

FUTURE CHURCH

Introduction

1 – What's It Going To Be Like?

2 – Time Travel

3 – Getting First Things First

4 – Past Church Priorities In Their Own Words

5 – A Called Church

6 – Take Me To Your Leader

7 – Change and the Unchangeable

8 – Cultural and Eternal

9 – Going to Church

10 – A People Who Are For People

11 – Evangelism is Not a Priority

12 – A People With A Message?

13 – Future Church. A Conversation with the Future

Bibliography

FUTURE CHURCH

CHAPTER ONE – WHAT’S IT GOING TO BE LIKE?

“What is the church here going to be like in 20 years?” she asked. This wasn’t an academic or theoretical enquiry. It was born of a deep concern about the future of the church that had nurtured her for the last 8 years.

She had seen the same things everyone else had seen but she was one of the few to ask the question. She had seen the dwindling numbers. There were always explanations (or were they rationalizations) of why there were fewer in the church family this year than last. She had seen the younger generation leave the fellowship and join other churches or worse still abandon faith altogether. No matter what she saw she still loved this church and wanted to see a healthy future church but she was having trouble doing that.

There are some people who love the church. I don’t mean that they think the church is okay or that they like the church. I mean that they really love the church. For some, their love comes from godly and loving motivations. For some it is founded in ungodly and selfish attitudes. For some they love the church because it is “their” church. For others they love the church because it is Christ’s church. I am highlighting this because we need to understand that just because people profess a great love for the body of Christ it doesn’t mean they have the best motivations.

Whatever the motivations are, I know there is one who loves the church with a passion beyond measure and whose motivations cannot be questioned. He puts us all to shame. He has made no secret of His love. God in Christ and through the Spirit loves His church. He bled incarnate blood for it.¹ He dressed her up like a pure bride and He married her.² He has taken us like bricks and built us together into a spiritual house.³ He has taken the unholy and made them into His holy temple.⁴ He didn't do this *symbolically*. He did it *actually* by placing His Holy Spirit within those very bricks. If you can read all that God has revealed about His church and come to any other conclusion than that He loves the church with an eternal desire whose dimensions cannot be measured by human scales then you are just not listening.

That can happen. You need the right ears to hear the message of God.⁵ You need spiritual ears.⁶ Without these godly appendages you can sit in church until you wear the seat out and you will not truly hear the message of God. That is why so many go to church and of that group, so many times, only a few are moved by the Word to action. Maybe that's true. I know it is a judgment on my part, but I think it's true. One thing I do know for sure is that without ears that will hear you will not truly believe, even if Jesus Christ Himself was speaking to you face to face. How do I know that? Because when He did speak face to face with people and revealed God's message, most rejected Him. Most of those who grew up with Him wrote Him off as a babbling carpenter. The religious

¹ Acts 20:28

² Ephesians 5:23-32

³ 1 Peter 2:5

⁴ 1 Corinthians 3:16

⁵ Luke 8:8, Revelation 2:7 et al

⁶ 1 Corinthians 2:14

leaders saw Him as a threat, not a messiah. Why? Because they didn't have ears that would hear. They had ears muffled by prejudice, familiarity, jealousy and pride. Oh, they heard the words of God but they did not hear the Word of God. They heard the words of God but they didn't hear the voice of God. God was speaking but they weren't hearing. Is there a greater tragedy than that? Is anything more pathetic and worthy of pity than for a mortal to have the honor of hearing the voice of the immortal God and then to disregard it and flip to another channel for something more interesting?

If we are going to get any sort of godly answer to the question of future church we must become people whose ears are attuned to God's frequency. Only God can guide us to the future. His Word is full of answers if we are willing to hear them.⁷

Are you willing to take this journey? Bear in mind many have taken this journey before us and it cost them dearly. They found cherished traditions that they had to relinquish because they (the traditions) competed with God's word.⁸ They started to see things with which they had become so familiar, that they decided must be sacrificed for the sake of unity and love for others.⁹ For some the journey cost them their lives and for some it cost them their families.¹⁰

Gaining a glimpse of future church is costly. While considering the question of whether it is worth it we are challenged by the question, "Why look to the future? Why

⁷ 2 Timothy 3:16-17

⁸ Matthew 15:1-9

⁹ Romans 15:1-23

¹⁰ Luke 12:51-53

not just let it unfold and take what we get?” It is a good question and the answer is just as good. I am convinced that future church can be changed by our faith, perceptions and thinking right now. If we can do something now that will make the church of the next generation better why would we choose not to do it? Is traditionalism a good enough reason for inaction? Is a lack of courage? Is a spirit of procrastination? No. We cannot hide from future church. It is coming with the onslaught of time. It is inevitable unless Jesus chooses to come back and take us home in the mean time.

Will you take this journey to the future? It will wind through past church, the pages of scripture and present church. It will not be an easy journey. We do not travel as tourists but as ones on a search. God guarantees it will be challenging and even frightening but He also promises that He will be with us and He will do more than we ask or imagine.¹¹

What dreams do you have for future church? God has dreams for His church and He wants us to share those dreams. He is still saying that He is able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine.¹¹ He wants us to imagine what future church will be like. I heard of a church that started to dream.¹² It was in Beloit, Wisconsin. It had its origins in 1911 and by 1960 they maxed out their attendance at 200. In 1981 a new preacher began work with them and after 3 years they fired him. The place was a mess. Wrap this one up. This church has no future. But, it did. They rehired the preacher and in 1989 started to grow. By 2003 they had reached 1600 in attendance. In 2002 alone they baptized 172

¹¹ Ephesians 3:20

¹² Thom S. Rainer, *Breakout Churches*, Zondervan, 2004. p. 223.

souls into Christ. What had happened to bring about such a great change? The leaders decided that they had to change their thinking and attitudes. They decided that for the sake of future church they would have to bring themselves more into line with God's word rather than assume they were because they had been around so long.

Sometimes we lose our dreams because we get beat up by the church or at least by events within the church. We give up on any hope that the church will get better. I know the pain you feel because I have felt it but I want you to honestly answer this one question. Do you think God has stopped dreaming great things for His church just because you are having a hard time? Read the first letter of Peter and tell me if God says it's okay to give up on His family because we suffer. No, God has not stopped dreaming. You may have to go away and lick your wounds for a while. I know I had to. But, that doesn't mean that you should never dream the dreams of God again. You are a believer. Believe in God. You know He can do awesome things. You see that every time you look at the creation. Do you think "bitter and twisted sister" is going to stop God dreaming? Do you think "cranky old brother" really can hold up God's will? No, they can't. So, allow God's word and Spirit to work in your heart once again and allow yourself the privilege of hope for the future.

I know I am assuming that you aren't the bitter and cranky one. If you are, wake up to yourselves. Peter once found himself being a stumbling block to Jesus.¹³ Was it because he was a mean and nasty character? No, he thought he was doing the right thing

¹³ Matthew 16:23

in trying to save the life of Jesus. But he wasn't. He was thinking as humans think, not as God would think. Are you getting in God's way? Are you the reason that future church doesn't look that good at the moment? No, it's not all your fault, but are you a part of the problem or are you a part of the solution. It may sound clichéd but it's true. Problem or solution. Which are you?

What dreams do you have? God has a habit of fulfilling our dreams. Will you dare to dream? Will you, in faith, imagine a future beyond your present? This book is about such imaginings?

FUTURE CHURCH

CHAPTER TWO – TIME TRAVEL

You either love science fiction or you hate it. I have loved it since I was a young lad trying to jump off our front balcony with a towel for a cape, Superman for a name and mumbling something about truth and justice. One of the classic sci-fi stories is the one where you travel into the past to change an event in the hope that it will change your present. I know it gets confusing but I expect you remember the Back to the Future movies. That was their premise.

Consider this scenario. Today is 2015 and the local church you go to has almost closed up. There are only a few older ones who are still “faithful”. They are considering selling the building. Imagine you could travel back in time to 2005. Is there anything you would try to change about the church so that it wouldn’t die in 2015?

The realist in us says, “You can’t do that. It’s just fanciful imagining.” Yes, it is, but **if** you could change the past, what would you do? We often think that we have only two perspectives. Most of us see things only the way they have been and the way they are. The future is often seen as an irrelevance that we have no control over. Yet we do not limit our perspective when it comes to insurance or retirement. We look to our final years and say, “I need to do something now while I am earning to prepare for the time when I can no longer earn.” Why can’t we look to the years of future church and make preparations for that? More than that, why not consider what we think God wants in future church and work towards that now?

Kennedy once inspired a nation with the words, “Some people see things as they are and say why. I dream things that never were and say why not? “

Seeing the future (dreaming things that never were) can change your perspective and your thinking. It is a godly way of looking at things. The Holy Spirit used it in 2 Peter 3:11 where He says, “*Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives*”. He had just given a cataclysmic view of the future and challenged the Christians to change their present behavior based on this future view.

None of us can predict the future with absolute certainty. Only God can do that. But we can look at the trends in our churches at present and get an idea where the church will be in the near future. It’s like the weather forecasting business. Even with all its technology they still seem to be saying to me, “We looked out the window and saw some clouds coming our way and so we think it might rain.” Well, we can stick our heads out the window and look at the church today and with faith, wisdom and hope look to the near future.

We have to be realistic. The optimistic among us see only a rosy future. The pessimists see only doom and gloom. Both of these groups have a predisposed view of the future. I’m not knocking them (maybe I am a bit). I’m just saying that their view of the future isn’t often based on reality but upon what they wish the future will be. We need

to realistically look at our congregation both past and present and then look into the future.

We often say that the children are the future of the church. However, our churches are increasingly losing their children. “Research indicates that 70% of teens who are involved in a church youth group will stop attending church within two years of their high school graduation.”¹ They are choosing to go elsewhere when it comes to church. If they continue to do this, future church looks to be consigned to being an increasingly older demographic. Where does that lead? To smaller churches made up of older saints who will all be gone to heaven within a generation. How many churches like this have you seen? I know I have seen far too many. Is this inevitable? No, it isn’t. Do our children leave because they are unfaithful? Is that the only explanation? No it isn’t. Should we change everything because the youth are leaving? No. As we will see in later chapters, it is only God who has the authority to move us to change. All I am saying here is that our vision of future church will change if the statistical evidence of a departing generation holds true. It’s not a pretty picture of future church. Can it be changed?

