

~Other Speakers G-L: Sermon Illustrations I:

Yet membership in a confessing body is fundamental to the faithful Christian life. Failure to do so defies the explicit warning not to forsake "our assembling together." His understanding of this prompted Martin Luther to say, "Apart from the church, salvation is impossible." Not that the church provides salvation; God does. But because the "saved" one can't fulfill what it means to be a Christian apart from the church, membership becomes the indispensable mark of salvation.

"So highly does the Lord esteem the communion of His church," Calvin wrote, "that He considers everyone a traitor and apostate from religion who perversely withdraws himself from any Christian society which preserves the true ministry of the word and sacraments."Â

Charles W. Colson, *The Body*, 1992, Word Publishing, p. 70.

The church is the only cooperative society in the world that exists for the benefit of its non-members. \

William Temple.

Growing up on the Atlantic Coast, I spent long hours working on intricate sand castles; whole cities would appear beneath my hands. One year, for several days in a row, I was accosted by bullies who smashed my creations. Finally I tried an experiment: I placed cinder blocks, rocks, and chunks of concrete in the base of my castles. Then I built the sand kingdoms on top of the rocks. When the local toughs appeared (and I disappeared), their bare feet suddenly met their match. Many people see the church in grave peril from a variety of dangers: secularism, politics, heresies, or plain old sin. They forget that the church is built upon a Rock (Mt. 16:16), over which the gates of hell itself shall not prevail.Â

Gregory P. Elder.

In a museum at Greenfield Village, Detroit, Michigan, there is a huge steam locomotive. Beside this complicated piece of machinery is a sign showing boiler pressure, size and number of wheels, horsepower, lengths, weight and more. The bottom line indicates that 96% of the power generated was used to move the locomotive and only 4% was left to pull the load. Some churches are like that.

Source Unknown.

When it was built for an international exposition in the last century, the structure was called monstrous by the citizens of the city, who demanded it be torn down as soon as the exposition was over. Yet from the moment its architect first conceived it, he took pride in it and loyally defended it from those who wished to destroy it. He knew it was destined for greatness. Today it is one of the architectural wonders of the modern world and stands as the primary landmark of Paris, France. The architect, of course, was Alexandre Gustave Eiffel. His famous tower was built in 1889. In the same way we are struck by Jesus' loyalty to another structure--the church--which he entrusted to an unlikely band of disciples, whom he defended, prayed for, and prepared to spread the gospel. To outsiders they (and we) must seem like incapable blunderers. But Jesus, the architect of the church, knows this structure is destined for greatness when he returns.Â

John Berstecher.

In the Greek Islands, one can seek out the home of Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine. In the area, one can also find an olive tree, supposedly dating from his time. If this is so, this tree would then be some 2400 years old. The trunk of this tree is very large but completely hollow. The tree is little more than thick bark. There are a few long, straggling branches, but they are supported by sturdy wooden poles every few feet. It has an occasional leaf here and there and might produce a few olives each year. In the fields around, however, are olive groves in many directions. The strong, healthy, young trees with narrow trunks are covered with a thick canopy of leaves, under which masses of olives can be found each year. The tree of Hippocrates can still be called an olive by nature, in that it still shows the essential unique characteristics, but it has long since ceased to fulfill an olive's function. Tourists file up to inspect this ancient relic, having some link to a dim history, but the job of the olive tree passed long ago to many successions of replanted trees. Do you know any churches (or even people) like the tree of Hippocrates? The form is there, but the function is not. They have stopped reproducing and are satisfied just being big, or having a noble history.Â

Keith Copley.

Remember putting your face above a headless frame painted to represent a muscle man, a clown, or even a bathing beauty? Many of us have had our pictures taken this way, and the photos are humorous because the head doesn't fit the body. If we could picture Christ as the head of our local body of believers, would the world laugh at the misfit? Or would they stand in awe of a human body so closely related to a divine head?Â

Dan Bernard.

Imagine that we are TV sportscasters standing on the sidelines of a football game to give the play-by-play.

