

# The Blueprint for a Successful Church<sup>1</sup>

A Topical Sermon

SERMONS TO CHALLENGE THE CHURCH

by David Roper

The Lord expects a lot from His church! We cannot afford to be mediocre, run-of-the-mill, or commonplace. We must be awake, dynamic, forward moving!

Today, to re-emphasize the *kind* of church that Christ wants us to be, we want to study a lesson entitled "Blueprint for a Successful Church." We want to suggest that there are at least *four essentials* to true success—four things that should characterize us as the Lord's body.

## I. SOUND IN DOCTRINE

First and foremost, we must be *sound in doctrine*.

One of the qualifications of an elder is that he hold "to the faithful word which is according to the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort *in the sound doctrine*, and to convict the gain-sayers" (Titus 1:9; italics mine).

In 1 Timothy 1:10, Paul warns Timothy against "any . . . thing that is contrary to the *sound doctrine*." And in 2 Timothy 4:3, Paul condemns those who "will not endure the *sound doctrine*; but [he says], having itching ears, will heap to themselves teachers after their own lusts."

Woe be unto us as a congregation if we are not first of all interested in being *right* in our teaching and practice. If we are not sound in doctrine, we cannot have the Lord's approval, and we cannot be "successful" in the true sense of the word. In the ASV the footnote on the word *sound* shows that the actual meaning of the Greek word here is "healthful." We cannot be a *healthy* congregation unless we are teaching and practicing *truth*.

Joshua's admonition to the people of God seems appropriate here. Joshua 1:7 from the RSV says, "Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law, . . . turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, *that ye may have good success wherever you go*." (Italics mine; see also v. 8.)

Success is dependent on having God's help,

and having God's help is dependent on doing the will of God!

What does it mean to be "sound in doctrine"?

It means we must be *sound in our teaching*. First Timothy 6:3, 4 says, "If any man teacheth a different doctrine, and consenteth not to *sound words*, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; he is puffed up, knowing nothing." (Italics mine.)

It means we must be *sound in designation*: "The *churches of Christ* salute you" (Romans 16:16); "The disciples were called *Christians* first in Antioch" (Acts 11:26). (Italics mine.)

It means we must be *sound in organization*: "Set in order the things that were wanting, and appoint *elders* in every city" (Titus 1:5); "*Deacons* in like manner must be grave, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre" (1 Timothy 3:8). (Italics mine.)

It means we must be *sound in worship*: "And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, and in the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42); "Singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:19).

It means we must be *sound in our teaching on the way of salvation*: "We behold him who hath been made a little lower than the angels, even Jesus, for the suffering of death . . . that by the grace of God he should taste of death for every man" (Hebrews 2:9); "Preach the gospel to the whole creation. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved" (Mark 16:15, 16).

It means that we must *stay with the Book* in all that we do. And it means that we will be constantly *re-examining our position* to make sure that we have a "thus saith the Lord" for *all* we teach and practice!

I do not know how to emphasize this first point enough. It is the *foundation* of all we are and all we can hope to accomplish. Anything accomplished without this will be but as dust

and ashes. We MUST be *sound in doctrine!*

But now let us say that *this alone* is not sufficient. It is possible to be very sound doctrinally and *still* not acceptable before God.

## II. CLEAN IN LIFE

We must be *clean in life*. Our *teaching* and *practice* must agree! It is still true that “what you *are* speaks so loudly that I can’t hear what you *say*.” People will not be interested in our plea to return to New Testament Christianity in *doctrine* if we do not return to it in *life*.

Recently I came across this statement from an OG&E<sup>2</sup> news bulletin:

*A corporation may spread itself over the entire world and may employ a hundred thousand men, but the average person will usually form his judgment of it through his contact with one individual. A bad impression caused by rudeness or inefficiency can be erased only by a lot of kindness and efficiency after the harm is done.*

*Every member of an organization who, in any capacity, comes in contact with the public is a salesman and the impression he makes is an advertisement, good or bad. (Italics mine.)*

How true that is! One on’ry old reprobate who claims to be a member of the Lord’s church can do more harm than a hundred godly children of God can undo!

