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Presentation Transcript
Elements of a Biblically-Based Congregation – Part 2
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Today we're continuing our series, *Elements of a Biblically-Based Congregation, Part 2*. The topic of this second part is about the appearance of a biblically-based Church of God congregation – what it looks like, what to look for.

If you wanted to be a member of a spirit-led Church of God, how would you find it? Well, think with me about this. If you come from a Church of God background, and you're looking for a spirit-led Church of God congregation, it might not look familiar to you when you find it. That's an upsetting statement to some people, but bear with me.

What would some of the differences be? What things can you see about it that might point to the fact that it's led by the Holy Spirit, based on Jesus Christ – based on the Bible? Well, here's the first thing I think is the most obvious one is you can see a structure. When the door is opened, people come in and start doing things. Pretty soon, you smell coffee, maybe, or you might go to the snack bar, if they have one. There might be teenagers tending the snack bar. That means that there's no self-centered adult saying, "I run the snack bar. It's mine. Stay away." You might hear musical instruments being tuned – people working together to make music. The sound system might squeal a little bit while they get it organized and set up. Seems like everybody knows what to do. It's clearly organized. There may ministers, or elders, or deacons – or, maybe not – but you might hear casual, infrequent references to a board or governing group. But mostly, you hear and see people talking and laughing and hugging, and, as a new person, you would be welcomed.

So, these observations vary from group to group obviously. There's no cookie-cutter way to build a spirit-led congregation. Why is that? Well, that's because the Spirit builds the congregation for the best benefit of those in it. And that means it's governed by the gifts God gives to the members.

We had a Bible Study, rather than church services years ago. We only live music once or twice that I recall. Why was that? We all liked music, but none of us in that group were any good at musical presentation. The times I remember that we did have it, it was because somebody who was gifted in music came and offered to sing for us. So, if you can't have live music, don't worry. God knows. Some groups don't even have a minister and they do just fine.

Another thing that you might notice, if you hang around for any length of time, is that there are variations of belief in one group. Why is that? I used to think that everybody had to believe exactly the same way. And I thought that our church did, until I began to talk to people and realized that we had as many differing beliefs as we had people in the church. They were just controlled by one person.

You see, Jesus called us to be free in Him. He gives us the freedom to read the Bible, make of it what we can, and then adhere to it until we're proven wrong. So, the people in a spirit-led congregation know that it's okay to have differences of opinion, as long as we're willing to be found wrong by Christ. Remember last time, in the first part of this series, we talked about the wedding supper. You can tell those people, because they don't pour a large amount of concrete around minor or indistinct parts of doctrine or practice, so they can feel superior or secure. We know that all diverse ideas about how to worship God and about what Christ meant by the things He said are going to be understood from each person's own context – of where they're coming from – and they're all going to be changed to unity of thought and heartbeat, so why make a big deal out of them now.

So, members striving to live by the fruits of the Spirit – we talked about this last week – this is the next thing you will notice – that people care about each other, have respect for one another, look out for each other, and include everyone. Instead of resisting each other, they cooperate to make the congregation a safe, warm, accepting place for everybody.

I was watching *The Chosen*...I think it was the episode where Jesus is working on the Sermon on the Mount with Matthew. Matthew was helping Him with His notes, and he told Jesus that He needed a stronger introduction – that after Jesus had asked him for his input. Imagine a church leader asking somebody for input. So, Jesus lays out the beatitudes – the seven attitudes of true spirituality, right? And He tells Matthew that He's going to start His sermon with these because these are a map, for people looking for Him to follow, to lead to Him. So, when you find a congregation that lives its Christian values, they're poor in spirit, and meek, and are peacemakers, etcetera, you're home.

It's interesting that among Christian groups, there was a huge study done over a number of years. It's been a few years now since I heard about this, but 4,000,000 people around the world – Christian people – were surveyed. What the people running the survey learned was that congregations that were spiritually healthy grew naturally. The people God is calling are drawn to spiritual health. That's what they're seeking. So, that sort of supports the idea *The Chosen* put

forward about the beatitudes and what Paul said about the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit. The Spirit has to win. So, that's a very important thing to think about.

