

"BUILDING A CHURCH"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

The rest of the world must surely marvel at the nature of religion in America. For example, you may have read in the papers sometime back about the newly-formed Positive Impact Church in South Centre, Pennsylvania. According to Associate Press releases, this church advertised a raffle. Two thousand people signed up, but apparently didn't take the time to read the fine print. They had to attend services to be eligible to win the \$ 1,000 prize. Only about 30 people showed up that Sunday morning.

"Where are all the people?" asked George Lane, the minister, after an hour of religious songs and humor-filled talks in a school cafeteria. "It's kind of embarrassing" said Lane. He was hoping to get about a thousand dollars in contributions. He got only about \$ 100.00. A woman who was present won the thousand dollars, but told Lane to keep the money for his ministry. Despite the low turnout, Lane said he's going to keep trying to attract people to the church. He says his next drawing will be for an eleven hundred dollar shopping spree.

DEVELOPMENT

Or, how about this one. There's a church in San Francisco called the Saint John Coltrane African Orthodox Church. John Coltrane was one of this country's most talented and respected jazz saxophonists. Sadly, he died in 1967 at the age of 40. But some people believe that his spirit is alive and well at that Church. One of his fans founded the Church where weekly services feature a blend of worship and jazz. Coltrane is immortalized in a mural on the church wall that depicts him as a "haloed", white robed Saint playing a blazing saxophone. The Church is a popular tourist site in San Francisco and one of the church elders has claimed,

"Sometimes folks come in here and the music's so loud it just scares the devil out of them..!"

And did you know that down in Columbia, South Carolina, there's a Richard M. Nixon Church, a congregation that blends Baptist and Quaker doctrine. The pastor claims that the inspiration to name the Church for the former president came during a prayer. He told the reporters the Church would be the largest in the South by the year 2010!

How do you go about building a Church? Perhaps a raffle will help to get it going. Or, perhaps dedicating the church to a dead jazz idol or an ex-president will work, but studying the Book of Acts gives us a more profound plan.

SHARED PURPOSE

Three outstanding characteristics marked the church of Jesus Christ after His resurrection. The first is that His followers had a shared purpose. There was an amazing unity in their fellowship.

In the Bible, there are 12 mentions of the Greek word, "Homothymadon". And eleven of those instances occur in the Book of Acts. "Homothymadon" can be translated "harmony", but it really means more than that. It connotes a shared spirit, a meeting of minds and hearts, a unity of purpose. Those are the things that drew the early believers together to pray in the "upper room". They are still the most necessary elements of worship and fellowship in the Church. There is no limit to what a group of people can get done for Christ when they have this shared purpose.

David Bissell was pastoring a church in Indiana a few years ago. His five year old son was puttering around in the garage pounding nails and pulling nails out of a board. His father was busy doing something in the garage. A while later David told his son he would have to go over to the church next door for a board meeting and that he would have to stop pounding the nails.

David said he noticed the wheels turning in his son's bright little head. And then suddenly his son asked,

"Daddy...do you use that hammer on the church board? "Needless to say" says David Bissell, "When I shared that story with the members of the church board, they all had a good laugh".

I know there are church boards and pastors who would like to drive some nails into another, but how much better it is when people share a common purpose. As I reflect back across the years here, I feel richly blessed that we have always had that feeling of a shared purpose and let that be the pattern in the coming days and years. A shared purpose!

Dr. Lloyd J. Ogilvie, in writing on the passage we read early from the Book of Acts, ponders how a spirit of unity could have come upon such a diverse and disparate group as was in the upper room at that time. There were rich people and poor people. There were women. There were people who had been brought out of unclean life-styles.

One disciple, Thomas, had even doubted the Lord! And Peter had denied Him. James and John were there...remember how they had been trying to gain favor with Jesus over the other disciples. Under any normal circumstances, these people from all walks of life would never have met, much less hang out with each other. Nicodemus was was, the Pharisee who had asked Jesus about being "born again". So how did they overlook all of their obvious differences? What inspired them to come together and to pay "in one accord" (as it says). It could only have been their shared love for Jesus, says Lloyd Ogilvie, that brought ~~them~~

It was their love for Jesus that gave them that unity and of that I am sure. And also I am sure of this. We need that kind of love for Jesus and for one another in our churches. On a scale of one to ten, I'd say we are at about a "7"...edging up to "8". There's room for improvement. And in addition to this kind of love for each other, we need to cultivate it for our world - the world for which Christ died! A shared purpose helped to make the early church strong.

CENTERED IN PRAYER

It was also made strong because it was "centered" in prayer. We read in chapter one of Acts,

"Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called The Mount of Olives, a Sabbath's day walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James, the Son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas, son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus and with His brothers...."

We simply cannot overstate the early church's commitment to prayer.

