

"BUILDING A CHURCH"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
May 16, 1999

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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 newspapers sometime back about the newly formed Positive Impact Church in South Centre, Pennsylvania. According to the Associated Press, this church advertised a raffle. Two thousand people signed up, but apparently they didn't take the time to read the fine print. They had to attend Sunday services to be eligible to win the one thousand dollar prize. Only about 30 people showed up.

"Where are all the people?" asked the minister, George Lane, after an hour of religious songs and a humor-filled sermon in a school cafeteria. "It's kind of embarrassing" said Lane. He was hoping to get about a thousand dollars in contributions. He got about one hundred dollars. 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 a eleven hundred dollar shopping spree.

### DEVELOPMENT

Or how about this one? There's a church in San Francisco called the Sain 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 serves 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 says or calims,

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

And did you know that in Columbia, South Carolina, there's a Richard M. Nixon Church, a congregation that blends Baptist and Quaker doctrines? The pastor, Rev. Noel Vande Grift, said the inspiration to name the church after 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 work. 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.

### A SHARED PURPOSE

Three outstanding characteristics marked the church of Jesus Christ after His resurrection and ascension. 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". Eleven of those instances occur in the Book of Acts. "Homothymadon" can be translated "harmony", but it means more than that. It connotes a shared spirit, a meeting of minds and hearts, a unity of purpose. These are the things that drew the 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 do when they have a shared purpose.

David Bissell was pastoring a church in Indiana a few years ago. His oldest son was four years old at the time. David was puttering around in the garage and his son was busy pounding nails and pulling nails out of a board. A while later David told his son that he had to go next door to a church board meeting and that he would have to stop pounding the nails.

David said he noticed the wheels turning in his son's 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 board members, we all had a good laugh".

Well, I'm certain there are church boards and pastors who would like to drive nails into one another, but how much better it is when people share a common purpose. As I reflect on my ministry here, I feel blessed that we have always had that feeling of a shared purpose, a shared ministry. Let that be the pattern in the coming days and years.

Dr. Lloyd J. Ogilvie, in writing on the passage we read from the Books of Acts, ponders how a spirit of unity could have come upon such a disparate group as was in the upper room at that time. There were rich people and poor people there. There were women. There were people who had been brought out of unclean lifestyles. One disciples, Thomas, had doubted the Lord. Peter had denied him. Maybe Nicodemus was there, the Pharisee who had asked Jesus about being born again. James and John were there. Remember how they had been ailing 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 hung with one another. So how did they overlook all their obvious differences? What inspired them to come together and to pray "in one accord" (as it says)? It could only have been their shared love for Jesus, says Olgivie, that brought unity out of such disparity.

It was their love for Jesus that gave them unity. Of that I am sure. And also of this. We need that kind of love for Jesus and one another in this church. On a scale of one to ten, I'd say we're about 7...edging up to 8. We also need that kind of love for the world for which Christ died. The early church was made strong, first of all, by a shared purpose.

#### CENTERED IN PRAYER

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

"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, 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, the woman said, "I'll try that".

While she was driving home from church she prayed,

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

Well, 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 start...."

Friends, 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, as we say, is HISTORY!

There was a devotional in the magazine, Our Daily Bread, for June 5th, a year ago that caught my attention. 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 lines 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."

It's no wonder they triumphed over the mighty Roman Empire. That's how you build a mighty church of God. Unified by a shared purpose. Centered in constant prayer. Driven by a selfless passion. Really...who could stop such men and women? No one could. They couldn't be stopped then and they cannot be stopped now. Think on these things as we praper to celebrate Pentecost next Sunday, with the Bishop present. The ~~Birthday~~ Birthday of the Christian Church. Come, be with us. Plan to stay, too, to celebrate in the memorial service for a layman, one of your own - Paul Russell - who 50 years ago came to this church, saw an opportunity for service and without his contributions, the church wouldn't be here today.