

THE CHURCH part 2
First Things First
Part 6
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These last few Sundays we've been in a series "Things That are New." I've been especially speaking to two groups of people. Those of you who have recently come to the Lord Jesus Christ and want to know how now to act upon that commitment. And all the rest of us who need perhaps some re-patterning in our life to see if we're laying out the straight line foundations that God wants for our life as Christians.

Last Sunday we talked about the church and about the fact of coming into the church and what God asks us to take as responses. I want to continue that today and look at some more aspects of the things that are new – the church.

One of my very favorite biblical churches is the church at Philippi. Luke in Acts 16 tells the story of the founding of this church. In answer to a vision, the Macedonian call Paul crossed the Aegean Sea from Asia into Europe and there at the city of Philippi at the river side he shared the gospel of Jesus Christ to a group of women one of them named Lydia who opened her heart to the gospel. Lydia evidently was a woman of some means and culture. We know that she had a house large enough to accommodate Paul's group of four people. That would have involved more than a utility apartment. She is identified as a seller of purple from Thyatira in Asia, which we know that at the time was a very costly form of dress, very stylish – known worldwide for its quality and its cost. If we were to plug Lydia into the southern California culture she would have a job comparable to that of a regional marketing director for Saks Fifth Avenue. She was Asiatic.

The second convert at Philippi was the opposite end of the social spectrum. She was a demon possessed slave girl who was kept in bondage for the ability of the demons to prophecy through her. She was evidently Greek. Through the exorcism of the spirit that was in her she evidently came to the Lord and Paul was thrown into prison as a result.

Which leads to the third convert in the church. That was the jailer. A Roman. Think of it. The three founding charter members of the Philippian church were one, a well to do cultured, sophisticated, wealthy Asian woman. Second, a down and out poverty-stricken abused young Greek woman. And third, a lower middle class, male Roman small time warden.

Prior to their conversion they had absolutely nothing in common. On Saturday nights Lydia would have been at the opera. Simultaneously the Greek girl would have been plugged into the rock radio station. And the Roman jailer would have been at the wrestling match or the roller derby. You probably could not find three more opposite people anywhere in the world. But they found Jesus. Or Jesus found them! Suddenly they have everything in common. Asia, Greek, Roman. One in Christ. Upper class, middle class, lower class. One in Christ. Male, female. One in Christ. They become charter members of one of the greatest local churches there ever has been in all time. The church at Philippi.

When Jesus called these three persons to himself he called them to each other. That's what the church is. It's a collection of people whom Jesus has called. When the Lord calls you to himself he calls you to full participation in his body.

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Last week we looked at four steps of participation. In calling you to his universal church first he's called you to his local church. Secondly no two churches are alike. Third, come out of anonymity. Come out of the role of being a passive observer or attender to one that takes on responsibility and shares in being a person in that body who pulls weight and serves. Fourth, be committed, seriously committed to the church and to Jesus Christ.

Today I want to look briefly at three additional steps of moving inside the church. The fifth step of involvement in the life of the church is to pray for it. Not praying for your church, whether this church is your church or you happen to belong to some other church, not praying for the church is akin to not watering the plants in your home. What is not watered does not grow. In fact, if you don't water it, it will die. It's that way with the church. The surest way to see the death of the church is for everybody to stop praying for it. Open the book of Acts you'll find the church praying. It's praying before Pentecost, Acts 1. Three thousand people are converted and they immediately commit themselves, devote themselves to pray. They pray all the way through. When their leaders get in trouble they pray. You explain the spiritual phenomenon of that church by the prayers of its people.

If you do not know exactly how to pray for your church, take prayers that Paul prays in Ephesians 1 or Colossians 1 or Philippians 1 or Romans 15 or 2 Thessalonians 1. In all of those chapters you will find specific prayers that Paul the apostle prays for the church. Substitute the name of this church or the church you're a part of and pray for your church in that way.

As you pray remember always that someone in the church, the local church, is going through a time of loss. A time of grief, a time of need, a time of sadness, a time of bearing great burdens. Lift those people up in prayer. As you hear their names in a Sunday service or from the prayer list, pray for people who are walking through crisis.

Pray for people who are going through happy times. Almost every week a couple makes their vows to the Lord. Pray for those couples.

