

STANDING STRONG THROUGH THE STORM

THE VICTORIOUS CHURCH AND FAMILY



Essence, Function and Form

THE SIMPLICITY OF THE CHURCH

Essence, Function and Form

And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

Colossians 1:18

“Our church is considering whether to relinquish our government registration,” said Pastor Sergei to our *Standing Strong Through The Storm* (SSTS) seminar group in a restricted Central Asia country. No one knew how to respond. The seminar was being conducted in this pastor’s church because it was the only one in the region registered with the central government!

“Why?” someone asked.

“Here is our reasoning,” Pastor Sergei graciously replied. “We have a ‘grandfather clause’ that permits us to be registered even though we do not meet the current requirements to be registered. But I have to file a report with the government each month outlining the number of meetings, who attended and how much money we received from these meetings and people. I find it very difficult to give an accurate report, thereby possibly jeopardizing some individuals who attend our meetings, or to falsify the reports and thereby violate my conscience.”

Pastor Sergei added, “I feel like I am working every day for the NSS (National Security System—former KGB). As a denomination, we are unprepared for persecution. I feel my people would be better prepared for persecution if we met in smaller cell groups and were not registered.”

To register a church in this country, three conditions must be met:

1. A list of at least one hundred members whose last names are Russian or Koreans but no one from one of the traditional Muslim tribal groups.
2. A vote of 100% among the church neighbors favoring a meeting in their area.
3. A building...but few want to rent or sell a building to a Christian group—even if the neighbors approve!

“This is why we are thinking of deregistering with the government and going underground as smaller cell churches,” concludes Pastor Sergei. Then he looks straight into your eyes and asks, “Do you agree?”

What is the church? To understand its essence, function and form, consider the concept of “fishing.” What is required to have fishing? Some may immediately think: a fishing pole and a hook. While helpful, these two items are not always necessary. Whatever is necessary every time in order to have “fishing” would be considered the “*essence*.”

- the *essence* of fishing is whatever the minimum essentials are in order to achieve fishing: a person (or fisher) to do the fishing and a fish. With no fisher there are only fish in the water, and with no fish there is no fishing, only a person spending time by the water. Essence never changes.



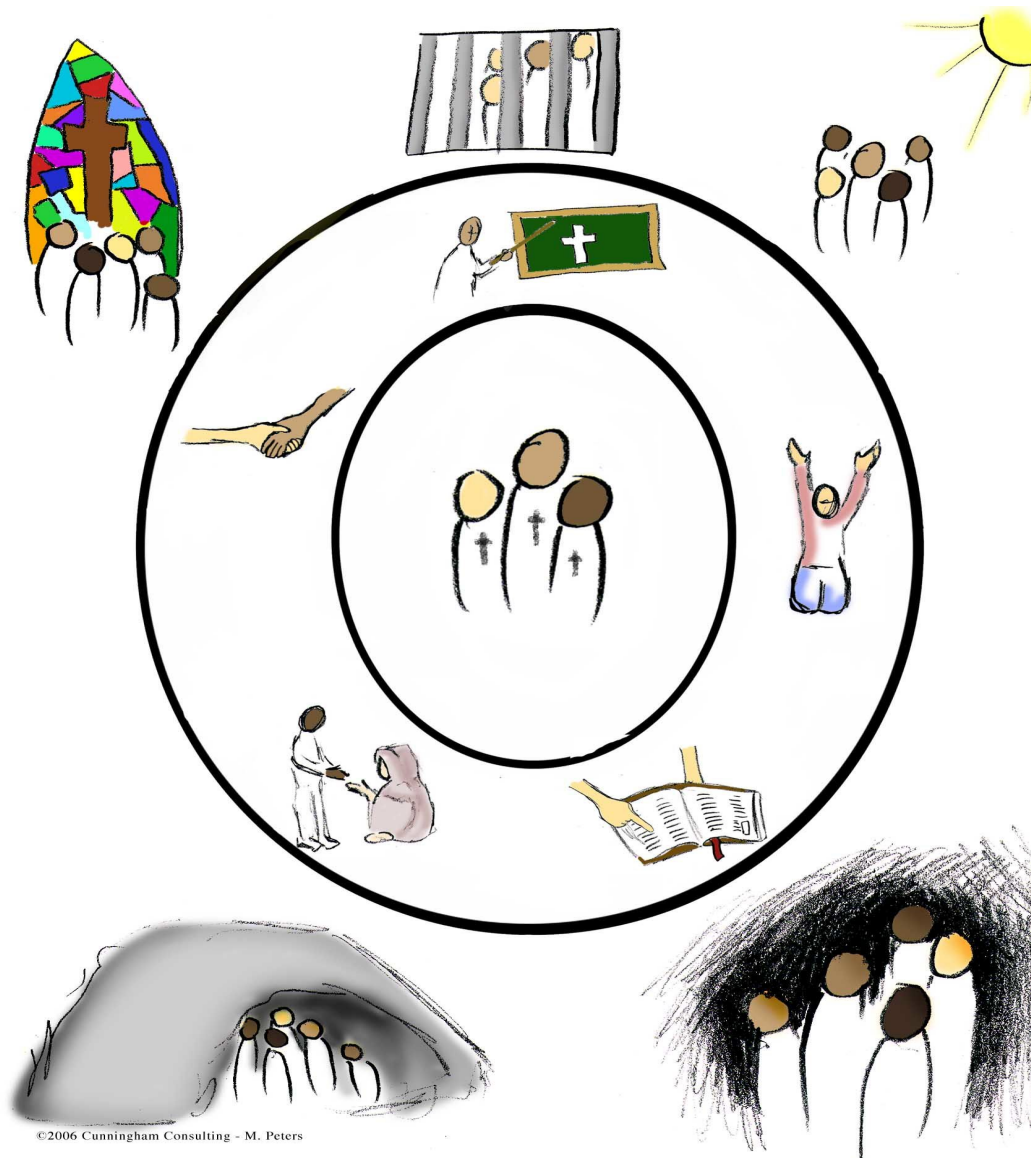
Figure 8

- the *function* of fishing is its purpose: to catch fish. This is the same function every time whether the person is fishing for pleasure, for employment or to escape from other

responsibilities. The function fulfills the purpose of the essence. Function never changes.

- the *forms* of fishing can be as varied as you wish as long as they do one thing: fulfill the function, which is to catch fish. Different countries permit different items and different methods: fishhooks, spears, nets, birds, rifle, dynamite, drain the pond, hands and so on. We are not concerned about laws for the moment, only principles: to fulfill the function and meet the essence. Form, unlike essence and function, can always change.

We can apply the same principles to the essence, function and form of the church.



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Figure 9

- the *essence* of a church is its minimum essentials: committed believers gathered in the name of Jesus Christ.
- the *function* of a church is five-fold: to evangelize (Matthew 28:19); to disciple or train those who are evangelized (Matthew 28:20); to minister to or serve people showing

God's love (Matthew 22:39; Ephesians 4:12); to fellowship together (Ephesians 2:19; Galatians 6:10); and to worship (Matthew 4:10; John 4:23).

- the *forms* of a church are as varied as you wish—meet in a building, in a field, in a home; meet on Sunday, Saturday or Monday afternoon. We are not concerned about traditions for the moment, only principle: Does the form fulfill the function and meet the essence?

To understand the makeup of the church, we must also be able to clearly distinguish the essence, function and form of the church. Essence and function never change but the resulting forms can—and often must—change regularly.

ESSENCE: BASIC REQUIREMENTS OF A CHURCH

The Scriptures give us three requirements that never change for the “essence” of a church. They are:

Personal Faith In Christ

Individuals must trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. When they do, the result is the new birth: “*unless one is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.*” (see John 3:1-17; 2 Corinthians 5:17) By prayer, they can then go directly into God's holy presence.

Two Or More Sharing Faith

One person cannot be a church, since a church is made up of *living stones* and is a body with *members*. (1 Peter 2:5; 1 Corinthians 12:12; Matthew 18:20)

Commitment To Jesus Christ And To Each Other

**Christ is the head of the church and we are the Body of Christ.
Without commitment and submission to Him, there can be no church.**

God draws certain believers together in a special relationship that the Bible calls being *built together* (Ephesians 2:22). Christ Himself brings Christians together in this relationship and directs them to care for each other (1 Corinthians 12:25-26). A church such as this is the work of God and is not merely a human organization.

As we consider this teaching on the church, we can see that there are many misunderstandings about the church. It is not a building; it is not a human organization; it is not headed by a human being; and it does not require a particular group of “ordained” persons or “clergy.”

