

What Should We Want Our Congregation to be Like?

What do we want our congregation to be like in this coming year and in the years beyond? Our best guide is to see what the congregations were like at the time of the apostles, and how the apostles encouraged them to be. In whatever city, town, or village where they were, they met on the first day of the week for worship, prayer, and to encourage one another in the faith. That was their chief time for meeting and for celebrating the Lord's Supper. They had their pastors, who were men with the ability to teach, instruct, comfort, and advise them. Besides the pastors, other people devoted their lives fully or in part to works of mercy for their fellow-Christians. They helped poor, sick, and needy people among them (Ac 2:42-47; Ac 6; Ac 20:7-11; 1 Cor 11:17-31; 1 Cor 14; 1 Cor 16:2; Hb 10:25; 1 Tm 2:1-8; 1 Tm 3:1-7; 1 Tm 4:9-10; Tt 1:5-9; Tt 2:3-5; Jm 5:14, Eph 4: 11-12; Ac 20:28; Hb 13: 17; 1 Pt 4:11; 1 Pt 5:1-4.)

When we do not see those Christians assembled for worship, we see them going about their daily affairs and business, doing their work as wives, mothers, fathers, and husbands. Some of the women were looking after their homes, some of the men were working in their jobs, some of them, who were slaves, were obediently doing what their masters directed. In their many different occupations in and outside their homes they were encouraged to lead attractive lives, doing good works in their regular callings (Mt 5:16; 1 Pt 2:11-12; 1 Pt 3:1). By these lives of good works they made the Christian faith look attractive. They confessed what they believed and spoke about it as opportunities arose. Jesus wanted other people to see His disciples' good works and come to glorify their Father in heaven (Mt 5:16). Women who had married unbelieving men lived modestly with the hope that, although their husbands did not yet obey God's Word, their quiet behaviour might win them without any nagging (1 Pt 3:1).

That is how the congregations of the New Testament spread the Gospel. If a pastor today desires to serve a congregation whose members live by faith in Christ Jesus and are active in love (which are the only things that matter, Gal 5:6), and if the pastor is sure that all his flock are doing just that, there is not need at all for any further organization in the congregations beyond the barest minimum for the sake of order. There do not need to be any stewardship committees, evangelization committees, and programs like "forty days of purpose." There do not need for any elaborate programs to give the impression that everybody is busy in some spiritual activity.

However, there will then be a mighty spiritual, churchly movement, as all members of the congregation live their free lives of faith, loving their fellowmen and serving them in freedom. The members will be characterised by joy in the Lord and lively hope for His second coming. The members will not care about themselves or their standing in the opinion of others. The whole body of Christ in that place will, under Christ's blessing, grow as they hear the Word and receive the Sacrament. They will build themselves up in love, as each part quietly does its work. Such a mighty spiritual movement will exert a tremendous attraction on the unbelieving world. The Holy Spirit will, as happened in the early Church, cause growth where and when it pleases God in those who hear the Gospel, and keep adding to the church those who will be saved.

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