

Looking Forward, Looking Back 2011

M. W. Bassford, 4-17-11

April 16, 2006, was the Sunday that I began my work with the Joliet church of Christ. That was five years ago yesterday, and so, as is my custom, this morning I'm going to take a look at where we've been and where we need to be going. As has been true for each of the five previous sermons in this series, I can begin by saying that it's been a blessing to work with you. There have been a lot of changes. Some brethren have died, moved away, or fallen away. Others have moved in or obeyed the gospel. Despite those changes, I still find it a joy to be here, and I can only wonder at your desire to keep me around. Before, I used to think it was because of Lauren. Now, I know it's actually because of Zoë.

What's important, though, is not whether I'm pleased with the journey we've taken together. What's important is whether God is pleased with it. This church doesn't belong to me, nor indeed even to the elders. It belongs to Christ, and it is His right and His right alone to evaluate our progress and chart the course that we must take.

Thankfully, Jesus is very clear about His desires for His church. The record of our brethren in the first century provides us with a model that we must imitate, and we can judge from that model whether we're doing what we're supposed to. Every church is going to have areas of strength and areas that need improvement, and ours is no different. There are some things that we're doing well, and other things that we must work on, and unless we pay attention to both of those categories, we won't really know what to do. Let's turn our attention, then, to looking forward, looking back.

Strengths

First, let's consider our strengths, to the things that we're doing well spiritually. Perhaps the most important strength that we've displayed this year is our **UNITY**. We learn about how important this is to God from Psalm 133:1. God loves it when we are united, and indeed, He expects it of us. It's not been easy for us to maintain this unity. First of all, we've had a lot of people join our number over the past several years, many of whom have different perspectives than our "traditional" norm. Second, we've had some controversies thrust upon us in which it emerged that we all didn't see things the same way. Many churches have split and splintered under much less stress than that.

We haven't, and I don't think we will. For that, we must give credit to God and His providential help, but also to the love that we have for one another. When differences arise in a church, and the members don't know one another and don't love one another, the differences will often prove fatal. However, we've learned to work through things with one another, even though we don't always agree, because of the affection that we have for one another in Christ. That's a rare and precious gift, and it's something that we need to learn to nurture and improve in order to please God.

The necessary counterpart of this unity is our commitment to **STUDY**. Over the past year, I've seen the same spirit in the congregation that Luke praises in the Bereans in Acts 17:11. It's not enough for us just to be united. If peace at any price were all we cared about, we wouldn't be any different than all the community churches out there that stand for nothing and teach nothing. Instead, our unity must be founded on the word. One of the most powerful signs of our love for each other has been the way that we've handled disagreement. We haven't had a party spirit and gossiped about other Christians with those who share our opinions. Instead, we've tackled those areas of difference head-on. In Bible classes and private studies, we've examined those controversial questions, not from a desire to defend our own opinions, but from a desire to uncover the truth. If we want to remain Christ's church, we must maintain and develop that spirit.

Third, over the past year, we've seen a lot of **GROWTH**. Luke describes the two kinds of growth in Acts 9:31. Thankfully, both of these have been evident in our congregation. First, we've been growing numerically, not from Christians moving in and causing a swelling effect, but because we've been baptizing and restoring people. That's marvelous, and it needs to continue. Second, though, we've also seen spiritual growth. By this, I don't mean that brethren have been showing up and hearing sermons. I mean that there are a number of Christians here today who are doing more work for the Lord than they were a year ago. Some men are learning to lead prayers, when they weren't willing to do that before. Both men and women are getting more involved in teaching classes. Others are becoming more active in visiting the sick and the shut-ins. Ultimately, God's goal for us is that all of us are active, that all of us have found our niche in the work and are consistently contributing. Let's continue to grow toward that goal as a church.

Finally, we continue to be strong in our **WELCOME FOR OTHERS**. Paul points to the importance of this in Philippians 4:5. Psychologists say that we form our opinions about others in the first thirty seconds after meeting them, and the initial impressions that our visitors form of our congregation will often go a long way to determining whether they will eventually join us. When we go out of our way to be friendly to visitors, we make sure that that first impression is a good one. I've seen many instances of this over the past year, but let me just cite one recent one. A couple of months ago, Lauren and I had some friends who were passing through the area and came by for Wednesday evening services. That evening, our friends were among the last people to leave the building, not because we had been talking to them so

much, but because so many of you took the time to speak and visit with them. Now, these friends of ours were faithful Christians, but if they hadn't been, if they'd just been visitors from the community, what a wonderful way that would have been to show the love of Christ! In fact, I'm confident that many of our newer members are here because of the warm and friendly reception that they got when they visited. Our welcome in the assembly has been the engine driving our numerical growth. Let's make sure that we continue to be welcoming, so that God will continue to give the increase.

