

1. God's Model for the Church

by Chuck Smith

The book of Acts provides a model for the church, a church that is led by the Spirit, teaches the Word, and develops oneness, and when the church is what God intends it to be, He will do what He wants to do for the church.

Topics: "Model for the Church", "Spirit-led Ministry"

Description

Chuck Smith emphasizes that the true model for the church is found in the book of Acts, where the early church was dynamic, Spirit-led, and focused on the teachings of Jesus. He critiques the failures of church history, urging believers not to judge Christianity by its imperfect examples but by Christ's teachings of love, mercy, and service. Smith highlights the importance of prayer, fellowship, and the Word of God as foundational elements for a thriving church, warning against the dangers of seeking personal glory or church growth through worldly means. He encourages pastors to minister faithfully to their congregations, trusting that God will add to the church as He sees fit. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a return to the Spirit-led practices of the early church to fulfill God's purpose.

Transcript

"Upon this rock I will build my church..."

Matthew 16:18

In Calvary Chapel we look to the book of Acts as the model for the church. We believe that church history, for the most part, has been a sad and tragic story of failure. Many horrible things have been done in the name of Jesus Christ under the banner of the church.

When I went to college I had a very difficult time because when the professors found out I was a Christian, they would start bringing up issues of church history that I was all too familiar with. My only response was, "Look, don't judge Christianity by the imperfect examples that we have seen in history. Judge it by Jesus Christ. Let's go back to what He said and what He taught. He taught, 'blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy.' Do you have a problem with that? He taught that we should love one another. Do you have a problem with that? He taught that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Do you have a problem with that?" When you talk about the basic teachings of Jesus, even skeptics have to confess that they don't have a problem. What they do have is a problem with people who have claimed to be Christians and the things they have done in the name of Christ.

In the book of Revelation, Jesus was addressing the problems of the seven churches of Asia. Even at this early date, Jesus was calling the churches to repent. He pointed out the flaws that existed, the false doctrines that had crept in, and the practices that were already sowing seeds of decay within the church. For the most part, the church had failed by the end of the first century. Gnosticism and Arianism had begun to creep in. The development of a priesthood and the establishment of church organization started early on in the history of the church. In the book of Revelation, Jesus expressed His displeasure with all these things in His letters to the churches.

Now this was less than sixty years after the church was first founded. So it didn't take long to become so corrupt and lukewarm that the Lord was ready to spew it out of His mouth. It was nauseating to Him. As I look at church history, I don't think that things have improved. The church has only deteriorated even further. The things that the Lord spoke about to the seven churches are things that He could very well say to the church today.

So you can't look at church history and find the model for the church, just like you can't look at the history of mankind and find God's divine intention for man. Man is fallen, and so you don't see the divine ideal. The same is true of the church. You don't see the divine ideal for the church by looking at church history.

The divine ideal is found in the book of Acts. This was a church that was dynamic. It was a church led by the Holy Spirit and empowered by the Holy Spirit. It was a church that brought the Gospel to the world. Paul, writing to the Colossians some thirty years after Pentecost said, "For the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel; Which is come unto you, as it is in all the world; and bringeth forth fruit, as it doth also in you, since the day ye heard of it, and knew the grace of God in truth;" (Colossians 1:5-6). The first believers experienced a church effective in bringing the Gospel to the world.

Looking at the book of Acts, I believe we see the church as God intended it to be. The model that we find in the book of Acts is a church filled with the Holy Spirit, led by the Holy Spirit, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. It was a church where the Holy Spirit was the one directing its operation and ministry.

How dependent was the early church on the Holy Spirit? We find the Holy Spirit saying, "Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away." (Acts 13:2-3) Paul uses such phrases as, "For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us." (Acts 15:28), and "they assayed to go into Bithynia: but the Spirit suffered them not." (Acts 16:7). These were men who were led by the Spirit, guided by the Spirit, and who sought the direction of the Holy Spirit.

We see in the fourth chapter of Acts how, when they were faced with heavy persecution, they prayed and sought the help and guidance of God. It was then that the Holy Spirit came upon them afresh, and they went forth speaking the Word with boldness.

There were four basic functions of the early church. Acts 2:42 tells us, "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." These four foundations must be instituted when developing a fellowship of believers. If we lead people to continue steadfastly in the Word of God, teaching them the apostles' doctrine, bringing them into fellowship in the body of Christ, participating in the breaking of bread, and being people of prayer, we will see God meet every other need.

