

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

68 What Kind of a Church Is Hope Church?

Scripture: Ephesians 4:1-12

The question we have before us this morning has been asked many times. It is a reasonable question and people have different things on their minds when prompted to make such an inquiry. Some are concerned about the size of the church while others are curious about the people and their ability to identify with those who worship at Hope Church. A common concern has to do with the doctrine and beliefs which are taught and adhered to. Not a few people have questioned the denominational affiliation of Hope Church and this is the matter I desire to turn our attention to at this time.

It was the privilege of your pastor and his wife to represent the church as delegates to the 94th annual conference of the Evangelical Free Church of America held this week, June 19-24, on the campus of Bethel College and Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. The theme of the conference this year was drawn from Ephesians 4:12, *“Equipping the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.”* (NASB) We thank you for the opportunity to have attended this inspiring conference and to all who assumed added responsibilities and shared in making the trip possible, be it known, we are most appreciative. I would like to incorporate a report of that conference in this study having to do with our understanding of what Hope Church is like.

I. HOPE CHURCH IS AN ECUMENICAL CHURCH WITH A PARTICULAR DISTINCTIVE:

By ecumenical we mean the desire and capacity to join in meaningful worship and service with any person of like precious faith. The ecumenicity we seek to enjoy here is one of spirit rather than structure. We are a community church and like to think of ourselves as a family of believers which welcomes people of all denominational backgrounds and affiliations. We are glad that on this given Lord's Day our congregation represents a cross section of religious experience.

It was Chrysostom, an early church father, (347-447) who wrote, “In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, charity. In all things, Jesus Christ.” I would like to think that this is our attitude toward all who come to worship here. The heritage of

Hope Church is not separatistic in the sense that we make minor points of doctrine a test for fellowship. We believe that the basis of fellowship derives from a personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Upon this confession an individual becomes a member in the body of Christ and a candidate for membership in the local church. There is latitude for differences of opinion in some categories of doctrine, but unanimity of belief concerning the tenets of historic Christianity. We do welcome all to thoroughly investigate these beliefs as well as to participate the knowledge and enjoyment of them.

Hope Church is not alone in this persuasion. Throughout the United States there are 699 other churches which share similar convictions and which constitute a fellowship known as the Evangelical Free Church of America. It was noted at this year's conference that 30 new churches were added during the past year and that membership numbers 72,000.

It is sometimes asked if The Evangelical Free Church is a denomination. The answer lies in the use of the word "denomination." The Evangelical Free Church is not a denomination in the common use of the word. There is no hierarchical "denominator" which gives cohesiveness to many religious bodies. The fact is that the above mentioned churches are self governing bodies which vote to select leaders, raise their own budgets, provide their own buildings, call their own pastors, and decide upon their own form of worship and service, as guided by Scripture, the leading of the Holy Spirit and conscience.

We recognize that even a thorough study of Scripture does not bring a conclusive understanding of the form of government in the New Testament Church. We recognize that some Evangelicals believe that a Presbyterian or Episcopal form of government is closer to Scripture, more efficient, and more effective in terms of church growth. However, notwithstanding the imperfections of a system where authority is vested in the laity, in spite of the fact that the mind and will of the Lord is not always discerned, we do know that the early churches were independent and the New Testament places a great emphasis upon the exercise of spiritual gifts to be exercised in the edification and growth of the local church. Thus we feel that an autonomous form of government affords the greatest opportunity to employ the gifts God has given in the fulfillment of Christ's pledge to build His church.

Dr. Thomas McDill, President of the Evangelical Free Church, emphasized this thought during the past week with the words, "The Free Church movement in

Europe and America was lay oriented from its inception. Laymen gathered in home Bible studies to better “equip” themselves for the work of the ministry. Evangelism, personal holiness in lifestyle, and authority of Scripture for faith and practice became the hallmark of the Free Church in its early history. The movement spread throughout Europe, attracting laymen both inside and outside the state church. Hundreds became believers and joined the ranks of those who looked to Scripture for a pattern of ministry. It was evident that this pattern involved laymen.”

To summarize, Hope Church is ecumenical. Our understanding of the word is drawn from John 17:21 where Jesus prayed that all believers might be one. A legitimate exegesis of that passage reveals that Jesus was not praying for organizational oneness. His concern was that believers should be one in the way He was one with the father. This was an invisible unity and one of purpose and love. (John 4:24, 6:38,40, 17:4) It was a unity of doctrine. (John 7:16, 8:26, 12:49) As far as we can tell from the writings of the early church, unity of purpose, belief concerning the Christ, and love, was the goal. Hope Church is distinctive. We are not fighting fundamentalists so to speak. We do not draw swords over minor points of doctrine. We do believe in the fundamentals of the faith but we do not look askance at those who hold other views and have differences of opinion in some matters. We are able to enjoy fellowship with all who desire to live under the lordship of Christ.

II. THERE IS A STRONG INTEREST IN MISSIONS:

In a world where major denominations are withdrawing missionaries from the fields feeling there is no significant reason for keeping them there, we feel the continuing impulsion of a command which has never been rescinded. Clearly, we are to pray and send forth laborers into the harvest field. (Luke 10:2) Beyond the missionary commitment we have assumed on the local level, we share a wider interest in missions through the Evangelical Free Church. One of the strong advantages in identifying with other Christians in the fellowship of Free Churches is that much more can be done in the cause of world missions when we work together.

