
FINDING REST IN MY CHURCH

“Oh, for some good church life!”

I suppose the restlessness we see in church members today as they seek better church life elsewhere is not a new thing. The grass on the other side of the fence has always been appealing. Restlessness because we want better church life has some good aspects to it. Vision and purpose in church life are good. But church hopping that is born out of that quest to find the ideal church—is that restlessness good?

I have often pondered the second generation children who have not gone through the trauma of the founding fathers. “Founding fathers” usually have a zeal which unites them in purpose and evokes images of that “perfect church.” With purpose of heart they sacrifice to overcome the deadness or error of the former group and enjoy the spiritual life and enthusiasm of a new group. But I am convinced that starting a new church group every twenty years is not the answer. The ideal church doesn’t go through a debilitating division every twenty years. That is not ideal church life, neither is it the will of God! (John 17:20-21).

Hopping from one church setting to another in search of the “right” church is not the path to spiritual strength and stability either. Moving to a new church setting may at times be necessary, but even then it can destabilize the children beyond recovery. A genuine “church hopper” doesn’t contribute to church life. They are not that kind of person. They are busily looking for the perfect church, not understanding what they are looking for or how to find it.

What is a perfect church? Does a perfect church exist?

The power and spiritual vitality of the apostolic church emanates the picture of a perfect church. Healing the sick, raising the dead, bringing thousands to Christ, and spreading the gospel into all the world, the early church is often viewed as the perfect church setting. But had we lived in that time, we would have realized that the apostolic church wasn’t perfect either. Problems and stress were common. Tensions flared early on because the apostles themselves were showing partiality in the food distribution (Acts 6:1). Hypocrites and liars were found early among the church membership and were dealt with harshly (Acts 5:1-2). Gentiles were received with reservation into the church and had to battle against Judaizers for years to come. The outreach churches had their struggles too, from false teachers (Thessalonica) to rampant carnality (Corinth) and much more. And it would be interesting to know how good speakers the apostles were. One of their preachers, Apollos, is described as eloquent. Paul described himself as being “rude in speech” (2Cor 11:6). But the Corinthians used a different word. They said his speech was “contemptible” (2Cor 10:10). After reading James, I would guess he was accused of being “tactless” at times. And Stephen surely did seem rather long winded. The church, fresh from Pentecost, was far from being “the perfect church.”

What is a perfect church?

Our concept of the perfect church starts with our concept of ourselves. Who am I? If I view myself as being spiritually superior to my brethren, if I am critical of them and despise them, I will find it hard to “be at rest” with my church. Jesus said we need to be “poor in spirit” and among those that “mourn.” Those who feel they

are not up to the task and mourn because of their own sinful heart are blessed. These blessed ones, needy and mourning their own condition, are grateful to be a part of the body of Christ, and their concept of the “perfect church” is so much different than that of the ones who feel superior to their brethren. Being needy themselves, they know the other members are needy also. The perfect church to them is not where other “perfect” believers abide. No. To them, the “perfect church” is where needy souls are ministered to by other needy souls under the watchful care of the Great Shepherd. Needy people are expected, even desired in their fellowship. Ministering to the many needs in the congregation is their calling. Needy leaders do their best to give wise and caring oversight. Knowing they have a crafty enemy intent on destroying believers, they are not surprised when his attacks rock the church and try to bring it down. They expect war and sacrifice and weariness in church life, and also victory (Eph 6:10-13). They expect to be able to say with Paul, “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day.” Some day they can lay their weapons down and bask in perfection!

Until then, we do not want to be caught assisting our enemy. Don’t you be attacking your church leaders and defaming your brethren like the devil does. We can find shortcomings in ALL our brethren and criticize them. Do you think the “accuser of our brethren” is only accusing them falsely? No. There are enough shortcomings found among the believers that he doesn’t need to lie to God about shortcomings among the brethren. There is Joe’s thoughtlessness, Peter’s rashness, Sam’s criticalness, Harry’s negligence, John’s assertiveness, Andrew’s harshness. God knows we are not perfect, but as long as we are pursuing Him, He will help us to grow into the very image of His Son. Scraping up against other unpolished brethren can be really testing. We can easily attack them and despise them like the devil does. But God loves needy people. That’s the only kind of believers He can embrace. There is no “perfect church.” There are no “perfect believers.” Your own shortcomings are obvious to your brethren and to God. So humble your heart. You fit in quite well with those other “exasperating” brethren. But don’t despair. We are not perfect, but our Savior is!

Do genuine fellow believers need to be so exasperating or “carnal”? Spiritual growth comes slowly for us. Jesus’ own handpicked disciples stumbled along so slowly that they are exasperating to us! You have to wonder how Jesus felt. And we would assume He chose the cream of the crop. Do you believe we learn spiritual truths any faster than the disciples did? Who are you?

I remember a pastor who lost his solid and stable church families through a church division. One by one they moved away. He was left with the weak, the lame, and the halt. What kind of church life could he have now? But then he realized that these were the people he was called to minister to. The strong didn’t need much attention from the shepherd. It was the weak that needed his care. So with renewed vigor he put his heart into ministering and nurturing the flock God had given him.

We can very easily criticize our brethren, but Jesus said, “Judge not” (Matt 7:1). Don’t be harshly critical of your brethren! If you are, then you have a “beam” in your eye. Your problem is much bigger than the irritating problem your brother has. Who are you? Paul admonished us to be “longsuffering” and “forbearing” (Eph 4:2). What kind of church life were they having if they needed to exercise longsuffering with fellow believers? Suffering long with an offensive unbelieving neighbor will test us, but we find it unbearable if it is a fellow believer in our own congregation that we need to be longsuffering with. Maybe it’s your church leaders whom you find coming up short all the time. It is true; some do better than others. But you will find shortcomings in

them all, even if you are not looking for faults. Is that going to frustrate you? Do you deserve better church life than that? Who are you?

We want good church life. We need it in these last days. Peter admonished us that the end is near and that our church life should be sober and prayerful. But more important than anything else, he said we should “have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins” (1Pet 4:7-8). Love that needy brother! Don’t hop away from him! LOVE him! Not a little. Love him fervently! Yes, he is needy spiritually. Yes, he is weak. Yes, he stumbles sometimes. Peter says that he even has some “sins” that your passionate love for him will need to bear with. Good church life is not when everybody around you is a blessing to you. No! No! No! Good church life is when I can be a blessing to the weak and needy believers around me. Good church life is not the absence of “motes” in my brothers’ eyes. Good church life is when the “beam” of brotherly criticism no longer ruins my vision, and beams of love for my brothers shine out of my eyes. Those cords of love cure church hopping. The bands of love tie us together. We are not complete and we are not perfect, but we have found mercy and acceptance from God, and we are excited about nurturing each one of God’s children, whether great or small.

Such “fervent charity” for our brethren will give us much rest in our Lord, “for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God” (1Jo 4:7). Oh, the bliss of finding “rest” in the love of God! A love that embraces us in our frailty and shortcomings and says, “I love you.” But we won’t find much “rest in our church.” True, we won’t be weary because of our “church hopping”; we will rejoice in the fellowship of the brethren. But our love for our Lord and His followers will compel us to serve and give and sacrifice for them. We will be weary and tired. We are at war. And we will die in this war. The cause is too great, the stakes are too high, and the promises too precious for us to rest now. But rest is promised and rest will come, full and complete, to all those who have a deep and tender affection for their brethren. Their heart is fixed. They will not be moved. They are anchored in Christ and at rest in His church.

-Vernon Martin