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Presentation Transcript
Elements of a Biblically-Based Congregation – Part 1
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November 17, 2023

We begin work today on a new series, *Elements of a Biblically-Based Congregation*. There are so many elements of Christianity – grace, covenant, law, forgiveness, eternal life, etcetera. We’re not going to talk about those in this series. We’re not going to talk about numbers, church buildings, budgets, what people wear to church, the right doctrines or music. We’re going to talk about longevity. What causes a congregation to last?

Now, this is a three-part series. The first part is the foundation, which is Christ, specifically – the way He acted when He came in contact with other people in His group – His example, in other words. The second part will be about a spirit-led congregation and what it looks like. And third, we’re going to discuss the purpose of a spirit-led congregation. Okay, that’s the introduction to this series. Now we come to the introduction to the presentation.

The New Testament describes the church as a vital part of a Christian spiritual development. That makes the church incredibly important to each of us for the sake of our own spiritual health. Did you get that? The church is important for our spiritual health. God tells us that the church is one of the primary tools He uses in His sanctification process. It’s one of the ways He perfects us.

But have you noticed that even though most of the larger Christian churches – Catholics, Protestants, Evangelicals – have existed organizationally over time – some of them even over centuries – the Church of God that we know was often not that way at all. We, historically, have been a volatile lot – organizations coming and going, changing doctrines, names, claiming things that aren’t true – you know, the Intergalactical Only True Over-arching Church of God. You know, “I’m a member of the IGOTOACOG.” I once saw a map of the Florida Gulf Coast with push-pins at the location of each of the Church of God festivals sites. It reminded me of a pin cushion. As far as I know, in my lifetime, nearly every one of those festival sites find their origins in one of the Churches of God – and that one no longer observes the Feast, because it no longer exists.

So, why does this happen to *our* church? Is there anything that *we* can do about it – that God wants us to do about it? Well, that's what we're going to talk about today.

Now, I'm going to make a *duh!* statement. To endure, a congregation must follow Godly principles. We all know a number of Church of God organizations that have folded and a number of them that have split. A split can be a bad thing, if it's about control, but it can also be a lesser of evils – at least, they're all continuing in the faith. But, if you have two groups in a congregation with unreconcilable beliefs about governance or doctrine, sometimes it makes sense to split for the sake of peace. Birds of a feather *should* flock together. That's why there are so many. And if you are wondering if I believe they folded because of biblically faulty organization and goals, you would be correct. That's exactly what I mean.

Jesus said He would build His church on a Rock, meaning Himself, and the gates of hell would not prevail against it. So, that sounds pretty durable, doesn't it? Built on Christ. Yet, in the New Testament, even there, we find the church dealing with dissension and division – things not associated with longevity. The New Testament church is supposed to be our example, and even they had those issues. So, just the fact that that's present in your group, doesn't necessarily mean everybody's evil. It's something that we have to learn how to deal with. And that is there for a lesson for us – all those scriptures about various heretics, false ministers and things like that.

So, what did the apostles teach about combatting it? Well, one of the most important parts is in Galatians 5. Paul explains what the real issue is and how to resolve it. So, let's listen in – Galatians 5, starting in verse 16:

Galatians 5:16-17 – *But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do – that is, want to do, if you're walking by the Spirit. (Notice the Spirit is capitalized and flesh is not – so the Spirit is being on God's side and the flesh is not – being on the other guy's side.)* So, there's this struggle within *all* those who follow the Spirit of God in them – to obey or follow are natural tendencies. When we're winning that struggle, things go in a Godly way, and when we're not winning, we can't function in a Godly way. It's impossible. The things that we *want* – like a peaceful congregation or a long-lasting congregation – will elude us.

So, that's the struggle – to walk by the Spirit instead of the flesh. It's only when we're winning that struggle that we have peace. Now, he's going to define what that means in a few verses. So, here we go.

