

In Search Of the Church



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All Scripture quotations are from the King James Version unless
otherwise noted.

Dedicated to

**My Parents,
John and Mary Hutto,
Who Took Me to Church**

&

**My Wife,
Trish,
Who Supports Me
In Everything I Do**

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Introduction

The year 325 A.D. was a pivotal year in the history of the church. It was in that year that Constantine called a council in which the bishops of the church were to address an issue concerning the deity of Christ that was causing havoc in the church. A man by the name of Arius had written and was preaching that while Jesus was Divine, He was not God and could change. The council was called to come up with some sort of statement that would ease tensions in the church. The outcome of this council was *the Nicene Creed*. In 381, a council in Constantinople reaffirmed this creed.¹

This historic occurrence is seen by many as a great event in the history of the church. However, others see this as an effort that actually undermined the authority of the Bible. In their eyes (and in mine), it replaced the Bible as the governing document of the church. A creed, just like a constitution, is a document or statement that has the highest authority in an organization or body of people. As a result of this substitution of this and subsequent creeds for the Bible, many historians see this as the time when the early church went into apostasy (left its founding principles.) It ceased to become a judicial body that interpreted the established Word of God. It became in essence a legislative body with the ability to make rules at its own pleasure.

Since this time of apostasy, there has been a search for God's true plan. This plan began to be uncovered when Martin Luther declared in 1517 that salvation was through faith. Then, in 1738 John Wesley experienced the miracle of sanctification. Still later, in

¹ A. Kenneth Curtis, J. Stephen Lang, and Randy Peterson, *The 100 Most Important Events in Christian History* (Grand Rapids, MI, Fleming H. Revell, 1991) pp. 34, 35.

1906 people were exposed to the miracle of speaking in tongues, something that hadn't been heard for many years.

These three rediscoveries of Biblical truths cannot be equaled. They are necessary for lost mankind. However, in this search for truth, there was also a search for a church where the truth could and would be preached and taught and lived. Many of the corresponding revivals that Christianity has experienced have resulted, for good or for bad, in new organizations being formed. The fact is men and women have hungered for a church that closely follows the pattern of the New Testament church. They have become disgruntled or disappointed with churches that have failed to live up to the Word they often preach so passionately.

Today, in 2003, people are still searching for a place where they can worship in the Spirit, put Christ first, participate in effective outreach, and otherwise fulfill the purposes of the church as outlined in the Bible. The reason for the continuing search is simple. There are several ideas about who or what the church is or is supposed to be. Some believe that all Christians make up the church. Others believe that only one organization /denomination can be the church. And so, people search.

I have searched. I grew up to love the church. I have grown up with particular ideas about the church that I have sometimes declared unequivocally. But as I have grown into adulthood, I have asked a lot of questions. My questions have not been asked because I lack respect for what I have been taught. They have often been a desire to see the truth in the Word of God. I do not want to simply believe anything because it is what I was taught, as good as that teaching may have been. One of the great miracles of

Christianity is that I can have Divine revelation for myself. If what I have been taught is correct, the Spirit of God will confirm it.

I have often misunderstood the church, even as it was taught to me. This is the natural state of man- to lack the understanding necessary to see Spiritual things. However, I know that God gave His Spirit in part so that Spiritual things could be revealed to man in his redeemed state. God wants to open to us the Word. Jeremiah 33:3 says, “Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and show thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not.” I want to see what He wants to reveal and that includes the plan for the church.

My search has been underway for several years and is ongoing. I don't have all of the answers. But in His great mercy, God has given me some insight into what He wants from His church. This book is the result of my search thus far. Some will see it as far short of where they are. Others may actually see it as far beyond their own personal vision. Either way, this book can hopefully be of help to you. I hope that it will enhance your understanding of the church. This cannot occur from a simply intellectual standpoint. In fact, if your experience with God is only an intellectual one, I question whether you have any experience with Him at all. If you have a relationship with Him, it is because He has moved beyond your mind into the depths of your spirit. He has opened places in your soul you didn't know existed and shown you things men of all ages have desired to see.

Revelation is available to every child of God. Read this book, but do so with the understanding that there must be a corresponding move of God in your heart. Otherwise, all you will have is knowledge. Proverbs 2:3-5 says,

**Yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy
voice for understanding;**

**If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for
hid treasures;**

**Then shalt thou understand the fear of the LORD, and
find the knowledge of God.**

I have made reference to several sources such as sermons, lessons, and books. If I have made any mistakes, they are mine. If, however, you find any truth in this work, I am sure most of the authors and writers I have referenced will agree it is from God.

My Dad' s House

Chapter One

My parents recently moved into a house that is different from any other house they have ever owned. This house is different for one very important reason- I have never lived there! Because of this fact, my parents have taken great pains to acquaint me with this new residence. During the construction phase, they took my wife and me to see the progress of the builders. We viewed the rooms before they could truly be called rooms. We saw the basement, the upstairs, the kitchen, the closets, the garage, everything that could be seen. We were seeing it in its unfinished state.

After they moved in, my parents decorated according to their tastes, and because I was familiar with their touch, I was able to recognize this house as their home. I could see their hand in the choice of new furniture. I recognized items that have been in the family for years. When I visit, I am familiar with my mother' s cooking. My father still has one of the better-landscaped yards around.

There were two overriding considerations when they were building and then decorating the new house. First, they included the things they wanted in a home. They decorated so that they would be comfortable. They chose a floor plan that would be pleasing to them as they lived there. Second, they took into consideration the desires of the family. They made decisions that would make the house a place to come home to, one that was recognizable to us. Very simply, they wanted the family to visit!

The house of God, the church, is the expression of God' s pleasure on earth. It is the place where He demonstrates His taste in decorating. But it is also a place that He wants all of His children to visit. The church as we understand it remains unfinished, but He has assured us that He will build it (Matthew 16:18, 19.) It is apparent from Mark 3:13, 14 that construction began while He was still on the earth in bodily form. Furthermore, He is so desirous of our presence that at some point He will gather us all together to live in one house (Isaiah 60). It would help us to be able to recognize the correct house as His house. It needs to be a place we know to be home.

I have grown up in church. My whole life has been spent in one religious organization. I grew up feeling like "our" church was THE Church of God, to the exclusion of all others. As I grew into adulthood, I was surprised to learn that most churches see themselves as the continuation of the Bible church. This really makes sense. After all, who wants to be in a home that really isn' t home?

I have heard a variety of arguments, ranging from only one organization being the church to all Christians being in the church. My own belief was somewhat uncomfortable for me because it seemed rather brash. How could one group claim to be THE Body of Christ? I began to pray. Over a period of several years, I have read and heard many things that have struck me as significant about the church. These revelations of the church have come to represent a set of qualifications. In other words, I have found that, according to the Bible, there are certain things that have to be true for any body of believers to be the church. Some of these things may not be fully matured in a particular

group, but they at least have to be in the process of becoming true in order for any group to actually be the church.

I want to address seven characteristics of the church that are clearly spelled out in the Bible. These are the characteristics that have stood out to me as I have questioned and searched for the true meaning of what it means to be the continuation of the Church of God of the Bible. If God wants me there, then I want to know what to look for. There are too many counterfeits from which to choose for me to go window-shopping. I want to find the genuine article.

I pastor a church that still believes in giving the pastor's family an occasional offering of food. We used to call this a "pounding", but to avoid the pastor being "pounded" we have unofficially chosen to call this a food offering. One day my family (my wife, children, and I) received a pounding that included a new item. It was a new type of peanut butter.

Now, I have loved peanut butter longer than I can remember. I am one of those people who can dip the spoon in the jar (though I don't double dip out of jars used by the whole family) and eat the peanut butter without anything else. This particular pounding included a well-known brand of peanut butter, but it was fat free. Not given to being overweight, I didn't really need fat free peanut butter, but I tried it anyway.

Suddenly I was transported into a new world of taste I had never before experienced. This was the best peanut butter I had ever tasted in my life! Without question, this would be my peanut butter of choice.

Now, whenever I run out of peanut butter and have to buy a new jar, I buy that brand (Peter Pan) and that version (fat free). It's not that I absolutely won't eat any other kind. It's just that I found a special edition, the version of peanut butter that fits my idea of perfection. I'll pay the higher price for the real thing. Most of the time I won't settle for a cheaper brand, even if money is tight.

There are many versions of "church" in the world. Most are well meaning. Most will have representatives in heaven. But I want to find the special edition, the one that most closely matches what the Bible says the church should be.

In some cases, the Bible says the church will have certain characteristics or she won't be the church. In other words, there are some things that are required in order for any body of believers to be the church. I believe in other cases there is an allowance made for growth. But characteristics that may not be completely developed right now must be in the process of becoming more evident as the church grows and matures.

Here are seven characteristics of the church that I have found in the Word of God as I have sought God and listened to Him reveal His church more perfectly to me. The church...

