

Equipping the Church

Part 1: 'Spectator or Team Member?'

Within thirty years of Christ's ascension, the gospel was being preached in every outpost of the Roman Empire. Unencumbered by mortgages, committees, staff salaries and conflicts between choir rehearsal and the Church cricket team practice, the 'followers of the Way' blazed a trail of stunning success across the nations. The growth of the Church was phenomenal. As the Church of Jesus Christ exploded in those first few centuries, it thrived in hard times and endured dreadful persecution.

The early Church had so much going for them, but three strengths really stood out. The first was the observable presence of the living God in their hearts and in their midst. Secondly, the gatherings of the Church were an informal and often-boisterous affair with a full-on meal, not just a polite ceremony with a scrap of bread and a thimbleful of juice. Church life was a floating celebration, a continuous progressive dinner with everyone eating at each other's houses and all participating in the festivities. Thirdly, when they came together as the Church, everyone was the star of the show, everyone was needed. Spirits were lifted, problems were solved, hurts were healed, hearts were fed, and the Lord of Lords spoke to every soul. But the most outrageous part of the meeting, the "love-feast" (Jude 12), resembled a cross between a grand final victory celebration and a new year's eve party. From our vantage point today, it looks as if they had an unbeatable thing going. A sure-fire, runaway, free-wheeling style of Church that was gobbling up Satan's territory like a giant pacman and expanding in size and impact at an unbelievable pace.

So what happened? Why did that roaring success in the early days of the Church fade? When did we cool off? Well, as the Church grew larger and more popular, our feeling of being a distinct family waned. The Church became less of a revolutionary band and more of a static establishment. It changed from being an organic, Spirit-led, transformational movement into a human organisation. The final straw came in AD 313, when Emperor Constantine signed the Edict of Milan, officially tolerating the Church and ending years of persecution.

Church leaders from popes to local bishops got involved with the government. Many even became officials. At that time it looked like a good idea. ("Hey, we won! Now we can take over!") However, as it turned out, it was a really bad idea. Our top leaders drifted away on a long power trip and let their flocks wander. Before long, we ceased being an interactive family; a dynamic, well equipped army - and we soon became an audience. Team members became spectators of the elite few who were given 'up front' roles.

Now the biggest blunder of all came when the Church began constructing buildings which would become their new 'home.' No more meetings in the catacombs and forest glens and no more warm, precious get togethers in someone's living room. Modelled after the Roman pagan forums, the new buildings now held hundreds of Christians - all sitting in rows looking towards a podium and platform where the important people were speaking.

Of course, you can't have intimate, easy interaction with that size crowd and in that setting. So from the first Sunday they were opened, these new sanctuaries put limits on free expression. The new crib ended up strangling the baby. Imagine you were living in that time: You may have felt at ease confessing a sin to a couple dozen friends in Josephus' and Elizabeth's living room - but in front of five hundred strangers? No way!

If God taught you something this week and it lay strongly on your heart, you wouldn't hesitate to stand up and spend ten or fifteen minutes sharing it in Joe and Betty's living room. But here in this fancy new hall, there are probably at least fifty people with a message burning in their hearts. So take a number!

Also, over at Joe and Betty's, everybody got into the act in the worship time. You were able to praise the Lord from your heart - again and again as you felt led. It was the most meaningful and healing moment of your week. But here? Not likely – only the really good speakers, singers and musicians were given that opportunity.

Without modern acoustics or roving microphones, open meetings with so many involved became difficult. So closed meetings took over. Gradually the speaking became centralized in a pulpit and order was maintained. (Again, it seemed like a good idea at the time.) Back at Joe and Betty's, you were a participant. Here, you are a spectator - a passive listener - a face in the crowd. At first you don't mind it - the change is exciting and being with 500 believers at once feels like paradise!

Time marches on and now, with 1,000 eyes focused on the pulpit, the man behind it has become extremely important. He's very, very good, of course - probably the best speaker in the area. His warmth and wisdom and skill defuse any latent objections to this new state of affairs. Certainly, his polished sermons beat the sandals off the impromptu teachings you used to hear - and give - at Joe and Betty's place. So it doesn't take long before every local Church from London to Alexandria has its own building and its own professional Christian standing up the front every Sunday, doing all the talking. Eventually, the love-feasts got so big and rowdy they were banned. Everything changed.

Yet we see no prophet or Godly leader standing up, mourning the passing of the house Church or condemning the new diversion of Church funds into real estate development. No one of any importance questions taking initiative away from ordinary believers and bestowing it upon a new priesthood class; nobody dared point out that the Scriptures don't sanction any of this and nor does this look anything like the Church Jesus Christ birthed.

