

# Congregational Focus that Builds Brotherhood

*"What?" Donald asked his high school friend, "You never speak in tongues in your church? Have you never read Jesus' words the way Mark records them, that His followers would have signs follow them? He plainly promised that His disciples would cast out devils, speak in tongues and heal sick people."*

*"No, we don't" Sidney answered. "We have had people who tried to follow that course, but that is not the focus of our church life. If anyone begins to pursue that course in our church, he soon finds he does really fit in."*

*"Well then what is your church all about then?" Donald persisted, "If you don't do what Jesus promised, and if you don't really even want to do those signs, can you even call yourself Christians?"*

*"That is a really good question," Sidney mused. I know why we don't pursue the signs Jesus promised the Apostles, because they were given to confirm the word, but what is our church life all about?"*

And what would you say to that question? When we know why we are organized and why we meet from Sunday to Sunday then that will influence how we live.

*"My story is a sad one." Julian began, "even though I became a Christian when I was eleven, I was not baptized nor received into the church until I was 16."*

*"What was the reason for that?" Silas asked.*

*"I don't know," Julian continued, "I never was told." I finished instruction class but when the question of baptism came up, I kept being told that I was not ready; that I was not mature enough. I finally told the leaders that I would do anything they said, and then I was baptized. But even then, it wasn't long until I was kept back from communion again."*

*"Were you given reasons?"*

*"Looking back, I think it was all about looking good. The only thing mentioned was they did not think that I was conservative enough. There never were any questions about my moral involvements, nor about how I was doing with my Bible reading or the relationships that were deteriorating between me and my brother. Those were the real issues in my life."*

*"Finally, I gave up and walked away..."*

### **The Focus of Church Life**

Every church leadership team has a basic goal that drives their church. Perhaps they have not consciously evaluated what their goal is, but the goal is there. Sometimes this goal is more obvious to others than to themselves. As generations come and go, younger ministry may become a part of the team without assessing the reason their church exists. Sadly, if members of the ministerial team have different goals, the church will become divided in their focus.

The members of the church will benefit or suffer from the focus of the church leaders. They may be able to influence their leaders in some ways. Very likely they will need to find a church with a Biblical focus and support that.

It is essential that the ministry of a church examine their focus so they consistently function in the purpose that Christ has established it. As Revelation 2-3 points out, Christ continues to walk among the churches. He is constantly evaluating whether or not we are serving His kingdom the way we ought.

In this lesson we'd like to examine what a worthy goal for the church would be. We will examine several inferior but possibly tempting goals. Then we'd like to crystalize what our goal should be as the Church of Jesus Christ. After we know and agree what our focus should be, then we will be able to blend our varied gifts and our individual resources to truly support each other. The entire body of membership will benefit from our unified focus.

We will include a diagram with each church goal in an effort to clarify the vision and to help us understand the goal of the church and how that influences how the church will function.

responsibility to be a disciple of the Lord Jesus then there is transparency in all dealings. That produces trust.

Since trust is the foundation of all healthy relationships, then communication is easy. People take others for what they say, not assigning hidden motives or meanings. Relationships endure for many years and even for many generations. People are predictable in actions and reactions.

When there are mistakes, and there will be because we are human, then the members will talk things out and forgive. If people are sad, or if they are happy they are free to express those emotions because we are human and humans have been given and even share God's own emotions.