This does not mean that the church should not “ordain” leaders, or “separate unto the gospel” those who have God-given abilities to lead the church. Nor does it mean that people with no training or experience should be given responsibility in the church, though at times this may be

necessary. When those who show evidence of spiritual gifts and who seriously study the Word of God are ordained, the church can greatly profit by their having been ordained. But when ordination becomes a badge of superiority or a religious “class” division, it is a hindrance to the church.

Ordained people are to be “*servants*” of the church. As servants, they are important and valuable, but they are not essential to the survival of the church in times of persecution. Such leaders, when recognized by the government, may be required to carry out activities normally found in institutional churches in free societies, for example, performing weddings and funerals. Many times, these activities required by the government are not identified in the Bible as basic functions of the church.

The first thing we notice in the Scriptures about our lives as believers is that we are expected to “live” our faith. The miracle of the new birth and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts should be evident in the way we live our everyday lives. Basic principles such as submission to Christ and commitment to well-being of other believers are not to be just ideas. They are to affect the way Christians live.

A women’s group studying this material in Australia noted, “As the Body of Christ, all believers have a mandate to respond to God’s calling and serve in the church accordingly, with or without the contribution of ordained leaders.”²¹

FUNCTION: THE PURPOSES OF THE CHURCH

Jesus Christ ordained five functions for His church to accomplish in our work for Him. We are to *evangelize* (Matthew 28:19); to *disciple* or train those who are evangelized (Matthew 28:20); to *minister* to or serve people demonstrating God’s love (Matthew 22:39; Ephesians 4:12); to *fellowship* together (Ephesians 2:19; Galatians 6:10); and to *worship* together (Matthew 4:10; John 4:23). In the Bible, there is not a priority order for these five purposes. They are all equally important.

Evangelism

Once we know Christ as Lord and Savior, we will want to share our wonderful experience with those we love. Sometimes we find it hard or embarrassing to share the gospel with our relatives and friends. But since we believe that all who are without Christ will suffer for eternity separated from God, and because we love them, we must tell them. No matter how oppressive the culture or the political situation is, we must tell them.

People who are determined to do so can always find ways to share the Good News with their friends and loved ones in a loving, respectful way. Telling God’s plan of salvation to others is an important evidence of our relationship with God. It is also a primary function of the church.

Discipleship

Once we have seen a person come to know Christ, we are responsible to make sure that person grows in the Lord. Many Christians expect that a new convert will learn from the regular preaching

services. Thus, they take no additional responsibility. In some cultures, if a person saves someone's life, that person becomes responsible for the one saved. This is a good concept for the Christian.

Once we have led someone into new life in Christ, we share a responsibility to make sure that person learns what the Bible teaches about the Christian life.

Since the Bible is so important to Christian growth, many Christians want to immediately give a Bible to anyone they lead to the Lord. In some countries, such as Russia or China, Christians have faithfully carried on for years without Bibles. But it has been very difficult for them. They have had to depend on Scripture verses that one of the church members memorized earlier or heard on a Christian radio broadcast. The desperate hunger for the Bible among Christians who have been cut off from it for an extended period dramatically illustrates just how important the Bible is to the Christian life.

Believers in restricted countries find clever and creative ways to protect their Bibles. Some tear the binding apart so that each book of the Bible becomes a separate, small pamphlet. Those trying to destroy Bibles would not recognize these pamphlets as the Bible. This also makes it possible for many people to use one Bible at the same time. Whatever the circumstances, it is important that believers, whether new believers or those who've known Christ for many years, continue to read and study the Bible.

When the Holy Spirit brings a group of believers together as a church, the five basic functions of a church will be evident. Small informal churches often enjoy getting together to worship, minister and fellowship, but then find it difficult to teach and evangelize. But these churches must learn to teach and evangelize.

When formal training centers are closed by the authorities, it is especially imperative that local churches take seriously their responsibilities to teach (2 Timothy 2:2). This teaching may have to be done on a one-to-one basis when a mature Christian and a young Christian can get together.

The Bible gives many examples of leaders trained in this way. Besides the clear example of Christ teaching His disciples, Barnabas taught Mark (Acts 12:25; 15:39); Priscilla and Aquila helped Apollos (Acts 18:24-26); and Paul trained Timothy (Acts 16:1-3).

Paul gives a detailed approach on how to "disciple" a young believer. He taught first by example (1 Corinthians 4:16), then lived with his disciples, sharing all he had with them (Acts 20:34). His relationship with them was not just "student-teacher." Rather, he became personally involved with them in ministry (1 Timothy 1:1-2). He gave them responsibilities while they were still in training, and also kept in close contact with them after they became leaders themselves (1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus).

Ministry

When we "*minister*" or serve, we are showing or demonstrating God's love to others by helping to meet their needs and heal their hurts in the name of Jesus. Each time you reach out in love to others you are ministering to them. The church's job is "*for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry*" or as Ephesians 4:12, NKJV says, "*to prepare God's people for works of service.*"

Jesus commanded us to preach the gospel, heal the sick, and cast out demons (see Mark 16:15-18). One preacher said: “God does not want to be included in *our* plans. He wants us to be included in *His* plans.” We need to be aware of the spiritual needs of both fellow believers and non-believers and try to help them at every opportunity. Saying something encouraging to or doing something kind for a struggling friend may be the deciding factor in whether or not that friend is able to stand against the enemy.

Fellowship

As Christians, we are called to belong, not just to believe. We are not meant to be loners but true members of His body—a real part of Jesus’ family. Therefore, it is important for Christians to spend time together to talk about their spiritual lives, encourage each other and have fellowship.

Satan brings all his efforts to bear on Christians to prevent them from fellowshiping together. He realizes that believers need to help and strengthen each other, so he will try to prevent it by trying to cause Christians to be indifferent about meeting together (Hebrews 10:24-25). Or he may try to bring about difficult circumstances that would discourage them from meeting together.

The Lord can use even informal or casual meetings to strengthen Christians, especially when formal meetings and large group fellowships are forbidden. Though going to large meetings may be very encouraging, Christians can receive more help one-on-one in small “cell” groups where they can discuss their needs in depth.

Worship

It is a privilege and responsibility to worship God. Worship begins when the Holy Spirit enters our being and then takes more and more control of our lives. We worship the Lord because of who He is, because of His creation and because He has redeemed us and continues to be with us. Worship flows from the heart of a grateful and thankful person.

Worship is a matter of attitude. It is a way of life. “*Offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship*” (Romans 12:1). Every believer should worship the Lord privately, as well as, whenever possible, gather with other believers to worship. This may be expressed outwardly in prayer, various bodily positions (such as, standing with hands raised, kneeling, or even lying), singing, clapping, and so on. For most believers, music is an important part of worship. The form of worship should reflect the believer’s cultural methods of showing adoration as long as it does not conflict with biblical guidelines (for example, offering sacrifices).

The Bible makes it clear that believers should worship, and why they should worship. It is obvious that many practices used in pagan religions—bowing to images, self-inflicted punishment of the body, sacrifices of blood—have no place in the church.

Worship in Scripture revolves around praising God—an act of the will that should not be related to feelings or circumstances. In other words, we should praise God even when we feel sad and discouraged because things seem to be going wrong. When we do so, we are submitting to His divine will and we bring pleasure to Him. (Psalm 67:3; Hebrews 13:15; Isaiah 12:1)

THE EXAMPLE OF THE EARLY CHURCH

The early church, in spite of intense persecution, fulfilled the five basic functions of the church.

Evangelism

When the church first came into being, the authorities permitted believers to preach in public. Peter preached to thousands on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-41) and also in the temple area following the healing of the lame beggar (Acts 3:1-26). But later, the believers were ordered to stop talking about Jesus. When they did not obey that order (Acts 4:1-31), persecution began.

Therefore, believers gradually began ministering in private homes rather than in public places (Acts 5:42). And many fled from Jerusalem. As they were scattered, they took the gospel message with them (Acts 8:4). Note that they were ordinary lay Christians, not the apostles (Acts 8:1). As a result of being scattered, they became missionaries, witnessing person-to-person without depending on an institutional church. Rather than persecution destroying the church, it caused it to expand.

It was at this time that Peter was led to go to Joppa to see Cornelius and, there in his home, speak to him and his relatives and friends (Acts 10). Also, about this time, Paul was converted and began his ministry of declaring Jesus to the Gentiles. He usually preached first in the synagogues, but when his message was rejected there, he began teaching wherever anyone would listen. In Corinth, he went to a private home (Acts 18:1-7). In Ephesus, he rented a hall (Acts 19:1-10). In Philippi, he taught on a riverbank. (Acts 16:12-13)

The early Christians witnessed to the saving power of Jesus whenever and wherever possible. As far as we know, they quoted Scripture from memory since copies of the Scriptures were scarce at that time. Those in the early church depended heavily on the Word of God. Christians under pressure today must do the same when they evangelize. All believers must present Christ, depending only on the Scriptures and the direction and power of the Holy Spirit.