If children are the future of the church, then the statistics are saying that many of our churches have a very bleak future. The statistics are also speaking of the adult’s involvement in the present churches of Christ in California. “Churches of Christ in California have declined in membership by 6 percent since 1980, during the same

¹ By: T.C. Pinckney, Brig. General USAF (ret). *We Are Losing Our Children* : Remarks to the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee in Nashville, TN. 2001

timeframe in which the state population sky-rocketed by 33 percent.”² Our statistics are not the only parameter of church health but they do give you some idea. Very rarely will a church with declining attendances year after year be a healthy church. It is possible, but rare. Jesus’ images of the kingdom were always of expansion, growth and multiplication.³ The first century church was an expanding fellowship.⁴ Future church is not looking good if our statistical trends are any guide. Can this be changed? If we decide to change it, it will.

But you might object to such a negative view of the future with stories of large and growing churches in the present day. Yes, there are some, but for each one of them there are 100’s with the exact opposite characteristics. However I am not speaking of other churches. I am speaking of the one in which God has planted you and me. What is its future church?

Imagine if someone had challenge the 1995 church with this same question. What question? “What do you think the church will be like in 2005?” I know El Cajon Blvd in San Diego where I preach had no idea that Australian of all people would be preaching for them in 10 years. What dreams did we have in 1995? It really isn’t a worthwhile question is it? Why? Because we can’t change what our dreams were in 1995. But wait; we can change our dreams in 2005 because this is where we are. And if we do that, will

² Dr. Andy Wall, *A Study of Disaffiliation from Churches of Christ In Southern California*, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, 2003.

³ Matthew 13

⁴ Acts 1:15, 2:41, 47, 4:4 etc.

future church 2015 look back on us and says, “We sure are glad past church 2005 took the time to evaluate where they were going.”

Will your husbands and wives be there? Will your children and great grandchildren be there? If not, is it because they just don't believe or is it because of something we can change and we choose not to? Do we have any right to say to the next generation, “We know church may be boring sometimes but that's the way it's always been and we are used to it. So you need to get used to it!” Well, they aren't getting used to it. They are leaving. Is that all we can hope for in future church? Will it be a church for the aging and not for all the ages?

Will it be different? Yes, it will. For those of us who find our security in the sameness of things this is a scary prospect. In fact, it is paralyzing. But we have to face reality. Whether we try to change things or not, future church will be different. There will be different people because God will add some new ones to the family. The existing members will grow up and mature. The world around about us will definitely go on changing and with that will come new satanic threats on the kingdom of God and that will necessitate new strategies to repel the missiles of the evil one.

I went to high school at Gympie, Queensland. Stop snickering. Gympie doesn't mean the same thing in Australia as it does here. Over there it is a stinging nettle. Come to think of it I don't think that makes Gympie sound any better. I was never offered drugs at school. No one tried to recruit me into a gang. There were no metal detectors or police

cars at my high school. It was a different world. But my boys grew up in a different world to me. New strategies needed to be developed to combat the temptations and trials of the current age.

Future church will be different but that doesn't necessarily mean it will be bad. Have you ever changed something and that made it better? Of course you have. Now, I'm not talking about tampering with the eternal truths and underlying teachings of Christ. Those are eternal and anyone who messes with them has God to deal with. I am talking about all the others stuff. Like what? That's for later chapters. Thanks for coming this far with me. I hope you will continue to walk with me on this trip through time.

FUTURE CHURCH

CHAPTER THREE – GETTING FIRST THINGS FIRST

Past church is important. It tells us a lot about present church and future church. As a part of the historical movement known as the Restoration Movement I have always been fascinated about the ultimate past church, the first century church. I have been drawn to its raw purity that comes from its proximity to Christ and the apostles in time. I am not so naive as to believe that any of the churches described in the New Testament were actually the “perfect” church. They weren’t, but we can glean from Christ’s vision and from the apostles teaching and correction of the early churches what Christ’s church should be.

It’s important, when considering what future church can and should be, to look to the God inspired account of the first churches of God and what they were taught.

When I go to the record of the first century church, the New Testament, I am increasingly becoming aware that most of the letters written to those first century churches were written to them to correct problems. In fact, despite my theoretical musings, there is no statement of what a “perfect” church is in scripture.

However, despite this, an image of Christ’s church does emerge. I am challenged by the fact that my image of the first century church is colored by my twenty first century assumptions and paradigms. Once (in my earlier years as a Christian) I thought they worshipped in church buildings like many of us do until I learned that most of the time

they met in homes or in rented or borrowed facilities.¹ When I learned that they didn't have Bible Schools before worship on Sunday mornings I started to wonder why. How stupid could I be? And then I learned that they never referred to their Sunday gathering as "worship". It all started to confuse me. Now I have been preaching for churches for 25 years that are committed to being a restoration of the first century church and yet the look and feel of these churches is vastly different to those primitive ones. For goodness sake, they didn't even have songbooks, communion trays, New Testaments, or even a standard and official name.

Despite these apparently superficial differences between present church and past church we can learn what the key ingredients are for the church through the ages. These key ingredients are defined by God, not by church councils, magazine editors or zealous preachers. His word is given to us to teach us and we must listen to its teachings as they define the priorities of the church of Christ.² Sounds simple doesn't it? Yet our history is littered with examples of Christians who have just ignored the word of God in preference to their ideas, traditions and politics or who have read into the Bible their own preferences and preconceived ideas.

When the head of the church was asked what the most important commandment was He was not evasive or vague in his answer. The Holy Spirit gives us Christ's answer. *"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is*

¹ See chapter two of Frank Viola and George Barna's book, *Pagan Christianity*.

² 2 Timothy 3:16-17

the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Matthew 22:36-39). There is so much in this short conversation of our Lord. Firstly we must observe that Jesus **did** believe that there was a higher priority to some of the commands of God. He didn't say (as some today say) that all the commands of God are equal and none is more important than the other. Secondly, He states that the greatest commandment of God is that we love Him with all our being. Even though He wasn't asked for the second most important commandment, He gives it. Love people as much as you love yourself.

You can't stand it anymore and you jump up and say, "Hey, wait a minute? Do you mean to say that loving God and people is more important than going to church or any of the other commands?" "Of course it is. That's what Jesus just said. Now, He didn't say that we need to choose which to do. He wants us to do both, but He wants us to know that loving Him and people is more important than any other manifestation of faith. That's not eliminating or minimizing the other blessed commands of God. Rather it maximizes our actually loving God and people as the supreme commands.

Why is this important? Because there are so many choices of what to do in future church. If there is a priority of practices, then that changes the whole experience. And God has clearly said that there is a priority, loving Him and loving people.

He actually goes one step further. He says that if we do not love people we cannot love Him. That's right. "Surely", you cry out, "my lack of success in getting along with

this bunch of unholy and ignorant ones is a completely separate issue from loving the holy and omniscient God?” You really love those twelve cylinder religious words, don’t you? (Sorry, I just get a little exasperated with some who seem to think that using highly conceptual jargon is a sign of really being able to discern God’s will.) Back to the point. You cannot love God while you do not love the people around you. The Holy Spirit puts it this way. *“If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.”* (1 John 4:20).

Loving God is not a separate issue from loving people. Isn’t that what Jesus was getting at in that famous story of the Good Samaritan?³ People are lying by the side of the road and are dying. The religious ones (the ones who are known for at least teaching about loving God) move to the other side of the road so as to avoid the dying one. Why is it that so many times it is the religious who don’t see the connection between loving God and loving people? Why do they huddle in their sacred places, loudly denounced the lost for being lost and then walk straight past them as they leave their worship of God? Who comes to the aid of the dying? A Samaritan? You have to be kidding. The man is a half-breed. He is unclean. He worships at the wrong mountain.⁴ He is so unworthy. But, what is he doing? He is helping the dying. He may have a lot wrong about religious correctness but he has learned somewhere the most important of the commands of God.

Why did Jesus construct this story with such a negative view of religious people? Could it be that He knew that it was the religious who often become so “spiritual” that

³ Luke 10:25-37

⁴ John 4:17-21

they disconnect loving God from loving people? What is Jesus saying when He says, *“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”* (Matthew 5:23, 24)?

You are on your way to worship God. You love Him and He is worthy of your worship. It is vitally important that you worship. And then you remember there is something between you and a brother. What are you to do? The answer is difficult. It is blunt but it is God’s only answer. Like the freeway sign that says, “Wrong way. Go back”, God says to you, “Stop worshiping me and sort things out with your brother first”. You and I often struggle with the truth of such a strategy. Surely, we think, worship of God is more important than getting right with my brother. But God injects Himself into our thoughts and says, “No way. How can you love me who you have not seen when you can’t even love him you can see?”⁵

Is everything to be discarded or disregarded if it doesn’t fit into this priority? No. The point is that love is a priority not a replacement. Future church, if it is to be God’s church, must be characterized by an obvious and real practice of love for God and people. It is how we will be recognized as disciples of Christ.⁶

⁵ 1 John 4:20

⁶ John 13:35

FUTURE CHURCH

CHAPTER FOUR – PAST CHURCH IN ITS OWN WORDS

As the first church of Christ is forming in Jerusalem in AD 33 the Holy Spirit makes this observation of them in *Acts 2:42* “ *They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*” They devoted themselves. It wasn’t just a matter of duty or expedience. It was a matter of intense devotion. We should take each item of devotion as a guide for the devotion and priority of future church.

The Apostle’s Teaching. Past church was known for its high respect for the Word of God. The apostles had the word of God in their hearts and minds through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.¹ There were no New Testaments in written form yet. In fact it would be years before portions of the written New Testaments would be distributed. Beyond that there would not be New Testaments even vaguely similar in form to ours until Gutenberg in the 1450s invented the moveable type printing press and starting printing Bibles on it.²

The devotion of past church to the apostle’s teaching lay in its divine origin not in the persuasiveness of the apostles (1 Corinthians 2:1-5). As near as they could figure it, God had not spoken to His people this way for four centuries. The stories of those ancient prophets had long since faded and had been relegated to ancient literature. But now in the time of past church God opens His mouth once again and breathes His word once again

¹ John 16:13, 15:26

² A great site about the Gutenberg Bible is <http://www.bl.uk/treasures/gutenberg/homepage.html>

into the hearts and minds of people. Paul, the apostle and preacher, would say to his apprentice, Timothy, “*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*” (2 Timothy 3:16, 17). God breathed both the Jewish Old Testament and the assembling New Testament. He was the author and some privileged humans were His scribes.³

Past church was eager for God’s word. In it was the message of life and they wanted as much as they could get. It was food to their hungry souls (1 Peter 2:2). It was not only their food it was their authority. How else were they to know what to believe and what to do. In a time of confusing morality, and political and military oppression they needed guidance on the absolutes of life.