After a church service, a woman stormed up to the minister. "Pastor" she cried, "I pray every day and God never gives me what I ask for!" The minister patted her hand and said, "Perhaps, sister, you need to think beyond yourself. Start praying for other people instead". And with that, she said, "I'll try to do that". Well...while she was driving home from church, she prayed,

"Lord, bless our next door neighbors, the Andersons. Give them a millionaire living next door".

That's a kind of prayer, I guess..... It reminds me of someone else's prayer that goes like this:

"Lord, help me to relax about insignificant details, beginning tomorrow at 7:41 and 23 seconds, AM...PST. And Lord, help me to consider the feelings of other people, even if ~~most of them~~ are hypersensitive. And Lord, keep me open to the ideas that others have, wrong though they may be. God help me to take responsibility for my own actions, even though they're usually not my fault. God, give me patience, and I mean right now! And my favorite...God, help me to finish everything I sta..."

The early Church relied on prayer. They had a whole empire arrayed against them. Organized religion was against them. They were climbing a mountain that seemed impossible to climb. If God did not help them, then who on earth would? But God did help them and the rest, they say, is HISTORY!

There was a devotional in the magazine, Our Daily Bread, for June a year ago that happened to catch my attention. It hit home.... The author writes,

"I needed to make a phone call to my Insurance Company. It's a good thing I started early! First, came the busy signals...for the entire day. Next came a recorded message followed by music, occasionally interrupted by a voice that said, 'Our lives are still busy. Please hold for the first available person to assist you, or hang up and try again.'

Finally, I got through! But this led to a complicated set of instructions. For policy information, PRESS ONE. For new coverage, PRESS TWO. To make a claim, PRESS THREE. To talk to an agent, PRESS FOUR. I chose the last option. A recording said he was out of the office and told me to press the POUND KEY. The same voice repeated the same options. I hung up.

About the same time, I had an urgent need to talk with the Lord. I didn't get a busy signal, nor was I put on hold. I knew that God was listening and that He cared deeply for me. We don't always get immediate answers to our prayers, but because of the wonderful prayer promises in the Bible, we know that we are heard!"

"In Psalm 34, David reviewed his prayers and the Lord answers. Then he said, 'The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and His ears are open to their cry'. Thank God that there is no such thing as a prayer run-around."

A SHARED PASSION Yes...we can thank God for that. The early Church gained its strength from a shared purpose and from being firmly centered in prayer. But there was one more thing. They also gained their strength from a shared passion.

We would not have the church today if they were only unified. There have been other organizations that were unified, but they did not turn the world upside down. There have been groups of people who have been very faithful in their prayer life, but their impact has been minimal. We need a shared purpose and we need to be centered in prayer, but there's one more thing we need if we are going to be the Church that Christ is calling us to be. And that is what I call selfless passion.

During the tour of France, the German poet, Heinrich Heine and his friend visited the great Cathedral of Amiens. As they stood in admiration before the Church, the friend said:

"Tell me, Heinrich, why can't people build like this anymore?" The poet is said to have replied, "Friend, in those days people had convictions. We moderns have opinions. It takes more than opinions to build Gothic cathedrals". I like that....

Those early followers of our Lord were passionate about their service to Him and to the world for which He gave His life. Not many of us have that kind of passion. Oh, we might be passionate about our work. We might even be that passionate about a leisure activity or some sport, but it is rare, is it not, when people feel that way about their faith.

Oh, you and I often encounter people who are quite passionate about many things now-a-days, but rarely passionate about their faith claims. That which really should be at the center of their lives is now peripheral. One wonders... how can we ever expect to build a church with people who are more excited about a job or a sport or a style of dress than they are about the Kingdom of God?

The single minded dedication of those early followers of our Lord remind me of those ads that newspapers carried for the Pony Express riders back in 1860. Remember how they went:

"WANTED: young, skinny, wiry fellows - not over 18.
Must be expert riders, willing to risk death daily.
Orphans preferred."

As you reflect on the great history of the Christian Church...the Christian enterprise, it's really no wonder that those early Christians triumphed over the powerful Roman Empire. Unified by a shared purpose. Centered constantly in prayer. Driven by a selfless passion. Who could ever stop such men and women. That's how you build a mighty Church of God. They couldn't be stopped then and they cannot be stopped now!

A closing word. Think on these things as we prepare to celebrate Pentecost next Sunday, with our Resident Bishop present to lead us. Pentecost - the Birthday of the Christian Church. One of the three great days - along with Christmas and Easter...add Pentecost. Come and be with us. Plan to stay, too, for the memorial service that will celebrate one of the great laymen of the Church of our time- Paul R. Russell. That's scheduled for one o'clock. Talk about purpose and prayer and passion. He made a difference. He gave us much for which to be thankful, and Jesus reminds us:

"To whom much is given, much also is expected!"

PRAYER