



Evaluating Church Models

A surprising number of church people have a viewpoint about the new-model churches that are being planted all over North America. Some choose them and want to be a part of them. Others tend to be against them or have no interest in being a part of them. And still others not only oppose them but are very critical of them. So who's right? And how can we know? These viewpoints are based on some kind of evaluation of these new churches. But is it a good one? The answer is to evaluate these new church models but how? I've written this article to help you adopt a fair and impartial process for the evaluation of models whether established or new.

Before I launch into this process, I need to mention two items. First, the process that I will explain here can be used to evaluate any church, established, current, or those to come. My experience is that most established churches do little formal evaluation that could be most helpful in making needed corrections.

I believe that it's the responsibility of the churches in general and their leaders in particular to police what they're doing to make sure that it's biblically or doctrinally sound. To do this, they need a process for evaluating church models that provides evaluators with a biblical-theological sieve through which they run the church's practices. Philip Melancthon developed such a process in the sixteenth century that is based solidly on the Scriptures. It consists of three filters.

Filter 1: The Essentials of the Faith

The first filter is the essentials of the faith. These essentials are the propositional truths that are both clearly taught in the Bible and are necessary for one to be considered orthodox or sound in the faith. What are they? There are at least five that I've placed in the following chart for quick reference:

Filter #1: The Essentials of the Faith

The inspiration of the Bible as the Word of God
The existence of only one true God as three coequal and coeternal persons (the Trinity)
The deity and substitutionary atonement of Christ
The bodily resurrection of Christ
The physical return of Christ

What should our response be to others in light of these core essential beliefs? The key word is *unity*. We pursue unity with those who agree with us on these (Eph. 4:3; Jn. 17:20-23). But the essentials are exclusive as well as inclusive. They include people of like mind, but exclude people who don't agree on these core essentials, such as those who don't base their faith on Scripture or part of a cult who reject in some way the essentials.

Filter 2: The Non-essentials

The non-essentials are those views we hold based on the Scriptures, our tradition, or both. The nonessentials aren't as clear biblically as we would like to believe, and that's why evangelicals disagree over them. One group's nonessentials may be another's essentials. For example, one group may allow much freedom in their mode of baptism, whereas another may argue that immersion is the only correct mode. Agreement on the nonessentials doesn't affect one's faith or standing before Christ as the essentials do. The key word is *liberty*. There is room to flex. The following chart provides us with some non-essentials:

Filter #2: Some Nonessentials of the Faith

Church government (polity)
Mode of baptism
Efficacy of the Lord's Supper
Role of women in the church
Presence and permanence of spiritual gifts
Time and place when the church meets
Church practices

What should our response be to others regarding the faith nonessentials? In the essentials, we're to pursue unity and self-respect as persons. However, in the nonessentials we're to pursue Christian liberty. Liberty says that it's okay to take a firm position on these issues, but we must understand that we're in the realm of interpretive tradition. We must be willing to grant others their distinctive beliefs and still hold one another in high regard. Preserving the "unity of the faith"

(Eph. 4:13) means treating others who differ with us on the nonessentials with love, kindness, and compassion (Jn. 13:34-35; 15:12-14, 17). We must not falsely judge, condemn, or malign them (Rom. 14:10-13). Instead, we choose to treat one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. This is important, because there are some who viciously and wrongfully attack new-model churches.

Filter 3: In All Things Love

The third filter affects the essentials and nonessentials. It argues that in both we treat others with love. We're to love those believers who differ on the nonessentials (John 13:34-35; 15:12-14, 17), and we're to love those who differ on the essentials (Jn 3:16; Rom. 5:8). We don't love what they do or teach, but we love them as fellow image bearers. However, it's imperative that we address false teaching and sinful behavior. As Jesus modeled for all, we love the individual but hate his or her sin (Jn. 3:16).

To summarize: In the words of Philip Melanchthon: in the essentials we pursue unity and in the nonessentials liberty; in all things love.

New Book

I have taken the above material from my newest book entitled *A New Kind of Church* (Baker Books, 2007). If you would like a copy, you may order a copy from Baker Books, Amazon, or your local book distributor.

Want to Know More?

The Malphurs Group will be offering training in Christ's church or model building process this fall, beginning in August. It covers this issue and more. Those who have been trained say this is leadership at its finest and is a must for all pastors. We will meet for five sessions that will take place once a month on Fridays from 1:00 to 6:00 p.m. and Saturday mornings from 8:00 to noon. This will happen at a hotel near the Dallas/Fort Worth Airport. Those who attend may receive seminary credit toward a masters or doctor of ministries degree. If you would like to know more, contact the Malphurs Group (aubrey@malphursgroup.com). Also, you can learn more from my website (www.malphursgroup.com).

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