

# *The Measure of a Strong Church*

#1 in Series: *Let's Be Church*

The practice of gathering together with our church is important:

Hebrews 10:24-25 (NASB)

<sup>24</sup> and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, <sup>25</sup> 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.

Naturally, we desire that our church would be a strong one. But for many churches – that may not be the case. In the NT, there were many good congregations, but some were not what they should have been:

To the church at **Ephesus** Jesus said: Rev. 2:4 (NASB) “But I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love.”

To the church at **Pergamum** He said: Rev. 2:14-15 (NASB) <sup>14</sup> But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit *acts of immorality*. <sup>15</sup> So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

To the **Sardis** church, He said: Rev. 3:2 (NASB) <sup>2</sup> Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God.

To the **Laodicean** church He said: Rev. 3:15-17 (NASB) <sup>15</sup> ‘I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. <sup>16</sup> So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will <sup>[a]</sup>spit you out of My mouth. <sup>17</sup> Because you say, “I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,” and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked

What, then, is the “measure” of a strong church?

Some have considered that the answer to that question is often based on things like the building (or lack thereof), the number of programs, or classes. Sometimes, people think the answer has to do with how smoothly it runs as an organization, with its committees, departments, etc.

But a church can have all these things and still be dead!... I suggest a better measure is to be found when we think of the church in terms used in the Bible to describe it... Terms such as *body*, *family*, *temple*, *kingdom*, and *bride*.

Granted, these are terms used to describe the UNIVERSAL church; but I believe these figures of speech can help us to properly measure the strength of a LOCAL church.

In other words, a “strong” church is one that...

## 1. Functions like a “Body”

➤ **The church is the body of Christ.** Paul said to the Corinthian church:

1 Cor. 12:27 (NASB) <sup>27</sup> Now you are Christ’s body, and individually members of it.

As such, the church is an organism – rather than simply an organization.

You can have organization, but still not have LIFE! (The “foot bone’s connected to the leg bone...” can just as easily be said of a corpse as with a living body.)

➤ **The Body of Christ has many members.**

But, the various “members” of the body do not have the same function:

Rom. 12:3-5 (NASB)

<sup>3</sup> For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.<sup>4</sup> For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function,<sup>5</sup> so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

It goes on to say –

<sup>6</sup> 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;<sup>7</sup> if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching;<sup>8</sup> or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives,

with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

Every member must appreciate his or her own role:

1 Cor. 12:14-19 (NASB)

<sup>14</sup> For the body is not one member, but many. <sup>15</sup> If the foot says, “Because I am not a hand, I am not *a part* of the body,” it is not for this reason any the less *a part* of the body. <sup>16</sup> And if the ear says, “Because I am not an eye, I am not *a part* of the body,” it is not for this reason any the less *a part* of the body. <sup>17</sup> If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? <sup>18</sup> But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. <sup>19</sup> If they were all one member, where would the body be?

Every member must appreciate the function of others:

1 Cor. 12:20-22 (NASB)

<sup>20</sup> But now there are many members, but one body. <sup>21</sup> And the eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you”; or again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” <sup>22</sup> On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary

➤ **The Body must have members who fulfill their function!**

Growth occurs when every part is healthy and functioning well:

Eph. 4:15-16 (NASB)

<sup>15</sup> but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ, <sup>16</sup> from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

We understand that a chain is as strong as its weakest link. So a body’s strength is affected by weak and inactive members!... By the way – categorizing members as “inactive” is un-acceptable – and a church that allows it to remain is weak...

Injury or physical handicaps limit the ability of the body to perform... Strong members may try to help out, but then that limits what other work they would normally do... So – how each of us function as a member of the body affects the strength of this church!

**M.R. DeHaan** – “God cares nothing about our manmade divisions and groups and is not interested in our self-righteous, hair-splitting, and religious, man-made formulas and organizations. He wants you to recognize the UNITY of the body of Christ.”

A strong church is also one which...

## **2. Loves like a “Family”**

- According to 1 Tim. 3:15, **The Church is identified as the “household”**.