Scene #1: The team nearest us is standing together, heads bowed in prayer, with the coach in the center. Suddenly they give a great cheer, and the coach trots out onto the field by himself. The players go sit on the bench. "What's going on?" we ask as we stick a microphone in front of a 250 pound guard. "What's the coach doing out there?" "Oh, he's going to play today." "All by himself?" "Sure, why not? He's had a lot more experience and training than the rest of us. We've got a lot of rookies on this team, and we might make mistakes. Anyway, they pay the coach well. We're all here to cheer and support him--and look at the huge crowd that's come to watch him play!" Bewildered, we watch as the opposing team kicks off. The coach catches the ball. He valiantly charges upfield, but is buried under eleven opposing tacklers. He's carried off half-conscious...Â You think that's ridiculous? But isn't it the picture many of us have of the church? The members expect the minister to do the preaching, praying, witnessing, and visiting because he's paid to do the Lord's work and he's better trained. But listen to God's Game Plan. According to Ephesians 4:11, 12, Christ has given the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers "to prepare God's people for works of service." God gives leaders to the church, not to do all the work, but to help all of God's people to do it! Lay people are not there simply to pay pastors and evangelists to do the Lord's work. Rather, pastors, evangelists, and teachers are to equip the so-called lay people to be ministers! Your pastor is meant to be a kind of playing coach. His main function is to help you as a Christian discover your spiritual gifts, develop them, and use them to build up the Body of Christ.

Now look at Scene #2: The team realizes they've all got to play, so they're on the field in a huddle. They huddle...and huddle...and huddle. The referee calls a penalty for delaying the game and moves the ball back five yards. Still the team huddles, huddles, and huddles. The referee calls penalty after penalty, until finally the ball is moved all the way back to their own goal line. "Hey coach!" shouts the quarterback to the sidelines. "This is the greatest huddle I've ever been in. What a group of guys! We have the best fellowship...and some of these guys are amazing students of the play book. Some have memorized over a hundred plays and can analyze them precisely. We learn so much in this huddle!" "But why don't you get up on the line and play?" "Why should we? What we want are bigger and better huddles! Besides, we might get hurt. No one ever got hurt in a huddle!"

Your church and mine are in big trouble if they become a "holy huddle" a band of saints gathered Sunday after Sunday, singing, praising, enjoying each other--but never setting out on the line to apply what they learn. The church is supposed to be Christ's body--his hands, his feet, his voice--by which he carries out his plans in the world. God intends that "through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known" (Eph 3:10). The church is to be God's light in a dark, corrupt society. The Christian life was never meant to be lived only in church for 83 a couple of hours on Sunday. It's meant to be lived in the public arena--on the firing line at school, the office, and in the neighborhood, seven days a week. Of course, we need worship and training and fellowship with other Christians--a football team needs the huddle. But it's what happens after the huddle that the game is all about.

Here's scene #3: the team breaks out of the huddle. But instead of lining up against the opposing squad, they break into groups of two or three, arguing with each other. Soon they start shoving, and two of them actually get into a fight. "What's wrong now?" we ask as one of them walks off the field in disgust. "That bunch of malcontents can't agree on anything," he says. "Those two over there are arguing over the color of the uniforms. A couple of others are quarreling over the right way to kneel in the huddle. Those two guys are arguing because one believes in what he calls 'personal' football, and the other believes in 'social' football. They can't agree whether the individual or the team is more important. Some of the white players say the blacks should go play on their own field, and some of the black guys don't like the band music. A couple are fighting over whether women should be allowed to play. And I'm quitting because I can pass a lot better than that other guy, and they won't let me be the quarterback." The Game Plan says that Christ "is our peace...His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two [Jew and Gentile], thus making peace...to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility" (Ephesians 2:14-16). Christians talk a lot about the peace of Christ. Can the world see that peace in our church relationships? Within the Body of Christ there is plenty of room for diversity of gifts, but underlying that diversity is unity. "Be completely humble and gentle," writes Paul, "Be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit...one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all..." (Ephesians 4:2-6). Isn't it time to show our oneness in truth and love to a watching world?

So the first half ends. The team drags off to the locker room defeated, demoralized, beaten. But when the second half begins, we see a different team. Suddenly they're playing together with a new spirit. They huddle, slap each other on the back, and take the line. They're off the ball with split-second timing, there is no hesitation, they know where they're going. Each player carries out his assignment, and soon they score a touchdown, then another, and another. When the game ends, they've won! Afterwards in the locker room the players are exhausted, cut and bruised, but happy. "What happened at halftime to change this team?" we ask, the coach. "We were sitting here beaten," he says, "and suddenly a kind of presence seemed to come over us. I started talking to the players, pointing out my mistakes, and theirs, and they started talking. Everyone was honest. Nobody blamed the others. We took a good look at ourselves. Then someone recalled that the Great Coach, the one who invented the game, also wrote the Master Game Plan. Wouldn't it make sense to see what he said? "We remembered how he literally gave himself to get the game started and to teach that first team everything he knew. So we got out the original Game Plan and read about basics such as each player knowing his place and dedicating himself to it, about pulling together, being willing to sacrifice, knowing the aim of the game, and using the proper equipment he designed. "Well, we were quiet. It felt as if the Great Coach was with us, as if somehow his Spirit got inside us. Suddenly, we were up! Motivated! Ready to go! We can't take the credit. It goes to Him!"

