

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE CHURCH OR THE NURSERY?

The Apostolic Church was devoted to bringing every believer to full maturity in Christ. Maturity in turn, will produce stability in faith. This cannot simply be accomplished by adopting some sort of *program* for discipleship. We see all around us today churches that are numerically thriving because of their user-friendly appeal, their emphasis on multiple programs, and a lively, upbeat contemporary worship experience. Listen to the words of Edmund Clowney, “The work of Christian nurture will languish without a passion for holiness like that of Paul. Churches may attract outsiders by being ‘seeker friendly’. Then, when surveys show that new members are dropping out, another minister is added to guard the back door by following up on non-attending members. Through that experience, many churches have recognized that training in discipleship has to be the regular ministry of the church to its members. The great missionary apostle saw church growth as growth in grace, wisdom and fruitfulness, i.e. growth in Christ (Col. 1:9; I Thes. 3:11-13).”¹ “Christianity,” observed Thomas C. Reeves, “has always absorbed elements of the culture of its adherents, and it is important to consider how extensively the classic faith has been altered by a modern, literate, prosperous, technologically driven society undeniably absorbed with obtaining prosperity, security, and pleasure. In short, what is the content of our Christianity?”² This is a critically important question. How we answer this question will determine, to a large degree, what kind of Christianity we will embrace. This in turn underscores the importance of *teaching*. Our Lord declared, “Go and make disciples [clearly, those brought to Christ are to be grounded in the Christian faith primarily through teaching] of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and [note this emphasis] *teaching* them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20). In light of this we need to heed the words of J.R.W. Stott. “Nothing is more necessary for the building up of God’s church in every age than an ample supply of God-gifted teachers....It is teaching which builds up the church. It is teachers who are needed most.”³

I. THE PLAN OF PERFECTION (Three Things To Note)

A. The gifted (v.11) equip or perfect the saints. How do they do this? *By teaching doctrine, by proclaiming and explaining the word of God.* II Tim. 4:2 states – “Preach the word, be instant in season, out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.” Likewise I Tim. 4:6 declares – “If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, whereunto thou hast attained (PARAKOLOUTHEŌ - to follow beside. The word combines the thoughts of “understanding” with that of “practicing preserving”).” I Tim. 4:13 reads devote yourself (PROSECHE, present tense imperative (!), the word implies previous preparation in private.) to reading, to exhortation, to *doctrine*. A couple of verses late Paul instructs Timothy to “Be diligent.” (MELETA, lit. to take care, to practice, to take pains with) upon these things; give thyself wholly (ISTHI, present tense imperative, lit. be in them) to these matters, Paul’s language here, observes Guthrie, “Is a construction expressing absorption in anything. The mind is to be as immersed in these pursuits as the body in the air it breathes.”⁴ The saints must have their minds, their thinking habits, renewed in the knowledge of the Word of God (Rom. 12:1ff; Eph 4:23). Once that occurs, behavior and practice follow suit, and maturity develops. Teachers are given this responsibility, and it is to consume them (note the warning in James 3:1).

B. The saints do the work of the ministry (v.12). Ministry was never understood by the Apostle Paul to be the function of professional “clergy”! When the saints are equipped by the gifted men through doctrine, they will do the work of ministry. They will in maturity function with their “grace-gift” in the body; if not, then regardless of the church’s numerical size and “hot” programs, etc...that church has failed – pragmatic arguments notwithstanding.

C. The Body is built up (vv. 12, 13). “Edifying” is the Greek word OIKODOMĒ, which literally means “building up”. The word expresses development. The inward maturity of the saints promotes outward service by them, and these tend to one result, the *up-building* of the Body.

II. THE RESULTS OF PERFECTION (five things to note)

- A. With maturity comes true unity. The exhortation of v. 3 stresses the responsibility of believers to maintain unity, but not just outwardly (like some professional athlete who can’t stand another player on the team personally but has to play with him anyway). *This* unity is the result of maturity. As believers are matured into the likeness of Jesus Christ they will have unity – I Cor. 1:10, “Now I beseech you brethren in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing and that there be no divisions among you, but that ye be perfectly (KATARTIZŌ) joined together in the same judgment.” The point is that where there is immaturity, there will be division.
- B. With maturity comes the knowledge of the Son of God. The word for “knowledge” is EPIGNOSIS, a knowledge that is directed towards a particular object – Phil. 3:10, “That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his suffering, being made conformable unto his death.” Comp. Eph. 3:17. This is the supreme objective in the believer’s life, the consuming knowledge of his Savior – a knowledge that apprehends and transforms.
- C. With maturity comes Christ likeness. The expression, “unto a perfect man,” is EIS ANDRA TELEION. It is followed by the phrase, “of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” The perfect man is none other than Jesus Christ Himself! Notice how “Son of God” and “fullness of Christ” bracket “perfect man.” II Cor. 3:18, “But we all with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord are changed into the same image from glory to glory even as by the Spirit of the Lord.” I John. 3:2,3, “Beloved, now are we the children of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is and every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself even as he is pure.” Cf. also Col. 3:4; Eph. 5:27.
- D. With maturity comes stability in doctrine (v.14). Who is it that gets tossed around here and there by bad doctrine? “Infants”, NEPIOS, baby, immature; this word refers to the immaturity of children in opposition to the adult status of the perfect man. Children, as every parent knows, are not discerning. They do not know what is best for them. They will gladly eat popcorn, peanuts, cotton candy and the like all day, and cry and throw a fit if they can’t have it! Note also that the Apostle declares that “children” are easily attracted and carried away by “sleight of men (KUBEIA, lit. dice playing, wicked dice playing – it refers to intentional fraud) and cunning craftiness (METHODEIA – following after, deceit, scheming; cf. Eph. 6:11) by which they lie in wait to deceive.” Note Paul’s words to the Ephesian elders in Acts. 20:29-32.
- E. With maturity comes loving concern for people (v.15). “There are two great enemies of a successful ministry, whether carried on among believers or among unbelievers; one is departure from truth, compromise with the lie, whether in words or deeds. The other is chilling indifference with respect to the hearts and lives, the troubles and trials, of the people whom one is ostensibly trying to persuade.”⁵