V-19-21 – *Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity – hatred – strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions....* See, right there Paul is explaining what causes division in our congregations and

churches. It's when people are operating from the flesh, not following the Spirit. Now, that word *flesh*, what do you think that means? The Greek word is *sarx*. It's not about the human body. There are other words for that, like *soma* – you know, somatic diseases – that's the Greek root of somatic – and it has to do with the physical body. But Paul said, in his *sarx*, which isn't his body, was no good thing. So, that didn't come from God, because we were not created that way. We couldn't have been. After God created Adam and Eve, He said it was all good. So, the *sarx* is the part that comes from the devil. So, how did the devil do that? Did he do neurosurgery on their brains and add another component to it – that's not of God's creation? Or, did he catch them one day, when they were not wearing their foil hats, and beam it into them? No, the devil's not a creator. He's a destroyer. The Bible shows us how it all started. He just talked to them. He lied. They believed them. And people have been believing the same lies ever since. And we pass down his lies through our words, our attitudes, our behaviors, the way we treat others for generations. His lies distort us. They make us selfish, self-seeking, jealous, rivalrous, power hungry, manipulative, passive-aggressive, deceptive – all those things that he talked about in the fruits of the flesh. That's the *sarx*. When you see division in a congregation – a struggle for control, a choosing up of sides – you know, Paul said, “You people say, ‘You're of Paul and I'm of Apollos,’ he put them down for that – talking against others behind their backs – that's another sure sign – rest assured that those who engage in these efforts are *not* following the Spirit, but the *sarx*. There's always a way to deal with issues. One way is God's way and the other way is the devil's. Talking behind people's backs is *not* God's way. So, Paul continues with his list: ...*envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these*. So, there's a blanket coverage there. But then he gives this warning: *I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

So, one of the reasons for the church is to help us learn *how* to walk by the Spirit, instead of the flesh, because, if we don't learn that, we're not going to be in God's Kingdom. Of course, God says He promises to take us to His Kingdom, if we don't give up on Him. So, we're going to have to learn the hard way in some cases, but He promises to help us get there. The point is, that walking by the flesh is what can either destroy or preserve a congregation. It kind of gets down to whom you're going to listen to. Then he continues – verse 22:

V-22-23 – *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.*

I was talking to a friend recently who came into the church through another friend that I know – so there are three friends there – myself and those two. The one that my friend came in through is deceased now. My friend was telling me that when he went to his first Feast, he was terribly worried that things would go wrong at work and that he would lose his job. When he got home, he told our mutual friend about his worries, and our friend said to him, “You know how everyone says, ‘Have faith in God,’ and we say, ‘Right. I will.’?” My friend said, “Yeah, I know.” My other friend said, “Well, next time, instead of saying it, really do it. Trust God about your job *really*, intentionally.”

So, that's what we have to do with the flesh – intentionally resist it. And that's what we have to do with the Spirit – intentionally follow it. Don't just ignore what's going on. Think about it. Is this coming from my *sarx* or is it coming from God's Spirit? And then follow it.

We can't think church is about attendance and potlucks and fellowship. It is, but there's something else there that drives the experience. And that is resisting the flesh with its destructive fruits and intentionally following the impulse of the Spirit. To be good at church, you have to do that. And for church to benefit you, you have to do that. One set of impulses are lies and the other is truth. So, if we do this, people of differing beliefs. . . . I'm going to pick a really ridiculous example of something here that's a difference of beliefs in our group. It exists, but I don't think anybody gets too upset about it anymore. Whether the Passover is on the 14th – at the beginning of the day – or at the end of it. Let's say – the 15th. So, to do this, people of differing beliefs are kind, gentle, patient and control their tongues. They have respect for each other. They can get along, even when they disagree.

V-24 – *And those who belong to Christ* – he says in verse 24 – *have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires*. We're trying to destroy it in our lives. And when led by the Spirit, we want peace and unity and freedom more than we want control. If we belong to Christ, we know getting along, while maintaining our differing beliefs, is more important than imposing our beliefs on others. How do we know that?

