

THINGS THAT MAKE THE CHURCH STRONG

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I am very thankful today for this opportunity of being able to study this portion of God's word with you. We will concern ourselves with some things that make the church strong. I realize that we will not be able to touch the hem of the garment as far as studying all of the sources of strength we as the church have. I believe all of these things have been given by God for these intended purposes.

The first that we would like to notice is perhaps the greatest source of strength that God's people have ever had. I believe that it is the greatest source of strength that we have in the church today, and I believe that it is so very instrumental in the reason that the church still stands. I'm speaking of the truth of God's word.

We find that the truth is so very important that upon it depends salvation and sanctification. In Romans 1:16-17 the Apostle Paul tells of the great power that is found in the truth of the gospel. He says, "For I'm not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith" Again, Jesus in His prayer, in John 17:17 said, "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

God has always supplied truth to His people. He has always told them to depend upon the truth of His word for their strength in serving Him. In Deut. 32:2, He said, "My doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distil as the dew, as the small rain upon the tender herb, and as the showers upon the grass." In Prov. 4:2, He says, "For I give you good doctrine, forsake ye not my law."

If we are to be strong and if we are to accomplish our purpose in the church, we must always be loyal to the truth of God's word. The Apostle Paul told the young man Timothy as he was beginning to preach the gospel and to do the work of an evangelist, "If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine whereunto thou hast attained." (I Tim. 4:6).

Paul also speaks of the leaders of congregations of the church. He says that elders need to hold "fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers." (Titus 1:9). In order to accomplish our purpose as the church today, in order to be successful even to the smallest extent we must be loyal to the truth of God's word in everything and in every area of the work and worship of the church. Jude told us we must earnestly contend for this faith, the truth of the gospel of Christ, which was once delivered unto the saints. (Jude 3). In II Tim. 2:15, we are instructed to study the truth. "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." I think that we can all see from these scriptures the importance or the great stress that is given concerning this teaching. The Apostle Paul, all the apostles, Jesus and the prophets of old show us that the ultimate strength or the greatest strength that we have as God's people is the truth of God's word. Our loyalty to that truth is what brings about the strength of the church today.

Secondly, an intelligent way of applying those words of truth brings about strength. It is not enough just to have the truth all of the time if you do not obey it in the way in which you have been instructed. We must live intelligently before God and before men. We must live an intelligent Christian life. When we say we need to live intelligently or we need to obey the word of truth in an intelligent way, we are saying that we need to take the teachings of God's truth and to allow them to affect the environment in which we live. We need to allow that to affect the influence which we have on other people. We need to allow it to affect our attitude toward the work of the church, toward the worship of the church and toward our fellowman.

Jesus said, "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father, which is in heaven." (Matt. 5:14-16) Jesus is talking to Christians here, and He is teaching that we must take the truth of His word and apply it to our lives in every way. We must allow it to affect our everyday lives, the places we go and the things that we do.

If we have a sincere desire to know each commandment of God's word and a sincere desire to

receive that teaching with the exact attitude and motive which Jesus and the apostles instruct us to possess, then we most likely are living the intelligent Christian life in the sight of God. If we just haphazardly try to obey this commandment and that commandment from the truth of God's word and we do not pay much mind to what attitude we have in doing these things, we are not accomplishing our purpose and we will not be successful in living the Christian life. Remember what the Apostle Paul said concerning our love and our service to God over in I Corinthians, the first chapter. He tells us there that we need not only to do those things which the Bible teaches but that we need to do them in a particular way. We need to have love in our hearts as we do these things. He went on to say, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. (I Cor. 13:1-3).

Having the truth is the greatest source of strength that we have, but obedience, attitude, and the way we acquire the truth are necessary to attain the strength. It's not enough just to have the truth, but it takes the proper application of that truth. Remember that the Apostle Paul told Timothy that he was to "study to shew (himself) approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (I Tim. 2:15) It would not have done him very much good just simply to study the word of God and not to rightly divide that word of truth and add it to his life. Even if we understand what the word of truth says, if we do not become workmen, if we do not allow this to affect our lives, if we don't allow this to affect the influence that we give, if we are not careful of the attitude that we have, we may not be living an intelligent Christian life. We may not be pleasing in God's sight. Jesus told the woman at the well "... the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." (John 4:23-24) We must have the right spirit or the right attitude in our obedience to the truth. In John 13:34-35, the apostle recording the words of Jesus, tells us that we must be careful of the attitude that we have in obedience to the truth or in the influence that we give and in our relationship with one another. "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another."

