

"Who we are and What we believe"

Notes of an Address given by Ian McDowell at the Openings of various Gospel Chapels in Australia

Introduction

Those who are not familiar with our manner of gathering may wonder what is distinctive about people who meet in a "Gospel Chapel" rather than in a "Church". The present purpose is to explain this.

Membership

Every person who has received the Lord Jesus Christ as his or her own personal Saviour (John 1:12; Rev. 3:20), is a member of "the church, which is His body" (I Cor. 12:13; Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18). The Bible also speaks of local churches (Acts 9:13; Rom. 16:16; Philem. 2). These churches reproduce locally the characteristics of the whole church when their membership is open to Christians and only Christians. (Rom. 15:7). This raises the problem that although "the Lord knoweth them that are His" (II Tim. 2:19), local church leaders cannot be so sure. Hence we are justified in maintaining in membership only those persons who are Godly in life (I John 1:6-7), loving in their attitude to other (I John 2:9-10), and sound in essential doctrine (I John 2:23-24), no matter what claims they might make.

Notwithstanding the restriction on membership, all are welcome to attend our meetings (Matt. 11:28).

Major Beliefs

Our major doctrinal beliefs are those of traditional evangelical Christianity. We consider that the Bible is the Word of God and is fully inspired (II Tim. 3:16-17; II Pet. 1:21). We believe in one God who is eternally existent in three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:18; II Cor. 13:14). The Father is God (Gal. 1:1); the Son is God (Heb. 1:8-9); and the Holy Spirit is God (II Cor. 3:17-18). In addition, the Son is Man (Acts 2:22; I Tim. 2:5). We are sinful (Rom. 3:23) ,but He is sinlessly perfect and morally glorious (John 13:31-32; Rom. 1:4; Heb. 5:8-9). Our sin would separate us eternally from God (Isa. 59:2), but the Lord Jesus died for our sins (I Cor. 15:3; I Pet. 2:24), so that a full and free salvation is now offered to all who trust Him (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8; II Cor. 5:17). Salvation has its outcome in discipleship (Luke 9:23-26) and victorious Christian living (Rom. 6:11) as we walk in the enjoyment of the presence of the living Christ within us (Eph. 3:17; Col. 1:27; 2:6, 9-10).

The Place of Meeting

It is good to have a tasteful building (I Tim. 6:17). But this is the "House of God" only in the sense that it is set apart for Christian worship and service. The true House of God is the Assembly of Christians who meet there (I Tim. 3:15). There is no "altar" or "sanctuary" where the presence of the Lord might be sought; rather, He is found in the midst of His people (Matt. 18:20).

The Form of Meeting

We have no clergyman; our ministry is according to gift (Eph. 4:7-8; 11-13) and is available to all local churches. It is restricted to men (I Cor. 14:34-35); subject to this, we follow the New Testament pattern of liberty of utterance in meetings of Christians so that the Holy Spirit can speak through whom He will, and gift may be manifested to all (I Cor. 14:29-30; II Cor. 3:17). Every Christian is a priest (I Pet. 2:5, 9), which confers on him or her the right to enter the presence of God at any time (Heb. 10:19-22), whether for prayer (Heb. 4:16) or for praise (Col. 1:12), as led by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:14).

Leadership

Our rule is by elders who combine ministry gifts with those of administration (Heb. 13:7, 17, 24). These brethren show first by their interest and use of gift, their desire to serve (I Tim. 3:1). Their elders recognize their qualifications by comparison with Scriptural requirements (I Tim. 3:2-7; Titus 1:6-9), and in fellowship with them the new elder begins his work. The Holy Spirit makes the actual appointment (Acts 20:28), and this is verified by the spiritual fruit that follows (Matt. 7:20).

The Ordinances

We cherish the ordinances in their apostolic simplicity. These are, baptism by immersion in water of believers (Matt. 3:13-17; 28:18-20; Acts 2:37-38; 8:37-38; Rom. 6:3-6), and remembrance of our Lord Jesus Christ in the breaking of bread (Luke 22:19-20; Acts 20:7; I Cor. 10:16; 11:23-30). It has been well said that a Bible, a pool, and a table with bread and wine on it, are the only essential furnishings which a place of meeting for Christians requires.

What Are We Called?

For legal reasons and for convenience generally we are called "Christian Brethren". Both words are Scriptural (Matt. 23:8; Acts 11:26). Their use does not mean that we think that believers who are not members of our churches are not Christian brethren, and we regret the necessity to imply the distinction.

Outreach

We have described our belief and practices concerning the local church. At the same time, we are a Gospel-loving people who will take all steps possible to secure the salvation of men and women (Acts 1:8; 20:20-21; Rom. 1:15; 10:10; I Cor. 1:18). We are missionary-minded (Mark 16:15; Rom. 15:19-20) and, in our Lord's Name, ready to engage in social work (Matt. 25:35-40).

Conclusion

We believe that the foregoing principles will characterise all local churches which conscientiously seek the Lord's path for them in this present day. Because there is a minimum of formal control, experience has shown that a very high degree of spirituality is required on the part of brethren and sisters. It is emphasised in closing that all must strive, with the Lord's help, to maintain this (Luke 22:27; I Cor. 13:2; Gal. 6:1-2; Phil. 2:3; I John 3:18).