

## **A Church Should...**

I know what you're thinking, reading the title to this message: "Hey, wait a minute – What makes you qualified to comment about what should happen at a church?" Well, my wife and I have been in situations where we have worked with pastors, plus we spent a long period of time trying to find a church "home," if you will. A lot of that search was spent going to vastly different places, and we have come to one conclusion; today's church (in far too many cases) is in trouble.

I can't tell you how many times my wife and I have been to churches that have fallen for the siren song of packaging the Gospel using the world's methods, or which have been transformed into "Holy Malls;" mere revenue generators where the blessings of God are thought to be directly proportional to the number of people that can be packed into a service... and kick in to the collection plate. Sometimes the results have been (unintentionally) amusing, and others times they have been bizarre enough to prompt us to get up and walk out at once. For the most part, however, the results have simply been boring and the church was nowhere you'd want to get up and go to on a Sunday morning, despite a lot of hard work to be otherwise. And the sad thing is, the people at many of these churches are some of the nicest folk you'd ever want to meet – and some of them know in their hearts that something is wrong, but don't know what to do about it or what to look for if they do try to make changes.

To paraphrase a song by country artist Josh Turner, *I might not know what church is, but I know what it ain't*. I think the reason why we went through this long period of time finding a church home for ourselves is that the Lord Jesus wanted us to observe what's going on. It is my hope to address these problems this year in future messages.

But to establish a kind of "baseline" of sorts, I would like to offer five things that a church should be doing with its members and the outside world at large. From these five principles, I hope to address where the Spirit is saying the church has gotten off the track.

Yes, you're right – that's a bold thing to say. But I'm finding in conversations with other believers that I'm not the only one coming to these conclusions. Many of them are now looking away from and leaving the "established" church – not because of outright, blatant sin (although that's also there, sometimes) but because they're tired of the "dog and pony show" and are finding the true church in the most unlikely locations – in people's homes, in lunchtime meetings with co-workers, in loose confederations of believers who simply do what God says believers are to do.

### **A CHURCH SHOULD BE A PLACE WHERE:**

#### **1. God – not man – is glorified in each and every thing that is done.**

Ultimately, at the end of our lives, a believer wants to hear "Well done, good and faithful servant" from the Lord. So, God is the One who we want to please in our actions, our thoughts and everything else about our lives. This

should be the chief motivation in all church operations, programs and activities. The phrase, *What Would Jesus Do?* should find its ultimate expression not on a wristband, not on cheap junk sold at the church bookstore, but in every church board meeting, and in every action taken by the pastor and the ministerial staff.

## **2. People experience the goodness of God and are brought to His Salvation through Jesus Christ.**

Jesus said, “When I am lifted up, I will draw all men to Me.” and “Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father.” God loves us more than we can possibly imagine, and wants us back to Himself so much that He sent *His* Son to pay the penalty for *our* sins. Ideally, anyone who enters a church should be aware of that love – without having a word said to them – within the first few minutes. Or, if it is expressed verbally, such expression should not be the overture to hit people up for money, or participation in some activity. And that great love should be unhindered in drawing that person to asking Jesus to be their Savior.

## **3. The Kingdom of God changes the world, not the reverse.**

If people are drawn to Jesus by lifting Him up, then church should be a place where people get a taste of the Kingdom of God – as unadulterated as possible, so that people can see just how good the Kingdom is and a desire for it is kindled and encouraged to grow. This does not happen when the Kingdom is packaged in the trappings of the world in a mistaken idea that by making it more palatable to the masses, those masses will not reject it.

Churches accomplish the goal of letting the Kingdom shine through by surrendering control, not to a philosophy, a denomination or a creed, but to God Himself through the Holy Spirit. By letting Him have free reign, not only in the service, but in all church operations, the church opens the door for God to work through them and among them. Miracles and conviction of sin will follow, far more easily than if one tries to *force* such things to occur through human effort, but this takes place on God’s agenda and not our own. I have a genuine problem with people who read the Scriptures and seem to think that God can, somehow, be *manipulated* into action. (Some Biblical scholars think this is what Judas was ultimately trying to accomplish in his betrayal of Jesus – forcing the Lord’s hand, as it were, in order to establish Himself as the Messiah.)

There is a difference between *contrived* piety and genuine worship, and not as many people know the difference like they used to. A good example is found in 1 Corinthians 14, where Paul advises the church at Corinth about spiritual gifts. Some in the church had gotten overly “hung up” (as many of us tend to do today) on the gift of tongues, but Paul recommended that they focus more on the gift of prophecy; building up the latter, you might say, without neglecting the former. You can read the chapter for yourself, but to paraphrase and condense it, Paul tells the church that if an unbeliever comes in during a time when God is moving among believers in worship and His

Presence has free reign, things known only to that person and to God will be revealed, conviction of sin will take place and true worship will be the result as the unbeliever exclaims, "God is really among you!" (Verse 25). Far too many worship services today are mere staged "productions" where the music sounds great (just like the stuff you hear on top 40 radio), the singers perform well and the pastor is entertaining – *but everything is superficial, and there is no spiritual depth to any of the proceedings*. God is also tired of the "dog and pony show," not just because He is misrepresented but because He longs to break through the clutter and be intimate with His people. If you love someone, you want to spend time with them, and God loves us more than we know. The desire for intimacy should be a two-way street, and we are forgetting what it is like to be truly intimate with God. And so, God will sweep away the "razzle-dazzle" and the clutter because they are obstacles getting in the way of people coming to Him.