CONCLUSION: Unfortunately, many Christians think that if they attend their church faithfully and abstain from worldly ways, i.e., live a good, clean, moral life, then God is pleased with them. The Lord Jesus Christ is not honored with such thinking. He is honored when believers are mature. An immature, moral, church-going Christian does not honor the Lord. He does not develop in Christ likeness. Real maturity and growth go hand in hand with Biblical preaching. “The problem in our day,” writes Robert Raymond, “which give rise to highly questionable church growth methods, is two-fold: On the one hand, *we are seeing a waning confidence in the message of the gospel*. Even the evangelical church shows signs of losing confidence in the convincing and converting power of the gospel message. That is why increasing numbers of churches prefer sermons on family life and psychological health...On the other hand, *we are seeing a waning confidence in preaching as the*

means by which the gospel is to be spread. As a result, preaching is giving way in evangelical churches to multimedia presentations, drama, dance, “sharing time,” sermonettes, and “how to” devotionals. Preaching is being viewed increasingly as outdated and ineffective. Business techniques like telemarketing are now popular with the church growth movement. Churches so infected also look to the multiplication of programs to effect their growth. They sponsor conferences and seminars on every conceivable topic under the sun; they subdivide their congregations down into marrieds and singles, single parents and divorced, “thirty-something” and “twenty-something,” teens, unemployed, the child-abused and the chemically dependent, attempting to arrange programs for them all. And once a person joins such a church, conventional wisdom has it, the church and the minister must meet his every felt need. Accordingly, ministers have become managers, facilitators, and motivators—everything but heralds of the whole counsel of God—and this all because they have lost confidence in the preaching of God’s Word as the primary means for the growth of the church and the individual Christian.”⁶ Jesus tells us that God will sanctify (synonym for growth and maturity) His people by the truth, the Word of God. This means that the preaching and teaching of the Scripture must take center stage in the life of the church. This process involves more than mere instruction. God uses hardship and even suffering to nurture His children, (Heb. 12:7-12) but principally He uses His Word. We need to heed the counsel of the Apostle in I Cor. 2: 1-5 and not the strategies of so many in the church growth crowd if we would honor the Lord in growth and maturity of His church. What were the priorities of the Apostolic Church? Acts 2:42-47 tells us. They were preoccupied with “The Apostles’ doctrine, and fellowship, and in breaking bread and in prayer.” Note the focus of teaching. I am afraid we have lost this perspective in our day. Pastors are not generally expected to be especially equipped to teach. “The Pastoral office,” wrote Lloyd Jones, “is a great office, but unfortunately it is a term which has become debased. A pastor is a man who is given charge of souls. He is not merely a nice, pleasant man who visits people and has an afternoon cup of tea with them, or passes the time of day with them. He is the guardian, the custodian, the protector, the organizer, the director, and the ruler of the flock. The teacher gives instruction in doctrine, in truth. The Apostle proceeds to elaborate this, showing that we need to be built up, and that we must not remain ‘babes.’ We must be protected against ‘every wind of doctrine.’ and the way to do so is to give instruction and teaching.”⁷ B.B. Warfield concurred when he wrote “Let us make no mistake here. Religion does not come of itself: it is always a matter of instruction. The emotions of the heart, in which many seem to think religion too exclusively to consist, ever follow the movements of the thought. Passion for service cannot take the place of passion for truth, or safely outrun the acquisition of truth; for it is dreadfully possible to compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, to find we have made him only a “son of hell.” This is why God establishes and extends his Church by the ordinance of preaching; it is why we have Sunday schools and Bible classes. Nay, this is why God has grounded his Church in revelation. He does not content himself with sending his Spirit into the world to turn men to him. He sends his Word into the world as well. Because, it is from knowledge of the truth, and only from the knowledge of the truth, that under the quickening influence of the Spirit true religion can be born.”⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ E.P. Clowney, *The Church* (IVP, 1995), p. 140.

² Thomas C. Reeves, *The Empty Church: Does Organized Religion Matter Anymore?* (Simon & Schuster 1996), p. 61. He later adds, “Christianity in modern America is, in large part, innocuous. It tends to be easy, upbeat, convenient, and compatible. It does not require self-sacrifice, discipline, humility, and otherworldly outlook, a zeal for souls, a fear as well as love of God. There is little guilt and no punishment, and the payoff in heaven is virtually certain. The faith has been overwhelmed by the culture, producing what may be called cultural Christianity. This is not a question of mere influence; acculturation takes place at all time and in all places. Christianity becomes cultural Christianity when the faith is dominated by a culture to the point that it loses much or most of its authenticity.” (p. 67).

³ J.R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (IVP, 1979), p. 164.

⁴ D. Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Eerdmans, 1974), p. 99.

⁵ W. Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Ephesians* (Baker, 1976), p. 202

⁶ R. Raymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nelson, 1998), p.882.

⁷ D.M. Lloyd-Jones, *Christian Unity: an Exposition of Ephesians 4:1-16* (Baker, 1981), p. 193.

⁸ *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield I* (P&R, 1973), p. 381.