- 1. Will have faith in Jesus Christ,**
- 2. Will participate in true worship of the Godhead,**
- 3. Will be the place where the Word of God can be understood and demonstrated,**

- 4. Will exercise government, including accountability and discipline, in love,**
- 5. Will be a place where fellowship takes place consistently and unconditionally,**
- 6. Will be a place where the Gifts of the Spirit work together in Divine coordination for the strengthening of the church and as a sign to the lost so that God will be glorified,**
- 7. Will actively live out the Gospel so that outreach can and will take place.**

These seven points are presented here as the result of my hearing from God in various ways. The Lord has used a number of channels through which to speak to me. Often, as I would listen to a sermon or lesson, the Holy Ghost would suddenly open my eyes to a particular Biblical truth. Sometimes, He would light a flame in my heart during a private devotion or time of study. But whatever channel He chose, I knew in each case that I had heard from the Lord.

According to Isaiah chapter sixty, all believers will come together, brought together by the work of God (Isaiah 60:1-7; John 10:16; 17:11). When this process of flowing together begins, I don' t want to miss it. I want to go to Dad' s house. In order to do that, I believe I not only need to be sensitive to the Spirit, but I need to be sensitive to

the characteristics of the church as expressed in the Word. I hope you will read the following pages with sensitivity to the Spirit.

My search for the truth continues. Above all, I want to see Christ more clearly. But if His plan includes a church, then I want to make sure that I find God's plan for the church. Join me as I share the beginning of my still-developing vision. Join me as I continue to look for my Dad's house!

The Savior

Chapter Two

In the 1960s, television was coming into its own. People were seeing things live they had never seen before. The world became smaller as people were drawn together across geographical boundaries.

Enter Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan was a communications theorist who believed that the medium in a given era (such as television or radio) was often equal to the message it presented. For example, Americans may value the importance of having the evening news playing in the background as much as they do the actual report being broadcast. They may turn the radio on for the sound rather than the information they may gain from having it on. In fact, news can sometimes become lost in the broadcast.²

When I get up every weekday, one of the first things I do is turn the television on. While I keep a listening ear out for the news and weather of the day, the message may sometimes become lost in the noise. The noise may offer our subconscious comfort because the noise is always there.

It is possible for any church to become so convinced of their own importance that they actually forget or take for granted their reason for existing in the first place. Then, when things go wrong or become bogged down by minutiae, they may look to the church or some individual to straighten things out.

² Sydney W. Head & Christopher H. Sterling, *Broadcasting in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982) p. 517.

Have you considered that the most important thing that can happen in the eyes of some church members is the arrival of a new pastor? They see the coming of a new minister as *the second coming*. They feel that the right person at the “top” can pull the church out of the rut it’s in or provide it with the power it needs to step forward and take its’ place on the community stage. In short, these people are looking for *someone* to save the church!

What many churches should be doing is looking for *Someone* (read *Jesus Christ*) to save the church! You see, it is easier than we think for our faith to become misdirected. We may look for the right person or program to get us turned around or transform us into the church we think we can be. But true, meaningful transformation has to come from God. Second Corinthians 3:18 says, “But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.” This verse is describing the difference between living under the law (or what I can do for myself) and under grace (or Christ’s Power living in us.) Notice that we are changed, not by man’s power, but “by the Spirit of the Lord.”

So what! What does this have to do with being the church? A few years ago I listened to a cassette tape of a sermon, and then I listened again, and again. The reason this particular sermon was so important to me was because God had revealed something to me that I had never considered.

The minister read the following scripture, and then began preaching.

**For every house is builded by some man; but he that
built all things is God.**

**And Moses verily was faithful in all his house, as a
servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be
spoken after;**

**But Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are
we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of
the hope firm unto the end. (Hebrews 3:4-6)**

First, I became aware that this passage was talking about the church, Christ's house. But then I was made aware of a very significant word. It is a small word with far reaching ramifications. The word is 'if'. The verse states that we are the house of Christ 'if' certain things are true. Having been brought up in a freethinking household, I should have already considered that being the church carried some requirements.

After getting over the idea that the church could actually cease to be the church, I began to listen as the minister pointed out some of the conditions for being the church. The writer of Hebrews states that we are the church if 'we hold fast the confidence and rejoicing firm unto the end.' Doesn't that mean we have to have faith in Jesus and worship Him? Don't we have faith in Him if we are saved (we'll deal with the rejoicing aspect of this verse in the next chapter)? It is interesting to note that confidence, or faith, might not endure to the end. It may become mixed up with other things. We may

actually put our confidence in something or someone other than Jesus and not even realize it.

We may believe that more visitation will “save” our church from extinction. Currently many churches think that a large, active youth group will move them along. Some feel that what is needed is a new collection of songs and music to bring the church into the twenty first century. Others think we must return to the old hymns.

Notice that none of these items being depended on are either bad or inappropriate for a church. Some churches like the newer music. Some like traditional worship. Some have a strong youth program. Some have found energetic pastors and leaders. There is nothing wrong with any of these things, in and of themselves. The problem is not with the program or person, but with the fact that we see the methods used and the people employed as equal to the message we are suppose to present. Stated in another way, we seek an answer from men rather than God.

It’s interesting that we don’t often hear of churches in need simply falling on their faces before God. Oh, we say we trust God. But we can actually become accustomed to depending on people and ideas and the church itself more than we do God!

I find the following verse very interesting:

Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?
(2 Corinthians 13:5)

The Apostle Paul obviously thought it needful to write to Christians and remind them to examine themselves to see if their faith was centered where it needed to be centered. This verse was, and is, an invitation to review where we are in the Lord and make sure we are looking to Him for answers rather than each other, the church at large, or some national or international gathering of leaders.

Permit me to use a secular illustration of this Biblical point. A few years ago a movie called *Ghost Busters* was very popular. It seems that ghost were infecting houses and buildings all across the city. A broom couldn't drive them out. They couldn't be sent away like a bunch of children. Something more was needed.

A bright group of young men came up with a way to eradicate the city of this increasing mess. They had the proper tools. They could get rid of ghosts because they were using something that could enter into the supernatural realm and neutralize the ghosts.

Scooby Doo and his friends were successful without fancy equipment, but remember, Scooby Doo's ghosts always turned out to be people in costume. They didn't need anything supernatural because they were really dealing with the natural.

In *Ghost Busters*, the theme song gave us a clue we should consider. If ghosts are giving you a hard time, if strange things are happening, the song asks, "Who you gonna' call?" The answer would come back loud and clear, "Ghost Busters!"

If you need money in your church, raise it. If you need to reach outsiders with the message, do it. But if the problem has any supernatural component to it whatsoever, you

need to get supernatural help. Who you gonna' call? A new pastor? A new leader? The young people? No! If you want real help with Spiritual problems, call the Holy Ghost!

Money may have to be raised, but prayer can help loosen up the hearts and pocketbooks of hardhearted members. Maybe you need more people in Sunday School, and visitation may be just the thing. But if there is a spirit in your town that is lulling would-be attendees to sleep, then you need to pray. Don't trust your plan to make everything right. Seek Jesus Christ! Have faith in Him.

Some of you won't hear this message. But some of you are hungry. You're tired of running into the same old ghosts in your church. You think there may be something insurmountable going on. Maybe its been going on for years. Maybe a mountain really does have to be moved. Well, I've got news for you. The only real hope is to trust in Jesus and turn to Him in humility. You may have to repent for ever trusting anything else. But if we trust Him, there is one thing we have to remember. This is the first step towards being the Church of God of the Bible! That's what I want to be a part of.

Worship

Chapter Three

**...whose house are we, if we hold fast the
confidence and the rejoicing of the hope
firm unto the end. (Hebrews 3:6b)**

In addition to having faith in Christ, we must rejoice in Christ in order to be the church. This seems like an unnecessary thing to have to say because it is so obvious. Yet, I must say it because much of what we decide is worship, or rejoicing, isn't true worship.

The topic of worship invites all sorts of interpretations, definitions, and explanations. In fact, my own interpretation of worship has changed a good deal over the years. In 1988 I attended a worship seminar where I began to realize that it was possible to worship, and yet not worship God at all. I saw then that we could become so obsessed with God's *presents* that we actually miss His *Presence!* This realization spurred me to begin to study the concept of worship. I read many books on the subject. I developed a series of lessons on the topic.

I also began to compare what I saw happening in the church to what I was reading about. Though my understanding was still being formed (and is even now), I began to realize that many churches don't really worship. This was, and is, troubling to me. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that some churches are playing church. They mean

well, but often they simply fail to even begin to worship. No, it doesn't take a genius, but it does take revelation.

During the past several years, there has been a major shift in religious thinking in the United States. A lot of attention has been given to worship. A whole new body of music has evolved. The worship chorus has become the vehicle of choice for many churches desiring to worship God. Worship ministries have developed. Churches emphasizing worship have begun to spring up. It is all very exciting. And while much of it has been inspired of God, some of it has been the same old thing in a different mask.

