

## BUILDING A GREAT CHURCH

*“And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness. And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all.” (Acts 4:31-33)*

Years ago I read the story of King Midas. When he was granted a wish, he asked that everything he touched would be turned into gold. His wish came true! He turned everything around him to gold and became extremely rich. It was really great until he touched his beautiful young daughter. To his horror, she also turned to gold. It would have been wonderful if he had qualified his wish to only include specific things.

The church at Jerusalem was truly a great church. I like to call this the King Midas church. Everything they did worked great. Thousands were saved and baptized. There was great harmony among the believers. Their prayers were heard and answered. They went soulwinning from house to house on a daily basis. They sold their possessions and gave the money to the church and to the needs of others. They met together to search the Scriptures. It was wonderful. What a pattern for churches in our day!

Josephus, a first century historian, wrote that this early church had 3,000 converts at their first service and 5,000 a few days later. 20,000 were added the first week, and 80,000 during the first year. Wow! What an exciting time that must have been!

Because all three of my churches grew very large, I received invitations on a regular basis to speak to preachers' meetings on how to build a big church. My message was always very simple. My listeners would usually show up with a pad and pencil ready to copy down twenty or thirty steps to make it happen. I then told those who attended that there were really only two things necessary to build a big church:

*First, we must carry out the great commission.*

Second, we must then *solve the problems* that result from carrying out the great commission.

That's really all there is to it. Obedience to the Lord's command to go into all the world with the gospel will bring His blessings. We will surely come again rejoicing, bringing our sheaves with us, as David said.

There are several things that made the Jerusalem church great.

### I. The great purpose

They were there to *obey the Lord*. Jesus had told them to go into Jerusalem and wait until they were endued with power. Then they were to take the gospel to the rest of the world, beginning at Jerusalem, then to Samaria, and then everywhere. They were doing what He asked them to do. It is always better to do what we should, than to try to make excuses for why we did not do what we should.

They were there to *obtain the promise* of the Holy Spirit. He said "*Ye shall receive power after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you.*" The promise was fulfilled as the Spirit came with a sound of "*a mighty rushing wind.*"

They were there to *offer the gospel* to others as He had commanded them to do. From this beginning, we see in the book of Acts twenty-two sermons, preached by four different preachers, and all of them have the same central theme. Their message was the gospel: the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul later summed it all up by saying, "*Moreover brethren, I declare unto you the gospel . . . that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day, according to the scriptures:*" (I Cor. 15:1-4)

The main purpose was to get people saved, then to disciple them for the work of the Lord.

After a funeral on Saturday in my first church, a group of the family members came to our Sunday school. A word from one of their family members led me to believe that none of them knew the Lord. I hoped they would get saved, but after Sunday School, they all got up and left. I was greatly disappointed.

During the invitation the back door opened and one of our good deacons came down the aisle leading the whole crowd. They sat down on the front pew and began to fill out decision slips. I asked the deacon what had happened.

He explained, “I was standing in the vestibule, and these people came up to me and asked, “Where is the getting saved room in this church?” He pointed to the nearest room, ushered them inside, closed the door, and used the entire morning service to lead them to Christ and instruct them in how to come forward and be baptized. He then said something that filled my heart with joy. He smiled at me and said, “All our rooms are getting saved rooms in this church, aren’t they, preacher?” “They certainly are,” I assured him. “This is the main purpose of our church.”

## II. The great praying

The place shook when they prayed. What mighty praying it must have been. Imagine a prayer meeting that lasted ten days and ten nights. Their praying brought a miracle response from the Lord.

I was preaching for Dr. Harold Henniger at the Canton Baptist Temple in Canton, Ohio. We had gone to lunch, and then he took me to a very lovely room provided for guest speakers. I got on my knees to thank the Lord for the privilege of being there and to pray for the evening service. After some time, I sensed that the room was shaking. I thought the Lord was doing it again.

I got on the phone to call home and share the experience with my wife. She asked me if I had been watching the news; I had not. She informed me that they were reporting an earthquake somewhere near the Kentucky and Ohio border. I felt a little silly thinking I had caused the shaking with my praying, but I had really enjoyed the thought that I might have caused it.

There are some lessons to be learned from the praying of the early Christians.

First, *praying unifies*. The one hundred twenty different folks in the upper room probably were as diverse as people can get. Their praying brought them together. They were in one accord. They that pray together, stay together.

Second, *praying unctionizes*. The Father promised to give the Holy Spirit to them that asked for Him. “*Ye shall receive power, after the Holy Ghost is come upon you.*” There is no eternal work without the Holy Spirit.

Thirdly, *praying undergirds*. Praying leads to faithful church attendance. People who pray are usually ready and willing to help in other areas of the work. The church moves forward on its knees.

### III. The great preaching

Great crowds gathered because of the miracle of healing at the gate of the temple. This impotent man had been there a long time and everybody knew about him.

The miracle provided a wonderful opportunity to preach the gospel to the people. Peter and John seized the occasion and presented the gospel of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They made it clear that salvation could not come by any other than Christ Himself. It was great preaching.

Great preaching *exalts Christ*. They were not there to win friends and influence people. There were no jokes. There was no entertainment. This was serious business. They had a message and not just a sermon.

It was said that when folks went to hear the great preachers in London, they came away saying, "What a great preacher!" or "What a great sermon!" When they went to hear Charles Spurgeon, they came away saying, "What a great Saviour!"

