

CALVARY DISTINCTIVES

EPHESIANS 2:10

Two pastors lived next door. The one man pastored the Baptist Church, while the other man pastored the Methodist Church. Both families had four year-old children. One tot was a little boy - the other tot was a little girl. Every Sunday morning the kids attended their respective churches, but on Sunday afternoon they would play together in the front yard. One blistering hot afternoon the kids were playing in the sprinkler. They both took off their wet clothes, and laid them on the hood of the car to dry. *Remember, they were both innocent children - just four years old.*

When the little boy saw the girl without her clothes, he just stood there scratching his head. He was surprised. Later he told his dad, “Wow, I didn’t know there was so much difference between Baptists and Methodists.” Obviously, little boys and girls are alike in many ways – they should be - they’re both human. But there’re also definite differences between them. Likewise, each Christian church is simultaneously *alike* and *distinct*.

We’re alike in that we worship the *same God* – serve the *same Savior* – are led by the *same Spirit*. We read the *same Bible* and have been shown the *same grace*. We come to the *same table* to take communion, and participate in the *same baptism*. We’ll all live forever in the *same heaven*. There’s much Calvary has in common with other churches, but there’re also some differences that set us apart, and give us our own identity.

And in many ways, this variety in churches is healthy and positive. Humans come in a multitude of stripes and types – and it takes an wide array of churches, and diverse approaches, to reach each group for Jesus. That’s why God gives to each church, and family of churches, its own particular *flavor and focus* - its own set of **Distinctives**. This is what I want to talk about today. The traits that set Calvary apart from other churches. This week we’ll host pastors and church leaders from right at 75 Calvary Chapels. I want to make sure you know *who we are* and *what we value*.

Our text this morning is Ephesians 2:10. Paul writes to the church at Ephesus, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” The word translated “workmanship” is the Greek word “poema” – from which we get our word *poem*. As individual believers we’re God’s work of rhythm and rhyme – His *work of art*. We’re His unique and special creation! Like a poet who organizes his words in a meaningful manner - God is shaping us into *a sonnet of salvation – an ode to His amazing grace!* And I believe Calvary Chapel is also a *poema* - a work of God – special and unique for these last days. God birthed it in Pastor Chuck – then He’s birthed it over and over in other Calvary pastors all around the world.

Today, I want to lay out **twelve distinctives** of a Calvary Chapel... Our approach **to God’s grace, to people, to children, to worship, to the Scriptures, to church doctrine, to the Holy Spirit, to membership, to ministry, to money, to church government, and to the rapture**... If we were like every other church in the community *why take up space?* We’d be better off closing our doors and throwing in with someone else. But there are distinctives – some real differences. We’re a special expression of God’s heart, and I want you to know what makes us unique.

First, recognize Calvary Chapel’s approach to **the grace of God**. John 1:17, “the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus...” Grace is the *unmerited and undeserved favor of God*. I like the explanation, “Grace is love that’s on the house!” God’s grace was paid for by the sacrifice of Jesus, and comes to us freely. God *saves us* and *blesses us* not because of our good works, or our religious deeds, but for no other reason than His amazing grace.

When I come to Jesus He takes me *just as I am*, and *right where I’m at*. He plants His Spirit in my life, and begins to work in me from the inside out. It’s not up to me to *do this* or *do that*, but to cooperate with His Spirit. Grace and works are mutually exclusive ways of approaching God. You can’t trust in grace to *obtain* God’s favor; then trust in your own works to *maintain* God’s favor. It’s one or the other. Galatians 3:3 says it best. If we begin in the Spirit, don’t try to be made perfect by your own elbow grease.

The churches I grew up in hammered us weekly about what we should be doing for God – the *dos and don'ts*. The theme was *try, try, try...* But the Bible's emphasis is not on what *we should be doing for God*, but what *God has already done for us*. God's theme is *trust, trust, trust!* I grow spiritually not by attempting righteousness through my own efforts – but by realizing I'm already as right with God as I can get through Jesus. 1 John 4:19 tells us, "**We love Him, because He first loved us.**" God's grace is what supplies the incentive to be holy, to witness, to serve, to love our neighbor. The more I realize God loves me the more I'll want to love Him in return. A Calvary distinctive is an emphasis on grace!

