

# Kent's Perspective

## What Makes 'a church' A CHURCH?

- A Message by Kent Shirley (ADOM of Grand Valley Baptist Association, So. Baptist of Colorado)

### Introduction

A. Is it the word 'church' in a name that makes 'a church' A CHURCH? **NO!** (example: The LDS use the word 'church' in their name, but their doctrine and practice is far from the Biblical teaching with respect to A CHURCH).

B. Is it the 'heritage' or 'denomination' of a church that makes it A CHURCH? Does the word 'Baptist' or 'Methodist' in a name make 'a church' A CHURCH? **NO!** (example: The true Biblical teaching with respect to A CHURCH has nothing to do with denominational affiliation any more than putting a Ferrari emblem on the hood of my Pontiac will make my car a Ferrari).

C. Is it longevity of 'a church' that makes it A CHURCH? Does the number of anniversaries that 'a church' celebrates make it A CHURCH? **NO!** (example: The RCC has been around for centuries, but doctrinally it fails the New Testament test of A CHURCH).

D. Is correctness of doctrine alone enough to make 'a church' A CHURCH in the New Testament sense of the word? **NO!** Although doctrine must be Biblical for 'a church' to be A CHURCH, ***doctrine alone without Biblical function is insufficient for 'a church' to be A CHURCH!*** (example: A recent study of evangelical churches in the USA revealed that over 80% are in a state of decline or plateau. Many SBC churches have not baptized anyone in years! Thom Rainer of LifeWay reported that 62% of SBC churches are in rapid decline. These disturbing facts reflect problems with unbiblical ***Function*** rather than false doctrine).

E. In addition to correct Biblical doctrine the ***essential element in the DNA*** of 'a church' that makes it A CHURCH is found in the ***FUNCTION*** of A CHURCH! **It is what 'a church' does that makes it A CHURCH according to the book of Acts!**

### What Are the Primary Functions of A CHURCH found in the early chapters of the book of Acts?

1. ***A CHURCH*** boldly proclaims the Good News of Jesus Christ. (Acts 2:14-36, Acts 3:11-26, Acts 5:42)
2. ***A CHURCH*** is continuously devoting itself to the teaching of God's Word. (Acts 2:42a, 5:42)
3. ***A CHURCH*** is a community (fellowship) of like minded Believers in Jesus devoted to one another in Him. (Acts 2:42b, 46)
4. ***A CHURCH*** regularly remembers the Lord through the breaking of bread. (Acts 2:42c)
5. ***A CHURCH*** continually devotes itself to prayer. (Acts 1:14, 2:42d, 3:1)
6. ***A CHURCH*** continues in joyful praise & worship of God. (Acts 2:46 & 27)
7. ***A CHURCH*** consistently & boldly shares its faith. (Acts 4:13, 29, 31 & 14:3)
8. ***A CHURCH*** obeys God rather than men. (Acts 5:29)
9. ***A CHURCH*** is a partner in starting new churches. (Acts 13:1-3, 14:19-23)

**CONCLUSION**: 'a church' is A CHURCH when it consistently functions as A CHURCH according to the New Testament! The essential element found in the DNA of A CHURCH is found in its ***FUNCTION!*** The crucial question is "***Does 'a church' function as A CHURCH???***"

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## A Guest Opinion by Dr. Ed Stetzer-

### Why is cultural relevance a big deal? Here is my take

The scriptures are relevant to this and every culture. They do not need updating, correcting, or revisioning. On the contrary, what needs revisioning is our understanding and obedience to God's word as we live out His mission in context. When we live a humble orthodoxy and humble missiology, we will be salt and light in contemporary culture—a biblically-faithful, culturally-relevant, counter culture. Here is a brief article I wrote for our friends at Catalyst that might be an encouragement:

The fight goes on. Like a giant tug of war, each side is pulling hard. The battle lines: Cultural relevance versus biblical faithfulness—a classic tyranny of the "OR." Yes, cultural relevance can be confusing.

Not everyone buys into what I've just said. Whole ministries exist just to tell you not to pay attention to culture. To them, a virtuous church is one that is culturally irrelevant. In their view, a mark of holiness is not just being disconnected from sin but also being disconnected from sinners and the culture they share with us every day.

Preaching against culture is like preaching against someone's house—it is just where they live. The house has good in it and bad in it. Overall, culture can be a mess—but (to mix metaphors) it is the water in which we swim and the lens through which we see the world. And the gospel needs to come, inhabit, and change that and every culture (or house).

Preaching against culture is not the pattern of the New Testament church (see Dean Fleming's [Contextualization in the New Testament](#)), the historic church (see Ruth Tucker's [From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya](#)), or today's church (see [Breaking the Missional Code](#)).

Culture clearly does matter! For 2000 years, missionaries have courageously sought to take the message and make it understandable. Through these two millennia, changing cultures have impacted the church and its missional strategies. Conversely, in many cases, the church has also impacted culture. The reason ministry models have to change is because they have an unchanging message that must be conveyed in a changing world. That message is Christ, the gospel, and the Scriptures. Jude 3 says that we are to "*contend* for the faith once delivered for the saints." That's essential.

But, the Bible also clearly gives us a mandate to make the message understandable. We do more than just translate it into a language. We also have to translate it into a culture. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9:22-23, "I have become all things to all men." Why? Because the message needs to be *contextualized*. The "how" of ministry is, in many ways, determined by the "who, when, and where" of culture. That's also essential.

