

A Bible Church?

A relatively recent development in the religious landscape in America has been the emergence of the “Bible” Church. These churches, also known as “Full Gospel” give the impression that they embrace all things scriptural, and therefore are the true and ancient church of the Christians.

In fact the “Bible” Church of today is a type of independent or loosely affiliated “fundamentalist” Church. Fundamentalism is a 19th and 20th Century invention, an over-reaction to critical and historical biblical studies originating in Germany, which quickly spread to American mainline Protestant denominations.

Whereas the German criticism method tends to question all historical and theological presumptions concerning scripture, fundamentalism, in its zeal to protect the ‘plain meaning’ of the texts in fact finds itself interpreting the scriptures with a closed 19th or 20th century mind-set. The “Bible” Church of today is the inheritor of this relatively recent form of biblical interpretation. In their zeal to hold onto the ‘plain meaning’ of the text (as is interpreted by their Pastor and his recent predecessors), they in fact may miss the meaning that the authors of scripture intended for us to comprehend.

Add to this mix the 5 centuries of ingrained Protestant hatred for anything Catholic (remember a Protestant is someone in “Protest” of the Catholic Faith) and you find the conclusion by “Bible” Churches that they are the only true Christians in their town.

Quite often this ‘sect’ mentality leads these “Bible” Churches to refuse to cooperate with any other Churches and the common ministries of their ministerial association.

A True Bible Church

Historical reality supports the fact it is those churches in the Apostolic Tradition, especially the Orthodox, Roman and Anglican (Episcopal) Churches, with their 2000 year foundation and historically developed liturgies, that are in fact the true “Bible” Churches.

Since it was the early bishops, assembled in an Ecumenical Council of the undivided Church, who put together what we call the Bible, it is those same early bishops and theologians who help us to interpret and live the message of salvation in Jesus Christ our Lord. We call this the “Living Tradition” of the Church. Tradition helps us to understand and interpret the Holy Scriptures, since the Bible itself was originally a part of the oral tradition of the Church, before being

committed to paper. The exception to this is Paul’s Letters, which were literally Paul’s written responses to questions by the early Church in various cities. It is that same living tradition that developed the biblical liturgies that the apostolic Churches continue to use to this day.

Biblical liturgical expression

“Bible” Churches are notorious for their belittling of what would be called liturgical churches, such as our own Episcopal Church. Ironically, while bashing us for having a set, written liturgy, most “Bible” Churches follow the same pattern of worship from week to week anyway, making them quasi-liturgical.

But it is through the liturgy of the Holy Eucharist that biblical truth is set forth in it’s most poignant way.

How we worship at St. John’s Church in Detroit, a traditional Anglican Parish of the Episcopal Diocese of Michigan, is in fact an image of a true “Bible” Church, obeying scripture in the way in which we worship. The evidence is overwhelming.

Following are a few examples of how our worship, which finds its roots in times of the Apostles, is in fact biblically commanded.

For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes again. (1 Corinthians 11:26)

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

(Acts of the Apostles 2:42)

The Biblical and Apostolic model of the Church includes the celebration of the Holy Eucharist at least every Sunday, if not more often. The early Church, whenever it came together, celebrated the Holy Eucharist – the breaking of bread – to proclaim the Lord’s death and resurrection, and their expectation of His return in glorious majesty.

At St. John’s the Holy Eucharist is ALWAYS the primary Sunday service, and is also celebrated upwards of 4 to 5 more times during the week.

The modern “Bible” Church celebrates a ‘communion service’ monthly or even quarterly. For them, it is the sermon (which is intrinsically linked to the personality of the pastor) that is primary. In the Eucharist the whole community does not focus on the priest, but on Jesus’ gift of Himself to us in the Blessed Sacrament.

*This is my Body; This is my Blood
(Matthew 26:26,28 Mark 14:22,24
Luke 22:19,20)*

Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. (John 6:53-55)

At St. John’s, we take Jesus at His word. We don’t think He is a liar. He says we must eat His flesh and drink His blood, and that He has given them to us under the species of bread and wine. How it happens, we do not know – we only know that if Jesus says it, we believe it...just as the Church throughout all of Christian History has believed.

Only since the Protestant Reformation have there been sincere attempts to reinterpret the Holy Eucharist as only a memorial or remembrance meal. The so-called “Bible” Church does not believe that Jesus is really present in the bread and wine, but rather present only in the faith of the community. They find it too incredible (and too Catholic) to believe Jesus is really present in the Sacrament. Even in Jesus’ time, there were those who thought these saying were too hard –

and they went away sorrowful.

Rather than trying to explain it away to bring them back, Jesus reasserts that these words are true! (John 6:60-66) What may seem too incredible for some minds is not too incredible for Jesus!

*At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth
(Philippians 2:10)*

Again and again in the Old and New Testament we hear witness that people ‘fall down in worship’ of the Lord. At St. John’s we bow the knee when we enter and exit our pews (called genuflecting) in respect for the real presence of Jesus. We kneel when we pray (the ancient posture for prayer). Even when Jesus’ name is said, we make a deep bow of our bodies, in respect for His Holy Name.

As St. Paul says, we are to worship God with our bodies. We not only bow and genuflect, but we also use all our senses: smell – incense, sight – beautiful ornamentation and vestments, taste – physical body and blood of Jesus in the bread and wine, hearing – the word of God proclaimed and our singing and responses. We use our entire redeemed person to worship the Good God.

Devote yourselves to the public reading of scripture. (1 Timothy 4:13)

The Holy Communion service of the Book of Common Prayer, used at St. John’s, devotes the majority of the service to the public reading and teaching of Scripture. A full 50 percent of the service is devoted to the 3 bible lessons for the day, the Psalm, and the sermon. The rest of the service is also saturated with Scripture; in the prayers of the people and the Eucharistic Canon.

The crux of the “Bible” Church service is one bible reading, with the Pastor’s interpretation in the sermon.

Also, with our assigned rotation of lessons (called a Lectionary), you get a well-rounded overview of the entire text of the Scriptures. The “Bible” Church choice of Scriptures is at the whim and prejudice of the Pastor.

Conclusion

Without even touching the biblical justification for the use of incense, vestments, apostolic ministry, crucifixes, and much more – it is clear to see that those calling themselves “Bible” Churches have fallen short of the standard set by the Bible itself. But at St. John’s we seek to worship the Lord after the example of his earliest followers.

Worship and the “Bible” Church

*An introduction to how
the liturgy of the
Episcopal Church
is a form of worship
after the true
Biblical model*

St. John’s Episcopal Church

(next to Comerica Park)

Detroit, Michigan

<http://www.stjohnsdetroit.org>