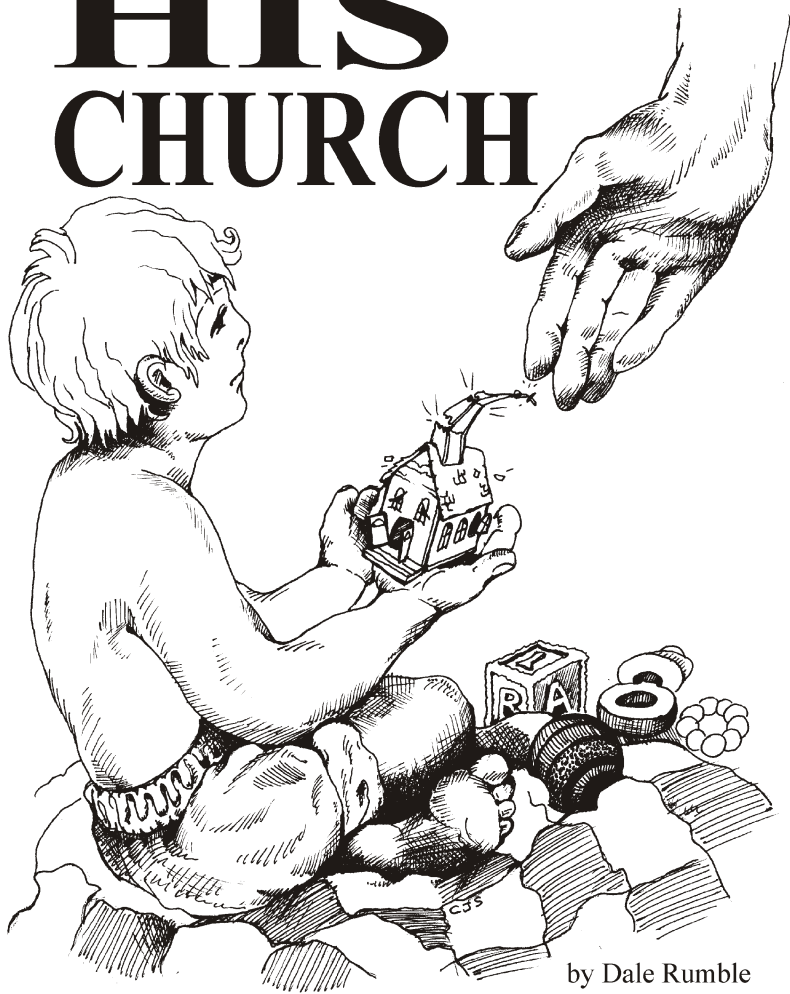


GIVE THE LORD BACK HIS CHURCH



by Dale Rumble

INTRODUCTION

There are many faithful church members today who are not satisfied with their Christian life. Most sermons they hear are largely concerned with definitions of doctrine, theology or of some social issue. There is such a blending of political, social and religious terms that God's voice to them is usually indistinguishable from the opinion of man. Right and wrong, righteousness and sin are not clearly defined. How to find one's place of service in the church and please the Lord is unclear.

If you are such a person, and believe that there is little you can do to correct the situation, then this tract has been written for you. The Lord has a great work He wants you to do, right where you are. Read on and believe; you may never be the same again!

THE PREEMINENCE OF CHRIST

Make no mistake about this point! There can be only one place of preeminence if a church is to have a spiritually credible witness to the lost. It doesn't make any difference whether it is highly liturgical or is an undenominational, body-ministry oriented assembly; Christ Himself, must have center stage! Only to the extent that in the eyes of everyone His Lordship is supremely more important than all persons, all doctrine and all tradition, will the Holy Spirit be free to do His work.