### In Conclusion

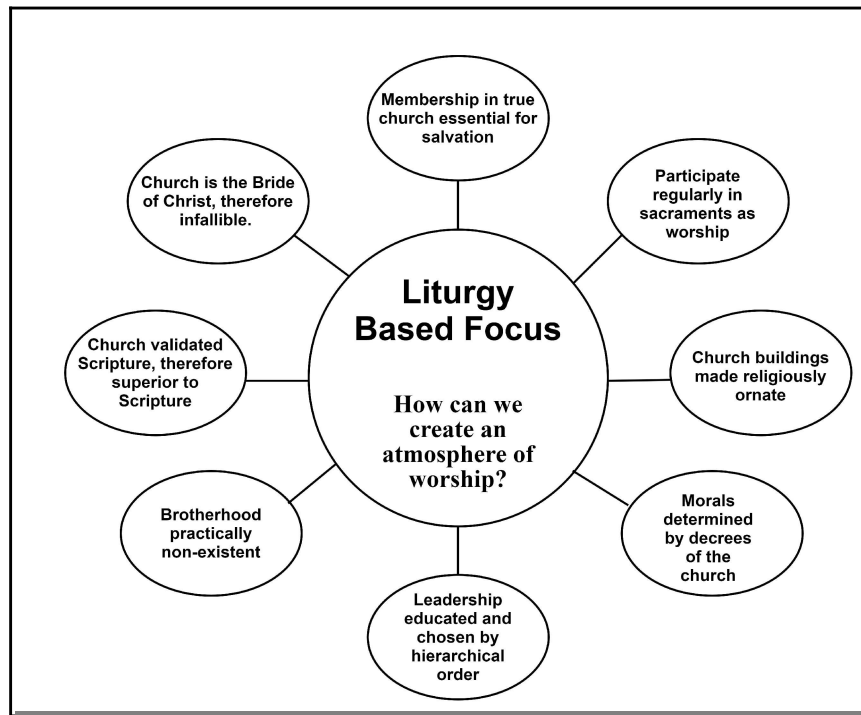
There is no such thing as a perfect brotherhood. But there is a Perfect Holy Spirit that guides us and we do not hesitate to put our trust in the Word He has given us and the guidance He gives us.

It is a healthy thing for brothers to discuss these concepts. Sadly, the very nature of the inferior goals of churches will forbid many from a discussion of whether or not they are on the path Jesus desires for His Bride. Then only eternity will reveal which groups have truly produced saints and which have been a stumbling block to their members.

Since all we have ever known is living here on this earth, it is difficult for us to imagine how we will look back at earth-life from eternity. We simply have not been there yet.

And yet we have been given revelation from heaven. We know Jesus walks in the midst of the churches, that He weighs our devotion and obedience to His Word and will reward us accordingly. Jesus knows which way we as leaders tug at our church member's hearts. And He knows how we as church members respond to the passionate preaching of our leaders. Eternity will reveal our devotion and submission to His will.

### Liturgy Based Focus

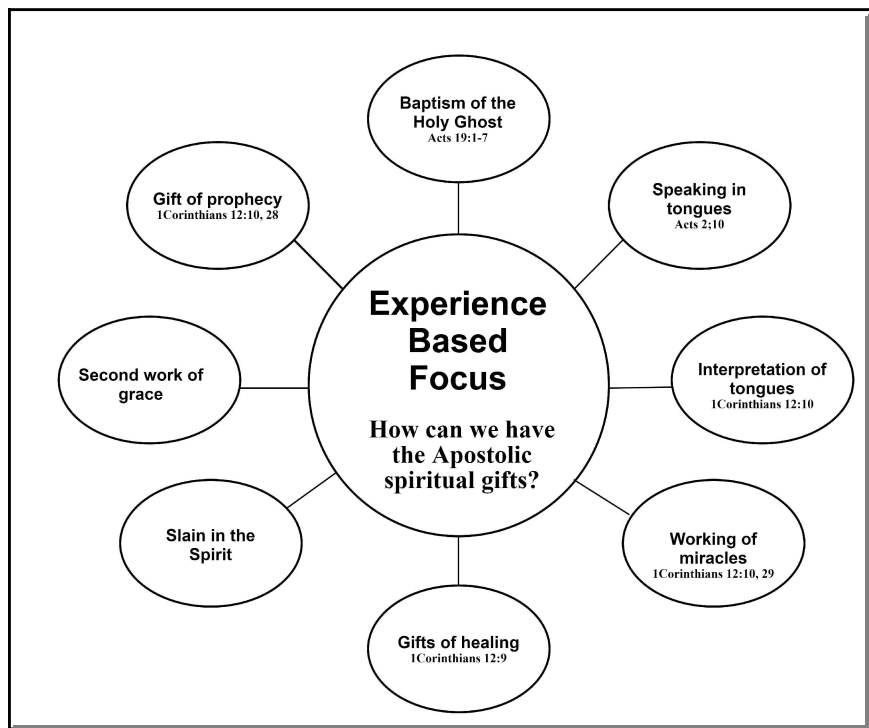


The word "liturgy" signifies "a rite or body of rites prescribed for public worship." One main characteristic of liturgical worship is that it is not so easily affected by change. Practices that were established decades or even centuries ago continue without change.

