



“Paul’s Measure of a Strong Church”

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Are you a member of a local church? If so, do you think it’s a strong church? Is it a congregation that measures up to the strength, fidelity and vitality of the church as we read about it in the New Testament? That begs the question: how do we measure a strong church anyhow? What criteria do we use?

I don’t think you can do any better than to measure a church like the inspired apostle Paul did. Paul’s desire was the same as Christ’s; that is, to see the church be grounded in the truth, to be growing and working and strong.

Ephesians 4:11-16 “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.”

Members of the early church were endowed with spiritual gifts that brought the church as a whole to maturity. Whether in the age of supernatural gifts (the first century) or today (when the effects or products of those gifts are realized and enjoyed through the word that those gifts produced and left for us), the church is to function in such a way as to become strong and mature. Are you part of a church like that? How did Paul measure a strong church? I’m going to discuss five ways in which Paul referred to the church that give us some insight as to what constitutes a strong congregation.

The church of Christ is not a building; rather, it is a congregation of people. Universally, the word *church* refers to *all of the saved in Christ*. In a visible, organized and functioning sense, the church is *a local congregation of baptized believers who worship God together and who work together in the spread of the gospel and the edification of one another*. It is God's will that every Christian be a part of such a local congregation. In fact, one cannot serve Christ without being part of His body.

Ephesians 1:23 "Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all."

The church is the receptacle through which we enjoy and exercise the blessings that are found in Christ Jesus. By being a member of the local church, I assemble with others to worship the Lord, as did congregations in the first century.

Hebrews 10:25 "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching."

Acts 20:7 "And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight."

I am taught and edified within the local church.

I Corinthians 14:12 "Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church."

It is there that I receive the encouragement and exhortation to be faithful to Christ and to live the Christian life.

Hebrews 10:24 "And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works:"

But it's not that I am just merely a part of the local church because of what I receive, but also for what I can give. It is there that I contribute my own abilities, talents and opportunities that the Lord has given me to serve and to build up others, and we all possess those unique abilities. It is within the local church that I sometimes receive the corrective discipline that I need when I sin or stray from Christ (**I Corinthians 5, Galatians 6:1-2**).

With all of that said, we want the church we are a member of to be strong and healthy. We certainly want it to be one approved of God. Unfortunately, that is not always the case. Sometimes, a church has the reputation of being strong when God doesn't see it that way at all. Jesus said to the church at Sardis in Asia Minor:

Revelation 3:1 "...I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead."

Jesus said this to the church at Laodicea:

Revelation 3:17 "Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked:"

They were oblivious as to how they appeared in the eyes of God. What they saw and what God saw were two entirely different pictures. Could that be the case with the church you are a part of? Does it

have a name that it's alive and vital, but in the sight of God it is dead and profitless? How would we know? Well, some measure a church by some pretty worldly standards and that's part of the problem. For example, don't let a building deceive you. Churches today are spending millions and millions of dollars—unwarranted, in my estimation—on campuses, complexes and cathedrals, and people are attracted to all of that. They think, *if they can afford a multi-million dollar complex, they are a church on the move, a church that God is working among! They MUST be doing something right!* Friend, churches of the first century often met in homes and private dwellings or temporary spaces. There is certainly no emphasis placed in the New Testament upon the location where a church happened to meet. So, don't be fooled by a building.

Some say that crowds are a good gauge of a strong church. That's not true either. God's faithful people, whether in the Old or New Testaments, have ALWAYS been the minority. I can't think of an exception to that.

Some will point to all of the various programs, committees, departments and attractions that modern-day churches seem to boast of. Such is never mentioned of the church we read about in the New Testament, much less used as a measure of its strength. No, rather the Bible places a completely different emphasis on a strong church. What makes a strong church are not its physical properties, but its spiritual properties.

The apostle Paul often commended churches for their strength and faithfulness. I wonder what made them so in his estimation. I think it's a better measure of what the church is supposed to be when we think of the church in the terms that the apostle Paul used to describe it. He used at least five metaphors to describe the church of Christ: *a body, a family, a temple, the kingdom and a bride*. When you think about it, each of these descriptions are very practical, and they highlight a unique feature of the church that makes it what God expects it to be in this world.