By “household” – it means that the church is the “family” of God.

Do we think of each other as “family”?... We should – in light of:

1 Tim. 5:1-2 (NASB)

<sup>1</sup>Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but *rather* appeal to *him* as a father, *to* the younger men as brothers, <sup>2</sup>the older women as mothers, *and* the younger women as sisters, in all purity.

- **A strong family is one where there is...**

Concern for one another...

Care for each other...

Love for one another...

The church at Thessalonica is a good example:

1 Thess. 4:9-10 (NASB)

<sup>9</sup>Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for *anyone* to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; <sup>10</sup>for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more,

2 Thess. 1:3 (NASB)

<sup>3</sup>We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is *only* fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows *ever* greater;

- **To develop a sense of family requires...**

A willingness to get to know one another...

Taking advantage of opportunities to spend time together... That's why we have Community Groups in our church. Every member needs to be in a CG – investing their lives in growing together in Christ... That cannot happen if we don't seek to get to know one another...

How well we one love one another will be a true measure of the strength of this church!... But remember, a loving church is made up of members who are truly a loving people. Are you a member, determined to love your church?

A strong church will also be one that...

### **3. Worships like a “Temple”**

➤ **Temples are built for the glory of the one to which they were dedicated**

The design of the structure itself was designed for worship – to praise the one to whom it was dedicated...

➤ **The Church is God's Temple**

1 Cor. 3:16-17 (NASB)

<sup>16</sup>Do you not know that you are a temple of God and *that* the Spirit of God dwells in you? <sup>17</sup>If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.

We are both the “temple” and the “priests” who offer “spiritual sacrifices”.

1 Pet. 2:5 (NASB)

<sup>5</sup>you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Our purpose is to proclaim the praises of God:

1 Pet. 2:9-10 (NASB)

<sup>9</sup>But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR *God's* OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; <sup>10</sup>for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY.

➤ **How do God's people offer up spiritual sacrifices and praise?**

By lifting our VOICES in song and prayer:

Heb. 13:15 (NASB)

<sup>15</sup> Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name.

By doing GOOD:

Heb. 13:16 (NASB)

<sup>16</sup> And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

By offering OURSELVES as living sacrifices:

Rom. 12:1-2 (NASB)

<sup>1</sup> Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship. <sup>2</sup> And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

How each of us praises God with our voices, body and service is a true measure of this church!... Remember – a church worships the Lord as her members worship. Are you a worshipper of God as was just described by the Scriptures?

And then consider that a strong church is one that...

**4. Submits like a “Kingdom”**

➤ **It is the privilege of the church to be in the Kingdom of Christ**

As were the Colossians:

Col. 1:13 (NASB)

<sup>13</sup> For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son

➤ **A Kingdom suggests a King, to Whom we submit and obey**

**Alan Redpath** (20c British evangelist, pastor and author) – “Before we can pray, ‘Lord, Thy Kingdom come,’ we must be willing to pray, ‘My Kingdom go.’”

Unfortunately, many churches are more like the kingdom of England ... where the king (or queen) is only a symbolical figure head... The true decision-making power is in parliament.

But a strong church is one in which the citizens (members) submit to Christ as King in reality:

Col. 3:17 (NASB)

<sup>17</sup> Whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

Acts 2:36 (NASB)

<sup>36</sup> Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.”

Where things are done as He directs, by His authority

Where we follow His commands, and not make up our own rules

How each person submits to the Lordship of Jesus Christ is a true measure any church.

Finally, a strong church is one that...

## **5. Is pure as a “Bride”**

➤ **Paul thought of the church as a bride**

2 Cor. 11:2 (NASB)

<sup>2</sup> For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you *as* a pure virgin.

Paul thought in terms that he had betrothed them to Christ... Betrothal was a stronger word and concept than modern-day engagement... Today – for many in our culture – engagement is a term used to try and justify living in sin – and can easily be broken off... In the NT times, betrothal was more

of a legal covenant and was a term that sought to honor and guard the time between engagement and marriage of a bride and groom...

