

DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

APRIL 2025 | EPHESIANS 3:20-21

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church, and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 3:20-21 (ESV)

THE SIMPLIFIED CHURCH

Once we have heard the Lord of the world declare that His church will not fail and that the gates of hell will not prevail against it, our fears of its apparent weaknesses must be re-interpreted. We have investigated in previous articles how the visible church through the ages has been affected by the various cultures that defined societies and nations. Hell has no shortage of ideologies that have been leaked into the stream of ecclesial thought, polluting the doctrines that, when pure, change people and their world. When we dig again into the treasure of New Testament revelation about the new community of God's people who have been called out of the world to represent God's kingdom on earth, we find a simplified version of church that offers hope for this or any generation. We discover that a simplified church is a purified church - a vibrant church.

What gives hope for a revived, vibrant church? There are three observable dynamics that give rise to such a hope. **First, there is an obvious hopelessness in the nations.** Endless surveys have verified that more people are purposeless and hopeless than any time since such surveys began to be taken. This malaise reaches across generational and gender lines. It is rampant in both the religious and the non-religious. Modernism and post-modernism have been exposed as false hopes. The gods of materialism, individualism, elitism, moralism, and intellectualism, along with other pretenders promised that we would find the nirvana we longed for if we only gave attention to their agendas. The gods have been exposed. This is like the time of Gideon. During this part of history, Israel was under the oppression of a godless regime where their gods were ominous. When the Lord appeared to Gideon to partner with

him in freeing his people, He told him to push over the idols that represented the gods. When the people came to the garden of the gods in the early morning, they were perplexed to find their precious idols lying flat on the ground. They tried straightening them back up, but surely they were stung by the thought that gods who can't defend themselves and must be propped up by people aren't really worthy of worship. There was so much fear rumbling through the enemy army that they were routed by simply hearing sounds they heard from Israelites breaking their pots and shining their torches. A society is vulnerable when its gods are exposed as fakes. I dare say that our culture is vulnerable now. The last version of the American dream is turning into a nightmare of despair. The mega-churches and the mini-churches alike are watching the people either leave seeking a better product, or settle for ritual and tradition.

The second reason for hope is the hunger among the believers. Not everyone who comes to church or is a member of the visible church is a real believer. Jesus made it clear that one must be born of the Spirit if they are to see or participate in the kingdom of God. Many who have sought to use religion to further their own agenda have never been born of the Spirit and have no internal receptor for the world of the Spirit. But those who have heard the gospel and responded in faith in Jesus alone have been baptized into the body of Christ by the Spirit. They have a spiritual tuning fork in their inner man, and they can hear the sound of the gospel a mile away. When it is preached or sung or even mumbled, it excites life in the believer. When they hear the Bible used as a text, but no gospel is heard, their spirit wanes and their hope diminishes. Believers are getting hungrier, and a hungry crowd will begin

to protest. They were built for the gospel, and when they are deprived, they will seek with intensity the sound they so desperately need.

The third evidence of hope for a revived church is the honor in the heavenlies. The apostle Paul makes an intriguing statement about the effect the existence of the church has on the heavenlies: "...so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places"(Ephesians 3:10, ESV). It seems that the mystery that astounded the saints of the Old Testament era was also a subject of interest to the heavenly powers. What God did in the giant redemption narrative on earth is a cause of delight in the heavenly realm. We are told that heaven rejoices when even one sinner is rescued. So we know we are not alone in this universe, but the entities of heaven are involved with the campaign of the church marching through creation bringing reconciliation and restoration. The powers of evil are confounded by the unexpected way God used human instrumentality to accomplish the death blow to defeat Satan and then the new body of Christ carrying out that victory by preaching with distinction the good news of forgiveness to all people. The unity of the body of Christ shouts out the majesty of God's power to remove walls of sinful separation between Jew and Gentile. Demons surely cry "foul" when they see that the day they marked as their best was the day their champion was slain. The angels can't quit dancing about the victory of the slain lamb. Nobody expected it to go down like that. Heaven is cheering for and rejoicing with the progress of the church in the created world. We are part of a greater community than we thought.

