

# What Makes A Great Congregation?

**Introduction.** Seven churches in ancient Asia received a divine report card including the good and the bad in Revelation 2-3. And while we frequently focus on what is wrong with these churches, these chapters are excellent for their details that will make a great congregation acceptable to God. The One who gave us the list is the only One who could make the church a reality, and every congregation claiming attachment to Christ was securely anchored to the list. The list could serve as the elder's primary passage for keeping members sound in the faith, and John wants us to take it to heart.

## ***I. Works***

- A. God knows the works of Christians (Revelation 2:2, 19), and real faith rolls up its sleeves and gets to work (Ephesians 2:8-10; Titus 2:12-14).
- B. Faithful, conscientious Christians respect the simple work of the church as teaching the lost (Philippians 1:3-5; 2:25-30; 4:14-20), edifying the saints (Hebrews 10:25; 1 Corinthians 12:28-29), and being benevolent to needy brethren (Acts 2:44-45; Romans 15:25-27). It also respects that the church's work is not social, recreational, teaching secular education, or political activism.
- C. Faithful, conscientious Christians get involved in the work of the church. Find something in the body that fits your talents and use those talents for God. Every Christian identifying with a congregation should be given choices for involvement and then be encouraged to get busy.
- D. Wise elders know that working Christians are happy Christians because they feel a sense of "ownership," a vested interest in the work of the church. Deacons, make it your goal to do your assigned task, but also to involve other Christians who find that particular area of work interesting. Jesus loves to see a church of people growing in works (1 Corinthians 15:58).

## ***II. Keeping The Church Pure Morally***

- A. Christ had something against Thyatira (2:20) and Sardis (3:4). We have to withdraw ourselves from those who are both immoral and impenitent (2:2).
- B. We all sin (1 John 1:8), but you do not withdraw from people because they sin. You withdraw from them because they choose to continue in sin and refuse to repent. Withdrawal does not make a person lost nor even more lost. It merely acknowledges what is already true: this person is lost because he or she has involved themselves in some sin and simply declines to leave it.
- C. Why was Jesus so determined to express this in the guide book for the church? Because He knew that either the church would be distinctive, or it would evaporate. That is true because, like leaven, sin has a spreading, infectious effect when it goes unchecked within the church (1 Corinthians 5:6). Many churches are no longer recognized by Jesus because they refused to do what the New Testament plainly commanded (2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15).

## ***III. Identifying And Correcting False Teachers***

- A. The statements in Revelation 2:2, 14 and 3:8 imply something we need to hear today. We have a standard of absolute, understandable truth by which to judge

everything and everyone. It simply makes sense that the One who made people and designed the church would also be trustworthy to supply all our doctrine.

- B. Not every Christian who says something in a class or pulpit which is inaccurate is a false teacher. He might have merely misspoken or have been misinformed like Apollos (Acts 18:24-26). Someone is a false teacher when he persists in teaching error that causes people to sin despite the fact that he has been taught the truth (2 Peter 2:1-3; Jude 4).
- C. The church's protection plan against false teachers is elders. A man who would be an elder cannot be a "novice" (1 Timothy 3:6), and it is the elders in a congregation who insure that biblical truth is all that is taught in the church for which they serve (Acts 20:27-28; Titus 1:9).
- D. In the best situation, when the church is surprised by a false doctrine being taught in an assembly, the question would not be, "I wonder if one of our elders will have the courage to come to the podium and correct this?" because every elder present would be ready and able to address the problem.

#### **IV. Perseverance**

- A. Perseverance is a necessary part of being a Christian (Revelation 2:2-3, 13). It is foolish to persuade a man to become a Christian by suggesting his life will necessarily be easier. The devil will make sure living as a Christian is difficult.
  - 1. But Jesus would rather have fewer disciples who are converted than more disciples who are going to give up soon (Luke 14:25-28; John 6:26-27).
  - 2. The heroes of Hebrews 11 make up a great "cloud of witnesses" encouraging us to never give up (Hebrews 12:1-3). Eternity is only a moment away; too much is at stake to quit before the race is run. A great congregation is made up of imperfect people helping one another to keep their promise to never turn back (Hebrews 10:38-39).
- B. The church at Ephesus was leaving her first love (Revelation 2:4). Remember the day you became a Christian? Remember those hugs of congratulations from your new brothers and sisters? Remember how determined you were to live totally devoted to your Master?
- C. This was the fire in the heart of the one who "went on his way rejoicing" in Acts 8:39, But the passion can cool, worship can grow tired and trite, and sacrificing for the cause can eventually fade away. Jesus suggests that you measure your love and passion for the cause from that first moment. Are you at least as on fire for the Lord now as then? Great congregations work hard to keep that first love.

#### **V. Maintaining Genuine Love**

- A. Christians in Thyatira had a love that was known to the Lord (Revelation 2:19). He was the One who commanded love in the first place (John 13:34-35). Paul elevated the importance of love in the church in 1 Corinthians 13:13 to an amazing level.
- B. There is a sense in which love of the brethren rises above faith and hope (1 Thessalonians 4:9; 1 Peter 2:17; 1 John 3:14; 5:2). And this is not a weak, meaningless love that has no practical side to it (1 Peter 1:22-23; 1 John 3:17-18).

## **VI. Staying Alive**

- A. The Lord views churches as either living, dying, or dead (Revelation 3:1). The Christians in Thyatira had strong faith (Revelation 2:19). In judging these churches in Asia He never said anything that would make us believe that size and greatness are connected in a church. Jesus clearly prefers a few devout disciples over a thousand lukewarm ones. This is not about size and not about money. It is about hearts and actions.
- B. Staying alive means having a strong faith (Hebrews 11:6). Faith is the confidence that God is, that He has revealed Himself in the Bible, and that we will be judged by Him (2 Corinthians 5:10). It is a faith that expresses itself in works, and our only hope is in service to Him (James 2:26).
- C. Is our congregation alive? Measure it by the quality of worship (John 4:24). Measure it by the thirst for truth (Matthew 5:6). Measure it by foresight in actively preparing the younger generation to lead the church in righteousness (Proverbs 22:6). Measure it by the quality of preaching coming from the pulpit (2 Timothy 4:2-4). Measure it by the ways Christians are helping one another to be faithful to their Savior (Ephesians 4:11-14).

**Conclusion.** Any philosophy of what makes a congregation great that excludes these qualities is misguided and wrong. These are valid and right because they came from the lips of the One who bought the church with His own blood (Acts 20:28). Every time we say the words “church of Christ” we should think of His ownership and the importance of seeing true growth and greatness through His eyes.