Fellowship. They were devoted to fellowship. (Please don’t give me word studies. I know they are valuable and helpful and are readily available from our scholars but I despair that teaching the scripture’s story has been reduced to a linguistic study). Back to the point. It wasn’t just that fellowship was great and gave them a feeling of belonging (as I expect it did). It was that it was a priority that God demanded of them. You see, they were taught that God had added them not only to a church but also to a family.⁴ And families do things together. That’s the visible expression of their blood relationship. They live together. They eat together and even work together. They worship

³ 2 Peter 1:20-21

⁴ Galatians 6:10

together. If the “together” stuff is missing then all they have is a legal relationship and that’s hardly family.

Fellowship is a sharing in common. And they had a lot to share. There was their mutual submission to Christ that had lead to their salvation. There was their baptism⁵ for the remission of sins. And there was the Holy Spirit they all received in a special way when they were baptized. There was their common calling from God. In that calling they share their common responsibility to love God, each other and the lost.

Past church wasn’t just a place to go to. It was a fellowship. It existed wherever they were. It wasn’t defined by its cathedrals and meeting places. It was defined by its common heritage in Christ and its common call to shine the light into the entire world.

Breaking of Bread. In the context most commentators see this as a reference to the Lord’s Supper. It’s hard to be 100% conclusive but it is also hard to see Luke making the observation that the infant church was very devoted to eating!

Jesus had instructed his followers to partake of a simple symbolic meal of bread and wine in memory of Him.⁶ The bread and the wine had distinct meanings reminding them of the sacrifice offered for their sins. But the meal also was also a gathering to proclaim the focal point of the gospel.⁷

⁵ Acts 2:38,41

⁶ Luke 21:19

⁷ 1 Corinthians 11:26

This meal has become a very visible symbol in the church. However past church's devotion to it wasn't to its performance as a rite. In it they were devoting themselves to the one it memorialized. Without that, it was just a ritual of passing historical interest. With it, it was a world changing proclamation of the salvation that is offered to all through Jesus.

Prayer. They were devoted to prayer. Luke is not saying that past church devoted themselves to saying lots of prayers. He is saying that they were devoted to talking to the Father. Every time you would come into contact with the members of past church you would find them praying. Praying over their food, or praying over their leadership appointments or praying over their imprisoned preachers or praying for wisdom. They were always praying.⁸ Prayer is encouraged and commanded in every letter written by the apostles and prophets to the early churches.

Prayer to them was so much more than a way to open and close one of their gatherings. They were devoted to it because they were devoted to the one they were praying to. He is their Father and the one who is in control of everything.

As the story of past church develops we find that it becomes devoted to spreading the good news of Jesus. In fact when the opposition to past church becomes so strong in

⁸ Acts 4:31, 6:6, 13:3, 20:36

Jerusalem it is scattered all over. It is particularly noted that this only spurs them on preaching the message of salvation in Christ.⁹ More on this in chapter eleven.

So here we have a description of some of the priorities of past church. Learning from God's word, loving each other in close fellowship, worshiping God in the memorial feast of the Lord's Supper, worshiping God in prayer and evangelizing. These weren't the only things that the infant church did but they were the ones that the Holy Spirit specifies they were devoted to in the beginning.

Given that this is what past church had as a set of priorities, what priorities should future church have?

⁹ Acts 8:4

FUTURE CHURCH

CHAPTER FIVE – A CALLED CHURCH

Christ's church is a called church. There is no doubt about this. The very word, church, literally means "called out group". Phones call out to me. I don't care whose phone it is, I can't stand to let a phone ring. If you call me and it rings more than twice, it's because I'm not there, because I normally answer it by the second ring. If I'm at your home or in your office and the phone rings, I will answer it. It's not an efficiency thing. In fact, I think it is evidence of mental instability. Mum did say I started to act funny after I fell on my head in the first grade. Enough of my twisted heritage. The important thing is that God is calling His church. Are we eager to answer the call? Do we know what the call is?

There are two dimensions to this that are important for us to understand before we can really develop our understanding of God's vision for His church. A soldier is a called out person. Every day he has certain tasks that are in line with that calling. We would think it foolish if one day we came across our soldier friend and all he was doing was running around the parking lot in full battle dress. We ask him what he is being called out to do today. He answers that he doesn't know but he feels he has to do something. We are not like that. At least, we shouldn't be. God's church has been called out and we can know the reason every day.

What the church is called out of. God says that we "*are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the*

praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”(1 Peter 2:9).

That’s right. We have been called out of darkness. Paul puts it in these blunt words in *1 Corinthians 6:9-11* “*Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders 10 nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*” What were they called out of? Yes, darkness, but what did the darkness look like. It looked like their immorality, homosexuality, adultery, drunkenness, thievery and the list goes on. It wasn’t someone else’s heritage. It was there’s. Wait a minute. That list looks familiar. Does it remind you of some familiar place? That’s right it could be a description of twenty first century America. In fact it could be a description of the twenty first century world. Sin has darkened our world and we have been called out of the darkness.

However despite God’s family being called OUT of the world they have been called to live IN the world. Many Christians have made a huge mistake in this. They thought that because they were called OUT of the world that they should separate themselves from the world and create communities disconnected from the world. They choose not to associate with those of the world. Past church in Corinth had made this mistake and Paul had to correct them. “*I have written to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people-- not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave*

this world. But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.” (1 Corinthians 5:9-11). It was the wayward Christian who was living according the values of the world that they should not associate with. We are called to associate with the people of this world.

Why? Because that is how they will hear and see the gospel of Jesus that will save them. Do you remember where were you when the gospel touched your heart? That’s right. You were in the world. You didn’t know how to swim and God rescued you from drowning in a pool of your own sin. He gave you CPR, taught you how to swim and then asked you to jump back into the water.¹ “No, don’t send me back into the water. I’m scared. It almost killed me”, you cry out. “Don’t be afraid,” Jesus says, “I am with you” (Matthew 28:20, Acts 18:9-10). “No, Jesus”, you reply in confusion. “The evil in the world will corrupt us and kill us”. Jesus, having a déjà vu moment of a discussion He had with Himself before He came to Earth, says “I have called you out of the darkness and now I have made you into bearers of the light into this dark world. Shine your light² Love the sinners. Hate the sin³ and let that love/hate relationship protect⁴ you while the battle of light and darkness continues.⁵ I have given you my Holy Spirit in your very bodies.⁶ Lean on Him.⁷ Don’t be afraid. *“That which is in you is greater than that which is in the world” (1 John 4:4).*

¹ Matthew 28:19-20

² Matthew 5:14-16

³ 1 John 2:15-17

⁴ 1 John 4:18

⁵ 2 Corinthians 10:2-6

⁶ 1 Corinthians 6:10-20

Yes, God's church has been called out of the darkness but He has put a bright light into our hand and sent us back into the darkness so that others may receive the light that we received. How do we shine that light? By being the light. God says that we were called to be holy.⁸ That holiness is not just for our benefit but for the benefit of all of those we connect with. He says, *"So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, 9 who has saved us and called us to a holy life--not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time,"* (2 Timothy 1:8, 9)

We have been called into battle but our weapons are unlike any others. They are weapons of light. They are the very weapons that Jesus used during his human sojourn. How did He use them? There is no need for us to theorize. God tells us plainly. Will we let God have the final word? *"Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, 7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death--even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus*

⁷ Ephesians 3:16, 5:18

⁸ 1 Corinthians 1:2

every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Philippians 2:4-11

FUTURE CHURCH

CHAPTER SIX – TAKE ME TO YOUR LEADER

Past church, as we find it in the first century, is not a bunch of individual Christians with only a vertical dimension (relationship with God). They, as the word church suggests, had a horizontal dimension (relationship with each other and the world). These first groups formed themselves into visible groups that Paul and others could write letters to.

Each of these churches had leadership. It was not a pragmatic, evolutionary leadership. It was a gift from God. I have been profoundly affected in my ministry and in the identity of my ministry by the following section of scripture. Please read it carefully and let it form your view of leadership in the church. *“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, 12 to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:11-13).*

God wants to equip his people for the work He has called them to do (:12). In these verses He tells us how that great feat is to be accomplished. His apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers are to do this. Equipping the church is their main work, according to this verse. Yes, they have other responsibilities but if their work doesn’t result in the equipping of the membership of the church then they have failed.

Preacher can preach. Pastors can shepherd. Teachers can teach. If one thing has surprised me in my life in ministry, it is the fact that these men can do these things and still the church often is not equipped. There are a lot of reasons for this and people wiser than I will research and reveal those reasons. My point here is the one that Paul is making in Ephesians 4. Hey pastors, evangelist, teachers! Your commission from God is to equip the church. We all have to look at our ministries and ask the question, “Is my ministry helping my brothers and sisters to be better equipped to do the work God has called them to do?” The question is not, “Did I preach the right number of sermons for the appropriate length of time?” or “Did I go to all the elder’s meetings?” or “Did I pass on the correct information?”.

Realistically this means we must ask specific questions. Did my ministry help the married ones have better marriages? Did it help save some marriages? Were the weak given strength? Were those who couldn’t reach out to the lost ones in their lives given tools to help them do just that? Were teenagers trained to the point they could resist the temptation of drugs, materialism, peer pressure and rampant sexuality? Were those who have a desire to teach equipped with what they need to learn how to do just that? Were the seniors trained to find usefulness when the world is telling them the opposite? Were the addicted equipped to overcome their addiction? Were the suffering trained to deal with their pain? And the list goes on.

Our task is awesome. Some days it seems impossible until we come out from under our self-pity or lack of faith and realize that it is not our strength that will bring about such awesome transformation in the members of the church (2 Corinthians 3:4-5). It is God who provides the power. You and I provide the faith. That's the way God has always worked (Hebrews 11:6).