Let me explain. Someone recently approached me about the type of music some old-fashioned churches use in their services. This person was earnest as they questioned whether or not a church could actually worship using the old "blue book." Your church may have a different book, but the blue book for us is the book out of which our grandparents worshipped. I am sure it has been updated some, but it represented to this person everything that was wrong with traditional worship. This person felt that the new way was not just a better way for them, but the only way for anyone desiring to really worship.

A trend has developed that is actually the same old thing we have always had to deal with. We have taken sides over the issue of worship. As is so often the case, the sides are drawn largely along age boundaries. The youth in general tend to favor the new music, and the old tend to favor the hymns and traditional music. If it were simply a matter of preference, there would be nothing wrong with these tendencies. But the issue

is much more than a tendency toward the music of each generation. The tendency in many cases is toward a feeling that “our music is exclusively Spiritual.”

There is an associated trend that is equally troubling to me. I grew up in a home where we listened to a lot of music. I grew up loving music. I play guitar, and both of my parents, my sister, and I have performed music at one time or another in church. But today, some churches think that worship consists of nothing *but* music. Many worship services are characterized by two hours of singing. These churches often contain people that believe that you have to sing a lot in order to worship. In fact, if you cut the singing short to listen to a sermon, to have an altar call, to hear a testimony, or do anything else, in their minds you are quenching the Spirit! But as much as I love music, some churches give far too much attention to music without ever approaching God.

How do I know? Because as I have experienced it, some of these churches sing and continue to sing when the Spirit isn't moving. I have heard reports of services that go far too long because the singing goes on, and on, and on.... If your church sings for two hours every service, there is nothing inherently wrong with that. But if the Spirit isn't moving, and if people aren't getting into the Presence of God, then you aren't worshipping. You might as well stop doing what you're doing. It is possible that God wants to do something else.

We can worship “worship” instead of God. Just like we can get focused on the *gifts of God* more than the *Gift of God*, we can put more time and attention into the method of worship than we do the God of worship. Friends, it isn't about what type of

songs you sing, how many songs you sing, how often you sing, how long you sing, or even *if* you sing. It is about *being in the Presence of Almighty God!*

In Matthew 17, Jesus took up Peter, James, and John into a mountain. While there, Jesus was changed, transfigured before them. It was an awesome experience. These ordinary men were seeing the Power of God moving on the Son of God in a way that neither they nor anyone else had ever seen before. They were absolutely overwhelmed by what they saw.

But Peter's response to this is so typical of us. Listen to him:

Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias. (Matthew 17:4)

Peter's first response was to say and do something. Fortunately, God speaks to the disciples and tells them that what they must do is listen. So often, our response to worship is to do or say something. But the Essence of worship has nothing to do with who we are or what we do. It has everything to do with *Him!*

Should we not sing then? Of course we can sing. We can shout. We can dance. We can do all sorts of things. But we must understand something that David certainly knew. In 2 Samuel 6, David and the Israelites are moving the ark of the covenant to

Jerusalem. As it is being moved, David begins to dance, even uncovering himself. Let's read:

And as the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal Saul' s daughter looked through a window, and saw king David leaping and dancing before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart.

Then David returned to bless his household. And Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David, and said, How glorious was the king of Israel to day, who uncovered himself to day in the eyes of the handmaids of his servants, as one of the vain fellows shamelessly uncovereth himself!

And David said unto Michal, It was before the LORD, which chose me before thy father, and before all his house, to appoint me ruler over the people of the LORD, over Israel: therefore will I play before the LORD.

And I will yet be more vile than thus, and will be base in mine own sight: and of the maidservants which thou hast spoken of, of them shall I be had in honour.

(2 Samuel 6:16, 20-12)

Did you catch what David said? He said he was dancing before the Lord. In other words, God was his audience. Worship is all about God. If you are looking for the best talent in your church to put up front, beware of your intent. Looking good isn't a sin, but allowing the audience to be the congregation is. Your audience is God, and frankly, I don't believe God enjoys talented singers more than He does those who can't carry a tune in a bucket. If all you are concerned about is public relations, then you have missed out on the one relation that really matters.

Go ahead and have good singers. The talented need a place to sing. But the church that seeks to put on an attractive program had certainly better understand Who the audience is and what He wants. God resists the proud. He gives His Presence in the form of grace to the humble. The key is we must find out what God wants to do in a given service at a given time. The answer to what God wants in this Sunday's service may surprise.

I just got off of the phone with a very unconventional pastor. He was telling me about a minister in his congregation who talked about how "off the wall" he, the pastor, often was. I know this pastor very well. He is not smooth and distinguished as men measure distinction. He is not dignified, though he isn't crude either. But he does obey the Lord. When God speaks to him during a service, he is willing to stop the program in favor of God's direction. The funny thing is, no one in his church seems to mind. Why? Because they are looking for what God wants.

Church is not an industry that indulges in public relations in order to profit, either monetarily or in the business of attendance. We are a place built for God's Own purpose. Perhaps that purpose is seen most clearly in Ephesians 2:22 which says,

**In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation
of God through the Spirit.**

That's right! The most important Person in your church should be God. Of course we all give lip service to this idea. Unfortunately, we say this and then go about doing what we have always done. How little of God we actually see in our services. The reason is because they are indeed *our services* and not *His services*.

We become possessive of our meetings, and we become protective. Our way is right and somebody else's is wrong. We want to defend our method of worship, maybe because of the results we have seen. But we sometimes become exceedingly narrow-minded. We fail to see that while God may indeed want to work a certain way for us, He may be doing something else in and for somebody else.

A few years ago our church held a concert featuring recording artist Warren Barfield. I knew beforehand that his music was different from what our "blue book" crowd was accustomed to. So I warned the older members of our church that they might not like the upcoming music. If they wanted to stay home, it was okay. (Perhaps I was focused too much on the congregation and not enough on God!)

On the night of the concert, I walked one of the oldest members of our church. She sat through the whole thing. The next morning before Sunday School, she talked about how much she enjoyed the music. Now, she probably did not buy a CD, and she almost certainly doesn't listen to the contemporary Christian radio station at home. But she knew something that many have yet to learn. She knew that different people worship in different ways.

If you find yourself defending the worship of your church, please be careful because you personally may not be worshipping God at all. Your defensiveness may not be healthy. People who are on uncertain ground find it necessary to defend themselves, even to the point of being unreasonable.

We must remember a few important ideas. First, worship is not about a method. Second, it isn't about the congregation. Third, it is all about the Lord God Almighty. Last, if your church is going to be the church, you must truly worship God and God alone!

Doctrine

Chapter Four

**But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know
how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the
house of God, which is the church of the
living God, the pillar and ground of the
truth. (1 Timothy 3:15)**

This verse is rather straightforward. It states that the church is the “pillar and ground of the truth.” Truth and the search for the truth have always been associated with the church. In fact, it is our interpretation of truth more than anything else that has been at the root of much of the denominational division that now exists among Christians.

Perhaps as a result of this fact many churches declare that they will accept anyone regardless of what they believe. In doing so, they are trying to prevent doctrinal differences from turning people off from their particular church. However, the decision to have no doctrine is in itself a declaration of belief. In short, everyone has a set of beliefs. Everyone has a set of religious beliefs, even if that set includes the belief that there is no God.

To be sure, doctrine can be a touchy subject for many people. When we discuss doctrine, people have to reexamine things that they may have accepted as cardinal doctrine long before. People don't willingly lay down long held beliefs. Beliefs become personal. We base our lives on them. Doctrine is very important since it is doctrine that

tells us how to live. It is seen as the basis for behavior. Truth is the basic set of principles that underlies who we are. Reexamination is painful, and change is extremely difficult. Disagreement with one's beliefs is sometimes seen as a reason to leave one group and go somewhere else.

Though doctrine and its declaration, or even its discussion, can cause much pain and unhappiness, Paul still wrote that the church is "the pillar and ground of the truth." Some may argue that the word "truth" refers simply to the essence of the Gospel, but the true Gospel properly lived out covers every area of our lives. The church is to be the place where the doctrine, or Word, is seen and understood. Implied in this idea is the fact that we have to hear from God concerning truth. This in turn implies the need for occasionally revising where we stand regarding the Word of God since none of us knows it all.

Wade Phillips, in his book *God, the Church, and Revelation*, explains that being the pillar of the truth does not mean the church holds up the word. We do not support the Word. The Word doesn't need or depend on earthly help to stand. The early church understood being the pillar because they understood the importance of the pillar in every day life.³

In those days, there was of course no radio, no television, no newspaper, and no means of mass communication as we understand it today. If someone had information of importance that everyone needed to know, they might post a notice on the column of one

³ Wade H. Phillips, *God, the Church, and Revelation* (Cleveland, TN: White Wing Publishing House and Press, 1986) p. 90.

of the main buildings near the center of town. The columns, or pillars, were the place where information was displayed.⁴

It is this fact that makes the church significant when it comes to truth. The church is to be a place where people can look and see the Word lived out in people's lives. We are to be a place where the Word is displayed on a regular basis.