Also, a Godly independent Church of God congregation values the gifts of the Spirit. A couple of the churches that I have been a part of didn't even talk about those things. But in 1 Corinthians 12:1 and verses 4 through 7, Paul said:

1 Corinthians 12:1, 4-7 – *Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed.* So, that should be a clue to the ministry, shouldn't it, to talk about these things to people so they won't be uninformed. *Now there are varieties of gifts* – he says – *but the same spirit.* So, some people are good at one thing and others at other things. *And there are varieties of service, but the same Lord, and varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.* So that manifestation of the Spirit is not the same thing in each person. People have different gifts.

So, God and Christ live in us by their power – the Holy Spirit. And they impart certain spiritual gifts – things that their good at – to the members so that they can contribute them to the congregation, and make it a stronger, safer, more spiritually nourishing – sometimes even more fun – group to be with.

Now, this is the problem for leadership when it's based on control. When that kind of minister sees someone taking initiative in doing something to benefit the congregation, because of their unbiblical orientation, it feels to them like that's a threat to their position, because everything has to go through them.

Is that the way it should? Well, when the church first started, many Christians fled Jerusalem because of persecution by the Jews. Now, this is early on in church history. The apostles and the brethren were still trying to figure everything out. When these people fled, they were mostly Jews, like I said, everywhere they went they talked about Jesus Christ. They just couldn't not do it. It was the biggest thing in their lives. As they fled north out of Jerusalem and through Israel, when they got to Asia Minor, they found, to their surprise, that the Gentiles were taking to it like a three-year-old to ice cream. This was all new to them. Gentiles in the church! Who'd a thunk? We thought this was just a Jewish thing. Well, it wasn't. None of them came up with that idea, but God had gifted those people to talk about Jesus Christ.

And what did the apostles do? Did they shut them down? No. They sent the most loving and encouraging person they had to see what was going on. And when Barnabas saw what was going on, he said, "You can't do that! You don't have the apostles' permission! You have to have a minister present to think about the Bible and talk about it. You'll just muck it up! Leave it to the spiritual giants." Just kidding. That's *not* what he said. No, he said the opposite. He said, "Wow! This is great! God is obviously with you! Keep up the good work!" You see, the apostles were not afraid of the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit manifested itself, they were excited about,

rather than threatened by it. They were anxious to follow the lead of Christ and humble enough to realize that He didn't always do that through them. So, they were curious to see where it would lead them next.

This is one of God's ways of including *us* and giving us all a way to contribute. God doesn't want us to feel like outsiders and left out, so He gives us spiritual capabilities that we can contribute to the group so that we can fit into it – so that we have a place in it. And, if we are living by the Spirit, we don't contribute with the mode of looking good, or being popular, or soothing our own sense of loneliness, or trying to fit in or gain power, but to contribute to the group. That's what it's for. And not just to contribute, but to be gifted at it, which means that doing it well is easy for us. So it's not a struggle for us to contribute our spiritual gift.

I have never volunteered to sing special music at church. Do you know why? Because I'm no good at it. There are many other people who are. It's not my gift. I know it's not my gift because I've been told so. So, if you struggled to hold a tune when you sing, for example, that struggle indicates you probably are *not* gifted in singing, no matter how badly you like to do it or want to do it. So, if half the congregation fidgets, or goes to sleep, or plays with their phone when you give a sermon, maybe giving sermons is not your gift.

Now, here's the concept that makes order out of potential chaos in this area. We learn by feedback from others what gifts God has given us, not by how strongly we want to have them. Okay? Not by how strongly we want to have them. So, we volunteer for things, and the things that we do easily – things that are easy for us and hard for others – then those are our gifts – things that help people. Those are our gifts.

I once pastored a congregation that had a deacon, who was somewhat unrefined – not educated, not particularly well-spoken, not a public speaker, and maybe not the most socially graceful person. But one day I walked into the men's room before church and there were quite a number of guys there, and here's this deacon standing against the wall, smiling but not speaking, and he was holding a plunger. And I said, "What's up, John?" (John wasn't his real name.) He said, "The plumbing is slow here today, so I'm ready." So, God had not given him the gift of speaking, but He did give him the gift of helping and of anticipation. He knew what was needed before anyone else. And he also one of the most loved deacons I've ever met. We say, "God gets the glory." That's true, but John got the love. So did God – for giving them John. That was his gift. I wasn't just in the bathroom that he was able to anticipate things. He just could see what's needed – sit and look and watch and knew what to do – where other people went around blindly. Without John, we would have been caught off guard when the first toilet overflowed. So, everyone in the congregation understood John. They got it. They appreciated his gift.

