

An inside look at The Church !

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Marshall Billingslea

Introduction

How do we see the church? How do people outside the church view us? How does God see His church? When we hear the word “church”, many different ideas arise. Thousands of denominations believe differently about who and what they are. Even local churches within a nationwide group seem to vary from place to place. Each one taking on it’s own personality. We tend to pick and choose what strengths and weaknesses to collect along the way. Most Christians are confused, let alone the millions who don’t or won’t attend a local church.

In a small group Bible study, we can only attempt to scratch the surface of discovering some answers. This booklet is a culmination of study and experiences from several local churches, all with varied denominational connections. The church (universal) is The body of Christ. It is His church, He built it, He alone sustains it and directs it. To many leaders and teachers proclaim their position as “all knowing” or infallible, as though they are the only channel to God. God’s creation is certainly diverse and so is His Body of believers.

Yes, there are some groups who are strong in their particular accomplishments, or emphasis, but we should **complete** one another, not **compete** . Even if we differ in doctrine, we must not discount another's rightful place in this complex organism. Of course there are many who stray from essential truths on salvation or the nature of God himself. They are not part of this body. It is those in the body, who agree on essentials, that need to live with a sense of unity. We have a much bigger picture to paint to the world than we as believers can often see.

Is our perception limited to personality, style, culture or tradition? Usually it is. The church, as a general rule, is stuck in a comfortable rut. We don’t see any need to change or grow up. With that disposition, we will miss our purpose on the earth. We will not fulfill our potential and God will not be honored. People will reject an open door to the kingdom of heaven, because the church has lost sight of her purpose.

Hopefully, this study will refresh our vision, maybe even give us a new revelation. Focusing on His concept for church, and abandoning ours.

What is The church?

The term “organized religion” is a turn off to most people. Some believe that to be organized is to be unspiritual. After all, the spirit is not tangible, it is free flowing, and certainly not organized. The word organism is a much better fit for the body. However, a living organism is highly organized. A basic understanding of anatomy will bring you to this simple conclusion. So we are a living structure with an active function.

The problem with too much organization is that **we** eventually take control to maintain the system. Everyone knows what to do, how to do it, and when it should be done. We can leave God out of it all together, and still put on the facade that we are His living body. What a sad pretense. The world can see right through it. Services are meaningless, prayers become rituals and sermons are hollow and empty.

Our pursuit in life becomes climbing the denominational ladder, or building a false sense of security for the local committee in charge of church events. I am not against all organization, and have even been accused of being too organized myself at times. I have felt the need to “call down” a spirit of organization from heaven on some groups who embrace chaos and wear it like a badge.

The problem with organized religion is that, this is our laborious attempt to connect with God. Not much different from any other world religion. The answer is letting God connect with us, through Christ. Embracing the bridegroom as a bride who longs for His leadership. That is how the church is meant to function.

The church is also known as an army which indicates battle. We spend much of our time battling with each other and debating our positions or convictions, while the real enemy sneaks by without a fight. We compromise our faith to unbelievers so as not to offend anyone, and miss the opportunity to share life with those who are dead in sin. The battle continues and the army must decide how and where to fight. Too many people avoid conflict altogether and this passive temperament hinders the church from advancing forward. Be careful to pick your battles carefully, but please, pick your battles! We have a real enemy

with a real agenda to prevail against us. We must not fall asleep in the bunker, waiting for victory to magically happen on its own.

So what is the church? An organism (1 Cor. 12), a bride (Matt. 25:1), an army (Rev. 19:19), and oh yes, a flock (1 Peter 5:2,3). We are called the sheep of His pasture. Sheep are not very smart, they can be stubborn, need protection, and need to be led. I always find it interesting when people criticize the children of Israel in their wandering of the desert for 40 years. Would we have complained? Would we regret leaving our security? Would we be hard to lead? YES, YES, YES! I am so thankful that we have a good shepherd who leads us beside still waters, and even makes us lie down, brings comfort with his rod and staff.

One final description of the church. We are a family (Matt. 12:49,50). He is our Father, we are his children, brothers and sisters to one another. This means embracing all the characteristics of a natural family. Many people can't get along at home, and in turn, can't get along at church. Yes we experience love and acceptance, but also sibling rivalry, power struggles, and so on.

Take the good with the bad because we are truly a spiritual family.

In some peoples eyes, the church has been reduced to a local club, or a click. It is sad to say that visitors are not welcomed or assimilated into the family very easily. (Luke 9:49-55) Most churches do not have a plan to reach new people because they don't really want new people. They require too much attention, they have strange ideas, and don't know our routine. We would never admit to being an elitist club with a limited membership, but our behavior communicates an exclusive social society.

