

The Church Of The New Testament (Part 5 of 8)

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The Work of the Church

Jesus said in Mark 13:34, "For the Son of man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch." From this statement of Jesus, we learn that the Son of man (Jesus) has taken a far journey (into heaven), leaving his house (the church), "and to every man his work." This teaches me that there is work to be done in the church.

What is the church? Paul said in 1 Corinthians 12:27, "Ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular." The church is not some artificial body from which we are separate and distinct. It is not some cold-blooded corporation. Every person in this world who has heard the gospel of Jesus Christ, and has obeyed the Lord's commandments, having been baptized for the remission of sins with the right preparation of heart, has been added to the Lord's church. The church, therefore, is made up of repentant believers who have been baptized into Christ.

The church is no stronger than the sum of men and women who compose and make up its membership. The church has no more influence than the sum total of its members. The church has no more money than the sum of that which its members possess. And the church has a purpose and a work to do in the world. Surely God would not build the church, and allow his only Son to shed his blood, and bring something into existence that has no reason for existing. The church has a work to do. I cannot claim membership in the church and do no work. The Lord has not called us into the church to be idlers, loafers, and parasites. He has a work for us to do. Therefore, we need to find out what God's will is for the church, and be up and about our Father's business.

I fear that many people have a misconception of the church. The church is a place of work. The apostle Paul compared the church to a race track, in which we "strive" for mastery, in order that we may receive the crown (2 Timothy 2:5; 1 Timothy 6:12). Jesus said in John 9:4, "I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work." And the apostle Peter said that Jesus left us "an example, that ye should follow in his steps" (1 Pet. 2:21).

Too many people think of the church as "the old ship of Zion" for which one may purchase a ticket, get on board, sit down, and be transported into

heaven. If the church is like any kind of transportation, it is more like a rowboat, which does not move or make any progress unless we actively apply the oars. Too many think of the church as a Pullman car, but it is more like the handcar, which must be propelled by the activity of those on board. The apostle Paul said, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2: 12). He also said, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love" (Galatians 5:6). He said, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 15:58). He said, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10). He said that God "will render to every man according to his deeds" (Romans 2:6). Make no mistake about it, Christian friends; the Bible abundantly declares that our acceptance by God will be based upon our activity as a member of the church, because we show our faith by our works.

A working church would solve many of the problems in the church today. It would eliminate much of the quarreling, strife, backbiting, jealousy, and envy found in some circles today. It would solve the problem of worldliness, because idleness and inactivity cause that. If every member of the church worked, it would solve the problems of Christians being found in the wrong places. Too much idle time causes talebearers, meddlers, busybodies and occasions of stumbling. Christian work and activity would be the remedy for all that.

What the Work of the Church is Not

What is the work of the church? It is not the work of the church to try to run the government. Members of the church have no business trying to form political blocs to enforce the law. Jesus and his disciples were never political activists. Jesus stated his position toward government in trumpet tones when he said: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21).

It is not the work of the church to try to adjust labor problems or improve social conditions. I believe that when Christianity is actively practiced it will ameliorate or perhaps abolish labor problems. It will invariably diminish social problems. It will eliminate racial strife. It will cause wars and battles to cease. But this is the result of Christianity in the hearts of men and women, and not the chief aim of Christianity. These things are not primarily the work of the church.

The work of the church is not to furnish entertainment for its members. There is a great area of misunderstanding in the world today along this line. It cheapens and belittles the gospel of Christ to see churches subscribing to the gimmicks and fads of the world in order to attract a large crowd. All you have to do to see that such is the practice is to pick up the newspaper ads and read of churches offering everything from hamburgers to helicopter rides in order to build their growth and attendance. That may succeed for a while, but the growth is not lasting. When a church is built on entertainment and the spectacular, it will always have to start doing something different, because after a time even the spectacular loses its appeal. Today some churches are constantly building modern, air-conditioned "church plants" with plush carpets and cushioned pews. Not content with that, they build fellowship halls, gymnasiums, and recreation rooms. Every self-respecting church has clergy, buildings, budgets, programs, and machines. In the eyes of some, the church is an entity, which holds services, recruits members, sponsors Scout troops, and holds fellowship suppers.

But we need to recognize that the church can exist without even a building to meet in. Brick and masonry have nothing to do with God's presence in the world. The apostle Paul said that "God . . . dwelleth not in temples made with hand" (Acts 17:24). Temples and buildings are not theologically essential to the church's work in the world. In Christianity, there are "no holy places, but only holy people."

The Lord's church has no liberal arts colleges or universities. It has no business owning or operating such. The church is not to determine their teaching staff or general operation. The church is not to finance such. The church existed before there were any schools or colleges. Giving children a secular education is the duty of parents, but it is not the work of the church. The church of Christ, as planned by divinity, has no youth camps. It does not own them or operate them. Camping is not the work of the church. There is nothing wrong with camping or with Christian parents providing such for their children, but it is not the work of the church. The church has no ball teams. The church is not in the entertainment and recreation business. Individuals have a right to play ball or do anything else that is morally right, but the church can operate only in those areas divinely approved. The church has no skating parties or any other kind of parties. Skating parties may be all right in themselves, if morally right, and we are happy to see young people enjoy recreation that is morally right, but that is not the work of the church. Parents bear the responsibility of furnishing recreation for their children. Remember that in all of these areas the thing is not wrong in itself, but attempting to make such things the work of the church or to do such things in the name of the church, or to finance them through the church is something for which we have no

authority.

