

WHAT MAKES A CHURCH GREAT ?

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on August 11, 1968
at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee and heard
over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P. M.

Brother B. C. Goodpasture preached for this congregation for a relatively long period of time--a period of twelve years. That is a compliment to him and to you, On June 1, 1951 of his own accord, he resigned his work to devote his full time to the editing of the Gospel Advocate. The elders of the congregation then concerned themselves with finding someone to take his place and in the course of time they invited me.

About that time I went down to Brother Goodpasture's office one day to talk to him about it. In the course of the conversation he said something that I would like to repeat to you. He said, "Brother Baxter, the Hillsboro church is one of the greatest congregations in the entire brotherhood. In fact, I think there is none greater." He has reminded me of that statement on several occasions since and has asked, "Haven't you found it to be so?" Each time I have responded, "Yes." In my experience or observation there is no congregation which I believe to be a greater New Testament church than this one. After seventeen years with you I can truly say that this is one of the greatest (we would not say the greatest) congregations of the Lord's family.

All of this raises the question: "What makes a church great?" A great many answers could and would be given if each of us were given an opportunity to speak. Off hand, what would you say first if somebody said to you, "What makes a church great?" I should like to suggest a few things along this line. May we begin by mentioning some things which are often considered as evidences of greatness, but which in reality are not essential. There are things which often go with greatness, but which are not necessary to greatness.

How Important Is Size?

The average person, when he thinks of a great church is likely to think in terms of size. How many members are there? If there is a long list of names, it must be a great church. Well, it may or may not be.

This congregation is a congregation of some size. It thrills me on Sunday mornings to see the building filled twice, for that means an average of more than 1,400 people come each Lord's day. Yet I would not say that this is evidence of greatness. There is strength in numbers, but that does not necessarily mean that a church is great. I suppose that we all know that there are more Mohammedans in the world than professed believers in Christ. If numbers were the primary thing Mohammedanism would be greater than Christianity. But size is not primary.

If one wants to study the subject of numbers he has ample material in the scriptures. Remember the story of Gideon? Thirty-two thousand men rallied to his call to fight against the Philistines. God said it was too many, and by various means reduced the number until only three hundred real men, men of courage and strength and devotion, went out against the Philistines. The enemy melted at the presence of the three hundred. The Lord has often used a few to conquer the many. He believes in numbers only because he wants all men to be saved. In and of themselves numbers do not spell greatness.

How Important Is Wealth?

There are those who think of greatness in terms of wealth. If a church is wealthy it is a great church. Again, the answer is wrong. The early church was not wealthy. The New Testament church was generous, but a generous church is not necessarily a wealthy church. Generosity may be a quality of greatness. It is fine when both of these things go together, but wealth by itself does not mean greatness.

As I am impressed and encouraged by the number that come here to worship, I am also encouraged by the generosity of those who come. More than \$220,000 was put into the collection baskets on the fifty-two Sundays of last year. This is all the more impressive because there were no high-pressure drives, or levies, or pledging systems. It was simply free-will giving.

It might be interesting to you to know how much we gave per person last year. I think you will find it to be about \$3.36 per member of the congregation per Sunday. That is high, though it is not higher than it ought to be. We are grateful for the generosity of this congregation, yet it is not money that makes a church great. The Lord is interested in money but he is interested in a lot of other things. Wealth does not make a great church.

How Important Are Buildings?

In thinking of a great church many people think in terms of big buildings, but fine buildings do not necessarily mean great churches. In the early days when the church began there were no buildings at all, yet the Jerusalem church was one of the greatest that ever existed. Buildings may accompany a fine church but strength does not necessarily lie in marble or brick or stone. The church is the people.

How Important Are History and Prestige?

There are others who think that a long and glorious history makes a church great. When one visits the city of London, inevitably he visits the old Westminster Abbey. There is a religious building steeped in history. They tell you with pride about who is buried beneath the floor. They tell you how it began to be built in the eleventh century. It has had a long and notable history. You cross a few blocks and see St. Paul's. That, too, is a great building, second in size only to St. Peter's in Rome. They tell you that it was finished in 1710, and that it was the work of Sir Christopher Wren, one of the greatest designers and builders of all time. For nearly two hundred, fifty years that building has been in active service. It is not how long a congregation has existed, however, or how old and how glorious its history. What counts is what it is now.

