

Chapter Four – “Five Stumbling Blocks That Beset the Modern Church”

At the end of the last chapter, we looked at some *historical* contributions to the present state of affairs in the Church. However, there are *modern* contributions to the weakened state of the Church as well - areas in which we are “missing the mark” in the Church today, as a result of misconceptions and false responsibilities we have taken on in approaching our life together as saints of God. *These areas constitute stumbling blocks or obstacles to discovering and experiencing the fullness of God’s plan and purpose for the Body of Christ.* We believe that it is important to put a finger on these misconceptions and false responsibilities for this reason: when we recognize and humbly confess our failings to the Lord, He will forgive us and cleanse us of our unrighteousness.^a Confessing our sin, so that we might receive His forgiveness and cleansing, is the first step in re-discovering the life and power that God purposed for the Church from the beginning! Our humble response to the Lord will put us on track as the Body of Christ to experience and walk in “the real thing”, as opposed to the parody of it that so many of us have known. With that in mind, let’s look at a few of these obstacles.

Obstacle #1 - Trying to Build the Church

One thing that keeps us from discovering more of God’s plan for us corporately is that we have taken on a false responsibility to “build the Church”. We have heard this phrase used frequently in conferences and in various streams within the Body of Christ. Yet the Lord impressed upon Dave very strongly one day that it is not, and never was, our responsibility to build the Church! The Scriptures bear this out. Jesus said, “***I will build My Church***”.^b Psalm 127:1 explains that, “***Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.***” He has to do it! Yet, somewhere along the way, we have gotten the idea that He wants *us* to build the Church and we have picked up this false responsibility. Whenever we try to do something that God intends to do, what is the result? We end up doing it in our own strength, using human wisdom and reasoning, applying the methods of the world, and generally making a botched job of it! We end up with Ishmael, the product of human effort, instead of Isaac, the son of promise!^c Much of the structure and methodology we see in modern-day churches, things we often mistakenly use to *define* what church *is*, are actually in place because we are focused on building the Church and trying to do God’s job for Him. Once again, what a tangled web we weave around ourselves!

In the Old Testament, the Lord made prophetic reference to rebuilding where man had opened a door for destruction and made a mess of things. The Lord promised His people who had suffered the consequences of their carnality, disobedience and idolatry that, “***Again I will build you, and you shall be rebuilt***”.^d Could this be a promise for the Church of today as well, if we will but submit our lives and ministries to His Lordship? In Jeremiah 33:6-7, He speaks of Jerusalem and says,

“Behold, I will bring it health and healing; I will heal them and reveal to them the abundance of peace and truth. And I will cause the captives of Judah and the captives of Israel to return, and will rebuild those places as at the first.”

Many times, Jerusalem in the Old Testament was a metaphorical reference to God’s people (corporately). In the New Testament, there are passages which similarly present the city of Jerusalem as a type of the Church (Revelation 21:2,9-10, for example). It is clear to us that the Lord wants to rebuild *His* way the things in the Church that we have tried to build *our* way over the past 1800 years.

The Lord wants to bring a change in our thinking about “building the Church” to hearts and minds within the *ekklesia* today. Our current situation might help to illustrate this, as it has made us more aware of the different approaches which can be taken in response to God’s call. We have been looking at possible locations for a youth center that the Lord is calling us to establish in Guaymas, Sonora. The location He appears to have chosen was once a grand and beautiful house, but it has been sadly neglected for many years. So many things have been stolen out of it, that there is nothing left except the shell. This house reminds us of the Church in modern times. The enemy has stolen much through deception and intimidation, leaving just the shell of what God purposed for the Church to be in so many ways.

There are a number of approaches we could take to get the youth center up and running. We could look at successful youth centers and model what we do after what they did (remodeling to suit, of course); we could read the latest “*How To Plant A Successful Youth Center*” manual and implement their guidelines; we could hire a youth center consultant who would tell us what programs to initiate and how to increase our impact; we could take out full page ads in a youth-oriented magazine to attract more kids; or we could do what we’ve always done in light of our own 20+ years of ministry experience!

