

## INTRODUCTION

We are in a series dealing with some real stumbling blocks of our neighbors, friends, and many others of our culture. Those stumbling blocks deal with perceptions of the Bible and how they see Christianity lived out in our day.

The purpose of wrestling with the issues is to address our own blind spots. It is also to move ourselves to a more deeply rooted understanding of our own faith; and gain, at least, a basic approach to the issues.

The issue for today is probably something that has crossed everyone's mind at one time or another: **There seems to be a big difference in the Christian experience we find in the Bible and what we see today; such as miracles and the way church people behave.**

### The insight has some valid Points:

In the book of Acts, we get a mental picture of the church being people in harmony and miraculous things happening as a matter of course. It sounds vital, exciting, and deep. Churches today have a reputation of being boring, archaic, and rife with all kinds of division and feuding. It just doesn't seem to fit at all.

And that leads us to some **disturbing implications**. If it's not the same, then, how we're doing church must be wrong –or- it simply doesn't work –or- the Bible isn't telling the truth and it's all irrelevant. So, **how closely does our own church reflect what we read?**

Let's go back to the beginning and take a balanced look; and balance is the key.

### 1. THE EARLY CHURCH

I believe it was at a **Promise Keepers convention**. During a lunch break we were outside the Hoosier Dome and there was a group passing out pamphlets. In affect, they were saying that the present church community wasn't really Christian, because it is nothing like the perfect and powerful original church. Was the early church really that perfect, or is that just a notion built over time? Here's what the church of the Bible documents about itself.

In the original gentile church:

**Paul's letters, and other writings to them**, reflect the state of the church like this:

Let's start with Laodicea-

#### Rev 3:

15. ``I know you well--you are **neither hot nor cold**; I wish you were one or the other!

16. But since you are merely lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth!

17. ``You say, `**I am rich, with everything I want**, I don't need a thing!' And you don't realize that **spiritually you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked**.

Here's a church that was physically, very rich. And their wealth blinded them to the fact of how spiritually lazy and shallow they really were. And because they were so comfortable and unmovable; they were really poor and miserable.

#### 1 Cor 11:

20. When you come together to eat, it **isn't** the **Lord's Supper** you are eating,

21. **but your own**. For I am told that **everyone hastily gobbles all the food he can** without waiting to share with the others, so that one doesn't get enough and goes hungry while another **has too much to drink and gets drunk**.

**Communion, the most foundational ordinance** in the Christian church; and people are using as an excuse to pig out and get drunk! And since they are so gluttonous and selfish, they are ***fooling themselves***. They think they're observing the Lord's Supper, but all they've really done is ***taking their bad habits*** from home and practice them in a church setting.

#### **Romans 14:**

5. Some think that Christians should **observe the Jewish holidays** as special days to worship God, but **others say it is wrong and foolish** to go to all that trouble, for every day alike belongs to God. On questions of this kind **everyone must decide for himself**.

The church in ***Rome was a metropolitan church***. It had a mixture of converted Jews who held to the old observances; there were converted pagans from all kinds of backgrounds. And there was a serious tug of war between ***traditional and progressive extremes***. It was causing all kinds of dissention.

#### **2Cor 12:**

20. For I am afraid that when I come to visit you I won't like what I find, and then you won't like the way I will have to act. I am afraid that I will find you **quarreling, and envying each other, and being angry with each other, and acting big, and saying wicked things about each other and whispering behind each other's backs, filled with conceit and disunity**.

From this letter of Paul, we get a ***basic summary*** of what was going on in the church at Corinth; people getting upset with each other; a lot of whispering going on... Let me ask you two questions based on these verses: ***1. Does this sound like the perfect church to you?***  
***2. Does any of it sound uncomfortably familiar?***

Well, we might reason that this is the ***gentile*** church. It's not quite the "original church." The original is in Jerusalem under the Jewish people. That's the church where the walls were shaken and tongues of fire came down. Surely ***that*** church was more the picture of perfection. Let's take a look:

#### **Acts 6:**

1. But with the believers multiplying rapidly, there were **rumblings of discontent**. Those who spoke only Greek complained that their widows were **being discriminated against**, that they were not being given as much food, in the daily distribution, as the widows who spoke Hebrew.

The Hebrew Jews saw the Hellenists, the Jews from Greece as second class Jews. And this cultural bias came right along into the ***daily practice of the Christian church***. -***Prejudice*** against others, even if they were supposed to be in the same spiritual family. Even if it wasn't said openly, it certainly showed up in the way they actually lived their faith.

Well, perhaps that was just the peripheral crowd, surely the core, ***the church leaders*** were closer to perfect.

## Gal 2

11. But when **Peter** had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because **he was to be blamed**;

12. for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision.

13. And the rest of the Jews also **played the hypocrite** with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.

So when people point a finger and say the ***church is full of hypocrites***, we have to agree. But the fact is; it has ***been that way from the beginning***. –The early church was just ***ordinary people***, striving toward an extraordinary God. And that involves a lot of stumbling.

A balanced and realistic view of the ***early church shows it had some glaring faults***. But at the very same time, in the very same places, by the same churches, even the same people; we also read this:

Even as the bigotry was going, there were ***people like Stephen-***

## Acts 6

5. ... And they chose Stephen, a man **full of faith and the Holy Spirit...**

There were people full of living faith and the literal presence of God inside. And this is was the result:

8. And Stephen, full of faith and power, **did great wonders and signs** among the people.

And ***remember Peter, the hypocrite?*** At the same time, this was happening:

## Acts 5

14. And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women,

15. so that they **brought the sick out into the streets** and laid them on beds and couches, that at least **the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them**.