In Ephesians 4 God goes further and gives us a model by which we can see if our ministry is actually equipping. Read verse 12 and 13 again. God has designed His church so that its leaders ministry should result in the body of Christ being built up. How does such building up manifest itself? He specifies three ways.

1. Reaching unity in the faith.
2. Unity in the knowledge of the Son of God.
3. Maturing into the fullness of Christ.

The language of these points is lofty and we need to be careful that the meaning is not lost just because we do not connect with these expressions.

He is saying that the equipping of the church is shown in its unity. He further explains this in verse 16 “ *From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*”. Paul says it this way when he was writing to challenge the Colossian Christians to now follow certain leaders. “*He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to*

grow.” (*Colossians 2:19*). Did you see what unity is? It is working together like the parts of our human body do when they are healthy. See also 1 Corinthians 12:12-27.

Such unity is the outgrowth of our belief in Christ. That’s why God says in Ephesians 4:13 that our unity is in the “*knowledge of the Son of God*”. Elsewhere the Holy Spirit puts it this way, “*Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.*” (*2 Peter 1:2, 3*). Our unity means nothing if it is not based on our knowledge of Christ. It is important that we understand that our knowledge of Christ is not just an informational thing. Sure, when we first hear of this ancient one we start to know *about* Him, but as faith starts to germinate in our mind and heart, our knowledge goes beyond the facts of Jesus into a relationship with the Christ. He now becomes our friend and brother. Jesus puts it this way, “*Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command. 15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.*” (*John 15:13-15*). See also Matthew 12:50 and James 2:23.

This unity or synergy with Christ and each other produces a maturity that is truly indicative of the effectiveness of our equipping of the members of the Body. Ephesians 4:13 says that in that maturity we are attaining to the fullness of Christ. Simply put, we are becoming more like Jesus. This has always been God’s plan. “*For those God*

foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” (Romans 8:29). Are those that God has given to our care becoming like Jesus. We know that they are not perfect like Jesus, just as we are not. But are they developing the image of Christ in their values and their behaviors?

In the past I would have replied, “Well, I don’t know. They show up on Sunday and they give an adequate sum of money. Well, at least, most of the time”. If Christ came to visit our church would he ask, “What are the attendance and contribution stats?” No, you know confidently He would ask, “Are my people becoming like me?” And He would ask the question for our benefit, not His. He knows the answer already. He wants *us* to answer the question because it will radically affect how we serve the members of the body. Many times our answer would be, “I don’t know”. Yet we can know to some degree. We can, at least, learn from Ephesians 4:12-13 that if His people are growing in their relationship with each other and Jesus through their knowledge of Christ then they are heading in the right direction. How is their unity with each other and with Jesus?

A final note on unity: True New Testament unity is not a peaceful standoff between the members. It is a cooperative working together. It is not good enough for my kidneys to put up with my heart. It has to work together with my heart and lungs and a lot of other bits of my body. Unity is not keeping each other happy. It is seeking each other’s highest good (Philippians 2:1-5).

FUTURE CHURCH

CHAPTER SEVEN – CHANGE AND THE UNCHANGEABLE

We have got to get serious about change. Often we make jokes about it or sometimes we ignore it all together or sometimes we initiate it with very little thought. On one end of the spectrum some of us fight it (passionately) for no reason other than it is different (preserving status quo appears to be a high value). On the other end there are those of us who just as passionately want to change everything for no other reason than it is different (change for change's sake). I don't know which is worse. All I know is that both extremes are bad as well as being counterproductive to health godly change in the people of God.

I have grown up in a generation that has seen more change than all previous generations combined. In my lifetime the personal computer was introduced (1981). It now figures as one of the most common and powerful communication tools available to billions of people all over the planet. That occurred in 24 years. I have lived in a time when personal communication has moved from a fixed black box telephone to a credit card sized cell phone that will also take photos and play music and video. And how long did this take? In 1973 Martin Cooper invented one and it weighed 2 pounds. That's 32 years. Previous generations have had wars that last longer.

What's my point? Well there are two. Firstly, previous generations in the church may not have changed things much because they didn't live in a culture where change was such a norm rather than because they believed that no change was needed. Secondly,

we have to be careful that the change that has become so normal in our society does not seep into the church as an influence rather than as the result of prayer, study of God's word and conversation. Change must never be just a matter of staying modern or postmodern (or whatever words the academics give to our culture after prodding and poking around our lives). Just because change is a cultural norm in the world doesn't mean it must be so in the church. Change must come from a different source if it must come. It must come from God.

Biblically we are mandated to change. Our lives and our churches must be constantly changing. In the Bible change is taught as normal and is manifested in two ways in our walk with Jesus.

1. *Individual, personal, and spiritual change* to become more like Jesus (Romans 8:29, Ephesians 5:1-2).
2. *Church change* where the church either chooses to change its behavior or beliefs because of scripture (in eternal matters) or because of effectiveness and preference (in cultural matters) as in Acts 6:1-4 by example or 1 Corinthians 9:22-23 by principle.

To hope that the church will never change is to ignore reality. Churches are always changing by the very nature of life itself. We are constantly trying to reach out to people to be saved and be added to the church. All these people bring new additions to the diversity of the population within the church. Even if they didn't bring their age, nationality, socio economic background or culture with them they bring themselves.

I remember hearing a Christian once complaining because the church where they were members was growing numerically. According to my New Testament the church is supposed to grow. It is a good thing and it is a healthy thing. Then why were they complaining? Because the growth was changing the church and they didn't know everyone now. I knew I had an uphill battle because the church they were speaking of was the one where I was preaching. Will someone save us from preachers who preach the gospel so effectively that the church grows and disturbs the environment of the saved? I'm sorry but every so often I am gripped with a fit of sarcasm. But the point is clear. The church grows because we do God's will and we have got to learn how to live with that and in fact praise God for it.

Scripture is very clear about two things when it comes to change.

1. Change on the outside that does not come from change on the inside is a pretense and is dangerous.

1 Samuel 16:7 "But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.'" God accuses us of looking only at the external appearance of things. He is right. So many times we judge even things in the kingdom on the basis of how they look rather than the heart of the matter. God has always told us to obey Him from our heart and that such obedience is the only one that matters. He is not concerned overly about how it looks. He is vitally concerned with the heart of his disciples. This doesn't discount the appearance. It just means it is not the only issue and that it is not the primary issue.

I don't know who came up with the form versus function paradigm but I am sure glad they did. It has helped me immeasurably in my ministry to understand things and have a balanced perspective. (By the way, who came up with it is not important.) What is important is that it is a biblical way of looking at God's will for us. Again let's use the Lord's Supper as a common example. Its form is a meal of bread and wine accompanied by prayer. Its function is as a memorial of Christ and a proclamation of Him. God wants both. To have one without the other is actual disobedience.

Change that is just superficial (changing just form) is not what we need. Some churches have introduced certain superficial changes without introducing the needed attitude changes. They have brought in small group programs, praise teams, contemporary songs, a new preacher, different ministries etc. in the hope that the program changes in and of themselves would produce the necessary growth in Christ on the part of the members. To introduce changes into worship without challenging the heart of the worshipers ends up with nothing more than the seeds of a new worship (or other ministry) tradition. Don't get me wrong. I don't see anything wrong with any of these changes. They are all perfectly legitimate forms. The problem is when they are introduced without a change of heart.

Will Christians who have chosen not to associate with other Christians in their church suddenly develop a desire to do some just because a Small Groups ministry is introduced? Mostly, no. Why? Because the same dynamic that keeps them from

associating informally will keep them from doing so formally. You have to address the issue of love and fellowship in the hearts of the unwilling before any program change has a hope of producing genuine growth.

Will those who were unwilling to worship truly in song i.e. do more than sing the music, be any more willing to sing because we put 4 song leaders up the front and call them worship leaders? Mostly no. Why? Because the same thing that held them back from worship from the heart is still present. Many of us are horrified and repulsed by superficial worship and what do we do? Change the façade and not deal with the superficiality. This is especially destructive to the church when those that are entering from a worldly existence into Christ do so because they despaired of the superficiality of the world they left. What horror and disappointment must they feel when they discover that same superficiality in the church?

A few paragraphs ago I noted that change that is external only is not only a vacuous pretense, it is dangerous. Isn't this what Jesus was saying in *Matthew 23:27, 28*? *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.”* The first century Pharisees (a Jewish denomination) had developed religious superficiality to an art form. Jesus’ conclusion was that they had all had an extreme makeover of the outside but inside they were nothing but dead men’s bone and everything unclean. The Pharisees had

tried so hard to be clean according to the Law. It was a supreme value to them. The extremities to which they would go to remain ceremonially clean are extraordinary. How ironic that in all their efforts to be clean, they had accomplished the one thing that they hated the most. They had become unclean. Spiritually they were dead. In their souls they were leprous. In their hearts they were hypocritical. But on the outside they looked so good, so clean, so spiritual. But what good was it? No good at all. In fact it was dangerous. Jesus put it this way. *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.” Matthew 23:15*

2. Change must come from the inside of a person; from their heart if it is to be real and to have promise.

Romans 12:2 “2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.” If this verse teaches us anything, it is that God wants us to change (be transformed). However He not only wants us to be transformed He wants to be transformed through a particular process. It is an internal process where our minds are renewed. You see God not only wants the new covenant written on paper (He’s done that already), He wants it written on our hearts and minds (that’s up to us). Long ago He ordained this when He said, *“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.” (Hebrews 8:10)*. When the covenant of God is etched on our hearts we start to

experience a renewal. This renewal, this re-creation occurs right from the beginning of the new life in Christ when we were born again¹ which resulted from His word generating faith in our hearts.²

As we live our lives for Jesus we are asked to do so wholeheartedly.³ This doesn't just refer to doing so enthusiastically. It refers to the fact that our obedience must come from our heart. We obey Him because we love Him.⁴ Life in Christ has always been intended to be a life lived out of love for God. It is this deep and personal origin for change that gives it its genuineness.