In other words, we could follow the crowd or implement what *we* think is best for the youth center. With zeal, we could roll up our shirtsleeves and wade in to make it happen through our hard work. We could use our logic and rationale, approaching things the usual way or the way other people have accomplished them in the past. We could “build” the youth center our way, and probably end up with something that works reasonably well and does *some* good, at least.

Or ... we could put all pre-conceived ideas out of our minds and ask the Lord for His plan and His strategy to raise up this center, doing only what He directs us to do and only in the manner He prescribes! *Which approach do you think will best fulfill His purposes in the long run?* Do you see the parallel between this example and our attempts today to “build the Church”?

Obstacle #2 - Trying to Perpetuate the Institution

Many of our modern church structures and methods are also in place because we are not just trying to build something, but also working hard to hold everything together! Have you ever seen someone start a plate spinning, then another and another until they had seven or eight plates spinning all at once? Did you notice how they kept attending to the plates to keep them spinning? This is often what we feel we are *supposed* to do to keep everything running smoothly and moving forward in the church world. We think it is our job to keep those plates spinning!

Dee remembers back many years ago, observing to herself that most of what we were doing in our church at that time were things to “perpetuate the institution”. Much of our focus and energy as the congregation and leadership was directed towards making the church seem warmer, more welcoming to visitors, better organized, and more efficient. They were all things to make the church function better and look more attractive to the people we hoped to attract ... or keep. Our motives were generally unselfish in that we desired to have more opportunity to touch the lives of people with the love and grace of God. Yet these very people were sometimes overlooked while we busied ourselves with improving the church building, services and administration. We had assumed a false responsibility to protect our small empire, to ensure its survival and life, instead of simply being obedient to the Holy Spirit and letting the Lord take care of it.

Later when we became pastors ourselves, we found that despite earlier observations, we had a tendency to take on this same false responsibility! Before we knew what was happening, we were trying to keep all the plates spinning and everything looking good. Of course, the more false responsibility we take on, the more structure we feel is needed. This is one reason why there is a huge amount of structure, bureaucracy and politics in the modern Church! This false responsibility bore other fruit in our own lives as well. We were literally worn out by pastoral demands and the need to attend to all the plates to keep them spinning smoothly. We have known many other pastors through the years, and we can say with complete truthfulness that the number one culprit in sapping life and joy from God's leaders is weariness. However, we can escape this trap - not burning out or growing weary in well doing - IF we will learn to let the Lord shoulder the responsibility for imparting life to His church and keeping it intact!

Obstacle #3 – Viewing the Church as an Institution Rather than a Force

Some years ago, the Lord began to talk to Dave about how our traditional view of the Church as an institution is in conflict with the biblical presentation of the Church as a force. Viewing anything from a faulty perspective is always a hindrance to walking in God's perfect plan and purpose!

In the first case, the institutional view, *the* Church becomes simply “church”. It engenders a passive position of receiving, one in which the institution is the focus and much of our energy is directed towards the continued existence of the institution. There are unseen definitions, expectations, and boundaries when the Church is viewed as an institution because any institution is man-made. Therefore, it is necessarily limited by our humanity. In the second case, however, there are no fast boundaries or defining characteristics because a force, although tangible, is not physical. It's all about energy, not organization! Viewed as a force, the Church is recognized to be the active agent for what God desires to do in the earth. It constitutes a position of giving and being catalysts for change.

Our perspective on Church –whether we view it as an institution or as a force – affects many aspects of modern church life, determining our values, emphasis, and goals. Our mindset in this area will also influence our church government, structure, and operation, including our approach to ministry. Finally, whichever view we take will determine how easily we are able to think “outside the box”. We believe that thinking outside our “box” of tradition and experience will be necessary if we are to rediscover the vitality and effectiveness of the first century Church.

To get a better idea of the concepts of institution versus force, let's look at some specific areas in which our view may be applied to Church life and practice. First, our whole concept of Church itself, what it is and how we define it, is dependent upon whether we view it as an institution or a force! Viewed as an institution, it is “church” - a special building or a specific time set apart for the work of God, or an organization characterized by the various ministries and programs offered. But viewed as a force, our concept is one of *the* Church – a people called out and set apart to Him. Buildings, programs and time can be measured and quantified. But people are not so tangible, and cannot be measured - except numerically. Certainly, we cannot gauge the force represented by a composite of differing giftings, callings, personalities, and individual levels of discernment, determination, compassion, etc. This is especially true when the people are filled with the Spirit of God and He is divinely enabling us!

