

The Church: Not Just a Social Club

by Jason Lovelace

Key Scripture:

Matthew 4.18~21 – And Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. And he saith unto them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” And they straightway left their nets, and followed him. And going out from thence, he saw two other brethren, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in a ship with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and he called them. And they immediately left the ship and their father, and followed him.

Matthew 9.9 – And as Jesus passed forth from thence, he saw a man, named Matthew, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he saith unto him, “Follow me.” And he arose, and followed him.

Matthew 28.19~20 – Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

Luke 9.49~50 – And John answered and said, “Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name; and we forbad him, because he followeth not with us.” And Jesus said unto him, “Forbid him not: for he that is not against us is for us.”

There is a story that goes something like this: This story is told of a small town of people who lived on a stretch of dangerous sea-coast where shipwrecks often occurred. Some of the towns-people decided to put some time, effort and money into rescue operations. A small rescue station was built and the devoted members of the rescue team kept a constant vigil over the sea, ready to use their little boats to search for survivors in case of a shipwreck. One stormy night there was a ship wreck, and the small team went into action. As result of their work, many lives were saved. When the news of their rescue was spread around, more and more of the towns people joined the rescue group. More and more funds were added and, thus, a bigger and better rescue station was built. The new building was transformed into a clubhouse which provided many recreational facilities for the fun and comfort of all their new members, supposedly, as they waited for another shipwreck. Again, on a stormy night, the alarmed was sounded. However, very few of the now clubhouse members dared to go out into the stormy waters to save lives. A few of the members went out and a few lives were saved. Later there was a division among the members regarding the purpose of their existence. Today, as the story goes, the town has grown to a large number and there are a number of exclusive clubhouses dotting the shore line. However, none of them are interested or concerned about rescue operations. Does this story sound a bit like the modern-day Christian church to you? Have you ever been to a church where the members pretty much kept to themselves, and greeted you curtly and almost coldly, if they greeted you at all? Are there churches that seem more like a social club with social events rather than life-saving stations for the spiritually lost and dying?

Rescue the Perishing?

There is an old Hymn that goes this way:

Rescue the perishing, care for the dying,
Snatch them in pity from sin and the grave;
Weep o'er the erring one, lift up the fallen,
Tell them of Jesus, the mighty to save.

Though they are slighting Him, still He is waiting,

Waiting the penitent child to receive;
Plead with them earnestly, plead with them gently;
He will forgive if they only believe.

Down in the human heart, crushed by the tempter,
Feelings lie buried that grace can restore;
Touched by a loving heart, wakened by kindness,
Chords that were broken will vibrate once more.

Rescue the perishing, duty demands it;
Strength for thy labor the Lord will provide;
Back to the narrow way patiently win them;
Tell the poor wand'rer a Savior has died.

Refrain

Rescue the perishing, care for the dying,
Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save.

This song makes one wonder in these modern days, is the church still about doing this? Does the Church of Jesus Christ seem more like a social club than a place where the lost may have a soul-saving encounter with Jesus Christ? If we take a look at the modern idea of church, especially with the rise of the Mega-church movement, we can see anything but a desire to rescue the perishing! If one takes a closer look at these churches' missions statements, we can see that their wording is all about Jesus Christ. The language used shows the would-be attendee that God is the main focus, and inclusion and welcome are the main offerings.

Key Elements Missing...

Even a brief look at some of the Mega-church mission statements and preaching messages show a serious lack of substance with regards to the Bible, and the dangers that Christ spoke out on. At Dr. Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral – one of the first Mega-churches in the USA, which calls itself the place "Where America Goes to Church" – the preaching messages are often more about self-reliance and uplifting oneself by catering to the self-esteem (one of Dr. Schuller's favorite saying is, "If it's going to be, it's up to me!"). At Willow Creek Church, Pastor Bill Hybels has geared his services for the unbeliever, creating atmospheres where the non-believer would not feel "threatened", but would be "entertained" and "welcome". Hybels himself states that his people "have put a lot of time and thought into what non-churched people want from a Sunday morning service." Much like Schuller and the Crystal Cathedral, Hybels is more into creating a church atmosphere that is geared towards comfort, raising up the self-esteem, with little reference to man's fallen, sinful nature. Similarly, Saddleback Church and its pastor Rick Warren, has also reached out to catering church to the unbeliever, so much so that the Saddleback Church's sprawling campus in Southern California includes various stores and shops, including Starbuck's ®. Warren is probably best known for his book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, which is intended for the reader to better understand God's plan for his or her life. However, Warren in *The Purpose Driven Life* makes use of quotes from several noted non-Christians and New Age proponents. Like Schuller and Hybels, Warren regularly leaves out references to man's fallen estate in sin, and the dangers passing from this earth without Christ's salvation.

It Isn't Just the Mega Churches!

For anyone who thinks that this lesson is harping on and criticizing Mega-churches, smaller churches, too, in many and sundry cases, have also ceased in being rescue centers for the spiritually lost. By and large, many smaller churches usually – if no real growth is registered – tend to become more like social clubs, like the story at the beginning of this lesson spoke of. Instead of there being ladies' meetings where prayer and Bible study are the norm, gossip and the passing around of slanderous tales becomes the popular thing to do. Instead of men's meetings where Jesus Christ is taught and God is worshipped, golf and other "club" activities take up most of the time. Instead of youth meetings and services where the younger generations are challenged to get

involved with Jesus Christ, and the dangers of sinful lifestyles are preached, entertainment and messages of self-esteem are the norm. Instead of pastors using the pulpit to call God's people to draw closer to Jesus Christ, and sinners to come in for salvation, the messages are, instead, more ear-tickling, and verbal candy, lacking any real substance (so as not to offend the congregation). Visitors entering into such churches are – if at all – greeted curtly and casually, the visitors' names being forgotten almost as soon as the congregation members are out the door. Does this sound like a church or churches that you, reader, have visited? The writer of this lesson was a part of two churches where such instances were the case. While the pastor of these two churches preached on the dangers of sin and the reality of hell, as well as messages which challenged the Christian Members to stay close to God, the members themselves were given to slander, gossip, "social" functions, and leaving most – if not all – church responsibilities to the pastor and his family. In these two churches, and many others like them, though they were small, for the most part, they were (and still are) basically social clubs. The danger for these churches is that once the church members pass on, or move away, the church, essentially dies. In fact, once a church becomes a social club, it is already dead (the size of the church really doesn't matter).