But how can we display the Word if we don't understand it? The answer is simple. With perhaps some exceptions, we can't. On the whole, however, God wants us to understand the Word so that we can live it. But saying the church is the "ground of the truth" is not a way of speaking that is common to us today. Again Brother Phillips gives us some insight. He goes back to Genesis 28. In this chapter, Jacob is running from Esau after having cheated and lied. He lies down to sleep, and God, Who years earlier had proclaimed that the blessing would go to Jacob instead of Esau, appears to Jacob in a dream. A ladder appears. The ladder reaches from heaven to earth. On the ladder, angels are ascending and descending. At the top of the ladder God is speaking.⁵

We know from John 1:51 that the ladder represents Christ. But as God speaks and the angels move up and down the ladder, it is important to note that the ladder is connected to the earth. God wants to make His Word known on the earth. So hallowed is this place to Jacob that he rises from sleep and marks this special spot of ground. What he unknowingly illustrates is the importance of the church. In His Sovereign will, God

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 90, 91.

desires to speak to men. But He also desires a place where men can come to an understanding of His Voice and will.⁶

The church is the place, according to Paul, where the Word of God will be understood and displayed. But can't any Christian hear and understand the Word? Certainly God does speak to and work through individuals. But the problem is that our own pre-conceived ideas often color individual interpretation. I know of times when I proclaimed that God had spoken to me, only to realize later that I had simply proclaimed what I wanted to do or believe all along. Sometimes the individual is right, but all too often there is an inherent prejudice that shapes what we say we have heard from God.

In the church, there is a safeguard against this. In the church, when God speaks to me, I can then take what I have heard to the group and allow it to be discussed. Coupled with what others have heard from God, we can then weed out that which is personal bias and leave only that which is from God. The resulting information or vision can then be disseminated to other groups in our fellowship so that we can all "...walk by the same rule..." and "...mind the same thing." (Philippians 3:16)

Of course, even in the group there is danger. The Bible says, "...in the multitude of counselors there is safety." (Proverbs 11:14b) However, this does not mean that the multitude is always right. Sometimes what God wills is different from what the church wills. However, there is a way to help us in this situation.

In Matthew 16:17-19, we find the following passage:

⁶ Ibid.

And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.

And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Jesus has just engaged the disciples in a discussion of what people thought of Him. People thought of Him as a prophet or teacher. They marveled at His miracles, but could not see His Divinity. However, when Jesus asked the disciples what they themselves thought of Him, Peter immediately declared Him to be the Christ, the Son of God.

Jesus tells Peter, and probably really focuses on the rest of the group, and says that Peter's information came because of Divine revelation, not flesh and blood intuition or intellectual activity. But Jesus doesn't stop here. He goes on to say that Peter will be able to bind and loose things on earth and know that those things are bound and loosed in heaven.

It sounds as if Jesus is giving Peter permission to do what ever he wants to do. But remember, He has just stated that what Peter has received has come from God, not

flesh. He is not giving Peter freedom to interpret or act as he sees fit. He is not saying that heaven will approve everything he does and says. If this were true, Jesus would not have rebuked Peter just five verses later in Matthew 16:23. What Jesus is saying here is that because Peter has been in touch with God, he is going to be more careful to loose or bind, to interpret and preach, that which has already been sanctioned in heaven.⁷

The group must always rely on prayer and the move of the Spirit. This is what makes the meeting in Acts 15 significant. The issue of circumcision was threatening to tear the church apart. But the leaders, and perhaps some laymen, got together and discussed the issue. They argued. They explained. They reported. In the end, they indicated that they had also heard from God, since “It seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us..” (Acts 15:28). Notice what happened after this meeting. “..They rejoiced for the consolation.” (Acts 15:31b) There was comfort in the church once there was resolution of the matter.

The process is clear. There was discussion, even disagreement, but there was time given for God to speak. Of course, there is abuse possible even in this, but we have the Word to gauge whether or not what we hear is the Spirit. Once we hear from the Spirit, we can then go home with the assurance of a clear path to follow.

There is one last passage that Brother Phillips writes about. (I don't want to attempt to rewrite his book, but I discovered these truths through his ministry, and they are certainly applicable to our search for the church.) The passage is found in

1 Peter 2:5, 9:

⁷ Ibid., p. 94.

**Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house,
an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices,
acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.**

**But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an
holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show
forth the praises of him who hath called you out of
darkness into his marvellous light.**

This passage calls the church a Spiritual house (remember Hebrews 3:6), and then it gives our purpose as a church. We are to “show forth the praises of Him Who hath called” us. The word “praises” means “virtues.” In other words, the church is to be the place where men can see the Nature of God. His Virtues are to be displayed in and by the church.⁸

The idea of a holy display does not preclude the possibility of holy living aside from the church. But it does give us a safeguard against error and false doctrine. While errors may still occur in the church, it is the moving of the Spirit in our midst that enables us to see more clearly things that once were unclear. It is our being open to the review of doctrine and scripture that helps us come closer to what God intends His children to be in this world. This example can be seen by sinners who need to see the way to God. It can be seen by Christians not yet joined to the fellowship of the church who are looking for a more perfect way. It should be shared with others, and these others can come to a greater

⁸ Ibid., p. 116.

understanding of the truth. This happens when the church is open to revelation and review.

This is undoubtedly what happened in Acts 18:24-28.

And a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures, came to Ephesus.

This man was instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only the baptism of John.

And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly.

And when he was disposed to pass into Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him: who, when he was come, helped them much which had believed through grace:

For he mightily convinced the Jews, and that publicly, showing by the scriptures that Jesus was Christ.

Apollos seems to have been in need of more understanding of the truth. Aquila and Priscilla took him aside and gave him what he lacked, or at least a part of it. They were able to share with him some of what he needed because as a part of the church, they were exposed to the revelation process to which the church can and should be open.

There is a danger that we won't be willing to reevaluate the truth as we see it. But truth, if it is really truth, will stand up to the evaluation process. Furthermore, one generation may pass on to the next generation what God has revealed to them (the first group.) But the new generation must hear from God for themselves. This in no way means the new generation should disregard what is passed on to them. Rather, as they pray and seek God, they have a starting point because of established doctrine. If the new generation gets it wrong, let the generation that came before remember that sometimes they got it wrong as well. But if we are truly open to the revelation of the Spirit of God, He will correct us, perhaps over time.

If we aren't open to this revelation and correction by the Spirit, we aren't the church anyway. Remember, the church is the place where the truth can and will be understood. When we establish a pattern of resistance to the will of God, once we begin to rely on intellectual activity or clever arguments, we forfeit our right to be the church. Revelation is essential to our being the church. If we don't hear from God, how can we truly be His church? If Christ is the Head of the body, how can we proceed without listening to Him?

Let us study the Word. Let us read and compare the scripture. Let us compare personal experiences with the Word. But let us never forget to include in the discussion what the Holy Ghost is saying to us at any given moment.

We must have the objective review of the scripture along with, not instead of, the subjective reporting of personal experiences. What God has spoken to the members of the church is important. So is the discussion process that follows. Through the process outlined in this chapter and illustrated in the Word, the church can hear from God, interpret what God is saying, share it among the various local churches, and present a unified witness to the world around us. The church must be a place where the Word can be understood as well as displayed. If we aren't hearing from God, and if we aren't living what God reveals to us, we are not the church!

Government and Accountability

Chapter Five

Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.

(Hebrews 13:17)

Sometimes I don't like this verse of scripture. Many of you don't, either, though you may not admit it. But we live in a day where politicians are seen as crooked, management is seen as out of touch, and even church leaders are disappointing. After all, it wasn't too many years ago when we had a president lying under oath, the Enron scandal, and Jimmy Swaggert and Jim Baker falling from grace. No wonder we don't trust leadership! If authority figures can't run their own lives, why should I obey or submit to them?

The trend toward "independent" churches has, in many cases, come because of our view of leadership and government. It might go something like this. A church experiences a special move of God. This move turns into a revival, not necessarily in the traditional sense of nightly services, but of having a regular visitation of God in their services.

Word of this move of God gets around. At first, the response is favorable. But of course, any time God moves, the devil works overtime. Rumors and false reports require the

organizational leadership to take a close look at the local church involved. The church doesn't like having to answer questions when all they are doing is following God.

Or perhaps there is the perception that while God is blessing in their midst, the rest of the organization isn't keeping up with them. Red tape, organizational procedures, or unspiritual leaders appear to be slowing them down. The local church begins to feel that the only way to deal with this is to pull out of the organization. It may begin with a group of people or one person, but the feeling that one has "outgrown" the organization is often evident.

