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# HOW TO STRENGTHEN YOUR CHURCH

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There are three things that every pastor hopes to see in their believers: radical surrender to the Lord, active involvement in the church, and trust and submission to the leadership, especially to the vision and work of the church. These are things that are necessary for the success of every congregation. Not only are they necessary, we often find battles concerning these things because the enemy wants to weaken these areas in every church and render them ineffective and frail.

- ▶ **1. RADICAL SURRENDER TO THE LORD IMPLIES THAT EVERY BELIEVER HAS FULLY SURRENDERED TO HIM THEIR**

## **LIFE, THEIR TIME, THEIR TALENTS, AND POSSESSIONS.**

Someone once said that many are willing for Christ to be Lord of some, but few want Him to be Lord of all. Christ wants to be Lord of everything in our life. We cannot

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place anyone or anything before Him, no matter how much we love them. He is our first priority; He is a jealous God and will not share His glory with another; which is why we are required to love Him more than our spouse and children and to burn more for Him than our career or life's ambitions.

It is impossible to have a mighty and effective church with believers who have divided hearts because if we are divided between Christ and the world we will not only cripple ourselves spiritually, we will, as a member of Christ's body, cripple our local church. James clearly said that a man who is double-minded is unstable in all his ways and "For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; *he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.*" (James 1:7-8) This is also true for the church; because if she is made up of these kinds of believers how can she be expected to receive anything of the Lord?

Our dividedness and refusal to surrender before God often causes dissention with other radical, surrendered believers as our undisciplined and fleshly behavior opens the way for devilish works to eat away at us like a cancer.

★ **What God is seeking of us is that we surrender ourselves as a living sacrifice, which means that everyday we put our own desires aside in order to follow Him.**

Every church made up of such believers is a divided church that God cannot use; in this church is often found lack of discipline and every kind of fleshly deed that destroys God's work – and it all happens because of partial surrender to the Lord.

For this reason the Apostle Paul implored the Romans, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is your reasonable service.* And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.*" (Romans 12:1-2)

When the sacrifices were brought, according to God's law the priest killed the animal, cut it into pieces and placed it on the altar. Although the sacrifice was very important, obedience from the heart was more important. Even in the Old Testament the example of Saul, who kept some of the spoil for a sacrifice to God, forgot that obedience is better than sacrifice. "Has the LORD *as great* delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, *And* to heed than the fat of rams." (1 Samuel 15:22)

What God is seeking of us is that we surrender ourselves as a living sacrifice, which means that everyday we put our own desires aside in order to follow Him.

Radical believers surrender everything to the Lord; they do not share with Him that which

means little to them. However, He does not occupy first place in the heart of many Christians today, rather their children, spouses, extended family, work, time, or even recreational time occupies first place. Only when they don't have anything else to do, or only when it comes to mind, do they come to the Lord.

In the early church the Lord was the absolute most important element in their life. They gave Him all they had; their time, their services and their possessions. When Jesus called them they immediately left what they were doing and readily served Him. We remember Peter and Andrew how they immediately left their nets and followed Jesus: "And Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. Then He said to them, 'Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.' They immediately left *their* nets and followed Him." (Matthew 4:18-20) James and John, not only left their nets, they also left their father behind. "Going on from there, He saw two other brothers, James *the son of* Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets. He called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him." (Matthew 4:21-22)

When Jesus called them they did not put forth excuses as many today who are "balanced and wise". When you ask them to do something radical they reply by saying that they do not have time. When Jesus called the first disciples, in that same moment, without excuse, they left everything and followed Him – this is an example of active faith.

How opposite these actions are from today's believers to whom marriage is the height of Christian surrender; to whom "balanced" means coming to services only once a week (but are still absent in spirit and thought) and who serve when they feel like it – but even then they serve passively and without interest. This is why our churches today are not effective.

If we continue speaking about even more radical surrender of our possessions we lose members, because many are sensitive to this subject. The truth is that those who give are not as sensitive as those who don't give; and they don't give their possessions to the Lord because they are not surrendered to Him.

The local church is often a mirror the hearts of the believers who belong there. Believers drive brand new cars, buy the latest technology, wear the latest fashions, live in their newly remolded homes, and yet the church lacks the finances necessary to do God's work. The reason – we are not surrendered to Jesus and we don't love Him!

The early radical Jerusalem Christians loved Jesus with all they possessed; and this is

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why they had radical results. “Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common...” (Acts 2:44) They didn’t give from what was left over, they gave all they had because they were radical; they sold their properties in order to give to the advance of God’s kingdom and to those who were in need. The early church was a very mighty and effective church.

