists or bible teachers, for they assembled with the church in Antioch a whole year and taught the word, **(Acts. 11:26.)** And **Acts 13:1** says **"Now there were in the church that was at Antioch, certain prophets and teachers as Barnabas and Simeon and Saul, and it was in the church that they administered to the Lord."** When the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write to the believers in Corinth it was to the church of God which is at Corinth, **(1st cor. 1:2;)** so also in the letters written to the Galatians, **(Gal. 1:2;)** to the Ephesians, **(Eph. 3, 14-21;)** To the Philippians, **(Phil. 4:15 ;)** to the Colossians, **(Col. 1:18 ;)** to the Thessalonians, **(1st Thes. 1:1 ;)** and, to the saints scattered throughout Asia, **(Rev. 1:14.)**

In all these cases, it was always to visible churches in the vicinities. No other work was recognized. No other work should be recognized today apart from the New Testament churches. Why do we not abide by the Word of God? I know of no Christian preacher or worker in the New Testament of whom it can be proved, that he was independent of the church. I know no institution of ministry or Christian work outside of the local church in the New Testament. Do you? But we have many today, and the people love to have it so. In the New Testament, the local church had its own God-Given authority to pass sentence upon matters, select their own officers, send out their own missionaries, and support whom they would. Examine the evidence as follows: the church has authority to pass sentence that is within scriptural limits. Christ taught that the highest court of appeals in difficulties between Christian brethren was the action of the church, **(Matt. 18, 15-18.)** No sinner or presbytery could be appealed to reverse the verdict. So the church receives whom it will, **(Rom. 14:1 ;)** and dismisses whom it will, **(1st Cor. 5:5.)** It is the Christian's courtroom, **(1st Cor. 6:4.)** Hence, in **Acts. 15:22** the important decision to whether or not gentile converts had to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses was decided by the whole church at Jerusalem; not by the apostles alone, or by some counsel or senate. The application of this doctrine, and healthy church discipline, would painfully try the souls of most Baptist churches of today we believe. The widespread practice among professing Baptist pastors of measuring the Lord's blessing upon their churches by the Sunday school attendance, and the amount of offering, is a corruption.

The passion to reach all possible effectively with the truth is commendable; it is a virtue. But, like every other virtue, it can be corrupted. To have a large and growing number of Sunday school scholars could be an indication that God's word is having free course in the community and this is blessed. A large offering could also be a good sign that the people are generously responding to the truth and so forth. However, crowds and offerings do not indicate God's pleasure and blessings prima facie. And we are convinced that

in most instances today, the pastor has been unfaithful, rather than faithful when he proudly announces large attendance and offerings. We believe that most Baptist pastors are gripped by a kind of terror of losing members by church discipline. As a result, nearly every Baptist church that we have seen is putrid with members who're walking disorderly, thus, moral and doctrinal leaven is leavening the whole lump.

Nelson Collier said recently during a conference, that if our Baptist churches of today attempted to exercise discipline over disorderly members, those churches would be torn to shreds; this we believe. But is it not better to attempt to please the head of the church, and then patiently take the consequences. What does it avail if a church reaches the multitudes but not with the truth? The purity of the local church is a part of our message; it is God's word. Unfaithful pastors rationalize by arguing that if they drive people away, they cannot help them. But the help all men need is the truth. Here lies the great weakness of the argument: they, in effect, withhold the truth from men, in order to win them. Win them to what then? Church members who quit the body over church discipline or any other sound doctrine have never been won to the truth. Let them go; they went out from us, because they were not of us.

Now let us dispassionately discuss the true state of a church that does not rigorously practice church discipline. It is inevitable, but that it should become infiltrated by doctrinal heresy, and moral looseness among the members. Thus, by the nature of things, the whole lump becomes leavened. How long before the savior removes a candlestick? And when the candlestick is gone, it is no longer Christ's church. The building remains. The people remain. The pastor remains. The Sunday school grows. The offering grows. But it is no longer a New Testament church. A great deal is said in the New Testament about church discipline, but, where is scriptural authority for the current fad of ambitiously reporting Sunday school attendance and offerings week by week? We verily believe that fleshly promotion provides the impetus for such activity. And they that sow the flesh, shall of the flesh, reap corruption.

The New Testament church has authority to select its own officers, while Peter suggested the election of an apostle to take Judas' place; it was the 120 disciples who appointed by vote, by lot, Matthias, (**Acts 1:15.**) Peter did not look like much of a pope there. And the New Testament church only has scriptural authority to ordain and send forth and support missionaries. I stand square on **Acts 13, 1-4** for this statement. It was the church at Antioch that sent forth Barnabas and Saul, and to that church, later they made their report of all that God had done with them, (**Acts 14:27.**) And so you see that so-called inner denominational faith mission board are void of any scriptural authority whatever to ordain and send forth and support missionaries. Some argue that these extra church organizations are simply innocent and helpful arms of the church. However, this argument merely begs the question: if they are in fact arms of the church, they would be necessarily authorized by, and responsible to, the church. But they are in fact, harmful to the church. They are parasites that leech and drain away much needed time and energy and funds from the local church. In closing, may I beseech you my hearers, do not be carried away with men, and great numbers, and sensational noise. I beg you to be bound by the word of God, and become therefore, followers of the churches of God which are in Christ Jesus, (**1st Thes. 2:14.**) As the song runs,

*“I love thy church oh Lord,
the house of thine abode.
The church our blessed redeemer saved,
with his own precious blood.
For her my tears shall fall.*

*For her my prayers ascend.
To her my cares and toils be given,
till toils and cares shall end.
Beyond my highest joys,
I prize her heavenly ways,
her sweet communion, solemn vows,
her hymns of love and praise.*

This is Fred Phelps, pastor of Westboro Baptist Church. Next week at this same time the Lord willing, more of the same. And now, peace be to the brethren, and love with faith from God the father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, Amen.