Discipleship

In addition to evangelistic teaching about salvation in Jesus Christ, the early church was involved in teaching (discipling) new believers. We are not told where they met to hold the training sessions, but we know that they were no longer welcome in the synagogues. So, they probably met in private homes.

The account preserved for us in the book of Acts shows that after Christians presented Christ to people, they made an effort to follow up with a teaching ministry. The Jerusalem church sent Barnabas to Antioch for that purpose (Acts 11:25-26).

Paul made a return trip to the cities he had successfully evangelized to strengthen and encourage the converts (Acts 14:21-23), and later he stopped again on his way to Jerusalem (Acts 20:6-8).

One-on-one teaching is vital to a church in a hostile environment. It can be done at various places and at different times. Group meetings must usually be kept to a certain length of time, but one-on-one teaching can be any length of time. And it doesn't matter if the class is small—the "class" may include only one person. What is important is that the teaching be based on the Word of God to encourage and strengthen brothers and sisters in Christ in their Christian walk.

Ministry

Acts 6:1-4 shows one way the church in Jerusalem ministered to people in need: they had a “*daily distribution of food.*” When the Grecian Jews in the church complained over how the distribution of food to their widows was being handled, the food distribution ministry was threatened. But after a church meeting was held and deacons were assigned to oversee the distribution, there was no longer a problem.

The Bible does not say that food was distributed only to the church people. We can assume that the church was also ministering to the community by serving food to them. Back in Acts 2:47, we read that they were “*praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.*”

On several occasions, churches outside of Jerusalem ministered to the Jerusalem church: they sent money to the poor in the church.

The modern practice of churches in one country paying the expenses for missionaries to go to another country or for providing Bibles and training materials follows this example.

Tithing—giving a percentage of one’s earnings to the church—enables the church to carry on its ministry of helping and supporting people with needs (Acts 4:34-35; Leviticus 27: 30-32; Hebrews 7:4-5).

Fellowship

Examples of fellowship in the early church are more difficult to identify than examples of evangelism and teaching—because fellowship is basically a heart attitude toward one another.

Institutional churches today may have “fellowship meetings” in their weekly schedule, but whether or not real fellowship takes place depends on the heart attitude of those who attend those meetings. In the early church, fellowship was closely linked to gathering together for a “fellowship meal.” An important part of that meal was the “breaking of bread” for the Lord’s Supper (Acts 2:42, 46).

We learn a negative lesson from the church at Corinth. The “fellowship” there was in sharp contrast to the loving fellowship in the Jerusalem church. Their “love feasts” (fellowship meals) were filled with strife instead of fellowship (1 Corinthians 11:17-30). In Corinth, even though the people met together, they had no fellowship. Paul writes that there were “divisions” among them. Today divisions in the church often cause church splits—church members become angry and a church becomes two churches, with the members not speaking to one another.

While the Jerusalem church had been able to settle their problems in love, the Corinthians were even taking their fellow believers before the pagan law courts (1 Corinthians 6:1-8). They had difficulty completing a project—gathering money to send a gift to the suffering Christians in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:6; 10-11; 9:15). That isn’t surprising. Since they didn’t have real fellowship with each other and weren’t concerned for one another, it is unlikely they would be concerned about strangers in Jerusalem. (see 1 John 4:20) Paul’s letters to Corinth deal at length with these problems.

The bond of fellowship among the New Testament Christians was based on a spirit of oneness, love and concern. Their relationship did not depend on meetings, organizations, programs and activities. They helped one another, bore one another’s burdens and prayed for one another. This kind of fellowship thrived in spite of everything the Roman government could do.

The stronger the opposition, the more fellowship means to those in the Body of Christ. The Bible says the world will know we are Christians by our love (John 13:34). Love for one another can be one of the greatest outward expressions of faith for any church.

The fellowship meal offered an opportunity to those who had been blessed with material goods to minister to others by sharing their abundance. Sharing is an essential part of the love and concern that make up true fellowship (see Acts 2:41-42, 44-47; 4:34-35).

Worship

Worship is recognizing and accepting God's glory, holiness and worth. An act of worship is an expression of this recognition.

Worship in the early church was simply believers "pouring out" their thanks from hearts that rejoiced in the Lord despite their circumstances. When early believers prayerfully together remembered Jesus and His sacrificial death on the cross for their sins, they were worshipping.

A group of Christians in hostile surroundings can celebrate the Lord's Supper without being limited to a certain building, a special time or a prescribed program. This type of worship *cannot be easily stopped* by enemies of the church.

The Jerusalem church met for "*the breaking of bread*" in various homes (Acts 2:41-47). The fellowship in Troas gathered in an upper room on the first day of the week "*to break bread*" (Acts 20:6-8). The large church at Corinth gathered occasionally to observe the "*Lord's Supper*." It was their abuse of this practice that caused Paul to write and give guidelines for such observances (1 Corinthians 11:17-30).

In Luke 22:19, we read that Jesus "*took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them [the disciples], saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.'*"

Jesus commanded the church to observe both "the breaking of bread" and baptism (Luke 22:19; Matthew 28:19). These are fundamental to the life of the church as members live out their obedience to Christ. Both should be consistently observed.

Both of these sacraments reveal all five functions of the church. They testify to our position in Christ (evangelism). They help others to understand the basis for our position in Christ (discipleship). They bring Christians together in a shared experience (fellowship). They focus our attention upon Christ (worship). And we go out from these sacraments to newness of life with a mandate to minister in and through the love of Jesus (ministry).

There are Scriptural references to other times of worship such as Peter's prayer (Acts 4:23-28), and Paul and Silas' experience in prison (Acts 16:23-25). Worship was as frequent and spontaneous to the early church as it was to Moses and David in the Old Testament. But it was a simple expression of adoration and praise. There was no requirement of time, location, form, or even specific leaders.

FORMS: THE PRACTICES OF THE CHURCH

The Bible does not say much about the forms through which the five functions of the church may be expressed.

**The forms most widely used by institutional churches today
have drifted far from the simplicity found in the New Testament.**

The places where churches meet, and their activities may vary. Only churches in financially strong, unrestricted societies are able to have big buildings; video-cafes; complex programs; social activities; and huge budgets that provide for schools, hospitals and orphanages. Although the Lord has blessed these activities in many places in the world, we must recognize that they are not essential to the existence of the church. In some countries, they are forbidden by the government. In other countries, the local economic situation makes it impossible.

A number of years ago, for example, some Vietnamese leaders thought that their lack of funds was the cause of the slow growth of Christianity there. On one occasion, the following conversation was overheard:

“Do you have communists in your part of the country?” the observer asked.

“Most assuredly. They are there,” the Vietnamese leader replied.

“Are they growing in numbers and influence?” he then asked.

The leader hesitated momentarily, then admitted sadly, “Yes, they are growing very fast.”

“Can you show me their meeting places and schools or introduce me to their leaders?” the observer continued.

“Certainly not,” the leader said in disgust. “If they are known, they will be arrested.”

“You mean they are secret, without buildings or property and still they grow in number?” the observer asked in amazement.

“Yes, you could say that,” the leader responded.

“Then it must be that their growing influence does not depend on such things. Since they are wrong in their beliefs and *still* grow without money and buildings, why do you think the church of Jesus Christ needs them?” the man concluded.²²

The New Testament church had none of these things, but they turned their world upside down (Acts 17:6).

The early Christians did not confuse the church’s functions with the church’s forms. If they had done so, the church would have died in the bondage of Jewish legalism. The early churches were not burdened with big buildings, nor were they hindered by the lack of them. When they were permitted to do so, they met in public places. But when they were not permitted to do so, they met together in different houses at different times.

The Apostle Paul taught in the synagogues as long as the synagogues were open to him. When he was stopped from teaching in the synagogues, he began to teach in private homes. Or sometimes he met with others at a riverbank or in the marketplace and taught or evangelized there. There were no signs to point believers from other communities to a place of worship, but believers were able to find others to fellowship with. The importance of such simple structure is evident in Acts 13:1-4.

The church of Antioch did not acknowledge any organizational authority between it and God. When the Holy Spirit led Paul and Barnabas out as missionaries, the Antioch church did not have to ask permission of someone else. And they were not burdened by long-range programs. The church leaders just prayed with them and sent them out. In those days, there were no mission boards, but there *was* great missionary activity.

Evangelists and missionaries had very little money, but as they ministered, local congregations met their needs. There were no seminaries and Bible schools, but the truth was committed to faithful people who knew the teachings of Christ, and they taught others (2 Timothy 2:2). Church leadership was valuable in selecting and sending out missionaries under the authority of the church. God has established the church and its leaders for our protection and spiritual covering.

