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CHURCH FOR EVERYONE



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CHARACTERISTICS OF A HEALTHY CHURCH

We have heard about the famous Preacher C.H. Spurgeon. God used him in a mighty way about 100 years ago. Nearly 23000 of his sermons are published. In his Church in London 6000 believers used to gather every Sunday during his time. But now there are only very less members. What happened to the church?

Over the past 100 years London changed considerably. People changed. But the church continued the same old style. Over the past 150 years the world has witnessed great changes from agriculture revolution to industrial revolution and now to amazing information technology.

God used Spurgeon effectively because he ministered knowing the needs of the people. As people changes our style of ministry also has to be changed. But there is no change for the Word of God. Someone has said, "principles are more but methods are less, principles never change but methods change always.

There is a saying among the tribal groups "when you find out that the horse upon which you are riding is dead, better to step down from the horse's back soon.

The fact that a church can continue for many years with traditional methods which are not Bible based is very surprising.

Church growth is one of the results of a spiritually healthy Christian community. It is not tactics or practices that grow the church.

Following are the eight character traits.

Strong leadership

Nothing happens without good leadership. God will use a person or a leader who is not afraid to trust God. A good leader always has a deep-rooted vision. Leadership is not a position, it is action and influence. A leader is someone who takes on challenges without fear of failure. The goal of the church leader is the growth of the church. Jesus said I will build my church. A true leader never backs down. He will have a long term plan with clear goals. Servant leadership is essential to the growth of a healthy church.

Gifts of the Holy Spirit

Healthy churches recognize the various gifts, encourage people to acquire them, teach them to develop them, and give people opportunities to use the gifts. For each task in the church, those who have a special gift of grace will be appointed. Each of them will be assigned subjects in which they are more proficient.

Emphasize high spiritual life and discipline

Healthy churches emphasize study, regular attendance at meetings, prayer, giving, and simplicity.

Thirst for souls

Reaching people through need-based evangelism is a sign of healthy churches. They will have a great burden for souls as well as a great desire. Church growth is an outcome, not a goal.

Efficient structure

A healthy church's organizational structure will be simple and functional. They will also be modern.

Inspirational worship

Worship in the church should increase the vision of divine supremacy. All eternity belongs to a child of God. A healthy church emphasizes inspiring worship. A healthy church emphasizes inspiring worship. The church should give only importance to the history and traditions of the church but should not be enslaved to the traditions.

Small groups

All healthy churches have small groups where each member of the congregation receives undivided attention, helps in spiritual growth, and nurtures and strengthens loving relationships. A case in point is the small groups in Yoo Yong-cho's church in Korea.

Love and unity

Healthy churches place great emphasis on nurturing loving relationships both inside and outside the church.

Churches with all these qualities are greatly needed today. The early church was dedicated and focused on God, teaching practical issues, helping methods, and evangelism.

This is how the Holy Spirit recorded about the church in the first century, which had such characteristics, that the Lord was adding those who were saved to the church daily.

Growth is a natural outcome of health. Focusing on health can help you move from a state of constant repair work to one of mission and see God building His church.

CONTENTS

EDITORIAL**05****MISSION-HEART OF THE CHURCH****Pastor Dr. John K. Mathew****06****NEED OF SOUND TEACHING AND ENCOURAGEMENT IN CHURCHES****Dr. C.T. Luiskutty****12****IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL CHURCHES (Congregation of Believers)****Pastor. P. J. Daniel****16****CONSISTENCY IN MISSION DESPITE SEVERE OPPOSITIONS: INSIGHTS FOR TODAY****Pastor Sunil M. Abraham**

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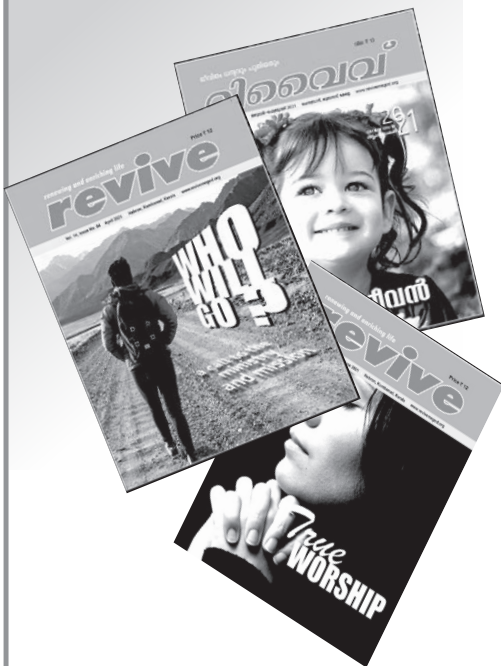
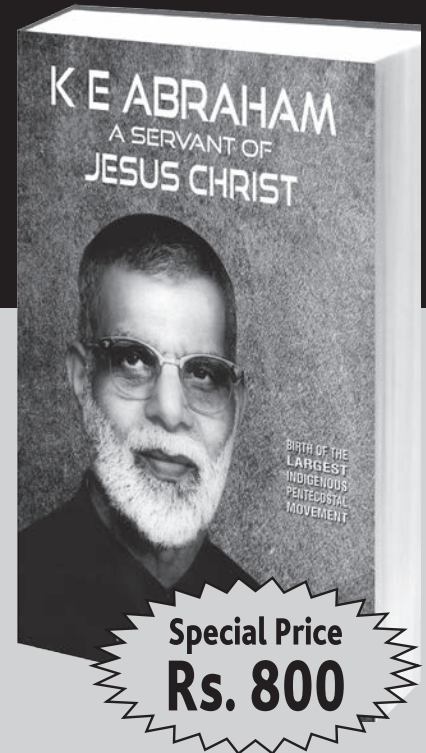
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Pastor Dr. John K. Mathew

MISSION HEART OF THE CHURCH

Acts chapter 14, begins with Paul's mission work in the city of Iconium. There Paul and Barnabas spoke effectively and many Jews and Greeks believed. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up hatred and opposition but the missionaries, stayed on and witnessed boldly for Christ.