This type of church life goes back to basically two kinds of churches (Catholic and Orthodox). These groups trace their identity to the first generations after Jesus lived on the earth. In establishing some practices by which to carry out church life they created a static environment that was not affected by every change that came along. These churches established dogmas and doctrines concerning faith and morals that in many ways remain unchanged even today. Through the years they also established rituals that are repeated over and over again as a part of a normal church service. Many other older Protestant churches such as Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed and Methodist are also strongly liturgical.

Tragically, much of what corrupts their doctrine and practice is belief about the church authority and scripture. Since the early church divided between the sacred writings and the false writings (pseudographs), then they hold the church has more authority than the Scripture. This supposedly gives the church the authority to selectively hold to practices and traditions that are not taught in the Scriptures and to disregard some things that are clearly taught.

## Experience Based Focus



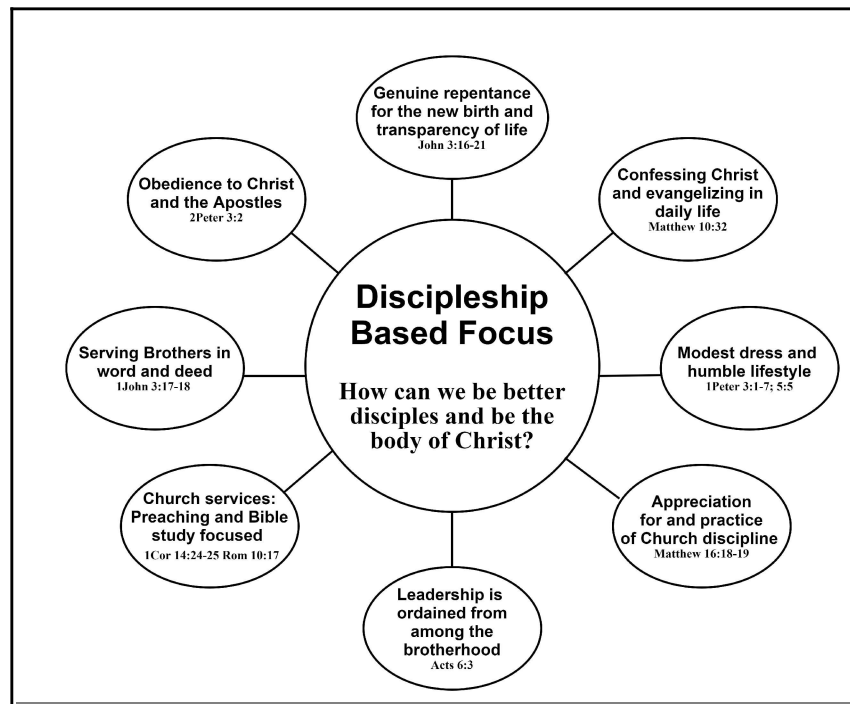
The second type of church life we wish to examine also has a distinctive style church service. We will call this experience centered because attending a church service is to give everyone an experience with the Holy Spirit which is measured in the atmosphere of the church service itself. Notice also that a distinctive from our first illustration, in this second illustration you will see that almost every label has a Bible reference. This type church does not sense the difference between the transition stages of early Christianity and their long-term function. These churches are known as "Charismatic" or "Pentecostal".

