

Many find it exciting to be a part of the church of Jesus Christ. We've got a good thing going here, and we need to let the rest of the world know just how exciting it is.

There's an old story about a young high school football star who was being recruited by a coach from a major college. The coach had never seen the young man play, so he asked him some direct questions.

"Son," he said, "I understand that you do the passing for your team. Are you a pretty good passer?"

"Am I a good passer?" the boy answered. "Why, I threw the ball 100 times this season and only had one incompleteness--and that was because the receiver fell down before the ball got to him." The coach was impressed. Then he said, **"I understand that you also played defense," he said, "are you a good tackler?" "Am I a good tackler?" the boy answered. "Why I'll have you know that in one game this year, I sacked the quarterback three times."**

The coach rubbed his hands in glee. "I understand that you also do the punting for your team. Can you kick the ball pretty well?" "Can I kick? I'll have you know that I have to hold back on my punts to keep the ball from sailing into the stands." The coach was thrilled. "Tell me, son," he said, "do you have any weaknesses?" The boy thought for a moment and replied, **"Well, I do have a tendency to exaggerate a little."**

That young man may have overstated his abilities more than a little. But what a refreshing change from most Christians. **If anything, most of us are more likely to understate just how much God means in our lives, and how much of a privilege it is to be a part of the church of Jesus Christ.**

Following Jesus is the most thrilling business in the world. God has entrusted you and me with the work of bringing this beaten and battered world into a right relationship with God. He has called us to bring abundant life to hearts that are cold and uncaring. He has offered us the possibility of being part of the building of God's kingdom in this world.

Doesn't that make you feel really good inside? Or are you like that man who went into a hotel and asked for a bottle of Old Squirrel whiskey? When the bartender replied that he didn't have any Old Squirrel, but that he did have some Old Crow, the man said, **"No, I don't want to fly. I just want to jump around a little bit."**

Please pardon that terrible story. But it makes my point: there is a great difference between people who want to fly and people who just want to jump around a little. Our spirits ought to soar when we contemplate the great honor that God has bestowed upon us--**the honor of being called God's own people and being entrusted by God to BRING OTHERS INTO A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD HIMSELF.**

In our Reading today from John's Gospel, Jesus is praying for the church. He prays that they will be unified in the work to which they were called. But I wonder if any of those disciples could possibly have imagined that more than 2,000 years later there would be people walking in their footsteps. YES, 2,000 years later!! **Certainly, God honored Jesus' prayer.** To be sure, Christians have bickered and fought with one another, and some have been lost. **But the truth of the matter is that there are more of us now than ever before...twelve became seventy, and seventy became hundreds. And now those hundreds have become millions.**

Indeed, the past two centuries, plus, have seen the greatest explosion of Christian outreach since the days of the early church. There are more Christians in the world today than there were people in the entire world just a century ago. **Don't be deceived by how anemic the church is becoming in the United States and Europe.** Around the world thousands of new people are coming to Christ every day.

It's truly an exciting time to be part of the church of Jesus Christ. But where does the church get THE POWER THAT HAS SUSTAIN HER THROUGH THE AGES? I believe she gets it from (3) sources.

First of all, she gets it from THE NEEDS OF OUR WORLD ITSELF. The world desperately needs what you and I have to offer. Whether in far off places or here at home, **the world still needs to know the good news of Jesus Christ.**

Years ago, evangelist Billy Graham spelled out the world's need in very graphic terms. He writes: "In China when my wife was growing up, frequently babies who died before cutting their teeth were thrown out to be eaten by pariah dogs. The people feared that if evil spirits thought they cared too much for the children they would come and take another one. They tried to prove their indifference in this crude way.

"In India," Graham continues, "a missionary who passed the banks of the Ganges noticed a mother sitting by the river bank with two of her children. On her lap was a beautiful new baby and whimpering beside her was a painfully [mentally challenged] child of about three. On her return home that night, the missionary saw the young mother still sitting at the river bank, but the baby was gone and the mother was trying to comfort her 3yr. old child. Horrified at what she thought might be true, the missionary hesitated a moment and then walked over to the mother and asked her what had happened. With tears streaming down her cheeks, the mother looked up and said, *'I don't know about the god in your country, but the god in mine demands the best.'* **She had given her perfect baby to the god of the Ganges.**"

Do you suppose these people needed to be liberated by the good news that God is not a God of darkness but of light, not a God of cruelty but compassion, not a God who demands fear but one who creates faith? No wonder that in the developing countries, so many people even today are turning to Christ.

We do not need to go half way around the world to find people who need the good news that Christ brings. There are people right here in this community who are lonely and heartbroken. There are people with physical needs, emotional needs, and spiritual needs. **We are the people whom God has called to meet those needs.** And when we acknowledge that truth and live out our lives in service to our brothers and sisters in Christ, then the church really becomes the church, and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it.

And we have so much to give! A visitor from an undeveloped country traveled across the United States. He saw many natural and man-made wonders like the Golden Gate Bridge, the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls and the Empire State Building. But he said--of all the wonders of America, **what impressed him most was the large size of America's garbage cans.**

We have so many things that we have difficulty disposing of our leftovers. **When will we learn that the measure of our lives is not how much we have, but how much we give?** The love of God must flow through us to others. As long as it is flowing we are fresh and alive. If we ever seek to dam up the flow and keep God's blessings to ourselves, we will become like a stagnant pond. **The church gets its power by meeting the world's need.**

The 2nd place the church gets its power is: **THROUGH THE "FELLOWSHIP: WE HAVE TOGETHER.**

Author and pastor Charles Swindoll tells a powerful story about an old Marine Corps buddy of his who, to Chuck's surprise, came to know Christ after he was discharged. Chuck was surprised because his buddy cursed loudly, fought hard, chased women, drank heavily, loved war and weapons, and hated chapel services.