The church can exist and carry on its functions of evangelism, discipleship, ministry, fellowship and worship without depending on physical forms and traditional methods. This vitally important truth tells us that any group of believers established by God is able to survive victoriously in hostile environments. When forms are confused with the functions of the church, these forms can become obstacles.

In many places in the world today, the forms most common to Christians living in free societies are forbidden. Some think that this means the church cannot exist in those places. Not so! Since the time of the Roman Empire, many governments have successfully suppressed outward forms and methods, but none have been able to destroy the church. When we commit ourselves to the biblical essence of the spiritual church, carrying out its functions in simple forms, we and our fellow believers will be a church that can survive victoriously under any circumstances.

**Church growth may often bring persecution,
but persecution does not always guarantee church growth.**

THE HOUSE CHURCH CELL STRUCTURE

We have mentioned that the five functions of the church, especially discipleship, fellowship and worship—were frequently carried out in private homes. But the early church was not limited just to meeting in homes. At various times, different believers also used the temple, synagogues, lecture halls, open forums, riverbanks, ships and other places, especially to evangelize. It is encouraging to realize that all five functions of a church can be accomplished in a small house or apartment. In many restricted countries, this is the only available place. The New Testament specifically refers to five “house churches,” and there were probably more (Romans 16:3-5, 23; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2).

A house church has many advantages. No rent money has to be paid or no money spent to buy an additional building. Meeting as a house church encourages fellowship and friendliness. It does not attract unwanted attention from authorities and the meeting can easily be moved from one house to another.

The biggest problem is that space is limited. But this forces the church to meet in small groups, which provides opportunity for closer friendship, better accountability and more meaningful ministry. If a group becomes too large to meet in a home, it divides into two homes and the multiplication continues.

A disadvantage of house churches is the lack of fellowship among the different cell groups. In a highly restrictive society, this can also be an advantage. If the authorities find out about any one house church, this doesn't put the other house churches in danger. In some less restricted societies, the house churches can sometimes fellowship with believers of different groups in joint meetings. And occasionally, they are even able to join and celebrate in large, citywide meetings.

In one country, for example, during a major festival, several house churches agreed to picnic in a particular part of a public park at the same time. Though they did not worship openly, the Christians were encouraged to see many other secret believers all together.

As we look again at the experience of the early church, we see that following the first few days of public ministry, persecution began. The Jerusalem church soon became too large to meet in one place. When the authorities ordered the apostles to stop preaching, Peter and John reported their threats to their own group or “...to their own people. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God” (Acts 4:23-24).

After the death of Stephen, the church became more careful. For example, when Paul came to Jerusalem, Scripture says “he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple” (Acts 9:26).

However, in spite of their precautions, James (the brother of John) was arrested and killed. Then Peter was seized and put in prison. The church prayed earnestly for Peter’s release, but they did not all meet in one place to pray for him.

When an angel miraculously released him, Peter went to the home of John Mark, where he apparently thought that believers would have gathered to pray. When Peter arrived there, he found that the door was locked, and believers were inside praying. He knocked but they were cautious about opening the door. He too was careful. After telling the group how God had sent an angel to bring him out of jail, Peter left and went to another place (Acts 12). It seems evident that those who are cautious are not cowardly or weak in faith.

Later, when Paul and Barnabas met with the Jerusalem church, elders were present as well as apostles (Acts 15:4, 22; 21:17-19). Perhaps these men were the leaders of the many house churches scattered throughout Jerusalem.

The church may be able to have a public witness through those leaders known to the government. At the same time, the leaders may be able to quietly encourage small house churches scattered throughout the area, where the five functions of the church are effectively working. In this way, the public witness of the church is merely a small part of the larger picture.

CELL (SMALL GROUP) CHURCHES

In 1982, the communists overthrew the government of Ethiopia and persecution of the church began. The buildings and property of one Christian denomination were confiscated. Many church leaders were imprisoned, and their members were forbidden to meet. Christians went underground without leaders, without buildings, without the opportunity to meet together publicly or continue any of their public programs. In their secret meetings, they could not even sing out loud for fear of someone reporting them to the authorities.

Ten years later, the communist government was removed, and this allowed the Christians to come out of hiding. They were amazed to find their denomination’s pre-persecution membership of 5,000 members had grown to more than 50,000 members in that ten-year period.

As in China, the Ethiopia house-church model reveals a great strength in small groups or “cells”—especially in evangelism. And this model is not just for restricted areas of the world. The largest church in the world, pastored by Rev. Dr. David Cho in Seoul, Korea—with more than 800,000 members—is also a cell-based church. It has a strong focus on all five functions, especially evangelism. Dr. Cho believes that cell groups are the best setting for introducing people to Jesus Christ. His church believes that new Christians, “new babes in Christ,” should become

spiritual “fathers” within six months. And they believe that cell groups offer the best training environment. Cell churches allow for not only church growth by addition, but also for church growth by multiplication.

A healthy church is the best church in good times and in bad times. Thus, we need to realize that a church is healthy when it truly fulfills all the five functions as seen in the early church. (Acts 2:42-47)

When members only attend a weekly public congregation or a worship meeting, the church usually does not grow. Thus, cell groups are vital to having a balanced church or, as one person calls it, a “two-winged” church. By that he meant that without small groups or “cells,” a church is incomplete—as a bird trying to fly on one wing would be.

The ideal number for a cell group is ten to twelve people. When the group grows to over twelve people, it is ready to divide and grow again. Someone recommended that the group always have an empty chair in their meeting. That chair is for the next person who has just passed from being an unbeliever to a believer. The empty chair is a continual reminder to the cell group members of the function of evangelism. It often directs focus of the praying at the meeting.

**Adopting a cell group system aids the persecuted church.
But it appears that the fastest growing churches today,
even in free societies, adopt some form of cell group system.**

A church functions well when church responsibilities are shared. *Shared responsibility* means that the pastor is not seen as the *only* capable leader. If a church is to grow both in difficult times and in good times, lay people must be trained. Our Lord never intended His church to depend completely on just one person.

Evangelizing our community is impossible without the whole church becoming involved. Leaders and pastors must take time to train the members. They must learn to delegate responsibilities to others.

One way to prepare for difficult times is to make every member of the church realize that each has a unique role and purpose in the Kingdom of God.

A pastor in Vietnam prepared for his arrest—which he was sure would happen—by carefully training the thirty members in his church to take roles as leaders. The day came when he was arrested and sent away to a remote prison camp. While there, he was encouraged to hear that his church had grown to more than three hundred members.

Our God is able to meet your needs and bless in many ways. Begin now to look for new and simpler ways to express your faith. Trust the Holy Spirit to guide you.

GROUP ACTIVITY – DEBATE

Divide the group into two teams. Using the book of Acts as evidence, one group is to build a case that persecution brings church growth. The second team is to build a case from Acts that church growth brings persecution.

Then have the groups debate the issue. The moderator summarizes at the end.

GROUP ACTIVITY – IDENTIFY WITH A CHINESE HOUSE CHURCH

1. Sing Songs Softly

Most house churches meet illegally and do not want neighbors to know of their presence. But they love to sing hymns. So they lean in together and sing the songs in hushed tones.

2. Copy Scripture Passages

Some Chinese house churches like to copy passages of Scripture, not because Bibles are scarce, but because they believe it is a good discipline for getting the Word deep into the soul. Each member of the group copies out by hand five or ten verses and commits them to memory. Then all the writing paper is glued together to form a kind of scroll.

3. Share Experiences of Suffering

In a Chinese house church, if you say, “I’m fine,” then something is regarded as spiritually wrong. If you are having a witness for Christ, there *must* be suffering to report, otherwise how do you know you are Christ’s? Ask all members to tell the group how they have suffered for Jesus since the last time the group met. Reflect on how this exercise challenged **you** to be different from the surrounding world.

4. Live Through a Verse for a Whole Week

House church Christians will often ask God for a Scripture verse, and then live every activity that week in the light of that verse. The following week, they report to the group all they have learned from “the school of life” in that verse.

5. Pray “Prison Style”

Conditions in prison are harsh—overcrowding is common; the food is poor; the water is unsanitary.... Some house church Christians in Wenzhou do the following to identify with their brothers and sisters who are in jail: They first mark out a small area about twelve feet long. Then, packed like sardines, they all lie side by side in that area and pray for those in prison. This reminds them of the conditions their beloved leaders are in.

