Church As It Was Meant To Be
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In many respects, the contemporary church in America looks more like a large corporation than like anything described in the New Testament. Even church leaders sometimes bear a closer resemblance to CEOs and corporate executives than to humble, tender shepherds. Sadly, the good news — that a sinner can find forgiveness for sins before a holy God by placing his trust in and committing his whole life to Jesus Christ — is often eclipsed by “success”-oriented programs and an interest in the bottom line.

As a result, many churches have become nothing more than entertainment centers, employing tacticsthat effectively draw people into the church, but are incapable of truly ministering to them once they come.

God never intended the church to be like that. In Matthew 16:18 Jesus says, “I willbuild My church, and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it.” Notice the Lord’s one condition to that great promise: “I *will* build My church” (emphasis added). Christ’s guarantee is valid only when He builds the church His way. When you follow His blueprint, you can be sure that He is doing the work through you and that nothing, not even the gates of hell, can stop Him.

So, what’s the blueprint? A logical place to start is at the beginning with the first church — the church at Jerusalem. It began on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit filled 120 believers who had gathered for a prayer meeting. The Lord added 3,000 souls later that same day (Acts 2:41). Those fledgling believers didn’t know anything about building a church. They had no precedent; they didn’t have a book on the church; they didn’t even have the New Testament. Yet it was built Jesus’ way, and as such it’s the model for the church today.

Back to the Blueprint: Bible Study, Fellowship, and Prayer

Acts 2:42 gives the blueprint they followed: “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” Those are the vital elements that make up the actual function and life of the church — and all of that in just one verse!

Here’s an obvious starting point: A church built to the Master’s plan will begin with the right raw material — a saved congregation. Verse 41 identifies the church as being made up of “those who had

received [Peter's] word," and "were continually devoting themselves." The church at Jerusalem was filled with true Christians — those who continually adhered to apostolic teaching.

If the church is to be built Christ's way, it will be redeemed and therefore empowered by the Holy Spirit. An unsaved membership, devoid of the Holy Spirit, has no capacity to overcome self will, personal agendas, and the love of sin. Only believers have divine power to put those things off and so manifest the Spirit of God.

While the early church didn't have a New Testament, they had God's Word in the form of the "apostles' teaching." The church at Jerusalem was committed to receiving that Word. Doctrine is the basis of the church — you can't live out what you don't know or understand. That's why Paul instructed Timothy to "preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine" (2 Tim. 4:2-3). That time has come. If your church isn't teaching the truth straight from the Bible, how will you recognize error when it comes? How will you grow? Don't ever allow anyone to stand in the pulpit who isn't committed to leading the congregation through a deep, penetrating study of God's Word.

The central focus of the early church's fellowship was the breaking of bread — the Lord's Table. It was the most fitting symbol of their fellowship since it reminded them of the basis for their unity — salvation in Christ and adherence to apostolic doctrine. If you share those things as common ground with other believers, then the Lord's table — communion — is the most appropriate symbol of your fellowship too.

We eat and drink in remembrance of Christ's self-sacrificing love that took Him to the cross. In your fellowship, make it your habit to practice the same kind of love Christ demonstrated toward you. Practically speaking, you can always give your life to those God brings across your path. Do you habitually pray for fellow believers? Are you encouraging them, edifying them, meeting their physical needs? Do you love them enough to confront them when they are sinning? Those are the marks of true Christian fellowship. It is *church* as it was meant to be.

Acts 2:42 says the believers continually devoted themselves to prayer. Sadly, the same devotion to prayer is often neglected today. Churches can pack pews by offering entertainment, but when a prayer meeting is held, only a faithful few trickle in. The early Christians remembered the Lord's promise: "If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it" (John 14:14). As they demonstrated dependence on the Lord, the results (Acts 2:43-47) were astounding.

Built to Scale: Wonder, Love, and Joy

What happens when true believers remain under biblical teaching, in a spiritual fellowship, and in devotion to prayer? Acts 2:43 says, “Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe.” “Awe,” the Greek word for fear, speaks of a sense of reverence. It is reserved for special times when people are struck with wonder because of something divine or powerful that defies human explanation.

Your church ought to be able to instill awe in your community. That first church certainly did. Verse 43 says everyone was in awe of them because “many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.” Though the miracles and wonders of the apostolic times are no longer necessary now that God’s Word is complete, God’s power remains on display. What could be more miraculous than giving life to people who are dead in sin? He heals people of their hurts, puts broken homes back together, and brings people out of the bondage of sin to Christ. In short, He transforms lives. When the church follows God’s design, He will do marvelous and powerful things in individual lives before a watching world.

The early church was full of love — they “had all things in common” (v. 44). There was ownership in the early church –believers didn’t live in a commune — but no one owned anything to the exclusion of someone who had a need. The Greek verbs in verse 46 translated “began selling” and “were sharing” show that they were continually selling and sharing their resources as needed. That kind of sacrificial love is the result of the Lord’s work in obedient believers who follow His blueprint.

The Lord blesses those who labor according to His plan. First, He fills the obedient church with gladness (v. 46) and praise (v. 47). How can you not be happy when you see God at work in your midst? How can you keep from rejoicing when you watch God use your church to make an eternal impact in the world? Second, He adds to their number. Acts 2:47 concludes by saying that “the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

I want to see the church grow, and I know you share that desire. My prayer is that we will let God build the church His way as we await our Lord’s return. If you want to make the most of your church, just follow the blueprint, and encourage your church leaders to do the same.

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