No one puts themselves in this class, but here are some questions to evaluate ourselves. How many converts did we have last year? How many new members? Who has taken on new leadership roles? How many new ministries started? This is not for the sake of numbers, but for the giving of new life. A family that does not procreate, has no one to carry on the family name, and soon fades out of existence. The church is alive and reproductive. We must never grow complacent, stagnant, or obsolete.

Who belongs in the church?

The answer is obvious, everyone belongs in the church. It is the way God created us, to be a part of something greater than ourselves, and find fulfillment in connecting with others who we have something in common. Unfortunately people find a shallow substitution in bars or clubs, apart from God. The terms belonging **in it**, and belonging **to it** may need some clarification. The term for church used in the Bible (Ekklesia) means “called out ones”. Separated from one thing and connected to something else. But does that mean everyone who attends is a member? Are we required to attend every service to be considered a part of the body? Many people today do not even believe in a formal church membership. Others attend regularly and sit on committees out of duty. So what does God require?

It is simple and clear in scripture what is required to be saved. (Rom. 10:9) Believe on the Lord Jesus, confess with your mouth and you will be saved. It is also clear that anyone who is saved is automatically a spiritual member of The (universal) church (1 Cor. 12:27). Some believe that you can not be saved apart from the church, and apart from church sacraments. In other words, faith alone is not enough. Church attendance is obligatory, and required to maintain salvation. This is great theology if your real goal is the building of an institution. If our goal is building God’s kingdom, we should be about reaching people with the gospel, and let Him build His church.

Heb. 10:25 says not to give up meeting together, or forsake not the assembling of ourselves together. We should not take church attendance lightly, for there are many benefits of belonging to a local fellowship of Christians. My point is all about motives. People should have a free will and a personal desire to commit based on our gratitude to God. We can not earn His approval by doing good works and going to church. He approves of us because of Christ, and because of His work in us. Our comprehension of this will in turn (as church members) naturally produce a greater commitment to His body.

This commitment often includes:

1. Formal written membership (accountability)
Neh. 9:38
2. Contributing time, talent & treasure
1 Cor. 16:2
3. Serving others (involved in some type of ministry) 1 Peter 4:10
4. Faithfulness
1 Cor. 4:2

Why should we belong to a local church?

Many of us have attended a stale religious service at some point that seemed irrelevant and confusing. Others seem legalistic and condemning. So why go? I wouldn't! If that's all you experience, stay home. Attending would probably hinder your faith, not enhance it. Just going to any ole church is not the answer. When we search for a spouse, we have expectations, and the same should apply to a church. It can in some ways be compared to a marriage. It must be a give and take relationship, where needs are met on both sides.

Belonging to the right church means growing spiritually, and the wrong church means spiritual death. We can not get our spiritual needs met by our selves. We must connect with those who can help us learn, those who can support us emotionally, and spiritually. We need one another (1Cor. 12).

When we find a place that we can receive, we usually feel at ease to give of ourselves in that same environment.

Healthy characteristics of a local church

1. Friendly, welcoming atmosphere 1 Cor. 16:20
2. Unity of purpose
Amos 3:3
2. Mutual support in times of need
1 Cor. 12:25,26
3. Doctrinally sound (clearly written, publicly

- taught) 2 Tim. 4:3
4. Corporate worship
Heb. 2:12
 5. Expanded outreach / missions
Duet. 32:30
 6. Multi cultural and cross generational
family. Rev. 14:6

The following is a list of traits in an **unhealthy** church according to Charisma magazine Feb. 1999:

1. A controlling spirit among leadership
 2. An atmosphere of secrecy
 3. An elitist attitude
 4. A performance emphasis
 5. Motivation of fear
- * others I would add to the list include:
- Unorganized chaos, lack of leadership
 - No written strategy or vision
 - No youth or children's ministry
 - Irrelevant songs sung without any life

Of course we all have our own “pet peeves”, and on occasion, we are called to a church where they lack in the very area we can bring improvement. I have also made the mistake of ignoring negative signs, and unhealthy traits, only for them to come back and bite me at a later date. Whatever the issues, good or bad, the leadership in that church must be secure enough (with some method) to evaluate and improve on negative traits. Every dysfunctional family lives in denial about their issues. They go unchecked, until they eventually bring death.

What are we called to do?

It depends on who you ask. The congregation may think one thing while the deacons would disagree, let alone the pastors opinion. I have

watched established, mature churches split over trying to write a mission statement. The very thing designed to bring unity and purpose, created division, so then many would conclude not to discuss such volatile things. Some say it is self evident in the scriptures, so why mess with it? Many scriptures give us many reasons for coming together, so I believe the real heart of the matter is about priorities. While every church has a distinct personality, we all must be governed by Gods word, following His plan and blueprint.