Of course, there are other reasons for divisions to occur, but you get the picture. What starts out as a move of God ends in a split. But Hebrews 13:17 shows a different picture. It says to "obey" and "submit". Ouch!

But doesn't the move of the Spirit justify such action? Here is what the Spirit has given me concerning this issue. First Corinthians 7:1-16 is a scripture dealing with marriage between a believer and an unbeliever. Paul warns the believer to remain with the unbeliever three different times. But verse fifteen is controversial. It says,

But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace.

The common interpretation of this verse is that if your partner is determined to leave, then you can let them go and not be under bondage to them any more. You are now free to

remarry and go on with your life. However, if you take this verse in the context of the entire chapter, then you find a different picture.

Imagine a Christian man is married to an unbeliever. The wife decides she wants to leave. The man can do one of two things. As a devout Christian he can say, ‘I don’t believe in divorce. It isn’t biblical. I won’t give you a divorce.’ What would the wife do at this point? More than likely, she would not just leave, she would leave angry! The chances of restoring such a marriage are negligible.

But what if the husband takes the other option and says, ‘I do n’t want a divorce, but if you are determined to go, I’ll let you go?’ Then the wife leaves, but the husband can then begin doing what verse sixteen advises him to do. It says,

**For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save
thy husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou
shalt save thy wife?**

These verses indicate that the husband has clear instructions to remain married. But they also indicate that he may have to let the wife go against God’s will, then live a life of holiness before her that will hopefully influence her to find God for herself in the future. This stand is hard, but it keeps the peace. ‘God has called us to peace.’

So what does this have to do with churches? If your church has heard from God, or if you have heard from God, but no one else has, you have an obligation to submit in order to maintain the peace. Then you have the responsibility of displaying a Christ-like spirit and

living the truth that has been revealed to you so that others will be open to hearing from God as you have. The answer to disagreement isn't division, it is submission, at least when there is an impasse among the various parties involved.

It is clear from Hebrews 13 that we are to obey those over us in the Lord, and sometimes we have a hard time with this. Many churches that haven't officially split from an organization might as well be independent. They certainly don't give regard to organizational directives. But we must remember that, while there are sometimes those who are in leadership positions that are not spiritual, generally speaking our leaders are men and women who have to give an account to God for your welfare.

'But we answer to God,' many will undoubtedly say. Well then, remember Who inspired Hebrews 13:17. God inspired this and other verses dealing with how we are to deal with those over us in the Lord. Let's look at two more passages:

Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine. (1 Timothy 5:17)

And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you;

And to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. And be at peace among yourselves.

**Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly,
comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient
toward all men. (1 Thessalonians 5:12-14)**

It appears from the scripture that God had something other than independence in minds. Acts six shows a definite division of labor, with the Apostles taking the leadership roles assigned to them by Christ, and the Deacons taking on the new role established by the church. There seems to be little doubt that there were leaders and followers.

Along with government comes the concept of accountability. Accountability is the idea that we have to answer to others. Perhaps one of the most interesting examples of accountability in the Bible concerns the apostle Paul. Look at the following passages:

**And when we were come to Jerusalem, the brethren
received us gladly.**

**And the day following Paul went in with us unto James;
and all the elders were present.**

**And when he had saluted them, he declared particularly
what things God had wrought among the Gentiles by his
ministry. (Acts 21:17-19)**

**Then fourteen years after I went up again to Jerusalem
with Barnabas, and took Titus with me also.**

And I went up by revelation, and communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to them which were of reputation, lest by any means I should run, or had run, in vain. (Galatians 2:1, 2)

Paul is one of the most successful missionaries in the history of the church. We know from Galatians one that he received a revelation of the Gospel that wasn't then prevalent in the church. He could have proclaimed it and snubbed his nose at anyone who called him into question concerning this "new doctrine" he was preaching. But he didn't. Instead of looking down on the rest of the church, he went in privately to the church leadership and explained what it was God had revealed to him. They then gave him their blessing.

In Acts 21, Paul is coming in "off the road" and has experienced some success. In fact, he has raised a man from the dead on at least one occasion. What does he do? Does he set himself apart from the rest and have people come to him to bask in his glory? Does he walk around with an entourage? No! When he arrives in Jerusalem, one of the first things he does is report to the leaders at headquarters. This man who could have commanded respect and attention actually humbles himself before these men who didn't even accompany him on the journey. In fact, these are the same men to whom he had to explain his revelation in the first place!

If this wasn't bad enough, Paul, who had already declared his willingness to suffer once he returned to Jerusalem, is now told to do certain things in an apparent attempt to appease the Jews who are looking for an opportunity to arrest Paul. Paul has declared boldly

that he is not only ready to be arrested, but to die for the cause of Christ. Now he has to submit to skittish leaders. But Paul obeys.

I hate reporting. I have to complete a monthly report concerning my ministry, and I don't enjoy it. But the concept of reporting is biblical. It is biblical to be accountable to God by being accountable to leadership. This doesn't fit well with some of our views of grace and freedom, but it does fit with the Bible!

I wish that was all there was to government, but I would be doing you a disservice if I didn't mention the concepts of judgment and discipline. Matthew 17 and 1 Corinthians 6 both show that we as the church have to be willing to confront sin among the members of the church. We cannot allow offenses or overt sin to go uncorrected. In both cases, we are told to confront the brother or sister who has sinned. In 1 Corinthians 6 Paul tells the local church to appoint a judge to judge the matter.

The only scriptures some of us want to quote concerning judging are Matthew 7:1 and Romans 2:1. We believe that judgment is absolutely taboo among Christians. But then Paul tells us something different! He says to appoint a judge! It actually gets better than that, because in Matthew 17 it is none other than Jesus talking.

My overseer pointed out a verse that is often misinterpreted. It is 1 Peter 4:17, which says,

For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?

In this passage, Peter is talking about the behavior of the members of the church. He then tells them ‘judgment must begin at the house of God.’ He isn’t talking about the wrath of God here. He is talking about a process of decision-making that actually judges the actions of the members. Obviously this can be taken too far, but the idea is that the church has the responsibility of confronting and correcting sinful behavior. The hope is that correction and reconciliation will take place. But if this doesn’t happen, then Paul spoke of excommunicating members in rather harsh terms. He spoke of two individuals, ‘Hymenaeus and Alexander’ by saying ‘I have delivered (them) unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme.’ (1 Timothy 1:20)

These are difficult situations, but they are a part of the responsibility of the church. It is certainly easier to assert that your church doesn’t judge, that it allows for personal freedom and interpretation of the scripture. But the easy way isn’t the Biblical way.

The secret to maintaining discipline in a spirit of humility is seen in 1 Corinthians 6:4, which says,

**If then ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life,
set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church.**

Our view of church government may come from the distasteful idea of having the Chairman of the Board being the judge. God bless those chairmen who are truly humble, but you get the picture. We are not to put the most influential person in charge. (May God help

those congregations that are ruled by an individual or group who are unwilling to relinquish any control over the affairs of the church!)

Paul essentially says, ‘Let the janitor be the judge.’ How about the silver-haired lady who never raises her voice on any issue? What he is advocating here is a court of inquiry without a show of personal power. This is not a time to have anyone flexing his or her political muscle. This is a time to reconcile erring members in an atmosphere free of intimidation or politics. It is a time to mourn and hold out the hope of repentance as the preferred outcome.

Government, including accountability and discipline, is an aspect of the church that requires grace, dignity, and much humility. Demanding one’s way is not godly. It is a show of pride when we demand to be heard. When we would rather argue than hear our brother or sister we are missing the point of biblical government. There is no place in the church for dictatorial power. In the church, we must work together. We must discuss, even disagree, occasionally submit, but always pray and look for the steadying Hand of God.

The church of the Bible will have government. This government will be grounded in a Christ-like spirit. It will be quick to defer to others, willing to stand for the truth, and always having as its goal the growth of the members. May God grant that this state of affairs will exist in a selfish era! May God grant the grace for godly government!

Fellowship

Chapter Six

But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ:

From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

(Ephesians 4:15, 16)

In 1985, I found myself saying goodbye to a church where I had spent about eight years. This particular church had become a special place for me. I had spent most of my teen years here. I had been involved in various ministries of the church. I had developed many relationships with the people of the church. Now, for several reasons, I found I had to move to another town, another job, and another church.

In our organization, we have churches connected in many ways to other churches around each state, around the United States, and around the world. Fortunately for me, my move was within the state of Georgia. Because my family and I had established

several relationships around the state, our move to a town just outside of Atlanta was known to a few of our friends. I remember attending a state function shortly after it became known that we were moving. A dear lady from a church near Atlanta extended an invitation to me to attend her church. I also received some prodding from a few other people associated with that church. Once I moved into the area, guess where I attended church. That's right! I attended the church of the lady who invited me.

