

Doctrinal Statement of South Plains Bible Chapel

This document summarizes the beliefs of South Plains Bible Chapel. As to these doctrines, the elders of the church are in full agreement. The deacons and teachers of the church agree in general with these doctrines and will teach within the confines of this document.

Scripture

We believe the Holy Spirit moved prophets and apostles to write the sacred Scriptures (2 Peter 1:20-21). He did this employing the distinctive styles of each individual. These writings are God-breathed, the very Word of God (2 Timothy 3:15-17; John 10:35). As such they are unfailingly accurate. They are without error in all that they state and teach as fact, including God's work in creation, events of world history, and prophetic matters of the future (Matthew 5:18,19).

We believe that God has given us the whole of Scripture, down to the very words. This plenary and verbal inspiration applies, strictly speaking, only to the original manuscripts. These originals are known to us with great accuracy from the many manuscript copies available to us. As God has faithfully overseen the writing of the Scriptures, so He has safeguarded their preservation and recognition in the 39 books of the Old Testament and 27 books of the New Testament.

We believe that the Scriptures speak with divine authority. We submit to all that they command and embrace them as God's trustworthy guide for our lives. They are the norm of the Christian faith. Their central message is the self-revelation of God, the person and saving work of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and his desire for mankind in this age and the one to come (John 1:18; Luke 24:25-27).

Authority of Scripture

Like the early Bereans, we are responsible to examine the Scriptures directly to determine that which is true (Acts 17:11). Though some creeds may well express truth revealed in Scripture, we do not regard any creed or this present declaration to be a normative standard or perfect and comprehensive statement of the Christian faith. Such exists only in Scripture. Nor do we treat the teaching or writings of any man as the final word on a subject. We should not establish by any means authoritative traditions in violation of Scripture (Proverbs 30:6; Mark 7:1-13; Revelation 22:18).

Translations

Bible translations are the Word of God to the extent that they faithfully represent the original. Some translations accomplish this better than others and should be used for serious study. Recognizing the ever-changing nature of language, however, we do not regard any single translation as the final authoritative translation.

Interpretation

Our goal in Bible study should be to understand the intended meaning of the divine Author. We are to understand the text in its normal, usual, and customary manner, taking into account the grammatical structure of the passage and the literary devices used by the writers. We must interpret the passage within its literary and historical context. We should understand a text within the specific context of the book in which it is found and within the general context of

Scripture as a whole. We should use Scripture to interpret Scripture. We should allow that which is plain to guide us with regard to that which is difficult to understand. We should not give undue emphasis to any one portion of Scripture or any specific doctrine, placing all truth under it. Rather, we should understand each doctrine in balance with the rest. We must allow the Scriptures to speak to us, being careful not to twist them to conform to our own thinking or to the popular opinion of our day (2 Timothy 4:3). The Scriptures mean what they say. “Living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword” (Hebrews 4:12), they are relevant in all times.

Typology

The typological portions of Scripture are rich in meaning and helpful in illustrating truth. We caution against, however, fanciful extensions of them. We should not spiritualize or allegorize the text of Scripture at the expense of its objective meaning. Neither should we use typology and other forms of figurative language to establish doctrine. We should use them only to illustrate that which is plain in Scripture.

God

We believe God is the sole, eternal, self-existent being. “I AM WHO I AM” (Exodus 3:14), the Lord told Moses. “God is spirit” (John 4:24). He has personality, possessing mind, will, and emotions (Exodus 3:14). God is love (1 John 4:8). He is good and faithful in all things (Psalm 119:68; Lamentations 3:22, 23). He is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth (Exodus 34:6). Without sin, He dwells in perfect holiness and justice (Isaiah 6:3; Jeremiah 9:24). He has all knowledge, all power, and is present everywhere (Isaiah 40:28; Psalm 90:2; Jeremiah 23:24; 32:17; Psalm 147:5). He is infinite and perfect in all His attributes. Sovereign over all things, He rules the universe (1 Chronicles 29:11). To Him be “glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen” (Jude 1:25).