The following is a balanced threefold purpose:

1. *Minister to the Lord*— Luke 7:36-47

Mary washed Jesus' feet, we can
worship, pray, and study His word

2. *Minister to each other*— John 13:5-9

Teaching, serving, helping, giving

3. *Minister to the world*— Luke 14:16-23

evangelistic efforts, nursing homes,
homeless shelters, etc

Here is another balanced plan in 4 parts:

FELLOWSHIP— the condition of a friendly relationship between two or more people. (1 John 1:3) Our relationship with God will never go beyond our relationship with one another. (1 John 4:20) When Jesus revealed himself as God with man, He lived as a friend to the disciples. They ate together, fished, went to the lake, met in each others homes, and He called them His friends in John 15:15. If we're going to really get spiritual, then we have to get really friendly in the process!

WORSHIP— Some believe that the worship experience is limited to reciting creeds, and following church sacraments. Others believe in an all out emotional frenzy of charismatic expressions. Jesus said that the Father was seeking worshippers who knew both "spirit and truth" (John 4:24) Church music should include both exciting praise tunes as well as solemn and reverent worship songs. Both hymns and choruses can be honoring to God. The Bible encourages instruments (Psalm 150), singing, clapping, and more when we express our love and thankfulness

to Him.

DISCIPLESHIP— We hear much today about the process of mentoring, but this is not a new concept. It is the process by which we reproduce and carry on the work of ministry. Jesus trained and entrusted 12 simple men with continuing the work of the gospel. I believe Christians (including pastors) should always have a personal mentor, and always have at least one apprentice. Paul said follow me as I follow Christ (1 Cor. 11:1) He told us to train faithful men who could in turn train others also (2 Tim. 2:2). This is without a doubt, the most neglected area of the church.

EVANGELISM— Many churches have grown numerically, and completed monumental building programs but still have not reached the unsaved in that community. We have dreamt up worldly programs to bring in visitors and forgotten our mandate to share our faith. We must go into all the world according to Mark 16:15 and compel them to come in according to Luke 14:23.

* see the study guides on worship, evangelism, and relationships for more information on these topics.

So are we called to **DO** something, or to **BE** something? If we take the canned religious approach, we read that the church broke bread, so we have a church dinner where everyone sits with those they know. Then we read about prayer so we print off a new poem for the bulletin. We can not imitate what we see and be a success. We must adopt the spirit of those principles of ministry. Then we will see God at work.

The book of Acts is a picture of what happened in the early church. A more concise view is found in Acts 2:42-47. They were people of prayer, people of action, friendly people, faithful people, generous people, and more. I think the world has seen enough of what we (The church) can do and they're not impressed. What we're all looking for is a church full of people who **ARE** something. Something different! Something that we can't find anywhere else. When our community recognizes God at work in our daily lives, they can't help but to be drawn in.

The following pages are full of strategies, and church growth

principles, designed to help us become the people God can use.

Core of leaders

Committed members

Congregation

Community

Fulfilling a spiritual life cycle:

1. Include them - membership
present the gospel at every level
2. Instruct them - maturity
provide a plan for Christian living
3. Involve them - ministry
promote body ministry
4. Invest them - missions
send them out

Church growth principles / terminology

Preconditions—

1. The Pastor must want the church to grow and be willing to pay the price.
2. The people must want “ and be willing “
3. The church must agree that the purpose of evangelism is to make disciples.
4. The church must not have a “terminal illness”

Barriers to Religion— without these in place, religion supersedes a move of God.

1. The offense of the cross
2. True repentance practiced
3. Public confessions of Christ with water baptisms

Body life—”clusters” of Christians sharing intimacy, where each member participates, while recognizing individual spiritual gifts.

Allowing for personal accountability and growth. Small groups of 8 to 12

Progression— internal spiritual maturity, then expansion to non believers, and extending the kingdom by church planting, missions, etc.

How do we reach our goals?

Assimilation—new people integrating, participating and taking mental ownership, taking responsibility and eventually leadership.

Clarification—specific strategy, vision or plan to carry out. Goals set for each ministry to eliminate fog, guesswork, or uneducated opinions.

Reproduction—An absolute truth, good or bad, we reproduce what we are, not just what we say we are.

Leadership—clearly defined roles, duties and job descriptions. Everything rises and falls on leadership.

Focus—a publicized mission statement that determines priorities. Ability to sacrifice (or say no) to good things, in order to achieve the best thing.

Sacred cows—wisdom to end old, unproductive programs, plans, buildings or ideas that are no longer useful.

Branches of Christianity /
History of Denominations

Approx. 1 billion each . . .