Unfortunately, most congregations, if they were honest, would admit they judge their church by measures other than how truly Christ is exalted. Some examples of their yard sticks would include:

- Music Ministry
- Sermon
- Attendance
- Offering
- Order and flow of events that make up a meeting, including its length

Possibly the best way to recognize how inappropriate such measures are is to consider the life and community practices of the early church as described for us in the first chapters of the book of Acts. It is apparent that these early believers were wholly committed to care for one another and to stand united in their testimony for Christ. Their faith was largely centered in four practices.

*And they were continually devoting themselves to the **apostles' teaching**, and to **fellowship**, to the **breaking of bread** and to **prayer**. (Acts 2:42)*

The credibility of their witness for Christ was not based in programmed meetings; it was expressed in a lifestyle that produced spiritual fruit on a daily basis.

*And **day by day** continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. and the Lord was **adding to their number day by day** those who were being saved. (Acts 2:46-47)*

It was not their doctrines, practices or sacraments that bound them together, but the living union they had in the Spirit with Christ. Life in Christ cannot be confined to doctrine and definitions. It is possibly best described by the Greek word KOINONIA, which means to share a common life through the Holy Spirit.

*But the one who joins himself to the Lord is **one spirit with Him**. (1 Corinthians 6:17)*

This life union in the Spirit is what constitutes the church; it is the only basis for true unity in the body of Christ. God has always sought to have such fellowship with His people. Where Christ is not preeminent, then creeds, doctrines and traditions take on an inappropriate measure of importance that eventually becomes a source of division among believers. He alone was the basis of their identity.

The centrality of Christ to these early saints was not exhibited simply in their admiration of His words and deeds but in their personal obedience to Him. His Lordship was real to them! Each believer was responsible to serve in his (or her) place in the local body.

There was no concept of clergy and laity, of performers and spectators. The following verse expresses their concept or ministry in a meeting.

*What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, **each one** has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. (1 Corinthians 14:26)*

Each true believer was an active minister whenever the body of Christ assembled. The Lord Himself was the center of their attention. It was He who they worshipped, and it was His words that they sought to hear and obey.

Whenever the emphasis of a church becomes mired in programs, committees, politics or organization, these things will inevitably usurp priority over the preeminence of Christ. The end result is a stifling of body ministry, and the control of what takes place in the assembly begins to pass from the Holy Spirit into the hands of man.

I recall watching on television the performance of a musician who alternately played a violin or an accordion. At the same time, he accompanied himself with a harmonica held in position by a strap around his head and supplied timing for his music by beating a drum with sticks tied to his feet. Although the quality of his music was not great, his ability to simultaneously play several instruments was most impressive.

The musician reminded me of what congregations today demand of their pastor. He is expected to perform all spiritual tasks in the assembly, to represent the church in the local community and to administrate all major functions for the congregation.

This mind-set is not from God, and it certainly did not exist in the early church. The Lord sees a local church much like a symphony orchestra. As conductor, He desires to express a harmony of spiritual ministry through the many instruments that He has chosen to make up His body. The skill of any one particular member is not nearly as important as the orchestration of *all* members.

But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Corinthians 12:7)

Thus, the ultimate measure of success for leaders in the church is not in the excellence of their personal performance, but rather, how well they have equipped and prepared each individual believer to serve (Ephesians 4:11-16). To equip a saint for his place in the body of Christ is to establish what God has planned from eternity for that person. The greatest tragedy in life is not death, but a life lived that failed to find and fulfill the call of God! And the place of equipping begins at the cross of Christ!

FOUNDATIONS OF THE CROSS

There are three foundational truths concerning the cross of Christ that anchor our Christian faith.

1. First of all, this is where spiritual life begins. The cross is where God's Son died in our place, shedding His blood to cleanse our souls from sin. When, by repentance and faith in His death and resurrection, we personally accept Him as our Savior and Lord, we pass from death into life becoming a child of God.

The Old Testament promised atonement for sin through the blood of animal sacrifices. These offerings foreshadowed the blood of Christ.