Every other week in our church on average a baby's being born. It's a wonderful time in the life of families. Pray that God will help our young families make strong and sure foundations. Pray. Pray for your leaders. Leadership always needs faith and wisdom and strength.

Then think of the people who are on the outer edges of the church. The people that have not walked all the way in yet to commitment to Christ. But as we've seen are on the outside circle and they're coming in. Pray for them that they'll come in. Come to Christ, come in to the flock of God. The fold of Jesus Christ.

Pray for all of those who labor and work in the kingdom of God for the extension of the gospel whether its here or far afield. Let's bathe the church in our prayers.

Pray for the services of the church. Before you come, gather your family together if you live in a family. Or by yourself if you live alone. Pray that the Lord's presence will be evident to all that come hat day in the service. If you get out of the house without praying then pray as you drive. Pray on your way. But let's pray for the church.

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God moves as his people pray.

The sixth step for involvement in the church is to be a witness. Everyone of us is a witness. The question is not whether or not we're going to be a witness. The real question is what kind of a witness are we going to be.

Recently the Lord gave me a word about a thin, straggly, nearly barren of leaf tree that was sandwiched on a swatch of grass between some busy boulevards of life. It was dying. Some shovelers came to remove it and the tree was filled with false hope for it thought that a change of location would bring back life. I realized in the vision that it was not a change of location that would bring back life. It would just be a sick tree in another busy place. The shovelers were not from God. But the tree needed to be concerned for others. As it began to weep the tears fell onto the ground and watered the roots. The more the tree wept, the more it was concerned with other people, the more it grew and flourished.

I believe we need to visualize the fact that tremendous witness is taking place. We need to encourage that and see that. A church that is being used of the Lord is a church, which is sharing their faith. Sharing our life and sharing words of the gospel.

Some people say, "The only thing I think is important is how I let my life show." It is important for you to let your life show. But no one will ever know by watching your life that Jesus Christ died for their sins. Or that he physically rose again from the dead. And that he is our savior and he's coming again from heaven. They'll only know that if we tell them.

So in addition to our life, let's say it with our words. Each of us are involved in a web of relationships. Let's witness within those webs and pray for God to use us as a witness for his glory. That is our Jerusalem and Judea.

I would rather not talk about the 7th step in becoming involved as a vital member of the church because the 7th step involves a negative. Yet if you were to successfully become a disciple of Jesus Christ you must take this step. Failure to take this step has resulted in the shipwreck of many people. What am I talking about? You may think I'm going to talk to you about money. But I'm not. I'm talking about disappointments.

Disappointments with people, disappointments with fellow members of the body of Christ. Disappointment even with leaders in the body of Christ. You must successfully learn to deal with those disappointments. People are going to fail you within the body of Christ. I wish that weren't true. But it is true. You will experience failure and disappointment from some of the members of the body. Some of them will hurt you and fail you deliberately. Many of them will do it quite un-deliberately because sin has not yet been eradicated in our lives. Because we have not yet been fully formed in grace.

Are you prepared to handle disappointments?

When I was in high school I keenly remember a time when others failed me. My father was doing evangelistic work in small churches at the time and gone much of my senior year in high school. Mom and I lived in a very modest, rented home. The poor end of town. We were very conscious we lived where we did. We had the house furnished in the sparse way that we did.

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But my youth group that I was part of wanted somebody to volunteer their home for a youth social. I asked mom if it would be ok and we volunteered our home. I remember getting ready for that. We got ready. We took some of our meager funds for refreshments and plates of goodies and sandwiches. The youth group I was part of had about 80 kids. We expected about 30 or 40 of them would show up.

The arrival time of 7:30 came and went and nobody came. 7:45 came and nobody was there. Maybe they're late. 8:00 came and nobody was there. 8:15. By 8:30 we realized no one was coming and no one even called us. I think my mom felt that perhaps that we were poor and maybe that's why kids didn't come. I knew that that probably wasn't the reason at all. Just that everybody got careless and made other plans and didn't think. But I was hurt. To say that we were not hurt would be a tremendous understatement. In rethinking that story this week in a tender moment this week I was crying as I thought about it. Thought about the hurt.

