

What Constitutes A Strong Church

A look at the New Testament reveals that early in the history of the Lord's church, some congregations were not as strong as the Lord desired. While Paul's epistle to the church in Philippi indicated that congregation to be strong and faithful, his first letter to the Corinthians revealed a congregation inundated with spiritual problems, division and worldliness. A quick reading of our Lord's letters to the seven church of Asia (in Revelation 2-3) shows criticism and calls to repent for every congregation other than the congregation in Philadelphia (3:7-13).

Paul's exhortation to the Philadelphians to "*Hold fast*" points out the importance of knowing what constitutes a faithful and strong local congregation, and diligently applying those principles. Consider the following (with thanks to Mark Copeland's sermon, "The Measure Of A Strong Church"):

A strong church functions like a body. The human body is a marvel, when it is functioning properly. I recently watched a video of an 6'5" athlete weighing 287 pounds, jumping flatfooted onto a platform 55" above the ground. Accomplishing the feat took preparation, training, and a proper diet. His body was tuned in such a way as to allow for maximum effort, and his body produced.

The apostle Paul used the image of a body in referring to a local church (1 Corinthians 12:12-31). He wrote that each Christian had a different function and responsibility (as the different members of a physical body). He indicated that members were to be sympathetic (as are members of a physical body). In another place (Ephesians 4:11-16), He emphasized that if every member does his or her share, the body will "*grow up in all things into Him who is the head — Christ*" (vs. 15). This is referred to as "*growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love*" (vs. 16).

A strong church loves like a family. Most people grow up in circumstances where they are loved by their own. We recognize the importance of family, and are saddened at the plight of the neglected and abused. In 1 Timothy 3:15 the church is referred to as "*the house of God.*" Paul gave instructions for Christians to treat an older man as a "*father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, with all purity*" (1 Timothy 5:1-2). Paul clearly indicated that love should be characteristic of the relationship sustained between Christians (1 Thessalonians 4:9).

As sad as it is when physical families are estranged and unloving — strife, antagonism, and indifference among the people of God is equally disappointing to God, and destructive to the congregation itself.

A strong church praises like a temple. Both the tabernacle and the temple were erected to supply a place where the Jews could gather to worship God. When the Samaritan woman asked Jesus where to worship God, He indicated that the correct place (under the Old Covenant) was in Jerusalem (cp. John 4:22). In the New Covenant, the place of worship is not important (vs. 21). A congregation of Christians can — at anytime and in any location — worship God acceptably, so long as it is done “in spirit and truth” (vs. 23; cp. Romans 12:1).

A strong church submits like a kingdom. Though absolute power among men is seldom seen, and almost universally rejected as a viable form of government, at one time it was common. As a king had absolute power in his domain, the welfare of the people was dependent upon whether he ruled wisely and benevolently.

Fortunately, in the Lord’s church/kingdom our ruler is Jesus Christ. He is king, and has absolute authority (cp. Matthew 28:18). A church cannot be rightly defined as “strong” unless it submits to those parameters which Jesus Christ determined to constitute strength. No other standard matters. Consider the church in Sardis: “*I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead*” (Revelation 3:1). He called upon them to “hold fast and repent” (vs. 3).

It has been said that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Going back to the analogy where the church is described as the body of Christ, the growth of the body comes when “*every part does its share*” (Ephesians 4:16). Every member (individual) in a local congregation is necessary for its edification and growth (cp. 1 Corinthians 12:21-25).

For our congregation to grow, each of us must work (using our God-given talents), love each other, worship God in spirit and in truth, and it all ways submit to His will in our lives. If we do it singly, then collectively we will be the strong, vibrant church that the Holy Spirit calls our congregation to be.

Adapted From Stan Cox