The church cannot engage in fund-raising projects for its work. The funds of the church come only from the free-will gifts of its members, according to 1 Corinthians 16:1-3; 2 Corinthians 9:7. The church is not authorized to sell products or services. It is not to ask the world for help in financing the church's work. Whatever we do for others, we are to do without charge. The church has no weddings, bridal showers, baby showers, or funerals. These are social activities of Christians, and we do not offer criticism of such, but they are to be carried on by Christian families or individuals, and not by the church. In fact, nothing can be a scriptural work of the church unless it is authorized in the New Testament. Individual Christians may do any number of good works, but nothing can be the work of the church that God did not ordain. Even the weak and wavering prophet Balaam understood this principle. He said, "I cannot go beyond the commandment of the Lord, to do either good or bad of mine own mind; but what the Lord saith, that will I speak" (Numbers 24:13). Well, what is the work of the church?

What the Work of the Church Is

The church has an exclusive work on earth, that is, the bringing of the lost to God through Christ. Jesus described his work in the world in these words: "For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). The church is to do in Jesus' absence what Jesus would do if he were here in person. This is accomplished through three avenues: evangelism, edification, and benevolence. Let us look briefly at these three:

1. Edification

Jesus said to the disciples: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 28:19). Then what? "Teaching them." Teaching whom? Teaching those whom you have baptized. "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20)

Therefore, I learn that every member of the church is to be built up. We are born into the family of God, according to John 3:5. We enter the family or church as babes, weak and frail. What is our first duty? What is the work of the church? To strengthen members of the family. When our children are born into our physical families, we want to see them grow, and, they will grow if they receive three things: (1) The proper food. (2) Freedom from disease. And (3), the proper exercise. One of the works of the church is to provide a place where the child of God can grow

spiritually. It needs the same three things to grow: (1) Proper food. What is that? The word of God. The apostle Paul said, "And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified" (Acts 20:32). (2) The child of God needs freedom from disease, therefore the church must have the proper atmosphere of spirituality and devotion. (3) The child of God needs exercise. He needs some work to do.

There are some things that we receive only from close contact with the service of God and from the King himself. It is the work of the church to provide these things for its members, that they may grow and be edified. Paul reproved the church at Corinth in these words: "Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church" (1 Corinthians 14:12). Many in Paul's time wanted spiritual gifts but Paul said, "Seek to excel." In what? In edifying the church. But what else is the work of the church?

2. Benevolence

Paul said: "Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labor, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth" (Ephesians 4:28). He said again: "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith" (Galatians 6:10). James said: "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world" (James 1:27).

According to the book of Acts, at one time during the days of Claudius Caesar there was a great famine throughout the land of Judea, and the disciples, members of the church, at Antioch, determined to send relief to the saints in Judea, and they did, "every man according to his ability." They sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Paul, according to Acts 11:27-30, not by some receiver, some worldly organization, treasurer or board, but to the elders of the church.

The church is to practice benevolence, and in this way to bear one another's burdens, but the church is not to be reduced to a purely charitable institution. Remember that there were thousands in Jerusalem in the valley of Jehoshaphat and in the valley of Hinnom in the dirt and filth who were poor and underprivileged, but Jesus and the apostles did not engage primarily in that sort of work of relieving their poverty. But what else is the work of the church?

3. Evangelism

The noblest work of the church is preaching the gospel to the lost. It is wonderful to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and give shelter to the unfortunate, but if we fail to teach them the gospel, they will die and land in hell at last. The church is God's missionary society. The great commission is our marching orders. Jesus said, "Go preach the gospel to every creature." Jesus said, "Go . . . and teach all nations" (Mark 16:15; Matthew 28:19). We are to preach the old time gospel. We are to know nothing but Christ and him crucified. The Lord did not commission us to preach our philosophies, our theories, or the wild speculations of men. We are not to preach on any theme except the gospel of Christ.

The church is a divine institution. It is to be always engaged in the spiritual business that God has appointed. Let us devote our strength to preaching the gospel to the lost of the earth. The church is the only institution that is divinely authorized to do so. Let us be actively involved in edifying the members of the spiritual family. Let us be diligent in ministering to the needs of the poor and the suffering about us. Let us never be distracted from these holy, God-ordained pursuits for any other work, no matter how good or worthwhile we might deem it to be.

Let us not be ashamed to declare the whole counsel of God. Men's souls are at stake. Human lives are precious. Upon whose shoulders does this responsibility rest? It rests upon the shoulders of those who claim membership in the church of the Lord. These things and these alone are the work of the church.

By Johnny Elmore, Used By Permission