Great preaching *edifies Christians*. There ought to be something for the head as well as the heart. A message ought to say something as well as stir the emotions. Jesus told Peter to "*feed my sheep*." Abraham Lincoln said he would like for a preacher to act like he is fighting a swarm of bees. Truth does need to be alive and not just dead orthodoxy. An old Indian was asked how he liked the sermon he had just heard from a missionary speaker. He remarked, "Heap lot of wind; no rain."

Great preaching *exposes sin*. Modern preaching seems to speak of mistakes and failure. The old-time preachers talked of stealing, lying, drinking liquor, gambling, and living in immorality. Peter was pretty plain also when he laid the death of Christ and the rejection of the Messiah right at their feet. Paul was pretty plain when he wrote, "*Preach the word, be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.*" (II Timothy 4:2)

#### IV. The great persecution

First, *it involved criticism*. Sometimes the honeymoon does not last. The Grecians began to grumble about their widows. Most preachers experience a honeymoon period the first few months of ministry in a new church; then something happens. Why does God allow problems to come into our lives and ministry?

Second, *it sometimes involved prison*. Several of the apostles ended up in jail. Organized religion does not take it lightly when an aggressive evangelistic movement comes on the scene. Peter and Paul knew all about jail time. Their crime was preaching the gospel. History is filled with the account of believers being arrested and hauled off to jail for differing with the organized church or the state.

Third, *it sometimes involved death*. Stephen was stoned to death; then Paul was beheaded. All the disciples met with a terrible fate. Millions have died for their faith at the hands of Communists, Catholics, Moslems, and on and on it goes. Heavy wind causes a tree to send down deeper roots. It helps Christians get serious. I visited in Budapest, Hungary, and met a group of folks in an underground church. They were under intense scrutiny by the local secret police. The leader likened his movement to the Blue Danube River running through the city. He said the year before the river had been very wide and very shallow. As the city grew and property became more valuable, the river was dredged deeper and deeper and more ground was claimed for buildings. "Now," he said, "it is very deep. It is the same with our Christians," he told me. "The persecution has made them very deep and sincere."

I look back now on my first ministry. After six months of growth and blessing, a small group of folks did not want our church to be a soulwinning church. They wanted a deeper life program of study, learning new truth. They set out to oppose me and got a group of folks together to try to get rid of me. It became vicious. There were accusations and lies. They twisted my words and accused me of saying things I did not say. I wanted to leave. I had not quit my good job, sold my house, gone to Bible college for this opposition and strife. Finally, the Lord gave me victory. They left and I stayed. After it was all over, I realized it was great schooling. I had learned some lessons that would help me for years to come. The Lord had made a blessing out of problem. He always does.

## V. The great people

A great church always involves great people. It is not buildings, budgets, programs, or equipment; it's people.

They *gave up their work*. Many of the folks in the early church had given up the fishing business, left their tax collecting jobs, and left their means of livelihood to follow the Saviour. They went from house to house on a daily basis to tell others.

They *gave up their wealth*. Barnabas was an example of what many others did. He sold his house and possessions, brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. We read that many others did the same and parted their proceeds to others who had need. These folks got serious about their religion. It got into their pocketbook. After Paul's conversion he said, "*I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung.*" (Philippians 3:8)

They *gave up their lives*. These early believers set a pattern for hundreds and thousands who would later be called upon to suffer death for the cause of Christ. The Bible tells of those who stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, were slain with the edge of the sword, were tortured, were sawn asunder, and were stoned. Others endured scourging and cruel mocking, and were afflicted.

Paul obviously had read about these who endured this suffering and gave his own testimony. He wrote, "*But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God.*" (Acts 20:24)

This kind will make for a great church.

## VI. The great power

The supernatural touch of God was on this people and this place. As the Spirit of the Lord had come upon Sampson, David, Gideon, and others in the Old Testament accounts, He had come upon these people in this early ministry. We read of this type of experience happening to Finney, Moody, Mueller, and others in days gone by. When God comes on the scene, miraculous things take

place. This power is available. It can be ours for the work of the Lord today. God is no respecter of persons.

Great power comes through *a clean life*. Purity is essential. There must be clean hands and a pure heart. David wrote that the “*godly man ceaseth from the earth.*” We must learn to bring every thought into captivity.

Great power comes through *a consistent walk*. We must be “*steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord*” if we are to see His power at work in our lives and ministries. It is a “*same yesterday, to day, and for ever*” thing. Many in our day are ignoring the landmarks set up by the saints of old.

Great power comes through *a continual asking*. Jesus told of the unjust judge who would not help a poor woman, but because of her continual begging and persistence, he gave her what she wanted. The phrase, “*ask and ye shall receive*” is written in the tense that means keep on asking and asking until you get it.

## VII. The great promise

These folks had *a promise of Heaven*. Jesus had told them that He was going to prepare a place for them, and that He planned to come back and get them, and take them to that place. His death had shattered their hopes, but now His resurrection and His appearances on several occasions had restored their faith. All believers have that same hope; and because of it, death has lost its sting.

They also had *a promise of the Holy Spirit*. “*Ye shall receive power after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you*” (Acts 1:8) He asked them to tarry until they be endued with power. This special promise is also available to all of us. “*Be ye filled with the Spirit,*” we are told in Ephesians 5:18.

They too had *a promise of happiness*. Heaven and happiness are the two great themes of the Bible. One is a message to sinners and the other is to saints. Contentment, satisfaction, fulfillment, and happiness is what the Lord wants for all his children. This joy is available in spite of situations, circumstances, events, and problems that come our way and are beyond our control.

Not only are these seven things what made the early church a great church, but they are also what will make any church a great church and every Christian a

great Christian. When these things are implemented and incorporated into the life and ministry of a church or individual, there will be great praise and giving glory to God from whom all blessings flow.