Which leads to the Calvary approach **to people**. **A church needs to be a grace place!** If God loves each of us *just as we are* and *right where we're at* – then that's how we should love each other. 1 Samuel 16:7 tells us, "**The Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.**" God doesn't look at the *color of our skin*, or *cut of our hair*, or *the clothes that we wear*. God looks behind the veneer. God looks at the heart.

And this is how we should see each other. God's love transcends racial, and cultural, and economic barriers. It's *grace* for every *race*. God's grace picks up people despite their background or problems - it elevates them as children of God - it forgives and fixes them – then it unites them in a common future. Heaven will be a hodge-podge of people. And the church should reflect the same demographics here and now.

One of the distinctives of a Calvary is a warmth and acceptance for all people. Hopefully, anybody – from any walk of life, or situation, or political persuasion – can walk through our doors and sense God's love for them. The first Calvary in Costa Mesa which began in the mid-60s reached out to the counter-cultural Hippies that had flocked to Southern California. And Calvary has been reaching out to the disenfranchised every since. Here's what happens in a *grace place*... folks who aren't accepted anywhere else, become accepted... people who aren't love, get loved...

Remember, on the night before His crucifixion Jesus told His followers that the world will know we're His disciples by our love for one another. 1 Corinthians 13 teaches us the greatest of God's gifts is love!

And while we're talking about people – *let's talk about Calvary's approach to little people - to children*. Once, the disciples made the mistake of thinking the Master was too busy for kids. When they turned the children away Jesus responded, "**Allow the little children to come to Me.**" In our Children's Ministry - from nursery, to Way Street, to MS – we try to create an environment where learning is fun. Kids need to be taught on their own level. We want our children to look forward to coming to church. This is why we run our Children's Ministry simultaneous with our adult worship and Bible Study. It spares the kid's the boredom of an adult service, and provides them a worship experience to which they can relate.

One Sunday, Kathy was out of town, and I had the three older kids for the weekend. Nick was just a kindergartener, but he was mature for his age. I thought he could sit next to me during the worship, and Bible study. *Man, was I wrong!* As I started teaching his paper airplane launched. Before I knew it he was in the floor buzzing the altar with that airplane. I tried to ignore him, but it was impossible. I interrupted my own message, walked over to him, and sent him to the foyer until I was finished. *That did it for me...* God made preschoolers to learn by exploration.

You're fighting against God to expect a child to sit still through an adult-oriented service. That's why we don't allow kids under 6 into the sanctuary. Yes, they can distract others, but most importantly it's unfair to the kids!

When I was a child our church had the traditional format – kids and parents in the sanctuary side-by-side... *And here's what happened...* The parents had to devise little ways to hold their child's attention. They played tic-tac-toe with their kids... they counted ceiling tiles, or folks in the choir... Not only were the parents unable to pay attention, but without realizing it they taught their kids how to come to church and not listen. So by the time the kids got to the age where they could actually glean from the pastor's sermon – they conditioned to ignore what was being said. That's tragic. We want our kids to grow up excited about church!

And speaking of our Sunday services, let's talk next about our approach **to worship**. The Bible tells us the whole purpose of our existence is to worship God. Humans not only please the heart of God, but we find our greatest fulfillment in the praising, and in offering, and in worshipping God.

That's why at a Calvary a choir comes out only on special occasions. When a choir sits in front of the congregation each Sunday you create an impression. Eventually you assume the choir is suppose to be singing to the congregation. Performance and entertainment overshadow worship.

At Calvary we view you – *the congregation as the choir. God is our audience!* We have worship leaders, but they're job is to direct us to God. We sing songs to God – not each other. We communicate our praise personally and directly. We're not just singing – we're expressing our heart.

And that expression needs to be voluntary and natural. It needs to rise up out of an attitude of awe, and wonder, and gratitude, and adoration. If the worship leader has to pump us up, or hype up the worship – it's a flawed sacrifice. It needs to flow from our hearts to the throne of God.

