

"What Makes A Great Church"

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

Introduction:

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 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.

I. OFTEN CONSIDERED AS EVIDENCE OF GREATNESS

1. 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 larger than the average church of Christ, but it is by no means to be numbered among the largest. It thrills me on Sunday morning to see the building nearly full. 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 Moslems in the world than professed believers in Christ. If numbers were the primary thing, Muhammadanism 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 Midianites. God said it was too many, and by various means reduced the number until only three thousand real men, men of courage and strength and devotion, went out against the Midianites. 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.

2. 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 \$_____ 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 \$_____ per member of the congregation per Sunday. That is usually considered in this day and time very good. I'm sure that it could and probably should be higher. But we are thankful 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.

3. How Important Are Buildings?

In thinking of a great church many people think it 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.

4. 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 on the visit lists is 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 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.

5. How Important is Prestige?

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 opulence of the society in which its members operate.

II. What Makes A Church Great?

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

1. 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 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." (2 Tim. 2:15). Size, wealth, fine buildings and prestige mean nothing unless the church knows and obeys God's will.

2. The Necessity of Faith

A second very vital thing is a deep, abiding faith in God. In Hebrews 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 2 Timothy 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.

3. 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." (Matthew 6:33). The apostle Paul possessed this quality in great measure as shown in his statement, Philippians 3:12-14 "Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect, but I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for

which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.¹³ Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." NASB

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 equaled 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.

4. The Necessity of Work

Still another essential of greatness is WORK. No church can become great until it begins to carry out the work that God intends for his children to do. James 1:27 "This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."NASB 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, Matthew 7:21-27, "21 'Not everyone who says to Me, Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven.22 'Many will say to Me on that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?'23 'And then I will declare to them, I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'

24 'Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock.25 'And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded upon the rock.26 'And everyone who hears these words of Mine, and does not act upon them, will be like a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand.27 'And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and it fell, and great was its fall.'"" [NASB].

5. 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, John 13:34-35, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.³⁵ "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." [NASB]. 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.

-- Sermon by Batsell Barrett Baxter

– <http://home.hiwaay.net/~wgann/sermons.htm>