Churches that have experience centered focus clearly seek to identify and recreate the signs God gave to the early church. They do not give attention to verses that explain why these signs were given to Jesus and the Apostles in the first century. They do not recognize verses that teach the signs would be done away with and replaced with the written word. They do not see that eventually even the apostles themselves did not have the ability to perform signs. All of this creates a confusion between the church life they pretend to achieve and the reality of what really happens in their midst.

Jesus did promise the disciples would be given signs to confirm that the message they were bringing was from God (Mark 16:15-18). The disciples were

## Discipleship Based Focus

A church group that has its focus on helping each other be disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ will have some earmarks of all the other groups but be totally different. Like liturgy, some practices do not need to be reinvented. Baptism or

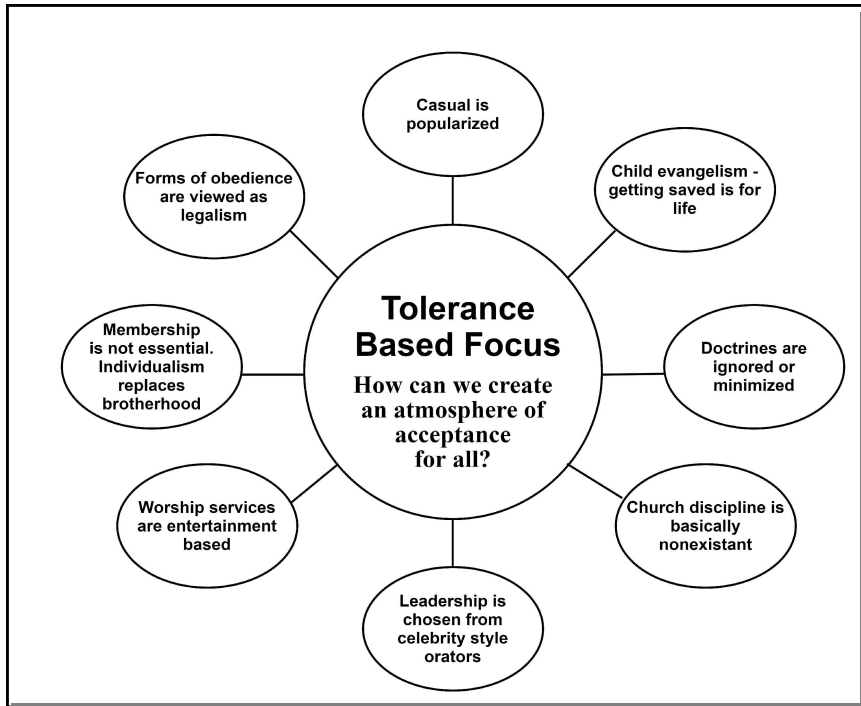


wedding procedures may follow the same pattern year after year. Like experience centered church life, everyone needs to experience a personal salvation in a relationship with their Lord Jesus. Like performance church life, there are visible expectations for each Christian, even in clothing and in everyday behavior. And finally, like tolerance focused churches, there is an acceptance of other's gifts and calling. Not everyone is able to fit into the same mold.

But what is different than all the rest is the driving goal of the church that each member is to first and foremost strive to be a disciple of the Lord Jesus. Along with this is the goal to assist each other to be a faithful disciple as well. It matters what shows up in church, but it also matters what is happening in the home and in the personal life of each individual.

As each member is called to serve his Lord, he also finds his calling to serve his brother. Brothers are able to admonish one another but not because they are trying to outdo each other but because they wish to serve each other as brothers.

In this church there are signs of healthy relationships. Since each takes



are always saved". Another common expression is, "once a son, always a son".

This type of emphasis creates a very casual attitude toward one's expression of faith, and therefore a casual attitude toward one's church life. Even churches that have not officially adopted the Free Grace theology have embraced a similar expression of their faith. The only doctrine that is soundly embraced is the doctrine of tolerance toward all men and intolerance toward those who do not express tolerance for sin..

It is true that we are to love all men, and God does not regard race, gender, culture, language, nationality or financial status as He judges men. But the Bible does make it clear that our life of works and obedience does fill a very large role in our relationship with Him.