#### **4. The Bible is the final, ultimate standard for human life.**

Let me ask a basic, straightforward question: Is the Bible the Word of Almighty God or not? If you think not then, frankly, you're wasting your time here. But if you think it is, then everything in church operations – indeed, in the individual person's beliefs – must be measured against that standard.

Remember a comedian by the name of Don Novello? If not, you might know him better by his fictional alter ego, Fr. Guido Sarducci, the "gossip columnist for the Vatican newspaper." In a rather long career, he made several appearances on *Saturday Night Live*; in one, Father Sarducci plugged a fictitious book entitled *Guide to the Confessional*: "Twenty ways you can [mess] around your whole life, and *still* get to Heaven!" Books are now starting to emerge from authors to the left of the political spectrum in pretty much the same vein, only deadly serious; challenging the idea that Christianity is too heavily aligned with conservative social beliefs and declaring that "God is not a Republican." The idea, in few, is that you can be a Christian and still hang on to your particular besetting sin. It's a variation on the idea that we can pick and choose what parts of the Bible we will obey and which we will not; trying to get the blessings and benefits of the Kingdom on *our* terms, and not God's.

These people are correct in one regard: God *is not* a Republican. (I've found that the folks on the right can fall short of the Glory of God in their own ways, often in terms of mercy or compassion.) Neither is He a Democrat. He is not a Libertarian, a member of the Green Party, nor is either conservative or liberal – and I'm pretty sure the fact that He is not a Communist was established long ago. God transcends any of the labels we are so fond of employing, because He is God: "*For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are My ways your ways,*" declares the Lord. (Isaiah 55:8) God raises the standard of ethics, attitudes and behavior because He is Holy, and as our Creator has every right to order such things however He pleases. As such, social movements, political parties, creeds or any enterprise that human beings might undertake, be it large or small – indeed, even our individual lives

– must measure up to the Word of God, because that is the standard by which our lives will be evaluated in the end. As His creation, we are in no position to negotiate with Him; either we obey and live in ways that are pleasing to Him or we do not and take both the immediate and the eternal consequences of our decision. God offers us His mercy through Jesus Christ, but He also still honors free will and will not force Himself upon us.

Furthermore, any body claiming to be called the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of Almighty God, *must* live and die by that same standard and teach others to do the same. The overriding reason we do this is out of love for Him who paid the penalty for our sins with His own life, paying a debt we could never fantasize about repaying. There is, however, a second reason, one which carries a hint of warning to those who might contemplate entering God’s service for any reason other than “following orders,” or wholehearted devotion to Him: *Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.* (James 3:1) In other words, if you claim to know what the Kingdom of God is all about, you have an obligation to *accurately* represent it and not distort it to others... our *Teacher* insists upon it.

**5. Believers are actively taught about the Kingdom of God and how to live it in front of (and present it to) the world.**

A church should be a place of rest in and worship of God and enjoying His Presence (if you ever have been in a service where the Holy Spirit is free to do whatever He likes, you know that there’s a *lot* to enjoy). But a church should also be an academy of the Kingdom of God, learning about His Principles and what gifts the Holy Spirit has for you to use in the service of the Kingdom.

Perhaps just as important, we should be learning about “the competition,” if you will; false religions and cults that are trying to take souls away from God and the distortions and outright lies about they make about God and His Kingdom. We should also learn about other cultures and how to present the Gospel to them, because the mission field is no longer just a hut in some far-away corner of the world – it’s right outside our door. More and more, those cultures are coming to America and we need to know how to address them in a way that the Spirit can break through their preconceptions and get the Gospel into their hearts.

In addition, we need to learn about how to answer the usual arguments made by those who are resistant to the Gospel message. While the Spirit is the one who actually does the drawing of people’s hearts to God, we are also called to “give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” (1 Peter 3:15)

In more and more cases, the messages coming from the pulpits of churches are not “God-minded” or “others-minded” but “*self-minded*,” how to make your own life better by using God (as if God could ever be *used* like a utensil or tool of our own creation). In parable after parable, Jesus told of God’s desire for the lost to be restored to Him, and we need to get the focus back to witnessing and winning the lost, not by our own efforts or by massive

campaigns or projects, but simply by *being* the church, the Body of Christ, Jesus' own hands and feet and voice, living our lives for Him in the full view of others.

The late Christian songwriter Keith Green wrote, *the world is sleeping in the dark that the church just can't fight 'cause it's asleep in the light*. Next month, Lord willing, I hope to address the first of several ways the church has been lulled to sleep over the years... in the hopes it will wake up.

For the Glory of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ  
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