If change is to come it must first come to the heart and to the attitude of the follower of Christ. I know I have spoken mainly about change in this chapter but it is also important to note that one of strengths of the gospel of Jesus and His church is that there are some core things that never change. God's word never changes.⁵ Jesus never changes.⁶ The good news of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection cannot be changed and the necessity of all to respond to it God's way.⁷

Once future church addresses issues outside these core cross-focused teachings and behaviors there is an extraordinary range of variety. This is what Paul was getting at

¹ John 3:3-5

² Romans 10:17

³ Romans 6:17

⁴ John 14:15,23, 24, 2 Corinthians 5:14

⁵ Matthew 24:35

⁶ Hebrews 13:8

⁷ Galatians 1:6-9, John 3:16, Ephesians 2:8, Acts 2:37-39

when He said, *“Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”* 1 Corinthians 9:19-23.

Paul had been as an extremely religious Jew. He would even note that his resume in Judaism was exemplary.⁸ Despite his sincerity⁹ he concluded that he was fighting against God, which for such a zealot must have been a horrifying thought. He was now a Christian. He left the religion of the old covenant for the religion of the new covenant. And yet he was willing to act like a Jew to win the Jew (:20). As far as the Gentile went, he had never embraced their values or religion. Yet he would become like one of them in an effort to get the gospel to them (:21).

To do so did not deny Christ even though it often meant he was found in places of false or vain worship. He understood that the key issue is reaching the lost world for Jesus. Let’s bring this into the twenty first century. Future church will need to have such flexibility if it is to get the gospel to a lost world.

⁸ Philippians 3:4-6

⁹ Acts 23:1

If Paul was to live in our time do you think he would go into a bar to reach people? Do you think Paul would act like a new-ager so as to get the gospel to them? Would Paul go to synagogue on Saturday to reach the Jews? Wait a minute. We already know he did that. How far would he go to get the good news to those who needed? He wouldn't sin. *"By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" Romans 6:2.* But, he would associate with sinners. He would take on their cultural practices so as to give the gospel a chance to get across those cultural barriers. Should we do any less?

Paul had decided that he would constantly change his life and culture so that the lost could get a clean view of the eternal gospel. He would cross national borders, cultural taboos and personal dislikes. He wasn't being insincere or fake. He was living the ethic that says that nothing gets in the way of God's people sharing the cross of Christ with the unredeemed. This leads to a question for future church. What are willing to begin doing or to stop doing for the sake of the lost?

FUTURE CHURCH

CHAPTER EIGHT – CULTURAL VERSUS ETERNAL

One of the impediments to healthy change in our personal and church lives is not being able to distinguish between the cultural and eternal issues. Cultural issues are ones that are rooted in the temporary culture of the people. Eternal issues are ones that God says are unchangeable and permanent for this creation. If future church is to be all that God wants it to be we must really get our heads around this concept. Most times it is not difficult unless someone is trying to mess with one of our favorite things!

I learned a lot about this personally during my 25 years ministering in churches in Australia. American preachers started many of the churches I grew up in and worked with in Australia. I wouldn't be a Christian today if it wasn't for the ministry of an evangelist from Texas. Along with many Christians all over Australia I am eternally grateful for the ministries of these missionaries. I say that because I don't want you to think that I don't appreciate the work the Lord did and does through them in what I am about to say.

Over the years a problem developed. Many of the practices that the missionaries introduced within the churches were not based on biblical instruction but based upon the way they did it "back home". These practices in and of themselves were not the problem. Here's an example. A controversy developed once when one of the Australian preachers grew a moustache (believe it or not). It was seen by the American missionaries as being

worldly and certainly wouldn't be tolerated back home in the US of A. However the issue was soon "resolved" when one of the visiting missionaries from Lubbock arrived with a moustache. There are churches to this day that you can visit in Australia that are carbon copies of churches in Oklahoma down to the design of the church buildings and the dress styles. However the issue is not their cultural similarity but the practice of making these cultural issues points of controversy. Cultural issues only become a problem when we don't recognize them as cultural.

Australian Christians were faced with the challenge of having to determine what in their practices was a matter of God's eternal word and what was a matter of human and American tradition. It was and is not an easy task, but it is vital. This is not only applicable to mission churches on the other side of the world. It is applicable to US churches where, over generations, a lot of cultural practices (both good and bad) have intertwined with eternal practices. This mixture of cultural and eternal is not the problem. The problem is that many of us have lost the ability to distinguish between the two.

In seeking to be Christ's church it is vitally important to know exactly the eternal aspects because those are the non negotiable. God settled these things long ago and we have no authority to change these. These are the things that we must advocate and practice. We have no choice.

I know that this is a sensitive subject but I want you to know that my only desire is to follow the scripture in all that we do. Things that we bind as matters of fellowship,

or even things that we have such a strong ownership of that we get upset if they change, need to be matters that God has said are important. Maybe a story will illustrate my point.

I heard of a church once where one of the members got very upset one Sunday morning because the lace tablecloth, that was usually covering the Lord's Supper emblems, was not used. After church she immediately confronted the elders. "Since I was a little girl in this church we have used a tablecloth for the emblems!". Her anger was evident and so the leadership set about investigating the situation. It turns out that in the previous church building there was no air conditioning and that they needed to cover the emblems to keep the flies off. Most did not realize this and grew up thinking that it was an indispensable part of the Lord's Supper. Someone had decided to not use the tablecloth because they did not think it was an eternal issue and someone got very upset because she had become so used to it that she thought it was an eternal issue or at least the thin end of the edge of one.

Missionaries all over the world deal with this issue on a daily basis. No, not the lace cloth! They are challenged with the issue of the cultural versus the eternal. It is not good enough to do it the way we always have. Why? Because we are in a different culture and some of things we did back home may actually be destructive. The question needs to be answering, "Are these matters of eternal consequence or are they matters of tradition, culture or circumstance?"

Think about it with respect to the Lord's Supper. In accounts of the institution of the remembrance feast¹ and in the account of Christians actually partaking of the meal² it is noted that they were in an upper room. Was the fact that both accounts mention this a matter of eternal significance or is it a cultural circumstantial issue? I think it was just a matter of circumstances. But how did I come to that conclusion?

The text of the scripture will most times tell you. "It's just common sense", some might say. However common sense can be a subjective thing and one person's version may be quite different to another's. God has given us the New Testament so that we can determine between the cultural and the eternal and it is to that authority we must submit.

"Surely everything we do in Christ's church is because of His will and there is nothing that is a matter of cultural traditions?" some might ask. I must admit that I used to think this way until I was forced to challenge some of my practices in Australian churches.

I am not advocating we change any of the following but I want you to consider whether they are cultural/traditional or eternal/essential. Pews, songbooks, church buildings, multiple cups, baptistries, invitation songs, four part harmony, bulletins, secretaries, youth ministers, PA systems, committees, ministries, Sunday schools. I could keep going but I hope you are starting to see the point. None of these things are mentioned in the New Testament as being present within the life the church we have

¹ Hebrews 13:8

² Acts 20:8

described there. Does that mean they are wrong in present church? No, all it means is that they are not on the eternal side of the experience of church. As such they may be appropriate or they may not depending on whether they fulfill the purpose of Christ.

One of things I love about our heritage is our commitment to following the scriptures as our only authority and our rejection of human creeds and traditions as binding upon us. Let's be faithful to that commitment and understand when we are using the freedom that Christ gave us to fulfill His will and when we are submitting to His eternal commands.

One final example. When Jesus sent apostles out on what is often called the Limited Commission, He commanded that they go two by two.³ Was that an eternal example of how we must evangelize the world or was it particular to that work at that time? I came across a church once that believed that it was an eternal command.⁴ They didn't have a church name (because the church in the New Testament didn't have one, they argued) so they became known as the "two by twos" because of their unswerving belief that this is the only biblical method of taking the gospel to the whole world. What mistake had they made? They mistook the cultural and temporal for the eternal.

Future church will look different because some of our cultural practices will be gone and replaced with others. Future church will look similar because the eternal beliefs

³ Mark 6:7

⁴ See http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_2x2.htm

and practices have been preserved. May God give us the wisdom to distinguish between the two.

How do we determine what is cultural and what is eternal? Here are some questions that I have found useful in answering this question.

Does God’s word specifically command Christians to do this? For example in Matt 22:37-39 God commands us to love Him and love people. The New Testament is full of direct commands for us to obey. Eph 5:19 tells us to sing to each other and to God.

Does God’s word emphasize this particular part of the practice or does it seem incidental? If God doesn’t make a big deal about it, should we? The last supper in the upper room. Does God make a point of the location? No. Then neither should we.

Does God’s word indicate that this is a cultural, temporary thing? For example, in 1 Corinthians 11 Paul writes to the Christians and talks of head coverings for women. His whole argument is built on how the absence of head covering is perceived in society. In verse 6 he uses the word, “if”. He builds his instructions to them on a condition (“if it is a disgrace for a woman....”). As soon as he does that he is saying that this is a cultural instruction.

How old is the practice? If it doesn’t date back to the first century church then there is a good chance it is cultural. For example, Sunday Schools have only been present

in church ministries since the late 18th century. They are very effective tool in teaching young and old alike the word. However as a method they are not eternal.

It takes some time for us to identify which of our practices fall into which category because we have been doing things certain ways for a long time. We must be patient with each other. Future church is a learning church and we must love each other enough to be patient when some don't learn as quickly as others.

FUTURE CHURCH

CHAPTER NINE – GOING TO CHURCH.

If I were an outsider looking at the life of most churches, I would conclude that Sunday morning “worship service” was the most important thing we do. In one sense I live in pragmatic fear of saying anything about this because I know that most hassles in churches arise from disagreeing with someone’s view of what goes on in that time. Churches have split over what to sing and how we sing it during the “worship service” and I’m not even talking about the instrumental music question. We have split about whether we stand up or sit down ... about whether there are pews or chairs, one song leader or a group, carpet or wood floors, four part or one part harmony, children’s church or not. And the list goes on.

If there is a more contentious battleground, I have yet to see it. You would think there are whole chapters in the New Testament speaking of worship services, how to leader prayer, singing four part harmony, how to conduct the Communion (beyond the emblems and prayers), how long to preach, offering invitations along with invitation songs and how to make announcements. Despite all of what is said and done in the name of these things, do you know how many times these terms are mentioned in the New Testament. Not once. I may be wrong. You might find one or two verses that allude to them but you will never find a structural description of this time of worship in the New Testament.