Even as Peter struggled with hypocrisy and the courage to stand up for what he knew was right, he had such a ***reputation for imparting God's healing***, that people were happy if only his shadow should touch them.

And while the practice at one church allowed ***communion to be a selfish drunken party***; and ***bigotry*** affected the sharing in another; there was also this:

## Acts 4

32. Now the multitude of those who believed were of **one heart and one soul**; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but **they had all things in common**.

The early church was a ***complicated mixture of transformed lives, profound miracles, and failures that would make the pagans blush***. It would be nice to think it was all one thing- but that is not real life and that is not real people. Real life is messy; people are imperfect; even as they stumble after a perfect God.

***The same person that awes you*** with their spiritual strength can at another times, leave you shaking your head at the incredible weakness of their failure.

### **Matt 13**

24. Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field;

25. "but while men slept, his enemy came and **sowed tares among the wheat** and went his way.

26. "But when the grain had sprouted and **produced a crop, then the tares** also appeared.

***The wheat is God's seed-*** which essentially, are the people who allow God to grow within them. By Biblical nature; ***those people gather together-*** they are the ***church***. So the ***field*** of this parable ***is*** the church. So the ***struggle of the wheat and the weeds goes on in the church***. God said it would be that way ***from the beginning***. It's safe to say that struggle goes on- ***even in the same heart***. Life is messy; whether it's a garden of plants or a garden of people.

## **2. THE CHURCH TODAY**

When we look at our churches today- we find the ***same faults-*** lukewarmness, divisions, thinly masked envy and anger; people abandoning church in a huff.

And yet, we find the same, ***early church strengths*** in authentic fellowships today. In our own church, there are people performing acts of kindness behind the scenes all the time! You'd be surprised at how often someone is plowing a needy driveway, or mowing a lawn, or bringing food, or just sharing and caring.

## **3. COMPARING THE DIFFERENCES**

However, even in a ***balanced*** view- we can't help but see there was a depth and regularity of profound miracles that we don't see today. Why not?

***One explanation that's been offered is-*** the early church was a fragile minority in a hostile world. And to give it a chance, ***God imbued it with extra power***. I confess, there was a time in my life I accepted that explanation; and then a time I completely rejected it. But now, I see a nugget of truth through a legitimate spiritual principle.

If you follow the literature or sites of organizations like ***Voice of the Martyrs***, ***persecution.com***, or ***christian-faith.com***, you may discern a certain pattern. ***God is working everywhere people are open to Him***. But there is a greater level and frequency of God's thumbprint in areas of sincere Christian growth ***under persecution***.

However, it ***doesn't have to come from misfortune***. Power also comes when we ***venture out on that limb of faith*** to which God calls us. ***Peter didn't need the power of God until he got out of the boat and tried to walk on water!***

And that brings us to a spiritual principle for churches: ***God's hand is manifested to the extent it is needed***. God's gifts are manifested ***in proportion*** to our spiritual action and faith.

**Consider the analogy of a carburetor or fuel injector in a car**, push the pedal to the metal and the car senses a need for speed. In response to the need, there is a pouring of power into the engine in the form of fuel. ...But **if the car is parked**, there is no need for power, and so, only a miniscule trickle flows through, or perhaps, **none at all!**

If a church fellowship is Laodicean; we have what we want physically. **We become very comfortable just the way we are.** ...And that cultivates a tendency not to take **God's call too seriously**; we don't need to **venture out in faith.** ...The big difference in our western churches and the early church is this: **spiritually, our car is parked!** The pedal is far from the metal, and there is no need for God's power.

**But there are a few rumbles in the engine.** There are those in here who have witnessed things on **mission trips.** But, they wouldn't have experienced those things, if they hadn't ventured there. There have been **answers to prayer** (*the prayer team has prayed for thousands*); but that wouldn't have happened unless people diligently prayed. (*The pedal is at least in proximity to the metal!*) ...It might happen on one of our prayer walks, the Alpha course, or some other way God calls. But if we are not "out of the boat", if the car is parked; **there is no need.** **And since there is no need, there will BE no power.**

Our skeptic claims that the church is nothing like the church of the Bible. And **they are WRONG, in the fact that the church has always been imperfect-** and yet, **tremendous Godly things** happened right along with the hypocrisy, imperfection and failing. And that should be a great source of hope. ...But our skeptic is also **RIGHT in the fact that there was a level and frequency of God's manifested power that is rarely seen in our western churches.**

That brings us to the challenge: It is not a question of where God is, but where we are. **Is this church; are you and I -in that place of service- where God's power and Holy Spirit- are actually needed?**

Now, we don't have to go there. But if **we choose to stay "Laodicean"**, lukewarm, comfortable and idle; Scripture promises only **one alternative outcome- God will spit us from His mouth.** (*I'll leave you to envision what that may mean.*)

**I really hope you take this with you; because in a BALANCED view there is wonderful HOPE, but there is also a profound WARNING.** And to have a **real experience** of God, we must **be acutely aware of both- as we live our Christianity.**