6. Target the Unreached Parts of Your Country in Prayer

Chinese house churches spend long periods of time in prayer for outlying, unreached people in their country—people who have not heard the gospel, such as the Muslims in Xinjiang, and the Tibetans of Tibet. Identify and target the unreached parts of your own country in prayer.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Evangelism: When the church is restricted, new and creative ways of evangelism and worship are used. In one restricted country, church members hired a bus, then invited relatives and friends to go to the beach. On the bus, using a handheld loudspeaker, the pastor preached to the “captive audience.” At the beach, everyone continued to talk and fellowship. And also, those who received Christ while on the bus were baptized! As a pastor, how would you respond in your spirit to this method of evangelizing? Do you feel this pastor violated your principles of sensitivity?
2. Describe the differences between the Jerusalem church and the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 6:1-8; 2 Corinthians 8:6, 10-11; 9:15).

Jerusalem Church Corinthian Church

3. As we saw in previous chapters, churches in free societies usually express their faith through the institutional pattern. Therefore, that is the primary form familiar to most Christians. And it is easy for a repressive government to eliminate that form. Consider some of the options **you** would initiate under the rule of a repressive regime.
4. What is the role and responsibility of the institutional church in a free society?
5. What is “the church” according to the following passages of Scripture? What does each illustration mean to **you** today?
 - 1 Corinthians 3:9
 - 1 Corinthians 12:13, 27
 - Hebrews 3:6
 - Revelation 19:7-9
 - Revelation 21:2, 9
 - Ephesians 5:22-33
 - Matthew 16:13-18
6. Describe the Essence, Function and Form(s) of **your** church.
7. Who may belong to “the church” according to these verses?
 - 1 Peter 2:5, 9
 - Hebrews 4:16
8. What are the three minimum requirements for a church?
 - John 3:1-17; 2 Corinthians 5:17 - _____ “in Christ.”
 - 1 Peter 2:5; 2 Corinthians 12:12; Matthew 18:20 - At least two _____
_____.

- Ephesians 2:22; 1 Corinthians 12:25-26 - Committed to _____ and to _____
_____.

9. What commitment should Christians make to each other?

10. One church leader defines evangelism as “presenting the gospel in such a clear way that the hearer must either accept or reject Christ.” Do you agree? Explain why or how **your** family has/has not been evangelized.

11. What is the best way to stimulate fellow Christians to do the work of evangelism?

12. How do you evangelize in a community where it is forbidden? How do you evangelize when you have no spiritual materials?

13. How can *small groups* help a *cell church* do the following things?

- Serve one another Galatians 5:13
- Accept one another Romans 15:7
- Forgive one another Colossians 3:13
- Greet one another Romans 16:16
- Bear one another’s burdens Galatians 6:2
- Be devoted to one another Romans 12:10
- Honor one another Romans 12:10
- Teach one another Romans 15:14
- Submit to one another Ephesians 5:21
- Encourage one another 1 Thessalonians 5:11

THE CHURCH IN OPERATION

Flexible, Unstoppable and Growing

To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home.

Philemon 1:2

While having lunch in (then) famine-stricken Marxist Ethiopia, a visiting pastor from the West said, “It must be terrible for you and your churches to live under communism.”

The local leader looked around carefully, and then spoke softly about the severe hardships and unjust imprisonment of Christians. “These sufferings have refined the faith of our people. In our history, more people have come to faith in hard times than in easy times.”

He continued, “I have been to your country, and I know your churches also have serious problems and temptations. I know that many Christians in your country are consumed by materialism and have little concern for the poor. Many Christian families are breaking up. Some churches try to attract people with entertainment.... I felt sorrow in what I saw and heard.”

The Ethiopian church leader concluded, “I really am not sure whose church is better off, yours or ours!”²³

FLEXIBILITY WITHIN THE CHURCH

The disciples complained to the Lord Jesus that a man who was not of their group was ministering in His name. The disciples had forbidden him to continue, but Jesus said, “*Do not stop him...for whoever is not against you is for you*” (Luke 9:50). Peter found this a hard lesson to learn. The Lord had to deal with Peter very specifically through a vision and a dramatic experience before he could say, “*I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear Him and do what is right*” (Acts 10:34-35).

The Apostle Paul had more to say about this idea. He summarized his teaching when he said, “*Who are you to judge someone else’s servant*” (Romans 14:4)? And, “*You then, why do you judge your brother?...for we will all stand before God’s judgment seat*” (Romans 14:10). He even approved of the preaching of some others who were preaching the gospel with wrong motives (Philippians 1:12-18). Scripture clearly teaches that we should not cause divisions in the body because other leaders lead differently than we or our leaders do (1 Corinthians 1:11-17).

**We must be very careful about rejecting someone
just because they do not serve the Lord the same way we do.**

If we quietly go about the work the Lord has given us, we need not be overly concerned about how others feel led to serve Him.

People in the Bible responded to oppression in different ways.

- **Samuel:** When the Lord told him to anoint the future king, Samuel was afraid. So, the Lord showed him how to cover what he was doing without telling a lie (1 Samuel 16:1-5).
- **Elijah:** On one occasion, Elijah boldly defied the king (1 Kings 17:1). On another he was led of the Lord to run and hide (1 Kings 17:3).
- **Esther:** In this beautiful Old Testament account, Esther became the queen, and did not even tell anyone that she was Jewish. But at the proper time, she did a very important service to her people, even risking her life (Esther 7:1-4).
- **Daniel:** In the book of Daniel, Daniel and his three friends boldly faced death in defying the king, but God protected them (Daniel 3 and 6).
- **Jesus:** In John's Gospel account, Jesus avoided the Jewish rulers and even hid Himself on one occasion (John 8:59; 11:54).
- **Peter and John:** The authorities ordered Peter and John not to preach, but they refused to obey (Acts 4:18-20).
- **Paul:** In the face of opposition, Paul was especially flexible. Sometimes he fled (Acts 9:23-30); sometimes he went to prison (Acts 16:22-24); sometimes he called upon God for miracles (Acts 13:10-11). But at all times, he allowed the Holy Spirit to show him what to do. He was guided by this principle: "*I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some*" (1 Corinthians 9:22).
- **Faithful saints:** In Hebrews 11, some faithful saints were delivered, and others were not. Just because a church or individual follows the Lord's leading, deliverance is not automatically guaranteed. The key seems to be *obedience* and *flexibility* under the leading of the Holy Spirit.
The extreme flexibility of the church and individual Christians in these biblical examples is seen in their responses to persecution. For example, compare the church at Jerusalem and the church at Antioch.
The church at Jerusalem was made up primarily of Jewish converts. They continued to express their faith in traditional Jewish ways, when these traditions did not contradict the gospel.
The church at Antioch was made up of Gentile converts who did not have the background of Jewish traditions. Therefore, their fellowship meetings were less formal than those of the church in Jerusalem.

A conference was called in Jerusalem to determine whether the Antioch church should be required to follow the Jewish traditions. After a lengthy discussion, the apostles and elders decided that Gentile Christians should be free to express their faith as the Lord led, while in Jerusalem they continued in their Jewish traditions. They only asked that they do some things and not do others in order to not offend Jewish Christians (Acts 15:1-35; 21:17-26).

- **The Early Church:** The church of New Testament times was a church in a hostile environment. The Roman government encouraged persecution throughout the whole Roman Empire. Yet Christianity triumphed and outlived its persecutors.

EXPRESSING FAITH IN THE CHURCH

We can learn from the experiences in the past century of many of our brothers and sisters in Christ living in restricted or repressed societies. For almost three decades—from the 1950s through the 1970s—believers in China were not able to express their faith in an institutional way. They had to discover new ways to worship and maintain their walk with the Lord. How did they do this?

During the Cultural Revolution (1965-1976), most abandoned the old institutional expressions and began to operate differently. Although the new patterns of expression they used had to be very secret, they were effective.

Others struggled to maintain their public forms of worship as long as possible and they suffered greatly for it. Many were imprisoned, and some were killed. God highly honors their bravery. They can be sure, as Paul testified, that their sufferings served “*to advance the gospel*” (Philippians 1:12).

But the government finally eliminated all public expression of faith. Many Christians around the world were deeply shaken by this turn of events and didn’t know what to do. They wondered if God had abandoned China and if His church there had indeed died. Gradually, however, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, faithful believers found valid ways to express their faith quietly, but dynamically, on a person-to-person basis.

In contrast to China, Saudi Arabia is a country that has not had an institutional church for over 1,400 years. Any local citizen who professes faith in Christ faces an automatic death sentence. Yet, despite the danger, hundreds of local Christians and Christians from other countries living in Saudi Arabia faithfully continue to meet in secret. And they survive and grow in one of the most hostile environments in our world today.

