

THE CHURCH AS JESUS BUILDS IT

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Matthew 16:18 Upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it.

Over the last two millennia, many of God's people have wrestled with the Master over His building plans, His building materials, and His building methods, for many had their own ideas to insert, their own designs to implement, and their own preferred materials. However, those who wrestled with Him have passed on and He remains. He continues to build His Church as it suits Him.

*NIV 1 Corinthians 12:18 But in fact God has arranged the [members] in the body [of Christ], every one of them, just **as he wanted** them to be.*

And a strange work it has been! It has taken much longer than anyone expected. Some gave up and moved on, because it took so long. Others died before seeing its completion. And it has cost much more than anyone could have imagined. Yet the work continues — according to God's plan, by God's provision, and on God's timetable.

Permits and Approvals

After Jesus presented Himself, it was nearly four years before any real work could begin, while He gathered materials and announced His plans to all who would listen. Some of the authorities were reluctant to grant approval and all the people required much persuasion.

When it came time to begin, the raw materials included 120 hopeful-but-confused and frightened-but-praying followers of the Builder.

Site Preparation

Jesus started the transformation from the inside (the 120 were all baptized in the Holy Spirit, speaking with tongues). He had foretold them that they would "receive power after the Holy Spirit came upon them, and be His witnesses (co-builders) in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the farthest parts of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

This experience had an amazing watershed effect: that day 3,000 others were saved and filled with the same Spirit and devoted themselves to follow Him. (Acts 2:41-42)

Then, the building commenced.

Phases of Building

Phase One: People shared what they had with each other; material needs were met, fellowship was sweet. And the church was growing. (Acts 2:44-47)

Phase Two: People prayed for one another; divine miracles, including instantaneous healings, happened. (Acts 3)

Phase Three: People preached about the builder, Jesus; they were threatened by the authorities and commanded never to speak His name again. Respectfully, they declined to abide by that restriction. (Acts 4:1-22)

Phase Four: People lied, people died. Sometimes, image takes precedence over character. Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, became the poster children for personal cover-up, and all the church began to fear the Lord. (Acts 5:1-11)

Phase Five: People were healed and the leaders were jailed and beaten. Acts of kindness were not always greeted with thanks. Goodness can actually rile some people. But the leaders counted it a privilege to suffer shame and pain for building according to the Master builder's plan. (Acts 5:17-42)

Phase Six: People complained; new leadership was drafted. Wherever there are people, especially growing numbers of people, there will eventually be complaining (and pushing and shoving), as they try to protect their own, until they learn to care for each other. The first deacons were appointed to provide this training and insure that needs were met. (Acts 6:1-7)

Phase Seven: People were tortured and persecuted; evangelism efforts expanded. Although Jesus had described His plan to take the Message to the ends of the earth, the Church was still confined to the city of Jerusalem. However, as persecution and mistreatment (even imprisonment, torture and death) heated up, His people fled the city and discovered fresh materials for the expansion of the Church Jesus was building. (Acts 6:8-8:3)

Phase Eight: Deacons preach; revival breaks out. The deacons were men full of the Holy Spirit and the wisdom of God, truly devoted to the building program. As a result, their leadership qualities began to show and they took roles as foremen in the work. Salvations, healings, and other miracles resulted, and the Church grew more and more. (Acts 8:4-9:31)

Phase Nine: Pastors travel; new churches are planted. With the Church growing at such a rate in so many diverse territories, the pastors began to visit the work in the outlying areas. Their impact was significant, as the Holy Spirit led them to people as yet untold, and the builder expanded His work. (Acts 9:32-10:48)

Phase Ten: The traveling pastors were called on the carpet for their bold entrepreneurialism. This brought fresh revelation of God's grace, and they all applauded the Builder's vision and thoughtful planning. (Acts 11:1-18)

Phase Eleven: Churches helped each other. Mutual care began to reach beyond those within a locality, as individual groups began to care about the work in all its dimensions and locations. Gifts were sent to assist the work in areas that were in unusual need. Unity was developing and the sense of mission was budding. (Acts 11:19-30)

Phase Twelve: Missionaries were sent out; the world received the Message. The sense of mission demanded response. Through prayer and fasting, missionaries were appointed to open new territories and expand the building even further. They were open to any and all invitations, even when they weren't well received. (Acts 13 on)