Many things in my life had become unstable. When I began attending this church, the members made me feel at home. On Sunday evenings after church, they would get together and go out to eat. (Yes, it was a relatively small church.) I made friends, and felt at home.

After a couple of years, I got married and my wife and I relocated to a town that necessitated us finding a new church to attend. Several years passed. Recently, the lady who originally invited me to church passed away. I attended the funeral, and the members of the church reached out to welcome me back. It was as if I was home, and I was.

As a church, our attention should be on Christ. He is our priority. There are no exceptions. But in our worship and devotion to Him, we are directed to support and fellowship with one another. Ephesians four is a passage dealing with the Body of Christ, i.e. the church. This body, according to Paul, has been given gifts by the Spirit of God. These gifts have as their goal the growth of the Christian. The Christian is to grow up "into Him." But verse sixteen gives a picture of the relationship of the members to one another. As we grow up Spiritually, we are also to grow into a close-knit body of believers. The body is

described as being “fitly joined together.” This phrase illustrates a unity that exists for the strengthening of the body.

I enjoy jigsaw puzzles- not the five thousand piece ones, but one thousand pieces or less. One of the great things about a jigsaw puzzle is that when you put the right pieces together, the fit is comfortable. There is no resistance. The colors go together, the edges fit perfectly, and they contribute to the larger puzzle as a unit.

The Church of God is a place where people get together and are joined in a way that compliments all the members involved. It is a place where there can be unity among the differing opinions. The individual is joined together with others in a unit that in turn contributes to the church at large.

Of course, there are differences of opinion that threaten the overall stability of the church. But the beauty of relationships is that they cause us to be more open to one another, even in times of disagreement. When there is no relationship founded on the principle of love, church fights break out at an alarming rate. Disunity results. Alienation results. Splits result. The existence of the church does not equal the absence of disagreement, but rather the presence of a Christ-like Spirit.

This fellowship must be evident to visitors. It must be evident to the community. Jesus said, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” (John 13:35). If we are to be the church, we must first be Christians. When people see our fellowship, they can know beyond any doubt that here is a group of Christians.

A few years ago, I worked for a company that produced Gospel videos in local churches. On one occasion, my supervisor and I were in charge of taping in a local church.

After the service, a meal was served, and everyone met in the Fellowship Hall. My boss and I sat down to eat, but we noticed that for the entire time we were there, no one ever spoke to us. No one ever acknowledged our presence. Now I know we were the hired help, but for all these people knew, we could've been lost souls in need of Jesus. But they never even made us feel like they were glad we were there.

Before my wife and I were married, we went once a month to a church that had a monthly concert for youth. We attended nearly every concert, but only one member of that local church ever even spoke to us.

I have some friends that attended a very evangelical church one Sunday, only to be completely ignored by the members. How can a church be evangelical and not care about people?

I hope that these stories are exceptions rather than the general rule. However, every church needs to take notice of how it welcomes visitors and how it cares for members.

I pastor a small church. We are a church that stands around to talk before and after services. We talk about anything we need to talk about. We discuss what's in the news. We discuss various situations people have to deal with through the week. I have often thought that these times of fellowship are more important than what happens in the actual services. Of course, I hope that we will always seek to worship God, and that is our priority. But my point is that fellowship has a positive impact on the members. Some churches don't fellowship. They arrive at the last minute for service, and they are out the door almost before the last amen is said. I have heard stories of churches that literally empty out before a person sitting on the

front pew can get to the back door. I'm afraid something vital is missing in churches where this is true. There is a lack of friendliness that is a treasure when it is present.

I like Acts 2. I'm not talking about the coming of the Holy Ghost. I like that part, too, but I really find the last part of the chapter fascinating. Look at the fellowship that existed among the members of the church:

And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.

And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles.

And all that believed were together, and had all things common;

And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.

And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart,

Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

What strikes me as significant is the fact that their fellowship was *daily*. They worshiped from house-to-house. They ate together. They probably shared the latest jokes. (If you're a skinflint who wouldn't laugh at a joke told by Jesus, just pretend you didn't see that last line!) They shared the news. They were together.

Satan has succeeded in stopping this sort of thing in many churches. We don't see each other except on Sundays. The day in which we live is extremely busy. It often takes both parents working in order to support a household. But worse still, we seem to be working an ever-increasing number of hours. When the computer first became a serious commodity for businesses to make use of, it was believed it would cut our work time in half. Well, it did, so what did we do? Instead of making use of the extra time to be with our biological and spiritual families, we successfully crammed more work into the void.

The term "workaholic" has become an all -too-familiar description of many workers in the United States. Work is important. We have to work. But our families are struggling to maintain relationships that are strained beyond reason. Add to this the need for recreation, which is realistic, and we have weeks that are filled with work, weekends that are filled with pleasure, and no time that is filled with anything remotely related to God or the church! We no longer see church as being quite so important as the other areas of our lives. Think about this example. There was a time when every church had a Sunday evening service. But now many churches simply do not have evening services on Sunday. I am not against this trend, but it is a striking example of how church suffers at the hands of time. In our efforts to accommodate busy lives, we have less time on the schedule for God.

There was a time when churches would hold revival meetings that were weeklong. People would come from miles around to be a part of the services. Now, revivals are rare when they are held, and they are usually held for three nights instead of seven or eight. Again, I am not suggesting that the new way is bad or the old way is good. There may be a way to counteract this tendency. I simply want to point out that church is often relegated to last place on our to-do list. The things that once were priority are not important anymore.

The tragedy is that people need people who are increasingly unavailable. They need God first, but God regularly works through individuals to strengthen His people. He works through willing vessels. Some of the great moments in my Christian experience came when I was fellowshiping with a brother or sister in Christ. The church is made up of flesh and blood people joined together for the cause of Christ. When we lack fellowship with one another, we lose something valuable. We lose something necessary for the Spiritual growth and welfare of the people of God.

Ephesians 4:16 says, 'From Whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth,..." It is important to note that what proceeds from Christ (the Whom referred to here) is a body of people joined together in a way that allows each member to fit with every other member. It starts with Jesus, and it then flows from Him in a way that is sheer genius and a work of great beauty.

The current denominational "structure" has been almost prohibitive when it comes to Christians fellowshiping together. But out of our disunity, we must find unity. Again, Jesus prayed for unity among believers, and only He can make this happen. Jesus talked about bringing believers together in John 10:16:

And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.

Even though Jesus will make this happen so that we don't need to worry about it, it does indicate that Christians ought to fellowship together regardless of religious affiliation.

A few years ago, Billy D. Murray was appointed General Overseer of the Church of God of Prophecy. He had some big shoes to fill, for the former overseer, M. A. Tomlinson, had served the third longest tenure of any leader of an international Pentecostal organization.⁹ I understand that one of the first things he did after taking office was to contact denominational leaders of other churches and try to develop a relationship with them. What a testament to the need for fellowship in the church. He regarded neither his position nor his organization as things to protect. Rather, he sought to take the hand of others in an effort to bridge the gaps that often divide religious organizations!

God's church must be open to the fellowship of Christians regardless of denominational affiliation. It must be a place where Christians can come and find a place, their place, in the Master plan. This happens when we are ***"fitly joined together."***

⁹ Stanley M. Burgess and Gary B. McGee, Editors, *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988) p. 207.

Spiritual Gifts

Chapter Seven

**Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren,
I would not have you ignorant. (1
Corinthians 12:1)**

**If the foot shall say, Because I am not the
hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore
not of the body?**

(1 Corinthians 12:15)

**And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I
have no need of thee: nor again the head
to the feet, I have no need of you. (1
Corinthians 12:21)**

**...but God hath tempered the body
together...**

(1 Corinthians 12:24b)

**That there should be no schism in the
body; but that the members should have
the same care one for another.**

(1 Corinthians 12:25)

The idea of the ‘lone wolf’ appeals to us. We like to hear stories of ‘rebels’ who struck out on their own and made it big. They were successful, they were prosperous, and they largely made it through their own sweat.

Fortunately, in the wild, wolves actually travel in packs. This helps them hunt more effectively. It also allows for protection and defense.¹⁰ If a wolf tried to make it on his or her own, the solitude would diminish its effectiveness as a hunter and would make it more vulnerable to various sources of danger.

Though we idolize those who strike out on their own, among Christians there is a diminished capacity for effectiveness for those who tend to work outside of the body. There is a greater chance of spiritual failure in the life of the person intent on separating from the pack.

The above referenced passage indicates Paul is writing about Spiritual gifts. He makes a strong point when he says God has ‘tempered the body together.’ This indicates God’s plan was to put believers together in groups so that we could do the work of the kingdom *together*.

When an individual decides their giftedness is bigger than the church, they may look for ways to fulfill their work outside the church. The problem is they are more vulnerable when they are alone. They are less likely to be given adequate spiritual nourishment. Also, their effectiveness is diminished, their reported statistics notwithstanding.

