

Center of Attention

Have you ever invited someone to church and they decline by saying the church is full of hypocrites? What they probably mean is that they don't see a consistency in the talk of Christians and their walk. Of course when some criticize us or our church it stings because there is always some truth in the charge. Last week I spoke on that topic – about living with integrity. Living with integrity means living what you profess to believe. It is always necessary for us to “practice what we preach.”

Every church has problems. Or as Paul concluded about people, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (see Romans 3:23). I think of the little fellow who said to his playmate, “My mommy says I can't go with you to church because we belong to different abominations.” The truth is I haven't seen or even heard of a church without an Achilles' heel. Every one of them has an underbelly. Why? Well, Jesus is the head of the church, but the rest of us are human. There will always be hypocrites among us because we're not a museum for saints, but a hospital for sinners. We might desire to grow more like Jesus, but we're still human.

Often the problems from church to church remain mostly the same. If we approach issues from every angle but the Bible's; if a lot of our folks don't know what's in the Bible, so that they are easily swayed by the latest pronouncements of some interest group or the major media; then we've got problems. When churches have people who don't know what they believe, and have unconverted clergy - pastors who don't really live out what they say about the saving Lordship of Jesus, or don't even talk about Him - then we've got problems. If most of our members are friendly and faithful, that's fine. But in the long run, that in itself will not be enough to sustain the church. Only one thing – really only one Person - can sustain this church or any other.

Lloyd Ogilvie, former Chaplain of the United States Senate once made this introduction:

This morning it is my profound pleasure to introduce to you an outstanding man of great eloquence and moral excellence. His ministry is unparalleled. He can walk on water and perform great wonders. His work has changed the world. He is a homiletical dynamo, the prince of pulpiteers, a sensational man of God whose spellbinding words will capture your attention instantly. His name is Jesus Christ, and here to introduce him is Lloyd Ogilvie.

Or as Gary Beets, Missouri State Director of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, has printed on the back of his calling card, “If we meet and you forget me, you have lost nothing. But if you meet Jesus Christ and forget him, you have lost everything.” Jesus is who makes every church credible. Our goal here must be for people to meet Jesus. I recall Larry King asking Chuck Colson how he avoided personality getting in the way of his ministry. He answered, “I tell people, ‘Don't follow me! Follow Jesus!’ ” The minister, the preacher, the lay worker, each member carries Jesus ... like that day Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey...

Jesus is the church's one foundation. In his letter to the Colossians Paul declared, “He is the image of the invisible God ... for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created ... for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Colossians 1:15-20). All the fullness, the sum total, the full supply and reservoir of Godhood is concentrated in Jesus. All concepts of reality which do not take account of him are abstractions.¹ All of the Christian churches agree on this and the saving Lordship of Jesus. That is the very thing that separates us from all other religions. In fact, others think our claims about Jesus are preposterous, if not blasphemous.

Yet to those who believe he is the source of hope in our salvation. For “...through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things...by making peace through the blood of his cross.” The Nicene Creed puts it succinctly and poignantly, Jesus is “God of God; Light of Light; Very God of Very God ... being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made... for us and for our salvation he came down from

¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, quoted by Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, “The Alpha & Omega,” *Good News Magazine*, July/August 2010, (Wilmore, KY).

heaven.” There is no separation of the Jesus in the Bible from the Christ of faith. These days have we shrink-wrapped Jesus? Is he our once a week mascot, whom we rally round on Sunday morning, reaching for all the goodies and gifts he may give us, then push him to the margins of our lives the rest of the week? Has Jesus become for us just a fire-insurance policy and cosmic Santa Claus?²

One Sunday the pastor asked during a children’s sermon, “When I say frog, what is the first word that comes to your mind?” One little boy blurted out, “Jesus!” The puzzled pastor asked, “Why do you think about Jesus when I say frog.” The little boy replied, “Because I know you didn’t call us down here to talk about frogs.”

That little boy got it right. We can’t be spending our time at church talking about frogs, or buildings, or music styles, or even righteous causes. If Jesus and his saving and healing power is not the center of attention we aren’t being church. Here’s the test. When faced by tough or even easy issues in our church, have you ever heard anyone ask, “What would Jesus do?” Does that question ever come up when talking about our personal as well as church finances? Or human sexuality? Or biomedical research? or...? When faced with questions or issues do we stop our discussions and pray and maybe even say, “Let us pray for some days for our Lord’s guidance, before we make a decision?” In a church where Jesus, the mighty Lord, Savior, Good Shepherd, Advocate, Conqueror, our Rock and Captain, is no longer the center of attention soon the Body of Christ becomes quite ill.