In the Old Testament, in many occasions, we can see radical surrender, especially in regards to giving. Of course, giving was motivated by love for God. When they built the temple they didn’t give small change, rather they gave that which was most dear to them. “And whoever had *precious stones gave them* to the treasury of the house of the LORD, into the hand of Jehiel the Gershonite. Then the people rejoiced, for they had offered willingly, because with a loyal heart they had offered willingly to the LORD; and King David also rejoiced greatly.” (1 Chronicles 29:8-9) Radical life surrender of time and possessions, without excuse, is found in every mighty and effective church.

► **2. BEING ACTIVE MEANS BELIEVERS ARE BUILDERS AND NOT PASSIVE OBSERVERS.**

The Apostle Paul said of himself that he was a wise builder. When the Corinthian

church was wrapped up in jealousy and fighting (there is always fighting where jealousy is found) and split up into certain camps of apostles, Paul mentioned that he was a wise builder: “According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it.” (1 Corinthians 3:10) Although this verse refers to healthy and qualitative building in the sense of sound doctrine, it emphasizes that Paul was active in building the church. He wasn’t a passive player – an observer.

Our church can never be mighty or effective if we are passive observers, regardless of our pretenses. In my pastoral experience I’ve noticed that there are certain well-known clichés that show that a person is double-minded and not doing well spiritually. Often I ask myself just how long it will take for them to fall into sin. Spiritual failure always begins when a person begins missing church meetings. Their excuses are signs that God does not occupy first place, because if He did nothing would keep them from coming to His house. It used to be that people joyfully attended church activities, much more than today, while having the same responsibilities that we have – all because they loved Jesus. Today they are an example to us as a congregation.

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The problem we have is that either we are too undisciplined or the Lord is not first in our lives. It has come to the point that to spend two hours in a mid-week service is a burden; some show up after the service is over and spend three hours visiting with

friends because visiting is more relaxing.

One excuse is sickness. Often when people are sick they have no problem doing whatever they must do, but have no strength whatsoever to come to church. In fact, many will go to work out of obligation but will not pick themselves up to sit in the house of the Lord. What kind of warriors are we really? We grow weary at times when ought not to! This is nothing other than deception because often when there are interesting special meetings, a wedding, or a fun outreach we suddenly feel better and find the time to attend. When we find the time and energy to fulfill worldly responsibilities but are not active for Christ and flee God's call we prove that we are not doing well spiritually. What kind of gospel are we sharing?

Let us remember Jesus' parable of the servants who were called to the wedding feast but began to make excuses one by one as to why they couldn't come (when someone says they can't it really means they don't want to because we will always find time to do that which we want to). "...how when one of those who sat at the table with Him heard these things, he said to Him, 'Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!' Then He said to him, 'A certain man gave a great supper and invited many, and sent his servant at supper time to say to those who were invited, "Come, for all things are now ready." But then all with one accord began to make excuses. The first said, "I have bought a piece of ground, and I must go and see it. I ask you to have me excused." And another said, "I have bought

five yoke of oxen, and I am going to test them. I ask you to have me excused." Still another said, "I have married a wife, and therefore cannot come." So that servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house, being angry, said to his servant, "Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in here the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind." And his servant said, "Master, it is done as you commanded, and still there is room." Then the master said to the servant, "Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say unto you that none of those men who were invited shall taste my supper.'" (Luke 14:15-24)

It is very absurd that the passive become angry when no one includes them or when their ministry is given to another who has more time for God's call (don't we all have 24 hours in a day?).

If we want to strengthen our church then we ought not to sit around complaining, instead we ought to get involved in serving our church. Become builders of your local church, not just of the universal church. Members of the universal church are the most interesting, they are so "universal" that they do everything but what they ought to be doing. It is always

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much easier to put your best foot forward when you are in the company of people who rarely see you than when you are at home, because those who live with you know who you really are and don't buy the cliché that "the people 'out there' recognize my qualities".

If we want to build and strengthen our local church we must be surrendered to that church heart and mind. A great problem often witnessed is that people often come to church but their faces show that they are absent and closed off. When an announcement is shared about a gathering or an activity they toss the information aside because they have their own plans with other believers in town. They act as if they are not part of a local body; they come in body but are absent in spirit. Their pastor operates as a technical pastor; they don't wish to receive from him or be led by him. Their spiritual leader is "Pastor Joe Shmoe" from the church across town. When their pastor tells them to go left they want to go right; when the church organizes days of fasting and prayer they impudently boast that they cannot come because they are attending an activity at another church; no church in this condition can be mighty. When have we ever seen this kind of behavior in a successful church?