We believe there is one God. “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!” (Deuteronomy 6:4). He eternally exists in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father is God (John 20:17). The Son is God (Titus 2:13). The Spirit is God (Acts 5:3,4). We see the divine persons distinguished in the baptism of Jesus. The Father speaks from heaven. The Spirit descends as a dove. He rests upon the Son, the Lord Jesus (Matthew 3:16-17). We also see the persons distinguished in Christ’s instructions to His disciples to make disciples and to baptize them “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). Yet, there is one God (1 Timothy 2:5).

Creation

We believe that God is the creator of the universe. The opening words of the Bible state, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). In a separate act of creation, “the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7). From Adam God fashioned a woman (Genesis 2:21, 22). Adam called her Eve, for she became the mother of all future generations (Genesis 3:20). In this manner, “God created man in His own image, in the image of

God He created him; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27). God blessed Adam and Eve and gave them dominion over the earth (Genesis 1:28-30).

We believe that mankind is distinct from all other creatures. More than just a physical being, God has given man an eternal spirit and soul, endowing him with a mind, will, and emotions (1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 4:12). As such we are moral beings with a spiritual awareness of God and a conscience that we might know right from wrong (Romans 1:19; 2:14-16). God has also revealed Himself to us through the universe that He has created (Romans 1:20). “The heavens are telling of the glory of God,” the Psalmist writes, “and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands” (Psalm 19:1). God has revealed Himself most perfectly to us in His Son and preserved that revelation in His written Word (John 1:18; Hebrews 1:1-3). God has revealed Himself to us that we might know Him as God and be morally responsible to Him as our Creator.

We believe that before God created man, He created holy angels to serve and worship Him (Colossians 1:16; Job 38:6,7; Mark 8:38; Hebrews 1:6-14). They have personality, possessing mind, will, and emotions. They are ministering spirits that God sends forth as His messengers, sometimes appearing in glorious forms and sometimes as men (Matthew 28:2, 3; John 20:12).

Science

We do not see an intrinsic conflict between the Christian faith and the scientific method, when the latter is understood as an objective determination of the normal functioning of the universe through observation and repeatable experimentation. Most of what is taught by modern science agrees with the Bible or deals with matters not addressed by the Bible. At times, however, scientists have drawn faulty conclusions, sometimes unduly influenced by an atheistic worldview. Christians at various times also have asserted false ideas about nature and the universe based on a misinterpretation of Scripture.

Evolution

Evolutionary theory stating that inanimate chemical substances became living organisms through undirected random chance and after much time evolved into humankind contradicts the Bible and cannot be reconciled with it. We are supported in our position by the increasing number within the scientific community who are questioning the theory of the evolution of the species.

Salvation

We believe that Satan, possibly the highest of God’s created angels, rebelled against God’s authority. Scripture also refers to him as Beelzebub, Belial, and the devil. Many angels followed him in this sin. Scripture refers to these as demons (Luke 11:15). The judgment of God awaits them along with Satan (Genesis 3:15; John 12:31; 16:11; Revelation 20:10).

We believe that in the garden of Eden, God tested Adam, telling him, “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:16,17). Satan tempted Eve to eat of the forbidden tree, and “she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate” (Genesis 3:6). Through Adam’s willful choice to disobey God, sin entered

the world and spread to all mankind (Genesis 3:1-7; Romans 5:12). With sin came condemnation and death (Romans 5:12-21). In this way, humankind became corrupt and “by nature children of wrath” (Ephesians 2:3).

We believe that in mercy and love God has taken the initiative to reach out to us (John 3:16; John 16:8-11). He has done this by sending His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to save us from sin and its consequences (John 3:16; Luke 19:10). He was born of a virgin, whose name was Mary. She came to be with child by the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). In this way, the Son of God veiled His glory and “emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men” (Philippians 2:7). Jesus, therefore, is true God and true man, though without personal sin (Luke 1:35; John 1:1-14; 1 Timothy 2:5; 2 Corinthians 5:21).