*The life of the flesh is in the blood and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is **blood by reason of the life** that makes atonement. (Leviticus 17:11)*

The animals selected could not have any blemish. They were killed, skinned, cut into pieces, burned with fire, and essentially destroyed (Leviticus 4). This pictures for us the utter humiliation and suffering of God's Christ. His beard was plucked out and His facial appearance was marred (Isaiah 50:6), pierced through with nails (Psalms 22:16), His side was thrust through by a sword (John 19:34), and all of His bones were forced out of joint by pressures generated as He hung upon the cross (Psalms 22:14, 17). We too easily forget how much He suffered, and thus, how much He loves us and how terrible sin is to Him. However, He endured everything because *only the blood of Christ*, the Lamb of God who was completely sinless, could purge our souls from sin and our consciences from guilt (1 Pe-

ter 1:18-19; Hebrews 9:14, 22). The cross expresses the love of God for sinners.

2. The second foundational truth is that the cross of Christ provides victory for us over our fallen human nature which causes us to sin. Jesus went to the cross *as the last Adam*, taking with Him our corrupt Adamic nature which was crucified with Him. He dealt *once and for all* with our fallen Adamic nature. We can walk in victory as we exchange our life for His.

I am crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me. (Galatians 2:20)

Just as it requires faith to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, it also requires faith to believe what scripture states happened to our old nature on the cross.

*For the death that He died, He died to sin, **once for all**; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Even so, consider (reckon, fully believe) yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:10-11)*

The reality of this truth in one's walk has absolutely nothing to do with how one feels, how impossible personal circumstances may be, or whether one has failed the Lord. It depends entirely on believing and trusting in what God declares in His word. He says that our sinful nature was crucified with Christ and that we have been given a new life, an exchanged life, in Him.

*Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. **For you have died** and your life is hidden with Christ in God. (Colossians 3:2-3)*

The act by which a new believer first expresses faith in this truth is to personally identify with the Lord's death by being baptized in water. In so doing, one is testifying, "I believe that my old nature was crucified with You (Lord) on the cross, and I now bury it in the waters of baptism where the Holy Spirit will cut it away by circumcision so that I may rise out of the water to walk in newness of life." What a wonderful provision is ours in the cross of Christ!

*. . . do you not know that all of us who have been baptized in Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried **with Him through baptism into death**, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too **might walk in newness of life . . . knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him**, that our body of sin might be done away with, **that we should no longer be slaves to sin**; for he who has died is freed from sin.*
(Romans 6:3-4, 6-7)

*In Him also you were circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, but in a (spiritual) circumcision (performed by) Christ by stripping off the body of the flesh (the whole, corrupt canal nature with its passions and lusts). **Thus you were circumcised when you were buried with Him in your baptism . . .*** (Colossians 2:11-12 *AMPLIFIED*)

The waters of baptism by themselves can do nothing; what takes place is a work of the Holy Spirit.

After this, should we sin, the remedy is always the same: instant repentance with confession while turning wholly and anew to our Savior (1 John 1:7). If we are consistent in doing so, a love for righteousness and a new awareness of the sinfulness of sin will arise in our hearts. This is evidence of the new life developing within us. We are to keep our eyes on Him, not on ourselves, our failures, our successes, our circumstances or on the enemy. *Everything* we will ever need is to be found in Him. He is our victory, our life and our hope!

3. There is also a third wonderful provision for believers in the cross of Christ.

*. . . that in Himself He might make the two (Jew and Gentile) into **one new man**, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both **in one body to God through the cross . . .***
(Ephesians 2:15-16)

We never stand alone as believers in Christ. We are a member in particular of the body of Christ. We have been spiritually born into the family of God. We now have brothers and sisters to help and en-

courage us in our Christian pilgrimage. We are all uniquely one body because of the cross.