¹⁰ Microsoft® Encarta® Reference Library 2002. © 1993-2001 Microsoft Corporation.

Let me make the point that gifts of the Spirit exist outside of the church as well as inside the church. The presence of spiritual gifts is not what makes the church unique. Rather, it is the joining together of these gifts into a unified body that makes it effective.

An individual who exercises a particular gift on an independent basis is at a distinct disadvantage. For example, someone may exercise the gift of healing. They may travel around the country or the world laying hands on people. They may be successful in their attempt to share Jesus Christ. But what happens when they leave town? Those individuals who received the Gospel have no one to turn to for training or support. Of course, they may look for a church to attend. Indeed, many ministries that travel attempt to arrange for churches to be represented at their meetings. This gives the seekers a place to go after the crusade is over. But the minister (or singer) cannot be sure of the type of training a person will receive from a given local church. If there is a prior relationship between the minister and the church, then the minister can recommend the church with confidence. But when there is little or no relationship between the two, the minister leaves town unsure of just what kind of help the seeker will receive. In fact, he or she is not absolutely certain that a local church won't destroy the life of the seeker. Paul wrote about the impossible scenario where one part of the body decides it doesn't need the rest of the body. Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it! But this is what happens many times when a person decides he or she must go out on his or her own in order to fulfill their ministry.

But think about what would happen if that minister were to exercise his or her gift in the local church and community. What would happen if that singer decided to sing in the local orphanage or jail? What would it be like for ministers to go out from the local

church into the surrounding community and preach in various venues where souls are hungry? I'll tell you what would happen. People would get saved. Churches would grow. Ministries could be supported by the local congregation. People would be able to mature in the Lord under the nurturing hand of the church.

Is it wrong to have a ministry where you are required to travel? No! But all too often we follow the path of someone who has become famous and we try to replicate his or her success. We seem to have come to believe that we are successful only if we can travel and have a ministry that crosses city, state, and/or national boundaries. We try to go where the crowds are big. Sometimes we chase the largest offerings (but not always.) It isn't wrong to be famous or to travel, and it isn't wrong to make money. But our local churches are suffering while individuals are seeking to be "fulfilled in the Lord."

Paul makes it very clear that the body is to work together. Each member is to bring his or her own uniqueness to the group and thus complement the group. If everyone was a teacher, we would get sick of teaching, and nothing else would get done. But when one person comes and is able to raise money, and another can teach, and someone can visit, and another can sing, there is a Spirit that shines through and lets the world know that unity prevails in the church.

The world sees too many people showing off. We have sports figures, actors, public officials, and a myriad of individuals who act as lone wolves trying to save the day. Not every public figure fits this picture, but you get the idea. How refreshing it is for them to see a group of people that works together. Furthermore, it offers hope when they realize they themselves can be a part of this group and contribute.

While it is sometimes unhealthy for a person to leave a local church, the other extreme is also harmful. Some in the church suffer from a lack of Spiritual self-esteem, or rather, a lack of God-esteem. They feel they can't do anything. Paul said not to have this attitude. He warned that we are not to say that because we aren't like so-and-so we aren't any good (verse fifteen). This isn't pleasing to God. He has equipped all of us with something we can do. What we are implying is that God is unable to make us effective ministers.

This "poor me" attitude is just as dangerous as the attitude of the person who supposedly "outgrows" the local church. The aggressive member leaves the church and diminishes his or her effectiveness. In the case of the "poor me" Christian, a fear of failure or inadequacy causes the Christian to be inactive. They become "bench warmers." They don't contribute. They are faithful but not fruitful. Over a period of several years, you can watch this Christian and see no change whatsoever. This isn't anymore pleasing to God than the "lone wolf." In the end, the results are the same. Both lack substantial Spiritual growth, and both are unable to offer lasting Spiritual support to others.

The presence of Spiritual gifts is important, but equally important is the coordination of those gifts into a body that can meet multiple needs. The Holy Ghost puts us together in the body. "But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him." (1 Corinthians 12:18) Then He gives gifts to each individual in the body. "But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal." (1 Corinthians 12:7) He then works through each gifted individual to see that the gifts are used properly. "But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit,

dividing to every man severally as he will.” (1 Corinthians 12:11) This working of the Spirit through individuals is done in a coordinated fashion that makes the whole church more effective. “.But God hath tempered the body together...” (1 Corinthians 12:24b)

The presence of Spiritual gifts and the coordination of those gifts are necessary for the church. It is these gifts that enable the church to do the work she is called to do. We must work in the Spirit and we must work together. Anything less is flesh! Anything less and you aren't the church!

Outreach

Chapter Eight

But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

We could actually cite two other passages where the Great Commission is given to the church (Matthew 28:19, 20; Mark 16:15-18). But this passage in Acts includes a word that must not be overlooked when discussing the characteristics of the church. The word is “shall.”

This passage is familiar to most of us, but let’s put it in context. Jesus has spent some time with His disciples after His own resurrection. Now, it is time for Him to ascend into heaven. He gives His final instructions to His disciples.

These disciples constitute the leadership of the church. In Mark 3:13-20, we find Jesus holding an organizational meeting. We know this because Mark uses the word “ordained”. The word “ordain” means “to invest with the functions or office of a

minister, priest, or rabbi.”¹¹ It is obvious from the use of this word that this was the organizational meeting for the church. So when Jesus spoke to this group of leaders, He was talking with the church leadership.

In talking to them, a sure sign that this message was intended for the church at large, He said, “.ye shall be witnesses...” If you want to look at some other translations to see if the King James scholars got it wrong, then look at the following versions of Acts 1:8:

..yo u WILL be my witnesses... (New International Version)

..you WILL be my witnesses...(New Revised Standard Version)

..you SHALL be My witnesses... (New American Standard Bible)

You WILL be my witnesses...(New Century Version)

Notice anything these versions have in common? They all say the same thing. The point is, Jesus is telling the church that they “*will*” be witnesses for Him. The true church of the Bible “*will*” participate in spreading the Gospel. This is absolutely necessary if we are to qualify as the church.

¹¹ *Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982) p. 1000.

The tragedy is that many modern Christians never tell anyone about Jesus. Many churches have no viable plan of outreach. I feel strongly that if any church is to be a part of the true Church of God of the Bible, then it must participate in spreading the Gospel. We must seek to share the Gospel in some way.

I refer again to Acts 2 because of its simplicity regarding this topic. It says in verse forty-seven,

**And the Lord added to the church daily such as should
be saved.**

It seems almost an after thought for the writer to put this line in the text. It's as if souls getting saved was as natural as drinking water. No fuss is made about what they should've been doing as a church. It is evident that they were winning people to the Lord.

I want to say a few things about winning the lost to Jesus. First, I am no great organizer when it comes to leading people to win souls. I have a pastor's heart, but I am not a good evangelist. Nevertheless, far from using this as an excuse, I feel a weight placed on me to lead my people to use their Spiritual gifts in such a way that souls will come to Christ.

I like to think of the church as a lighthouse rather than an incubator. Certainly, an incubator is an important thing for someone in the early stages of Spiritual growth. But too many churches seem to have an incubator mentality. "Let's hold on to what we have. Let's be careful not to lose anyone." The church must nurture and grow spiritually, but

many churches have nurtured themselves to death. If you can get in, it's more like you have become a member of an exclusive club, not a living body. But unfortunately, the word "exclusive" describes too many of our churches.

There is another problem. Many of the outreach strategies being promoted for churches might be seen as something for large congregations to use, but not small ones. Notice I didn't say these strategies were designed for large churches. I said they might be *seen* as something for large churches to use. Many small churches are suffering from a corporate inferiority complex. They believe they are too small to do anything of value. While this is not always true, the small church mentality may be prevalent and cause a congregation to simply not believe that much growth is possible.

Not every church has to be a super church. Super churches may very well have their place in the Body of Christ. However, so do the small churches. By this I don't mean that small churches should remain small. I mean that they should find their place in the body at large and do what they are called to do. God places each member, and therefore each congregation, in the body so that he or she can complement the overall makeup of the church.

I heard a State Overseer ask a question a few years ago. He asked what difference would it make in your community if your church ceased to exist. That, I think, is a question every church needs to answer. But even in identifying our ministry there has to be a balance. A church in a neighboring town had a reputation for performing a particular charitable work in the community. When that ministry got so large it had to be

taken over by an outside group, the church began to question its own mission. They struggled with a corporate identity crisis.

Our first priority is to worship God. The work must not unconsciously become more important to us than God. But, as we worship God and maintain our schedule of services, we must also make sure that we are in the community and not cut off from it.