Christians don’t follow Christianity; we follow Christ. Christians don’t preach themselves; we preach Christ. Christians don’t invite people to church; we invite people to meet Christ. Christians don’t point to core values; we point to the incarnated, crucified, resurrected, ascended, enthroned, exalted, triumphant, glorified, reigning Lord – Jesus of Nazareth, the King, the Messiah – the Christ beyond the tomb.³

There was this big church packed to the rafters with people one Sunday morning. During the middle of the sermon, two men burst into the church. One took position at the chancel steps while the other stationed himself just inside the sanctuary near the exit. From under their long coats, they pulled out automatic weapons and announced, “Everyone who is willing to take a bullet for your Lord Jesus remain seated.”

In a swift motion the sanctuary cleared out in seconds. Only about 25 saints stayed.

Then the gunmen dropped their weapons, sat in a pew, and said to an older elder, “Now that the hypocrites are gone, you may begin the service.”

I don’t know if this is a true story, but you get the point. I do know of amazing true accounts of Christians in many parts of the world who stand fast in Christ despite severe persecution.

Three years ago I had several students in my class at Claremont who were from Viet Nam. They told me of their experiences in prison and work camps under the communists. They told of how their steadfast faith even won over one of the guards who told them, “You are better communists than we are. You do what you say.” And that was because they knew whom they followed: Jesus, their Captain and Comforter

About a decade ago we learned of the terrible civil war in Sudan, that had been raging for many years. It barely made the news here. The great untold tragedy was the systematic persecution of the Christian population in Southern Sudan. Churches, hospitals, and schools were regularly targeted by government forces and bandits. Villages were burned, men killed, while women and children were enslaved. (Yes, slavery is still practiced!).

In 1998 Pastor Abram Yac Deng showed aid workers his Bible, which was the only Bible for his 400 member congregation. They noticed that one page was particularly worn and had come loose from the binding. Not surprisingly it was Romans chapter eight:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword. As it is written: For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present

²Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, “The Alpha & Omega,” *Good News Magazine*, July/August 2010, (Wilmore, KY).

³Ibid.

nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Four days after this meeting Pastor Abram was shot dead by government soldiers in a raid that killed or enslaved 2,000 people.

Closer to home is the Church of the Redeemer in South Central L.A. They have about 25 members and meet in one member's house in a poor neighborhood, in a racially mixed ghetto. Most of them are young professionals, all are committed Christians who want to live out their faith in Jesus and His concern for the poor. They do tutoring for students, have helped close a liquor store which was the scene of drug dealing, shootings and prostitution, and instituted a community block party. They see themselves as part of God's redemption of individuals and this urban neighborhood and realize they are in for the long haul. More recently they have fostered Redeemer Community Partnership through their youth group. Through this effort they nurture kids from this tough neighborhood through film-making. The kids make 5-6 minute films (often about some aspect of their own lives) and in the process learn about themselves, their potential and about faith in God.

It shouldn't be all that hard for us to give thanks to God for our many blessings. It shouldn't be all that hard for us to pray for those who suffer because of their faith in Christ. It shouldn't be all that hard for us to see in them an example of genuine faith in Christ. It shouldn't be all that hard to keep Jesus as the center of attention here and in our lives.

Look at the cross. Really look at the cross. Jesus didn't die just to take you out of hell and into heaven. He died to take *himself* out of heaven and deposit himself in you;⁴ all the more reason for us to keep Christ as our center of attention. When we do, we will more nearly live a life of integrity, and practice what we preach. That doesn't mean everyone among us will be perfected in Christ, but at least those whom we invite will have an idea that we're headed in the right direction, and meet the One who leads us.

May God find in us a people who are of Christ, through Christ, and for Christ; a people of the cross; a people who wish to know only Christ and him crucified, and to let everything else fall away. May God find in us a people consumed with the unvarnished vision of God's eternal passion: to make Christ preeminent, supreme, and the head over all things visible and invisible. May God find in us a people who have discovered the touch of the Almighty in the face of his glorious Son, Jesus; a people who are searching his immeasurable depths, discovering his un-searchable riches, encountering his abundant life, his infinite love, and making him known to others.⁵

"It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ."

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.