Jesus was not only the last Adam, He was also *the first-born from the dead*. He is the first of a *new race* of which He is the Head. This company of beings is referred to in scripture as “the body of Christ,” “a chosen race,” “a royal priesthood,” “a holy nation,” “one new man” and “the church of god.”

It is within this collective relationship of those in union with Christ that each believer finds his identity and place of service. This is not primarily based on who we are in Him but rather on who He is in us. There is a unique deposit of His life within each of us that determines our call and service in His body. He desires to be center focus in *all* things that concern us, and it is not a question of how much or how little ability we have.

This organism of body life is not based on religious organization or on denominational membership. It is simply the life union, or spiritual communion, that believers have with Christ and with one another. We are members of a living body where each one has a unique and vital function to fulfill through the Spirit and by the grace of God. It is a body without any hierarchy or classes of believers; a common characteristic is that *all* are servants.

*For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are **one body in Christ**, and individually members of one another. And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly . . . (Romans 12:4-6)*

Spiritual service is a question of grace and anointing. The Holy Spirit distributes spiritual gifts to each one just as He wills, and God places each member in the body as He desires (1 Corinthians 12:11, 18)

. . . God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked that there should be no division in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. (1 Corinthians 12:24-25)

We place our feet on this foundation stone by wholly committing ourselves to a Biblical local church, so that we can be built together by the Spirit with other believers and equipped to serve in a local expression of Christ's body.

Because God sees us as one body in Christ, we must purpose in our hearts to love all other members. We are called collectively to become an expression of the will and character of Christ. This requires unity. There must be no gossip, division, backbiting or faultfinding. Instead we are to serve, comfort, admonish, love and care for one another.

The body of Christ is a place of transition where we learn to be less concerned about our personal needs and become committed to meet the needs of others. This is the primary motivation of body ministry.

*Therefore encourage one another and build up one another . . .
(1 Thessalonians 5:11)*

*Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.
(Romans 15:2)*

*And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds.
(Hebrews 10:24)*

The many benefits of relationship and body ministry are best learned and practiced in the dynamics of small groups (i.e., home church or cell-group meetings).

Let us now address the issue of how the church lost these principles and practices of spiritual life.

THE TRADITIONS OF MEN

When we consider what God has provided for His people through the cross of Christ, we are faced with the question, "What on earth happened to the church?" To answer this correctly, we have to first understand where the problem began.

It is easy to blame church failures and problems on the devil; after all, he is committed to lawlessness while we who believe are on God's side. However, the real culprit is the hand of man! If we re-

search church history we would find that subtle changes, which occurred over many years, have the fingerprints of man all over them. This is where the real problem lies!

It is important to recognize that none of these issues, by themselves, disqualify a church from the grace and power of God. It is also important to remember when sin and failure are recognized, that through godly repentance and obedience, individuals and churches can be forgiven and renewed. Let us briefly examine ten areas of change that have made the contemporary church so different from that of the first century.

1. The early believers came together frequently throughout the week to spontaneously share their life in Christ with one another. They were committed to the process of making disciples for Christ. The church of today gathers once, or perhaps twice, in a week to experience a programmed one hour service of song, announcements and sermon with the hope of gaining decisions for Christ.

2. The first assemblies had no official church building for over two hundred years; the saints gathered in homes (Philemon 1:2; Colossians 4:5; Romans 16:5; Acts 2:46, 20:20). Today, a church is largely identified by its building and, in some cases, even by the building's architecture. The emphasis today is more on "going to church" than on "being a church."

3. The first churches were overseen by a plural group of elders, men who were selected from the congregation because they demonstrated the character, grace and servant's heart that qualified them to shepherd the flock (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Matthew 20:25-28). The spiritual oversight of modern day churches is invested in one man (i.e., pastor, senior pastor or priest). The basis of their authority lies in their title or office, a position they are prepared for by education at a school of theology. Not content with limiting itself to the spiritual input of only one minister, the church today also places upon this person all the administrative responsibilities necessary to hold things together.

