

# HOW TO MAKE A CHURCH GROW IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

Churches of Christ are at a moment of unparalleled opportunity in the world, perhaps a second fullness of time; and yet we seem ill prepared to respond. Like the foolish maidens in the parable we find our-selves running for oil! Various solutions are given as to what we should do, and as to why we are not better geared for this moment, none of which appear to be working very well. Some say we need a new method of interpreting the Bible, others seem to suggest that the idea of "Restorationism" was bad to begin with, and yet others indicate a need to fine-tune our worship to bring it into line with popular views.

If your tire is flat, changing the muffler will not fix it! There is a glaring fault that exists within churches generally, a fault that literally paralyzes us! That fault is an over dependency on "full time ministers" on the one hand, and a failure to develop the Biblical concept of the "priesthood of all believers" on the other hand. As a result, in many churches it is clear that members often have no idea that God has called us to be workers in His vineyard and has furnished us with all the talents and abilities required to develop that broad area of ministries needed to penetrate the world with the Gospel of Christ.

By dumping the major part of the load on our local preachers, what should be a ministry to the world has frequently become a ministry to the church. "By making it a ministry of the clergy to the people, then there are two losses: loss of a ministry to all the people (now only to the Church), and a loss of joy, freedom, spontaneity, and variety of Christian ministry." ("Training the Ministry the Church Ought to Have," International Review of Missions, Jan. 1977). The result is that all too often, we practice in reach rather than out reach, we become increasingly building and assembly oriented in our concept of work and faithfulness, our faith seems to be in programs rather than individual member involvement, and we tend to become more centered on defense than on offense.

Some say that we are a small church because we are so faithful to the Lord and His word. Several years ago, a well known preacher from Europe said in a public forum composed of American Christians that in his opinion the church in America is small because we are so unfaithful! His point was that we are basically a non-working church. I believe that all too often he was right.

Given the above, we can hardly claim to be perfect in our practice of the New Testament design for the church. It is clear that the impact we

are having on our nation and the world is not in line with the power of the gospel and with the riches of God's grace. However, the solution is not to cave in to the pressures of a culture dominated by Satan, but rather to go back to the "old paths" (Jeremiah 6:16). The church found in Scripture received all of its spiritual food and direction from the inspired word of God (2 Timothy 3:16-17). For some time I have been praying daily for certain changes prompted by Scripture which would make us a more successful church. I want to share that prayer with you, and encourage you to pray it as well.

I ask God to help us develop a heightened sense of our identity as the bride of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2). This will lead to holy living as we seek to be a chaste bride, and not an adulterous bride. We will see to it that no other love comes before our love for Him, whether it be the love of self, the love of family, the love of material things, or any other love.

I pray that we will become more aware of our identity as the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27). Our connection to the Head means that we listen to Him, that we are directed by Him, and that we do His bidding (Colossians 1:18). It also means that just as each part of our own body works as God intended, so each part of Christ's spiritual body is to fulfill its appropriate function (1 Corinthians 7:7, 1 Peter 4:10-11, Romans 12:6-8). When we have a whole church made up of active body parts, we are promised that the church will grow in love and numerically (Ephesians 4:15-16). The truth is that God has given us talents and abilities which are intended to designate our service in the Body, a service for which we will eventually respond to God (Matthew 25:14-30). Incidentally, there is no way we can pay another person to do the work God expects from each of us personally.

I ask the Lord to help the church dedicate itself to the major issues addressed by Christ. Jesus had a passion for revealing the truth of God, the truth that would set us free ((John 8:32). For this reason, Jesus told Pilate that He came to the world to "to bear witness to the truth" (John 18:37). He had a passion for saving the lost. It was for this He came into the world (Luke 19:10). If God had His way, all would be saved (2 Peter 3:9). Jesus had a passion for helping those who are in need. The rich young ruler was told to sell his goods and give to the poor in order to have treasures in heaven (Matthew 19:21). God taught Israel to aid widows, orphans, and strangers (Deuteronomy 24:19-22). Evangelism and benevolence must be at the center of every church program and of every Christian life. New Testament examples show these initiatives begin at home and reach into all the world (Romans 16:25-27, 2 Corinthians 9:11-13).