Let me illustrate why it is so important for *every* child of God to be clean in life: Here is a sheet of paper.<sup>3</sup> As I hold it before you, let me ask you this question: “What do you see?” If I were to go up to you and ask that question personally, I think I can tell you what your answer would be. You would say, “I see a *spot*.” Now, think about it just a minute. Here is a sheet of paper 8½” by 11”. The little spot in the middle occupies about one-hundredth of the total area of the paper *and yet the average person will see the spot and not the ninety-two or ninety-three square inches without a spot*. Even so, the world will ignore the *ninety-nine* godly church members and will fasten their eyes on the *one* whose life is not right and will say, “Why, I’m as good as he!”

If we are to be “clean in life,” *our standards must be higher than the world’s standards*.

We must be clean *in thoughts*:

Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are

just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things (Philippians 4:8).

You are not what you think you are, but what you think, you are.

We must be clean *in words*: “Also put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, railing, shameful speaking out of your mouth” (Colossians 3:8). Gossip, slander, curse words and, yes, even so-called by-words, have no place in the language of a Christian. There are some 400,000 words in the English language. We can learn to express ourselves without the use of the questionable.

We must be clean *in body*: “Know ye not that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit which is in you, which ye have of God? and ye are not your own” (1 Corinthians 6:19). *Anything* that harms your body is *sinful*.

We must be clean *in play*. “Abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:22). Make sure your “recreation” *does* re-create instead of tear down!

And we must be clean *in business*: “Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord; . . . Provide things honest in the sight of all men” (Romans 12:11, 17; KJV). All is *not* fair in love, war, and business!

All of us, whether we realize it or not, are *salesmen* for Christ (as the OG&E bulletin noted). And as salesmen, we must *use* our product. Batsell Barrett Baxter tells of a man who sold Allstate tires in a Sears store. This salesman told brother Baxter that the first thing he always did, when he bought a new car, was to take off the original tires and put on Allstate tires. Why? *Because one of the first questions his customers asked him was “What kind do YOU use?”* Never forget it: Every time we try to sell our friends on New Testament Christianity, they are, in effect, asking, “What kind do you use?”

We must be clean *in life*.

But again we note that *this alone is not enough*. We can be both sound in doctrine and clean in life and *still* not be pleasing to God.

## III. FRIENDLY IN SPIRIT

We must be *friendly in spirit*. (Here we are getting into the *positive* side of Christianity.) Christians should be the friendliest people on the face of the earth.

For instance, we should always be *friendly to visitors at our services*. Matthew 25:35 says, "I was a stranger, and ye took me in." Hebrews 13:2 says, "Forget not to show love to strangers."

Some time ago I saw this motto on a church sign: "Where you are a stranger but once." I am afraid, however, that this is not always true of us. Too often we are described by the little boy's mistake. He heard the preacher preach on Matthew 22:14: "For many are called, but few chosen." When he got home, he was asked what the sermon was about. His reply: "*Many are cold, and a few frozen.*"

The poet Robert Burns was once in a strange town and lonely. He went to a church service, but received no word of welcome or hand of friendship. Before he left, he scribbled this bit of verse on the flyleaf of a song book:

As cold a wind as ever blew;  
A colder church, and isn't but few;

As cold a preacher as ever spake;  
Ye'll all be hot ere I come back!

One preacher kept a suggestion box in the vestibule. After preaching a sermon by request on "Recognition of Friends in Heaven," he received this request: "I appreciated your sermon on the recognition of friends in heaven, but now I would like for you to preach a sermon on recognition of friends on *earth*. I've been coming here six months now—and no one has recognized me yet!"

These stories may have their humorous aspects, but I am afraid they should cause us to re-examine our own actions. This congregation has been called by some the friendliest church they ever attended and, by others, the coldest.<sup>4</sup> Of course, I realize that many of those who find a congregation cold often do not put forth an effort themselves. Solomon said, "A man that hath friends must show himself friendly" (Proverbs 18:24; KJV). On the other hand, I realize that we sometimes *are not* as friendly as we should be.

There are three things we must constantly guard against: (1) leaving without visiting with *anyone*; (2) visiting with "the same old ones" at each service; (3) just not putting forth enough effort to meet all the visitors and make them feel welcome. Let us really work on earning the reputation of "the friendliest church in the brotherhood"!

And not only should we be friendly to visitors; *we should be friendly to one another*. Paul said, "In love of the brethren be tenderly affectioned one to another" (Romans 12:10). His warning in Galatians 5:15 is still needed today: "But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another."

