

LET'S STOP TRYING TO BUILD THE CHURCH

CHRIST SAID, "I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH," IS WHAT WE ARE BUILDING TODAY HIS CHURCH?

The word "buildings" is a paradigm of the church and her members. Some examples: Matthew 7:24-27; I Corinthians 3:10-6; Ephesians 2:19-22. Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of *hades* will not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). Notice, the church is his and he is the builder. In the Book of Acts we see how Christ built his church. He empowered with the Spirit a few men he had chosen and through them called out of the existing religious system and the world a great number of people who were being "built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the corner stone." The book of Acts is the record of how Christ, not only started building his church, but how in a few short years it swept across the empire, confronted a pagan culture with the Lordship of Christ, demonstrated to the world a new and living way and made Roman emperors sit up and take notice. He began a movement in the small corner of Palestine and in a little more than thirty years reached Rome. At the heart of this phenomenal growth was the Word of God. Note six phases of the church: Acts: 1:1-6:7: tells of the church at Jerusalem and the preaching of Peter. It finishes with this summary: "*The word of God was increasing, and the number of the disciples in Jerusalem was being greatly multiplied and a large number of priests were becoming obedient to the faith.*" 6:8-0:31: describes the spread of Christianity through Palestine and the martyrdom of Stephen and ends with the summary: "*the church then through all Galilee was having peace, being built up and walking in the fear of the Lord was being multiplied.*" 9:32-12:21: includes the conversion of Paul, the extension of the church to Antioch and the reception of Cornelius, the Gentile, into the church by Peter. Its summary is, "*And the word of God was increasing and being multiplied.*" 12:25-16:5: the extension of the church through Asia Minor and the preaching tour of Galatia. It ends with, "*the churches then were being confirmed in the faith and were abounding more in number daily.*" 16:6-19:20: relates the extension of the church to Europe and the work of Paul in great cities like Corinth and Ephesus. Its summary runs, "*So mightily was the word of God increasing and prevailing.*" 19:21-28:31: the arrival of Paul in Rome and his imprisonment there. It ends with the picture of Paul "*proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness unhindered.*" In a day when the word of God is a scarce commodity, even in many so-called conservative churches where sometimes the Word has little value, it is important to note how many of these sections of Acts ends with a reference to the Word of God. Today's methods may fill church buildings, just as they can fill stadiums for rock concerts, but work done in that way will be the world's work, not the work of Christ.

The early church became the target of persecution because it "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6), threw cities into confusion, and threatened to destroy the economy (Acts 16:21; 17:6). Today's church has turned itself upside down and crawled into bed with a world that has always been upside down. Instead

of being a threat to the world's economy the church is dependent upon it to finance their massive structures and spending programs. Is it any wonder that the church that lets the world determine its music, its method of evangelism and its reason for existence poses no threat to the worldly system? Rock and roll becomes the music of choice to reach the young people, targeted communities becomes the method of reaching a specified and desired clientele for church membership and the reason for existing is to meet the felt needs of a baby boomer generation who has no interest in Scriptural righteousness and holiness. Is this the church Jesus is building? David Wells asked at the end of his book *Losing Our Virtue*: "Is it too much to hope that the church can yet again recover its vision of the its moral seriousness, that it can recover its vision of the holiness of God, its trust in the greatness of His power?" His answer was "we need the faith of the ages, not the reconstruction." The early church became the target of persecution because it "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6), threw cities into confusion, and threatened to destroy the economy (Acts 16:21).

In a few short years the early church had swept across the empire, confronted pagan cultures with the Lordship of Christ, demonstrated to the world a new and living way and made Roman emperors sit up and take notice. How did they do it? They certainly did not do it because they had no problems. In reading the New Testament you will see they encountered every kind of problem known to our modern world. Nor was it that they had no competition. When Christianity came to town, the religious marketplace was already over-crowded with everything from Judaism to Emperor worship with Zeus, Baal, Jupiter, Artemis and the like in between. It wasn't revivals or eloquent preachers that influenced pagan society but everyday Christians doing everyday evangelism. This type of evangelism wasn't an effort to make the pagan feel at home. Rather it was the fact of a way of life that made pagans feel they were missing something. They had something and showed to the world something that was real, the reality of Christ and the gospel. How did they do it? The answer to that question is: They did not try to build the church by their own ingenuity, or by copying the world's method of doing things; they did it by letting Christ build his church by working through dedicated and Biblical-minded people.

However, as always Satan is not going to let the success of God's work go on unchallenged. In a few years after the death of the Apostles things began to change. Although these years brought some severe persecution upon the church and the church endured this and continued faithful until the year of the Roman emperor Constantine (AD 274-337). *A Dictionary of Early Christians Beliefs* states: "Emperors Constantine and Licinius issued the Edict of Milan in 313, giving full legal recognition to Christianity for the first time. Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea (which gave us the doctrine of the trinity) and began the process that eventually led to the full union of church and state."

In his book *Will The Real Heretics Please Stand Up*, Historian David W. Bercot, very distinctively shows the result of this merger, and shows there is little difference in the church today and then. This is a rather long quotation but is worthwhile.