In my mind that leads to many questions but I will only focus on one in this section. What was a gathering for worship like in past church 33 to 65 AD? The following is not an exhaustive study of this question but it is meant to give us a reasonably clear picture of a gathering of our brethren in the early church. There is one other note. The word, worship, is never used in the New Testament to describe any gathering of Christians. Is that significant? I don't think so except to observe that even our language about this subject isn't even biblical in its origin.

It is past church, first century. Your friend has invited to come with him to hear about Jesus. You don't know why you go, but you do. When you arrive you start to notice some things.

Unlike other religions you are aware of, you do not go to a temple or holy place. You go to Peter's place.¹ There appears to be a lot of encouraging going on in the group before anything else happens.² After a while they begin to sing. The songs sound like chants.³ They aren't the best singers you have heard (musically) but they sure seem to enjoy it. Their hearts seemed to soar as they sing of God and Jesus. They almost seem to be teaching other.⁴ This happened to be a Sunday evening after you had got home from work. They began to have a ceremonial meal that they said was in memory of Jesus. You

¹ Early Christians met in private homes (Acts 12:12; Romans 16:5 Colossians 4:15; Philemon 1-4), parts of the Temple (Acts 5:12), public auditoriums (Acts 19:9), and synagogue as long as they were permitted to do so (Acts 14:1, 3; 17:1; 18:4) although not all of these were times of worship.

² Hebrews 10:25

³ (1 Corinthians 14:15-16, 26), although the style that is used is unknown most scholars believe it was in the form of chants. They did sing the Psalms of the Old Testament but we know they also sang hymns and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19).

⁴ Eph 5:19, Colossians 3:16

didn't understand it but they spoke of his body and his blood.⁵ You have so many questions. One of the men starts to teach and starts reading a letter from someone they call an apostle. You don't catch the name exactly. It sounds like Paul.⁶

The teaching is interesting and is answering some of your questions. It seems to always focus on this Jesus who they say was resurrected from the dead.⁷ After a while someone starts to pray with his hands raised⁸ and everyone listens intently and they all say "amen" at the end.⁹ There are many languages spoken but no matter which one is used there always seems to be someone to translate so we all understand what is being said.¹⁰ Someone tells of a famine someone and that the "brethren" need some help. They gather a collection on money and commission someone to the task of delivering it.¹¹ Then, just when you think everything is coming to an end someone else gets up and starts teaching. It seems to you that it is going to go until midnight.¹² Your mind wanders a little from the teaching and you begin to notice that this is a varied bunch of people.

⁵ We know that they ate the Lord's Supper in their times of worship (Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 1:20-22) in obedience to a specific command of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:23-34).

⁶ Teaching, preaching and reading of God's word were a part of their worship gatherings (1 Timothy 4:13). In 1 Corinthians this is distinctly shown in the use of the miraculous teaching gifts of the early church of tongues, interpretation and prophesy. All of the teaching and preaching had to be aimed at building the church up. "*What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.*" (1 Corinthians 14:26).

⁷ 1 Corinthians 2:2, 1:22-25,

⁸ 1 Timothy 2:8

⁹ 1 Corinthians 14:16, Acts 2:42, 4:24, 21:5

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 14:15-25. Because it is a first century church, there are manifestations of miraculous gifts. A study of such gifts will show that they were temporary. However I am open minded, but I have yet to find in any church, people who can speak fluently in languages they haven't learned, healing of highly visible diseases at the command of a healer and prophecy in its future predicting dimension.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, 2 Corinthians 8:1-6

¹² Acts 20:7-8

There are slaves, women, wealthy, poor, Gentile, Jew, Greeks and even some Romans.¹³

The teacher seems to be preaching now and speaks of God's love for the whole world.¹⁴

You have never heard of such a thing.

You ask your friend, as the meeting appears to be ending (although no one seems to be leaving), "What is the name of this group?" He tells you they wear only one name, Jesus. He says that they are called many names. Sometimes, Christians.¹⁵ Sometimes the church of God.¹⁶ Sometimes, disciples.¹⁷ Sometimes the Way.¹⁸

Do you think you would feel at home in the first century church meetings? I don't know if I would. I like having an order of worship, the songs on the screen in shaped notes, a neat twenty-five minute lesson (except when I am preaching) with a designated time for a "response", four part harmony in the singing and the formality. That first century church sounds so different to the one I go to. In fact they never speak of going to church. What's with that? My tongue is a bit in my cheek but I genuinely feel I would feel out of place in their assemblies. I wouldn't **be** out of place because I would be with my brothers and sisters in Christ but I would **feel** out of place because of my unfamiliarity with their culture. Like when I went to an African American church recently. Boy, they sure did things differently to what I was used to. There wasn't

¹³ Galatians 3:26-27

¹⁴ John 3:16

¹⁵ Acts 11:26

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:2, 10:32, 11:22, 15:9, 2 Corinthians 1:1

¹⁷ Acts 11:29, 13:52, 14:21-22, 15:10, 18:23, 21:16

¹⁸ Acts 9:2, 19:9,23, Acts 2:14.

anything wrong with the differences. The eternal things were the same. The cultural things are the different things.

I know we joke about Paul using the King James Version. Someone called this “present mindedness”. It is reading our present experiences into accounts of the past and thus coloring our view of the past. When it is a joke it is pretty funny. When it’s not a joke it is sad. We have to guard against reading into the accounts of the first century church our twenty-first century experience. Let the documents from the past speak for themselves. I know it makes us feel uncomfortable but that probably is not a bad thing for you and me.

This chapter (as I’m sure you can tell) has an extraordinary significance when we consider what future church will be. The significance is simply this. Just as our present church assemblies are different from past church assemblies in cultural ways, future assemblies will be different also. They will not differ in the eternal components but they certainly will differ in the cultural ones.

FUTURE CHURCH

CHAPTER TEN – A PEOPLE WHO ARE FOR PEOPLE

Do you collect things? Some people collect the weirdest things. I don't why we humans do that. I worked with a guy once in a computer store who was collecting every TV or movie video connected with Star Trek. He had this huge collection of tapes and then everything turned to DVD! I'm sure it's easier collect pig figurines like a friend of my wife has done all her life. Every so often I catch a show called Antiques Roadshow on PBS while I am hunting for a better show than the one I'm watching during the ads. It always amazes me what some people are prepared to pay for old things. Literally they spend thousands of dollars on really old stuff because they collect those particular things. I guess something's value is determined by how much you are willing to pay to get it.

God is a collector to. He collects people. He specializes in broken, disenfranchised, sinful people.¹ And when God collects people He doesn't box them individually in a glass display case. He gathers them all together and puts them in a family called His church and lets them continue to live in the sinful world He found them in.²

Church is a people place. In fact, it isn't place. Church is a people thing. People created it. God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are people. Church is populated by people. It is lead by people and people are constantly entering into it. Its purpose is driven by God's desire to save people through the passing on of the message of God by people. Often this

¹ Luke 14:21-24

² 1 Corinthians 1:2

simple fact is overlooked when we start to act like the church building is what it is all about. What are we saying to people when we fuss over the color of the carpet, the name on the sign or the clothes on the worship leaders more than we do over the hurts of the people in the church? What are we saying when we spend most of our money and time on ourselves and not on the lost people who are supposed to be the target of our ministries?³ We are saying people aren't our focus and especially lost people.

I heard a story once. I imagine it is like most stories preachers hear and all the details may have been augmented by time. It doesn't matter because the impact of this story is that it rings true with our experience. A young preacher and his wife were going out to dinner one night to celebrate their wedding anniversary. As they were leaving their restaurant, which was in the downtown area, an extraordinary thing happened. A hooker walked up to them and made an illicit proposal. They were shocked as they were not used to dealing with such things but the young preacher quickly responded, "We are not interested in that at all but you may be interested in a proposal we have for you. Would you like to come and visit our church tomorrow?" The woman was shocked, as she was not used to dealing with such things. For one who had said yes to almost anything she loudly said, "Why would I go to church? Those people wouldn't want me there. Church is the last place I would think to go. Get away from me you disgusting do-gooders!"

There are a lot of observations of the human condition in this story but I only want to zero in on one. Isn't it a shame when the last place that the soul destroyed people of our communities would think to go to get help is our church? There are a lot of reasons

³ Luke 5:31-32, 15:4-7

for this. Some are under our control and some aren't. However, never let it be true that the reason the poor, the unemployed, the immoral, and the lost of this world don't turn to us, is because we gave them the impression that they were not welcome.

The church has been likened accurately to a hospital for sick souls. Didn't Jesus say, " *It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.*" (Luke 5:31). Yet we in the hospital are wandering the corridors grumbling to ourselves, "This place would be great it wasn't for all the sick people." Looking at a hospital we can see point. Can we see the same point when we think of the hospital of sick souls, Christ's church?

When God's church becomes a country club for an exclusive group we start to erect security gates on the fence lines to keep the wrong sort of people out. In the club we only want people like us. We become the very opposite of what Christ wanted in His church. He wants it to be the body of Christ.⁴ Would the body of Christ complain about those visiting kids making all the noise? I am not being self righteous or overly pious. What do you think Christ would do? Would he bemoan the changing demographic in our church neighborhood? No. You know what He would do. Would he treat the church like all that mattered was the attendance and contribution figures? Would he think that everything was okay with the next generation as long as their hair was the right length and they didn't have anything pierced or tattooed?

⁴ Ephesians 1:22-23 et al

We are the body of Christ. We are his physical hands and feet. Through us He ministers to a lost and dying world.⁵ In our church we must make up our minds whether we are going to take Christ seriously. Are people the priority? Are the lost of a greater priority than the saved? More on that in a later chapter.

⁵ Matthew 25:31-46

FUTURE CHURCH

CHAPTER ELEVEN – EVANGELISM IS NOT A PRIORITY

Reaching the lost in service of Christ is not a priority. Preaching the good news of Jesus so that people might be saved is not a priority of His church. No, it is not a priority. It is **the** priority.

If future church is to be the church that Christ wants, its must be a church dedicated to His purposes. It is not good enough to boldly claim the name of Christ and then not take on board his priorities for His people. God’s purpose for his people is not an intricate theology that you need a Bible degree to understand. It is plainly taught in scripture. Let God’s word speak to your soul as you now read His word. I know you’ve read them before but it is remarkable the power God’s word has. Maybe our hearts are more ready for their message today.