We believe that Jesus died for our sins on the cross, taking the penalty that was justly ours (Mark 10:45; 1 Peter 2:24; 3:18). Jesus rose on the third day never to die again (Romans 6:9; 1 Corinthians 15:1-8). We believe His work of salvation is finished, and that the righteous demands of God are fully satisfied (Romans 3:24,25; 1 Peter 1:18,19; 2:24; John 19:30; Hebrews 10:18).

We believe that Christ died for all mankind (John 3:16). “He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). God “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). He is “not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

We believe that God offers salvation to all. He saves those who repent and place their faith in Christ alone for salvation (Mark 1:15; Luke 24:47; Acts 20:21; John 1:12,13; 1 Peter 1:9). This salvation is a free gift from God received through faith and apart from human merit (Romans 6:23; 10:9-10; Ephesians 2:8-10; Galatians 2:21; 3:10). God put our sins to Jesus’ account that God’s righteousness might be put to our account (2 Corinthians 5:21). This imputation of the righteousness of God to the credit of the believer is by the declaration of God. It is what the Bible calls *justification*. “God is the one who justifies” (Romans 8:33). He justifies the ungodly sinner who believes in Jesus (Romans 4:5). The imputed righteousness of God is available “through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith” (Romans 3:22-25).

We believe that without God’s help, no man by his own initiative would seek God (Romans 3:10-18). God, however, urges men to repent, sending forth the Holy Spirit to “convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment” (John 16:8).

We believe that God in His sovereignty has given man a will, and that though God desires all men to repent and be saved, most are not willing (Genesis 1:26; John 3:19; 7:17; Luke 7:30; Revelation 22:17). Jesus told the Jews who were opposing Him, “You are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life” (John 5:40).

We believe that those who receive God’s offer of salvation through faith at that moment become “born again” (1 Peter 1:23), regenerated (Titus 3:5), new creatures (2 Corinthians 5:17), children of God (John 1:12), “redeemed” (1 Peter 1:18), and “forgiven” (1 John 2:12). Henceforth, God sees them “in Christ” (Ephesians 1:1-14; 1 John 5:20). Sealed with the Holy Spirit, they are kept by God for heaven (Ephesians 1:13,14; John 10:28; Romans 8:29-30; 1 Peter 1:3-5; Jude 1:24,25). They can also have personal assurance of their salvation (1 John 5:13).

We believe that God predetermined this glorious plan of salvation (Acts 2:23, 4:28; 1 Corinthians 2:7). He also predestined those who would be saved to certain blessings. These

include being conformed to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29,30), being adopted as sons (Ephesians 1:5), and obtaining an inheritance in heaven with Christ (Ephesians 1:11).

We believe that God chose the church in Christ “before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him” (Ephesians 1:4). The saints are “God’s elect” (Romans 8:33), against whom no one can raise a charge. Nothing can separate them from the love of Christ (Romans 8:35-39)

We believe the outward evidence of new birth is obedience to Christ (for which we believe Christians are promised rewards in His heavenly kingdom (2 Corinthians 5:10)) and the fruit of the Holy Spirit (John 14:21; Galatians 5:16-26; 1 John 3:4-10; James 2:14-26). One of the first responsibilities of obedience for the new believer is to publicly confess Christ in baptism (Matthew 28:19; Acts 16:31-33).

Repentance

Repentance is an inward response to the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8-11). It is a change of mind about God, sin, and self. The sinner begins to fear God (Proverbs 1:7; Isaiah 55:7; Acts 10:35). He acknowledges God’s rightful authority over his life and his guilt before God because of sin. Scripture promises: “He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, But he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion” (Proverbs 28:13).

Faith

Saving faith is trusting Jesus, and Him alone, as Savior. It is more than simply agreeing with certain facts about Jesus. It is a sinner placing his full faith in Christ as the one who died in his place, taking his punishment. The Scriptures are the basis of faith. Jesus is the object of faith. What one must believe about Him is the gospel: “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day” (1 Corinthians 15:3,4).