God also enabled the men to perform signs and wonders so that the people could believe that these men were servants of the true God. From there they moved to Lystra and Derbe. There they faced indescribable trouble and persecution and Paul was almost dead.

The mission has its challenges, but Christianity is not a movement finished because of opposition. The history of Christianity proves that it grew and thrived despite all troubles. The mission is the heart of the church and every born-again believer. Because the first message of the birth of Christ was a missionary message. It reads, *'But the angel said to them, Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people'* (Luke 2:10) The first prayer Jesus taught was a missionary prayer (Matt. 6:10). The first disciple Andrew was a missionary. Not only that the last wish of our Lord Jesus Christ was a missionary wish as we see in the last lines of the Gospel of Matthew. *"Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit."*

The history of Christianity proves that it grew and thrived despite all troubles. The mission is the heart of the church and every born-again believer. Because the first message of the birth of Christ was a missionary message.

Yes, the mission is a mandate for all of us.

A missionary in Africa was once asked if he liked what he was doing. His response was shocking. "Do I like this work?" He said, "No my wife and I do not like dirt. We have reasonably refined sensibilities. We do not like crawling into vile huts through goat refuse ..."

But is a man to do nothing for Christ he does not like? God pity him, if not liking or disliking has nothing to do with it. We have orders to 'Go' and we Go, Love constrains us.

People all around the globe wait for the good news. We must Go. ●

NEED OF SOUND TEACHING AND ENCOURAGEMENT IN CHURCHES



Dr. C.T. LUISKUTTY

Christian writer and a teacher of spiritual formation and practical Christian living, now residing in Punalur, Kerala.

Acts 13 and 14 give us the story of the first missionary journey of Paul along with Barnabas through Cyprus and the region which is currently called Turkey. In a Jewish synagogue in Antioch Paul used the opportunity awarded to him to highlight Jesus and His mission. To the Jewish audience Paul presented Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophecies given by the Old Testament prophets and King David. Regardless of his audience the good news that Paul preached was always the story of Jesus Christ. He focused on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the remission of sins for those who believed in Him. Some believed and followed; the majority opposed the preachers and persecuted them. As they moved from town to town the same pattern repeated. In Lystra, they were almost worshipped because of a miracle God performed through them, then due to the instigation of some outsiders, were stoned and abandoned as if they were dead.

Though God performed miracles through the apostles, they did not highlight the miracles attempting to profit from them or to enhance their name. When they were about to be adored as gods, they forbade the worshipers since their focus was the person of Jesus Christ, His suffering, death and resurrection and salvation of the Jews and gentiles through faith in Him. This is the essence of Christian doctrine -- what the apostles preached, the early church emphasized and the present church should continue to teach.

In the last letter Apostle Paul wrote to the churches, he gave this instruction:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage--with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men



will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. 2 Timothy 4:1-5

What Is Sound Doctrine (Teaching)?

Acts 14 communicates the following important concepts about the ministry of Paul and Barnabas from which we can gather important lessons on sound teaching:

- The goal of their ministry was to birth faith in the heart of the hearers (Jews and gentiles alike) so that they would believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved from their sinful condition.
- In spite of heavy opposition, they stayed in Iconium and preached with boldness trusting in the Lord.

The last statement in the Gospel of Mark is that as Jesus' followers obeyed His commandment and preached, the risen Lord who had already ascended to Heaven, worked with them and confirmed His word by the signs that accompanied it.

- They were not advertising their miracle working power, but God bore witness to their ministry by performing miracles as they preached the gospel. The last statement in the Gospel of Mark is that as Jesus' followers obeyed His commandment and preached, the risen Lord who had already ascended to Heaven, worked with them and confirmed His word by the signs that accompanied it. (See Mark 16:19-20). The author of the book of Hebrews wrote later, "This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will (2:3-4). The present trend of emphasizing miracles over the preaching



of the gospel of salvation and teaching the principles of discipleship is putting the cart before the horse.

- When the opposition in Iconium grew to the point of physical violence they fled to Lystra. As a result they were able to come back to Iconium later and meet with those who believed and became disciples to confirm their minds and encourage them. It may not be always wise to be stubborn and resist physical violence. There are other places where people need to hear the good news of Jesus Christ.
- In Lystra an unusual thing happened. A lame man was healed. The witnesses of this miracle mistook the apostles to be two gods because they knew only a god can perform such spectacular miracles. Even the priest of the local temple was

In Lystra an unusual thing happened. A lame man was healed. The witnesses of this miracle mistook the apostles to be two gods because they knew only a god can perform such spectacular miracles.

ready to offer sacrifices to them. But Paul did not enjoy such adulation even for a second. Instead they confessed that they were mere men, not gods, showed their disapproval of their intentions and with great difficulty restrained them. Sound teaching does not draw attention to the teacher or preacher even if a miracle occurs in their ministry. Only God is worthy of sacrifices and adoration.