Of course meeting in larger numbers in a purpose-built sanctuary was not a great problem in itself – if this was an innovative *addition* to all that was happening in the Church it might have been a really positive development. But it wasn't an addition – it actually replaced most of what the Church used to do and be. House churches, shared fellowship over a meal and every-member-ministry – was all gone. Everything which defined the Church was replaced with these new centralised meetings.

By A.D. 400, just 87 years later, the Roman Empire had gone from being less than four per cent Christian to eighty per cent Christian ... but with almost no conversions! The government just decreed that you were Christian. True evangelism virtually disappeared from the face of the earth during that time. Think about this. The life-changing, nation-transforming power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ did not regenerate the hearts of these new Christians – they became Christians because their government declared them to be so. The power and reality behind that phenomenal growth in the early years of the Church was gone! It was arguably the worst disaster to hit the earth since Noah and the flood! In fact, I believe all the major problems of the Church today - other than sin - can be traced back 1700 years, to when the Church became an audience. When we switched from living rooms to Church buildings and professionally staffed the local church, we lost all momentum. When people were declared 'Christian' without being transformed by the power of the gospel, the local Church became weak and cold and ineffective.

Non-priests were now seen as 'lay people' a term not even found in the Bible - for good reason. As a lay person in a fourth century Church building, you no longer approached God directly. The priest did so on your behalf. And thus an architectural decision turned into a serious doctrinal problem. The priesthood of all believers was forgotten or ignored and the Church began to die from within.

The Bible was taken from the hands of the lay people and given to the priest. This was a logical step - after all, if you're not allowed to decide what it means, why bother reading it? With the Scriptures out of the hands of the people, the priesthood was free to play with it unencumbered by the corrective discipline of the wider Church. For a thousand years, cloistered monks lovingly piled theological baggage on top of the Bible until, by the time of Martin Luther, hardly a lay person in Europe could even begin to tell you what 'justification by grace, through faith' meant or why it was so important. Without the Scriptures to lift them out of the darkness, lay people turned into serfs in the feudalism of the Dark Ages. Ironically, in that darkness the only candle of hope and upward mobility was the Church. Becoming a priest was the only way out of oblivion.

The medieval Church is often praised for providing this sole escape hatch from the pit, whilst we conveniently forget that the Church helped dig that pit in the first place! The early Church had so much success and momentum that they logically should have evangelised everyone from Turkey to Tokyo by A.D. 600. But that didn't happen.

What went wrong? As I said, the Church got so big and popular that it decided to follow the pagan way and erect its own buildings. Unfortunately, this solved a long-standing problem that was actually never a problem! Whenever a healthy house-church got too big for its living room, it had to split - into two living rooms – then three – then four. New leadership was thus always being trained and raised up to meet the growing needs of this organic, grass-roots, rapidly multiplying Church. But when Church buildings began to sprout across the Empire, Christians no longer had to face the awkward anguish of who got to stay with the favourite elders and who had to split off with the new leaders. Everybody stayed with everybody. It was heavenly!

The trouble is, sharing, intimacy and one-on-one ministry were impossible in a crowd of 500. And the bigger the crowd the higher the importance of eloquence for those who spoke or sang or played an instrument. So the stuttering new converts now stayed in their shells. Anonymity replaced fellowship. Communication during meetings began to be dominated by the few who could read and had access to books: In the end, that meant the priests. The laity, citizens of a long-crumbling Roman empire, were turned into spiritual eunuchs and lost the strength the empire needed so desperately at that time. By A.D. 476, Rome fell for the final time and the Church led the way into the Dark Ages.

Now a thousand tear-stained years later, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli & Co. began picking up the pieces in what we now call the Reformation. They put Christian theology back together like a lovely jigsaw puzzle. They also worked a bit on the Church's practices and functions, and got about half of them glued back together, more or less. Fabulous work. The best fix-it job since Nehemiah. But they couldn't do everything. Rome wasn't built in a day and nor was it unbuilt in a day. So the Puritans had to pick up some more pieces. In the 18th Century, the Wesleys picked up some more. In the 19th Century, the revivalists and missionaries picked up more. Early in the 20th century, the Pentecostal movement picked up even more.

But more reform was needed and so there's still a gigantic hole in the Church. The 'priesthood of all believers' - the central goal of the Reformation - has only been restored theologically – it has a long way to go practically. It still exists mainly on paper. In very important ways, our Churches remain the way they were after Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of Rome and then dictated how that religion would operate. Between clergy and laity there is still a big, un-crossable gap - academic, professional, and liturgical. Lay people today have regained the Word of God, but not the work of God. The priesthood of the believer has been restored in theory more than in practice. The very earliest Christians had plenty of problems, but the clergy-centred Church was not one of them. Their Churches were elder-led, and the burden of God's work was spread across all believers like dew on a paddock.

Everyone was a minister of the gospel and everyone was equipped to advance the kingdom of heaven by God's grace and for God's glory. There were no spectators – only team members.

