

Looking Within: Discovering the Essentials of the Church

Matthew 16:13-18 and Acts 2:41-47

Charles R. Swindoll *Gaining A Fresh Perspective: Seeing Relationships through New Eyes* chapter 4. Insight for Living, 2002.

Is church a drudge or a delight for you? And what's the point of church anyway? This morning I want to talk about a scene from the gospel of Mathew and take a close look at a reading in the book of Acts chapter 2. These two scripture offer some insight to help us rediscover God's passion and purposes for His church.

There is this scene in Mathew chapter 16. Jesus is walking along with his disciples and he throws out this question: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

He got a few responses – some think you are John the Baptist, others Elijah or a prophet. Then Jesus turned the question on them: "***But what about you?... Who do you say I am?***" (v. 15)

It was one thing for the disciples to say what they've heard the crowd saying. But even more important was for them to know for themselves. Simon Peter is the one who steps up with an answer (not usually a good sign but this time he gets it right), "***You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.***" (v. 16)

Jesus affirmed Peter for his answer and then he prophesied about Peter's role in the birth and growth of a new institution called ***the church***" saying: "*And I tell you that you are Peter [name means Rock], and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.*" (v.18)

From this verse, we can pick up some key prophecies about the church:

"I" – Christ builds the church, not pastors, people, or programs.

"Will" – this verb appears in the future tense. At the time that Christ was speaking, the church had not yet been established.

“Build” – the growth of the church is a process, not a completed act.

“My” – Christ, not the pastor, council or even the members, Christ the owner of the church.

“church” – In Greek, the word is *ekklesia*. It suggests people are “called out from their homes into....an assembly” and gathered for a distinct purpose.

“the gates of Hades will not overpower it” – neither Satan and his forces nor anything else on earth can destroy the church that Christ has established.”

This prophecy became a reality on the day of Pentecost which is recorded in the book of “Acts chapter 2.

The Holy Spirit descends on the people in Jerusalem and the church is birthed. The Gospel blows through the city like a fresh ocean breeze. Simon Peter preaches the sermon of his life, which God uses like a fisherman’s net to pull three thousand souls into his kingdom.

Now, turn in your Bibles to **Acts 2:42-47** and let’s take a close look at how these new believers lived out their faith. **READ**

Imagine that! A thriving community of new believers with no pastor, no bylaws, no high-powered programs, and an incomplete Bible. Yet they still managed to fulfill the primary purpose of the church – praising and glorifying God.

From the example of these early believers, we can find 4 objectives that are essential for every church regardless of size, style, culture or denomination. Together these objectives comprise the acronym WIFE which is appropriate for Christ’s bride, the church.

“W is for Worship

Like an irresistible perfume, worship’s holy fragrance wafted from this fledgling community. The Greek term for “devoted” suggest a constant, steadfast persistence. This was no half-hearted group of pew warmers! When these early saints gathered, their prayers

overflowed with praise. Their meetings radiated with intense devotion. As they sat under the apostles' teaching, assembled for fellowship and prayer, and took their meals together, they kept their focus on the Lord their God.

The immediate result of the people's devotion was a "sense of awe" (2:43a). This was more than music-induced goose bumps or "warm fuzzies" from a sermon. As the people worshipped, they were overcome with the magnificence of God's holiness.

It's clear that were not talking about people sitting quietly in a pew nodding their heads. Vs. 46 mentions "with glad and sincere hearts" – I think that's a crummy translation. The Greek word means exultation, extreme joy.

Think of a mighty volcano, overflowing with the power of God and spilling passion into the hearts of people. Imagine hearts erupting in praise to God. That's sincere heartfelt worship.

The early church effervesced with the spontaneous expression of heartfelt worship (*should have kept those leftover alka-seltzers to demonstrate*). But unfortunately, many of today's churches have replaced that genuine heartfelt worship with ritual and routine that is dull and predictable.

I'll be honest with you, I struggle each week to lead worship... after 13 year here, I don't have the same sense of awe inspiring delight and joy in worship. Some of it has to do with being the leader and keeping track of all the stuff that comes my way on a Sunday, a lot of it is a result of listening to all the complaints and even sometimes the demands about how worship "should be". Fortunately, I get a few weeks of vacation each year where I get to go worship without having to lead.

What about you? Do you find awe-inspiring delight in worship? I know some of you do, but I sometimes wonder how many of us are simply going through the motions.....