- Sound teaching could lead to heavy opposition. The same crowd that was ready to venerate the apostles turned against them soon, stoned them, dragged them out of their town and left them assuming they were dead - not willing to give even a decent funeral! A repetition of what happened in Jerusalem a few years earlier. The same streets which reverberated with adoring chants of Hosanna to Jesus echoed the angry shouts of 'Crucify Him.' Doesn't this happen in the mission fields today?
- As long as the Lord enabled them,



they continued preaching the gospel.

- They returned to the towns where they were rejected earlier. There were a few believers in each town. The apostles formulated local assemblies there, encouraged them and appointed able elders to lead them in fellowship, prayer, fasting and growing in the Lord.
- Encouraging the believers goes hand in hand with sound teaching. That is why Paul and Silas retraced their path in their return journey.

In Acts of the Apostles 2:37-47 we read that, after the advent of the Holy Spirit with powerful manifestations on the day of Pentecost, Peter preached a great sermon exalting Jesus Christ. In response to the crowd's question, "What shall we do?" Apostle Peter asked them to do three things, viz., repent, be baptized, and save themselves (separate) from this corrupt generation. He included the promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit and implied that this gift is available to those who desire and seek for it. In addition, in this

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passage Luke enumerates certain practices of the early church such as devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer, working of miracles and signs, and holding their material property in common. Many Pentecostal churches use this passage as the statement of their basic doctrine.

Most of the traditional churches recite regularly in their services the Nicene Creed or the Apostolic Creed as a statement of their doctrine. They talk of faith in the Almighty Creator God, in Jesus Christ the only begotten Son of God, His virgin birth, death, resurrection, ascension, second coming, the Holy Spirit, the Church, forgiveness of sins, resurrection of the believers and everlasting life in the world to come. We need to hold on to these models of confession of our faith.



The formation of the Creeds became necessary because from the very early days false teachers and teachings crept into the local churches. The writers of the epistles in the New Testament had to deal with this problem. A formal discussion of the history of heresies or of the various present day heresies is outside the scope of this article. But the church should be aware of and vigilant about this ever present problem.

It is relatively easier to identify and be watchful about heretical groups that are clearly unscriptural or antiscritural. Jehovah's Witnesses, Church of the Latter Day Saints (Mormons), Church of Jesus Christ Scientist, Unification Church, etc. belong to this set. But the danger we face is not such sects but those who believe most of what we believe and teach, but give new interpretations to scriptures,

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As we examine the ministry of the Apostles, it becomes clear to us they were bold in evangelizing. Their focus was the gospel of Jesus Christ and conversion of people by believing in Him and repentance and confession. They faced heavy opposition but were not deterred.
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extrapolate Biblical teachings to suit their imagination, claim new revelations beyond what Jesus said or the Apostles taught and make doctrines out of personal experiences.

In this context a statement from Harold Brown, the author of 'Heresy in the Early Church' is relevant. He wrote:

"There is nothing new under the sun," the Preacher wrote (Eccl. 1:9). According to Professor Klaus Haacker of Wuppertal, Germany, one of the primary sources of error in theology is the desire to say something new. As a teacher of theology for a score of years, I have noticed this: It is extremely hard for a theologian today to say something that is not either borrowed from an earlier, orthodox writer or heretical. Indeed, even the newest heresies, sometimes presented as the latest discoveries in biblical scholarship, usually turn out to be plagiarized from earlier heretics.

From this quote it is clear that in the modern world, where people are tired of old concepts and beliefs and frantically searching for something new, it is only natural for heresies to appear or resurface. The fact that the demarcation line between sound teaching and a heresy is narrow or hazy adds to the problem. Unfortunately, the leaders of the church and theologians abdicate their responsibility to define the boundary and teach the people clearly in a manner they can understand.

Some salient features of sound teaching

- One true God existing in three persons.
- The physical and moral attributes of God. His interactions with people (not only of history, but of the present generation).
- Jesus Christ. His divinity, humanity, uniqueness, his life, ministry, teaching, vicarious death, resurrection, ascension, and relationship with the church.
- The Holy Spirit. His personhood and divinity. His ministry in the present world, Bible-based teaching of being filled in the Spirit and Spirit-led life.
- The Church. Relationships with God, with other members and with the world. Need for spiritual maturity.

These and other topics related to sound teaching must not be confined to seminary campuses or scholarly publications. They should be communicated with clarity in simple language to the ordinary churchgoers. Leaders should clarify their positions on any new teaching that arises and inform their followers of the danger of such teachings. They should have a unified approach against false teachings.

As we examine the ministry of the Apostles, it becomes clear to us they were bold in evangelizing. Their focus was the gospel of Jesus Christ and conversion of people by believing in Him and repentance and confession. They faced heavy opposition but were not deterred. They went back to the small churches to encourage, teach, establish them in faith and edify them. Also they wrote letters to teach them

Christian doctrine, warn them against the infiltration of false teachers, false teachings and false prophets into the church.