The attitude that we have one toward another, that is, showing and displaying to the world that we are disciples of Christ and proving to them that there is a reality in serving the Lord, is another of the great strong points that we have as the church today. We must love one another even as Christ our Saviour loved us. When we have this love, even the people out in the world will be able to tell that we are disciples of Christ. On the other hand, it is a great weakness if we do not have this love. Even though we have the truth, if we do not have such an attitude toward one another it will be injurious to the cause of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Even though we have the truth, even though we might worship exactly as the truth directs, even though we might live our lives to a great degree by the truth of God's word, if we don't have such an attitude as this it will injure our service to God. Thus, we can see why Jesus places so much importance upon loving one another even as He loved us. It was so that the world might know that we are His disciples and be able to see what it is about Christianity that is necessary for them.

Next, we have a point of strength that concerns our activities for Christ. We will simply call it activities in service for Christ. Not much activity in service for Christ creates a problem and a weakness in the church and in the work and worship of the church. Activity in service for Christ is so very necessary. The Apostle Paul said, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord." (I Cor. 15:58) The Apostle Paul had gone to great lengths to show the word of truth to these Corinthian brethren. He had shown them the attitude that they were to display in obedience to the truth. Then, he sums it all up by saying, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding ..." in this work I have described to you. Always abounding in the keeping of the commandments, always

being loyal to the truth of God's word, always being sincere in your motives as you do these things so that you will be rewarded. He will reward you for these things if it is in the Lord, if it is in accord with His word of truth, and if you have done these things in the right spirit and attitude of love with a sincere desire to serve the Lord.

In Romans 12:11, Paul says to be, "Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord;". Sometimes I am amazed and very disappointed in some of my brethren who are so very fervent in their spirit as far as their secular business is concerned. They go to great lengths to make sure that their business is a success and remains a success for some time to come. Sometimes we are not as fervent in our spirit in wanting to see the church grow and seeing that it still stands, not only tomorrow, but in years to come if it be the Lord's will. We need to be fervent in the spirit of growth and in our attitude toward the church and its growth in the future.

I appreciate so very much a meeting such as this, the activities that go on and the things that come from these meetings to encourage our young people to be fervent in their spirit toward the Lord.

In I Cor. 14:12, Paul said, "Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church." We need to be zealous of these spiritual blessings that are ours to enjoy in Christ Jesus. We need to be zealously affected by the good qualities of the church. Sometimes, we look at the problems of the church too much. We look at the negative side so much that we become depressed and we finally say, "What's the use, we have so many problems that we can't overcome them" One good strong way to overcome these things is to look to the spiritual blessings of the church. The church may have problems, different congregations may have problems here and there, some small and some that seem quite large, but the church is the only way. It is the strongest thing that we have going for us. It has the spiritual blessings that Christ offers to mankind. And that is where we must be. We must be zealously affected by these things so that we can make sure that the church still stands today and in the future. We need to be zealously affected by these things and we must keep these things that we may excel to the edifying of the church. The only way that the church is ever going to grow and be as strong as it really can be is for us to realize the truth of God's word. We need to realize the spiritual blessings that are offered in God's word. This will bring about an edifying of the church and a growth of the Lord's church, here upon this earth.

In Gal. 4:18, the Apostle Paul said, "But it is good to be zealously affected always in a good thing, and not only when I am present with you." Some congregations think that they can't do any good unless they have a preacher there to work with them. The church is not in business to set up a pastoral system, where one man runs the church so they will not do anything unless the preacher is not there to do it for them. The Apostle Paul said "... be zealously affected always..." in the good works of the church, "not only when I am present with you." It is the responsibility of each individual Christian to do the good works of the church. If we are going to be active in the service of the Lord, If we are going to bring about strength in the church, we are going to have to do our individual work for the Lord. We're going to have to do our part or else the church can never be as strong as it really needs to be.

