

New Testament Churches

Their Strengths And Weaknesses

By
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STUDYING NEW TESTAMENT CHURCHES
by Carl McMurray

Spiritual “equipment” for the contest of life.



Introduction

IT IS IN THE INTEREST of extending and strengthening the borders of God's kingdom that this material is presented. It began as a series of sermons designed to compare our congregations today with the congregations of God's people operating under the direct guidance of apostles and prophets in the first century. In that process of comparison one thing became all too clear to this author—it only takes one or two generations for any people to develop their own set of traditions and settle into them. Once those practices or scriptural interpretations become accepted it becomes an extremely difficult thing to change. I have observed brethren engaged in practices and decisions which they were unable to defend scripturally, demanding specific scriptural authority from others (almost at the point of anger, I might add) over differences in expedients and matters of judgment. Such inconsistency betrays a desire to walk by familiar traditions rather than in the knowledge of God's word concerning the pattern for faith and doctrine that has been given by the Holy Spirit.

There may be some things presented in the material that fly in the face of some preaching that is going on today. Certainly it contradicts the statements of some preachers and the guidance of some elders that this writer has talked with. Knowing that, I am confident that it will challenge the traditional viewpoints of many. The intent of the material, however, is not so much to fight with tradition as it is to present the activities of the early church so that we might learn from their mistakes and follow in those areas in which they were divinely guided. Walking that path, no matter how difficult it may seem, we can do no less than be improved and perfected in our service to our Lord. For the child of God, "restoration of the New Testament church" cannot be a movement of the past century as much as it is a continual attitude of heart. The one who believes he has "arrived," has all knowledge, and whose practices are all correct and without need

of review and examination needs to heed the Spirit's admonition in 1 Corinthians 10:12 and 8:1-2. Some seem to feel that "their" interpretations, "their" practices, "their" judgment calls, even "their" versions of the Scripture are "the" right ones and any others are to be denied. I deny that attitude! This material is offered not only to help in one's study, but to be examined and corrected if God's word has been misrepresented.

Do not stop studying. Do not stop growing. Keep your mind open to different aspects of the passages that you are considering. If the restoration fathers had refused to consider the Scriptures as they spoke, and instead, had just kept repeating what their fathers had taught them, we would be members of some denomination today instead of the Lord's church. If the next two generations of Bible students after them had stopped with what these giants of the restoration movement taught, we would be teaching millennialism and supporting missionary societies just as Campbell and others did. We are here to teach the traditions of the apostles, not the church fathers. We are to look to the first century for our pattern, not the generations preceding us. It may be more difficult to accept simply what the Scripture says rather than the interpretation that we have grown up with and gotten used to hearing, but in the end, the "pure milk of the word" will do us good and we will be glad we learned it.

Please let me commend the student "to God and the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those that are sanctified" (Acts 20:32). May God grant us all courage and wisdom as we study His glorious church.

Carl (Mac) McMurray

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Lesson 1

THE CHURCH AT JERUSALEM

A powerful beginning

THIS CITY IS THE LOCATION of many of David's songs, Hezekiah's prayers, and Jeremiah's weeping. Here has been the shouting of Babylonian soldiers as well as the wailing and crying of Israel's children going into captivity. Here also was heard the rejoicing and open prayers of Jews returning to their land, the ringing voice of Ezra as the law was read publicly, and the sound of building as altar, temple, and city walls were rebuilt. Here is where you would have heard the rebuke of the prophets and the shouting protests of the Maccabees. Here would have been heard the shouting of the sick, blind, and lame as they cried out for alms or for Jesus to notice and heal them. And one night in these streets would have been heard the quiet voice of the Master, after midnight, echoing back from the stones, while on the way to the garden to be betrayed. From the measured tramp of a Roman battalion to the dedicated footsteps of every prophet that ever "went up to the temple," has any place on earth ever seen the history that Jerusalem has?

And when one speaks of "history" the establishment of God's spiritual kingdom must be THE pivotal point in the record of mankind. Since the beginning days in Eden and man's spiritually fatal introduction to Satan, history has pointed forward toward this center point in time. This is fully demonstrated by an examination of Isaiah 2:1-4; Daniel 2:44; Joel 2:28-32; and Zechariah 6:12-15. On the other side of this bookmark, since the day that the apostles were forced to flee Jerusalem because of increasing persecution, Christians have been looking back to this point. When church growth is considered, there appears more

power, more zeal, more change, and activity here than with any other church in the New Testament. This church is “the original” pattern for the church of our Lord.