Our emphasis regarding Church will be different also, depending on which view we take. Seeing it as an institution means we will be emphasizing the facility and the programs offered, taking great care to promote these things and make them visible to the community. Seeing the Church as a force, however, means we will be thinking in terms of people. Our emphasis is likely to be on things like

equipping, counseling, worship, fellowship and loving the people around us – things that are not so easily defined or measured.

Goals show a marked difference as well. If we view the Church as an institution, the goal is usually based on and measured by numbers; i.e., size of the congregation, number of children in the Sunday School, number of programs offered, amount collected in tithes and offerings, percentage involved in home groups, and so forth. If, however, we view the Church as a force, our goals will be less quantifiable. We will be looking at spiritual growth rather than numeric growth. Our goals will be about healing and wholeness, equipping and releasing, building godly character, and facilitating the development of true disciples of Jesus.

Depending on our view, our motivations can be very different also. When the Church is viewed as an institution, the motivation is usually to get people into the church, to encourage them to serve within it, and make the institution the best it can be. When the Church is viewed as a force, however, the motivation becomes simply to be vessels through whom God can touch lives with His love and power. The motivation is to reveal Jesus through our lives to a lost and dying world, and to be ambassadors of reconciliation. It's rather more nebulous, and for that reason, much harder for others to grasp or understand if they are viewing the Church as an institution!

Our approach to ministry changes also, depending on whether we view the Church as an institution or a force. In the first instance, most of our ministry is to believers or to the church itself. We are the focus of our own attention! It's all about us – our worship, our building, our programs, our kids, our needs, etc. And ministry is accomplished by bringing people to the church building at the appropriate times to be ministered to by “qualified” people who are officially identified as “ministers”. When we view the Church as a force, though, our nice and neat institutional ministry package is shattered! People are touched by God and they in turn reach out to touch others whenever and wherever they may be, whether they have titles or positions “within the church” or not. When the Church is viewed as a force, people are encouraged that, *if* they are full of the Holy Spirit, they are qualified and they are ministers. When we view the Church as a force, it is no longer about any *thing*, but about the Lord and about how He wants to impact people's lives. And it is not about using people to build the ministry, whatever it may be called, but about using the ministry to build people! People are recognized to be the focus of God's heart.

Finally, there is a caution we must share with those of us who recognize that we have been viewing the Church as an institution, making it “church”, and limiting God in the process. If we are going to allow the Lord to renew our minds so that we can begin to see the Church as the dynamic force He intended us to be, there are a few things we need to be aware of. First, most of the western church world views the Church as an institution. We will almost certainly make church leaders and others around us very nervous with our unorthodox perspective. Remember that Jesus upset many of the people around Him with *His* “wrong” perspective during His time on earth! Secondly, misunderstandings will probably arise if and when we take non-traditional courses of action. Finally, if we are currently pastors or Christian leaders, it is important to realize that viewing the Church as a force means we will continually need to train up new leadership! People will be moving out and answering the call of God on their lives just as fast as we can equip them. But the rewards of working in harmony with the Spirit of God, and with His plan for the Church, will be such a joy to our hearts that we will probably wonder why it took so long for us to embrace this fresh perspective!

Here are just a few passages of Scripture which reveal Church as a force: Acts 1:8; John 14:12; Ephesians 3:10-12; Matthew 11:12; 2 Corinthians 3:3; Mark 16:15-18; 1 Corinthians 14:31; Matthew 5:16; Matthew 10:1-8; Luke 10:1-3; James 5:16; and Jude 23. We encourage each reader to do their

own study and find other references. Remember that it is important to also study the words in the original languages of the Bible (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek), as the English translation does not capture the subtle nuances or full extent of the meaning in many cases.

Obstacle #4 - Keeping a Clean Barnyard

Another area where we often take on some false responsibility and try to control things is in our efforts to keep the mess to a minimum. Dee calls it “trying to keep a clean barnyard.” This mentality limits the Church from fulfilling her destiny and is another reason why much extraneous and unnecessary structure exists in the modern church system. The structure has been put in place to keep messy things from happening because we think messy things are bad!

