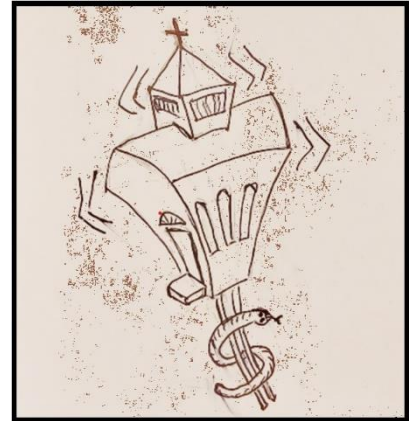


How To Build a Church (In the Short Term)

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Several years ago, I came up with a sure-fire plan to build up church attendance quickly. It was a great idea, but I never followed through with it for a couple of reasons. First, it was too expensive and, second, I have scruples.



So, what was this great idea? Well, it was simple really. It would begin with an announcement on Sunday morning that I will give a \$100 dollar bill at the end of the service to each person who comes to church the next Sunday morning. Now, I don't think that this would in and of itself guarantee a big turnout the next week. In fact, I would not expect most people to believe me. Most would surely think that it was a gimmick of some sort; that I was planning to give away Monopoly money or something. However, on the following Sunday morning, following the service, I would personally hand each person who came and stayed for the service a crisp, new \$100 dollar bill. Then, I would announce that I would do the same the next Sunday morning.

Now what do you suppose attendance would be like the following Sunday morning? A lot bigger, I'm sure! After all, everyone that came and received a \$100 dollar bill would leave and tell everyone that, though they may not have been absolutely sure that I would really give everyone who attended a \$100 dollar bill, I did! And I said I am going to do it again next week!

If I kept giving away \$100 dollar bills to everyone that came week after week, it would not be long before we would run out of room. We would have so many people coming that we would have to turn people away, add extra services, or rent a bigger place. People would be coming from all over to attend our Sunday morning services. No doubt, some would even get saved. Lives might be changed. Who could argue with that?

But let me ask another question. What if we started to have problems coming up with enough money to give a \$100 dollar bill to everyone each week? What if I said to our packed house on Sunday morning that, starting next Sunday, I was only going to give a \$50 dollar bill to everyone? Well, I think we would likely see a slight dip in attendance the next Sunday morning. After all, not everyone would hear or believe me. However, after only getting a \$50 dollar bill instead of a \$100, I'm sure there would be a much greater dip the following Sunday. Even so, there would still be quite a few people happy to receive \$50 for coming to church. And, besides, we would still see some get saved and some lives changed. Who could argue with that?

Now suppose that, after a few weeks of giving away a \$50 dollar bill to everyone who attends our Sunday morning service, I once again run into difficulties coming up with enough money and announce that I will only be giving away \$20 dollar bills. Then later, \$10 dollar bills, \$5 dollar bills, and eventually only \$1 dollar bills. At what point will the money become ineffectual, and people stop coming?

As you can see, although this is a simple plan and would likely boost attendance in the short term, it would quickly become too expensive to maintain. Besides, neither myself nor our church have the financial resources to even consider implementing such a plan. Plus, it sounds too much like it is paying people to come to church, which seems a bit dodgy and unscrupulous to me (oh those scruples!).

Consider, for instance, when Jesus fed the multitude with five barley loaves, and two small fishes in John chapter 6 by the Sea of Galilee. The chapter starts out with John saying in verse two that "...a great multitude followed him, because they saw his miracles which he did on them that were diseased." This multitude consisted of about 5000 men and, though it is not stated, there was likely a great number of women and children present as well. Further, in Matthew's account we find, in Matthew 14:15, that it was now evening, and the disciples were urging Jesus to "send the multitude away, that they may go into the villages, and buy themselves victuals." As the story unfolds, however, Jesus has the disciples set the people down and then multiplies five loaves of bread and two small fishes that a boy in the crowd had so that everyone had plenty, and 12 baskets of food were left over. Jesus then sent the disciples off in a ship bound for Capernaum, presumably with a basket of food for each, while He went up on a mountain alone.

During the night a storm arose, and the disciples became fearful. In the midst of the storm, they were shocked to see Jesus walking on the water toward them. Jesus entered the ship, calmed the storm, and immediately they found themselves docked at Capernaum. Meanwhile, in the morning, the people Jesus had fed came looking for Him, eventually finding Him at Capernaum, where Jesus says to them in John 6:26, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled."

Let that sink in for a moment. Jesus said that they had sought Him not to hear His teaching and preaching but because they "did eat of the loaves, and were filled." He rebuked them because they followed Him for the wrong reason. Now, think of my simple, albeit expensive and somewhat unethical, idea for quickly building up our church attendance in light of that rebuke. When I was giving \$100 and \$50 dollar bills, people were coming not for the teaching and preaching of God's Word, but for the money I was giving out. Eventually, when the money was no longer sufficient to fill their bellies, or rather their wallets, they stopped coming.

Now, I am not against the idea of using occasional contests, special Sundays, promotions, and giveaways in order to encourage people to visit our church. But they should be just that, occasional. When they become the norm, at what point does it differ from passing out \$100 or \$50 dollar bills each Sunday? At what point are we merely bribing people to come to church?

Consider this, if we are faithfully preaching and teaching the Word of God shouldn't we be counting on the Holy Spirit to bring people and keep them in our churches rather than gimmicks and giveaways? Remember, the Apostle Paul said in 2 Timothy 4:1-2:

¹I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; ²Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.

He did not say:

¹I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; ²Give the cash; be exciting in season, out of season; promote, bribe, excite with all giveaways and prizes.

You cannot build a church that will stand in the day of adversity, that will stand the test of time, that will, having done all, stand for the Lord Jesus Christ on promotions and bribes. It must be built on the eternal Word of God and the person of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Contests, special Sundays, promotions, and giveaways should be like icing on the cake; nice, enjoyable, but not the main course. After all, isn't more important that people come to church to hear the preaching and teaching of God's Word than for material gain?

Remember, what you build a church on is what you need to keep a church growing on.

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