

Study 10— The Church — Part 2

Jesus said. “I will build MY Church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matthew 16v18). In looking at the believers of the first century we are able to see how He built His Church.

The New Testament (in Acts 2v42–47) gives a practical picture of the Church living and functioning according to God’s plan and purpose. The main emphases in this passage, which should characterise every local Church and are indicative of a healthy Church, were:

1. Worship

“They devoted themselves ... to breaking of bread and to prayer” (v42) and “Praising God” (v 47). There wasn’t a formal set system of worship, but they depended on the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 14v26–40). Prayer was a priority.

2. Service

“Selling their possessions and goods they gave to anyone as he had need” (v45). The early Christians were sacrificial givers (cf 2 Corinthians 8v2–4) both to the leaders of the local group (1 Timothy 5v17–18) and also to the poor and needy (Acts 4v32–37; 9v36). They gave goods and money and it would have been at least as much as required under the Mosaic Law (Deuteronomy 14v22) i.e. a tithe (a tenth) of one’s income. They also gave offerings as prompted by the Lord (2 Corinthians 8&9). In principle today the tithe is put into the “storehouse’ (Malachi 3v10) — that is, the local church where you receive your teaching and fellowship. However gifts and offerings may also be given to societies or individuals. Finance has always been an area where Satan can gain a foothold in the life of a person (John 12v4–6) or a Church (Acts 5v1–11).

3. Outreach

“and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (v47). They took the words of Jesus in Matthew 28v19 and Acts 1v8 seriously. Not only did their disciplined, Christ-centred life attract the non-Christian but their clear presentation of the Gospel led to rapid growth (Acts 2v41; 4v4,21). To maximize the opportunities:

- a) they encouraged all Christians to share Christ (cf. Acts 8 & 16)
- b) They recognised gifts in the church – apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers and pastors
- c) they appointed leaders in the church

d) they were fearless and tireless in their preaching and teaching (Acts 20v26; 2 Corinthians 6v3–13; Ephesians 6v20).

Wherever the early Christians went the Word of God increased (Acts 5v14) and the number of disciples grew (Acts 6v7), largely because of the signs that followed. The lame and sick were healed (Acts 3v2–10; 8v7) and the dead were raised (Acts 9v36–41) — just as Jesus had promised (Mark 16v17, John 14v12). Indeed, within a generation the early church had ‘turned the world upside down’ (Acts 17v6 R.SV).

4. Fellowship

“They devoted themselves to the fellowship” (v42); “every day they continued to meet together in the Temple Courts” (v46); “they broke bread together with glad and sincere hearts” (v46). Fellowship was expressed in many ways:

a) Meeting together in homes

- to share their experience of the Lord (Acts 14v27)
- to pray together (Acts 2v42 cf. Acts 12v12; 10v9)
- to follow up enquirers (Acts 18v26)

b) Hospitality

This was widely practiced among the early Christians (Acts 10v23; Titus 1v8) and regularly encouraged (Romans 12v13; 1 Peter 4v9); sometimes with surprising results! (Hebrews 13v2)

c) Teaching

“They devoted themselves to the Apostles teaching” (v42). The Christians needed to know what they believed but this teaching was not merely intellectual but also spiritual. Remember many of the teachers themselves were regarded as “unschooled, ordinary men” (Acts 4v13). God’s approval comes when “we correctly handle the Word of Truth” (2 Timothy 2v15), and become “thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3v17) so that we are able to give the reason for the hope that we have (1 Peter 3v15).

Structures in the church

As this teaching was put into practice so discipline was incorporated in the life of the believers and the Church. For example:

a) The Family

The family is seen as a microcosm of the Church (cf. Ephesians 5v22) and the responsibilities for husbands and wives as well as those for parents and children are clearly laid down (Ephesians 5v21–6v4). The disciplined home is essential not only for potential leaders of the local Church (1 Timothy 3v4,5; 3v15) but also to show the reality of the Christian life. In these permissive days, a well-ordered family with Jesus as the Head is bound to stand out in a country of broken marriages and undisciplined children.

b) Church leadership

The local Church had men appointed to be overseers (or elders) of the flock of God (Acts 14v23; 20v28; Titus 1v5). They also selected deacons who were to attend to the more practical matters (Acts 6v1–6; cf. 1 Timothy 3v8–10). It is essential that members of a committed church are submitted to each other and to the leaders because the more committed a church is, the more discipline becomes important (cf. Matthew 18v15–17; Colossians 3 v 16; 1 Thessalonians 5v11; 2 Thessalonians 3v15). The personal life of the Christian and the corporate life of the Church must be decent and in order (cf. 1 Corinthians 11v32; 14v40).

QUESTIONS

1. Why did the early Church grow so effectively? (Matthew 16v18)
2. How do we best see God's plan and purpose for the Church?
3. What were the main characteristics of the early Church?
 - a)
 - b)
 - c)
 - d)
 - e)
4. What emphasis was put upon the teaching?
5. What did 'fellowship' mean for the early Christians?
 - a)
 - b)
 - c)
6. What does 'fellowship' mean for the average churchgoer today?
7. Why is discipline important:
 - a) in the Home?
 - b) in the Church'?
8. Why did the early Church grow rapidly?
 - a)
 - b)
 - c)
9. What effect did the 'signs following' have on the early Church?
10. In what ways could your Church become more like the church described in Acts 2:42-47?

FURTHER STUDY

1. Do a study on Christian giving — Its method and motive
2. Study the life of Stephen (Acts 6&7) or Philip (Acts 6&8)