I had to learn to deal with that disappointment and not become a drop out to our youth group. That carelessness on the part of my friends, my peers nearly wrecked my discipleship. And it did nothing to help my inferiority complex. I plead with every person in the body, in the church, please exercise common courtesy. One of the things missing in the body of Christ today is common courtesy. I see it even lacking in pastors and ministers. Common courtesy. Treat others as you yourself would like to be treated. Better yet, treat others as Christ would treat you. I had to deal with the hurt and get past it if I was going to be useful to the Lord. I could have dropped out and been gone all of these years in the service of Christ. I could have done that.

There are some people we learn of in the New Testament church that were there to disappoint. You're going to find these people in the contemporary church. Hermogenes the teacher who will bring shipwreck to your faith and tell you to reject your conscious. 1 Timothy 1 and 2 Timothy 2.

You will meet somebody in the body called Diotrephes, a person who is out to make a name for themselves within the body and they shove other people around while they grab for influence and power. 3 John 9.

Alexander will turn on you. You'll look to him to help you and when you just need him most he won't be there. He will turn his back on you. 2 Timothy 4:14.

Demus will desert because he has fallen in love again with the present world. 2 Timothy 4:10.

Euodia & Syntyche two outstanding leaders in the women's group will leave off serving the body because they are in an argument for control of what goes on in the women's group.

Even apostles may neglect you, Acts 6:1. The apostles got busy and neglected the widows in the ministry.

You will meet these in the contemporary body of Christ and a host of other dividers and disappointers within the local church. How you come to grips with the grief they cause you will determine the course of your discipleship.

Some wise-acher has said the church is just like Noah's Ark. If it weren't for the storm outside you couldn't stand the smell within. I've never liked that remark. It seemed particularly harsh.

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I prefer E Stanley Jones' perspective and healing remark of the church: Hospitals are out to banish disease and yet are filled with diseased people. Only a few, the doctors and attendants are well.

Schools are out to banish ignorance and yet they are filled with ignorant students.

The church is out to banish sin and yet it is filled with sinners. Real live people. Struggling to be fully formed by God's grace.

Have you been disappointed? Has someone let you down within the body of Christ? Forgive those who disappoint you. Don't get stuck in that moment. Forgive them. Release them. Forget the things that are behind and go on. Don't leave off service to Christ. Press through. Let the other person be accountable to God for their actions and you be accountable to God for yours. But go on. At all costs go on.

Instead of being consumed with these disappointments focus on those whose lives model the caring love of the Lord Jesus Christ. Sure in the church you will find those who disappoint you. But in the same church, the same body, you will find a Dorcus, who gladly serves. You will find a Phoebe who is a great helper. You will find a Timothy who is so loyal and devoted to serving the body of Christ that he puts their interest ahead of his own. You will find a Barnabus, an encourager. You will find a John Mark, a man who failed but succeeded. You'll find those people in the church too. Follow them as they follow Christ.

Within the church the weeds and the wheat are growing together until the harvest. There's going to come a day when Jesus comes with a scythe. But in the meantime the weeds and the wheat are growing together. God never called you and he never called me to pull the weeds. He called us to be the wheat. Don't get stuck in your life pulling weeds. Be wheat. And bear much fruit – thirty fold, sixty fold, a hundred fold. Deal with disappointments. Go on and serve the Lord. You'll be productive. You'll grow in Christ.

And there's never any disappointment in Jesus. Turn your eyes to Jesus.

Our Father, we come to you in this moment of prayer and commitment. There are people here who have known what it is to experience hurt within your body. If this hurt is still influencing them and hindering them wash them now. The Holy Spirit cleanse their heart. They'll forgive and turn and not get stuck on that experience. Not nourish and cherish the hurt but move on because you're calling them to new service. The field is white unto harvest but the laborers are few. You're calling us to serve, calling us to follow you. May you bring through this church body a great healing in any life that has been hurt by other Christians. Where there are hurts that have even occurred in this body, pour your oil of caring and help and forgiveness upon us. For people who have come to this church this morning and are on that outer edge that I talked about, they've never crossed the line into service for you and become your disciple, your child, open their heart to you. May this be a morning of walking across that invisible line of walking into you and you into them. Let them hear your voice now saying to them "Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone will open the door I will come in." Lord, let that person now take their hand and put it upon the latch and open that door and you come in. The king of glory – you come in. Do works of grace and healing and restoration as we come to these final moments of prayer in this

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service. Let your spirit be present in such a way that each one of us can reach out and touch and be moved upon and stirred in our hearts. We pray this in your name. Amen.