Is there any logic in believing that God started His Church as a Spirit-filled, loving body with the intention that it would evolve into entertaining, hour-long services? Was he hoping that one day people would be attracted to the Church not because they care for one another, not because they are devoted to Him, not because the supernatural occurs in their midst, but because of good music and entertainment?

Try to imagine what conclusions you would come to if you had no prior church experience. The things in church services might make sense to the American church-attendee, but they don't make sense biblically.

Picture yourself on an island with only a Bible. You've never been to a church-you've never even heard of one. The only ideas you have about church are what you've read in your Bible. Then you enter a building labeled "church" for the first time. What would you expect to experience as you entered that building? Now compare that to what you actually experience when you attend church.

GANG RELATED
A while back, an ex-gang member got baptized at our church. He fell in love with Jesus and turned from his old lifestyle. But after several months at the church, he stopped attending. When we asked him why he stopped attending, he answered: "I had the wrong idea of what church was going to be like. When I joined the church, I thought it was going to be like joining a gang. You see, in the gangs we weren't just nice to each other once a week-we were family."

That killed me because I knew that what he expected is what the church was intended to be. It saddened me because I realized that the gangs paint a better picture of loyalty and family than the local church body does.

But what if the church looked like this?

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.* (Acts 2:42-47)

That describes what the ex-gang member was looking for. It describes what the world is waiting for. I used to look at this passage as something that was wonderful but could never happen in the twenty-first century. There are just too many cultural obstacles for the Holy Spirit to overcome. He is powerful enough to raise the dead, but not powerful enough to form a sharing and loving body in our individualistic society. I doubted God's ability to stir a body of believers to love
tirelessly and give without restraint. I reasoned that this type of fellowship was probably not intended for our time. Besides, we don't have time to love like this.

Looking back, I wonder if I came to those conclusions because there was a part of me that wasn't sure I wanted it. It's interesting how much our theology is driven by desire.

There came a point where the elders at our church concluded that there was no reason why God wouldn't want the church to look like it did in the beginning. From there we reasoned that if God wants that, then we want it too. But the exciting part came when we resolved not to settle for anything less. We would pursue this for His Church regardless of how many would be turned off and move to other churches. If this is God's standard, then we will one day give an account for how we led His people toward the biblical model.

But where do we go from here? The hard part is answering the question of how. There are probably many who want our churches to function like the early church, but how do we get there?

**START WITH WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL**
In other words, start with yourself. It's wrong to blame others for the condition of the Church. And it's silly for leaders to blame followers. God wasn't satisfied when Adam blamed Eve or when Eve blamed the serpent.

Our elders started with what we could control. We can't control other people. We can't make the congregation "break bread in their homes" or "sell their possessions." We also can't control God. We can't make Him do "wonders and miraculous signs" through us. I can, however, sell my possessions as people have needs. I do have control over that, so that became the first logical step. As we do our part, we trust God to bring about the "awe" and "wonders" in His time.

It was a beautiful time of sharing as our elders laid "everything" at each others' feet. We surrendered the keys to our cars, homes, and bank accounts. I actually believed the elders who looked me in the eyes and said, "What's mine is yours. If anything ever happens to you, I will support and care for your kids as much as I would care for my own. I will be your life insurance." And because they had a history of genuine sacrifice for the sake of the gospel, I trusted what they said. From there, we began going to some of our friends in the congregation and expressing our commitment to them (something anyone can do).

And now this mentality is spreading. New life is permeating the church as individuals are backing up their words with sacrifice. Cars and homes are being sold or given away. Expensive vacations are joyfully replaced with spending on others. People are being taken into homes—not only for meals, but to live. It's still the beginning of the process, and most people probably still come for the teaching or the music, but there's a growing number at our church who are coming to be with their church family and they don't care about who's teaching or leading music.

**THERE MUST BE MORE**
Something real was happening in the early Church. It was something of the Spirit, too powerful to be replicated by human effort. Imagine taking a friend to one of their church gatherings. Your friend might not experience a smoothly run, professional service. But one thing he would
experience: God. Do we even need to ask which is better? So much of church growth today has nothing to do with the Holy Spirit. The right team of talented people can make any church grow. When people sit through creative services, is it really God they're experiencing?

Don't get me wrong: I'm not saying that we shouldn't give our best to God. If you're a musician, work diligently at your music. If you're a teacher, labor intensely over your messages. I'm just asking you to be willing to rethink what you're doing and ask: How can we create a more biblical environment where people see and experience God?

I'm reminded of the story of Gideon in Judges 7. God tells Gideon, "You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her, announce now to the people, ‘Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.' So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained." (Judges 7:2-3)

If you remember the story, God then reduced the army to 300 soldiers. God did not just defeat the Midianites—He was careful to do it in a way that gave Him all the glory. He did not want to allow Israel to boast "that her own strength has saved her."

May people see our churches and know that mere human beings could not have created what they experienced. May we seek the priorities of the early church and trust God to once again produce the fruit of the early Church.

"And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." (Acts 2:47)

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