Sometime later Chuck ran into this fellow, and after they had talked awhile, his buddy put his hand on Chuck's shoulder and said, *"You know, Chuck, the only thing I still miss is that old fellowship I used to have with all the guys down at the tavern. I remember how we used to sit around and let our hair down. I can't find anything like that for Christians. I no longer have a place to admit my faults and talk about my battles where somebody won't preach at me and frown and quote me a verse."*

It wasn't one month later that in his reading Chuck came across this profound paragraph and I quote: *"The neighborhood bar is possibly the best counterfeit that there is to the fellowship Christ wants to give his church. It's an imitation, dispensing liquor instead of grace, escape rather than reality but it is a permissive, accepting, and inclusive fellowship. It is un-shockable. It is democratic. You can tell people secrets, and they usually don't tell others or even want to. The bar flourishes not because most people are alcoholics, but because God has put into the human heart the desire to know and be known, to love and be loved, and so many seek a counterfeit at the price of a few beers. With all my heart,"* this writer concludes, **"I believe that Christ wants his church to be un-shockable, a fellowship where people can come in and say, 'I'm sunk, I'm beat, I've had it.'** Alcoholics Anonymous has this quality—**A QUALITY our churches too**

often miss.” “*Now before you take up arms to shoot some wag that would compare your church to the corner bar,*” Chuck Swindoll continues, “*stop and ask yourself some tough questions, like I had to do. Make a list of some possible embarrassing situations people may do not know how to handle.*”

“A woman discovers her husband is a practicing homosexual. Where in the church can she find help where she’s secure with her secret? Your mate talks about separation or divorce. To whom do you tell it? Your daughter is pregnant and she’s run away for the third time. She’s no longer listening to you. Who do you tell that to?

“You lost your job, and it was your fault. You blew it, so there’s shame mixed with unemployment. Who do you tell that to? Financially, you were unwise, and you’re in deep trouble. Or a man’s wife is an alcoholic. Or something as horrible as getting back the biopsy from the surgeon, and it reveals cancer, and the prognosis isn’t good. Or you had an emotional breakdown. To whom do you tell it?

“*We’re the only group I know that shoots its wounded,*” Chuck concludes. “*We can become the most severe, condemning, judgmental, guilt-giving people on the face of planet Earth, and we claim it’s in the name of Jesus Christ. And all the while, we don’t even know we’re doing it. That’s the pathetic part of it all.*”

That’s a pretty powerful indictment of the church at its worse. But it’s not the kind of fellowship we are seeking. And it is not the kind of fellowship Christ blesses. **We want to be a fellowship that lifts up one another and then seeks to lift up those outside our doors.** We want to be a fellowship that draws people with real problems into its fellowship and surrounds them with Christ’s love. **That is the second place the church gets its power, from our fellowship in Christ.**

Finally, THE CHURCH GETS IT “POWER” FROM THE KNOWLEDGE THAT GOD IS ‘WITH US’ THROUGH THE POWER OF GOD’S SPIRIT.

I was reading about a pastor who says that he was totally unprepared when he was assigned to his first church. He says, “I will never forget my first shut-in. She was a dear lady who had been a member of that church for eighty years, but now she was in the declining years of her life. For all practical purposes this dear lady was deaf. She could hear you if you cupped your hands around her ear and shouted, ‘Good morning! How are you?’ She would nod in reply, because she had Parkinson’s disease and her speech was garbled. For all practical purposes she was also blind; and she was bedfast. “I was not used to being with older people,” said this pastor. “I wanted so badly to minister to her but I felt so awkward. What kind of small talk could we make, even if, with all her handicapping conditions, we could talk? What did we have in common? I was totally incompetent, but I was faithful. I visited her regularly--though each time I felt like a complete fool. I had a prayer to close each visit--but how can you shout a prayer into someone’s ear? It was a totally frustrating experience.

“Eighteen months after my first visit with her, this dear lady died, and I conducted her funeral. Can you imagine my surprise when at that funeral the two daughters of this poor lady handed me a note? On it was scrawled almost illegibly the last message this lady ever communicated to anyone. On it were these words: ‘Please tell my young pastor how much his visits meant to me.’ *I have often looked back on this experience with wonderment and awe. I have come to this conclusion: As I sought to minister to this dear lady, it was not I who was giving comfort to her. It was Christ.*”

That is Christ’s promise to us, isn’t it? “*Lo, I am with you, even unto the end of the age.*” It’s not easy ministering to others, but he will give us the power to overcome our weaknesses and to accomplish the task to which he has assigned us. ***Where does the church get its power? From the world’s need, from our fellowship together and from the presence of the One who goes with us.***

IN OUR READING TODAY, Jesus prayed that God would secure and UNIFY HIS CHURCH. That prayer has been answered in a great and marvelous way--even though the church today is certainly not all that it was cracked up to be.

But, even though the church of the world today has fallen short, has faced many challenges, we are in the midst of the STORMS with others and still try our BEST to meet the world’s need. And because of our efforts, Christ is STILL WITH US! Amen.