

What do we look for in a church?

The Work of a True Church

Have we ever thought how much easier it must have been to be a minister of Christ a hundred years ago, or during a period of great revival? Have we looked back wistfully to some time when there was greater spiritual prosperity, and lamented the fact that we have to live in days of unparalleled spiritual confusion, declension and difficulties? However, we should rejoice that we are counted worthy to live in a day when things are so hard. God has called us to minister the Word at such a time and having called us, He will give us all the strength that we need.

In considering church building in these days, we must ask ourselves what kind of building we have in mind. What kind of spiritual body do we want to see? In a day when so much emphasis is placed on decisions and crowds we find it difficult to look at a local church in a truly spiritual way, but we must do this. Remember how the disciples were impressed with the Temple building, magnificent as it was, but Christ could see ahead, and knew what was going to happen to it.

The *spiritual* church may be surveyed in the same way as the church building. How large is it? Is it in a good state of repair? How much work needs to be done to improve it?

Christ has eyes as of a flame of fire. He looks at the work of God from the light of eternity. The church is the bride of Christ. What is His objective for the church? *'Christ...loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.'* If this is God's objective, surely it must be ours also. Purity, not size, should be of the greatest importance to us. Soundness, not fleshly impressiveness, should be our goal. As ministers, let us not resemble the Pharisees who wanted their reward and fulfilment on earth by *appearing* to be successful.

Church history can be very helpful to us at this point because time tests and proves a true work of God. Churches that have had a reputation

have often had their 'candlestick' removed. On the other hand, that small, unimpressive congregation that crossed the Atlantic on the *Mayflower* in 1620 proved to be a wonderful company. We are to be more impressed with Jerusalem which was beautiful for situation, a city compacted together, than by the enormous but worldly Babylon! We are to walk about Zion, appreciate her towers, admire her bulwarks and wonder at her palaces, rather than be overawed by the sheer magnitude of the worldly cities.

What is the point or the goal of preaching? Is it primarily intended to gather together a huge company of people, or to build a spiritual family? Charles Dickens once said that he could divide young boys into two classes, either pasty-faced or podgy. Both, alas, were unhealthy. This is so often true of churches – skinny or flabby. We have tiny churches with little energy and drive, and we have some large churches made up (to a degree) of those who want to escape the responsibility of real commitment in a working local church.

To move in the right direction for *spiritual* church building the members of a congregation must *work*, and they must *love one another*. First of all, we must *work*. We must recognise that God uses human instruments – we must work. When God led His people against Jericho He gave them special instructions about what they must do. We know the details – the blowing of the ram's horns and the falling down of the walls. The sound of the ram's horns did not cause the walls to fall. There was no *direct* connection between what the children of Israel did and what God Himself did. Indeed, there was no point whatsoever in blowing those ram's horns except that God had commanded them to do so. The whole episode taught them to trust in God alone and not in anything they themselves could do. However, this was a *unique* situation, a 'one-off' situation designed to teach them this vital lesson.

When the children of Israel were given directions by the Captain of the Lord's host for the taking of Ai an additional lesson was taught. The victory at Ai taught them to use *all* their ingenuity and *all* their strength. It was not Joshua who decided to lay an ambush behind the city but the Lord. It was not Joshua who decided to involve all the men of war but God. In this instance *God blessed the use of the normal means*, and this was *always* to be the pattern subsequently. Never again were the people of God told to use some strange method totally unrelated to

warfare. Subsequently God certainly acted *directly* and *independently* by destroying enemy defences and so forth, but the Israelites were obliged to fight like any other soldiers, yet they were to look only to God for victory. The miracles were given in support of what the children of Israel actually did.

Gideon's strategy was brilliant, but was assisted by divine power to be successful. David was a mighty man of war who thanked God Who taught his fingers to war and his hands to fight. His confidence in God did not deter him from using all his ingenuity and strength. God granted him success as he made full use of all the wisdom and strength which he had already been given by the Lord, at the same time depending on the Lord's help.

Looking at the New Testament we can see how God chose for service Peter, who was in many respects naturally qualified to fulfil his position as a leader. However, he had some defects in his character, being rather unstable, and he also lacked a formal education. But by God's grace he overcame those disadvantages. His *natural* gifts and energies were used to the full, and God empowered him to overcome his inadequacies.

The case of the apostle Paul stands out especially. He laboured more abundantly than all the other apostles. He did not assume a super-spirituality on account of his visions and draw the conclusion that it was unnecessary for him to work hard. He did not imagine that his special revelations eliminated the necessity for him to employ wise strategies in his evangelism. With great application and zeal he headed for the important cities and trade routes, always anxious to get to Rome, the hub of the empire. He recognised that he must use *all* his faculties to the full for God's glory, and in this he clearly set an example for us.

Looking again at Joshua, the scouts who visited Ai said to Joshua – 'Do not cause all the people to toil up there.' But it *was* the divine intention for *all* the people of God to be involved in that campaign. It was their privilege and their duty. So it is with the work of God today. We are labourers together with God. *Every* man shall receive his own reward *according to his labour*. Labouring in spiritual work is not just for the paid professionals or office bearers, but for the whole church and every member in particular. It is not something casual that members do when they feel like it. It is the work of the pastor and office bearers to con-

front men and women with their duties and to help them discern what is suitable for them.

Secondly, within our congregations we must promote *mutual love*. Christians are not isolated individuals, but are in organic relationship with each other. This is a secret of spiritual growth and the glory of a New Testament church. In *Romans 12* the apostle Paul speaks about the function of the body in relation to itself. This is where pastoral skill is needed and ministers are tested to the utmost. Many Christians will serve the Lord gladly but will not work with other people.

Harmony within the local body is essential to growth. We grow up *together* into Christ, as we are told in *Ephesians 4*. We must obviously therefore do our best to prevent people coming into the membership who are not converted. We must protect our people from the viruses of worldliness and false teaching, and we must deal quickly with problems which arise within the fellowship. We must watch over the flock to encourage this mutual love. We should be impressed by the fact that the one supreme evidence of new life in the believer is *love of the brethren* expressed in a readiness to minister to other members of the body in a variety of ways. *1 John*, *Matthew 25* and *Hebrews 6* all speak of loving the brethren as the outstanding evidence of new life in a believer.

Love, if you like, is the cement that holds the bricks together, and where it is lacking the bricks may soon be removed. The pastor therefore must spend much time encouraging the members to relate to each other. Paul speaks about each of us looking not at our own interests but at the interests of others. When we think of the fruit of the Spirit, a principal application of these virtues is their effectiveness to promote harmony and love within the fellowship. The fruit is – love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness (or loyalty), gentleness, and self-control.

What gives us pleasure as we look at a church? What do we look for? What makes the church beautiful to God? How can the congregation become more attractive? What will give our church true value and worth?

We must always remember how Paul wanted the Corinthians to get their values straight, and how he pointed out to them that without love, everything else in their church life was worthless.

He told them – ‘Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself [*does not parade itself*], is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly [*rudely*], seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things’ (1 Corinthians 13.4-7).

Listen to the words of the prophet – ‘For Zion’s sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness.’ How he wanted Jerusalem to be bright and attractive to God. We too must be striving to achieve that mutual love which is sometimes so hard to achieve, but without which we cannot present the church as something attractive to the Lord. Devoted labour by all the members, and true love and affection between all the members, is that which delights the heart of our Saviour and leads to that *real* instrumentality which we must long for in building our churches.

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Many thanks