My youth director has been called to preach. He also has lead several young people to the Lord. He came to me not too long ago asking about having a revival at the church. After some discussion, we decided that the best way to have a revival where winning souls was the aim might be having the services somewhere in the community. While we want to have people come into the church, we feel that many people might respond better if we go to them. Many times we schedule services and expect people to come to us. But there is a great need to get out in the field.

Jesus told a story that ended with this verse:

And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. (Luke 14:23)

The word Jesus used to describe outreach here is “compel.” Some will take that word and use it to justify strong-arm methods of outreach (that don’t usually work, by the way.) However, I don’t think that is what He meant at all. Rather, He was speaking to the urgency of the situation and the need for His children to become serious about

outreach. He also said “Go out...” We cannot wait for the world to come to us. We must go to them.

One last word about programs and plans seems in order. Plans, programs, and projects are okay. I am not condemning them at all. The problem isn't in the ideas themselves, but in how we use them. I have become a little concerned when we hear someone speak who found a plan that worked in his or her local church, and everyone listening is expected to go home and try this person's idea. We need to hear them, but not so that we can replicate all of their actions. We need to hear them so that we can see some of the results that are possible when a person (or a church) falls on his or her (or their) face before God and pleads for the harvest to be brought in out of the field. Every church has its own set of circumstances and its own personality. What works in one place will not work everywhere. But we serve a God Who knows just exactly what your church needs to do to reach out effectively in your community!

Another reason why many people and churches don't do outreach has to do with something I mentioned in a previous chapter. We are certainly in a busy society, at least in the United States. Daniel 7:25a gives us a picture of what the antichrist will do after the church is raptured away. But it seems also to describe one of the weapons satan is using against the church before the rapture. It says,

**And he shall speak great words against the most High,
and shall “wear out” the saints of the most High...**

Christians are well aware of Jesus' promise to bring rest to those who follow Him. However, we are also aware that we are not immune from the "worn out" feeling that pervades our society. We seem to run to work, run to school, run to after-school activities, run to whatever demands our attention. I want to emphasize that none of this is necessarily sinful by itself. However, just like church attendance and fellowship, outreach often gets relegated to the back burner. We view it as the thing that can be put off or deleted from our list of priorities all together. We are so tired that it is hard to get excited or even serious about evangelism.

If your son or daughter, your husband or wife, or mother or father were known to be in imminent danger, you would stop everything in order to warn them. Well, they are in danger if they don't know Christ. I understand that it isn't quite as simple as leaving the schedule and attending to someone right now. But I also understand that many of us give neither time in prayer nor activity to the salvation of souls we could win to Christ. I am not calling for us to put away our planners and quit our jobs. I am calling for us to reevaluate what is truly important. Let's give time to the things that are of eternal value.

Many Christians are unsure of who they can witness to. I believe that the Holy Ghost will direct our steps to the person or persons who we can reach. Outreach isn't always as simple as witnessing to someone and having him or her pray the sinner's prayer. It is living the life daily. It is being ready to give an answer when we are questioned about why we act differently from the normal person when bad things happen. It is living so that when we share Jesus, people will be interested in listening because they have watched how you live with interest.

We must live a life that causes people to be interested. I struggle with memories of times when I reacted to situations with a less-than-Christ-like spirit. We must be different. I want to spread the Gospel, not hypocrisy. I want to exhibit the ‘Divine nature’ of 2 Peter 1:4.

The church must reach out with the Gospel. The church *will* reach out with the Gospel. If your church aspires to be the modern day expression of the Church of God of the Bible, you have to reach out. Don't get discouraged if people don't respond immediately. Don't get upset if the job looks too big. Only your church can do what your church is called to do. And only a reaching church can be *the* church.

Your Vision

Chapter Nine

I remember growing up and hearing people testify to having a “vision of the church.” I wanted to have a vision of the church. I didn’t really know what this was. But I began to understand that the word “vision” wasn’t being used in the sense of seeing a bright light in the middle of the night. It was rather being used in the sense of having an understanding of something. But even after gaining this insight, I was uneasy about not having had some sort of great understanding revealed to me.

One night I went to the altar and prayed, probably not for the first time, for a vision of the church. During this prayer, I began to focus on the children of Israel being led by Moses. I made a mental connection between them and the church, and got up satisfied that God had given me my vision. But He hadn’t.

I was struggling under two misconceptions. The first was that a vision of the church would come in a flash. The second was that somehow I could have a vision by intellectual activity. In addition to these two misconceptions was a failure to understand that in order to know the church, I needed to know Christ. After all, our vision of Christ is greater than our vision of the church. I am not saying you don’t need a vision of the church. But I wasn’t putting things in their proper order.

I began to grow up emotionally and spiritually. I began to discover things that affected my view of the church. Simply put, I began to learn. Learning is a process. Being somewhat impatient, I often want things to happen *yesterday*. But God has our

lives planned. If we walk closely with Him, we will find His vision being revealed to us when He says we're ready to receive it. God certainly gives us the free will to make the decisions we want to make, but on those occasions when we give that free will back to Him, He surprises us with revelations we never dreamed of.

As I began the learning process, I did not always make the connection between the lesson and the church. However, God has a way of putting things in our hearts, adding other things, then bringing it all out and putting it together in a way that increases our understanding one hundred fold. Over time, God would open my eyes, my spiritual eyes, and help me to see His Word and His way so that my vision of the church would be clearer.

Another thing I learned was that I couldn't receive knowledge of Christ or the church by simply filling my mind with information. I had to have Divine revelation. I like the verse in 2 Peter 1:19, which says,

We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts.

Peter uses the illustration of the day star. The only star we can see in the day with the naked eye is the sun. He also refers to the dawn. The amazing beauty of the sun as it rises is hard to describe. Photographers and artists have sought over and over again to try and capture the

magic of a sunrise, and yet every sunrise seems different. There is nothing like standing in the blackness in the hour just before dawn, and then seeing the sun rise in the distance. It is a revelation. One moment, you can see nothing, then suddenly everything becomes clearer.

Psychologists sometimes refer to an “aha” experience. This happens when something not previously understood suddenly becomes crystal clear. We unexpectedly, perhaps abruptly, know what we have to do. This seems to describe what happens in the Spirit. We have our eyes open to something that we may have been taught a thousand times. We may have read a verse in the Bible over and over again, only to have the Holy Ghost give us the meaning we have missed all our lives.

The point is, it isn't up to me nearly so much as it is up to God. If I am open to hearing His Voice, He will show me the things of the Spirit. But it has to come from Him. Ephesians 4:21 says,

**..If so be that ye have heard Him, and have been
taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus...**

Jesus is our teacher and not just our subject. He opens our eyes.

I always thought Jesus was up in heaven somewhere on a throne. What a revelation it was to finally know what He meant when He said, “*I* am with you alway(s).” (Matthew 28:20) (This isn't the Holy Ghost speaking; it is Christ.)

Finally, I began to learn that my priority has to be Christ. If I will make Him first, he will reveal the church and my place in it to me. He will put me where I need to be.

If you have read this far, this book has not given you a vision of the church. It can't. I can't. You have to hear directly from the Source of wisdom. First Corinthians 1:30 says,

But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, Who of God is made unto us wisdom...

He is wisdom. He gives us knowledge of Himself and His plan.

The key is to not lose Jesus in the church. The church is a place where a lot can happen. A lot of study, meetings, worship, and other things can happen. While these things ought to point to Christ, many times they become an end in themselves. In attempting to be His church, we may actually exclude God from what we think is His house.

Another obstacle to Divine revelation that we must be aware of is found in James 4:6b,

..God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.

One can become proud in the knowledge he or she has gained through learning. Ecclesiastes 12:12b says,

..and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

Learning is good. I believe that education properly approached can be of great value. However, without the Spirit of God at work in our learning, the flesh becomes puffed up. First Corinthians 8:1b says,

Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth.

Knowledge without the Spirit can cause one to become proud of his or her ‘accomplishments.’ But the things of the Spirit cannot be intellectually discovered. They have to be revealed.

Let everyone who has knowledge, and especially knowledge of the Bible, be extremely careful. Knowledge is not a bad thing. But too many Christians have become puffed up due to their understanding of the Word. Many of these people started out well. But they became puffed up since they were, in the words of Paul, ‘Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.’ (2 Timothy 3:7)

I encourage you to begin to seek the Lord. Read what you can on the church. Learn as much as possible. But above all, seek God. His Spirit must move in your inner man. He must open your understanding so that you can receive a true understanding of His church.

I encourage you to seek to understand the Head of the church, Jesus Christ. Without Him, the church cannot be the church. Without an understanding of Him, an understanding of the church is wasted. Indeed, it is impossible. We must know Him if

we are to have any true understanding of the church. It is because of Him that we exist. It is for His glory that we work.

I hope that this book has helped you come closer to seeking God. I want to be in His house. I believe many of you do as well. To be there, we have to find it. To find it, we have to find Him. Let's go home together. A family reunion awaits that is beyond our greatest expectations.

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