Phase Thirteen: Doctrinal issues were sorted out; the first denomination was established. With multiple foremen at multiple job sites, issues arose as to the interpretation and application of the plans Jesus had prepared. Discussions, sometimes heated, led to general agreement and a body of codes that would preserve the general spirit of the work, wherever it continued. (Acts 15:1-35)

Phase Fourteen: Leaders bickered; the second denomination was started. Wouldn't you know? Differing styles and manners among diverse cultures and traditions created some friction. Sometimes the issues were resolved with understanding and compromise; sometimes not. (Acts 15:36-41)

Phase Fifteen: Missionaries experienced trouble. They were resisted, beaten, arrested, shipwrecked, without food, and imprisoned. It was not an easy road, this building program. Yet, in the face of such trials, most of the New Testament was written, providing us a record and a pattern for continuing to build. (Acts 16 on)

And the Beat Goes On...

From then on it has been "mix and repeat" the fifteen steps listed above. Nothing new under the sun. What you see today has been here before. What is gone today is likely to return again one day soon. As wise Solomon said:

Ecclesiastes 3:1 There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven.

As you can see, the Lord's building program has been a mix of good news and bad news, sweet successes and bitter defeats, faithful people and unfaithful, great progress and great setbacks. If we just take His word for it, it would seem that this is how Jesus builds His Church — through it all!

It's not the way I would choose to do it. I would spend more time on some phases that He completed quickly and leave other phases out altogether. But what do I know? I've never built a church before.

Some people suggest today that the Church is dead, that Americans are now living in a post-Christian era, like Europe. But I say, look again! Europe is on the rebound spiritually and Eastern Europe is leading the way. The African nations are planting churches at a rate, by one estimate, of over 100 a day! Latin America is not far behind. We may never know the number of churches of born-again believers inside Mainland China, but five to ten million is a reasonable estimate. The Church has appeared dead before only to resurrect, like its Architect, to a more brilliant day. And all across the United States groups are praying in earnest for fresh showers of blessing and an enormous harvest of souls.

Now, I'm a part of the Church Jesus Christ is building. I still find myself at odds with some of His methods. Sometimes I am confused, sometimes upset. But sometimes I am blessed — when a broken life is set free, when a rocky marriage is settled, when enemies become friends, when people care for each other, when churches thrive, when truth wins out, when I sense His love for me.

In any case, I am invested. Not for the short term, but for the long term. Through thick and thin, ups and downs. Whether mourning or celebrating. Whether you will go with me or you won't. I am invested. Because that's what it takes. Only personal investors get to share in the returns.

Luke 18:8 When the Son of Man returns, how many will he find on the earth who have faith?

Will He Find Faith?

I recently read this entry on a church-planting blog (glocal.net):

"As I traveled this past week to Kenya, Africa, we walked through the largest slum in Africa called The Kibera — 1.2 million people living in a 2 square mile plot of land. We met with church planters that are planting churches in the middle of hell. We joined our brothers and sisters in passionate prayer, exuberant worship and world class dancing in church.

'They had very little on the outside. Their buildings were make-shift wood and zinc, tents, plastic chairs, horrible sound systems that punished your eardrums. Yet, I observed a vibrant and robust faith, a faith that was pleasing to God.

"Here in America, we have nice buildings, incredible sound systems, soft chairs, but our faith is weak, feeble and anemic. Many times it is non-existent. Why do we need faith when we can do it ourselves? Will God find faith in America when He returns?

"Are you living by faith in any area of your life? Are you drawing upon the supernatural resources of God for any area of your life, or is everything in your life very manageable by your human strength?

"By faith, Abraham went out not knowing where he was going? Not knowing is our curse. We hate not knowing because we are a culture of know-it-all. We have it figured out. We have broken the secrets codes and wrote the books to inform the world. They are not buying it. The other side of the world has figured out that all we do here in the west is talk. [And talk is cheap.]

"By Faith, Sarah received power to conceive, even when she was past the age. Faith not only calls us to the unknown but also to do the impossible! If it is possible for you to do it, then you do not need God. Without faith, it is impossible to please God, and when God says it is impossible, trust me, it is impossible."

This is the church Jesus is building. Among both the faithful and the feeble. He always includes the "weaker brother." But, which are you?

Are you invested? To what degree?

How do you fit in to the Church Jesus is building? What is your role? Are you pursuing it?

His methods may seem strange and uncertain, but do you *trust* Him? This is all that really counts, for He knows what He is doing.