

The Imperfect Pursuit of Perfection

The Tension Between Our Human Imperfections and the Ideal of a Perfect Church

Introduction. We know the Lord's church was crafted in the mind of God before the world began (Ephesians 3:10-11). We know it was built by the Son of God Himself through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Matthew 16:18; Acts 2:47). We know the Lord equipped the church with apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers to bring it to the "unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). We know the New Testament is a perfect pattern, allowing the church to be "complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). With everything the Bible teaches about the church, we should expect to find perfect churches in the world today, but we don't. Why not?

I. Churches in the First Century Weren't Perfect

- A. Before we get too discouraged with the lack of perfection we find in local churches today, I remind you that perfect churches weren't easy to find in the first century.
- B. The closest thing to a perfect church that can be found in the Bible is the church in Jerusalem in the early part of the book of Acts. They "were of one heart and one soul" (4:32), and "continued steadfastly in the apostles doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (2:42).
 1. However, that perfection was soon shattered with the apostasy of Ananias and Sapphira recorded in Acts 5:1-11. Things get worse as one progresses through the remainder of the New Testament.
 2. The epistles showcase local churches that were beset with problems.
 - a) The church at Corinth was a case study in church problems (division, lack of discipline, perverted worship, error concerning the resurrection, etc.).
 - b) The churches of Galatia were foolishly abandoning the pure gospel of Christ after a short period of time (Galatians 1:6-7; 3:1).
 - c) The Thessalonians were held up as examples to all believers of their day (1 Thessalonians 1:7), yet they had a problem with members who would not work (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12).
 - d) Timothy had to guard against those who taught another doctrine in the church at Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3), while Titus had to set the church in Crete in order (1:5).
 - e) Five of the seven churches addressed in Revelation 2-3 had sins of which they needed to repent.
 3. One would be hard pressed to find a perfect local church in the New Testament. What makes us think we can find one today?

II. Does a Perfect Church Exist Today?

- A. I've not found one. I've found that some churches are stronger than others, but every church has problems.
- B. The fault for this doesn't lie with Christ or the New Testament pattern.

1. Local churches are made up of people: people who come from different backgrounds with different attitudes, experiences, values, reactions, habits, levels of understanding, etc.
 2. Given this fact, personality conflicts, peculiarities, protests, pouting, pity-parties, and the party spirit will always persist to one degree or another in every local church. This is unavoidable.
- C. I've yet to find a perfect church because I've yet to find a group of perfect Christians (to say nothing of a single perfect Christian).

III. What Should We Do About Imperfections?

- A. What should we do if we discover we're members of an imperfect church?
1. Should we leave? That all depends on what imperfections we've found and the efforts we've put forth to correct them. Yes, there may come a time when one must leave an unfaithful church.
 2. Interestingly, we don't find this action taking place in the New Testament. We do find Christians moving from one church to another, but not in a search for perfection.
 - a) Aquila and Priscilla are found in different churches throughout the New Testament, but this was because they were actually moving to different places, sometimes against their will.
 - b) Men like Paul, Barnabas, Silas, and Timothy moved around, but they weren't church-hoppers. They were traveling to different cities, doing the Lord's work.
 - c) If anyone would've been justified in leaving a church, it would've been the faithful brethren in troubled churches like Thyatira and Sardis.
 - (1) Yet, surprisingly, they were not told to leave. They were told to "hold fast" and to "overcome" (Revelation 2:24-25, 3:4-5).
 - (2) Their faithfulness was a much-needed positive influence at those churches.
- B. What should we do about the imperfections in the local church?
1. Don't become tolerant of imperfections. Jesus gave Himself to sanctify and cleanse His church, that she should be holy and without blemish (Ephesians 5:25-27). It's our duty to keep her that way.
 2. Be the best member that you can be (Philippians 2:14-16). Imperfections are brought into the church by the members. You need to make sure that you're not a part of the problem.
 3. Be an example for good. Imperfections on the part of other members don't keep us from being the best Christians we can be. Allow your life (including your good attitude) to be a good influence on the church (Romans 16:3-5; 1 Corinthians 16:15).
 4. If necessary, personally address a problem. Perhaps you need to talk to a member about sin in their life (Galatians 6:1; Jude 22-23).
 - a) Perhaps you need to make the elders aware of a situation that needs their attention.

- b) They may be the shepherds of the flock, but that doesn't mean they know everything that's going on. Get involved — but do so with the right attitude.
- 5. Be patient. Old habits die hard. Few lasting changes occur overnight. God gives Christians time to grow, and we need to do the same (2 Thessalonians 1:4; 1 Timothy 6:11).

Conclusion. The grace of God allows for Christians to sin and then repent (Acts 8:22; 1 John 1:8-10). God knows that we're not going to be perfect people, but we should be people who "press on to maturity" (Hebrews 6:1). For our young people, you're going to see Christians who disappoint you, but the local church exists in an attempt to bring us to maturity. Paul said, "Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all" (1 Thessalonians 5:14). If your congregation is imperfect (and it is), then work your best to improve it.

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