“She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”” Matthew 1:21

“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”” Luke 19:10

“Jesus answered them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”” Luke 5:31, 32

“But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”” Matthew 9:13

“You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.” Romans 5:6

“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.” 1 Timothy 1:15, 16

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”” Matthew 28:19, 20

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”” Acts 1:8

““We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.” Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than men!” Acts 5:28, 29

“For this is what the Lord has commanded us: “I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.””” Acts 13:47

“For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile--the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” Romans 10:12-14

“For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation:” 2 Corinthians 5:14-18

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” 1 Peter 2:9

“Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” 1 Peter 2:12

“But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,” 1 Peter 3:15

“His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms,” Ephesians 3:10

“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.” Acts 8:4

“We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition.” 1 Thessalonians 2:2

From day one of Christ's first century ministry He had one supreme goal. What was it? Simply it was to save as many people as He could. I love the story Jim McGuiggan tells about Fred (not his real name) who was traveling down a road to hell with a myriad of others. Jesus is standing by the road just before it goes over a cliff into eternal flame and he calls out, "Fred, what are you doing?" Fred yells urgently, "I'm going to hell." Jesus immediately asks another question, "Why are you going to hell?" "Because God wants us to!" Jesus is astounded, "Well, I'm God and I don't want you to go to hell!" "Well I'm Fred and I don't want to go" Jesus points at him and says simply, "You don't have. Come here, stand by me and tell everyone you can that they don't have to go either"

That's the point. God church can't sit around in the highly spiritual surroundings, sipping their biblical lattes while their neighbors are hell bound. More than that, how can the church of Christ bathe itself in the love of God every week and not be moved in their very soul to share that love with everyone?

We call it evangelism, reaching out, preaching the gospel etc. The list goes on. We can classify it, teach it and explain in detail why it's not happening but the only thing we really need is to do it. It's not rocket science. Someone once said it's simply one starving street person telling another one where the food is. All that we do in God's kingdom with helps us to share the spiritual food or it hinders us.

Evangelism isn't a department. It is what we do on Tuesday at 7 pm. A light isn't just a light ten percent of the time it's on. It doesn't shine on selected objects in its field of illumination. It shines for all to see and be enlightened.

Past church didn't theorize about whether they should focus on the lost or the saved. They simply did what God asked them to by His word and the example of Christ. One thing they did not do. They didn't say to the saved, "You don't have to share the gospel. There's only a few of us that can do this." The Christians in the first century didn't seem to even think that not sharing the word was an option. They did what they did out of the natural dynamic of offering forgiveness because they had been forgiven. They knew what they had received was so good for them. They wanted to share it. It would drive them to evangelize while being persecuted, even driven from their homes.¹ It would drive some to leave their jobs and go all over the Roman empire to proclaim Christ. Past church of the first century was an evangelistic dynamo.

What was the result? There were many, but the most important one was growth of individual congregations numerically and an explosion in the number of congregations all over the known world. This numerical growth was not only vital for past church, but was absolutely essential for future church. Our future church is radically affected by our numerical growth. I know I am being a little impersonal but there is a simple yet significant point here. If there are not more people coming in the front door than are

¹ Acts 8:4

going out the back door in one generation then the very existence of a church is threatened.

How to evangelize.

Evangelism is in different times and different cultures done in many different ways. God never limited our evangelistic methodology to a certain set. He just said that we should evangelize the whole world. It's up to us to choose how. After many years of training in many different evangelistic methods and many years of study of others, I have come to the conclusion that the best methods of evangelism in our society is a life of invitation. I suspect it is true in all cultures with the possible exception of repressive regimes.

A life of invitation is a combination of lifestyle evangelism with an invitation. These are not the only methods out there but they are the ones that are effective and that every single person in the body can do. Everyone can live each day for Jesus in the full view of the world. This is not saying that we will live perfectly in front of the whole world. Only Jesus did that. We can however live imperfect, forgiving, grace filled lives that many can see as people who have been transformed in to something better. It is not living self righteously or condescendingly but living transparently and lovingly. It is shining our light just like Jesus said we should do.

Everyone can invite. Little children are often the best inviters we have and they hardly know anything. Eighty-year-old shut ins can invite. If people in these two ends of

the spectrum can invite, then the more blessed of us certainly can. But what are we inviting them to? To anything that brings them into further contact with the light. Invite them to dinner, to a BBQ with friends, to a small group Bible study, to a church event, or to church itself. What are the worst and best case scenarios? Worst case is that they will say no and look at you a little strange. I have never heard of anyone being killed, mutilated or deported for inviting a friend to church. Best case is that they will say yes and this will be the first step of their journey to salvation in Christ. God wants it. Jesus died for it. The Holy Spirit works in us for it. The angels anticipate it and rejoice at its fruition. And future church waits for past church to come back to it because it knows that without it future church will not exist.

The priority of the lost.

Once a new church gets some years under its belt, the focus of the church so often moves from the lost to the saved. It's a familiar story. But the story isn't limited to them. It happens in churches wherever they are in the cycle of a church. It is surprising that this happens despite the plain teaching of Jesus. This is a vital issue and we need to be challenged with the blunt truth. Read, again, the precious words of Jesus.

“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

Luke 15:4-10

I'm not a shepherd or in anyway related to anything rural except that I grew up in mid sized country town, but I can understand this story Jesus is using to get the point across to us. Watch the numbers. There are 100 sheep. Each one has a sizeable economic value. Yet when just one of them is lost what does God endorse? We should leave the ninety-nine "in the open country" and go find the lost sheep. Some have thought that this means that we should disregard the needs of the ninety-nine. No, the ninety-nine are saved and are cared for. They are the righteous who have no need of salvation. However the point of this parable is that the highest priority of God's ministry is the lost one not the ninety-nine saved ones. He loves them all but the ninety-nine have been enlightened and in the salvation are being equipped to live long but the lost one is helpless and hopeless without Christ.

I'm not going to get upset about it but Jesus taught in this parable that the faithful disciple causes the angels in heaven to rejoice. But, what about when a lost one turns to Jesus? The angels go ballistic! "Oh, George went to church this week and on Monday helped his neighbor. But hold the phone. But, kook at Cindy! She just became a Christian. Break out the chips and dip. Let's have a party because this one was lost and now is saved."

How can we think that we are being New Testament Christians when the totality of our Christian experience is involved in taking care of ourselves? Think about it. How much of our church budgets go directly to evangelism (or indirectly for that matter)?

How much of our ministry time goes towards the lost? Future church will be a place of evangelism if past church decided that their ministries, attitudes and spending patterns would be dedicated to people who are not even members of the church. I heard it put this way recently when someone said that the church is the only organization in the world that is dedicated to helping people who are not even members of their organization.

Our elders, our evangelists/preachers, our deacons, and our members have all got to conform to this dynamic. They have all received. They can all give. They can all shine. They can all invite. God has done and is doing all He can do. We need to do the same.

FUTURE CHURCH

CHAPTER TWELVE – A PEOPLE WITH A MESSAGE

At the center of the evangelistic activity of God's church is the message. Evangelism is literally the proclamation of the good news. The good news is a message. God's church has been commissioned by God Himself to preach that message to the whole world.¹ The history of past church is full of declarations of their dedication to this task at the command of God. Read these verses and immerse yourself in the task they had dedicated themselves to.

Acts 5:42 "Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ."

Acts 8:12 "But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women."

Acts 8:25 "When they had testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages."

Acts 8:35 "Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus."

Acts 8:40 "Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and travelled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea."

¹ Mark 16:15-16

Acts 11:20 “Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.”

Acts 14:1 “At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed.”

Acts 14:6, 7 “But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, where they continued to preach the good news.”

Acts 14:15 ““Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them.”

Acts 14:21 “They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch,”

Acts 15:7 “After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.”

Acts 17:18 “A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.”

Acts 20:24 “However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me--the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.”

Last chapter we saw that evangelism was central to who God is and what He does. In this chapter we are going to look at what the actual message is. What is it that is such good news to a lost and dying world. If future church is to be God’s it must be one that is passing on His message. God goes to an extreme on this when He said to past church, *“But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!”* (Galatians 1:8, 9). Now that is extreme. Is God saying that the content of the message of the good news is important? Of course He is. It is vital that the message of the good news is correct. Why? Well, there are a lot of practical reasons but the most important one is that God says so. He commands that we should preach it. Don’t change it, not even a little bit. Teach it. Not your version of it. He says that He refined it since the creation of the world. Don’t let theologians or self-proclaimed prophets change it one iota. It’s a simple message so don’t complicate it. It’s a very personal message so don’t sterilize it. It’s not an equation. It’s message.

Church councils, respected theologians, persuasive preachers and dedicated Christians are not the original source of the gospel. The teachings of early Restoration preachers and the writings of Reformation leaders are not the authority when it comes

to determining was the gospel message is. God in Christ and the Holy Spirit wrote the gospel down. You and I can read the same documents as anyone else and see the eternal gospel for ourselves. Let us then, with an honest spirit, look into this New Testament and read the good news for ourselves.

Remember that gospel is an old English word that literally means good news. Paul was writing to past church in Corinth. He felt the need to remind them of the gospel. His words will serve to remind us of the gospel. *“Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,” (1 Corinthians 15:1-4).*

Paul said that he received it and He passed it on. What was this good news? Jesus Christ died for our sins, was buried and raised from the dead. This is the core of gospel. I mean it is the absolute ground zero of the good news. Without this simple message of those AD33 events the rest of the message is useless. Read 1 Corinthians 15:12-19 if you don't believe me. We can speak of God's love, reconciliation and hope but if the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus isn't at the core of the message these concepts are nothing but hollow and wishful thinking.

The good news is that God loves all people and he enacted, proved and proclaimed that love in the death, burial and resurrection of His son.² The good news is that when you would have expected Him to run away from us He ran towards us.³ The good news is that the debt that our sin had accrued for us has been paid for.⁴ God loves us so much He paid all our debts for us. However He didn't confer this gift on everyone. He does ask for us to receive it.

The good news is that God says that you don't have to earn this salvation from your sins. If you had to earn it you would never get it because you are not good enough.⁵ If you can't earn it how can you receive it? You have to simply accept it. In the Bible that acceptance is called faith. *“Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.”* *“For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.””* (Romans 1:5, 17).

In faith then how do I accept the forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and my entrance into the kingdom and family of God? When those who would become the first century church asked this (and even when they didn't ask) they were told.....