Today, as in other periods of church history, there is an abundance of false teachings in the church, covering a large spectrum from legalism to antinomianism. In his letters to the Galatians and Colossians, Paul warns against legalism. The Judaizers required that strict observance of Mosaic Law was required for salvation in addition to faith in Jesus Christ and his completed work on Calvary. Others instructed, "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" In other words, sanctification is the result of submission to rules enacted by their leaders (with good intentions, of course!) and hard work on their part. Paul stated, "Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence" (Colossians 2:23).

At the other end of the spectrum, the antinomians (those who are against law) argued that Christians are freed by grace so that they do not pay attention to Mosaic Law at all. In other words, Jesus accomplished everything in His death, and so, those who profess a faith in Him can live any way they choose. They are under abundant grace always. As the Gnostics of old times they argue that only the spirit has value, therefore whatever happens in the body has no eternal significance. They ignore the Apostles' instruction to mortify their fleshly desires, flee from lusts and live a holy life.

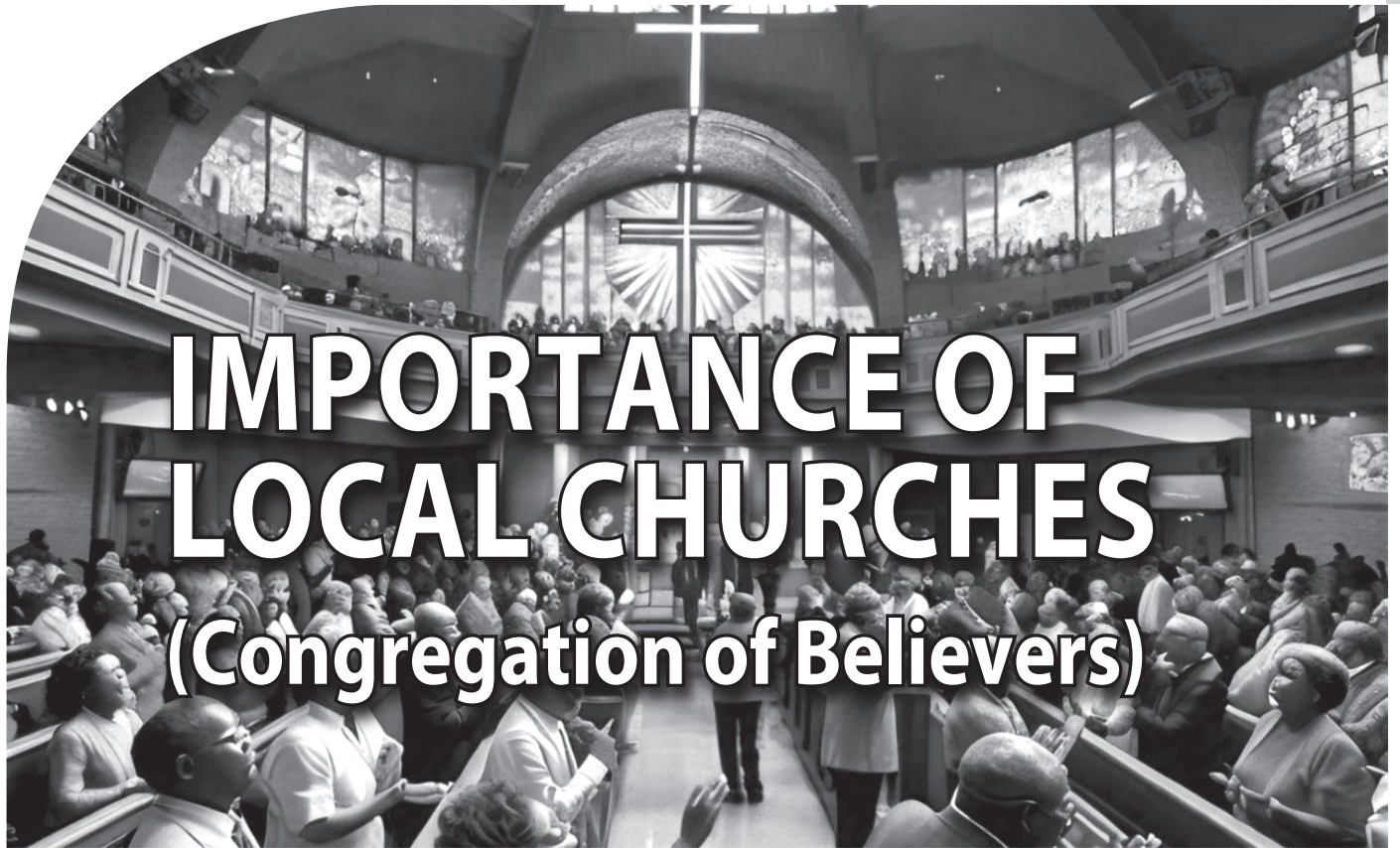
In our churches we face both problems. Some teach that grace was needed for salvation, but after that we should appease God through our efforts of behavior modification, abstinences and self-inflicted suffering. It is hard for anyone under such teaching to have a joyful life because they never feel that they are able to fulfill all the demands imposed upon them, be good enough to stand before the Judge, and be victorious in their Christian living. At the other end

there is no need for sanctification because grace covers any lifestyle. It is completely up to the Holy Spirit to bring good life to them. Both are equally dangerous.

Let me conclude this article after mentioning a serious problem arising from the lack of proper Bible teaching in our congregations. As we emphasize emotional responses such as clapping and loud utterances of praises, people do not pay attention to the Biblical principles of the Word of God. In order to make a name for themselves the preachers misquote, misinterpret and even add their own ideas to the Scripture. Such preachings elicit cheers from the crowd that is illiterate in the Scriptures. As a result the preachers become famous and in great demand because they are great crowd pullers. The church leaders should be cautious about such preachers and encourage the churches to be like those in Berea; "they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so" (Acts 17:11).