What else can we notice about independent, spirit-led – a congregation led by the Holy Spirit? Well, everyone in the congregation is seen by all the others that are called for a purpose by God. Therefore, respect and inclusion are afforded to everyone in the congregation.

Years and years ago – I don't think I was even ordained a minister – I might have been an elder – we got a letter from our headquarters that there was a man out in the delta of Arkansas who was interested in the church, and I went out to visit him. He worked at a gas station. He had one of those finely striped shirts with his name "Bob" (that wasn't his real name either). That was his job. It was way out in the middle of nowhere – this gas station. On the side, he would rebuild Briggs & Stratton lawn mower engines for people. So, he was not a man of great wealth. He had a happy family though. He told me, when I invited him to church, that the only clothes he had to wear was his gas station uniform. And I told him the church was not about what we wore, and that he would be welcome there in his uniform. And one nice thing about it was that everybody would know his name! So, the next Sabbath, this man shows up at church wearing his uniform. I noticed many, many people – men – around him and women around his wife and the kids around their new friends to talk to. That was that week. The next week, he showed up with a suit and tie, and his wife with some nicer clothes. And their kids had better clothes on as well. All these things were given to them by the members of the congregation.

So, isn't that just the greatest story? And that was in one of the "orgs" – this sermon is *not* to pick on church organizations. It's just to talk about what's in the Bible and let the chips fall where they may. So, this was an organized Church of God, but the brethren there were warm and loving, and they knew that this man would feel excluded when he saw how everyone else was dressed. So, they fixed it. Now, when we talk about inclusiveness, this also includes all the children.

My wife and I sometimes stream services from Cincinnati – Jim O'Brien and company. They have a very nice congregation there, and they stream their services. One Sabbath morning, one of the teenage boys did a scripture reading. He was very articulate in the way he read the scripture, and after it was over, he quickly summarized what he'd read and why he was reading it and what it meant to us. And then he sat down. And I told my wife, "That boy has a knack for that! He knew what to do." Well, a few weeks later, we were... on that Sabbath before the Feast starts, where we have church services at Common Faith Feast site – before the Feast begins for those who help come and set up and all – and I happened to be talking to this boy's parents when he walked up. I stopped talking to them and greeted him, and told him that I had heard his scripture reading. And I just told him that I thought he did a masterful job of it and explained a little bit of what I'd noticed.

Now, I'm not boasting about this. That was something that was very easy for me to do. Maybe you could say I have a gift at it. I wouldn't say that, but some might. Some people never think about the kids around them in the congregation. They don't know their names. They don't know what they like to do. They may not even know who their parents are. They know nothing about them, in some cases.

So, if you visited a congregation, and you came there for a month, and nobody ever said anything to you – it was though you were invisible – would you feel included? Would you feel interest coming from others, and would you feel good will? No, you wouldn't. You would think that it was a very cold group of people and that you didn't belong there. Well, kids are the same way – only much, much more so.

So, it's important for us to acknowledge the presence and show appreciation for those who are younger in our midst. I mean, Jesus said that the people who offend younger ones, there's always a millstone for them. So, let's not be caught in that crowd.

Another thing that the Church of God does is, it works together. Since I talked about Cincinnati Church of God, I'll talk about them some more. Some years ago, they bought a church building. It had some property with it. It was, I think, in a residential area. There had been some talk about – in the congregation – that there wasn't much for the kids to do after and before church. So, one of the men used his gift to clear the lot one day. He had a bulldozer. Was that his spiritual gift? No, it was his willingness and his foresight to use it. Another man, I think, built a swing set on the cleared land. Then, others seeing that, came and planted grass. Still others showed up to do yardwork. Pretty soon, they've got a pretty nice little playground. Kids in the neighborhood came to play there. Of course now, if this congregation had a crabby deacon, he would have wanted to run them off – it wasn't theirs. It was his. But all their deacons are loving. So, it was a safe place for everybody – even for people who didn't go to the church. So, today, you can see many adults out there with their kids after church. I think they've had picnics out there. So, it turned out not to be just for the kids after all. It was for everybody – and even the neighborhood. The neighbors know there's a really great church right in their neighborhood.

I love that example, because as it was told to me, it all started with the idea that it would be a great place for our kids. So, people in that congregation were thinking about others rather than self, or others rather than their own peer group, or rather than some way to control people, or it's only for those that keep the Passover on the same day I do. No, they work together. They make it good for *everybody* and to glorify God. That's what happens when the Holy Spirit is in the midst of us and we're walking by the Spirit, instead of by the flesh.