Christians in Saudi Arabia have unusual ways of communicating with fellow believers. One Saudi believer shared that even rest periods are turned into times of worship and sharing—done discreetly so as not to attract attention. Even in public, groups of three or four are able to casually meet together to share, worship and encourage one another.

In order for fellowship groups to survive, sometimes they are forced to shift from one meeting place to another. God honors their courage: new believers are added to the Kingdom of God. The creative ways they use to meet together and the methods they employ for fellowship are amazing. For security reasons, we cannot write about their specific strategies.

**Creativity and flexibility under the leading of the Holy Spirit
helps keep Persecuted Christians going.**

OUTWARD EXPRESSIONS OF FAITH

As we consider some of the common outward expressions of faith in Christ, we should include weddings, baptisms and funerals. Some governments have continued to permit religious weddings and funerals, even after they banned all other religious expressions. And Christians have taken advantage of this. For example, in the former Soviet Union, Christians had a public witness at such events long after public witnessing was forbidden. The authorities find funerals especially difficult to control. In the most anti-Christian societies, a Christian's radiance at the time of the death of a loved one can have a deep influence on unbelievers at the funeral. It may even draw some to Christ.

Baptism is a church ordinance that is important to church life. It is a sign that a new believer has identified with the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. In many cultures, baptism is seen as the evidence that a person has become a Christian.

By being baptized, believers testify of their own "death to the old life" and "resurrection to live a new life." Throughout the history of the church, baptismal services have been an expression of worship, both for the baptized one and for believers observing the ordinance. (Romans 6:3-9)

The early Christians baptized new believers whenever and wherever the opportunity arose. Baptisms were often done publicly, as when John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River (Matthew 3:13-15). They were also done when two men were alone in the wilderness (Acts 8:36-39). Note that baptisms were not just performed by church leaders, but also by lay Christians (John 4:2-3; Acts 8:36-39; 1 Corinthians 1:11-17).

In free societies, there may be justification for institutional church leaders to limit the ordinance of baptism to a particular method or to a service performed by someone authorized by the church. This was not what happened in New Testament times. And today, in societies where Christians are persecuted it doesn't happen either. It is often necessary to plan a baptismal service in extreme secrecy and perform it by whatever means available. Christians who have secretly participated in such a service testify of how greatly they were blessed.

Recently, in Nepal a new convert from Hinduism faced a seven-year term in prison after he was baptized. Another time, more than ten young converts were baptized at a meeting where a known government agent had come. When the group went out into the water to be baptized, he was in the "cook tent" enjoying a snack that had been prepared—just for him!

People who are bold enough to be baptized *in spite of government opposition* will likely be obedient witnesses for Christ in their society. That is proving to be so in Nepal. Since the 1990s, there has been exceptional growth of the church there.

THE VICTORIOUS CHURCH

Asian church leaders gave the following points for a victorious church:

A church that experiences the power of the Holy Spirit daily

Its members walk with the Lord. They are converted. They know and experience personal fellowship with God and show the fruit of the Spirit in their lives.

A church that experiences the fellowship of the Body of Christ

This is very important. It includes not only fellowship but also loyalty—a loyalty that is willing to die for brothers and sisters (see Matthew 25:40).

A church that knows the Bible and is able to use it

This includes Bible memorization that helps believers resist false teaching.

A church that is serious about evangelism

Its members know the reasons for evangelism. They are certain there is no other way of salvation but through Jesus Christ.

A church that is committed to serving the needs of society

The church must know its responsibilities and exercise appropriate opportunities for helping others.

A church that is self-supporting and free from outside power and control

The church must be not only free from *outside* power and control, but also, it must be free from influential people who seek to control the church *inside* the country.

A church that knows the strengths and weaknesses of the opposition

This includes all external as well as internal tactics of Satan.

A church that is bold and ready to witness even in the face of persecution

A church that is committed to shared responsibility

Laity and clergy share the load of leadership and ministry.

A church that is a praying church!

SCENARIO:

You are the pastor of a small fellowship in a rural community. One day a leader of the local rebel guerrilla movement approached you. He threatens you to stop the church activities or they will burn down your home (the meeting place). What would you do? What should the rest of the group of believers do?

GROUP ACTIVITY – SWOT CHART

Have each member of the group complete a SWOT chart for their own church group. Compare strengths and weaknesses and how they relate to the comparison of opportunities and threats.

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES (INTERNAL)
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS (EXTERNAL)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. There are many examples of the ways that forces opposed to Christianity have attacked the institutional church. Consider the following actual scenarios and decide how you would deal with them. Do you think a small informal church would have been able to deal more effectively with these situations?
 - Two months after South Vietnam was taken over by the communists, a Christian wrote a friend, “Many new faces appear in our worship services and they lead us to discuss many things. In reality, we no longer worship but have political discussion meetings. Normally we would rejoice when new people join us in a worship service, but in this case, it is obviously infiltration.” What would **you** do?
 - In China, the government initially allowed worship services to continue, but began to seize all church buildings not used for worship. They “took responsibility” for hospitals, clinics, orphanages and schools. What do **you** think should have been the attitude of Christians working in these places?

- In Cuba, the government of Fidel Castro allowed some churches to exist, but in many areas, the number of Christians was far more than the buildings could hold. They were not allowed to build larger church buildings and ministers were not allowed to conduct other meetings in other places—especially in homes. Even when everyone stands up during the service (in order to conserve space), many who would like to worship are turned away. How would **you** respond?
 - In some Muslim countries, Christians from another country living there are merely tolerated, and national believers must remain completely unknown. Can such “secret” believers be real Christians? Can they carry on the functions of the church? How should they determine with whom to fellowship?
2. Hostile governments often want to scatter Christian groups to reduce their influence. In countries such as Cambodia, whole populations had been forcefully resettled. In Vietnam, the government would increase taxes until a family could not survive in a particular place. Then the authorities would resettle that family somewhere else. In the former Soviet Union, many Christians were exiled to Siberia. Because of that, Siberia is now one of the areas in Russia with the strongest Christian testimony. What if you and your family, for economic reasons, were forced to move to an area where you didn’t know any other believers?
 3. Review the following “Asian Criteria for a Victorious Church.” Rank them from #1 through to #10 as they describe **your** current church.

[#1] “Our Strongest Area” to [#10] “Needs the Most Improvement”

- Our church experiences the power of the Holy Spirit daily - Repentance.
- Our church experiences the fellowship of the Body of Christ - Humility.
- Our church knows the Bible and is able to use it - Equipped.
- Our church is serious about evangelism - Outreach.
- Our church is committed to serving the needs of society - Ministering.
- Our church is self-supporting and free from outside power and control - Giving.
- Our church knows the strengths and weaknesses of the opposition - Discernment.
- Our church is bold and ready to witness even in the face of persecution - Faith.
- Our church is committed to shared responsibility - Biblical Leadership.
- Our church is a praying church - Intercession - Worship - Fasting.

4. Discuss the 10 points church leaders in Asia gave for what constitutes a victorious church. Do you agree? Are there points missing? Where does your group have its greatest strengths and weaknesses?
5. Did communism destroy the church in China and Ethiopia or change it? Discuss the reasons together.
6. Have you thought of “Christian fellowship” in the way this lesson presents it? Have you experienced this kind of fellowship?
7. What can a group do if they become too large to meet in a home?
8. What does Satan hope to gain by having Christians sent away to other areas? Can this tactic work against him? If so, explain how.
9. Have you made any “adjustments” in typical institutional church practice to meet the local situation? Discuss.

THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY

Facing the Future Together

*All your sons will be taught by the LORD,
and great will be your children's peace.*

Isaiah 54:13

Parable: A frail old man went to live with his son, daughter-in-law, and four-year-old grandson. The old man's hands trembled, his eyesight was blurred, and his step faltered. The family ate together at the table. But the elderly grandfather's shaky hands and failing sight made eating difficult. Peas rolled off his spoon onto the floor. When he grasped the glass, milk spilled on the tablecloth.

The son and daughter-in-law became irritated with the mess. "We must do something about Grandfather," said the son. "I've had enough of his spilled milk, noisy eating, and food on the floor." So, the husband and wife set a small table in the corner. There, Grandfather ate alone while the rest of the family enjoyed dinner.

Since Grandfather had broken a dish or two, his food was served in a wooden bowl. When the family glanced in Grandfather's direction, sometimes he had a tear in his eye as he sat alone. Still, the only words the couple had for him were sharp admonitions when he dropped a fork or spilled food.

The four-year-old watched it all in silence. One evening before supper, the father noticed his son playing with wood scraps on the floor. He asked the child sweetly, "What are you making?"

Just as sweetly, the boy responded, "Oh, I am making a little bowl for you and Mama to eat your food in when I grow up." The four-year-old smiled and went back to work.