Paul and Barnabas were not content with seeing people converted to Christian faith. They went back to them, even at the risk of their life, to ascertain that the believers remained faithful and held on to their teachings. Later letters were written to confirm them in faith, warn them against false teachings and encourage them. Only sound teaching will produce mature Christians and healthy churches.



**PASTOR P. J. DANIEL**

Bible Teacher and
Pastor, Kerala

The Word “Church” has fantastic meanings and the root words are exciting. The original word for Church was ‘Kuriakose.’ This word is composed of two elements, ‘Kurois’ means Lord, and ‘akos’ means a possession or belonging. Thus, Kuriakose means belonging to the Lord. Many assume that the Church is derived from the Greek word ‘ecclesia’, but it is not true. The English word Church descends from the old English word ‘12cirice’ which is derived from the Greek word ‘Kuriakose’, a possessive word of Kurios, Kuriakose simply means belonging to the Lord.

Apostles could have used this word in the New Testament, but appears only twice in the New Testament and the word Ecclesia is used almost 115 times. Ecclesia does not mean ‘belonging to the Lord.’ The word Kuriakose has a proximity and warmth. Since the word church has a spiritual connotation that the Church belongs to the Lord. But Ecclesia stands different. The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible gives a fantastic description. “In comparison with the other term Ecclesia is relatively neutral and colourless, conveying little theological meaning. It was open to use without a basic shift in meaning by unbeliever as well as by believers”

Bible dictionaries, lexicons, and commentaries agree that Ecclesia means “called out,” and generally implies an assembly of people. It lacks qualitative implication to anything either secular or spiritual. It describes anything that might be happening within a community that requires an assembly. This assembly could be social, governmental, or religious. It could be legal or illegal.

It is essential to see the Hebrew word used for the Church. One of the popular Hebrew words used for Church is ‘qahal.’ From this word ‘synagogue’ originated. Its usual translation is ‘congregation’ or assembly. Another similar word used for Church is “Edah.” These two words are simultaneously used for Congregation, assembly, synagogue,



or Church, but, mean nothing more than the Greek term Ecclesia. Though Ecclesia is often used in the New Testament for the Church, the word Kuriakose is more adequate and exclusive because it feels a warmness and proximity to the Lord.

The Church was a mystery to the Saints of the past. It was hidden to Enoch who walked with the Lord three hundred years. It was not revealed to Abraham who was the friend of God. It has not conversed to Moses who confronted the Lord face to face. It was not intimated to David who was known as the man after God's own heart. It was not revealed any renowned Prophets whom God has disclosed to them from the eternity past till eternity future. But it was revealed to us through Jesus Christ who was born as the son of God in the virgin Mary in the fullness of Time.

The Christian Church refers to the collective body of believers who follow Jesus Christ. It encompasses various denominations and doctrines, but it represents all individuals who have accepted Jesus as their Savior,

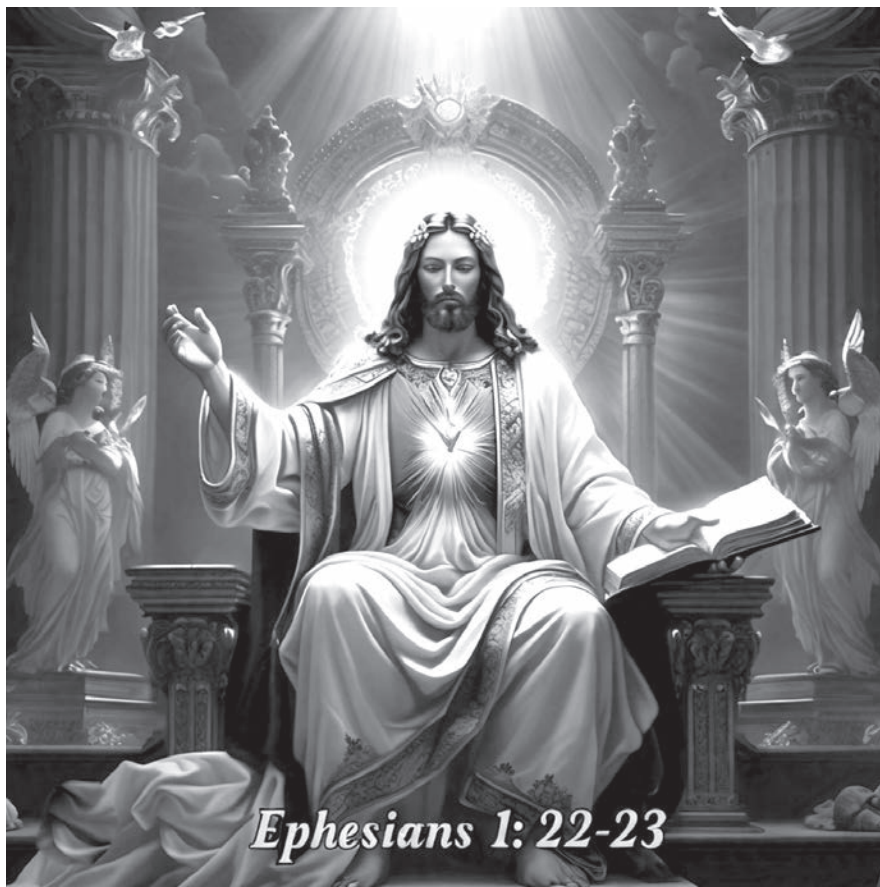
Why is the local church important? The local church is important because it is ordained by God. It is the channel through which God brings His Kingdom to the earth. The local church makes up the global church.

and who follow the precepts of the Scripture. The Church is one, holy, catholic (universal), and apostolic, as expressed in the Nicene Creed. It includes both the visible institutions where God's Word is preached and the invisible body of all truly saved believers. There are views like universal Church, local Church, visible Church, and invisible Church, yet the Church is one and catholic in nature.