What else can we think about? Well, major decisions are made by leadership and also by the ones affected by the decision. I'll give you an example of what I'm talking about. Acts 6:1.

Acts 6:1 – *Now in these days* – this is right at the beginning of the church – *when the disciples were increasing in number* – they were growing so fast they didn't know what to do with them all and there was lack of organization, because they didn't need it until just now – *a complaint by the Hellenists* – that is, the Gentile members of the congregation – *arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good*

repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and some other guys. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. Problem solved! So, everybody liked it. Everybody was getting what they deserved – the widows were taken care of and we had some more structure and go-to people that we could talk to about our needs and all that. *And the word of God continued to increase – it says – and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.*

Now, think about that. The members felt free to bring up an issue. Why? Because they believed they would be heard. It was not just one man in charge, who didn't like them. All twelve apostles, together, presented a solution. So, they probably sat down to talk about the problem beforehand among themselves. When it came time to discuss it and to make a presentation of what to do, they included all the disciples in discussion of the issue, and they proposed a solution that included members in the decision-making at the level that affected them. They got to pick who was going to take care of them. And then, everybody agreed it was a good way to go. And as a result of that organization, and that unity and togetherness that they had, the church grew – as a result of the peace and the order that they had created working together. Notice that the disciples didn't say, “We'll pick the people of our choosing – our relatives and our friends – because you guys are too dumb to know who to pick.” No, they gave the brethren the authority to choose who would serve them.

Most of us are used to having a minister who had the last word in everything. Perfect unity, right? Well, right up until his imperfection starts to show. That happens to every minister, because all ministers are imperfect. He may mistreat someone, or take the congregation in a way that most people think it's unbiblical, or he may be oblivious to certain needs. So, in that situation, when people object, quite often they're labeled disloyal or rebellious or self-centered, and then *everybody* is unhappy. So, the group that was supposed to be a safe place to bring our children and put down roots is dissolving right from under us. And since the pastor has the last word, there may be no other choice but to leave.

So, have you ever talked to some of the young adults who no longer attend with us? I have talked to hundreds of them. And the second biggest reason they leave, according to what I've been told by them, is because of the politics of the congregation and the consequential unrest. It seems like hypocrisy to them. The first reason, by the way, is feeling like they didn't belong – like there was no place for them, didn't fit in, etcetera. So, their congregation was not inclusive and that how they learned that. They hoped, at one point in their young lives, that that was where they were going to spiritually get to know God, and yet, it seemed like God left them out, because of what their congregation taught them by example. So, no mechanism built into the congregation to deal with the eventualities of imperfect leadership.

So, a congregation needs to make major decisions by group participation, just like we read. The mechanism for that in a small group can be as simple as sitting around a table and talking about what to do, or as complicated as electing a board. I pastored a church once that was filled with people who had chosen up sides and hated each other for years before I got there. And yet, when we established a board, and had election, everyone in the congregation attended the board meetings, boring though they were. Have you ever been involved in an organization where all the members went to the board meetings? Well, this is what happened in our group. Why? Well, because the board demonstrated to the members that they wanted to serve them. So, every time a decision came up, instead of making the decision themselves, they polled the members and then decided according to what the members wanted. And there was discussion among the members in open forum before the vote. So, they were giving back to the members the decision-making power in the areas that directly affected them. Imagine a group of people, who didn't like each other, working together to create congregational peace. I saw that happen.

You know, if the Worldwide Church of God had been run that way, there would have been no way for one man and his son and his son's friends to hijack an entire church. Of course, as it turned out, most of the members *wanted* to be hijacked. So, they all would have wound up in the same place in the end, but at least it would have been by majority rule.

There's a lot more that could have been said about how God promotes longevity in congregations and how they're organized. In this series – after two parts – we have a third part to go and that covers a core element as well (we haven't covered it so far, because it's such a huge topic, and we will devote an entire presentation to it as we get into this third one next time). So, what is that topic? Well, it's the *purpose* of a spirit-led congregation. What's it for? Well, Jesus said that trees that don't bear fruit are going to get cut down. So, that's a spiritual principle about groups. To exist over time, a congregation must understand and fulfill its purpose, and that way, produce fruit. We'll get to that next time, as I said.

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