Okay, let's do an exercise. Imagine you have died. You're sleeping the sleep of death. When you died, you expected that you would, one day, wake up, but now you're asleep in a way you've never been before. You're completely unconscious. All of a sudden, you hear a piercingly loud noise, and as your eyes open, you say, "What's that noise?" And then it hits you, you just heard a trumpet! You have been resurrected to eternal life. And while you're in a sense of excitement and, maybe, disorientation, an angel calls you and many others together and takes you to the wedding supper of the Lamb. Someone passes by with a tray of finger foods, another comes offering glasses of wine, so everybody is standing around eating and laughing and drinking and talking – all excited, waiting for the appearance of the groom – our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. As He arrives, everyone kneels down in worship, so thankful to be a part of His Kingdom. And He tells everyone to stand up, and asks if anyone has any questions. So, this is the moment everyone has been waiting for. We're now going to hear the answer to all our questions. You might think, "Well, that's going to take a long time." But, you see, with God a day is like a thousand years. We're outside of time now. Time's never going to be a problem again. So, you raise your hand. Everyone turns to look at you. And you ask, "Lord Jesus, which day is the right day for Passover – the 14th or the 15th?" Okay now, stop right there. What is everyone going to say – everybody there, no matter what they believed before or no matter what His answer is? What are they going to say? Yeah, everybody's going to say, "Yes, Lord." And, in less than a heartbeat, all division, all confusion, all points of dissension will simply disappear. There *is* a right day to keep Passover, but not knowing what it is, is only a minor issue, because everybody

who hears that trumpet has already proven they will follow Christ, no matter what. That's why they were allowed to hear it.

Now, knowing that, who would ever make an issue out of a differing minor issue of faith? I mean, how dumb would that be, when we know doctrinal difference is only a temporary situation? And yet, even though most of us are not stupid people, we still find ourselves in division and dissatisfaction and dissension over, sometimes, stupid little things that don't really matter. Why? Well, Paul continues in verse 25:

V-25-26 – *If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.*

So, why does division keep occurring? Well, if you read the letters of Paul, Peter, James, John and Jude, along with the book of Acts, you will learn that there was a lot of division and dissension in the New Testament church over who would be the leader, over doctrine – things like that. That all happened long after the issue of circumcision was resolved – a long time after they figured out how, basically, to proceed. In all of those other cases – in every case – the Bible writers attributed it to two deeply connected issues: control and money.

People who want to control others and draw people away into following them have to be conceited – think they know better and deserve better than others – not poor in spirit. If they were not self-seeking, and they found their congregation to be not to their liking, rather than upsetting everyone by trying to gain control, they would quietly leave and seek a congregation that believed the way they did. Or, they would remain with the congregation in humility and love, not disturbing the peace. If you think about the second generations of ministers after the apostles, they began to change the doctrines of the church in order to attract more people. One of the first ones they worked on was the Sabbath. All of a sudden, it was not the seventh day, but the day of the sun god, Sunday – the first day of the week. That was the day that most people worshipped back then, so that's why they were trying to change it. They were trying to draw more people. So, if they accomplished that, there was a lot more power – more people to control – and more of their money coming in, making the church much wealthier. And, as they appealed to the Gentiles, who were sun worshippers, they had a bigger audience to draw from.

So, unity in Christ is about being together in respect and tolerance and the other fruits of the Spirit, not about being right about the lesser issues or in control. When you see a spirit of division or animosity or superiority, get far away from that. It is a spirit, to be sure, but it's not God's. There can be an entire congregation trying to live by the Spirit, and one person who lives by the flesh, can take that congregation down, if he's determined enough. It's always a subtle quest for control. The only thing that can stop that is a firm adherence by the congregation to a set of founding principles and beliefs – principles put down in writing so that everyone knows what the playing field is. Those beliefs have to come from the Bible – from the principles of the

Bible – that include about how leadership is to act and be chosen. That all should be spelled out. One of those principles related to leadership includes the necessity to be faithful to founding beliefs and principles. And those principles, again, must be aligned with the Bible, to the best of everybody's ability. And, if the members will stick to that, and they will live by the Spirit, the congregation is safe. Those not living by the Spirit may even leave, but the congregation will remain.

So, what if you don't agree with the principles and beliefs of the congregation? Well, if you're functioning by the Spirit, you'll not cause division. Division is *not* God's way. You'll either tolerate the differences in love....