Catholics - **Protestants**

Liturgical

Lutheran

Presbyterian

Evangelical

Baptist

southern, free will,
Independent

Methodist
Episcopal

Christian
Nazarene
Wesleyan

Church of Christ
Salvation Army

Pentecostal
Assembly of God
Church of God
Pentecostal Holiness
Foursquare

Charismatic, word of faith

Cults
Mormon
Jehovah witness
Christian science

* some categorizations vary and are debated even within the denomination.

Major Protestant Groups :

Name	leader / founder	date began	membership
1. Baptist	none	1610	32 million
2. Methodist	John Wesley	1738	18 million
3. Christian	Campbell, B Stone	1832	1 million
4. Presbyterian	John Calvin	1540	3 million
5. Assembly of God		1914	2 million
6. Church of Christ		1900	3 million
7. Mormon	Joseph Smith	1820	8.4 million
8. Jehovahs Witness	Charles Russell	1884	4 million
9. Lutheran	Martin Luther	1530	5.5 million
10. Nazarene		1907	1 million

Liturgical—is a term for the more formal, regimented church noted for responsive readings, creeds, sacraments such as infant baptism, communion with fermented wine, robes worn by pastors, rituals, and ceremonies. Emphasizing church history, seasonal calendar of services, and referred to as mainline, or “high church”

Evangelical—is a term for those who profess the born again experience. Focusing on the authority and infallibility of the Bible, witnessing for the purpose of converting, Salvation by faith alone with little emphasis on ceremony or rituals. Services emphasize preaching and singing. Observances (communion and baptism) are known as ordinances, not sacraments.

Missing the mark -

The world's largest church building is over 457 ft tall has over 162,000 square feet and seats up to 20,000 in one service. If we compare our modest local church to this by size, then surely we've missed it.

The largest crowd on record for a religious service was 12 million 700 thousand in 1977. A Hindu crowd came for baptism in the Ganges river, and again by comparison, we probably come up short.

The real question is, What is the mark?

We know that seven churches in Asia during the first century were addressed by John in the book of Revelation, chapter 2 verse 3 through chapter 3 verse 15. Here's some of the observations...

1. The church in Ephesus had lost her first love— have we put other things like church business or programs ahead of our personal fellowship with God?
2. The church in Pergamum taught false doctrine—have we strayed from Biblical essentials or toned down our theology to accommodate and avoid the offense of the cross?
- 3.
3. The church in Thyatira tolerated sin in the body—Have we grown so tolerant with society that we would allow immorality to dictate the content of our sermons? Are we accommodating the world while offending and grieving the Holy Spirit in our midst?
4. The church in Sardis was caught up in appearance—Is our building, our budget, or our new choir robes what we're excited about from the last Sunday or the next? Do we appear one way to the community and another way to our heavenly Father?

5. The church in Laodicia was lukewarm and mediocre— Have we become complacent about our lack of worship, our lack of evangelism, our lack of Bible study? Do we make excuses about the backsliding budget and apathetic attendance at church?

We either live for the now and try to please men with our church, or live for eternity and strive to please God. After all, it's His church and He will build it His way. We can work with Him or against Him.

JESUS

PASTOR

DEACONS

ELDERS

FINANCES

BUDGET

SPENDING

REPORTS

FELLOWSHIP

DINNERS

SOCIALS

HELPS

BUILDING MAINT

USHERS NURSERY

WORSHIP

MUSICIANS

SINGERS

SOUND

VIDEO

DISCIPLSHIP CHRISTIAN ED.

YOUTH

MENS GROUP

WOMENS “

CHILDREN

EVANGELISM

JAIL

NURSING HOME

ALTERS

MISSIONS

PRAYER

VISITATION

TRANSPORTATION

This is a normal flow chart for a typical local church. Not carved in stone, but a good basic guide to go by. **Does** this, or *should* this apply to administration, responsibility, authority, duty, vision, accountability, etc? What are the positive and the negative repercussions of a flow chart?

Church Government defined—

Government—management or administration of an organization, a business or an institution.

Anarchy—absence of any authority. Disorder, confusion, no cohesive principles or purpose.

Democracy—governed by the majority of people through elected officials

Dictatorship—an absolute ruler, tyrant, or unchallenged authority who imposes control and commands orders.

Theocracy—ruled by God, subject to divine leadership

Bishop—presiding elder, pastor, shepherd, or leader having received the highest ordination for ministry.

Elder—one of seniority, an influential member in the governing affairs, having spiritual leadership.

Deacon—servant, layperson who assists and has certain responsibilities.

Consider the following definitions:

(these can often be found in any grouping)

- **Traditional -**
- **Contemporary -**
- **Liberal -**
- **Conservative -**

Can a church be traditional and liberal? Or can it be conservative and contemporary?