

The Church Game: Distinguishing Between Biblical Principles and Culture

Ted Ward

Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1991

Purpose

Many of the conflicts within the church, especially those that are associated with the “generation gap”, are attributable to confusion between biblical principles and culture. One step toward resolving conflict is in dramatizing the extent to which tradition, habit, and unchallenged cultural expectations influence one of our basic concepts, the church.

The title of this learning game, “The Church Game”, comes from its original version which was concerned with commonplace and biblical attributes of the word “church”. It is useful as a discussion starter in reference to any concept that can be expressed in one or two words e.g., church, missions, missionary, evangelism, or Christ-like behavior.

The purpose of the learning exercise is to help a group of leaders reflect individually and then discuss in small groups the meaning and implications of an important idea. The exercise works best if there is some degree of tension between the commonplace and the normative used of the word or idea under study.

Participants: 8-100 players organized in 2 or 4 teams, maximum 25 people per team.

Assumptions on which the exercise is built:

1. The term (key word) upon which the exercise focuses refers to ideas in which the learners can be expected to have substantial interest.
2. The learners have some awareness of the varieties of ways the term (key word) is used.
3. The learners are capable of thinking and talking beyond the narrowness of a dictionary-type definition.
4. Within the group the variations of sophistication regarding the concept are not excessive.
5. There is a distinct contrast between the commonplace and the normative or authoritative views of the term (concept).

If any of these assumptions is not reasonable for a given group of learners, the exercise is not appropriate.

Procedure

1. Divide the group into two or four teams with approximately the same number of people in each team. Provide each person a blank sheet of paper and a pencil or pen.
2. Leaders says, “Working individually and quietly, each person is to write down all the words and phrases that come to mind when I give you the key word. Work quickly. Write each word or phrase that seems in any way linked to the key word. For example, if the key word were *song*, you might write *singer, music, instruments, words, message*, and so forth. Any questions? . . . OK. Ready . . . The key word is “Church”! Write quickly. You have five minutes.”
3. After five minutes call a halt. Ask each group to combine the lists of individual participants. Allow about 10-15 minutes.

4. Ask the group with the longest list to read that list aloud.
5. Organize into groups of four people using the most convenient and quickest method (e.g., cluster closest chairs and move “stragglers” to designated locations.
6. Using the synthesized list in each group to complete the following tasks:

Leaders says, “From your group’s list find examples of the following:

- Ideas or word associations that have their origins in *culture* or the ordinary (and even prejudiced) ways that people think about those things if they are not using authoritative sources. Mark at least five of these items with the letter C.
- Ideas or word associations based on a biblical or theological understanding. Mark at least five of these items with the letter B.
- Ideas or word associations that are ambiguous. They could represent either responsible or misguided understandings, depending on what else is going on in a person’s thinking. Mark at least five of these items with the letter A.”

Total Group Discussion

Questions that may be used to facilitate discussion include the following:

- What sorts of items were the most common in your original lists?
- What do your lists show about historical and cultural influences on your concept of church?
- Identify some items that are cultural, not biblical, yet not necessarily wrong or inconsistent with biblical principles.
- Identify some items that are wrong or inconsistent with biblical principles.
- Which items were particularly hard to classify? Tell us how you were looking at them.
- Which category of items (A-ambiguous, B-biblical, C-cultural) are most common in your lists? Why might that be the case?
- What sorts of arguments or misunderstandings arise when you use our key word (name it) in a careless way?
- What can be done to encourage more careful use of this word?
- What difference does it make?
- What are the dangers in failing to differentiate between cultural and biblical elements in the operation of a local assembly?