Areas for Improvement

All of this doesn't mean, though, that we can sit back and rest on our laurels. Instead, there are many areas in which we still need to improve our service to the Lord. For one thing, we need to work on our contributions of **TIME OUTSIDE THE ASSEMBLY**. Look with me at Hebrews 3:13. As this passage makes clear, we're supposed to look for ways to exhort one another every day, not just during our regularly scheduled four hours a week. And yet, getting together outside of the assembly is something that we pretty categorically fail to do. This is not for lack of trying on the part of the church leadership. I and others have tried to launch Bible studies and men's Bible studies and ladies' Bible studies and ladies' luncheons and on and on and on, and every time, these things follow the same basic pattern. There's a decent turnout the first time, with lots of enthusiasm, but then, by the second or third meeting, nobody shows up. Is that where we are spiritually, brethren? Are our lives so filled with the thorns of worldly cares and concerns that we don't have any room left for the seed of the word to sprout? In future, let's do a better job of making time for the Lord.

Second, we have a lot of room to grow in **LOVE WITH PERSEVERANCE**. Look at the way that Peter tells us to love one another in 1 Peter 4:8. This passage isn't about a warm fuzzy feeling. It's about action. Nor is it about a one-time outburst, after which we can say, "I'm done with my love for the year." Instead, this is about the continual process of caring for one another, even the quieter, less visible members of the congregation. I fear that as good a job as we do of welcoming visitors to the congregation, we do almost the opposite in looking after all the members. We need to change that. We need to be constantly on the alert for ways that we can fill one another's needs. For instance, if one of the men here is out of town on business for a couple of weeks, we need to be checking in on his family, to make sure that they're taken care of while he's gone. In short, we need to re-orient our thinking, so that we aren't just attentive to our needs and our family's needs. We're attentive to our church family's needs too.

Third, we need to work on getting better at **EVANGELISM**. We learn a lot about the attitude of the early Christians toward evangelism from Acts 8:4. Even when they were fleeing persecution, they still went everywhere talking about Jesus. For all of the growth that we've had here over the past couple of years, I'm not yet convinced that we've bought into this as a congregation. Usually, when we bring someone in, here's the way it works. One Sunday morning, this family Just Shows Up. Nobody knows who they are, nobody knows where they came from, but they just up and decided that they wanted to go to church this morning. So, here they are, we welcome them, and they eventually decide to join us. That's wonderful, but it doesn't exactly point to a congregation-wide zeal for getting out there and seeking the lost. Instead of us planting and watering and God giving the increase, that's more like God planting, us watering, and God giving the increase. Brethren, if we're truly fishers of men, we're going to catch more fish than the ones that jump into the boat. We have the best news that mankind has ever heard. We just have to get out there and tell it.

Finally, let's talk about the **CONTRIBUTION**. We see the basic principle of our giving laid down in a very familiar passage, 1 Corinthians 16:1-2. As we know, all of our blessings come from God. As He prospers us, we're to return a portion of that prosperity to Him. I don't have any idea about how any of the individual members here are doing that. However, I can tell some things about the overall contribution. As I visit other churches, I like to compare their attendance and contribution numbers to ours. On a per-person basis, our contribution is the lowest I've ever seen. I know a couple of churches that are half the size that we are, yet come up with about the same amount of contribution on Sunday morning. We're not talking about the Beverly Hills Church of Christ here, either. We're talking little country churches, where the members are people of modest means, who still contribute twice as much per person as we do.

Nor is it like we can afford to slack off because the congregation here is running such a healthy surplus. In fact, every year, this congregation goes thousands of dollars into the red. Even though we don't have a building payment, we don't bring in enough money to cover our daily operating expenses, much less pay for larger projects like our elevator lift or new roof. If you ask Jeff, he'd be happy to show you the numbers to back up everything I'm saying. Basically, we're freeloading off of the generosity of members here in years past, and though that's a financial problem, it's an even bigger spiritual problem. Let me be clear about what I'm saying. If you're just barely scraping along, and you're living off of rice and dog food, and you only have a little bit to put in the plate every week, God is delighted with the little bit you have to give. However, if you're enjoying prosperity, and you have money for all kinds of nice little extras for yourself and your family, but on Sunday morning, you only give the leftovers to the Lord. . . Well, He has an opinion about that attitude too. Let's be honest, brethren. In light of all that God has done for us, doesn't He deserve more than a dog-food contribution from a steak income? Each one of us must consider our hearts and our wallets and contribute accordingly.