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What then is essential for the purified, simplified, vibrant church on the earth? There are four characteristics of such a community. **First, the simplified church has partner-oriented prayer as central to its life.** Jesus spent His time on earth with His disciples preparing them for the day when He would leave the physical realm and empower them to do His works on earth (see *John chapters 14-16*). They do that through praying in Jesus' name and cooperating with Him as He answers, bringing heaven's resources to bear on the object of their prayers. The early church was much more concerned about getting heaven's resources to grant them boldness to preach the gospel than they were of getting out of jail. They lived in partnership and expected the exalted Head of the church to dispense from the heavenly realm the needed supplies for their task to be accomplished. They did not pray as beggars, nor did they demand perceived personal rights based on their goodness. They were beyond such praying. They were actively involved in reclaiming the ground the enemy had occupied for centuries by preaching a gospel filled with resurrection power and loving people with unconditional love.

When the apostle John recorded what he saw in Revelation, he described incense going up from the people on earth to the throne. It was taken by an angel and mixed with fire from the altar and flung back to earth as thunder,

lightning, and earthquakes - a beautiful picture of the efficacy of prayer from heaven's perspective. There is partnership between the head of the church and the rest of the body. From His throne, Jesus has authority to overrule any power on earth, and He sent His people into the gravest dangers and darkest jungles of deception with the promise that He would not leave them and would hear their prayers. Believers who embrace this are not sitting idly by watching evil win and waiting for a great escape. They are moving forward unafraid to invade any sphere of life on earth. They are light and have never lost a battle to darkness when they showed up.

The second characteristic of the simplified church is gospel-centered preaching. As the gospel shakes off the shackles of cultural religion and rises to its rightful place in the church, the announcement of what God has done in Christ will ring through the rafters of church buildings, the offices of businesses, the kitchens of homes, and the halls of true education. The glory of who He is and what He has done will thrill earth as in heaven. The teaching and instruction we so crave as achievers will be based on the previous announcement of the event that shook the heavens and the earth and guaranteed the restoration of all things. The church only grows as the word of God increases, and the word of God is the truth of biblical revelation viewed through the lens of Jesus and His gospel. Those churches built on personality, governmental structure, and strategies of growth will give way to the simple and powerful proclamation of the Christ-event. What we should do is never to be the lead. What He has done is so grand that what we do is simply respond. Without being captured by what He has done, all our doing become dead works that we try to use to negotiate with God.

I love a Charles Spurgeon quote that I have prominently displayed in my home: "Do not go where there is fine music, grand talk, and beautiful architecture. Go where the gospel is preached and go often."

The third essential for a vibrant church in this generation is servant-hearted leaders. Sadly, the corporate model that has been widely adopted by churches as well as businesses produces leaders that are so interested in the bottom line of profit and progress, that they lose the ability to be shepherds of God's sheep. We tend to worship at the shrine of growth in numbers, size of footprint, and budgets. Sheep are people with needs, hungers, and problems, and the leaders over them will give an account: *"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account"* (Hebrews 13:17, ESV). The apostle Paul instructed the elders in Ephesus: *"Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of His Own Son"* (Acts 20:28, ESV).

Shepherding sheep and building ecclesial structures are not the same. Many have lamented that we have produced a church structure that demands a leader with narcissistic leanings. Jesus is the true shepherd and is the model for caring for His own. As the church submits to the head, His mind and Spirit will fill and energize the leaders in the body. True humility is the mark of Jesus the head and it will be honored in the church simplified.

The last essential that I will mention is obvious as we look at the church in its early days. **The gospel produces a community kind of life.** As Paul closes his letter to the Galatian church, he reminds them that they are a body with the

life of Jesus in it. What unites them is the Spirit who works in various ways in each and every member of the body. As He exhorts them to walk in the Spirit, He speaks of it in relation to one another: Restore the fallen brother or sister. Bear one another's burdens. Do your own work for the sake of the body. Share all good things with your teachers. Do good to all people, but especially the household of faith (see Galatians 6:1-10). When a group of people consisting of individuals who have been changed by the grace of God are living by the Spirit of God and taking care of each other in love, others are attracted to them. After all, everyone is built for community, and we all wander until we are anchored into one that offers us a safe place to embrace grace.

There may be many other activities and programs in church life, but if these essentials are minimized, the church will not reflect the kingdom of God that Jesus brought to earth. God loves His true church, and we earnestly pray that this will be the time when the purity of simplicity is the result of His work in our day.

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