The words so struck the parents that they were speechless. Then tears started to stream down their cheeks. Though no word was spoken, both knew what must be done.

That evening, the husband took Grandfather's hand and gently led him back to the family table. For the remainder of his days he ate every meal with the family. And for some reason, neither husband nor wife seemed to care any longer when a fork was dropped, milk spilled, or the tablecloth soiled.

Children are remarkably perceptive. Their eyes ever observe, their ears ever listen, and their minds ever process the messages they absorb. If they see us patiently provide a happy, godly home atmosphere, they will imitate that attitude for the rest of their lives.

The wise parent realizes that every day the building blocks are being laid for their children's future.²⁴

BIBLICAL EMPHASIS ON THE FAMILY

The family has been the basic unit of God's creation from the beginning. After He had created the world, plants and animals, God completed His creation by making man in His own image. Then from man He created woman. God could have chosen to create many human beings as He had created many plants and animals, and then set up a human government as His basic unit. But He did not do so. Rather He chose to create the family as the basic social unit, and the family unit became the basis for His relationship with mankind.

This is most clearly evident in the example of the Jewish family, although we see it in the Old Testament even before God called out the children of Israel to be a separate people. God spoke to Adam's family through Adam and He spoke to each succeeding generation through the head of the family. That is why these men are still known as the Patriarchs.

We see how God spoke to Noah, and through Noah saved Noah's whole family. When He called Abraham, however, the line of family relationship became especially evident. God made a covenant with Abraham that applied to his family and their descendants. God even began to refer to Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, identifying Himself with this growing family. Then as God blessed Jacob with twelve sons and changed Jacob's name to Israel, God's people became known as the "Children of Israel."

By the time Moses was born four hundred years later, the closeness of the Hebrew family was evident in the risks his parents took to preserve his life. When Moses answered God's call to lead His people out of Egypt, his brother Aaron, sister Miriam, and even his father-in-law, Jethro, were used of God to assist him.

In the wilderness God gave Moses the law, one section of which the Jews call the *Shemah* (Deuteronomy 6:3-9; 11:18-21). This section speaks specifically of the family and its responsibilities. It includes a declaration of who God is; the commandment to love the Lord with all one's heart, rather than just superficially; the command to teach these truths diligently to the children and to reinforce the teaching with continual reminders. The family was to talk of these matters frequently, post reminders of them upon the walls and wear them on their bodies. The Word of the Lord was to be continually in their midst.

The Jewish feasts were also intended to strengthen the family and draw them to God as a worshipping unit. The Passover particularly held up the father as the spiritual head of the family. Each father was strictly commanded to pass on this observance to the eldest son. Throughout the long history of Israel, from the tabernacle to the temple to the synagogue, the family has survived as the basic unit of worship and loyalty. In many communities around the world where there were not enough Jews to build a synagogue, or where anti-Semitism was too strong for them to worship publicly, the Jewish family survived, and Judaism survived.

The New Testament teaching regarding the family absorbs the Old Testament teaching and adds further details. The husband and wife become one, with the husband the spiritual head of the family as Christ is of the church (Ephesians 5:21-23). But both spouses are to submit to each other. Children are to be brought up "*in the training and instruction of the Lord*" (Ephesians 6:1-4; Colossians 3:20-21).

GOD'S PROTECTION OF THE FAMILY

God not only has established the family, but He has given His laws to protect it. Of the Ten Commandments, there are six that deal with interpersonal relationships. Of these six, three are intended to protect the family:

- *Honor your father and your mother*
- *You shall not commit adultery*
- *You shall not covet your neighbor's wife* (Exodus 20:7-17)

First, God established His plan for the family's organization; then He protected it from being undermined from within; and then protected it from attacks from without. Jesus extended this protection by enlarging upon the understanding of adultery (Matthew 5:27-28) and forbidding divorce except in the case of adultery. (Matthew 5:32)

Jesus plainly taught that a strong family unit is God's best for mankind. This is why Paul gives extensive teaching on marriage and the family in his letters. He makes a very strong statement in his first letter to Timothy that a man who does not take care of his own family is worse than an unbeliever (1 Timothy 5:8).

CHALLENGES TO THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY

This high standard of family loyalty puts the Christian family on a collision course with many modern political systems. These political systems undermine the family unit by setting the state over parental authority. They do this by removing children from their parents' care with only minor justification, attempting to usurp family responsibilities in the teaching of moral values, providing government "day-care centers" to replace parental upbringing, and generally downgrading the importance of the home.

Time

In some totalitarian countries, the attack upon the family is even more aggressive. The authorities in such countries cut to a minimum the amount of time the family can be together. Both parents are required to work long hours outside the home, while the children are "cared for" by the state. What little time the parents might spend with the children is often consumed by attendance at required political meetings or waiting in long lines to buy scarce basic commodities.

Teaching

During the time that the children are in the care of the state, they are being intensively indoctrinated. Teachings are often specifically anti-Christian and subtly designed to destroy the family unit.

One well-known aspect of their teaching is often referred to as "children spying on their families." This is a poor term, because it implies that the children are aware that they are doing something against their parents. Generally, this is not the case. They are supposedly being taught

to be “observant” and are rewarded for having noticed anything “unusual.” For most children it is just a game, but it is an important source of information to the authorities in many countries.

Following the fall of Vietnam, for example, many attempting to escape were killed or captured because of tips turned in by children under twelve years of age! Christians inside the People’s Republic of China tell us that one of the most serious problems a family faces is the question of when to let a small child know about Christ. If children are told when too young and they share their faith with the wrong people, the family may suffer.

In fact, it is not unusual for the Chinese government to take small children away from their parents and place them in government orphanages, if they learn that the parents are teaching them about Christianity. On the other hand, if the parents wait too long to share Christ with their children, they have already been indoctrinated with anti-Christian ideology.

Attractions

Christians often foolishly think that their children could never fall for the government “line.” This is a serious mistake. Repressive governments do not hesitate to make promises they cannot keep, but they also make very basic, practical promises that they can and do keep. Idealistic young people are frequently attracted to these programs of social justice. Many of these Christians live in areas where there is little possibility of knowing economic security. The unfairness of a situation in which there are a few very wealthy people while the masses can barely exist is obvious.

When governments begin to make some real improvements, as they have done in China, these idealistic young people are attracted to their cause. Another factor that puts great pressure on young people is their natural patriotism. When repressive governments take over, they try to make everyone that does not enthusiastically support them look like an “enemy of the people.” Pressure like this is hard for young people to resist.

Young people with Christian training should be more sensitive to injustice and corruption than others. When governments promise social equality and justice for all, it is very appealing. The point is that the lure of some political systems may put a real strain on the unity of the family. Those who have observed repressive governments over the years are aware that their promises are impossible to keep, and the popular slogans later have to be enforced with guns and barbed wire. But the young idealist may not be aware of this.

The communists took full advantage of these young people and did everything they could to discredit the church. They even quoted “liberal” church leaders who deny the authority of Scripture and the divinity of Christ. Only a Christian family that is firmly grounded in the Word of God will be able to resist the enemy’s attempt to draw away children and young people.

Future: Education and Employment

If the children do successfully hold on to their faith, they may pay a big price. Advanced education may be denied to them. Promotions in the menial jobs they are allowed to hold will be rare. The whole family may even be faced with open persecution, including physical violence. But if Christian families begin to realize the vitally important part they play in the victorious survival of the church, they will see that the family must stand.

Being a Christian doesn’t mean one is not concerned for political change and social justice. But change must be built on biblical principles that are not at the cost of the family or church.

THE FAMILY MODELING THE CHURCH

The Christian family is essentially a cell unit and thus a microcosm of the church itself.

There is much that families can do to be assured of victory in this battle the enemy is waging against them.

Study The Bible Together

First, the family should study the Word of God together and become familiar with its teaching concerning the family. Serious effort must be exerted to establish relationships in the family that follow the teaching of Scripture. It is always a vital first step to accept the biblical standard as your personal standard. A solid Christian family cannot be built on knowledge alone. It takes active commitment to the biblical standard.

Dedicate Children To The Lord

Second, parents should consciously set each child apart to the Lord. This may be done in a “dedication service” in a church building, or a simple act of commitment in the privacy of the home. The Lord honors such commitment. If we knew the percentage of those who were committed to the Lord as children and are now actively serving Him, we would be amazed. Just a casual review of the stories of Christian leaders substantiates this point. Of course, such commitment is just the beginning of the spiritual influence that parents should have upon the child.

Carry Out Five Functions Of The Church

Third, the Christian family should actively be carrying out the five basic functions of the church within the family group: Evangelism, Discipleship, Ministry, Fellowship and Worship. The family can begin by worshipping together. This worship can be done in a variety of ways: reading and praying, listening to soul-stirring Christian music together and then having a time of praise, following the early church example of worshipping around the Lord’s Supper, or any combination of these and other activities.