It is indispensable to define universal and local church. "The universal church is a heavenly and eschatological assembly of everyone—past, present, and future—who belongs to Christ's new covenant and kingdom." A local church is a mutually affirming group of new covenant members and kingdom citizens, identified by regularly gathering in Jesus' name through preaching the gospel and celebrating the ordinances. In other words, the local church is a community of regenerated believers who confess Jesus Christ as Lord. In obedience to Scripture, they organize under qualified leadership, gather regularly for preaching and worship, observe the biblical sacraments of baptism and communion, are unified by the Spirit, are disciplined for holiness, and to fulfil the great commission of Jesus Christ.

Why is the local church important? The local church is important because it is ordained by God. It is the channel through which God brings His Kingdom to the earth. The local church makes up the global church. Local churches are advisable based on the scripture. There were churches at Jerusalem, Galatia, Antioch, Corinth, and Macedonia, but they were harmoniously linked and united.

A local church may be large or small and have different weekly



Ephesians 1: 22-23

schedules and other distinctive differences, but every local church is defined by the presence of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. It is the Lord and His promised presence that makes a church different from any other gathering of people or organizations. (Mat 18:20)

The local church plays a vital role in the lives of believers. Though the universal church exists, primarily the local church reflects the activities and features of the church. The local church is incredibly important to God, which is why He made Christ the head of the church (Ephesians 1:22-23). He addressed specific local churches through the apostles. The local church grows when we love one another (Ephesians 4:15-16). The local church is where we use our gifts to God's glory (1 Corinthians 12:1-31). The local church is designed to be the place

The local church plays a vital role in the lives of believers. Though the universal church exists, primarily the local church reflects the activities and features of the church. The local church is incredibly important to God, which is why He made Christ the head of the church (Ephesians 1:22-23).

where we regularly worship (Hebrews 10:25). The local church helps to restore us when we are broken (Galatians 6:1-3). The local church is where we fall under the authority of the elders (Hebrews 13:17, 1 Timothy 5:17). Local churches support, fund, and make possible missions, ministries, and outreaches to preach the good news of the Kingdom of God. The Church helps us to spread love and the gospel across the globe and to bring light to a world in moral darkness. The Church helps us to maintain organization, and teachings, and to create a support system for members. By establishing a church, the Lord ensures that the correct doctrines are taught. Moreover, the local church is where believers are equipped for ministry. In the same way that they need each other to develop personally, they need one another to develop the community around them. God gives the Body of Christ and the spiritual gifts to equip the saints.

To sum up, the following features will rectify the significance of the local church.

- **Fellowship and Connection:** The local church connects believers. It is not just about attending services; it is about opening homes, sharing possessions, and experiencing joy together.
- **Spiritual Growth:** In the local church, Christians learn doctrine, receive reproof, and train in righteousness. It provides growth opportunities that are unavailable elsewhere.
- **Worship and Unity:** The purpose of the local church is to worship Christ in unity. It is also a place where sound doctrine is taught, and believers are trained.
- **Community Transformation:** The local church impacts its community by caring for widows, orphans, and those in need. It serves as a standard for direction in the world.

Remember, the local church is not just a building; it is a vibrant community where believers grow, serve, and impact lives.