“When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be

² John 3:16, Romans 5:8-9, 1 John 4:9

³ Luke 15:20

⁴ Romans 6:23, 3:23-26, 1 Corinthians 15:3, Hebrews 9:15, 1 Peter 3:18

⁵ Titus 3:5, Romans 3:20,28, 4:5, Galatians 2:16, Ephesians 2:8-9

baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off--for all whom the Lord our God will call.””(Acts 2:37-39).

“He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household.” Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized.” (Acts 16:30-33).

“Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you--even Jesus.” (Acts 3:19, 20).

“Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be baptised?” And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.” Acts 8:35-38, NIV.

““A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. He stood beside me and

said, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very moment I was able to see him. "Then he said: 'The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.'" (Acts 22:12-16).

When Holy Spirit inspired apostles and prophets would speak of accepting the gift salvation they would say....

"You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." (Galatians 3:26, 27).

It was Jesus who commissioned His people to *"He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." (Mark 16:15, 16).* The good news is that all we need to do to receive this most wonderful gift of redemption is that we turn our heart towards Him in faith and repentance and that we signify that by our baptism into Christ.⁶

To focus on any one part of the good news is to distort the message. It is all important. We must take away from it or add to it. It is God's good news, not ours. We

⁶ Romans 6:2-4, 1 Peter 3:21

are His ambassadors. He gives us the message. It is our task to pass it on. We aren't here to preach the message of Augustine, the Reformation fathers or the Restoration leaders. Our calling predates them and is from a higher source than them.

When all we speak of is obeying the gospel, are we really preaching all the good news? No we are fixating on the response. The response is important but it is reduced to ritual if it is built on the foundation of the dead, buried and risen Christ.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN –
WHAT CHANGES?

God has called us to excel. He hasn't called us to maintain the status quo. Will anybody argue with this?

We can excel and God wants us to excel. Christ's church can do better. Will anybody argue with this?

Who wants us to not excel? Who is behind all opposition to the church excelling? It is the father of lies, Satan himself. Will anybody argue with this?

Who has the power to get in the way of the church excelling? No one. The Holy Spirit encourages us and says, *“What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died--more than that, who was raised to life--is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”* (Romans 8:31-34). Who will argue with this?

So far I have tried to confine myself to making observations and points based on scripture as compared to the common experience in present and past church. I know

sometimes I strayed onto my pet topics and have given my opinion. However in this chapter my aim is to give mainly my opinion as one who loves present church but wants to see a better future church. I do so to give us some real world framework for a discussion of future church. I am not trying to be overly argumentative. Nor am I trying to get the church to update like we would when we replace an old car. You may not agree with my suggestions. In fact I would be very surprised if you agreed with them all. My aim is not to get you to agree with me. My aim is to get us talking about this stuff so that we can develop a biblical, God-guided strategy for a better future church.

Future church is changeable. That's the point of this document. The power for such change comes out of a conversation we must have. If this helps to get that conversation going then I will be happy.

In such a conversation we must remind ourselves once again what we are trying to determine here and what questions we are trying to answer.

1. What sort of future church does God want?
2. What behaviors and ministries in future church best facilitate evangelism?
3. What behaviors and ministries in future church best lead to a healthy and growing fellowship?
4. What can we do so that future church will be a godly group where all generations can live as disciples together?

Our times of meeting together are important. I think we have made them too important but it is natural and God ordained that we meet together to encourage one another and to worship God. In these meetings we need to be sensitive to the needs of all the participants. We need to allow the freedom that scripture and mutual respect allows. Our choice of worship styles should not be based on our particular like or dislike of a musical style. It's about God and our worship of Him. He is the heart of worship not us. In this spirit of freedom and of cooperation I suggest the following.

1. Maintain a strong commitment to acapella worship in our assemblies. Why? Without going into depth on a subject that has come to characterize us, I do suggest there are good reasons for this suggestion. It follows the example of the first century church. It encourages everyone to participate which is a godly goal. It keeps the energy in the assembly in the congregation and not on the stage (as in a performance).
2. Church leaders should make a consistent and constant call to the church to worship from the heart. God has ordained certain visible forms for that worship but we must see that the function of those forms is to give us an opportunity to worship Him from our hearts and minds.
3. Include a blend of song styles including traditional and contemporary and provide opportunities for all to learn these songs.
4. Allow for different arrangements for partaking of the Lord's Supper. This could include short talks before partaking so as to focus our hearts on the one who we are remembering in the meal.
5. Encourage the leading of more personal and spontaneous rather than repetitive rehearsed prayers.

6. Encourage an orderly expression of individual worship of God in our assemblies.
7. Establish a 90 minute worship service on Sunday morning giving adequate time for singing, prayer, communion, preaching and giving.

Worship is not just a Sunday experience. The Bible is clear on this. Here are a couple of suggestions

1. Church leaders should give a clear and consistent call to all members to worship the Father every day of the week in private and continuing times of devotion as well as to worship as they go.
2. Reinforce the biblical teaching that our life as a whole is worship of God.
3. Develop a significant prayer ministry in the church that uses prayer support groups.

Church leaders should make a consistent and constant call to the church to become a group that exists for the sake of those who are not members. To that end let me suggest the following.

1. Continue to deliver the Christ-centered message of the gospel through all our ministries. The days of argumentative and judgmental messages that rarely mention Jesus must be relegated to the past. Our cleverness with doctrine will not save anyone. Only the living Christ can. We are the body of Christ and the words coming out of its mouth must be the cross focused message of the apostles. It must never be a wrangling over words, nor a sectarian harping on issues of lesser importance than the Christ.
2. Develop “every person” evangelism. Everyone has a part to play in reaching the lost. The church needs to supply regular opportunities for our people to invite others.

3. Develop a mindset in all our ministries that focuses on how each of those ministries can be used to spread the gospel.
4. Continue to emphasize evangelism in the content of the teaching and preaching to the church.
5. Evaluate our communication styles to see if they are contributing to the clear communication of the gospel.
6. Encourage innovative ways to spread the gospel eg. Internet.
7. Establish or expand efforts to make a better connection with the community.

God's church is an equipping church. To that end let me suggest the following.

1. Continue to develop classes, seminars and other opportunities that help equip people in the living of the life in Christ as well as the knowledge of God's word.
2. Develop a ministry that focuses on helping new members of the church to integrate into the life and ministry of the church.
3. Encourage and teach, as a constant priority, the necessity of the servant life in Christ. Encourage everyone, not just the deacons etc., to find their area of service.
4. Search out new methods to teach and train members who do not use our traditional methods like Bible School and evening services. Wider distribution of CDs and DVDs of lessons as well as easier access to such equipping tools are a couple of suggestions.

One of past church's noted behaviors were fellowship. I find fellowship to be a byproduct of us doing God's will in the church. However I think there are some specific ways we can encourage it.

1. Encourage the use of the homes God has given us to show hospitality through the hosting of meals, prayer groups, bible study groups, outreach bible studies, work groups etc.
2. Continue to encourage purely fellowship events where Christians can fellowship together as well as invite their friends.
3. Develop care groups where everyone is contacted each week.

These are merely my suggestions. They are put here to provide a basis for discussion, not a blueprint for change. Some of these, if taken on board, will take years to nurture. Didn't I tell you that you would most likely disagree with some? My aim is to encourage us to get out of the mindset of the status quo and to develop the mindset of pleasing our Lord.

In recent years there has developed a metaphor that has helped many of us decide what church is really about. I don't know who came up with it. I only know that I didn't but I am sure glad for whoever did. It says that for most Christians church is like being on a cruise ship or a battle ship. In the cruise ship mentality Christians see their life in Christ as one where all they need to do is show up and all their needs (at least the ones they think are important) will be taken care of. They tend to be happy with their walk with Christ as long as they can come to worship on Sunday and "enjoy" the service. They

want their exposure to the Bible to be buffet style on the promenade deck and think that if something is to be done then “we have people on staff to do that”. Church is, for them, a place where you are served by others, who should be grateful that you are there. Church, for them, is a past time, sometime an entertaining one that is mainly about the being sociable and polite and it must finish on time because they have a game of shuffle board to get to.

The battle ship mentality sees the church as a ship that prepares Christians for battle. They come to this ship because they are volunteers for the battle. They choose to get involved. They understand that they each have a work to do and that they work with a servant spirit that makes their leader’s task a lot easier. They don’t expect to be served. When they need food, they get it themselves. Church, for them, is a place where you serve others and they are grateful for the opportunity to serve. Church for them is a part of life or death struggle in the spiritual realms in which sacrifice is necessary and they are ready to do just that.

There is a visitor at the door. (This will never happen but wouldn’t it disturb you to the core if it did?) We invite the visitor in. We ask him who he is and he, with a gleam of sadness in his eye, says, “I am the ghost of future church.” Despite our incredulity we tolerate this one because he is a visitor. “I am what the church can be if you would but open your Bibles and your hearts to what God wants in His church.” We are stunned and in our silence he continues. “You see, you are at a fork in the road. You have got to

decide on a most important question of theology. The question is: Is it Christ who owns the church or do we?"

We are offended. "It is Christ's! It always has been. That's why we call it the church of Christ." He ponders for a moment and then thoughtfully asks us, "Then why have you been treating it as though it is yours?" We are irritated by his presumptuousness. Who is he to ask such questions? He sounds a little bit too authoritative for our liking.

At that moment, as if by a miracle, we realize that it isn't the ghost of future church. There is not such thing. Someone can't come from the future. It doesn't exist yet. No, it is not a ghost. It is Jesus. And the day is not just any day. It is a day of judgment. It is a day when we must deal with Jesus.

At that moment of crisis we wake up. It was just a dream. Or was it a nightmare? Whatever it was, it is still disturbing us as we rub the sleep from our eyes.

Think about it for a minute. What would we do if Jesus turned up to church next Sunday? How would we regard Him? He wouldn't look different to other men. Yet, His words would give Him away. He would be asking us about real issues. Our excuses and rationalizations would be taken seriously. Our laziness and apathy would bring His rebuke. He would speak as one having authority. Would we feel that authority any better just because of physical presence?

This scenario will never happen but wouldn't it disturb you to the core if it did?
We need to be disturbed. We need to set our hearts, minds and hands to the task of future church. We only have today. What will we do? Future church is waiting for our answer.

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