Assurance of Salvation

A Christian can have personal assurance of his salvation as he understands and rests in the finished work of Christ, accepts the biblical promises of salvation, and observes the confirming evidences of salvation in his life. These evidences include freedom from the tyranny of sin, a new sensitivity to sin, a desire to please God, the ability to understand God’s Word, and the inward assurance of the Holy Spirit that he is a child of God (Romans 6:1-23; 8:15-17; 1 John 2:27).

Baptism

Baptism in water is a public confession of faith in Christ. It is, therefore, only for those who have made a personal choice to trust Christ for salvation.

Baptism symbolizes the washing of regeneration and the possession of a clear conscience before God (Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 3:21). Additionally, we can see in the act of baptism our identification with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection to the newness of life (Romans 6:1-11). Baptism portrays this as the person is lowered into the water and then raised again. Baptism is not a means of salvation, but a confession of salvation already received through faith in Christ.

We baptize by immersion. We believe this is best in keeping with the meaning of the Greek word “to baptize,” the example of the New Testament, and the intended symbolism of the act. When baptizing new believers, we use the words given to us by Christ, baptizing the person

“in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). Baptism is one of two ordinances given to the Church; the other is the Lord’s Supper and is covered later in this document.

Divine Election and Human Will

Sound teaching should keep all the biblical truths of salvation in view and in balance, rather than emphasizing some doctrines at the expense of others. We must also be ready to accept that our finite minds may not be able to fully comprehend this matter.

We must recognize that good Christians differ on this subject. Unfortunately, some in misdirected zeal have endlessly crusaded for their position, causing controversy and division. Those within the church holding views different from their elders should refrain from persuading others within the church of their position.

Sanctification

We believe that the moral standing of the Christian is perfect before God. In Christ he is “holy and blameless” (Ephesians 1:4). Justified by God, he possesses the imputed righteousness of God. For these reasons, Scripture rightly refers to believers as saints (1 Corinthians 1:2). We refer to this as *positional sanctification*.

We believe that the moral state of a Christian’s personal life here on earth is often less than perfect and at times may be sinful (1 John 1:8,9). Though the tyranny of sin over his life has been broken, the struggle with sin continues as long as he is in a mortal body of flesh (Romans 6:17,18; 7:18-25). God is at work in his life, however, changing him by stages and bringing his conduct into conformity with the image of Christ (Romans 8:1-30; 2 Corinthians 3:18). We call this process *practical or progressive sanctification*.

We believe that the Holy Spirit assists the Christian in growing in practical sanctification. The Spirit enables him to put “to death the deeds of the body” (Romans 8:13). He leads him (Romans 8:14). He assures him that he is a son of God (Romans 8:15, 16). He helps him to pray and intercedes for him (Romans 8:26, 27).

We believe that God will make the moral state of the believer perfect when he is finally freed from his mortal body and is with Christ (1 Corinthians 15:50-54). “We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is” (1 John 3:2). Some refer to this as *perfect or final sanctification*.

Personal Holiness

Personal sanctification begins at the moment of salvation. It progresses as the believer comes to understand his position in Christ and the Lord’s work on his behalf. It is perfected when Christ returns for His church or the believer goes to be with Christ. Only then will his struggle with sin and temptation end.

Scripture describes how a Christian can live a godly life in Romans 6:1-23. It explains that the believer is united with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. He is freed from sin and raised to newness of life. This being so, the believer should consider himself “to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:11). He should no longer yield himself to sin but to God. With the apostle Paul, he can now say, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me” (Galatians 2:20).

Holy conduct is more than simply not doing what is prohibited by the Bible. We are to do that which is pleasing to the Lord, that which brings Him glory (1 Corinthians 10: 31; 2 Corinthians 5:9). We should consider each act in light of our life purpose (1 Corinthians 10:23; Hebrews 12:1,2). We should seek to be an example to others (Romans 14:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:22). We should always remember that we are “children of the promise” (Romans 9:8), “children of light” (Ephesians 5:8), and “children of God” (Philippians 2:15). We should aspire to walk as Christ walked (1 John 2:6).

We grow in practical sanctification by various means. These include Bible study, memorization of Scripture, participation at the Lord’s Supper, and prayer.

