

Would the Early Church Be Able to Recognize the American Church?

By today's standards in the American church, Jesus wasn't cut out to be a pastor, nor would His ministry be highlighted as a model for church planters. Consider these facts:

Jesus had the greatest preaching, teaching and healing ministry in history. Thousands came to hear Him, followed His every move and lined the streets to get a glimpse of Him or simply touch Him. Yet amid His rock-star popularity, He intentionally offended religious leaders, challenged potential mega-donors and weeded out casual followers with tough teachings. Not exactly the textbook strategy you'd find today to grow your church, much less your Facebook likes and Twitter followers.

After Jesus spent three and a half years ministering to thousands, His church consisted of only 120 disciples gathered in the upper room. And even that was a low turnout, considering He had appeared to more than 500 people after His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:6).

But we know the rest of the story: how the 120 quickly became 3,120 and grew daily to where even unbelievers credited Jesus' followers as those "who have turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). The truth is, we know that Jesus' divine church-growth tactics surpass all others—with the proof being a global church that, 2,000 years later, refuses to die while it works to fulfill His Great Commission.

Why, then, do we in the 21st-century American church focus on all the elements that Jesus *didn't*? He focused on training and equipping 12 disciples; we focus on growing our crowds and spheres of influence, regardless of whether those people

follow Jesus. He preached an uncompromising message of truth; we sugarcoat the gospel until we're saccharine-high on deception. He walked among His enemies in love; we ostracize our enemies by blasting them for all their sins.

Indeed, most of the U.S. church is enamored with size over substance and microwave growth over true reproduction. Research shows that while 235 million people call themselves Christians, only 40 percent of those meet regularly with fellow believers and only a fourth (at most) read the Bible on a regular basis. It's time we discovered the marks of the real church, measured by Jesus' standards rather than our own trendy metrics. So what are those elements? Here are just a few.

1) Love. Jesus defined a premier characteristic of His church in John 13:35: "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." If we can't even love fellow believers—if we skewer each other over theological differences and cultural preferences—how can we expect the world to want what we have? Transforming the world with God's love starts right where we are, on the home front, as we learn to love each other as Christ loved us.

2) Prayer. Jesus was constantly communicating with the Father, listening for His thoughts and seeing where He was already moving. Luke's Gospel shows that little happened in Christ's life without Him first praying. Why, then, do most church gatherings today focus so little on prayer? In trying to be culturally relevant and seeker-sensitive, we've conveyed that this essentiality of our faith—both individually and corporately—is secondary. That can't be if we want to mimic Jesus.

3) Persecution. We in the West equate religious freedom and the lack of persecution with blessing. Yet when you look for the most powerful churches in the world, where the Spirit moves freely and in fullness, you'll always find persecution.

It's time we wake up and realize that persecution galvanizes and unifies the body of Christ like few other pressures. Remember, Jesus promised persecution to those who truly follow Him (Matt. 5:11-12; John 15:20). When was the last time you saw this promise fulfilled in your own life or church?

4) Power. Jesus also promised that His followers would do greater works than He did (John 14:12)—a promise sealed by the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower us. Wherever the early apostles and church went, the miraculous followed. Though there have been seasons of Holy Spirit revival in our nation, even charismatic churches today are de-emphasizing such things as praying for the sick, demonic deliverance or the prophetic. Making room for the Spirit's supernatural movement isn't an option; it's the mark of those who truly follow Christ.

Charisma has highlighted eight of the biggest issues today's American church faces. Some are core to our nation's culture wars; others are more exclusive to believers. Regardless, all require the church to stand up as representations of Christ and be the solution—just as Jesus modeled.

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