I. A strong church is one that functions like a body.

It is *the body of Christ*. Paul, on several occasions, referred to the church as *a body*. It was one of his favorite metaphors for the church, particularly in **I Corinthians 12**. That shows us that the church is more than an organization; it's an organism. You can have an organization without necessarily having life. A functioning body lives and breathes, moves, feels and acts. It is not just an organization of independent parts, rather those parts have interdependent function as they are directed by its head. That causes that body to not only live, but to also function.

I Corinthians 12:27 "Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular."

A few verses earlier, Paul shows how the different parts of the body—such as hands, feet, eyes, ears, nose and mouth—all work in cooperative concert to allow a body to live and function (**I Corinthians 12:14-19**). And the church is to be that way. Every member of the church is a vital part of that body. Not everybody is a preacher or even a public teacher. In fact, some are forbidden in the scriptures to even be public teachers. But that doesn't make them any less important to the kingdom of God. Not everyone is suited to be a leader in the worship. Not everyone is suited to effectively do certain kinds of work that needs to be done in the church. But every single member supplies a necessary and vital part.

So, a strong church is one that has an involved and working membership. Not a paid staff to work while everybody else turns out on Sunday to observe and go home. Every Christian is a participant in the work of the church. Every Christian is to participate in public worship. It is not a form of spiritual entertainment, even though some churches seem to be making it that. We don't come together to hear people perform. That's not the New Testament design. We come together to participate together in the worship: to sing together, to study together, to pray together.

Today, we've seen the rapid progression of the "megachurch" movement—churches with hundreds, sometimes thousands of members, and those are often thought of as the strongest churches, are they not? It's hard to imagine that in a church that size, every member finds a vital place of service. It's not just that you have a body of working members, or an innumerable number of members who are all just busy working; it's that you have a body of members who work together. In a physical sense, if you have a body whose members or parts are simply moving and operating, you might have chaos or something that is a danger to itself and others. But if a body works together under the oversight of its head and in coordination, then you have a wonderful thing.

There are those who claim membership in a local church, but they don't go to worship every Lord's Day. They are really not involved in the work and outreach of the church. They don't really have a place in the church. The church may be so large that they're hardly recognized as members of that church. Nobody knows who they are.

Is that the Bible picture of a strong and healthy relationship of believers? Do you occupy a scriptural, vital, effectual role in the local church? Do you supply something by being there? Let me ask you this: does the church miss you when you're gone? What about when you're sick and unable to attend, or when you are away worshipping at another congregation? Does that church of which you are a member feel your absences and miss your presence? Just like your body would miss a hand or foot or an eye? A strong church is not necessarily a large church; rather it is one that functions like a body.

II. A strong church loves like a family.

Paul referred to the church as *the household or family of God*.

I Timothy 3:15 "But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth."

This speaks not only of blood relationship, but also of love, concern and care for one another. Paul also commended the church at Thessalonica in this way:

I Thessalonians 4:9 "But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another."

II Thessalonians 1:3 "We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth;"

The church there was commended not only for their strong faith, but their boundless love for one another. Jesus said His disciples would be known by the love they have for one another.

John 13:35 “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.”

This isn't the same kind or intensity of love that we are to have for all men. It's not the kind of love that we may speak of in a general sense. Rather, this speaks of a very wonderful, working, effectual and intimate love amongst that body of believers to whom Paul wrote in his letters to Thessalonica. Again, the churches that are touted as the strongest, the biggest, the most effectual are often the ones that are so large. I have friends who attend churches with hundreds and sometimes thousands of members, and it's almost amusing when I ask them of someone else that I know attends that congregation. I'll say, *oh, do you know so-and-so?* And they'll say, *no, I can't say that I know who that is.* In some cases, they've attended services together for years! But that church is so large that they haven't even met one another. Friend, a strong church is made up of people who not only know one another, but are involved in each other's lives, struggles and spiritual battles. They know each other's temporal and physical needs.

Sometimes the argument is made about the worship of the church. People will argue against the Bible pattern for communion, for example. Jesus communed with His disciples with a loaf of unleavened bread and a cup of fruit of the vine, but they'll say, *we can't do it that way, even from a practical standpoint. How do you expect a large church to commune with one loaf and one cup?* But the size of the church doesn't determine the pattern; the pattern determines the size of the church. Have you ever stopped to think about the fact that a church can become too large to function like God desires for it to function? To have the closeness and the intimacy, the oversight and involvement in one another's spiritual lives that the church is intended to have? Friend, a church that is strong is a church that loves like a close family.