Church

We believe that God reveals the church in the New Testament. Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians: “When you read this you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit” (Ephesians 3:4,5). Scripture refers to the church as “the mystery of Christ” (Ephesians 3:4). He unveiled it. He is the source of its life. He is its focus. Jesus said, “I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). This is the first occurrence of the word “church” in the New Testament. A short time later, on the Jewish feast of Pentecost, His disciples were baptized with the Holy Spirit and the church was born (Acts 2:2-4).

We believe that the universal church is composed of all those “who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:2). They are “God’s people” (1 Peter 2:10). The Bible calls them “saints” (Philemon 5), “believers” (1 Corinthians 14:22), and “Christians” (Acts 11:26). It describes them as “saved” (Ephesians 2:8), “ransomed” (1 Peter 1:18), “forgiven” (1 John 2:12), at “peace with God” (Romans 5:1), and “holy and blameless before him” (Ephesians 1:4). These have entered into a family relationship with God through Jesus Christ. “To all who received Him,” the apostle John writes, “who believed in His name, He gave power to become children of God” (John 1:12). They have the privilege of addressing God as “Abba! Father!” (Romans 8:15). Should one of his children go astray, the Father disciplines him in love (Hebrews 12:6). God promises: “I will never fail you nor forsake you.” (Hebrews 13:5). Elsewhere the Bible describes the intimate relationship between Christ and his church as that of a groom to his bride (Ephesians 5:25-33; 2 Corinthians 11:2). Speaking of marriage, the Bible says: “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25). Scripture also uses the human body as a picture of the church. Christ is “the head of the body, the church” (Colossians 1:18). The redeemed are “the members of the body” (1 Corinthians 12:12).

We believe that we are responsible to follow the teaching of the New Testament with regard to the church. God blessed Israel for completing the construction of the tabernacle “just as the Lord had commanded” (Exodus 39:43). In a similar manner, the Lord will bless us, if we follow His design for the church as outlined in the New Testament. Paul writes, “According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it. But let each man be careful how he builds upon it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:10-11).

Reception

The local church should welcome in the love of Christ true Christians who visit their meetings. We are to “accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God” (Romans 15:7). As members of Christ’s body, the universal church, we are a family. We should not make distinctions based upon gender, race, language, tribe, nationality, or social status (Galatians 3:28, Colossians 3:11; James 2:1-9).

We know a true believer first through his sound doctrine. A true believer will confess Jesus as Lord and Savior and have a clear understanding of Christ’s saving work on the cross (1 Corinthians 15:1-4; Galatians 1:8-9; Romans 10:9,10). He should have confessed Christ in baptism, or, if a new believer, be willing to do so. He should also hold to the foundational doctrines of the Christian faith, particularly with regard to the person of God and the way of salvation. We should not expect a new believer to be able to clearly explain every doctrine of the faith, but he should know the basic truths of the Christian faith and be teachable and ready to learn. The Lord said, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me,” (John 10:27).

We know a true believer also by his holy walk. As a new creature in Christ, the fruit of repentance should be manifest (Matthew 3:8; Acts 26:20; James 2:14-26). There should be the practice of righteous living, not sin, and a new sensitivity to sinful conduct and attitudes (1 John 1:8-10; 2:4; 3:3-10). He should have a love for God and other believers, rather than a love for the world (John 8:42; 13:35; 14:21; 1 John 2:15; 3:14; 5:1).

Should a Christian express interest in becoming part of the local body and making it his church home, the elders should inform him of the doctrinal position of the church and the responsibilities of church fellowship.

Elders should not receive into fellowship a person who is under discipline from another church for biblical reasons (1 Corinthians 5:9-13). God respects the judgment of a local church with regard to discipline, and so should we (Matthew 18:15-20). To establish a person’s standing with his previous church, the elders might ask the person transferring for a letter of introduction from his previous church or contact them directly (2 Corinthians 3:1; Romans 16:1, 2). Such a letter can also be helpful when Christians are just visiting another church. It should briefly introduce the person and state the status of his fellowship in his home church.