The Lord certainly took care of everything for the church in Acts. "And the Lord added to the church daily, such as should be saved." (Acts 2:47). Never forget that it's not your job to add to the church. That's His job. Your job is to feed the flock, tend the flock, love the flock, and see that they're well cared for. This is especially true for a smaller flock. The Lord said, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord." (Matthew 25:21). The Lord's not going to make you a ruler over many until you've been faithful with a few. Don't constantly be thinking, "Oh, but I wish we had a thousand here!" or "I wish we had five thousand here!" Minister to those eight or ten people that you do have. Be faithful in ministering to them. Be faithful in nourishing them, and the Lord will add daily, as He sees fit, those that should be saved. The size of the church is not your concern, nor should it ever be.

Now if you look at most church programs today, the chief goal is trying to add to the church. There are all these growth programs and seminars that try to show you how to add to your church. Well, it's very easy. You don't have to pay \$175.00 for a seminar to find out how to grow a church. Just get the people into the Word. Get the people in prayer. Get them in fellowship and the breaking of bread, and you'll find that the Lord will add to the church daily those that should be saved.

One of the wisest things I ever did when I was still involved in a denomination was to stop counting the number of people. The church always had this chart on the wall that showed Sunday School attendance today, last Sunday, and a year ago. There was a constant emphasis on numbers. People were always being reminded of attendance statistics. "Where are we in relationship to last Sunday?" "Where are we in relationship to a year ago?" "Where is everybody today?" "Why is it that we're down?" The people were constantly interested in numbers. The trap of counting heads is a terrible snare to fall into. Don't do it! Just look at those that are there and realize, "These are the ones that the Lord has brought for me to minister to today." Give them your best, and minister to them from your heart. Minister to them diligently. As you're faithful, and as you prove yourself a faithful steward, the Lord will bring you more people to watch over, to care for, and to minister to. So be faithful to those that God has placed under your tutelage.

In the book of Acts, we see that some problems arose over a benevolence program in the church. The widows who were following the Greek culture felt they were being discriminated against, and that special favor was given to the widows who were more traditionally Jewish. So they came to the apostles with their grievances. The apostles said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word." (Acts 6:3-4).

So, the Word of God was the top priority in the ministry of the early church, along with prayer. They gave themselves to the teaching of God's Word, to fellowship (koinonia), to the breaking of bread, and then to prayer. "And the Lord added to the church daily, such as should be saved." (Acts 2:47). When the church is what God intends the church to be, when the church is doing what God wants the church to do, then the Lord will do what He wants to do for the church. And He will add daily to the church those that should be saved.

The kind of men that God used in the church in Acts were men who were totally surrendered to Jesus Christ, not seeking their own glory, but only seeking to bring glory unto Jesus. When the crowd assembled upon Solomon's porch, after the healing of the lame man, Peter said, "Ye men of Israel, why marvel ye at this? Or why look ye so earnestly on us, as though by our own power or holiness we had made this man to

walk? The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, hath glorified His Son Jesus." (Acts 3:12-13). Even Peter, after a great miracle, wouldn't take the glory or the credit. He pointed them to Jesus, to bring glory to the Lord through the miracle that was wrought.

Giving glory to God was the purpose in the early church. The men that God used were men who weren't seeking their own glory. This is something that is heavy on my own heart as we look at how men today are striving to be successful, to create a name, to bring glory unto themselves. They're always trying to position themselves so that they're in the limelight, so that the camera catches them. But Jesus insisted, the way up is down. "And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted." (Matthew 23:12).

So live for the kingdom of God. Seek to bring glory to Jesus Christ and the Lord will use you. It is my prayer, my constant and daily prayer, that God would keep me useable. Paul desired the same thing. He wrote to the Corinthians, "But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway." (I Corinthians 9:27).

Success is a dangerous thing. If God begins to bring success to your ministry, you're in much greater danger than if you're just struggling and trying to barely make it in some little insignificant, faraway place with a fellowship of ten people. It's easy to stay on your knees in those kind of circumstances! There isn't much opportunity for you to be glorified. But when success begins to come, that's when the real danger arrives in the ministry. As people begin to look to you, it's so easy to slip into taking the credit or receiving the applause. That's the shortest path to the end of the anointing of God's Spirit. The Bible says, "For promotion cometh neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south. But God is the judge: He putteth down one, and setteth up another." (Psalm 75:6-7). Promotion seems to be the name of the game today. Many pastors spend all of their time and energy trying to promote a church, or trying to promote themselves. But promotion, true promotion, comes from the Lord. So be careful.

The book of Acts gives us the model for the church. It's a church that's led by the Spirit, that's teaching the Word, and that's developing oneness - that's fellowship and koinonia. It's a church that's breaking bread together and praying together. The rest is His work, and He will do it. He will add to the church daily those that should be saved.

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