

The radiant Church



Some of my friends are tired of church-going and have even expressed the need for a break from attending. Have you also thought about that? One of the dangers is that it's easy to drop out of church-going altogether and slowly drift away, often losing our children to the world in the process.

The church is God's prized possession. Even the apostle Paul saw the importance of the local church and once converted, dedicated his life to establishing churches around Asia minor. He suffered misunderstandings, beatings and betrayals, but he never gave up his calling even under intense opposition (2 Cor 4: 7-12).

In the longer term, it was the early church with all its faults and failings which transformed the Roman Empire. Today, local churches around the world still affect communities for good. It's the outcome when people connect with the living God and have an outward focus of service! For that reason and others, I have a very high view of the church and have pondered writing this blog for a few years. Read on

Biblical perspective

The term 'church' dates back to the 5th Century BC. Jesus later took up this term and used the word 'church' only in Matthew 16:18 and 18:17, referring to the 'called out' ones. Acts 2 records the establishment of the church.

Paul develops the understanding of the church in his epistles. Jesus died for the individual, but Paul emphasises that He died for the collective group of believers known as the church (Eph 5:25-27).

'Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.'

Negative Observations:

1. From my experience as a pastor (and advisor), I have probably seen the best and the worst of the local church. If you have experienced hurts from close involvement (and who hasn't), avoid attitudes of cynicism and spiritual pride. We may not notice our wrong attitudes, but others will. It could be that to the degree we judge the church, God will judge us.
2. My wife and I would never speak negatively of the church in front of our children while growing up. After all, why should they want to go to church if we as parents are critical of it? Children often adopt their parent's attitudes.
3. It is far better to leave the local church and join another, than to stay if you have negative attitudes. That way the church is not pulled down by your criticism, and you are free to move on. The way you leave one church could have a bearing on how you embrace the next one. I admire those who leave but are very careful not to gossip about their past experiences.
4. Where there is spiritual abuse or unaccountable leaders and there is no desire for change or growth in them, it is a healthy thing to move on.

5. If you are a leader and people want to leave, don't hold them back as they are likely to go anyway. Wherever possible, bless them in their departure. In the longer term, they may end up multiplying your ministry!
6. Accept the fact that there are historically different Biblical models of doing church outside of your preference.
7. There are times when churches do need to close down, at least for a while. A church opening up again with new wineskins, (Matt 9:16,17) can have great success.
8. One's spiritual growth is stunted by not meeting with the Body of Christ in a small group. This provides accountability and encouragement.
9. Where criticisms about the local church are valid, it should drive us into prayer and even fasting, crying out to God for him to revive it.

Positive Observations:

1. Although Scripture does not specially call the church the bride of Christ, it is alluded to in Matt 25:1-13, 2 Cor 11:2, Eph 5: 21-27, Rev 19: 7,8, 21: 1,2. I have never seen an ugly bride on her wedding day and in the same way, God pictures his bride as potentially radiant.
2. The church is not there merely to meet our needs. Our consumer society leads to self-centredness. Become practically involved in caring for others and you are likely to thrive.
3. Small groups are still an effective way to enjoy worship, Bible study, fellowship and outreach (Acts 2: 43-47). It also fulfils the command to meet together (Heb 10: 24,25).
4. Unless you are involved in church leadership, few people understand the pressures they experience. For that reason, they hugely value your love, friendship and prayers. Where you have a concern, at the right time after prayer, it is better to discuss this matter over coffee with a leader, rather than write letters or tell people your negative thoughts. If you don't think you will get a fair hearing take someone along with you who is emotionally stable. Angry people seldom speak with righteous anger. I know that I have thought my anger was righteous at times, but later see it had selfish motives. Although Jesus could express righteous anger at the right time in the right way, he is known as loving and forgiving.
5. Learn to submit to godly leadership, where that leadership is also held accountable to the congregation. When this occurs, it creates a powerful medium for the Holy Spirit to work.
6. The church can vary widely in its appearance - different worship styles, outreach methods and teaching. Be open minded and respectful of other approaches.
7. There is room for small and big churches. Respect both.
8. Dissatisfaction within the church highlights the importance of seeking God's glory afresh, as the local church is still the 'hope of the world'. Historically, the church is still the most remarkable instrument under the Spirit's power for the transformation of societies for good.

Resources

Dictionary of New Testament Theology Vol1.1, Editor Colin Brown
The Story of the Church, A. M. Renwick
Extreme Church Makeover, N. T. Anderson and C. Mylander