Responsibilities of Fellowship in the Local Church

Christians within a local church must commit themselves in a particular way to love, care, and pray for one another. As “Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25), so they must love His church and sacrificially serve it. They should be faithful to the meetings of the church, coming together for teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer (Luke 22:17-20; Acts 2:42), “not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some” (Hebrews 10:25). They should use their spiritual gifts to build up one another (Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-27; Ephesians 4:12). They should give of their financial resources in a regular, proportional, systematic way, to provide for the ministry of the church (1 Corinthians 16:1-2).

To be a truly New Testament church pleasing to the Lord, the saints must be correct both in their doctrine and their spiritual condition. They must be a living testimony of the truth, having lives empowered by the Holy Spirit. Even if they were to get everything right doctrinally, without love they would be nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1, 2). They must always be aware that their conduct reflects upon Christ and His church. They are a “letter of Christ” (2 Corinthians

3:3), “known and read by all men” (2 Corinthians 3:2). For this reason, they must “maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men” (Acts 24:16). They must recognize their responsibility to resolve conflicts through biblical methods (Matthew 5:23-24; Matthew 18:15-20). They should be in submission to the elders of the church (Act 20:17; 28-31; Titus 1:7-9; Hebrews 13:17). They must accept the fact that they are accountable to the church and that unrepented sin may bring church discipline (Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5; 6:1-8).

A Gatherings of Believers

The meetings of the church are primarily a gathering of believers. For this reason, they should have the worship of God and the building up of the saints as their focus. Christians should always be sensitive to the needs of visitors and make them feel welcome. The needs of the unsaved, however, should not distract the church from its responsibilities to remember Christ and edify His people. Occasional evangelistic meetings, however, may alter this emphasis, moving the needs of the unsaved to the forefront.

A healthy church is a growing church. We read in the New Testament that “the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). We should not measure a church, however, simply by how many people it attracts at its services. More important is the spiritual condition of its members. When it comes to church size, bigger is not always better. The principles of the New Testament church appear to work best within a certain range. When because of great size the elders can no longer effectively shepherd the flock or apply the principles of the New Testament, the church has become too large. Rather than working toward ever-increasing numbers of people and programs, the elders should prayerfully consider dividing the flock to establish a second independent local church.

Dispensations

Israel and the Church

Though salvation has been by God’s grace and the believer’s faith in all times, when interpreting Scripture we should recognize that God has placed man in various stewardships (or economies) and tested him in various ways. Each period begins with a revelation of man’s responsibility and ends with a review or judgment by God. We sometimes call these stages in the history of God’s dealings with humankind as *dispensations*, which simply means “stewardships.” In the Garden of Eden we see the first. This changed with the Fall. Other changes occurred later, most notably with the giving of the Law to Israel through Moses and the later establishment of the church through Christ. Scripture marks this change, teaching “the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). As Christians, we “are not under law, but under grace” (Romans 6:14). This change is also expressed by the way we divide our Bibles into the Old Testament and the New Testament.

We must not confuse God’s plan for Israel with that of the church. The covenant of law given at Mount Sinai was between God and the Jewish people. Based upon a demanding legal code, it promised blessings for the obedient and curses for the rebellious (Leviticus 26). It is a covenant between God and the people of Israel (Exodus 24:1-8; 34:1-28). It does not pertain to the Gentile nations (Ephesians 2:11,12). God’s promises to the church, in contrast, are based upon grace freely bestowed in Christ Jesus. The church consists of people who have entered into a spiritual relationship with God through Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:3-14). It promises eternal life to all who believe (John 3:16).

When studying Scripture, we must keep in mind that the primary interpretation of a passage applies to the people and time to which it was written. Scripture not meant directly for the church, however, can often have valuable secondary applications for us when understood in the light of the New Testament.

Gifts and Calling

We believe that the Lord Jesus promised His disciples to send the Holy Spirit to permanently indwell them. “And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you” (John 14:16,17). They would be “baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:5), receiving power to be His witnesses (Acts 1:8). This is the blessing of every true born again Christian, occurring at the moment of salvation (Romans 8:9). “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:13). This baptism makes us members of Christ’s body the church. Each Christian is also sealed in Christ “with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession, to the praise of His glory” (Ephesians 1:13-14).