Source Unknown.

Statistics and Stuff

A survey of hundreds of pastors has allowed us to compile a preliminary list of measurable quality factors in the life of a congregation in ranking order. The twelve factors are:

1. Bible knowledge. Church members are increasing in their grasp of the teachings of the Bible. They can integrate this with a theological system that enables them to apply the Bible's teachings to their life situation.

2. **Personal devotions.** Members spend time daily in prayer, Bible reading, meditation, and other personal spiritual exercises.
3. **Worship.** Members regularly participate in the worship services scheduled by the church.
4. **Witnessing.** Members regularly attempt to share their faith in Jesus Christ with unbelievers.
5. **Lay ministry.** The lay people of the church are engaged in such ministries as teaching and discipling. In some cases this happens through consciously discovering, developing, and using their spiritual gifts.
6. **Missions.** The church actively supports missions, organizing and sustaining a strong program for recruiting, sending, and financing home and foreign missionaries.
7. **Giving.** Members give an appropriate portion of their income to the local church and/or to other Christian causes.
8. **Fellowship.** Members are growing in their personal relationships with each other through regular participation in church fellowship groups of one kind or another.
9. **Distinctive life-style.** Members generally manifest their faith in Christ by living a life-style clearly and noticeable distinct from that of non-Christians in the same community.
10. **Attitude toward religion.** Church members regard their involvement in the church primarily as a service to God rather than a means to fulfill personal needs.
11. **Social service.** Members are serving others outside the congregation. This includes direct personal involvement with the poor and needy, or in programs designed to help the needy.
12. **Social justice.** Either through the congregation as a whole or through specialized Christian agencies, members are striving to make changes in sociopolitical structures that will contribute to a more moral and just society.

C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth*, Regal Books, 1984, pp. 25-27.

There are four main bones in every organization. The wish-bones: Wishing somebody would do something about the problem. The jaw-bones: Doing all the talking but very little else. The knuckle-bones: Those who knock everything. The back-bones: Those who carry the brunt of the load and do most of the work.Â

Bits & Pieces, October 15, 1992, pp. 16-17.

The U.S. Department of Commerce has recently released statistics on American churches, clergy and church schools. Church Law & Tax Report give some interesting figures:

- Number of U.S. congregations: 294,271
- Churches with fewer than 100 members: 60,300
- Churches with fewer than 500 members: 205,556
- Churches with 1,000-1,999 members: 21,691
- Churches with 2,000 or more members: 13,958

Last year churches received \$49 billion in revenues, of which \$40 billion came from contributions, \$1.4 billion from wills and estates, and \$2.5 billion from fees or charges for services. There are a total of 348,000 clergy employed in the United States, and they have served an average of 15.8 years in each position.

Of special interest are the statistics on who is supporting these churches. Persons 65-74 years of age donated the largest percentage of their income (3.1 percent) and those 18-24 the least (0.6 percent). Increasingly, those with lower incomes gave a higher proportion of their income to charity than higher income individuals. Persons with household incomes of under \$10,000 gave 2.8 percent of their total incomes, while those with incomes over \$100,000 gave only 2.1 percent. The average annual contribution to the church was \$715 per household.Â

Pulpit Helps, August, 1992, p. 8.

1)purpose is the public worship of God, edification of the saints, and spread of the gospel.
2)organization: planned meetings (Acts 20:7), corporate discipline (I Cor. 5), money raising projects (II Cor. 8-9), recognized leaders such as pastor, elders, deacons (Heb. 13:7, 17).
3)ordinances practiced.Â Â Â Â

Humor

Like a might tortoise Moves the church of God.
Brothers we are treading, Where we've often trod.
We are much divided, Many bodies we,
Having different doctrines, but Not much charity.

Crowns and thrones may perish, Kingdoms rise and wane,
But the cross of Jesus Hidden does remain.
Gates of hell should never 'gainst the Church prevail,
We have Christ's own promise, but we think it might fail.

Sit here then ye people, Join our sleeping throng.
Blend with ours, your voices in a feeble song.
Blessings, ease and comfort Ask from Christ the King,
But with our modern thinking, We won't do a thing.

Source Unknown.