Notice too, Calvary Chapel's approach **to the Scriptures**. Ann Landers once published a list of real answers people gave to a Bible knowledge survey... Here's the Top Ten Erroneous Answers...

- 1) Noah's wife was Joan of Ark.
- 2) Lot's wife was a pillar of salt by day and a ball of fire by night.
- 3) Moses went up Mount Cyanide to receive the 10 commandments.
- 4) The seventh commandment is "Thou shalt not admit adultery."
- 5) Joshua led the Hebrews in the Battle of Geritol.
- 6) Solomon had 700 wives and 300 porcupines.
- 7) The people who followed Jesus were called the 12 decibels.
- 8) Jesus was born because Mary had an immaculate contraption.
- 9) The epistles were the wives of the apostles.

And 10) A Christian should have only one wife. This is called holy monotony. Apparently, the world today suffers from acute biblical illiteracy.

Even Christians are ignorant of the book they supposedly cherish. The average believer knows a few Bible stories and a couple of random verses, but they lack a comprehensive knowledge of the Scriptures. As a pastor I need to teach the Book – the whole Book – and nothing but the Book! AW Tozer said, "Nothing less than a whole Bible can make a whole Christian." A Calvary distinctive is the systematic study of the Bible.

I once received a letter from a member of our church. It was one of those encouraging notes a pastor keeps, and pulls out on difficult days. At one point in the letter it read, "Thank you for teaching God's Word and not a lot of other stuff." I appreciated the compliment, but quite frankly, I don't know what a pastor teaches who doesn't teach God's Word. A Calvary distinctive is to teach the Bible *verse by verse, chapter by chapter, cover to cover*. In our 30 years as a church we've been through the NT four times, and the OT three times... And this week our TBG groups will be working through two more chapters... I hope you'll join one!

Which brings up Calvary's approach **to church doctrine**... Just because we're a nondenominational church doesn't mean we don't know what we believe. Though we're contemporary in method, we're traditional in our beliefs. We affirm all the historic doctrines of Christianity... **We believe... in the Bible's inerrancy... God's triune nature... that God created all things... in the deity of Jesus... in His atoning death and bodily resurrection... that salvation is by grace through faith... in the power of the Spirit... in the rapture of the Church... and in Jesus' second coming...**

On these crucial doctrines we remain dogmatic and unbending. Yet there're other areas of Christian doctrine where we're a bit more flexible. Once, during a baptism I had an older lady ask me if she could be sprinkled. She was uneasy about going under the water. I didn't think it was God's will to cause a woman to have a heart attack, so I sprinkled her. What mattered most was her desire to identify with Jesus. Yet, churches have split, and denominations have formed over that very issue.

I like the old adage, "In the essentials, unity. In the nonessentials, liberty. In all things, charity." Remember, none of us has perfect theology. As Paul said, "We see as in a mirror, dimly..." We're all growing in our knowledge of God and His Word. Let's show each other a certain amount of tolerance. A little humility goes a long way. We're all works in progress.

In nonessentials we need to learn to *disagree agreeably* - and not break fellowship over trivial matters. At Calvary we believe that Jesus is the *main thing*... and our goal is always to keep the *main thing* the *main thing*.

And while we're talking about doctrine, let me explain our approach **to the Holy Spirit**. We believe the Spirit of God is at work in the world today. In the Gospels, Jesus spoke of three experiences a believer can have with the Holy Spirit... In John 14 Jesus said the Spirit is *with us* and *in us*. He's *with us* before we come to Christ. He convicts us of sin, and points us to the Savior... He comes to dwell *in us* at conversion, to cleanse us and transform us into the image of Jesus... *But there's a third experience*... In Acts 1:8 Jesus also said the Holy Spirit would come *upon us!*

This occurred on the Day of Pentecost, and afterwards, the Spirit filled the disciples - *made them bold witnesses for Jesus*. It was an outpouring of spiritual empowerment - and it was often accompanied by spiritual gifts. At Calvary we seek the power of the Holy Spirit. We believe both the baptism of the Spirit, and His supernatural enablings - are still available to believers today... And as with all God's gifts, they are received by faith.