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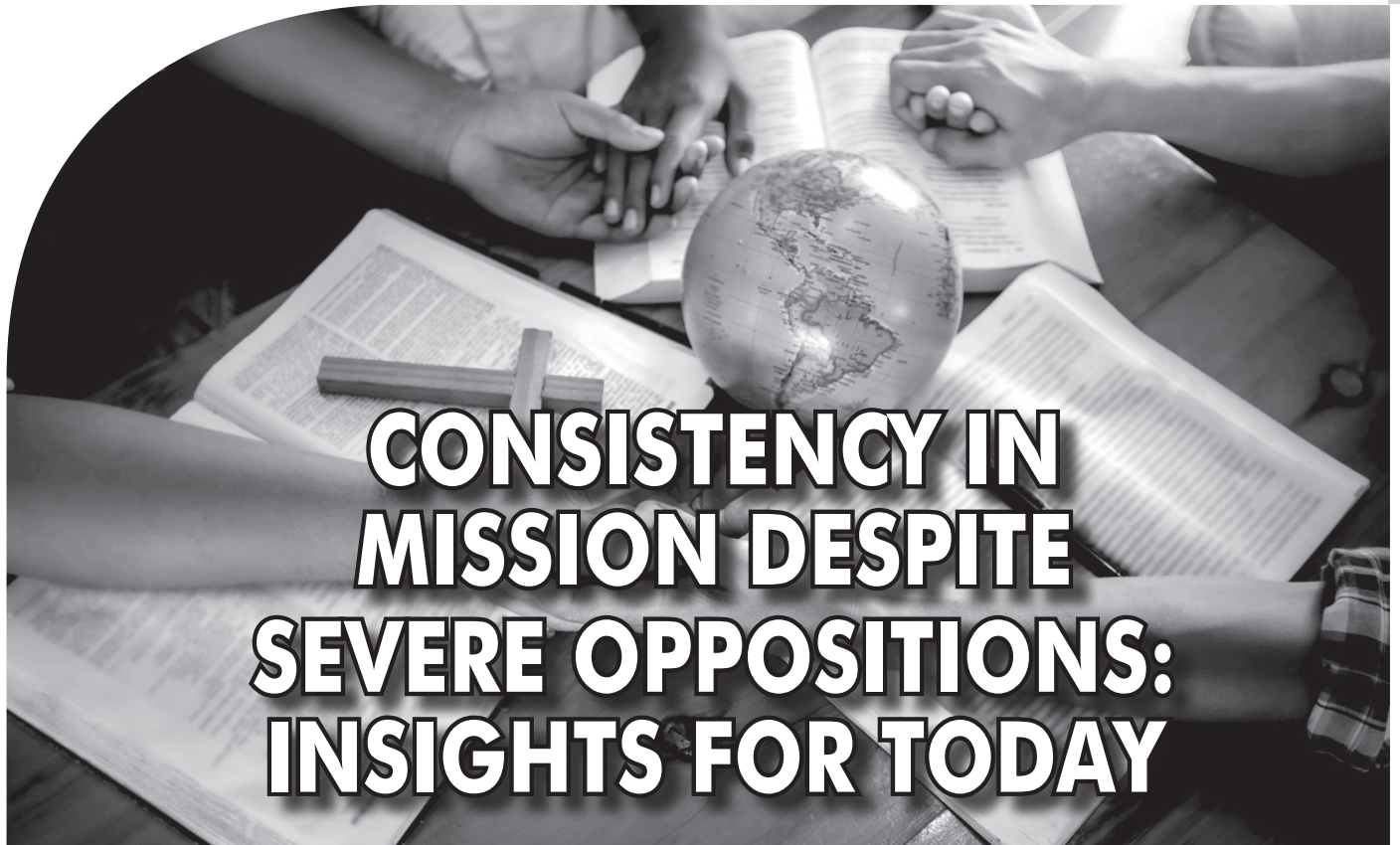
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CONSISTENCY IN MISSION DESPITE SEVERE OPPOSITIONS: INSIGHTS FOR TODAY



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Mission and persecution are related and recurring themes in the Book of Acts. In the context of continuing persecution and suffering, the believing community faced a paradoxical situation that needed urgent explanation. Why do people of God suffer? Whether suffering is a sign for their weakness? Luke addresses this complex situation and takes efforts to construct a self-understanding to strengthen the community providing a scriptural view of suffering for faith. Luke emphasizes that these are not the common sufferings of humanity, but unique and constructive sufferings for the faith in the advancement of the reign of God.

The Nature of Mission: Community Building

According to Acts, biblical mission naturally leads to the building of new communities as envisioned in the gospel known as worshipping communities-churches. Wherever new communities were formed in kingdom values, violent repression from opponents became a reality. The preaching of diluted gospel in entertainment/consumeristic models that neglect community formation can escape persecution but scripture is against such approach. Book of Acts and epistles witness that Apostle Paul faced tremendous pressure to dilute the gospel to present consumer friendly in the Jewish and Gentile contexts to ward off the suffering. But Paul opposed such a move and stood strongly to the truth of the gospel emphasizing that gospel must be enfolded in the lives of believers. The mission aims to create a counter culture community inclusive of all people as family of God and in this process it challenges the dominant cultural worldviews that distort the real human value. Luke says that Paul and his team followed the prophetic vision model of 'suffering servant' in reaching the Jew and Gentile with the message of new creation in Christ.



Paul: The Persecutor

Paul was a fierce persecutor of the young church. He was behind hatching the plan of stoning of Stephen and scattering believers from Jerusalem with a view to get rid of the new messianic movement formed around Jesus of Nazareth. The Pharisaic world view convinced him and provided courage to unleash severe persecution against the believers. As a Pharisee he thought, the emergence of this new movement will jeopardize the Jewish hope of national freedom, purity and uniqueness and even will delay or prevent the coming of the messiah. He thought persecuting the believers as pleasing to God and in this conviction he advanced even beyond Palestine. Thus the church in the beginning faced severe opposition mainly due to theological and political reasons.

But the apostles and disciples faced this opposition courageously and remained consistent in witnessing Jesus as the promised messiah with the support of proper reading of scripture and through the experience

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of the power of the Spirit of God. The scattered church continued the mission more vigorously and planted faith communities in various distant places. It was the Jewish persecution that paved the way to reach the gentiles with the gospel. The persecutors sought to stop and destroy the church but it actually helped them to advance the mission beyond geographical and ethnic boundaries. This shows that a church that is thoroughly convinced and experiences the power of the Holy Spirit can't be stopped from mission. Their motivation was not to gain temporal material comfort or personal benefits but to remain true to their conviction and calling in the presence of Lord Jesus Christ. They were convinced that they are labouring with Lord Jesus Christ in establishing the people of God to realize the eschatological purpose of God.



