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A Strong Church

- by R.J. Evans

Over the years, much has been written on how to build a strong church. And, no doubt, much of what has been written is good, scriptural, and should be applied. The Apostle Paul has given an inspired formula for a strong church in Romans 15:14: "Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with knowledge, able also to admonish one another." We would do well to constantly keep before us this passage.

A strong church is one that is "full of goodness." To be full of goodness is to be characterized by the excellence of the inner person which manifests itself in a quality of life that is attractive to others. A striving for moral excellence should characterize every member of a congregation in order for the church to be strong. Churches composed of members who are of questionable moral character are weak churches. Preachers who shy away from strong teaching on moral issues for fear such would diminish their numbers in attendance are making their contribution to the weakness of the church. The strength of a congregation is not to be equated necessarily to the number in attendance at its services. A congregation with thirty-five members who are full of goodness is more honorable in God's sight than one of several hundred members who are not.

A strong church is one that is "filled with all knowledge." This means that strong churches are not made up of people who are ignorant of the Bible. This is true because "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). One simply cannot have a strong faith based upon a weak understanding of the word of God. Our age is an age of shortcuts and convenience, but there is no shortcut to acquiring a genuine knowledge of the Bible. Nothing will take the place of honest, diligent study and meditation of the scriptures. We must study to be approved of God and to save our souls (2 Tim. 2:15). Paul knew that he could not expect to help build a strong church at Rome out of people who were too lazy to study and meditate on the word. Let us not make the mistake of thinking that we can allow emotional excitement, entertainment, or anything else, to substitute for the truth of the gospel.

A strong church is one made up of members who are "able also to admonish one another." That this might be true, two things are necessary: (1) sufficient knowledge of God's word in order to communicate it to another, and (2) the disposition or desire to do so. One cannot teach what he does not know, and one cannot know the Bible if he has not studied it with great interest. But all the knowledge in the world will not make a strong church unless those possessing that knowledge are of the disposition to communicate it to others. How sad it is that many members of the church do not have enough zeal to admonish their brethren or to encourage sinners to obey the gospel of Christ. Zeal without knowledge is just as bad as knowledge without zeal (Rom. 10:1-3; Lk. 12:47-48).

Let us all do our share (Eph. 4:16) so that the congregation will be a strong church.

Faith Working Through Love

Randy Hohf

These four words would make a great mission statement for every Christian and every church. It is difficult to imagine more truth and profundity packed within so concise a phrase. Here you have the three great principles of our salvation—faith, works, and love—placed side-by-side in their relationship to each other: Faith works through love. Before I talk about that, however, let's look at the context. The phrase comes from Gal 5.6, in which Paul contrasts it with circumcision and uncircumcision, which he says are nothing. The Judaizers looked on circumcision (or

uncircumcision) as the badge of who you are in relation to God, the proof of your justification (or lack of) in God's sight. To them, being circumcised was the sign that you kept the law, which meant that you were in favor with God. But Paul states that either way, it means nothing. What is something, however, is "faith working through love." This is the true badge of justification, the true mark of being in favor with God. Jesus himself touched in part on this in Jn 13.34-35: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

So perhaps "faith working through love" is not so much a "mission statement" as it is an "identity statement." It isn't describing what we do, so much as it describes as to who we are. Christians are those whose faith works through love. But as I said, packed within this concise statement is a world of profound truth. So let's unpack it a little. First, there is faith. In the context of Gal 5, faith is opposed to justification by law—not simply the Law of Moses, but law in general (vs.4). Law, by its very nature, demands flawless perfection (vs.3), which is burden or yoke that is too much for us to bear (cf. vs.1). Faith, on the other hand, by its nature recognizes our utter failure, and looks to the merciful grace of God. It looks outside of one's self for justification, trusting in Another.

But justifying faith is not simply an inner attitude or belief. It is a faith that works ("faith working..."). In the very same breath, Paul speaks of "obeying the truth" (Gal 5.7). Thus we see the relationship between faith and works. Works is what faith does. James likewise spoke of this essential relationship when he said: "Was not Abraham justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the alter? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected" (Jas 2.22). Thus, it is "faith working."

But Paul's statement also reveals the means by which faith works: through love. Jesus spoke of this as well when he said, "If you love me you will keep my commandments" (Jn 14.15). Love is the motivator behind a working faith. For example, when Christ, through his apostles, commanded believers to be baptized, faith obeys not in selfrighteousness, but in love for God. But the love Paul talks about in Gal 5 is not simply love for God or his son Jesus Christ, but love for one another (vs. 13-15). Faith works itself out in and through our love for each other. And that brings us back to our badge of identity, as well as our mission statement.