In many ways, the family worship time, especially when the Lord’s Supper is observed, can be like the Jewish observance of Passover. It will have great spiritual impact on the family and draw it together. Bible teaching and the study of Bible doctrine should be going on in the family as well. Sometimes a casual family discussion of a difficult point of doctrine will have more lasting influence than many sermons.

Christian education should be based in the homes, and occasional family devotions are not enough. The family should strive to have a daily devotional time together, but regular planned study sessions are also needed. This is the best way for a father to reinforce his biblical position as spiritual head of the home.

The functions of fellowship and ministry are needed in many families today. The members of a Christian family can learn to enjoy each other and actively care for each other. Members who have become sensitive to the needs of other members learn to put love into action.

As the concept of family members sharing each other's burden becomes a part of family life, the family will soon be reaching out to others: relatives at first, perhaps, then friends and neighbors. Many of these may not yet know Christ. A caring, sharing family will present a living gospel message that is hard to deny. Many Christians claim that their relatives and friends are the hardest to win to Christ. If families live a testimony for Christ in the home, this can change the heart of other family members. And as well, the home will be a witness to the community.

Sister Biral is a former Muslim who is able to recite Arabic prayers. Because of this she has gained the admiration and respect of her neighbors on a tiny island in the southern Philippines. Sister Biral is now a Christian. Despite persecution she continues faithfully to labor for the Lord. She and her husband look after a church comprised mostly of former Muslims.

Because love permeates their home, children of her neighbors have come to enjoy playing with the Biral children. They like to come to their home where they experience something different. There they are treated with much love. Constantly having other children in their home provides an opportunity for Sister Biral to share God's love with those little ones. Such a home draws people to Christ.

As other families are touched by the saving power of Christ, they should be taught to function as a church, too.

Set An Example In Prayer

Fourth, the parents set an example in believing, fervent prayer. This includes their personal prayer life as well as leading the family as a praying unit. One important part of a developing prayer life is learning to recognize God's answers. The parents can help the children in this matter, so that they can be encouraged that God both hears and answers their prayers.

Children sometimes get the mistaken idea that God will give them whatever they ask. Some who oppose the church try to destroy children's faith in prayer by challenging them to pray for something specific like candy. When the Christian children pray to the Lord, they don't get any candy. But when the others pray to the "*opposer*," they are immediately supplied. Children that have been raised in a praying family will not be so easily confused.

A Christian family that has followed these four steps will be strong in the faith and able to help their local institutional church as long as the Lord permits it to operate. If the time should ever come when public church meetings are no longer permitted, such a family can continue to stand for Christ from within their home.

THE CHURCH SUPPORTING THE FAMILY

What can the church be doing today to build strong Christian families? It is obvious that any steps the church would like to take to strengthen the family must be taken now. The following are some of the suggestions for strengthening the Christian family that have come to us from various countries of the world. You might consider them for your church.

Present Sound Biblical Teaching On The Family To Every Believer

This includes taking a strong stand against the aspects of modern living that are breaking down family life. Satan is already subtly using the same attacks in "free" societies that he uses openly in

restricted societies. Christians and churches should be involved in trying to prevent divorces from taking place by strengthening marriages. The rising divorce rate is a worldwide problem, but the increasing number of divorces among Christians makes us weep.

Help families understand the standards provided in the Bible on everything from sex to finances. Reinforce these standards as being relevant for today and provide guidance for young people in preparation for marriage. This helps strengthen marriages so Christian families can “stand strong through the storm.”

Provide Special Guidance For People Who Become Christians To Stay In Relationship With Their Family

Young people should be encouraged to honor their parents and attempt to draw them to Christ by their radiant lives. Too often young people have been encouraged to withdraw from active participation in their families because their parents were not Christian. This can be a serious mistake. Christian young people should stay in their own families if at all possible. This is even true in cases where they have been raised in homes that are anti-Christian, atheist or Muslim homes. Sometimes this is not possible, but as a matter of general policy they should be encouraged to remain in the family.

Spouses of non-believers have clear Scriptural guidance as to the course they must follow. The Bible makes it clear that a Christian should not marry a non-Christian. But it also teaches that if one spouse is a believer and the other is not, the Christian should stay in the union and try to love the other one to faith in Jesus (1 Corinthians 7:10-17).

Provide A Christian Family Relationship For Individual Believers Within Your Fellowship Who Do Not Have Families With Which They Can Identify

One way to do this is for a Christian family in the fellowship to “adopt” such an individual. The church can encourage such relationships so that each member has the opportunity to share in a family. Another way to do this, if the church is small enough, is for the church itself to provide family-quality relationships.

A way to check up on yourself is to see if any individual member spent the last holiday alone. Would you leave anyone of your family out of your celebration if it were possible for them to be present? Of course not. Paul made this kind of relationship so clear when he wrote to Timothy telling him to treat the other believers as members of his own family (1 Timothy 5:1-2).

Center The Christian Education Efforts Of The Church On The Family Unit

As an option, instead of dividing the family into various classes, encourage families to study together with some assistance and guidance from the church staff and elders. All families do not need to be studying the same subject; a variety of subjects and teaching materials could be made available. It is hard to estimate how much an approach so radically different from the standard Sunday school class method could strengthen the families. It might even revitalize the church.

Support And Encourage The Family In Their Efforts To See The Five Functions Of The Church Active In Their Midst

A church ought not to consider families who employ the five functions of the church in their family as a “threat” to their authority. A child could be truly baptized by his or her father rather than by the clergy. A family could observe the Lord’s Supper in their home. A father can teach Scripture to his family. Strengthening the Christian family can only strengthen the family and the church.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In your fellowship group a Christian family is reportedly having a tough time. The father has not been a spiritual leader, and this has caused problems for the wife and children. All relationships seem sour. There are rumors of an impending divorce if things do not improve. What can you and your fellowship do to help this family? What strengthening can external relationships do to help this situation?
2. How might the following suggestions for strengthening the family be activated in **your** church?
 - Sound biblical teaching on the family to every believer.
 - Special guidance for young people or wives who respond to the Lord to prevent their decision from breaking up their family.
 - Provide a Christian family relationship for individual believers within your fellowship who do not have families with which they can identify.
 - Center the Christian education efforts of the church on the family unit.
 - Support and encourage the family in their efforts to see the five functions of the church active in their midst.
3. One of the ways that Satan often attacks a Christian group is by trying to win away the loyalty of their children. The enemy is aware that few of us give our children the attention and training they need and therefore, they are especially vulnerable. Many anti-Christian forces today are trying to entice children to support their causes. The communists often reward children for reporting on their parents. This is a very difficult matter to deal with and doubly so if the children are too young to understand what is happening. One Chinese family carefully hid their Christian beliefs from their own children because they feared that they would be reported! How strong are your children in the faith?
4. In some countries, the head of the family dictates the religious beliefs of the other members. What should a wife or child who becomes a believer do in regard to honoring their family and yet remaining true to the faith?
5. If the Christian family is essentially a cell unit—how are the following like a microcosm of the church itself?
 - Studying the Bible together
 - Dedicating children to the Lord
 - Carrying out the five functions of the church
 - Setting an example in prayer

6. One way the enemy works against families in general, and children in particular, is through the selective offering of educational opportunities. If children do not show enthusiastic support for the authorities' point of view, they are denied further education. In many authoritarian societies this approach has effectively forced many young people to deny the religion of their parents. In one African state, where the authorities are trying to revive the pagan traditions to strengthen their own political power, young people are pressured to join in ceremonies to evil spirits. If they refuse, they suffer severe persecution. If they submit, they fear that they have lost their Christianity. Could your friends face this kind of pressure? Could **you**?
7. Discuss methods of families protecting Christian children and enabling them to remain strong in their faith when required to attend non-Christian schools that give strong false indoctrination.
8. Why is the family unit so important to God?
9. Of the Ten Commandments, six deal with inter-personal relationships. Of these six, three are intended to protect the family:
 - *Honor your father and your mother*
 - *You shall not commit adultery*
 - *You shall not covet your neighbor's wife* (Exodus 20:7-17)
10. What can individuals do to help strengthen families?
11. Identify how the following challenges affect families in a "free society" and in a "totalitarian country":
 - Time
 - Teaching
 - Attractions
 - Future: education and employment
 - Materialism
12. The hymn writer has said, "This world is no friend of God." What pressures do you feel the modern world brings against your family and its stand for God?
13. Has your fellowship seen its young people drawn away? What seems to be the attraction to them?
14. What do you think your fellowship could do to help strengthen your family?

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