

10 Ways the Church Can Thrive in These Evil Days

The contemporary church is facing unprecedented challenges to its faith. In addition to the increasing pressure upon believers to conform to the values of secular culture, churches have experienced considerable declines in attendance and finances due to COVID-19. However, Jesus commanded His disciples that amid tribulations, they must “take heart” because He has “overcome the world” (John 16:33b). His words have proven true as the early church not only survived, but thrived. It became a massive movement that has outlived and outlasted every worldly and political empire for the past two millennia.

The following are 10 ways the church can thrive in these evil days:

1. The church needs to gather together all the more during times of testing. The book of Hebrews tells us to assemble more as we see “the Day approaching” (Heb. 10:25b). Whatever your perspective on the precise meaning of this passage, we can all agree that “the Day” is referring to an ominous day of reckoning, a time of testing and judgment that every generation experiences to one degree or another. Thus, the only way the church can thrive during such challenging seasons is to come together to support one another. The devil would like nothing more than for Christians to use COVID-19 as an excuse to remain fragmented and isolated. Enough is enough! We need the whole body of Christ to physically gather as soon as possible (depending, of course, upon the physical health of each individual).

2. Pastors need to connect with each other. After a challenging season in my own life in the 1980s, I received a life-altering call from God in 1991 to focus my attention on

uniting the pastors of New York City. I realized that a spirit of ethnic segregation and independence was limiting the potential of God's purposes for our huge metroplex. Jesus said seven times in the book of Revelation that we were "to hear what the Spirit was saying to the churches" (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). This illustrates that there are some things God will not speak to individuals alone, especially when it comes to what Jesus wants to do in a community or region.

After starting a prayer movement called All City Prayer in 1991 and combining it with the Concerts of Prayer in 1994, we saw the crime rate drop dramatically in our city. Even more importantly, united prayer became the catalyst for breaking racial barriers and developing great levels of trust among hundreds of pastors.

The united church in our city paved the way for a robust response after the 9/11 attack on our city. Many pastors came together to coordinate crisis counseling as well as a memorial service broadcast to the nation. After that, a huge church planting movement began in Manhattan and beyond, which, to this day, is positively affecting every borough and region of the greater New York region. A united church is more than up to the task of meeting the challenges of the day. Truly, God releases a blessing commensurate to the amount of unity that exists in the body of Christ (Ps. 133).

3. Church place and workplace leaders need to collaborate. God never willed that there would be a separation between the church place and the workplace. Historically, the original 12 apostles were recruited from the workplace, not from the religious class. (Several had fishing businesses, one was a tax collector; another was involved in politics as a zealot; and even Judas Iscariot was the treasurer, indicating that he had experience managing money.)

Arguably, the greatest church in the New Testament, the church of Antioch, had leaders connected to the marketplace. For

instance, Barnabas bought and sold real estate. Paul was a tentmaker, and most likely Manaen was a politician raised with Herod the Tetrarch (Acts 13:1-2, 4:37, 18:3).

During times of financial lack and social unrest, the church must form partnerships with key community leaders in both the church place and workplace so they can put a collective of gifts and resources together to serve their city. Pastors and leaders who aren't open to collaborative efforts with the marketplace essentially tell more than 90% of their church that they are not needed. Indeed, for the church to thrive, we need to end this unbiblical bifurcation so the church gathered on Sunday becomes the church scattered on Monday.

4. The church needs to discern divine opportunities in the crisis. Paul commands the church to make the most of every opportunity because the days are evil (Eph. 5:15-16). Scripture teaches us that the "sons of Issachar" had a divine assignment to understand the times in which they lived so they could know what Israel should do in response (1 Chron. 12:32). In light of these principles, every crisis becomes an opportunity for the church to go to another level of effectiveness to shine the light of Christ to the community. For example, the betrayal and subsequent crucifixion of Christ revealed an opportunity for Jesus to rise from the dead. The challenge of feeding all the Grecian widows in the early church moved the apostles to set up the permanent ministry of the diaconate (Acts 6:1-6, 1 Tim. 3:8-10).

The persecution of the Jerusalem church afforded an opportunity for Philip to preach to Samaria and witness a great awakening (Acts 8:1-8). The imprisonment of Paul and Silas led to God bringing an earthquake that resulted in the Philippian jailer and his whole family getting saved (Acts 16:25-34). Hence, the present-day crisis in the church is an opportunity to manifest the power of Christ and dispel the darkness. Furthermore, the fear, depression, confusion and hatred abounding in the world today reveal an opportunity for

the true church to manifest the truth, love and peace of God to unbelievers. The true church will always thrive amid darkness and chaos!