I know a man, who years ago, believed Pentecost was on a different day. He believed it was on Sunday, instead of Monday. This was in the Worldwide Church of God days. He observed both of them for years. Never said anything to anybody, until he was asked by the leadership. He convinced them that it should be Sunday. So, he didn't destroy the church over it and try to take off a following. He just did what he thought was right, because he loved the people in the church and he loved being in it.

So, if someone tries to wrest control away from the leadership, outside of the parameters of the founding documents, the congregation has to stand up. If the congregation is *not* willing to resist the *sarx* in a case like this, in its effort to control them, they don't deserve to exist as a congregation. Everybody needs to man-up. It's a matter of being committed to God, because you're founding principles are supposed to be based on God's word. But that resisting must be done, not out of hostility, or superiority, or disrespect, or hatred, but out of love.

Long ago, in one of the congregations I pastored, a new person starting attending. I didn't know how he found out about us, but he was there. Members began to tell me that this man was preaching beliefs to them that conflicted with the Bible as we understood it. So, at that point, I started to become more aware of this guy, and I noticed that he always seemed to be on the other side of the hall from me before and after services. So, interesting, right? So, I got his phone number and I called him up. I told him what people had been telling me and asked him if that was correct. And he denied it. So, then I started to explain our beliefs one by one, and asked him if he believed them. He said he didn't believe some of them. He was honest, at least about that. So, I told him he was welcome to attend with us, but he was not welcome to preach his own beliefs in our midst. We considered it disrespectful, because we were all united to those things. And he said he felt compelled to say what he believed. And I suggested that he should find a congregation that believed more like he did, which he did. So, that was a win-win for everybody. He was happier and so were we.

Think about the map of the Florida gulf coast again – dozens of festival sites to attend. Why attend one you feel like you need to change? Pick one who has people that think like you do. That's why they're out there. I mean, there's only one other reason why you would try to change that congregation, and that's because you think you know better and you don't care disrespecting

them or their unity that they have. So, that's not good. God doesn't like that.

So, the founding documents must also define the role of leadership as oversight for the sake of service, rather than control, ego-feeding, etcetera – or not say anything about it at all. Leadership must respect, care for, love and foster growth in the membership – respecting and facilitating the spiritual gifts of the members.

Now, we're going to talk about spiritual gifts, because a lot of people that are new to Church of God independent congregations have never heard about that – or, maybe, have read over it in the Bible and not understood what it was about.

So, the founding documents must detail a process to maintain those qualities in leadership. So, how would you do that?

I have a friend in the church – she and her husband both work and they don't have kids anymore at home – and she got a job working as a secretary for a very large Protestant denomination in their town. One day, somebody on the board called her up and asked her if she would be able to take notes from now on for their monthly board meetings. She said, "Yeah, I'd be willing to, but why would you want me to, since I'm not a member?" And they said, "Well, that's precisely why we would want you to take them. You would be unbiased. You don't have a stake in the game." So, there's an effort by the congregation to avoid the appearance of evil on the part one taking notes or anyone trying to influence who takes the notes. She also told me – I can't use the exact same words she used, but... – she was sitting at her desk working one day and the pastor came by, knocked on her open door, came in, sat down and passed pleasantries, and he said, "You're going to be called into a meeting fairly soon. We have this meeting every year for every person. Every person that works for the church goes to one of these meetings." I forget what he called it. She said, "Well, what's that for?" And he said, "Well, that meeting is your opportunity to tell them about me – if I've been treating you unfairly, or disrespectfully, or not doing my job appropriately." So, you see, there was a system of checks and balances. The people that did the work – a lot of the work – had power – real power – in insure that the one who was over them was doing things in a Godly way.

Interesting to think about. You know, where we come from, there's one guy. He makes all the decisions. What he decides is right. If you get crosswise with him, there's no where to go for adjudication. So, you either leave or you live in resistance, or rebellion, or unhappiness with him. But it wasn't that way in that congregation. That's why they'd been around almost since the beginning of the nation – at least, one reason.

All right. That concludes the first part of the three-part series.

This is Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries, serving children, families and the Church of God.