I. The Time, Those That Heard, and What They Heard

The time of the kingdom was Pentecost, fifty days after Passover. This day was figured annually by counting from the first Sabbath after Passover, seven Sabbaths plus one day. Therefore, this day was always the day after the Sabbath, the first day of the week. This was the best attended of all Jewish feast days. It would have been a cosmopolitan assembly. In fact, Acts 2:5 says there were people there from “every nation under heaven.” Since this was a Jewish feast day, we can hardly understand this as meaning less than “every nation under heaven where the Jews had migrated.” Knowing how they had established colonies in every major city in the Mediterranean basin and even far beyond, this is not small statement, however. It was the day of first fruits ... a fitting day for the first fruits of the gospel to be brought forth to God.

The Scriptures refer to this audience that gathered here at this time as “devout.” They were believers in Jehovah. That is why they had traveled such great distances to be present. They were respectful of His will. One of the topics of conversation at this time would surely have been the recent appearance and subsequent crucifixion of one claiming to be the Messiah. Luke 23:48 records that “multitudes” were witness to Jesus on the cross. Matthew 27:52-53 adds that “many” of the saints came out of their tombs at His death and entered the city to testify. Do you think those that saw and heard their dead had so quickly forgotten? “Many” is the number of women that were present and impressed at His death, as well as probably seeing a Roman Centurion beat his breast and make the good confession. 1 Corinthians 15:6 tells us that at least 500 at one time had seen Him alive in the past few weeks, while 120 of His believers were gathered together waiting in this city. Jesus Christ would literally have been the talk of the town.

The preaching that those devout followers of the Old Covenant heard that day, recorded for us in Acts 2, was of Christ. They heard of His life (22), His death (23), and His exaltation (32-33). They heard that He was now beyond the carpenter/teacher Jesus. He was the Lord/Messiah Jesus (36) and the Savior (37-40). When the powerful plan of God is revealed to men who have their hearts prepared, great things can happen. And they did here on the day.

The preaching didn't stop when the sun went down in Jerusalem that day, however. It didn't stop when 3,000 received it and were baptized in faith. In the early verses of chapter two, the preaching was to a gathered crowd. However, by verse 42 the new Christians are "continually devoting" themselves to the apostles' teaching. It is going on and being received regularly and consistently. We are probably covering some number of weeks in these verses. And it doesn't stop here. In Acts 3:11, they are at the temple. Chapter 4:1-21 records the arrest of Peter and John and still the preaching doesn't stop. In fact, by 4:29 the Christians have gathered and are praying, not for trouble to cease, but for boldness to keep on speaking. By chapter 5:17-40, the arrests have begun; however, verse 42 assures us that the preaching went on, privately and publicly.

Acts 6 records some of the problems that are going to naturally occur when a church grows. Verses 1-7 speak of internal strife that we might describe today as racial or cultural. Verse 9 begins an account that goes through the next couple of chapters and describes external problems that could have paralyzed any less a group of believers. It did not paralyze this group, however, even when the largest group of these believers and their leadership had to flee the city because of the persecution. Even then, we are told they went everywhere "preaching." This surely must be the most basic and powerful tool that God has given His church. Preaching, teaching, and otherwise sowing the seed of the kingdom is our first and greatest duty. The good news of Jesus Christ and redemption

in His name deserves to be told. This began the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies from Isaiah 2:1-3. The word of the Lord and the Law were going forth from Zion/Jerusalem.

II. The Congregation

They were steadfast (Acts 2:42 KJV). The NEW AMERICAN STANDARD VERSION uses the term "continually devoting," but no matter what term is used, this trait needs to be seen in our congregations today. What they were "devoted" to is listed as the "apostles' teaching." What do you think being committed to teaching would involve? It would certainly involve meeting together to hear and learn, since there were no "Bibles" to take home and place on the bookshelf. Perhaps discussion among themselves would be common, as to this new teaching and how to apply it. Meditation on the things they were learning, reminding one another as they went through their day, and maybe even questions in their assemblies and of one another. It would not be something that they heard for an hour or so on the first day and then forgot until next week. They were also devoted to the breaking of bread, which most commentators understand in this verse to be eating the Lord's Supper. This is in contrast with the same term later in the chapter that seems to speak of eating common meals together in separate homes. They were "devoted" to prayer, and we see it as they turned to this communication at almost every deciding moment: when threatened, questioning, thankful, praising, or even dying. We cannot overemphasize the need for this same devotion today and perhaps even some encouragement toward the passionate model prayers of our Savior (Hebrews 5:7). They were also "steadfast" in their "fellowship." This term means a sharing together, in the New Testament, and is always used of partnership in some work for the Lord. It is never used in the way we so often apply it today, i.e., of meals/recreation together. Their devotion to fellowship probably included singing together or giving of their means into a common pool that the

needs of less fortunate brethren might be seen to. Other passages tell us these things were happening. It might also include works in the city that we have no knowledge of, where they gave support or encouragement to more timid brethren, or fell together into teams that took the apostles' teaching into homes or market places.