Yet the question arises, where should these spiritual gifts be exercised? *For example the gift of tongues*... We believe in tongues. It's a beautiful gift given by God as a means of praising Him in an uninhibited way. But here's where our approach is both balanced and biblical...

First of all, will everyone speak in tongues? In 1 Corinthians 12:29-30 Paul uses a series of rhetorical questions, "*Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles?... Do all speak with tongues?*" The obvious answer is "*no*." Not everyone has the same gifts - not everyone speak in tongues. *And second, should tongues be exercised in the church's Sunday morning public assembly?* This time, 1 Corinthians 14, tells us "*no*." It tells us the gift of tongues is reserved for a person's private devotions, or for a small group of knowledgeable believers. There's a proper place and time. Calvary believes in the gifts of the Spirit, but we also recognize the biblical guidelines for the use of these gifts. We want the fire of experience, but when it rages out of control it burns down the house - yet when the fire or experience burns in the fireplace of God's Word the house is warmed.

Tragically, in some churches weird stuff occurs in the name of the Spirit that the Holy Spirit has nothing to do with. In John 14:26 Jesus said of the Spirit, "*When the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me.*" Notice two points... *First, the Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of truth*. He's the author of God's Word, and the Spirit will never do or say anything, that contradicts Himself. *Second, the Spirit comes not to promote Himself, but to testify of Jesus*. I worry about churches that are preoccupied with the Holy Spirit. My hunch is the Spirit isn't really leading. If He was, the emphasis would be on Jesus. A church that's truly full of the Holy Spirit magnifies and glorifies Jesus.

Another Calvary distinctive is our approach **to Church membership**. In one sense, if you're a member of the body of Christ, you're a member of our church. We want to embrace anyone who comes to us with a desire to fellowship in Jesus' name. Besides, if God accepts you into His family who are we not to accept you into ours? At Calvary we acknowledge that there's only *one true Church*, made up of members in *many churches*... And as to a formal membership role... we don't have one. I grew up in a church that had 1000 on roll, but 300 showed up. Yet it bragged about having 1000 members. We just let God take care of the paper work. What matters is that your name is written in the Book of Life.

Understand, Calvary Chapel is a fellowship. On a national level, we're a fellowship of churches. On a local level, we're a fellowship of believers. We are followers of Jesus who voluntarily agree to live in community. The NT teaches that the church is more than an organization - it's an organism - it's a living body of believers coming together in Jesus' name. In the truest sense, you *become a member* of this church, by *being a member* - by participation. My arm is a member of my body because it serves a function - not because it stepped forward and signed a card. Likewise, you're a member of our church by hanging out, and growing, and serving with us... If you stop hanging out, you stop being a member.

And speaking of serving, let me mention our approach **to ministry**. In a lot of churches pastors are called "*ministers*" and the people are called "*laity*." And what happens is the pastors do all the *ministering* and the laity just *lay around*... *At Calvary every member is a minister!*

Ephesians 4 teaches that the pastor's job is to equip the saints for the work of the ministry. My job is not to do it all myself - but to teach God's Word so the members will be equipped to reach out and minister in their home - at work - in the community - on the mission field - in the church.

1 Corinthians 12 likens the Church to the human body. Each member is part of that body, and has a vital function. We believe you too have a place in this body, and we want to do all we can to help you discover your role.

But here's a vital principle when it comes to service – involvement in ministry should always be voluntary. Fruitful ministry comes from the heart, and is led by the Spirit. When people are pressured or badgered into serving – or made to feel guilty – then they'll serve with strings attached... At Calvary we don't plead or beg for help. We don't tighten the screws... We love people, teach people, and love people some more... until they're equipped, and willing. But we want everyone who serves to do so, not because they feel like they *have to*, but because they *want to*. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 9:7, “**God loves a cheerful giver.**” And I've found that a church full of cheerful givers is a really fun place to be!

Which brings us to our approach **to money**... We believe God's work - done God's way - will never lack God's support. As Pastor Chuck has taught us, “**Where God guides He provides!**” It's tragic when a pastor represents God as broke – on the verge of bankruptcy – in need of us. God has boundless resources at His disposal. Week after week pastors tell people to trust God, but when the church springs a leak they're prone to try and patch it by pleading, and begging, and preaching a sermon on tithing. Pastors should also trust the Lord!