4. Congregations of believers in the early church viewed themselves as a local expression of the body of Christ in their city. They were a charismatic body in the Spirit with each believer committed to being a unique contributor of the life of Christ (Romans 12:1-6). In contrast, present day churches are structured to function as institutions

with believers divided into two classes: clergy (performers) and laity (spectators). Instead of recognizing, as the early church did, that each believer is called by God to be committed to a place of service, the church today only requires such commitment from “full time” clergy. Thus, the church is weakened since the average believer finds it much easier to help pay someone to do the work of God than face the commitment to fulfill the call on his own life.

5. The early churches were shepherded by elders, with apostles among them traveling between congregations to lay foundations for churches, to ordain elders and to give overall direction. Today, the body of Christ is divided into denominations, each with its own doctrinal emphasis that is proclaimed through associated churches. Ministers are accountable within a hierarchical structure of authority patterned after that of the business world, being responsible to their own particular headquarters.

6. The first church presented the united witness and testimony of one gospel and one body in Christ to a pagan world. This gospel was the gospel of the kingdom of God (Luke 16:16). Today there are many gospels, such as: fundamentalism, the full gospel, dominion theology, liberation theology, the social gospel, the sacramental liturgical gospel, gospel of faith and prosperity, etc. Although all promise, in some measure, the grace and salvation of God, the gospel of the kingdom is uniquely centered around the government and centrality of Christ in salvation. The proponents of these gospel emphases compete with one another to gain members and influence. They seek to maintain unity within the contest of their own denominational body of doctrine and practice. As James Rutz so accurately states in his excellent book, *THE OPEN CHURCH*: “We have denominations today that are custom made for thinkers, for feelers, and for doers.”¹

7. The original church obeyed the Lord’s command to avoid titles when referring to their ministries (Matthew 23:8-12). The churches today identify their various ministers through specific titles often with special clothing to further distinguish their office. (Some obvi-

1 James H. Rutz, *THE OPEN CHURCH*; The Seed Sowers, Box 3368, Auburn, Maine 042121; 1992

ous examples are: reverend, senior pastor, archbishop, general superintendent, cardinal, pope, etc.). In the beginning, authority of ministers was evident by the grace and anointing that rested upon them along with their exemplary lifestyle. The use of titles imply a God-given authority. If for whatever reason this does not exist, titles then replace the Holy Spirit's anointing in the eyes of the people.

8. Two primary characteristics of early church meetings were "spontaneity" and "simplicity." They gathered in excitement and expectancy to worship the Lord and to hear from Him. The equivalent characteristics today would be "program" and "liturgy," where expectancy is often limited to hearing a good sermon and being entertained by the music.

9. Meeting of the early church were rich in spiritual gifts, ministries and prayer. The essence of services was the believers' day-by-day testimony of what God was speaking and doing in their midst. Modern day services are largely sermons oriented around definition and doctrine. The emphasis being more on theology and theory than what God is currently speaking.

10. The early church turned their known world upside down by taking the challenge of evangelism very seriously. Each member became a potential witness for Christ in his or her community. Miracles were frequent, and the Lord added to the church daily those who were saved. Believers today generally bring the unsaved with them to church in the hope that they will hear and respond to the gospel. The emphasis has become taking the lost to church rather than the church going out to win them. However, a revival is coming when the Holy Spirit will anoint and thrust out believers, adults and the youth, into the streets to bring in a great harvest. And miracles will be common place!

These ten issues are symptomatic of the problem that cripples the church today, for they reveal how greatly the hand of man has limited and replaced the Holy Spirit's role. However, all is not lost; there is an answer to the situation.

FOUR STEPS TO REALITY

If I am a church member and recognize the problem, I immediately face the question, “What on earth can or should I do about it?” The truth is that there is much that one person can accomplish; I can become an instrument for change in the hand of God. Furthermore, I do not have to be a great student of the Bible or even a gifted speaker, I simply have to be willing. One with God is a majority.