Socially Acceptable – Spiritually Wanting

Many churches, both mega and micro, in this day and age are more and more taking on the challenges of social activism. Many pastors and churches champion the plights of the down-trodden, fight for the rights of the underprivileged, stand-up for the minorities of their community, and get involved in social equality activism. Many more also champion efforts to curb pollution, conserve wildlife, and make their societies at large more environmentally friendly. The problem is, many churches that turn their attention to this world and its myriad of problems also tend to leave the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the message of redemption for every man, and the dangers of sin and hell in the wastebasket. Again, a glaring example of this is Rev. Rick Warren, who most recently signed a compact with dozens of other pastors and church leaders, declaring that the United States and her President have a moral obligation to curb global warming and green house gasses. While this effort to do something for the temporal world is commendable by Pastor Warren and his co-signers, where is their message to seek and save the lost? Where is Rev. Warren's letter to President Bush about how the People's Republic of China is killing Christians and this must be stopped in some way or another? Where is Rev. Warren's dictation to the President on cleaning up the filth and sinfulness that Television in the USA spews out day and night? Where is Rev. Warren's injunction to the President on returning prayer to public school, and allowing the Bible to be taught as other religions are in current society? Churches that fight for social issues, but fail in their fight against sin are no different than the Environmental Protection agency, the National Organization for Women, the Rainbow Coalition, and other social groups which fight to preserve societal rights, yet ignore sin and the need for salvation for the sinner. Churches that seek social acceptance by denying Jesus Christ even one iota are really spiritually wanting.

It's OURS...Not Yours!!!!

Much like social activism, and watering down of the Gospel, the church will be destroyed whenever there is division. As the Apostle Paul writes in the Corinthian letters, the church is made up of many members, many people with different types of gifts of the Holy Ghost. However, these gifts are not meant to divide, but to unite. The unfortunate fact of many churches is that they can be easily fractured and become readily factionalized when people get their eyes off of Jesus Christ. This writer was a part of a church in Hokkaido, Northern Japan, that was badly fractured. When one would walk into the kitchen area, there would often be four or five different cans each of coffee, coffee creamer, sugar, tea, and snacks. Why all of these? Because each group had its own little stash and supply of these for their meetings. When reaching for a can of coffee creamer for one meeting for the Youth and Young Adult Council of this church, this writer was told, "No! Don't use that can! It isn't ours! The Men's Ministry Council will get upset with us if we use theirs." Such was the case of this church, even in their practices for reaching out and spreading the Gospel to others. There was a fear that each group in the church wouldn't receive help from the other groups. Friend, this type of division in a church can put it quickly to death! As Paul states in his Corinthian Letters, each member is different, but each are needed for a full life. Same is said of the church. If a church gets divided, it cannot operate at full capacity, or will full effectiveness. Many churches have divided over trivial things such as the color of the carpet, or where to place the pulpit. Any time this happens, a church is heading down the road to death. However, churches that put aside

differences, that use each member's gift, or each groups abilities succeed in ways that often astound and surprise. The only way that this can happen is for the church as a body to keep its eyes on Jesus Christ, the Author and Perfector of our Faith!!!

Conclusion – How About Your Church?

Is your church a club, a social services center, or is it a soul-saving, rescue station, built to redeem men and women from sin, hell, and the devil? This lesson is not to say that churches cannot stand up for social problems, or attempt to be accepted by their neighborhoods or society at large. But watering down the Gospel, downplaying the dangers of sin, and de-emphasizing Jesus Christ in order to be or become a socially acceptable place basically strips the church of her meaning and reason for existing. If a church teaches something other than the Bible, lifts up someone other than Jesus Christ, downgrades the penalties and dangers of sin, and/or dilutes the Gospel, it is no longer a church. It has become something else. Church is meant to be a soul-saving station, bent towards spreading the Gospel far and wide, to any and every person it can. The Church of Jesus Christ can only survive in this world if she stays close to Jesus Christ, and preaches the message that he preached: that all people are sinners, and have fallen short of the glory of God, but that the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ, the Lord (Romans 3:23, 6:23). To preach anything else above this renders the church spiritless and toothless. This is not to say, also, that churches will not encounter problems. So long as a church is in the world, so long as people make up the church, there will always be problems: but these problems need not be the death knell nor the end of a church. If we keep our eyes on Jesus Christ, any problem, any disagreement, any ill can be worked out.

Prayer – We pray today, Lord God, for the church of Jesus Christ. We pray, Father, that the Church would be and would become the lighthouse to warn people of the dangers of the rocks of sin! We pray, Dear Lord, that you'd give us the fire, the zeal, and the desire to seek and save the lost for you. We pray for revival, dear Lord, and we pray this all in Jesus' Precious Name, Amen.

Verse to Remember

For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many.

– **1st Corinthians 12.13-14**