

When I was a teenager I used to build model airplanes from a kit and then fly them with little gas powered engines. I always felt a sense of pride and accomplishment when I painted the last pin stripe on a completed plane and took it out to fly. I built these planes according to a blue-print in the kit. The closer the completed plane resembled the blue-prints and the picture on the box the prouder I felt. It gave me a sense of self-esteem, pride and accomplishment to build and fly those planes which I had worked so hard and carefully over.

God has given us a blue-print in the Bible for building his kingdom here on earth. He has given us a picture of what he wants his church to look like. It is found in our Scripture lesson. He wants all of us to be fellow-workers in his kingdom and fellow builders of his kingdom. When we follow the blue-prints we also will gain a sense of self-esteem, pride and accomplishment as we see God at work in and through His church, the visible expression of his kingdom.

Let's take a look at the characteristics of the early church (and compare ours with it. We make this comparison, not for any cynical or destructive reasons, not in order to criticise and tear down but in order to build it up.) We need to take a careful look at the blue-prints and attempt

to reform the church according to the biblical model.

The first mark of a growing church is study. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching". The early Christians, were not anti-intellectual. They devoted themselves to study. Nor were the early Christians academics or scholars, but they devoted themselves to study. They studied the apostles' teaching. They didn't have the NT as we have it today but they studied the oral traditions that the apostles' kept alive and finally put down in writing. Today the apostles' teaching is found in the NT, in the Gospels and epistles.

Obviously their study met some need that they felt. No one volutarily devotes themselves to study unless it fulfils some felt need. The apostles' teaching contained the answers to the questions that these newly converted Christians were asking. Who is this Christ? What did he do? What is his ancestry? How does he fulfil God's ancient plans for the salvation of the world? What did he teach? What does he require of me?

These are questions which growing Christians continue to ask today? It is the mark of a growing church that it asks the right questions and knows where to find the answers.

It was a great encouragement to me to respond to a request from a group of people last week to come to their home and help them study what the Bible had to say about some very important concerns of theirs. I felt that we had a great time studying and discussing the apostles' teaching. This, then is a mark of Christians who are growing spiritually. It is a mark of a church that is growing spiritually, that it devotes itself to the apostles' teaching.)

A second mark of a growing church is fellowship. "They devoted themselves... to the fellowship." Why is it that we desperately try to divide what God has joined together. The early church studied and had fellowship. We are constantly dividing these two. If we have a time of fellowship we hardly ever study. Or we say, "What we need is not a Bible study, but more opportunities for fellowship." But the early Christians devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship.

Fellowship means sharing. When we have fellowship with one another we share ourselves with one another. We let people know how we feel. I have always been a member of some fellowship group as a Christian. I know the Bible backwards and forwards, but it has been in small fellowship groups that I have made the greatest progress in living out

in my life what I know in my head. (I remember one small group fellowship I was part of many years ago. We met regularly one night of the week in various homes. We got to know one another intimately and learned to trust one another with some of our deepest and most troubling spiritual secrets. One evening a Christian girl in the group came to the place where she could trust the other seven enough to share something she had never shared before with another Christian. She confessed that she was a homo-sexual. She broke down in uncontrollable weeping, and weakness. We didn't condemn. We gathered around her and prayed for her. Eventually through the strength and confidence she received from God through our group she came to gain victory over her behaviour. All of us need help to deal with things that aren't right in our life; God works primarily, I believe, through the church and particularly through those small groups that meet together regularly for fellowship and sharing.)

When this kind of fellowship takes place we not only share in the lives of one another, we share out of our own material resources more generously. We read in our Scripture lesson where the early Christians sold their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need." What a great testimony to the world this would be if we discovered to a

greater degree Christian fellowship where we share in the lives of others and share out of our material resources so that none of us should suffer materially or spiritually.

A third mark of a growing church is worship that is balanced and biblical. The early church had a remarkable balance in their worship experiences. For one thing they participated in both formal and informal worship services. In verse 46 we read, "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts" for the stated hours of prayer that were held there. This was a formal worship service. Some of us would probably have called it ritualistic. They participated in formal prayers. It was a dignified service. But they augmented these formal worship services with informal worship experiences in their homes. "They broke bread in their homes." There is no doubt in my mind that this refers to the celebration of the Lord's Supper, the Breaking of Bread, which they celebrated in the more informal setting of their homes, and followed by a common meal.

Why do we always have to polarise ourselves in the matter of worship. Some of us like formal worship services. Some of us would like to bring in guitars and drums and tamborines and clap our hands and do away with a formal order of worship. Why not give opportunity for both? Both have their place. John Stott wrote, "Every healthy local

church will have not only the united service of dignity on the Lord's day, but it will divide the congregation into fellowship groups, which meet in each other's homes during the week. We need both; we must not choose between them."

That leads me to point out another characteristic of their worship. It was both reverent and joyful. In verse 43 we read, "Everyone was filled with awe." But later we read that in their homes "They broke bread... and ate together with gläd... hearts." There is a place for awe and there is a place for joy. We don't have to choose between an atmosphere of gloom and doom ^{on the one hand} and a carnival atmosphere. ^{on the other.} Why do we always have to become polarised? I am used to very funeral like communion services. Sometimes I leave thinking that Jesus is still dead. Why not have a joyful, rollicking communion service at times?

Then there worship services were not only formal and informal, reverent and joyful, but they were also sacramental. The celebration of the Lord's supper was central to all their worship. "The apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread (i.e., holy communion) and prayer." All were regular ingredients of their worship. At this point evangelical Christians, I believe, have really missed the boat. We celebrate Holy Communion four, maybe six times a year.

It's possible for the church today to worship as the early Christians did. I remember one memorable worship experience which combine formal and informality, reverent awe and joy, and it was during the celebration of the Lord's Supper. It was at an Urbana Missionary Conference. Some 18,000 students, missionaries, and pastors filled the auditorium. We followed the ^{formal} Anglican order for the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Dr. John Stott preached. It was on the last night of the year. At the conclusion of the service we all joined in a great hymn of the faith. I found myself raising my arms in praise and awe and joy. I found myself clapping spontaneously. After the benediction 18,000 people turned to one another with tears in their eyes and embraced one another as brothers and sisters of Christ. It was formal and informal, reverent and joyful, and sacramental. A church that worships like that on a ^{basis in the sanctuary & in various homes} regularly will be a growing church and miracles & wonders will be taking place there.

And that's what happened to the early church. "They enjoyed the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." I really believe that one of the most effective means of evangelism is simply being a church that is reformed along the lines of the church on the day of Pentecost described in our Scrip-

ture lesson. People take notice of knowledgeable Christians who have studied the apostles' teaching and know how to give reasonable answers to questions that are raised by friends and neighbors. Men and women today are longing for real fellowship and interpersonal communion. They look for it at bars, in illicit sex, and in living frantic social lives. When they see Christians enjoying the very thing they are looking for at such a deep level they will be drawn to our fellowship and through us enter into the fellowship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Men and women are also created in the image of God and find their highest fulfillment in the worship of God. When they see Christians worshipping God with dignity and awe as well as with joy, exuberance, and spontaneity they may sense the God-shaped vacuum in their lives and seek to have it filled with Jesus, the Bread of Life.

Let's take a look at our church. What can we do to reform it according to the biblical model? What can you do personally? Study. Fellowship that dares to share deeply with others because a trusting relationship has been established. Worship that is dignified, reverent, and filled with awe but which is also joyful, exuberant, and spontaneous. What can you do to make our church more like that?