Paul: The Convinced Missionary

The lopsided Paul was corrected by an encounter with Jesus at Damascus. The encounter with risen Jesus brought an epistemological shift in the life of Paul and he began to re-read the scripture in the light of his new experience. His old conceptual frameworks and convictions were proved faulty and he finally accepted Jesus as the promised messiah. The nationalistic flavour of salvation was replaced by the biblical big picture of salvation for all through the faith in Jesus. This Christ encounter and epistemological shift enabled Paul to become a thoroughly convinced witness. This shows that only a person who is fully convinced who Jesus is and maintains deep intimacy can have the courage to continue the mission with consistency.

Epistemological Shifts: The Wisdom of Cross

Paul explains the epistemological

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shift using the term the 'wisdom of Cross'. Receiving insight from the scripture he realized that the Almighty God manifested the great plan of salvation in such a way that no human being can perceive and understand in human capacity. In the first 'exodus' God executed a great plan to deliver his people from the hand of Pharaoh. God brought Israel to Mt. Sinai and established a covenant with a purpose to transform them as the people of God. Then God promised through his prophets that in the last days he will establish a new exodus and a new covenant that encompass both Jews and Gentiles with a view to establish the people of God. This is the eschatological plan of God that leads to new creation. God revealed and inaugurated this eschatological plan on the cross and resurrection. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus realized the grand manifestation of salvation to all as predicted by the prophets. This wisdom of the cross opened the eye of Paul and he became thoroughly convinced about the importance of the servant mission model as pictured by prophet Isaiah. This conviction enabled Paul to remain faithful and consistent even in the midst of extreme sufferings and persecutions.

Paul: The Suffering Servant

Paul was not glorifying the suffering but understood it as an inherent element in the servant model of mission. A clear understanding of the nature of mission enabled him to continue in ministry even in the midst of severe persecution. Earlier Paul was a stout persecutor but this new revelation converted him as an apostle who underwent severe persecution for the sake of the gospel.

The missionary Paul faced the brunt of persecution from both Jew and Gentile unbelievers. The risen Jesus, prior to Paul's commissioning, clearly revealed to Ananias that Paul needed to go through severe persecution for the sake of the gospel, "But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name"

(Acts. 9:15-16). From the very beginning of ministry Paul encountered suffering and persecution. Jews turned against him and planned to murder him. The persecution became more severe when he commenced the missionary journeys under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

During the first missionary journey onwards he faced opposition all-around. He visited the synagogues in each city and presented the crucified Jesus as the promised messiah and proved it through the scripture. This message brought division in the synagogues and who believed the message formed different worshipping communities in the house of believers. This community building nature of the mission fuelled the persecution and unbelieving Jews used all opportunities to destroy this new movement.

Book of Acts vividly pictures such events as, Paul and Bernabas faced opposition from the locals at Pisidian Antioch "But the Jewish leaders incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. So they shook the dust off their feet as a warning to them and went to Iconium" (Acts 13:50-51). In Iconium an angry crowd tried to stone them, "There was a plot afoot among both Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country" (Acts 14:5-6). At Lystra Paul faced severe opposition where the mob heavily stoned and he miraculously escaped from death. "Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead" (Acts 14:19).

We Must Go Through Hardship: Exhortation for Consistency in Persecution

In the first missionary journey Paul faced the brunt of persecution in proclaiming Jesus as the Lord. Persecutors tried to stop this movement by killing Paul and other leaders. After the first missionary

journey Paul could have returned to Syrian Antioch from Derbe crossing the Tarsus mountain range as an easy escape route. But they went back through the same cities where they planted churches to strengthen the believers giving more teaching and appointing leaders "Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust" (Acts 14:23). The main aim of this visit was to strengthen the believers in the midst of opposition

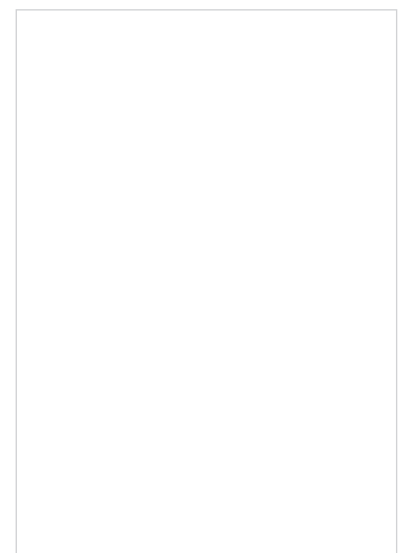
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so that they can remain consistent in faith. He enlightened them that suffering from unbelievers is inherent truth of the gospel and exhorted them to face it boldly being in the presence of the reign of God "strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). In the epistle to Colossians

Paul declared that "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Colo. 1:24) and he gives the insight that those who suffer for Christ will be glorified with him (Rom. 8:17).

The Insight: Can Persecution Stop Mission?

The scripture reveals that persecution is part of the plan and providence of God. Persecution originates from the rejection of God's purpose and plan through unbelief. Persecution is not something new but scripture witnesses that all the prophets and servants of God went through persecution. Persecution is the occasion of believers' perseverance and God's triumph. The worldly wisdom is impotent to grasp fully the constructive and creative role of persecution and suffering in the mission. In this generation it is our God given responsibility to be consistent in mission. Persecution and suffering may appear in various forms to stop the mission but our Lord Jesus Christ is with us to continue in mission with courage and conviction.





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