5. The church needs to be bold amid opposition. The focus of the early church was never about preserving people's lives and human freedoms. They thrived because they were willing to risk life and limb for the sake of the gospel. The apostle Paul said, "I consider my life worth nothing to me, my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given to me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace" (Acts 20:24, NIV). What a far cry from many in the American church who invest more time, talent and money in protecting their religious freedom than they do in gospel proclamation! (It is fine to protect religious liberty if it does not replace the proclamation of the gospel and winning the lost.)

The early church did not even consider persecution an obstacle. When the people prayed, they did not ask for less persecution but that God grant them boldness to preach the gospel with signs, wonders and miracles (Acts 4:29-31). The church will thrive when Christ's followers fearlessly proclaim the gospel despite persecution and cultural disapproval.

6. The church needs to put its trust in the Lord Jesus instead of political leaders. Although the church is called to nurture good citizens who vote and engage in the political process, our ultimate trust should be in King Jesus, not in elected officials. When the church puts too much of its hope in a mere man or a political system, it practices idolatry and will witness a swift correction from the Lord. (The past election has revealed the hearts and motives of many in the church, for good and for evil.) Jesus, as King of kings and Lord of lords, is sovereign over all the kings of the earth (Rev. 19:16). They are commanded to bow down before Him and "kiss the Son" lest His wrath flare up and destroy them. Hence, we are blessed only if we put all our trust in Him (Ps. 2:7-12).

Thus, when Jesus is truly Lord of the church, we will thrive no matter who the president is!

7. The church needs to maintain corporate spirituality during evil days. Since most societal systems lie under the control of the evil one (1 John 5:19), the church needs to continually walk in the faith of Jesus to overcome the world (1 John 5:4-5). However, the only way for the church to walk this way is to cultivate certain spiritual disciplines within its congregations. Paul tells us that amid evil days, we need to discern the will of the Lord so that we do not walk foolishly. How do we do this? We do this by continually being filled with the Spirit, by saturating ourselves with the Word, psalms and hymns, and living lives of thanksgiving (Eph. 5:15-20).

Hence, the church will only thrive if both corporate and individual spirituality are taught and celebrated. Only the church saturated with the Word of God will prosper and bear fruit in every season (Ps. 1). Notice, Ephesians 5:19 begins, "Speak to one another." This passage connects being filled with the Spirit and the knowledge of the will of God with assembling together for the purpose of corporate spirituality. When the church equips and releases the saints to minister to one another, the body of Christ will thrive no matter what the challenges are.

8. The church should employ regular times of corporate prayer. The book of Joel illustrates how the people of God should respond in the midst of a crisis. God instructed the people of Israel to call a "solemn assembly" that consisted of fasting, prayer and repentance (Joel 1:13-14; 2:12-13). The result is that God would remember His people and pour out a blessing (Joel 2:18-28). Peter quoted this book on the day of Pentecost after a 10-day prayer meeting that culminated in God moving in power and saving 3,000 people in one day (Acts 2:17-40). The church that engages in much corporate prayer, fasting and repentance will thrive even during the days of evil.

9. The church should put on the full armor of God. During the days of evil, the church can only stand fast by putting on the full armor of God. This primarily involves complete alignment with the Word of God. In Ephesians 6:10-17, we see the church must put on “the helmet of salvation.” The helmet protects the head, which is where our thoughts emanate. Hence, Jesus wants our thought life protected during times of testing. Proper thoughts are those based upon the knowledge of God’s Word, which alone is able to cast down every imagination and false thought (2 Cor. 10:3-5).

We have to wear “the belt of truth,” which is the piece that holds the whole armor together. Only those whose view of reality is framed by the Word of God are those who will escape deception and stand fast in the midst of spiritual battles. “The shield of faith” quenches the fiery darts of the wicked one. How does this overcoming faith develop? “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17, MEV).

Finally, “the sword of the Spirit” is our only offensive weapon. Jesus employed the Word of God against the devil when He quoted Scripture to counter his temptations (Matt. 4:1-11). The church that aligns with the Word of God will thrive in these days of testing.

10. The church should have an eternal perspective to counter temporary suffering. Paul says the sufferings of this present world are not worthy of being compared to the glory that will be revealed (Rom. 8:18). With an eternal perspective, the church will weather any storm, since its anchor does not rest upon temporal things and circumstances (Isa. 40:6-8, James 4:13-14, 1 John 2:17). The eternally minded church does not place significant value in things like material goods, wealth, fame and popularity. Hence, when any of these are threatened or lost, we can still walk in the joy of the Lord. When the church has an eternal perspective, it will thrive amid every crisis.

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