This is what our leadership tries to do. We recognize that you're the ones who drop their tithes and offerings in the box. I doubt the angels make much money. But I'm looking past you, to the God who prompts you. I believe the Bible holds up tithing 10% as a good guideline for our giving. But it also teaches that we're free from law, to walk in the Spirit. Thus, I'm not about to legislate when and how much you should give. The amount, or percentage, or destination of your gift is none of my business. Besides, if I insist on 10% - God may tell you 15%. Let's just all give as the Lord leads. God has given us so much, how can we not give back a portion to Him? And the more we give – the more He gives back.

Giving is like serving, it should be done because people *want to*, not because they feel like they *have to*. Again, “**God loves a cheerful giver!**” A person once asked me, “**Sandy, I can't believe you guys don't take an offering. You must have one extremely, wealthy backer funding your church.**” I said, “**Aw, you've figured us out. His name is Jesus Christ.**”

Another Calvary distinctive is our approach **to church government**. When it comes to church leadership we believe in *servant leadership*. The highest ranking person should be the servant of all. The people of the church don't exist to serve the pastors – pastors are here for the people.

The Church though, is not a *democracy - run by the people*. Nor a *monarchy - run by the pastor*. But a *theocracy – it's run by God's Spirit*. The leaders should be on their knees seeking God for direction. The followers should be on their knees asking the Lord to bless their leaders. And under the headship of Jesus we believe the biblical structure of church leadership involves three groups – **pastors, elders, deacons...**

First, the pastor is responsible to teach and lead. One day God will hold me responsible for the spiritual nourishment and direction of this church. Thus, I need the freedom to hear from God, and follow His leadership. Throughout the Bible – from Moses to Peter – God chooses men. He anoints a man – not committees - and leads through that servant leader. Thus, Calvary believes in strong pastoral leadership. The idea that everyone has a vote, *democracy*, is an American invention. It's not biblical.

The pastor isn't a hired-hand – an employee of the church. He's a shepherd who loves the flock. If you want a hired-hand fine, but at the first sign of trouble he'll abandon the sheep. It's just a job to him - a paycheck. Yet a shepherd loves the sheep. He makes sacrifices, takes risks, and lays down his life for the sheep. You want your pastor to be a shepherd. But pastors don't lead in a vacuum... They're assisted by elders who help oversee the spiritual needs of God's people. And deacons, men and women who serve in practical ways. We call deacons “**designated doers.**”

To me the church has made an awful mistake through the centuries in trying to be dogmatic on church structure while compromising the quality of the leaders who fill that structure. Our attitude should be just the opposite. We can be flexible and practical with our structure – but we should never drop the bar on the spiritual qualifications of the leaders involved.

Finally, let me touch on the Calvary approach **to the rapture**. We believe that just before judgment comes down - the church will go up. The Bible promises that in Christ we're "saved from the wrath to come."

And we believe that Jesus can return for His church at any time... Theologians call this the doctrine of **eminency**. This is why we believe the rapture occurs before the final 7 years of Great Tribulation. Any other timeline means something else has to happen first. Under other scenarios we're no longer *looking for Christ... but for the Antichrist*. Heaven forbid! We believe the Bible wants us to look to Jesus. 2 Timothy 4:8 promises a special crown to everyone who loves the Lord's appearing. The pre-trib rapture is more than our eschatological theory – it's our "blessed hope." And it has a purifying effect. Knowing Jesus can return at any moment keeps us on the edge of our seat. It keeps us from getting bogged down in this world. The eminent return of Jesus keeps our heart fixed on eternity.

In conclusion, let me admit this Calvary, or any Calvary, is not a perfect church. We have our shortcomings and deficiencies... And I'm certainly not the perfect pastor – if you know me, you realize just how true it really is... We're just believers hanging on to Jesus. We're saved by grace. But it's grace that restores our dignity as God's children, and shapes us into His image. The one thing we really want to be is genuine. Our part is *real faith*. Now that you know *who we are* and *what we value* – I hope you'll climb on board. Help us be *God's poema!* Together we're God's "workmanship!"