We can show our love one for another *by having fellowship one with another in our homes*. (When we "withdraw fellowship" from someone, we are told to stop eating with them in 1 Corinthians 5:11. We would find it hard to "withdraw" fellowship from most of our brethren *because we have never HAD any fellowship with them*.) One brother of my acquaintance goes around on Sunday mornings and invites other members to come into his home that night after services. For many of us, this would really be "entertaining strangers."

Again, we can show our love one for another *by taking care to include new members in our fellowship*. Let me paraphrase a statement made by Jesus: "If you simply invite into your home those who invited you into their home, 'what reward have ye?'" (Matthew 5:46).

In short, we should put forth a real effort to *get acquainted with all* the members and then to *show our love* toward them all. *The atmosphere of love should so permeate our services that it can actually be sensed by our visitors!*

If we are to be the Lord's church, if we are to be truly successful, we must be "friendly in spirit." Remember: *A cold church is like cold butter; it doesn't spread very well.*

This leaves then one more essential.

#### IV. AGGRESSIVE IN ACTION

We must also be *aggressive in action*. If we are going to be saved, we are going to have to be busy *doing something*. *It will do us no good to have an accurate compass if our ship rots in the harbor!*

First Corinthians 15:58 says, "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, *always abounding in the work of the Lord*. . . ."

The New Testament church was aggressive in action. *Every* member was *working*, using his talents for the Lord! Oh, that that could characterize us!

Someone has said that we have two big needs today: to THINK BIG and ACT BOLD!

Many times we don't do big things because we don't THINK BIG. Let me quote Mid McKnight: "When we think little-bitty thoughts, we'll do little-bitty things and have little-bitty results"! We need to listen to the advice the young girl gave the boy who kissed her on the chin: "*Aim higher, young man, aim higher.*"

There is a great need today for *vision*. Great realities always begin with a vision. Columbus had a vision and America was discovered. Bell had a vision and we have the telephone. Edison had a vision and we have the electric light. Back in the *Old Testament*, Abraham needed a vision of what was to come, and thus God said to him: "*Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art, northward and southward and eastward and westward: for all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it*" (Genesis 13:14, 15; italics mine).

The *New Testament* is also a book of vision. Acts 2:17 says, "And it shall be in the last days, saith God, I will pour forth of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions."

Peter saw a vision. What was the result? The first Gentile converts!

Paul saw a vision. What was the result? He was converted and started working for Jesus!

Some men in (*the city or address of the congregation*) had a vision and *this building was built and this fine congregation is worshipping here today!*

And the need for vision had not ceased. The wise man said, "Where there is no vision, the people cast off restraint" (Proverbs 29:18).

But we need not only to *think big*, we need also to ACT BOLD.

Too long have we had "the grasshopper complex" that the Israelites had when they said, "We were . . . as grasshoppers . . . in their sight" (Numbers 13:33).

We are *not* "as grasshoppers"! We are God's people, and with God's help, we can do great things! Keep remembering that *God is on our side* and

with His help we can do *anything* that is good and honorable. Paul said, "I can do all things in him that strengtheneth me" (Philippians 4:13).

We are not saying, of course, that we should constantly be going off "halfcocked," but *even a turtle never gets anywhere until he sticks his neck out a little*.

Let us be *aggressive in action*.

## CONCLUSION

Here then are four essentials if we are to be what the Lord wants us to be: We must be *sound in doctrine*; we must be *clean in life*; we must be *friendly in spirit*; we must be aggressive in action.

And what if these things characterize us? Then "all things" can be ours: "All things are yours; whether . . . the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours; and ye are Christ's and Christ is God's" (1 Corinthians 3:21-23).

If we indeed "are Christ's," then we can do anything! May God help us to be the kind of church that He wants us to be!

Anyhow as we close this lesson, we want to ask each one personally this question: *Are you Christ's?* Have you committed your life to Him through trust and obedience? If not, won't you come?

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>This was inspired by a remark made by Jack Meyer. Also various illustrations used came from Batsell Barrett Baxter.

<sup>2</sup>Oklahoma Gas and Electric Company.

<sup>3</sup>Show a sheet of white typing paper with a black spot in the middle. (Note: If you don't want to use this sheet of paper, you can show the palm of your hand and ask the listeners to *imagine* that there is a black spot in the middle of it.)

<sup>4</sup>This was originally said of a specific congregation where I was preaching, but I have since found similar statements made about practically *every* place I have worked.

## Visual-Aid Notes

The title, "The Blueprint for a Successful Church," lends itself to visual interpretation very handily.