Notice that they were NOT "devoted" or "steadfast" in tongue, desire, or intent. They were steadfast in ACTIVITY. 1 Corinthians 15:58 confirms that the reward is for steadfast WORK. James 1:25 tells us that the blessing is not upon the hearer, but the DOER. They were working at sharing the gospel with others, sharing their material blessings, a daily serving of food for some, daily teaching and preaching both private and public. They were working and the church grew with God's blessing.

They were united, not just meeting together. There is a serious difference. They were not just together for a few hours a week. They were together in fellowship, in partnership in this endeavor, and in the spiritual work of the kingdom and how to encourage and support it (Acts 2:42). They were together in love, watching out for and caring for the needs of one another (2:44-45). They were together in association, spending time with one another in a glad and sincere way (2:46). They were together in purpose (2:46), i.e., they were of "one mind," focused on the same goals. Notice the similarities in the above and the way that the apostles taught all Christians ought to be (Philippians 2:1-2 and 1 Corinthians 1:10). It is not uncommon for some believers to be in union with others at the same meeting place without the true unity that ties hearts and lives together. This fact is seen when the storms of life blow and the waves rise up. When it is not convenient or sacrifice is required, unions will come apart. Unity in Jesus Christ and our common salvation is what we need.

We want to add here that they were not just united in spirit, but there was only one congregation meeting in Jerusalem. Because of some men's love for small groups, as well as the lately popular

house church movement, some have begun teaching that the Jerusalem church, as well as the rest of the New Testament congregations, only met in homes and were thus limited in their abilities and size. From the onset, Acts 2:44 states that the disciples “were together.” Acts 4:32 refers in the singular to “the congregation” being of one heart, not to “all” the congregations in that city. Acts 5:12 plainly states that “they were all with one accord in Solomon’s portico.” Anyone who has the early church meeting anywhere besides Solomon’s porch for their collective gatherings must surmise that fact from his own thinking. The Scriptures give no such hint. They met in their homes socially, we are told. And I have no doubt that eventually another place or places of meeting would have been necessary due to winter weather and such eventualities. However, if we believe just what the record of Acts tells us, for quite some time the Christians met at the temple in the large porch area of Solomon. And though we do not know where they were meeting in coming years, we do have mention of elders in the (singular) church at Jerusalem. There is no mention of churches or elderships there.

They were liberal. This is not an indictment of their philosophical or political views. They were liberal with their blessings when it came to assisting their brethren who were less fortunate. Acts 2:45 and 4:32-37 describe this attitude, not of making loans and expecting repayment, but of selling possessions so that others could be taken care of. It was an attitude that was expressed in the fact that no one was calling anything their own, but seeing that all the brethren were cared for. We note that this was not a form of communism or communal life where members were called upon to give up all to the group. In chapter 5, Peter specifically reminds one disciple that his land was indeed his own and he was not called upon to give all or even a share of it. These were free will offerings. Later when Paul gave instructions to Timothy in his first letter, in chapter 6 he instructs Timothy about preaching to those who are rich in this material life. There would have been no

rich brethren if socialism were a requirement for entrance into the kingdom. Again, these offerings were free will, because of love for God, our Savior, and those who share a common faith.

It is sad today that in many places our view has become skewed. Rather than an offering of love, giving has become a responsibility or task to be undertaken with displeasure. Preachers hate to preach the truth about it, and when they do, someone is sure to comment about that preacher only being interested in money. Maybe part of the reason is revealed for us in 2 Corinthians 8:5. In that place the apostle spoke of the Macedonians who had first given themselves to the Lord. Their giving was then not only “liberal” it was beyond their ability and beyond what the apostle himself had expected from them. When was the last time you heard of a church taking on a project with that kind of zeal. In almost 3 decades of preaching, I can only name two or three. They are rare and wonderful occasions.