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God wants believers to actively build the church and not be passive observers who look more like guests than members of Christ's living body. "Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building being fitted together grows into a holy temple in the Holy, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit." (Ephesians 2:19-22)

► **3. BEING ACTIVE MEANS TRUST AND SUBMISSION TO LEADERSHIP OF THE LOCAL CHURCH AND MEANS SURRENDER TO THE VISION AND WORKING OF THE CHURCH**

For the church to effectively function, it is absolutely vital that the believers have trust in those who lead them and that they surrender to the vision and task of their local church. Conversely, when this is not the case nothing important can take place other than the "Balkan Syndrome" where everyone is their master; spiritual, self-willed, and creative individuals who are not answerable to any one system or man because they only listen to what God, Himself, tells them.

This condition is often boasted about in Croatia, many believers call disorder and noncompliance spiritual freedom and creativity, while the Bible calls it witchcraft. "For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry." (1 Samuel 15:23) It's like a vicious cycle, when

people are rebellious and noncompliant you cannot do anything with them other than spin with their cycle and suffer for years until finally they leave the church and “become a blessing” to others.

Not one church can be strong and effective if it is not submitted and led. The church cannot lead itself. To be sure, you have churches where everyone leads someone and everyone can become a formal leader, but ultimately confusion and disorder is their ruler and these kinds of churches do not last long (other than perhaps for good fellowship, if that is their goal).

When the Bible speaks about believers needing to submit to their pastors and leaders, Paul used as an example Stephanas’ household who were consecrated to serve the saints. He wrote to the Corinthian believers to submit to them and not only to them but to all who worked and labored with them – in other words, to their other leaders. “I urge you, brethren – you know the household of Achaia and that they have devoted themselves to the ministry of the saints – that you also submit to such, and to everyone to works and labors with us.” (1 Corinthians 16:15-16)

Similar to Hebrews where the writer says, “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. And I appeal to you, brethren, bear with the word

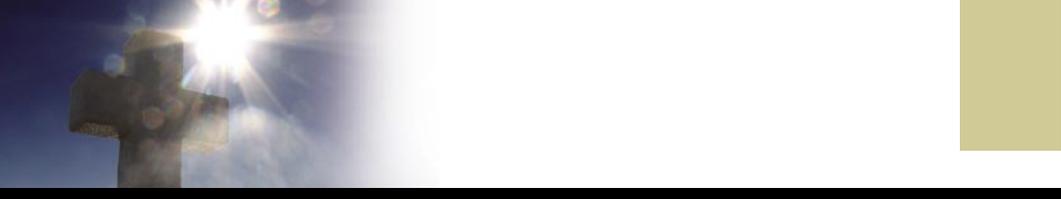
of exhortation, for I have written to you in few words.” (Hebrews 13:17, 22)

The Greek word for “obey” has a very interesting explanation: peito, meaning to have faith in, to depend on, “rule over you” in the Greek is hegeomai meaning, “those who lead you forward; those who lead, rule or govern. In other words, God governs us through His pastors and leaders.

It is impossible to lead people who do not wish to be governed because they govern themselves; how will the church be effective if believers do not have trust and will not listen to those who do not lead them? A leader who doesn’t have a following is only taking a stroll. This is why the church is paralyzed, because believers lead self-willed lives governed only by themselves.

You can only grow and be effective if you support the vision of your church with your whole heart. Every church needs to have its own specific vision and way of functioning. If you want your church to grow, and if you want to grow with it, you must unite with it; otherwise you will turn to murmuring and doubting or silently demolish the work of your congregation with your passivity and your failure to participate. It is also very important

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to constantly and wholeheartedly pray for your pastor and leaders; if you half-heartedly pray for them you will begin to complain and consequently become passive. However, if you bless them and pray for them earnestly you will have a peaceful, godly, and worthy church that respects those who lead. Paul told Timothy, "Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority..." (1 Timothy 2:1-2) Do not pastors and leaders fall under the group "all who are in authority"? This is why we need to pray for them.

Therefore, to have a mighty church means to decide that we will be radical in surrender, activities, giving of our time and possessions; that our hearts will be dedicated to our church; that we will submit and pray for those who lead us. If we don't, before us

lies a vicious cycle that will bring years of frustration without visible results. Let us make the right decision to strengthen our church, to close off the places where the enemy has jurisdiction, and to allow God to build a healthy church through us!

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