

DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

MARCH 2025 | ACTS 15

It is common to hear someone ask: "What in the world is going on?" But with current events surrounding churches and church leaders such as surveys screaming demise, denominations splitting, and popular dissatisfaction with the state of the visible church, the question has become: "What in the church is going on?"

WHAT IN THE CHURCH IS GOING ON? PT. 2

Since its birth at Pentecost, the church has been the target of the forces of deception and evil, constantly battling to stay true to its God-given nature and mission. In last month's article, we looked at the church as described in Ephesians 2 and 3. We saw that it is the reconstructed Israel, the redefined temple, and the restored humanity in partnership with God. This month, we are looking at the ways the church has been attacked by forces of compromise in the various cultures of the world.

One cannot read the Bible without noticing how "mixture" is contrary to God's purpose. Even some of the Levitical prohibitions regarding food, cloth-

ing, and social interaction are about avoiding mixture. God was adamant that His people not mix with the pagan cultures through marriage and worship. Israel was called to be a unique representative of God's distinctive way of living. The great enemy was the culture that sought to mix (and thus compromise) the purity of life in covenant with Almighty God. The horrible judgments that came upon Israel were due to their giving up their purity by adopting the gods and values of the cultures surrounding them.

In the book of the Acts of the Apostles, we see the struggles the early church had in staying true to its calling. The

Jews who rejected Jesus in order to keep their Jewishness were constantly trying to add some of their outdated customs to the message and methods of the church. In Acts 15, there is record of a large council where the leaders had to decide if the church was defined by the gospel or by the mixture of Judaism and Christian doctrine. The Jews weren't the only ones pecking away at the purity of the church's message and mission. In fact, the book of Revelation records Jesus' personal warnings to the seven churches of Asia Minor (see *Revelation 2-3*). In each case where He addressed an issue, it related to that church giving in to forces of cultural or religious compromise: losing their first love, dealing with those claiming to be true Jews, the encroachment of Balaam's teaching, tolerating Jezebel and her immorality, the lukewarmness that comes from adopting a lesser message and mission.

After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, the church began to march through the known world and effectively impact society. By the fourth century, Rome had been infiltrated by the life of the church. However, the church began adopting the philosophy of the Roman culture, which conquered nations and absorbed them into their culture. Over the next thousand years, many

superstitions and myths were added to the church's message as cultures influenced the church more than the church influenced the cultures. Things came to a head when Martin Luther and his companions stood against the corruption that had made the visible church a feared monster. The Great Reformation clarified some badly needed issues, and there was worldwide growth and transition for the betterment of the church and society.

As we look at the western church, particularly in America, we see the effects of cultural invasion. The Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, American individualism, capitalism, denominationalism, and religious escapism are some of the forces that have shaped a visible church that on the whole is not satisfying its members nor transforming the culture. Let's look at consumerism, individualism, moralism, accommodation, and nationalism. It is obvious that in a society where capitalism defines the economy, the danger of being consumeristic is huge. **Consumerism** says the customer is right and any product we offer must fit the expressed desires of the consumer. So we shop local churches like we do coffee shops. We measure success by how well we are giving the consumer what he or she wants. But, the church's

message deals with what the person needs in order to live an orderly and productive life. That is not the same as what is demanded for personal preferences to be satisfied. In a church that is mixed with consumerism, public worship becomes a competition for best entertainment and is determined by preference in music, preaching, and programs for the children. People don't usually prefer sermons that move the furniture in the basement of their hearts. They would rather have some minor adjustments to the pictures on the mantle. Consumers say they want practical sermons that give them some simple steps to do in order to be better people. It frustrates them when there is simply an announcement of the invasion of the kingdom of God and its ramifications. "Too deep." They prefer little or no doctrine, though they unknowingly embrace the doctrine of *transactionalism*. They prefer to negotiate with God by giving Him something He wants if He will give them something they want. That is paganism. The church's message is the gospel announcement that God has acted on our behalf without consulting us and has done for us what we couldn't do for ourselves. We have nothing to bargain with - we only bring our sin to the table. Discipleship is mostly scholastic in that we consider ourselves dis-

cipled when we have the information consumed. We honestly think we can make disciples without personal involvement in their daily lives. The consumeristic church's metrics for success include size, footprint, rate of numerical growth, and finances.

Akin to consumerism is **individualism**. Though individual salvation is essential, it includes being immersed into the body of Christ and participating in a community of faith where each member has a gift or gifts that make the health of that community flourish. Church life is more than "me and Jesus." Even our cry for freedom is often based on a myth that we can live without restraint, relationship, or accountability. We don't want anyone telling us what is right for us, what responsibilities we have as believers, or what it means to live for the sake of another. The declared individual reads the Bible as if it is an instruction book on how to do better written to him or her alone. It is seen as mostly a closed book of mystery, and the individual is left to find the path of life by listening to his or her own heart without scriptural understanding, family input, or confidence that God's will can really be known.

Moralism is the form of Christianity that develops when radical aspects of the gospel like crucifixion, resurrection, and transformation are removed. It consists of following rules, working principles, and comparing behavior with those worse than us. It is a good person doing his own thing using religious phraseology and practicing preferred rituals that mark all the right boxes.

Moralism walks hand in hand with **accommodation**. When society cannot find a way to fix an abnormality, it accommodates to make the dysfunction normal. When the church can no longer deal with problems bigger than human willpower can handle, we settle for therapy rather than expecting miraculous intervention from Divine grace. When the culture around us decides that certain human problems that once were called sin are normal, the message of forgiveness is ignored, and people are left confused about who they are and what the gospel is about. One wise commentator mused that we have traded the cross for a couch and transforming truth for human validation. That is not to debunk therapy and the value of a listening ear, but it is to say that the gospel is more powerful. In fact, when preached and received, it has the power of the resurrection in it.

And then there is **nationalism**. When loyalty to the church is not primary, it is easy to turn healthy patriotism into dangerous nationalism. Being a good American does not equal being a member of the body of Christ. But when we embrace our identity as citizens of the city of God first, we are ready to be productive citizens of our respective nations. The body of Christ is global, and it is refreshing to know that we are connected by an eternal family line to people from every nation in the world.

In conclusion, there is no need to condemn the visible church as if there is another option. The true church is in there. We are given the opportunity to repent and rediscover the core of the church. It will never be stopped. It is the bride of Christ. His blood paid for its victory. In the next article, we'll look at the core nature of the church - its simplicity, its beauty, its power, and our privilege.

**KERYGMA VENTURES**

P.O. Box 2022
Colleyville, TX 76034
(817)267-9224
Email: Contact@kerygmaventures.com
www.KerygmaVentures.com