There are many who think that prestige makes a church great. How many big names of the community are enrolled on the church roster? How many presidents of banks, how many men of high position are among its members? But just as the Lord does not measure a church by its marble, neither does he measure a church by the quality of society in which its members operate.

What makes a church great? Let me suggest some positive things, some things which are essential to greatness.

The Necessity of Knowing God's Will

The first absolutely necessary characteristic of a great church is knowledge of the will of God. A church begins to be great when its members know the truth of God and when they can distinguish it from error. The apostle Paul paid a fine tribute to the Christians at Berea, "Now these were more noble than those those at Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, examining the scriptures daily, whether these things were so." (Acts 17:11). He laid further emphasis upon the study of God's word when he said, "Give diligence to present thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, handling aright the word of truth." (II Tim. 2:15). Size, wealth, fine buildings and prestige mean nothing unless the church knows and obeys God's will.

The Necessity of Faith

A second very vital thing is a deep, abiding faith in God. In Heb. 11:6, the writer says, "Without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing unto him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek after him." In II Tim. 1:12, Paul shows more fully the kind of faith that is needed, "For I know him whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that he is able to guard that which I have committed unto him against that day." The faith that is needed by the Christian is more than mere belief in the existence of God. It is a deep trust in God.

The Necessity of Consecration

A third very vital quality is a deep, genuine consecration to the Lord. This is what Jesus meant when he said, "But seek ye first his kingdom and his righteousness." (Matt. 6:33). The apostle Paul possessed this quality in great measure as shown in his statement, "Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect: but I press on, if so be that I may lay hold on that for which also I was laid hold on by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself yet to have laid hold: but one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things that are before, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Jesus Christ." (Phil. 3:12-14).

The trouble with so much of the religious world today is that so many professed believers hold the faith in Christ so casually. It has such a fragmentary hold on their lives. The Lord would rather have "ten who are stout-hearted men" than a thousand who are luke-warm like those of Laodicea. Emphasizing this theme, William Fraser McDowell once wrote, "Wealth can be matched with equal or larger wealth; splendor of plant can be equalled or surpassed, elaborate organizations can be met and overcome in kind. The enemy of the ministry is very rich, very fertile, very enterprising and resourceful in all these ways...But one thing he cannot imitate, nor duplicate, nor match, nor conquer is a Christlike personality."

It is only when men commit themselves--body and soul--to the Lord that they begin to be worth something in building up a great church. It is only then that they are real Christians whose destiny is heaven.

The Necessity of Work

Still another essential of greatness is work. No church can become great until it begins to carry out the work which God intends for his children to do. "Pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world." (James 1:27). The Lord intends for his disciples to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the poor, encourage the disheartened, and lift up the fallen. He

intends for his followers to carry the message of a better life and a better world to all men. There is no place in his church for the lazy or indolent. It is not a matter of knowing or believing only, but also of doing.

Jesus closed his great sermon on the mount with the words, "Not everyone that saith unto me Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say unto me in that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy by thy name, and by thy name cast our demons, and by thy name do many mighty words? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity. Everyone therefore that heareth these words of mine, and doeth them, shall be likened unto a wise man, who build his house upon the rock: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon the rock. And everyone that heareth these words of mine and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and smote upon that house; and it fell; and great was the fall thereof." (Matt. 7:21-27).

The Necessity of Fellowship

Finally, it is imperative that there be a warm and continuing fellowship among the members of a congregation if the church is to be great. The members must love each other. They must not be divided by jealousy or factionalism. Christ said, "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; even as I have loved you, that he love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." (John 13:34-25). Paul emphasized the importance of unity in Ephesians 4:3 when he spoke of "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Christians must work together and worship together because they love each other.

Conclusion

Before a church is great there must be a thorough understanding of God's will. There must be a deep consecration, a giving of ourselves to the Lord. There must be a willingness to work. These go far toward making a church great. Along with these qualities there must be love of the brethren or fellowship. There must be real Christian unity. You cannot work if you pull against each other. When you have told the story in these terms then you have spelled out greatness.

It is not size; it is not wealth; it is not fine buildings; it is not a long and illustrious history; it is not prestige. Rather it is a knowledge of God's will which leads to a commitment of all that one has to the Lord. This leads one to work for the Lord in unity with other brethren. This makes a church great.