Jesus taught that those who say "Lord, Lord" but do not do the things He taught would be eternally rejected. John says, "He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him. He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked. 1 John 2:4-6

Even churches that do not believe once saved always saved are influenced by this casual attitude toward Biblical obedience.

given this ability totally outside of their seeking any special manifestation of the Spirit (Hebrews 2:3-4). Even the Apostle Paul was given these signs (2Corinthians 12:11-12) and he used this gift in his early church ministry to plant churches. He also witnessed the sad effect on church life that took place when believers made seeking these gifts the focus of their church life (1Corinthians 14:23).

Moreover, Paul also foretold of a day when these signs would cease (1Corinthians 13:8-10). In the lifetime of the disciples, they witnessed the shift of focus toward the written word of God and away from special miracles. The legacy they give us is an ongoing ministry of charity and a study of the complete canon of Scripture. By the time of Paul wrote 2 Corinthians 12, he not only ceased performing miracles on others but even his own requests for miracles were denied. God taught Paul that living with God's grace being applied to problems was a better witness than having all one's problems miraculously solved.

In experience focused church life, (supposed) supernatural expressions of the Holy Spirit are given priority. The Book of Acts is studied not so much as an historical record, but as a pattern of what the church is to look like today.

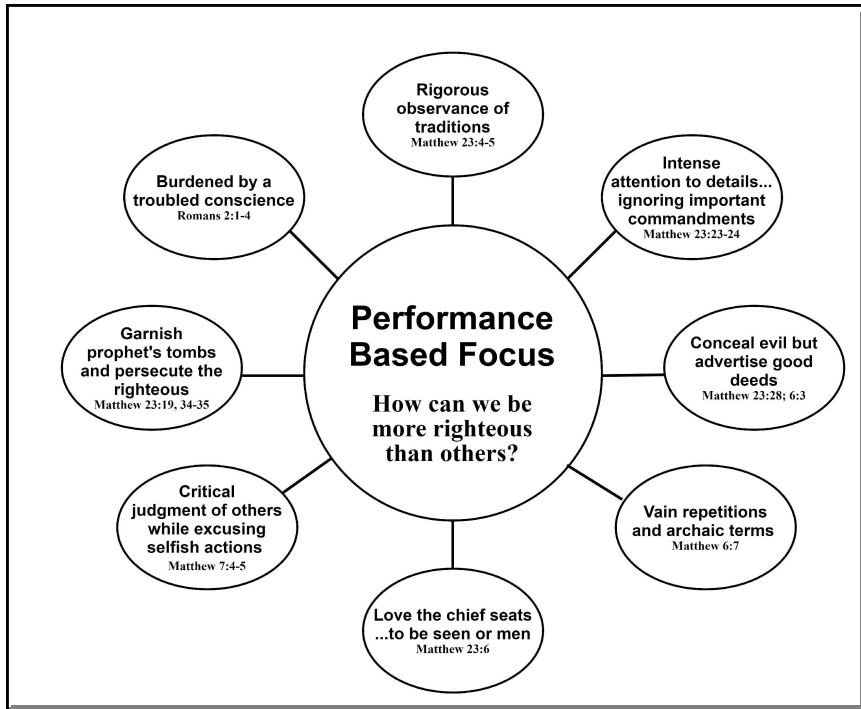
This type of church often ends up with the kind of problems that the early church at Corinth had. Since some apostles had gifts that appealed to some individuals more than others, a party spirit sprang up. The services that featured "speaking in tongues" were different than the ones described in Acts 2 and 10, in that those who heard the tongues had no idea what was being said. Instead of being impressed, unbelievers would go home muttering about the "crazy people" who were under such strange influences. Paul asked that tongues events would include those who could interpret to the group what was being said, but of course no one really knew if the translation was correct or if the translator was rambling according to his own imagination.

Today many of the "commanded" healings never happen. At times the family of the afflicted may be accused of not having sufficient faith to carry out the miracle. In such a case, not only does the family have the weight and burden of grieving, now they are somehow responsible for the ongoing suffering of their loved ones.

