

Making the Most of Your Church, Pt. 1

Scripture: Acts 1:13–15; Acts 2:42; John 8:31; Numbers 22–25

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The church has changed a great deal over the centuries, having become more complex and businesslike. Today it is a massive organization with denominations, commissions, committees, councils, boards, and programs. It quite often functions like a business rather than a body, a factory rather than a family, and a corporation rather than a community.

The church also has become obsessed with success, establishing superficial goals and awarding prizes to those who can pack the most people into the pews on Sundays. Many church leaders panic when the line starts dropping on the graph, indicating a drop in attendance and finances. As a result many churches have become nothing more than entertainment centers, giving performances to passive herds of unproductive churchgoers. Such devices bring people into the church, but are unable to produce any genuine, *biblical* growth once they come.

Unless the Lord Builds the Church

But God never intended the church to be like that—and He still doesn't. In Matthew 16:18 Jesus says, "I will build My church, and the gates of Hades [hell] shall not overpower it." Nothing will overpower the church. But our Lord did give one condition to that great promise: "I will build *My* church" (emphases added). Christ's guarantee is valid only when He builds the church His way.

When a building needs to be built, an architect designs it, makes blueprints, and a contractor is hired to construct it. If the building isn't constructed according to the pre-approved plan, the city inspector won't approve it. Similarly God produced a plan for the church, and Christ will build it through us according to that plan. When we follow His plan, the gates of hell won't prevail against us. But should we depart from His plan, we will forfeit that guarantee. Churches in New Testament times, throughout history, and across America have done just that. Many no longer exist because they didn't allow Christ to build His church His way.

In Revelation 3:1 the resurrected Christ has this to say to the church at Sardis: "I know your deeds [they were an active church with lots of programs], that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead." Despite appearances, that church was operated by people like those Coleridge made famous in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*: "Corpses man the ship; dead men pull the oars; dead men hoist the sails; dead men steer the vessel." Sardis was an ecclesiastical corpse because it had departed from the divine blueprint.

One New Testament church followed the blueprint perfectly. The first church—the church at Jerusalem—was born in a prayer meeting on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came and filled approximately 120 people gathered in an upper room (Acts 1:13-15; 2:1-3). After a dramatic manifestation of the change that came over those people, Peter preached to the populace (vv. 4-40). When he finished, nearly 3,000 people were added to the church (v. 41). You'd think a church that size would have lots of problems. But it had few because it followed the blueprint.

In its infancy the church was unspotted and uncorrupted. The people 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. There were no conferences, seminars, conventions, or experts the church could look to. Yet it was built Jesus' way; and as such, it's the model for the church today.

Back to the Blueprint

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 things make up the actual function and life of the church. Each is vital.

The Makeup of the Congregation

Jesus builds a church only with believing people. Verse 41 identifies the church as being made up of "those who had received [Peter's] word," and "were continually devoting themselves." Jesus said, "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine" (John 8:31). First John 2:19 says, "They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us." Continuing and remaining in Christ is proof of salvation. The church at Jerusalem was filled with saved people.

While that may seem such an obvious beginning, many churches are filled with unredeemed people. One pastor said to me, "I think the problem in our church is that half the board isn't saved." That *is* a problem: How can God and Satan ever operate the church together? There is no place in the church for people who don't love Jesus Christ.

Now that doesn't mean we shouldn't welcome unbelievers as guests. We want them to attend so they might hear about Jesus Christ and come to a saving knowledge of Him. Yet the *membership* of the church—those who serve Christ—must be redeemed.

What Christ said to the church at Pergamum illustrates the danger of a co-mingling of believers and unbelievers in the church: "I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit acts of immorality" (Rev. 2:14). Christ accused that church of compromise.

The "teaching of Balaam" refers to Numbers 22-25. Balak, king of the Moabites, wanted to eliminate Israel. He hired Balaam to curse Israel. When that didn't work as planned, Balaam dreamed up an alternate plan. He taught Balak to corrupt Israel by allowing Moabite women to intermarry with the Israelites. Balaam's plan worked, and Israel's power was sapped.

That's exactly what happened in Pergamum. Satan's strategy was simple: infiltrate the church with unbelievers. Once they established themselves in the church, they taught spiritual adultery and immorality. Christ's condemnation makes it clear that Christians must, at all costs, remain pure and separated from the world. Paul said, "Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial [Satan], or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?"

Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God" (2 Corinthians 6:14-16).

In Acts 2:38 Peter says, "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." If the church is to be built Christ's way, it will not only be redeemed but also empowered by the Holy Spirit. Self-will, personal agendas, and sin must be set aside so that the Spirit of God can rule in the assembly of believers.

What about your church—Have you examined the membership rolls lately? Do you know the spiritual condition of each member? That's the responsibility of each local church, for Christ will only bless a church committed to regenerate church membership.

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