They were respected. Acts 2:47 says they had favor with all the people. Of course, this was before the Jews figured out that this was not just a kinder and gentler sect of Judaism. Acts 5:11-13 records that the apostles were held in high esteem and 5:26 tells us that this respect was so evident that even the arresting soldiers handled them publicly with “kid gloves.” Popularity is fleeting unless it turns into respect. This was the same pattern in our Lord’s life. Luke 2:52 reminds us that as a youth He grew in favor with men as well as God. People liked Him and they liked His brethren in Jerusalem until in both cases the teaching got personal and guilt set in. Let’s not be in a hurry in our own lives to jump past the part where we are liked. Too often rude behavior and “Bible beatings” are justified by pointing to the persecution of Jesus and His saints. There may come a time for that, but first the grace and mercy of God should be evident in our lives. Let’s make sure that any persecution that arises comes because of what we are saying, not how we are saying it.

We might ask, “Why were they respected?” The answer would come back clearly. Number one is ... they were right! (Acts 4:23; 6:9-10). When we say what God says, we can be sure we are right. It is when statements are tinted with traditions, think so’s, and our own desires that we get into trouble. Whether they change and join us or not, people respect the difference between what is actually right and what is wrong. A second reason is ... they were impartial. Acts 5:11-14 demonstrates that they were impartial in their discipline. Impartiality is to truth what hydrogen is to water. They are inseparable. When impartiality is not present then truth becomes relative. There is an “insider’s” truth and an “outsider’s” truth. There is a standard for self and those we care about, and a different standard for others. This is observed when denominational folk are commanded to lay aside their traditions and their scholars and come back to the truth of the Bible. How do we interpret the Bible? Sometimes by our traditions and scholars! When it is observed that “your” preacher is wrong and “my” preacher is right, regardless of what the Bible actually says, then impartiality is gone and truth actually suffers. Respect is necessary for growth, to make an appealing model for the outsider. But there can be no respect for those who are partial, quibbling, or hypocritical.

They were zealous. This word literally means “on fire” in the pages of the New Testament. How do we know they were on fire in Jerusalem? The verses we’ve already looked at indicates they were continually devoted, daily associating with one another, daily teaching, and seeing daily additions. When they were threatened they prayed for boldness (Acts 4:29) and they received it (4:31). They all spoke with confidence and they could not stop speaking the things they knew to be the truth (Acts 4:20; 5:28-33, 41-42).

Perhaps in that knowledge was their confidence to be on fire. Today we act like nothing can be known for sure. We don’t believe we can know that 7 days of creation are really days. How does the

Spirit dwell within the Christian? How do angels serve the saints? How did Christ “empty Himself”? How did inspiration really work in men? When should we discipline erring members? When is one really married or divorced? Must an elder have more than one child? Do I have to attend midweek Bible study to go to heaven? Etc., etc., and on and on it goes. We spend our best efforts on things that shake our confidence in ourselves and in the revelation that God has given us. We haven’t even covered everything that God has told us, let alone what He hasn’t. We haven’t conquered the physical side of serving God in mastering our own selves, yet we let talk about spiritual mysteries shake us. We could probably all spend more time making sure we know what God has actually said. In that confidence we will be more ready to consider, perhaps, what He really hasn’t told us. We need to light up with God-given information.

They were happy and successful. Gladness (Acts 2:46) is a result of a clear conscience and honest service. Rejoicing (5:41) was a result of obedience and the appreciation of blessings freely given and received. Their success was immediate and impressive—3,000 additions the first day. Five thousand men added by chapter 4:4. How many was the total here in the Jerusalem church? And then the number is described as “multitudes” by the time we reach 5:14, of both men and women.

Their success was a result of good seed (the word of God), good soil (devout believing hearts), good sowers (teachers who exhibited joy and courage without compromise or partiality), and God’s blessing (accomplished by choosing the right time, demonstrations of the Spirit, etc.). Our success today can be also in direct proportion to the extent that we follow this model. Just like science may never identically recreate the original model of creation, we may never identically create this original model of the kingdom. Both of these had the direct miraculous, personal touch of God involved. But there is a great deal to learn and always the goal of trying to come as close as we humanly can with God’s help.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Instead of social commentary, recreation, or social missions, what did the preaching consist of that formed this model first church?
2. What does “continually devoting” mean, in your own words?
3. What were these early Christians continually devoting to?
4. How do we show this same trait in our congregation today?
5. How can Christians today demonstrate fellowship, i.e., partnership?
6. Christians cannot always be liked, but they can be respected. What is the difference?
7. Why were the early Christians respected?
8. What things contributed to the establishment and growth of this first step in the earthly kingdom?