III. A strong church worships like a temple.

Paul called the church *God's temple* in this dispensation of time.

I Corinthians 3:16 “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?”

Peter also used this terminology when he said that all Christians are priests who offer spiritual sacrifices and offer up worship within that temple (**I Peter 2:5**). Today, God doesn't dwell in temples made with hands, as Paul preached on Mars Hill (**Acts 17:24**), but the church is His temple. Priests don't go to a literal temple to sacrifice and worship for us in the temple as they once did under the law. Rather, every Christian is made a priest unto God and is therefore expected to serve Him within the church.

You see, worship is not a spectator event. It is not something that is done vicariously by one on behalf of another. Each Christian worships God in the temple and Jesus requires that all such worship be done in spirit and truth.

John 4:23-24 “But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.”

Never in the history of man—whether the age of the Jewish temple, the patriarchal dispensation, or today in the Christian age—NEVER in the history of man has God left it up to man to worship in his own way or as man saw fit. God has ALWAYS directed man in the kind of worship He desires and will accept. There is no exception to that. For those under the Old Law, the priests who profaned the worship of God in the temple by offering unto God that which He did not require or command suffered serious consequences. Just read the account of Nadab and Abihu in **Leviticus 10**.

Well, the church is the temple today. We come together, each of us as priests unto God, to offer up praise and worship to God, and that has to be according to a pattern and in spirit and in truth. A strong church is just as faithful to God in worship as the priests in the Old Testament were expected to be in that temple of old.

Can you read how your church worships in the New Testament? Is everything that is done--from the singing to the teaching to the Lord's Supper--exactly as Christ gave it and as the apostles revealed it in the New Testament? A strong church worships like a temple.

IV. A strong church submits like a kingdom.

The church is referred to as *the kingdom of God* in **Matthew 16:18-19**. The Bible teaches that the Lord adds the saved to the church.

Acts 2:47 “Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”

Paul also likens the church to a kingdom.

Colossians 1:13 “Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness (delivered or freed from our sin), and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son:”

So, to be in the Lord's church is to be in His kingdom; the church constitutes the kingdom of Christ on this earth. Well, what does a *kingdom* suggest? It suggests a king to which its subjects bow and submit allegiance and obedience. We might've lost sight today of what a kingdom really was in the times in which the Bible was written and when Jesus established His kingdom because we live in America, where we have a democratic form of government. We live in a republic where the citizens elect people to go to Washington or to the state houses and make laws and so forth.

But a traditional kingdom is not that way, and neither is the kingdom of God. Jesus is the absolute monarch in His kingdom and the church is to obey Him in all things.

Colossians 1:18 “And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.”

Unfortunately, many churches today are like the kingdom of England, you might say. Where the king and queen are more of a symbolic office or figureheads, but decisions are made and policy is set by the parliament and carried out by the Prime Minister. Consequently, many churches don't look to King Jesus for authority in their worship and work; rather they look to their councils, conventions and other creed-making bodies.

Colossians 3:17 “And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of (or by the authority of) the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.”

Jesus decides how our worship is conducted, He decides when and how we commune. King Jesus assigns the work of the church. He sets the boundaries of fellowship. He directs the affairs of the kingdom. And a strong church recognizes that and submits to King Jesus alone.

V. A strong church is pure like a bride.

II Corinthians 11:2 “For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.”

Paul not only likens the church here to a bride, but to a pure, untouched bride. One adorned in the snow white garments of purity and fidelity. Just as we’re cleansed from unrighteousness by the blood of Jesus when we’re washed in baptism (**Acts 22:16**), we are to remain pure and holy as the bride of Christ. Paul uses that metaphor again.

Ephesians 5:25-27 “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.”

According to Paul’s measure of a strong church, a church keeps itself pure in doctrine and practice and in daily living. A strong church emphasizes the need for faithfulness, holiness, godliness and righteousness, and shuns the works of the flesh. Strong churches are pure like a bride.

Does the church where you worship measure up? Are you part of a strong church? A biblical church? A godly, healthy, vital church? If not, we want to help you open the scriptures and come to understand what the Bible describes as a strong church because that’s what you need to be a part of.

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