Fourth, we need to have a great unity. Unity is one of the greatest sources of strength in the church today. In John 17:20-21, Jesus praying said, "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word;". That includes you and me, for we have believed on the Lord Jesus through the words of the apostles. "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: That the world may believe that thou hast sent me." Jesus prayed that we might have this unity, just as He had this unity of spirit, mind, and judgment with God. Being united upon God's word is one of the greatest sources of strength in converting the world. I am firmly convinced that the reason for much of the disbelief in the world today is due to this lack of unity among the body of Christ. It is hard for the world to understand when there is a Church of Christ on one street corner, then across the street there is another building that bears the name of Christ and on down the street there is another building that bears the name of Christ and on down the street there is yet another building that says Church of Christ. It is very difficult, with respect to the love that Jesus has for us, for me to understand that myself.

In I Cor. 1:10, Paul said, "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined

together in the same mind and in the same judgment." I think that this point, the idea of unity, brings to our mind again, exactly what we were talking about when we mentioned the attitudes that we have as Christians. If we all had the attitude of Christ, it would not be difficult for us to be united and perfectly joined together. Many times, the problem is not that we are not interested in being loyal to the truth, but that we have selfish attitudes when it comes to the work worship of the Lord's church. Selfish attitudes will cause a departure from the word of truth. It is a departure when we don't have a proper attitude, even though we may not depart completely from the commandments of truth. We need to have this unity.

Paul said in Eph. 4:3, we are to endeavor "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Some have taken this to the other extreme by saying we need unity so badly that we should just unify and stand together so that the world will believe, even though we have differences of opinion. They say that we should just unify, even though I believe that the law of Christ does not teach the way that you believe the law of Christ teaches and even though we do not agree upon the word of truth. It doesn't work in that way because we can't stress one strong point to the exclusion of another. I believe the Apostle Paul limits the subject of unity and shows us what we should unite upon as the Church to bring about this strength that we are talking about. In Phil. 1:27, he says, "Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ; That whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel." The unity that we talk about, the unity which gives strength to the church, is not just union. It is not just saying I'll excuse your erroneous position and excuse mine so we can be united. It is uniting upon a common thing and that common thing is the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Without truth we have no strength at all. It is the greatest source of strength that we have as the church; so we cannot stress the need for unity and exclude the need for truth. They must be in coordination with one another. We must have unity upon the truth of God's word.

Lastly, the church is made strong by liberal giving. Whenever I talk about giving, I am including much more than giving of our monetary goods upon the first day of the week. I am talking about giving of our time, our efforts, our hearts and our souls to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Principles in giving, liberal giving, are laid down throughout the scriptures. In Romans 12:8 the writer says, "... he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity..." Whenever we give of ourselves, whether it is giving of our means, our time, or our efforts, we are to give it with simplicity. It is to be done with a quiet, humble attitude. We are not to give things then turn around and say to the world, "Look what I have done." It is to be done in quiet, humble thankfulness to God.

"Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come" (I Cor. 16:2). The principles that we find in these two scriptures is that whenever we give to God, we are to give as God has prospered us. Only we and God know how much He has prospered us; therefore, it must be an humble decision in our heart when we decide what we are to give to the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

In II Cor.-8:12 Paul says, "For if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not." We must have a willing mind as we give to God. Some people give things to the Lord and then gripe about having to give so much. It is very evident they weren't willingly giving. Sometimes people give to the Lord and then boast about what they have done. They almost appear to indicate that the Lord owes them something because of what they have done. We are to give us completely as God has prospered us and with a willing mind.

Lastly, in II Cor. 9:7 it says, "Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity; for God loveth a cheerful giver." When we give of our means upon the first day of the week, we are not supposed to come to services and when the time comes to give of our means to just pull our wallet out and take something out and give it like that. We are supposed to think of this matter. We are supposed to purpose in our heart what we are going to give to the Lord. This also applies to the giving of our time and to the giving of our efforts to the Lord. How many of us, week by week or daily, whenever it is that we choose to purpose in our hearts, sit down and say, "I'm going to give to the Lord of this month, of this week, or of this day this much time." This is necessary if we are to be liberal givers. We need

to stop and think just how much the Lord has blessed us and just how much we really owe Him. I think that if we do this we will have no trouble purposing in our hearts that we need to give Him a greater amount than perhaps we have given in times past.

I do hope these points that we have brought out will help us in our study and will encourage us to be stronger as members of the body of Christ. These are by no means all of the sources of strength that the church has but I think that these are some of the most important things that we need to consider in our work and worship for the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.