We have to both *contend* and *contextualize*. This brings a balanced focus in our proclamation and practice. When we contend for the gospel, we remain biblically faithful. When we contextualize, we communicate the message effectively. When we *contend* and *contextualize*, our churches are *biblically faithful, culturally relevant, counter culture* communities.

Those who preach against culture are often unaware that they live in one. But the dynamic culture around them is often not the culture of their church. What they yearn for is typically not a scriptural culture, but rather a nostalgic religious culture of days past. The irony of this is that every church is culturally relevant. It is simply a matter of whether the culture of the church is in any way similar to the culture of its community or only meaningful to itself.

Contextualizing does not mean that your church needs to look like Northpoint (Atlanta) or Mosaic (LA). It may mean something very different, and a culturally relevant church in your community may look very different from culturally relevant churches in other communities. Yet, many of us miss that. Why? Because too many leaders pastor their churches in their heads and not in their communities. But the truth is, if you can't pastor the people God has given you (not the ones He's given Andy Stanley or Erwin McManus), then you don't love them. John Knox said, "Give me Scotland or I die." He had a passion for the people of Scotland. We need to have the same passion for the people where we are, and to love them and their culture (though parts of every culture should make you uneasy and call for a biblical critique—see Acts 17 and my message from [The Resurgence conference](#)).



## **TRANSFORMATION VS CONVERSION!**

It was reported in 1992 that only 20% of converts to Christ described their experiences as dramatic or radical. When you asked Jesus into your heart, were you *transformed* or *converted*? The Apostle Paul urged his readers in Rome to be *transformed*. Most Baptist churches have some of both kinds of members - *transformed* ones and *converted* ones. Isn't it simply a matter of semantics? I don't think so! I don't think Paul thought so either! Through the years I have observed a very noticeable difference in *transformed* Believers and *converted* Believers.

### **Here are what I believe to be observable results of conversion:**

- > A thankfulness for one's salvation and club-like membership
- > A habit of gathering for worship and Bible study, when it is convenient
- > Generally complacent and satisfied with being in a church that is on a plateau or is declining
- > A belief that witnessing, discipleship and ministry are just for the "hired church staff"
- > An attitude that spiritual renewal or revival is just for "others"
- > A belief that the focus of the church and her ministry should be on what takes place "on site"

### **Here are some of what I believe to be observable results of transformation:**

- > An attitude of joy and a lifestyle that reflects praise to the Father that pervades all areas of daily living
- > A habit of gathering in community as the body of Christ and a habit of going as a result of this worship
- > A constant desire to impact spiritual darkness through being "light" and "salt" in the world
- > A conscious understanding of oneself as a *transformed* person on mission daily for the King
- > A passion for and a habit of engaging others for the purpose of sharing the Good News of Jesus
- > A belief that the focus of the church should be on impacting spiritual darkness, beginning in one's Jerusalem and extending to the ends of the earth
- > A genuine joy and fulfillment in being in constant service to the King

What kind of believer are you - *transformed* or *simply* converted? It is my belief that it is the Father's will for every Believer to be a *transformed* Believer! *Transformed* Christians will impact their community for Christ! This will lead to true Kingdom growth and bring joy and glory to our God! Think about it! Pray about it!

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## **Relevancy and the Gospel!**

The powerful life changing Good News of Jesus Christ is always relevant in any age, in all translations to all peoples of His world! Relevancy and the Word are never the question. However, the question that is the key question today is are we communicating the Gospel in a way that can best be understood and therefore, accepted by those who are living in spiritual darkness?

Is it a valid statement to say that in order to be true to the inerrant text and to the God who gave us His written testimony, we must communicate it in the same way that it was communicated to us and to our forefathers? One man said to me that God's Word has always been proclaimed the same way! Obviously, it had been a long time since he had read the book of Acts and observed the various forms used there by Peter, Stephen, Philip and Paul to preach and communicate the Good News! Many of the accounts of the early proclamation of God's Word as recorded in the book of Acts are in story form. I am privileged to visit many of our Baptist churches on a consistent basis. I have heard some very good examples of the communication of God's Word. However, it has been a long time since I have heard a preacher use a form of preaching as used by Stephen in the book of Acts. If we really believe that the New Testament is teaching us a particular form of communicating the Good News that is the one and only "authorized" style of preaching, then I guess we need to return to the storying form used in the New Testament. Is it true, as some are saying, that there is only one correct way to communicate God's Truth? Or is it possible that there is more than one form to communicate God's truth to an audience?

Lewis Drummond in his 1975 work *Leading Your Church in Evangelism* said, "The task of the church is to present Christ to the world as we find it, not as it was or as we would like it, and to communicate in a relevant manner that in Christ alone is to be found the answer to life's answers."

Beloved preacher, how long has it been since you examined your style of preaching i.e. method of communicating God's truth, in light of the audience you are trying to reach, today? Are you aware of the worldview and mindset of those you are trying to reach today? Is your tried and tested method, which may have been effective 25 or 40 years ago, still being used by God to bring our young adults, youth and children today to faith in Christ? If the answer to this question is "no," dear friend, it is not the power of the inerrant Word of God to bring people to salvation that has changed! It is your audience that has changed! Although just as much sinners as their fathers or grandfathers, they are looking through a different set of glasses! Their worldview has not been shaped by the depression, preachers like George Truett or WWII. Their worldview has been shaped by prosperity, the ethical failures of preachers, deceiving politicians, drugs, terrorists and Gulf Wars! They view things from a different perspective! Do we have a passion of reaching them for Jesus in obedience to His command?? If we want to reach them, we need to use a different approach to present the eternal truths of God's Word. Think about it! Pray about it!