However, the Lord spoke to Dee one day as she was out in the paddock cleaning up after the horse, and what He shared helped her to see it a little differently. He said to her, “Dee, part of the problem in the Church today is that no one wants to deal with manure. People, like your horse, if given their freedom and not kept in a sterile institutional environment, will leave muck all over the place. It’s stinky, and it is work to keep it cleaned up, but the freedom to make a mess is also necessary for the good health of the Body.”

Sadly, we have actually welcomed the institutional mentality in our modern churches because it keeps everything nice and clean. Our congregations march in on Sunday morning scrubbed and cherubic-looking, in their finest clothes, masks firmly in place to hide their flaws, their sin and their pain, because this is what we have taught them to do. Generally speaking, we would rather not have to listen to people talk about the problems and issues that complicate their lives! This mentality carries over into ministry as well. We only allow the professionals to do the work of the ministry because it reduces the likelihood of mistakes and messes that will have to be cleaned up. We rationalize that we are protecting the sheep, and the desire to protect them is certainly honorable, but we wonder if one of our primary motives is not to keep a clean barnyard because it is less work for us as leaders if we don’t have to clean up other people’s messes? Or, perhaps we are afraid that other people’s mistakes will reflect badly on our ability to lead?

Proverbs 14:4 tells us, “*Where no oxen are, the trough is clean; but much increase comes by the strength of an ox.*” This verse speaks of a tradeoff we face in the church world. Messiness is one natural by-product of productivity and growth. Cleanliness suggests that we are not allowing people to plow, plant and harvest – in other words, nothing *life producing* is happening!

As Dee was mulling over what the Lord had shared with her about our attempts to keep people in a sterile environment, He then brought “free range” chickens to her mind. For many years she had thought that this type of chicken was preferred and more expensive because more people were joining with the animal rights activists in declining to eat chickens that had been “imprisoned” in cages. However, not so long ago, she discovered that the *real* reason we pay more for “free range” products is because they are healthier! Studies suggest that free range eggs contain significantly more omega 3 fatty acids, necessary for good immune systems, than eggs from chickens raised the normal, commercial way.

We can extend this analogy to the church world. When we keep people relating to one another in a sterile environment, where only a few people are allowed to provide the food, they miss out on the growth and sharpening that a wide variety of Christians can provide for one another. When we keep people restrained, they never learn to find their own worms and feed for themselves. Whatever “food” is available through their lives to a lost and dying world is almost certainly missing some important

nutrients, because no one supplier in the church world has it all. Further, the people will sit in their glass cages and wait for the leaders to dump the weekly ration of chicken feed in the dish for them. After a while, they get fat and lazy, unable to move.

The two of us were once part of a church well known for good Bible teaching and training for ministry. The congregation sat and received wonderful teaching week after week and year after year. They were encouraged to stay in this place of sitting and receiving until they were mature. Maturity, of course, is a process that spans many years and experiences, so few people ever attained this ideal during our time there. Some spheres of giving were encouraged, but they were always within the local church itself where more “workers” were needed, such as in the children’s ministry. Here, they could be monitored as they sought to minister in a way that was safe and acceptable to the church leadership. After a while, people lost the spark and the fire they had come with. They became content to just sit and receive, going through the motions of nominal service, without truly becoming good stewards of the deposit that the Lord was placing in them. Many of them traded their callings for the routine and security of “good” secular jobs. Others bottomed-out after several years, their lives devastated by the results of selfish and tragic choices. If there is not a strong flow *out*, what is being poured in will stagnate within us. This is exactly what happened to many precious saints in this particular local church.

The only way to experience life in the Body, as God intended, is to encourage every Christian to begin giving out what God has deposited in them. Let’s open the gates and let the sheep out of their pens! Yes, we will have some messes to clean up. But overall, the Body of Christ will be healthier, happier, more productive ... and much closer to fulfilling God’s plan and purpose!