The bride (and groom for that matter) has the responsibility to remain pure and faithful...

➤ **Christ thinks of the church as a bride**

Eph. 5:25-29 (NASB)

<sup>25</sup> Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, <sup>26</sup> so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, <sup>27</sup> that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. <sup>28</sup> So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; <sup>29</sup> for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also *does* the church,

Jesus offered Himself to enable His bride to be pure and holy...

He did this out of His great love for her!

➤ **John was told of the future marriage that is coming between the bride and Christ**

Rev. 19:6-9 (NASB)

<sup>6</sup> Then I heard *something* like the voice of a great multitude and like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, saying,

“Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns.

<sup>7</sup> Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready.” <sup>8</sup> It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright *and* clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.

<sup>9</sup> Then he said to me, “Write, ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.’” And he said to me, “These are true words of God.”

Note that bride “has made herself ready”

She was adorned by the righteous acts of the saints...



➤ **As the Bride – awaiting her marriage to her groom – we must maintain our purity and ready!**

By being cleansed through the blood of Christ...

1 John 1:7, 9 (NASB)

<sup>7</sup> but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin... <sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

We demonstrate our faithfulness to Christ by our “righteous acts”

Rev. 19:8 (NASB)

<sup>8</sup> It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright *and* clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.

We are also to abstain from unrighteous deeds

Eph. 5:3-5 (NASB)

<sup>3</sup> But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints; <sup>4</sup> and *there must be no* filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. <sup>5</sup> For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

So “**The Measure of a Strong Church**” is one that...

Functions like a BODY

Loves like a FAMILY

Worships like a TEMPLE

Submits like a KINGDOM

Is pure as a BRIDE

How each person does his or her part will have an effect on the measure of this church...

Be aware however, that we could have the best organization, and all the outwards signs of a strong congregation, but we could still be just like the church at Sardis:

Rev. 3:1 (NASB)

<sup>1</sup>“To the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars, says this: ‘I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.

*“A picture is worth a thousand words”...*

We have just considered five different pictures of the church that are presented in the Scriptures... Yet, there are those here who may not value these descriptions – saying that they really only serve to prove how “out of touch” the Bible is from reality... There are those who say the Bible has become irrelevant to today – because *brides* don’t need to be concerned about purity, and *families* are totally irrelevant and dysfunctional anyway – and for that matter my *body* is mine to do with as I wish with no accountability to another... And certainly *temples* and *kingdoms* are archaic and oppressive...

BE careful... reality is not defined by culture – reality is revealed by God...

Our post-modern *Americanized* culture is especially steeped in the deceptive lies of the enemy of our souls – and if we so easily ignore or dismiss God’s revelation, we will only suffer the consequences of our rebellion prescribed in the Scriptures... In other words, to borrow from another analogy we recently considered in our verse-by-verse study of Galatians – we will “*reap what we sow*” (Gal. 6:7-8).

If, on the other hand – we want to discover and enjoy the realities of healthy human relationships, we need to hear and heed what God has revealed about those relationships in His Word – and *church* is His idea and we will seek, with all our hearts to *be* a church He defines and directs.

Question to consider in CG:

Of the churches Jesus addressed – that were cited in the beginning of the message – which issues seem to be most common today?

Which “description” of the church (body, family, temple, kingdom, bride) helps you the most? Which challenges you the most?

What should a church do about “inactive” members?

How does one know if a church is truly a “loving” church?

What does worship really look like? (Hint, it involves a lot more than singing.)

What does submission to Christ in everything look like? Why does the issue of submission remain a challenge?

What does purity look like for the Christian? How do we become pure, and how do we maintain purity?

How well do these metaphors / descriptions of the church communicate to us today? Why do they present a challenge to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, post-modern culture?

Who defines reality for us? (What is this question really asking?)

What is there in the following statement that needs to be discussed?:

“If we want to discover and enjoy the realities of healthy human relationships, we need to hear and heed what God has revealed about those relationships in His Word – and *church* is His idea and we will seek, with all our hearts to *be* a church He defines and directs.”