The New Testament only makes sense within the context of the early Church. So many of the exhortations we have in the New Testament only make sense when the Church looks like and functions like the Church Jesus birthed and the Spirit empowered to change the whole world. Let's look at just a few of those exhortations and allow me to emphasise some words here.

1 Corinthians 12:7

"But **to each one** is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

Romans 12:6-8

"Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, **each of us** is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness."

1 Corinthians 12:8-11

"For **to one** is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and **to another** the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; **to another** faith by the same Spirit, and **to another** gifts of healing by the one Spirit, and **to another** the effecting of miracles, and **to another** prophecy, and **to another** the distinguishing of spirits, **to another** various kinds of tongues, and **to another** the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing **to each one individually just as He wills.**"

Ephesians 4:7

"But to **each one** of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift."

1 Corinthians 14:26

"What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. **Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.**"

Ephesians 4:11-16

"And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, **to equip the saints for the work of ministry**, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to **grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ**, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and builds itself up in love."

Hebrews 13:20-21

"Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, **equip you with everything good for doing his will**, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."

Just from those seven New Testament excerpts (and there are many, many more), we can see that God's intention was that every single disciple would become a spirit-filled, spirit-led, fully equipped minister of the gospel, exercising their specific gifts as God intended. **There were no spectators – only team members.** There was no 'clergy' and 'laity' – only disciples operating within their calling and gifting. Yes, there were leaders and overseers, but they were never elevated above those whom they led. They led alongside them. There were no separated, elevated coaches, only player-coaches.

No doubt you have heard the old saying, '*Those who can – do and those who can't – teach.*' It is a derogatory dig at those in leadership who have separated themselves from the 'real people' on the ground and in the front line of the battle. Well in the New Testament Church, that was never the case because those who taught were also those in the front line of ministry, side by side with the ones they were called to nurture, teach and equip. Every disciple of Jesus Christ was expected to grow up into Christ and be equipped with everything they needed to do God's will. Some of those gifts were leadership gifts, but there were many, many more gifts bestowed upon the people and all of them were needed to work in concert with each other.

The further we drift from the New Testament model, the more impotent, irrelevant and ineffective the Church becomes. Right now there are millions of Christians around the world praying for revival and for the kingdom of God to rise up and overcome the kingdom of this world. But when asked how that is going to happen, most believers say they don't really know and that such things are in God's hands. What utter balderdash! Download this sermon and read those seven New Testament passages again which I just shared with you. God has made it abundantly (and embarrassingly) clear that He has chosen us, His people, to achieve His will and fulfill the mission of Christ. In fact, you can go all the way back to 2 Chronicles 7:14 and read where God said,

"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

In our context today, God is effectively saying,

"If my people, whom I have called and empowered to fulfil My mission on earth, will recognise their calling, accept their gifting, and receive the equipping I give them along the way, then they will see revival, then they will see the wonder, the beauty, the power and the effectiveness of the Body of Christ as My Church transforms the world in which they live."

So my friends, as God has reminded me again of my calling, my purpose and my assignment within His kingdom, I will be giving Him the chance to do the same for each and every one of you over the coming months as I begin this new teaching series entitled, "*Equipping the Church.*" I have no idea how long it will run, that's up to God. But I do expect the Lord has a lot to teach us and even more to remind us of - because we all forget.

We will explore many different issues and ministry priorities and discover some real keys to advancing His kingdom on earth. When the Church is functioning as it was meant to; when every member accepts their role in the Body of Christ; when each disciple of Jesus exercises their gifts, no matter how large or small they might seem – then the result is as dynamic and amazing as the video I want you to see in a minute.

A number of years ago as I was preparing to preach to a combined Churches service in Yamba, I came across a brief YouTube video which had a profound and prophetic impact on me. The video itself is great and millions of people have enjoyed it over the years. However, I doubt that many of them saw what I saw that day. When I finished watching this clip for the first time I felt tears rolling down my cheeks and my heart was beating so powerfully in my chest I thought it would burst. What I saw and heard was amazing in itself – but something deeper was happening in me that day.

I heard that unmistakable voice of God's Spirit saying, "*That is the Church I am building and when everyone fulfils their calling and exercises their gifts together as one harmonious orchestra, the impact will be even greater than what you just saw and more overwhelming than what you are feeling now.*"

There are many analogies of the Church: a family, an army, a hospital, a body. Another powerful picture of the Church in action is that of an orchestra and that is the image of the Church I want you to focus on now as you to watch this video and don't just enjoy what you see and hear – look and listen for the prophetic declaration of God as He shows us the power and the beauty and the impact of a fully alive, fully engaged, fully united and fully equipped Church.

To view the video, turn up your sound and click the link below:

<https://youtu.be/kbJcQYVtZMo>