“The wall of the church’s separation from the world was soon demolished. The church was like a young naïve girl who had been suddenly swept off her feet by a rival suitor. The world wanted to be friends with the church, and the church saw no harm in reciprocating. Preference was given to Christians in appointments to state offices. However, the world’s friendship utterly gutted the church. As Constantine began passing laws to “Christianize” Roman society, the distinction between Christians and non-Christians became blurred. In the past, there had been little to attract anyone to the church other than a genuine faith in God. Fair-weather converts were ferreted out as soon as it became time to carry their crosses. Unregenerate persons in the church were a small minority. But now that Christianity was socially rewarding, people began flocking into the church in hordes. Already spiritually weak, the church was simply unable to assimilate such a large mass of new ‘converts.’ Before long the name ‘Christian’ became a meaningless description. It merely indicated that a person gave mental assent to a particular creed and that he had partaken of various Christian rites, such as baptism. It no longer meant he had a change life.

“One immediate effect of the church’s friendship with the world was that it began adopting the world’s methods. This was inevitable, because the world cannot do things God’s way. To do things God’s way requires God’s power. And mobs of unregenerated people using the name ‘Christian’ don’t have God’s power. Nor do they even want to do things God’s way, since God’s way requires patience, willingness to suffer, and absolute trust in Him. The character of Christianity had changed.

“Originally, Christians had held their services in private homes (Rom. 16:5). As congregations grew, they converted houses into meeting places, calling them ‘Prayer houses.’ No one was attracted to the church by the architecture of its buildings, rather by the godly lives of the people in the church. However, Constantine reasoned that many people would be attracted to Christianity if the church buildings were impressive. So, at state expense, he constructed lavish buildings that rivaled the magnificence of pagan temples. The new church buildings were arrayed with impressive colonnades and vaulted ceilings. Many of them had beautiful fountains and elegant marble floors. Constantine wanted it to be difficult for an unbeliever to walk past a church building without being tempted to peer inside because of its architecture. His idea worked splendidly. Pagans were attracted to the magnificent church buildings and thousands of them were ‘converted’ as a result.” Sound familiar?

The book of Hebrews states: “...the builder of the house has more honor than the house...Christ was faithful as a son over his house, whose house we are...” (Heb 3:3, 6). The Apostle Paul called those responding to the prophesy of Isaiah that Jesus “came and preached peace,” a “building” that was being “fitted together into and was growing into a holy temple of the Lord in whom God was to dwell in the Spirit” (Eph. 2:17-22). These people were called “the house of the Lord” (I Tim. 3:15), showing that God, by His Spirit, had entered his holy temple and was present with His people. This means it is first and foremost by preaching that Jesus builds his church (I Cor. 1:21). The early church preaching is quite a contrast with the preaching today. They were guided by the Holy Spirit and proclaimed to the world

the reality of spiritual things. They knew they were collaborating with the Holy Spirit. They never used their skills to perform mass psychotherapy. They told no death bed tales, no awesome stories to play upon man’s conscience. They shed no self-righteous tears of pity and engaged in no evangelistic brain-washing and trumped-up emotional conversions as we see today. Their method was to present plainly, forcefully yet passionately the great message of the cross, the resurrection, and the living power of the Christ. They did this in the simplest manner possible: “they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word.” There was nothing more important to these early Christians than the proclamation of this great good news.

We need to read again the book of Acts without asking ourselves how our publishing house literature, or our favorite Christian author interprets it. As we read this short history of the church, we are struck with the one great fact modern Christianity has neglected: the fact that Jesus Christ was real to them. Real in every sense of the word. He was not someone their preachers talked about on Sunday morning, he was someone they all talked with each day. They did not go to church in order to prepare to meet him, they had already met him and walked with him in the fellowship of one another, and ate with him in the fellowship of the breaking of bread and listened to him in the fellowship of the Apostles doctrine. Religion was not a part of life it was life. Christ was alive, but not just alive, he was present with them. Is it any wonder that fear came upon every soul of those who were beholding such things? The world does not fear that which is dead or asleep. One pigmy awake is stronger than a giant asleep. But here we see a wide-awake giant. We see a people with a message and a mission. with which God had visited them.

The Apostles had no time to take a stand on government issues, and the social gospel was unknown to them. Jesus had commissioned them to stand in a world full of chaos and confusion and witness of their hope in the resurrection and a better life to be found in the fellowship of Jesus Christ. The church should and must be involved in the great questions of morality that confronts each of us in this modern world, but this does not mean that the church is to minimize and neglect its one great mission of witnessing of the Christ, in order to influence a society that refuses to recognize any authority other than the authority of mammon. The answer to the ills of this nation does not lie in the legislative acts of Congress, nor in the legal acts of the Supreme Court, rather the answer to the ills of society is found in the application of the principles of the Acts of the Apostles. They fulfilled this mission by what the Greeks of their age termed “the foolishness of preaching.” They had a message to proclaim, and what a message it was! The message that in the name of Jesus Christ, God was granting the forgiveness of sins. Their message was Christ...the fact that He lives and reigns. The fact that He is real, and His message is true. This was first proclaimed by Peter and the Apostles on the day of Pentecost and since that memorable day it has changed the course of the whole world and led a church triumphant through the most terrible times imaginable to man. It is this message, given to and first proclaimed by these fishermen of Galilee, that is destined to fulfill the grand and glorious purpose of the church Christ is building. And there is no political, social or economic revolution that will keep it from fulfilling this Divine intent. Sadly to say many times this is not the message we hear from today’s pulpits.

In spite of Satanic opposition, false teaching and neglect of the Scriptures, Christ continues to build his church.