We believe that though the Holy Spirit indwells each Christian, they experience the fullness of the Spirit in various degrees in accordance with their faith and obedience. Scripture instructs, “Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ” (Ephesians 5:18-21).

We believe that the Holy Spirit has given spiritual gifts or abilities to each Christian for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7). We are to use these gifts to God’s glory in serving and building one another up and preparing others for Christian ministry (Ephesians 4:11-13; 1 Corinthians 14:12; 1 Peter 4:10).

Spiritual Gifts

God’s will for a Christian’s life is also related to his or her spiritual gift(s). Scripture exhorts, “As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Peter 4:10). Paul lists some of the spiritual gifts in his letter to the Romans as the gifts of prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, and mercy (Romans 12:6-8). Additional gifts are listed elsewhere, including the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, the distinguishing of spirits, tongues, and the interpretation of tongues (1 Corinthians 12:8-10; 12:28; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Peter 4:11).

The church is to be a place where each Christian accepts his responsibility to edify the church by using his spiritual gift(s) (Ephesians 4:13). With Christ’s enablement “the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love” (Ephesians 4:16). In this way, we grow up “to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

The Christian's Calling

As Christians we are to live lives of devotion to Christ. "For the love of Christ controls us," Paul writes, "having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf" (2 Corinthians 4:14,15). We are to yield our lives to God. Paul writes, "I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:1,2).

All Christians share a common calling to love and good works. This begins within the church. "By this all men will know that you are My disciples," Jesus said, "if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). With God as our Father, we should love one another as our family, treating older men and women as fathers and mothers, younger men and women as brothers and sisters (1 Timothy 5:1). Gifted and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we have a supernatural ability to show love in practical ways. The gifts of mercy, helps, serving, giving, administration, and exhortation are especially important in ministering to Christians in need. The widow and the orphan have a special place in the heart of God and should therefore be in ours (Isaiah 1:17; James 1:27; 1 Timothy 5:3-16). Practical Christian love should also overflow into our communities. Jesus taught, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). Paul wrote, "while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men" (Galatians 6:10). We are especially to be concerned about the needs of the poor, the downtrodden, the oppressed, and the stranger (Luke 4:18; Leviticus 19:34; Hebrews 13:2).

As Christians, we have a high calling: "to serve the living God" (Hebrews 9:14). We should not confuse our vocation with our occupation. Though every job, no matter how menial, when done to the glory of God is noble, our calling goes beyond working to provide for the need of ourselves and our families. Each of us has a personal calling. We are God's workmanship, "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10).

God reveals His perfect will for our lives as we seek His guidance through prayer, the study of Scripture, godly counsel, the inward leading of the Spirit, and the circumstances of life. We must seek God's will for our lives in faith, trusting Him to lead us (Proverbs 3:5,6). Jesus promised His disciples: "He who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8:12). God's Word promises, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5).

Personal Spiritual Experience

We should use the Bible to interpret personal spiritual experiences, rather than using experience to interpret the Bible or validate a practice or doctrine. Failure to do this can lead to mysticism, aberrant behavior, and serious doctrinal error. Scripture exhorts us to "examine everything carefully, hold fast to that which is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21). We are "in real knowledge and all discernment, . . . [to] approve the things that are excellent" (Philippians 1:9,10). We can be confident that the Holy Spirit will never act contrary to that which He has inspired in the written Scriptures. The "sword of the Spirit . . . is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:17).

Gift of Tongues

The New Testament presents the gift of tongues as the ability to speak God's message in a foreign language without prior instruction (Acts 2:1-21). Though Scripture states, "Do not forbid to speak in tongues" (1 Corinthians 14:39), it sets specific limits on the use of this gift in the church. Only two or three should speak (1 Corinthians 14:27). They should do so one person at a time and only if there is an interpreter present (1 Corinthians 14:27,28). As with all the gifts, tongues are for the common good, not self-edification (1 Corinthians 12:7).

