



# The Northpoint Lighthouse

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## WHAT MAKES A CHURCH STRONG?

Paul's exhortation, *Be strong in the Lord* (Eph. 6:10), seems primarily to be addressed to individuals. It can hardly apply with less force to congregations, since each congregation is the sum total of its individual saints. Just as the Lord wants each disciple to be strong, undeniably, He delights in the strength of His congregations. Generally, we rightly conclude that the elements that make each part strong result in the relative strength of the whole. Perhaps it will be helpful to consider the various sources that men often identify with congregational strength.

- **Large Numbers:** Israel fell under this spell and suffered for it dearly (Deu. 7:7; 2 Sam. 24; Jud. 7:2). There is neither vice nor virtue in numbers of people, whether large or small. There is spiritual strength in a large number only when the people are the right kind of people. Without a doubt, the Lord wants his congregations to grow and He wants all men to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4). Often people suggest, upon observing the large size of a congregation, "They must be doing something right." Such thinking is exposed as folly by the simple fact that the largest congregations wearing *Church of Christ* on their buildings are in full-blown apostasy, not to mention huge "congregations" gripped in denominational and/or pagan error. Large numbers indicate a large church, but not necessarily a strong church.
- **Riches:** Laodicea made the mistake of trusting in her material wealth, and the Lord pronounced her "poor" (Rev. 3:17). As with numbers, there is neither virtue nor vice in poverty or riches. Spiritual strength is not bought with money, either for individuals or churches. Wealth is a source of spiritual strength only when it is in godly, spiritual hands. Some strong churches have few material resources. Lamentably, it appears that many (if not most) congregations blessed with much money have abandoned the Old Paths of sound doctrine. The tendency is for wealth to corrupt its possessors, including individuals, congregations, and schools (1 Tim. 6:10). The material wealth of a congregation does not signal spiritual strength.
- **Worldly Wisdom and Knowledge:** Even if the education level in a congregation is very high, this says nothing of the level of spiritual strength. This fact is certainly no argument favoring ignorance; one should get all of the

education he can. There is a temptation, however, as one advances in his "formal" education, to "think more highly of himself than he ought to think" (Rom. 12:3) and disdain those who have not done so. Also, this conceit often leads men to disdain God's Word, as it did the "wise" of both Jews and Greeks of Paul's day (1 Cor. 1:18-29). For a few months many years ago I preached for a large congregation (1,200 members) that boasted numerous PhD holders who were professors at the nearby university. The church was pitifully weak then and has fully apostatized since. Unless it is used to glorify God, secular education and wisdom rob the church of strength and destroy it, rather than contributing to its strength.

- **Positive "Community Image":** Some think that having several members among the socially elite and the business community makes a church strong. Some have compromised the Truth to gain positive "image" by such things as participation in denominational projects and organizations. However, a church can be very strong while being "everywhere spoken against" as a "sect" and in spite of having few or no members who are mighty and noble after the flesh (Acts 28:22; 1 Cor. 1:26). Just as a positive "community image" may indicate doctrinal and fellowship compromises, negative "community image" may actually be a reflection of standing for the Truth and thus, spiritual strength.
- **A Fine Church Building:** Strong churches existed long before any fine church buildings were built. A building should befit the great work of the church that meets in it and the great God it serves, but the building is not the church. Elaborate and luxurious (and expensive!) buildings often house congregations that are far more attuned to fleshly pride and comfort (not to mention recreation) than to spiritual needs and interests. A building is not a correct barometer of the strength or weakness of the church it houses.
- **Scriptural/Spiritual Values and Qualities:** In these verities alone we find the sources of true congregational strength. The nature and work of the church are spiritual from beginning to end (Mat. 28:18-20; Luke 17:20-21; 19:10; John 18:36; Rom. 14:17). Congregational strength resides in the spiritual lives and fruit of its members (Gal. 5:22-23). It is strong only as its members recognize their alien status on earth and separate themselves from the world (John 17:14-17; Rom. 12:1-2; Eph. 5:11; et al.). The power of the Lord through His Word is the source of strength for His church (Eph. 6:10-17). Only by faithfully doing "all in the name of the Lord Jesus" can a church be strong, as He measures *strength*.

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