I pray for elders who will fulfill their role as shepherds of the flock. In order to do this, they must know their sheep and their sheep must know them (John 10:14-15). This means that time must be spent in contact with the sheep to see that they are spiritually fed, and they are defended from those who would devastate the flock of God (Titus 1:9-11). It is this intimacy which allows biblical shepherds to lead the flock by example (1 Peter 5:2-3). Paul also indicates that part of the elders' duty to the sheep is to help them prepare for their personal ministry to the Lord (Ephesians 4:11-12). This suggests that our vaunted individuality and privacy are at variance with the Biblical teaching about interrelationships within the Body.

I ask the Lord to help us have a greater sense of partnership with Him, and of His empowerment (Ephesians 3:20-21). Only then will what seems a daunting task become possible, planning becomes aggressive, and the work to be done takes precedence over all obstacles. When the work is done, God is given the credit as the prime mover, while Christians consider themselves channels through which the Lord has worked (Acts 14:27).

I plead with God to help us as a church to offer ourselves daily on the altar as living sacrifices for Him. In so doing, it is urgent that we not let ourselves be forced into this world's mold, but rather that our hearts and minds will be conditioned daily by the Word of the Lord in such a manner that they are continuously transformed into the likeness of the emotions and the mind of Christ (Romans 12:1-2).

I seek help for the church in developing a greater desire to give than to receive. This is the prime blessing indicated by Christ (Acts 20:35). There is a revolutionary difference when a church is composed of members more motivated to give than to receive! When members complain that they get nothing out of "going to church," the real problem is usually to be found in our failure to give of our time, abilities, and funds as we should.

I request that God give us hearts that seek to serve rather than to be served. This comes from a conviction that true greatness in the Kingdom comes to those who serve (Matthew 20:25-28). Believers who seek to serve others rather than being served by others will be happier, and will have more inner peace.

I ask the Lord to help us become a church which seeks to give honor rather than receive honor (Romans 12:10). Think how such an attitude would virtually destroy envy and jealousy within our congregations. Think how encouraging we would be to each other, how

the loving bonds of family would be strengthened, and how attractive the church would be to outsiders.

You may wish to add other requests to this prayer list for the church, but I have a final issue about which I pray daily. This one has to do with our worship. All agree that worship should feature offering praise and adoration to our Lord (John 4:23-24, Revelation 19:10). However, Scripture clearly teaches that an important aspect of our assembling to worship consists in lifting up, exhorting and encouraging each other in a spirit of love (1 Corinthians 14:12,26). It is often overlooked that the issue Paul was trying to correct in pointing out errors the Corinthians were making in their observance of the Lord's Supper had to do with their failure to edify and build each other up in their worship (1 Corinthians 11:20-32). I am convinced that abrasive, and sometimes divisive efforts to bring about "worship renewal" would not occur if we approached worship with the intention of building each other up, while doing nothing to tear each other down (1 Corinthians 10:23-24, Romans 14:13-23).

There are many indicators that denominational loyalties are gradually dying, and that people are choosing the church they will attend for other reasons. This may be the very best time to give a reasoned appeal to the world for nondenominational Christianity, for just being the church of the New Testament doing things according to the teaching given by Christ to the Apostles. If the Lord is going to work through us to accomplish this, then we must lead the way by showcasing a brotherhood bound together by love that truly speaks the "oracles of God" (1 Peter 4:11). In addition, a church that is "at ease in Zion" will not be able to do what Christ has charged His Church to do. A major company has advertised that we are in "safe hands" when we do business with them. Can a church with only a small part of the membership working, which sees the church as exiting primarily to fulfill the members' needs, demonstrate to either the Lord or the world that the Great Commission is in "safe hands" with that church? The answer can be found in our record. May the Good Lord help all of us to believe that the above changes will indeed create a successful church in this new millenium, or any other. Join me in praying daily that such will be he case!

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