Obstacle #5 – Believing That the Church *Should* be the People’s Source

Finally, a major stumbling block to rediscovering “the real thing” arises when we see the local church as responsible to fulfill the needs of God’s people. For years as pastors, we believed that it was *our* responsibility to feed, nurture, encourage, establish, strengthen and protect “our” flock. God *does* want to provide these things for His people and He *does* use people in His Body to provide them. But is it *really* our responsibility as pastors to provide them, and is it really *our* flock?

Most of us understand that for spiritual growth to take place, an individual believer needs prayer, fellowship, opportunities to serve, praise and worship, teaching, preaching, healing, restoration, counsel, accountability, discipline, communion ... and the list goes on. When individuals gather together as a local fellowship or church, the needs compound as we begin to see a need for men’s groups, women’s groups, children’s ministry, youth groups, singles’ groups, support for young parents, janitorial services, adequate administration, etc. As leaders, we often feel compelled to provide *all* these things for the people who attend the meetings, and what tends to follow this sort of thinking is a circular hazard that leaves us experiencing less than God’s best, to put it mildly.

When we believe that the church *should* provide these things, the inevitable result is burned out, frustrated leaders and often disillusioned, frustrated congregations. The local gathering of believers was never intended to be the Source and Supply for our every need as Christians – the Lord reserves that place for Himself!! Here is yet another example of false responsibility operating within the modern church system. It creates a corresponding false expectation which can never be fulfilled among churchgoers and a dependency upon the church system that is misplaced and idolatrous.

George Barna asks the question in his book *Revolution*, “If the local church is God’s answer to our spiritual needs, then why are most church members so spiritually immature and desperate?”¹ He concludes thus, “... if we place all of our hope in the local church, it is a misplaced hope” and reminds us that “Jesus, and Jesus alone is the hope of the world.”²

When we put our hope and trust in something other than the Lord, including a religious system, it is idolatry (and therefore sin). This is true whether we are the pastors or members of the congregation!

- **If we have created an idolatrous system in modern times and have deemed this idolatrous system to be right and good, so that the idolatry is not only perpetuated, but actually strengthened and magnified through our teaching and tradition ... then why does it surprise us that the church world in general is so devoid of God’s life and power?**

Why indeed does it surprise us that believers tend to remain so spiritually immature? Why does it surprise us that the world is impacting the Church rather than vice-versa? *It is the inevitable result of sin at the very foundation and core of our Christian experience in modern times!*

It is not our contention that the local church should refrain from helping believers to grow in their relationship with the Lord or should avoid offering opportunities for fellowship and ministry. Please do not misunderstand! However, there is a subtle difference between simply being a resource and attempting to be THE SOURCE for what believers need to grow and mature in their walk with the Lord! It is a subtle distinction. We might ask ourselves what the focus is on in our own spiritual community. Is it a narrow focus on the leadership, organization, structure, needs, ministries, programs, achievements or relationships within this particular group (church as our source) ... or is it a focus on HIM, His Kingdom, the relationship of each believer with the Lord, their personal responsibility to seek Him and walk in harmony with Him, and their membership in the larger Body of Christ?

When the Church can free herself from the idolatry she has been walking in, regain a proper biblical perspective and begin to function again as a living organism who receives her life from God, we firmly believe that it will pave the way for His Spirit to infuse our lives and our churches in a dynamic, refreshing way. And once again, *the Church will have hold of and personify “the real thing” which God intended for His people from before the foundations of the world!*

Food for Thought

1. Which of these five obstacles have been a stumbling block to you personally in your experience within the Body of Christ? What was the affect upon your spiritual life and growth as a Christian?
2. How might you change the way you are praying in order to more fully allow the Holy Spirit to bring change in these areas?
3. Do you think the Body of Christ would live differently if we didn’t view our local fellowships as responsible for ensuring our spiritual growth? If so, how?

¹ George Barna, *Revolution*(Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, IL, 2005), p. 30

² Ibid, p. 36

4. If you are carrying false responsibility as a pastor or Christian leader, what practical steps can you take to work *with* the Lord and release to Him the things which are actually His responsibility?

^a (1 John 1:9)

^b (Matthew 16:18, emphasis added)

^c (see Genesis 16 - 18)

^d (Jeremiah 31:4)