Dr. Lester Westlund gave the following report this week in St. Paul. “At this time we have 205 missionaries on active duty. This does not include short termers or missionary helpers. According to field of service, our missionary family divides up as follows: Belgium- 2, Germany- 7, Hong Kong - 21, Japan - 26, Malaysia - 4,

Peru - 3, Singapore - 6, Venezuela - 70, Zaire - 48, and the Philippines - 18. Ten fields of service covered. During the past year 17 missionaries were commissioned and sent out for their first term of service overseas. Also, during the year 31 missionaries were recommissioned and sent back to the fields again. We praise the Lord for these who know the language, the culture and people, and are able to begin their work at once. In addition, 25 candidates have completed their application work, met with the board and have been accepted for overseas service. There are now about 20,000 church members overseas with an attendance on Sunday morning averaging 46,000. This is an increase in attendance of almost 10,000, over the previous year. Sunday School now, stands at 13,000. The income flowing into all of the national churches last year was about one million dollars.

It was also noted that twenty years ago one dollar given to missions became two dollars on the field. Today two dollar's given to missions becomes one on the field. A highlight of the conference was the Thursday evening presentation of the 1977-78 Women's Missionary Society project check. The WMS treasurer, Mrs. Henry Rodstol, presented a check for \$45,039.00 to Rev. Vernon Anderson, area secretary for Latin America. Rev. Anderson, in turn, presented the check to Rev. Wil Anderson, rector of our seminary in Venezuela, where it will be used for much needed student housing.

III. ONLY SCRIPTURE PROVIDES A SAFE AND SUFFICIENT GUIDE FOR FAITH AND PRACTICE:

The word "evangelical" has to do with the belief we have in the integrity of Scripture. The reason that the gospel is good news is because it is true. Evangelicals are people who have a commitment to the authority of Scripture as being inerrant in the original autographs and a belief that only the Scriptures provide a safe and sufficient guide in spiritual matters. At the conference I was particularly interested in six institutions of higher learning maintained by the Evangelical Free Church. These are Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois; Trinity Western College in Langley, B.C., Canada; Trinity College, Deerfield, Illinois; Evangel Theological College, Hong Kong; The Evangelical Seminary, El Limon, Venezuela; and The Evangelical Bible Institute, Republic of Zaire, Africa. The Christian college and Bible institute is a catalyst in education which brings a new element into the social conflicts in intellect and morals. We cannot expect to change the direction of secular education, but we

can bring the influences of Christ to bear upon the system. Without the mooring provided by God's unchanging Word, we will sink into pure secularism.

It is of note that Trinity Evangelical Divinity School is one of the leading seminaries in the world today with a number of internationally known scholars on its faculty. Dr. Kenneth Meyer, noted the growth of this school which has taken for its motto, "In trust With The Gospel." He informed conference delegates, "In 1963 there were 39 students at Trinity, in 1978, 835 were enrolled. In 1963 there were 8 faculty members. Today there are 41 full time faculty members. Twelve students graduated in 1963, this year 170 will graduate. Gift income has risen from \$250,000, to \$800,000 in the past fifteen years. Twenty five percent of the students come from Free Churches, and upon graduation, sixty percent elect to serve the Lord in a Free Church ministry of some kind. Sixty five percent of incoming students are from secular colleges and universities. Hope Church has its own seminarian in David Pitt and we also note that Mr. John Scott serves on the President's Advisory Board of the school.

IV. WE WOULD VALUE THE RATIONAL AND RELATIONAL DIMENSIONS OF OUR FAITH:

Hope Church is pietistic in its heritage and orthodox in its tradition. The Free Church heritage has strong relational aspects. We believe the teaching of Scripture must be applied to our lives. We want warmth of heart, warmth of message, and warmth of concern. We want the total personality involved with God and His Word. There must be subjective involvement with the Lordship of Christ. We abhor dead orthodoxy and desire the living reality of Christ in the life. We want a clear head when it comes to doctrine, and a warm heart when it comes to devotion. We believe it is essential to have solid Biblical content in our doctrinal understanding of faith, but it is equally important to have a dynamic, vital relationship to God the Father through Jesus Christ. There must be a coupling together of sound Christian doctrine with dynamic Christian experience. (What Is The Free Church? Free Church Press; Minneapolis, Mn.

It was with this thought in mind that Dr. Clyde Taylor; long the general director of the National Association of Evangelicals, began the conference with a challenge to put self aside and to get to work. He said, "I believe the Spirit of God is trying to do something in these days if the church is willing to pay the price. Christians are called to be disciples and to make disciples. The job we have to do in world missions will not get done unless we are willing to spend time and effort teaching

and discipling new believers after they are won to Christ. We must put aside immature attitudes which allow us to do whatever we want to do. Whenever I find discipleship effective, I find almost total negation of self.” Rev. Rick Yahn Of Fresno, Ca., spoke to two thousand people on Tuesday evening and said, “In a time of great interest in being “born again;” a time of swelling enrollments in evangelical seminaries, God does not expect us to respond with apathy, but to let out all the stops.” Dr. McDill noted in the keynote message of the week, “God's plan for every believer in Christ is that he or she share in the service of Christ. God intends the church to function like a body, with everyone participating. God will give each believer the grace to use his or her talents to effectively perform the ministry to which the believer is called. We will never get the job done that needs to be done unless we get the whole body working together.”

We have this emphasis here at Hope church. We would commit ourselves to the discipling of the believer, to putting the principles and precepts of God's Word into practice in our lives, and to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

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