The following are attitudes and actions that I *must avoid*:

- Criticize the leadership
- Fire the pastor
- Reorganize the church
- Start a new denomination
- Look for a perfect church
- Stop going to church

The place to begin is with my own heart not the church. I must *first face the reality of where I am personally in my relationship to Christ*. I must view sin as He sees it. It is horrible, degrading, and it will cripple me. It must be repented of and forsaken. Whatever I may need for a life of victory is available to me in the provisions of the cross. He must become preeminent in my life.

The *second* step, if I am a parent, is to *accept full responsibility toward my spouse and children as I am commanded to in the word of God*. In reality, a church will be no stronger in God than its families are.

The *third* step is my *obedience to what God’s word commands me concerning my responsibility to the lost and relationship to His people*, including those over me in the Lord. Until I face the reality of these three issues, I should not be overly concerned about failures or weaknesses I may see in the church.

It is possible that, once my heart is right toward the local church leadership, the Lord may open the way to attend a new community of believers. Wherever I fellowship, the *fourth* step lies clearly before me. I am *not to gossip or find fault, but commit myself to intercede for the church and its leaders*. Prayer and fasting is an ultimate step of becoming real before God. God’s house is to be a

house of prayer for all nations, for liturgical, evangelical and charismatic “nations.” Four ingredients will be necessary for success in this endeavor: faith, humility, patience and perseverance; and I can expect to be tested in all four areas. Religion makes people weird, but Jesus makes them real! Spiritual reality is necessary; all religious facades must go.

The emphasis is to pray for a spirit of humility and repentance to fall upon the people, to claim His promises to restore and renew those who respond. The best environment for prayer is private gatherings. God’s heart is inclusive of all His people, thus my prayer should not be limited to only the leaders and for each believer in the assembly to discover and fulfill his place of service, but it should also reach out for all churches in the area.

CONCLUSION

Is it possible that these four steps can transform an inflexible, traditional church into the reality of a local expression of Christ’s body? Before we say, “no way,” we should recognize how quickly the Lord moved in response to prayer and brought down communism in Europe.

. . . the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. (James 5:16)

We Christians seem to always underestimate the power and sovereignty of God. He *never* leaves His throne, and *nothing* takes place apart from His permissive or directive will! The initiative for renewal and restoration always begins with Him.

Which is more difficult for Him: to turn a communist nation into a democracy, or to change a traditional church into a pliable wineskin full of new wine?

He raises up leaders and nations, and He bring them low according to His will. In the end, all events are simply part of a process in which God will certainly establish His kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Nothing is ever beyond the jurisdiction of His authority.

His intent toward us is for good, not evil. His Father heart is a heart of love that wants to change us, to transform us into a victorious

people who live above sin and failure; a people who will walk in the provisions of the cross. He is concerned about *every* area of our lives, no matter how small or insignificant it may be to us. He does not separate our lives into secular and spiritual realms; all that we are and do concerns Him. Furthermore, He has no favorite denomination. He loves all of His kids.

There is a special word going forth from the Lord today calling His people to repent and separate themselves wholly unto Him. He is at work to unit and prepare the church for a great end-time conflict of spiritual warfare and harvest that brings this age of grace to a close. The issue we all face is whether we will humble ourselves and submit to His will or stand in opposition to Him. There is no place for neutrality. Those who respond in obedience will rule and reign with Him in eternity. He is going to come back for a victorious church. He alone will be exalted and have preeminence in His house when the proper foundation is back in place.

The issue facing believers is not one of “going to heaven”; it concerns the glory that is promised to those who overcome. To go our own way is to forfeit this honor. He is calling us to humble ourselves, to intercede for the church and to walk together in holiness before Him. The challenge we face in Christendom today, especially leaders, is painfully clear: ***take our hands off and give the Lord back His church!***

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