Fake healings and phony expressions of spiritual gifts often become a major temptation. Anyone who is honest can tell these are not real miracles. The temptation comes to doubt all miracle healings, even those that are recorded in the Bible. Not only do people lose confidence in these groups, but they also experience a loss of trust in the Biblical record. This unbelief spreads to everyday life. Bible commands are disbelieved and in being disbelieved, they are also disobeyed. Outright disobedience to the Scripture is the norm in many different areas of life.

### Performance Based Church Life

This kind of church life is in some senses the extreme opposite of the spiritual-gifts focus. Instead of spontaneous expressions of fervor, the public



church service is marked by somber expressions of piety. The meetinghouse itself is marked by severe plainness.

A close inspection of Jesus' challenges to the Pharisees gives a pretty good idea of the competition and contentions that are the norm in a setting where one's value and worth is discerned by how strictly he practices specific traditions. This adherence to chosen traditions indicates one's loyalty to a movement. This competitive spirit spills over into natural life. Relationships are often driven by church members subconsciously seeking to prove they are better than each other even in everyday life.

Our illustration is based on the challenges that Christ gave the Pharisees. These challenges should not be handled lightly. When Jesus challenged performance religion, it cost Him His life. There have been many in successive years who have found that any uncovering of the shallowness of this legalism will demand a very high repayment price. Anyone who challenges long established practices on the basis of Scripture will find tradition holds more authority than the Bible.

Perhaps the most tragic snare in Performance centered focus is hypocrisy. Jesus said His disciples should do what the Pharisees commanded but should not follow their examples. When persons are transparent but have a strong loyalty to outward forms of obedience, there is not a lot of damage. The damage comes when human nature does it worst in dragging a person into sin, but his performance focus

compels him to keep it all secret.

It is true that when sin is confessed it shows up in all its ugliness. But it is in transparency that sin can be overcome and forsaken. Sin that is hidden away may not look that bad, but secret vices only increase in power over the human will. It will consume more and more energy in seductive dreams and in painful regrets. It will grow until it possesses the soul in time and in eternity.

Performance based church life usually creates a "don't talk" "don't trust" and "don't make any mistakes" atmosphere. Much will be made over tiny issues, but there will be huge gaps in what can be openly talked about. Many questions will be answered with "Just because we said so." Anyone who raises a question will be viewed with suspicion. But that is somewhat normal, because the entire relationship is suspicion based.

The identifying marks of good relationships are missing. Good relationships give signs that communication is easy. It is not difficult to talk about deep and heavy issues because the group is operating without politics. They are operating with the light of the glorious gospel. In performance-based church life there is strong control over who may be chosen to lead the church lest the control over the direction of the church somehow is jeopardized.

Good relationships also are evidenced by the fact that trust is evident. In Christ's church, membership and ministry are open with each other. Church is a safe place to take your struggles and your sins. All of the membership realizes their sinful tendencies, so when confession of sin takes place, forgiveness is extended, accountability is established and those who were bound in sin are set free.

### Tolerance Based Focus

As we look around us, the majority of our evangelical neighbors are greatly influenced by Free Grace Theology into what we will identify as Tolerance Based Focus. This version of Christianity highlights that God is a God of love and forgiveness and that anyone who has professed a faith in Jesus Christ is saved. This doctrine proposes if people want more rewards in heaven, they may involve themselves in discipleship. It is asserted boldly that personal salvation has nothing to do with one's works or obedience.

This doctrine arose as a reaction to Augustinian Calvinism. Calvinism emphasized the sovereignty of a God who chose those who would be saved and who would be eternally lost. The conclusion in this doctrine is that those who are elect by God's decree will persevere in their faith and will not fall away.

Free Grace Theology drew from the foundation that God is a God of love and that He would never decree from eternity past that some should be saved, and others should be lost. This led them to directly contradict their Calvinistic opponents. But along with free will and free grace, most of this theology adopted the platform that "whosoever believeth" on Christ shall forever be saved. The deception of this doctrine is found in the addition that those who are "once saved