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What is church for?

By Chuck Richardson

The church is the called out of the world of darkness ones {1Pe. 2:9}, and into Christ ones {Ro. 6:3}; called as saints (holy ones) {Ro. 1:7; 1Co. 1:2}, called into fellowship with Jesus the Christ {1Co. 1:9}. This fellowship is with those who have received the same faith {2Pe. 1:1}, drawing us into a unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, of which we're to keep with all diligence {Ep. 4:3}. And with this frame let us explore the purposeful activity of this fellowship.

The fellowship of the church is centered on the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ {Ro. 6:4}. So, it is fitting that the fellowship gathers to celebrate Christ's work in making this fellowship possible {Ac. 20:7; 2:42}. Thus, we discover the admonishment of the Hebrew writer: not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near. {He. 10:25}

Regular congregational worship is necessary to the vitality of the church; so, we don't "go to church", but we are the church, gathering often to stimulate one another to love and good deeds {He. 10:24}. We are to be build one another up {1Th. 5:11}, in fact, even though we can do all things lawful, not all things are helpful, so we are governed by what edifies {1Co. 10:23}. Therefore, the church is a fellowship of Christ, governed by the will of God {Ro. 12:2}, and the needs of one to another and others {Ro. 12:9-13}. The church will please God when she is engaged in these two things and if she does not then she is not HIS church {Re. 2-3}.

We conclude our fellowship is only as good as our participation in the works of God with one another, "so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another." [Re. 12:4,5] Are you like those James addresses? {Ja. 2:14-26}

Thus, just as James speaks of a problem with work-less faith, we too may be guilty of the same. In fact, I believe it is a prevalent problem in the church today. In thirty-nine years as a Christian, I have been a member of 14 congregations in 6 states ranging from 11 to 130 members (7 organized with elders and deacons), and in the majority of the churches there were significant differences of fellowship practices. My first observation is in assembly attendance, this being a fair benchmark of other fellowship practices. Sunday morning bible study attendance was 10% less than morning worship, Sunday morning worship attendance was 20% greater than Sunday evening worship, and mid-week bible study attendance was 10% smaller than Sunday evening worship. I'm convinced this is not a shock to anyone who worships regularly, and I'm equally certain my experience is by in large typical. Sad to say at the least, but my aim isn't to surprise or merely record my experience, but to awaken our spiritual senses to the need to remedy this tragedy.

But alas, this is only a benchmark of attendance, what about the fellowship as God intended: active pursuit of work in the kingdom with and on behalf of one another? I believe the sadder number, though indicative of the attendance record, is the participation in the work of the church of which we're to stimulate in

assembly {He. 10:24,25}. That number is more discouraging because it represents the real health of the church in her respective community.

So, from my historical experience, approximately 10 to 15 percent are regularly active with and on behalf on one another. To be fair-minded, this number reflects consistent regularity with a Christ-like desire. There is another 20 percent who dedicate service to the Lord on occasion, but this is still less than half. Recognize that when I use the term *service*, I'm including all works God has called the church to perform {Ro. 12:6-8}. Again, we must understand this reflects our view of church. Is church a place to go? Is church a place to go at specified times for certain religious activities? Is church a place to go to get from others what you believe is your right as a Christian? Think of this last one as a spiritual benefits package to ensure a heavenly reward. If any of these questions reflect your belief, then you don't know what church is.

Remember, I said this isn't merely to point out the misconceptions or to harangue about the problem. I desire an awakening in all of us, and I say all because at one time or another, and in bits and pieces along the way as well, I have been in the negative percentages above. But awareness is only the first step. We must adjust, modify, and correct poor fellowship practices in order to have fellowship indeed, so I will give some ways we can increase and strengthen our fellowship.

I close with this thought from Paul to his brother Philemon, "I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints; and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake." [Phi. 4-6]

To be continued next article