We have not seen convincing evidence that God is using this gift today. Though some in other churches claim to speak in tongues, typically they do so in an unintelligible manner, all at once, and without interpretation. Such fails to meet the biblical description and standards for the gift. Much of this appears to be of human origin, a non-miraculous practice, which linguists call *free vocalization*.

Baptism of the Holy Spirit

Every believer receives the baptism of the Holy Spirit at the moment of salvation. "By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:13). Scripture does not teach that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is a "second blessing," as some claim, or that Christians must petition the Lord and wait on Him in order to receive this baptism.

Miracles and Healing

As in biblical times, God still works in miraculous ways, including healings. Among the greatest of these is the rebirth that comes through faith in our Lord Jesus. We should not expect supernatural manifestations such as physical healings, however, to be commonplace. In biblical times, God used signs and wonders and various miracles sparingly, usually during particular periods in history to validate prophetic utterance or new revelation (Hebrews 2:2-4). Much of what is heralded today as miraculous, fails to meet the high standards found in Scripture. When this is combined with the misuse of spiritual gifts, showmanship, and the constant solicitation of funds, we should question whether it is indeed miraculous at all (2 Peter 2:12-19; 1 Timothy 6:3-5; Titus 1:11).

Future Events

We believe that Jesus is coming again for His church. He told His disciples, "In My Father's house there are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:2,3). At His coming, Christ will resurrect those Christians who have died. "Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:17). We refer to this as the *rapture*.

We believe that a time of unprecedented tribulation will occur on earth. It will be marked by religious apostasy, worldwide cataclysmic judgments, the persecution of Israel, the salvation of multitudes, and the rise and worldwide dominion of the Antichrist (Matthew 24:4-28; 2 Thessalonians 2:3-8; Revelation 5-18). This period will end with the battle of Armageddon, the glorious return of Christ to the earth, and the defeat of the Antichrist and the enemies of God (Matthew 24:29-31; Revelation 19:1-21). We refer to this period as the *tribulation*.

We believe that following the tribulation, Christ will reign on earth for a thousand years. His kingdom will be one of peace, prosperity, and justice (Isaiah 2:1-4; 4:2-6; 32:1-20; 35:1-10; Revelation 20:1-6).

We believe that at the end of the thousand year reign of Christ, God will judge Satan and his demons (Revelation 20:7-10). Then at the judgment of the great white throne, Christ will judge the unbelieving dead (Revelation 20:11-15). Their deeds will be reviewed. If their name is not written in the book of life, they will be thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15). There they will suffer conscious everlasting punishment away from the presence of God (Matthew 25:46; Luke 16:19-31).

We believe that the Lord Jesus will review the service of Christians at the judgment seat of Christ (Romans 14:10; 1 Corinthians 3:8-15; Corinthians 5:10). As the bride of Christ, they will enjoy the marriage supper of the Lamb with Him (John 17:24; Ephesians 5:25-32; Revelation 19:5-9).

We believe that God will create a new heaven and new earth, for the present heaven and earth will pass away (Revelation 21:1). There all believers will dwell with Christ for eternity, beholding His glory (John 17:24).

Order of Events

Though we may perceive some early signs of Christ coming, we cannot determine its exact timing and should not attempt to set dates for it (Matthew 24:36). As we understand it, the next major event on the prophetic calendar is the rapture, Christ's coming for His church. This could occur at any time (Hebrews 10:37). Following it, we understand there to be a seven year period of tribulation on earth. This is divided into two approximately equal periods (1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11; Daniel 7:25; 9:24-27; 12:7; Revelation 11:2,3; 12:14; 13:5). The tribulation will reach its climax in the battles of Armageddon and the glorious return of Christ. The Lord will then enter into judgment with the nations and establish His earthly kingdom, ruling for a thousand years.

Anticipation

Though the biblical texts concerning the prophecies of the last days are sometimes difficult, their study has an important sanctifying effect upon our lives and the promise of God's blessing (Titus 2:11-15). "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near" (Revelation 1:3).

We should be "looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus" (Titus 2:13). The Bible closes with the testimony of Jesus, proclaiming, "Yes, I am coming quickly" (Revelation 22:20). Every Christian should be ready to reply, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20).