Worship should primarily be a vertical activity – that is between us and God. The second essential objective for every church is also a vertical activity:

I is for Instruction

A closer look at Acts 2 reveals that the early Christians not only worshiped God, they “*devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching.*” The apostles – these guys were the 12 disciples of Jesus – I’m sure their primary focus must have been teaching about Jesus, his work and ministry, his death and resurrection pointing out how this all fulfilled the teachings of the Old Testament.

Notice that instruction is listed first in the order of activities of these early believers. Why? Because these brand-new baby believers had just tasted the milk of the Gospel. Now they required the meat of the Word for growth.

In Acts 6, we are told that the apostles considered the ministry of teaching God’s Word so important that they had to delegate other duties in order to ensure unobstructed teaching. They refused to allow other pressing demands keep them from their primary task of feeding the flock with God’s truth.

The ministry of the Word is no less important today. It is essential that we hunger after the truth and instruction that come from studying God’s Word.

“Starving sheep lack spiritual strength for daily living, and lack of knowledge makes them easy prey for false teaching.”

Many times when I ask about their study of God’s Word I hear “oh I was confirmed.” Let me just tell you that answer is garbage! It is essential for us to continue learning and studying God’s Word. If you need help, talk to me – I want to help you learn God’s Word.

The third essential objective of the church is **Fellowship**.

The early Christians would find it difficult to relate to the custom of some people - sneaking into the back pew, sitting there inconspicuously through the service, and then slipping out the door as soon as the service ends without talking to anyone. Because the folks in the early church **gathered not only to worship and learn, but to engage in intimate friendships with one another**. They celebrated and mourned together, laughed and cried together, cared

for and sacrificed for one another. They came for real fellowship – one of the activities to which they continually devoted themselves.

The Greek word for fellowship is *koinonia*, which signifies a close relationship. Its root *koinos*, means “common” or “communal”. The early church was a close, sharing group. That is what life in the church is meant to be. People who care for each other, who share life together – the good and the bad, people who engage in intimate friendships with one another.

Church I grew up in was like this -

The challenge is that as the church grows, this intimate connection is hard to maintain and so many churches have small groups of people who meet to share life together.

Isn't it sad to think of how many Christians today are missing this kind of closeness? Sermons and songs provide only part of a vital worship encounter. We need true fellowship with others, too. If we roll in and out of worship each week or even just once and a while and never getting involved, we are missing out. If we aren't interacting with others, we really haven't tasted the sweet joy of fellowship. That's not how the church was meant to be! If you don't feel like you have a close relationship with others here in your church – take the first step today to introduce yourself to someone else. Maybe you're even ready to take a leap and start a small group. Invite 3-6 other people to meet with you for coffee or breakfast or happy hour and get to know each other. Start by sharing highs and lows for the week and you'll be amazed at where the conversation will take you and how soon you will develop a connection with others.

The fourth essential objective of the church is **Evangelism**. As these first Christians lived out their faith - the love of God flooded from their hearts, and, as they expressed the reality of Christ to a watching world, the ranks of the converted swelled – *“the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”* (Acts 2:47)

Evangelism might sound scary but it is actually very simple – it is sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with others. I’m not talking about going around knocking on people’s doors and handing out tracts or standing on a street corner with a bullhorn. The early church did evangelism by living faithfully, connecting with others in daily life and loving them following the example of Jesus. Evangelism just flowed out of hearts in love with their Lord and Savior Jesus.

Is it any wonder that God blessed the Jerusalem church with growth? Christians there offered love and acceptance – to everyone. They modeled vulnerability, compassion, caring and giving. They radiated joy. The aroma of these qualities drifted from the church into the nostrils of Jerusalem like the lovely smell of a Sunday pot roast. And the world came to dinner!

The early church set a powerful example for us to follow. They glorified God by keeping these four objectives of worship, instruction, fellowship and evangelism. Keep in mind that a church may have more than these four pillars, but no faithful church will have less.

The early believers provided a blueprint for us to follow. If we don’t, our churches will crumble due to lethargy, malnourishment, selfishness, and fruitlessness.

As you continue to take a look at the relationships in your life, consider your involvement with your church –remember, YOU are the church, not the building, not the pastor but YOU. How will you help our church recapture the joy of worship, instruction, fellowship and evangelism?