

DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

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"God has always had the plan of a community of His people united in the common faith in His grace, but different in ethnicity, gender, geography, status, and culture. This community is the outpost of the new creation and its first fruits."

THE CHURCH: WHAT'S THE POINT?

A certain couple visited many churches looking for a place to worship and give attention to the spiritual aspect of their lives. They stopped the search after several months. Now they spend Sundays relaxing and getting ready for Mondays. When asked why they had stopped looking, they responded: "What's the point?"

Church is big business in America. The focus has often been turned toward attracting consumers rather than making disciples, and marketing has created a boon for churches. Yet surveys continue to tell us that a large number of younger Americans have their doubts about the importance of church. Older people have similarly found other interests pulling them away from old habits of church attendance. Others seek to defend the church as a needed plank in a civil society's platform: "We are just better off if there are lots of churches, regardless of what they believe." Some support the church because of sentimentality. They remember weddings, funerals, baptisms, etc. And many have concluded that since they can access all kinds of

theological content through current technology, they don't need to go to some special place to be entertained and instructed. What is the cause of the mass confusion regarding the purpose of the church?

The relatively recent history of the church in America reveals at least four myths behind an ecclesiology in flux.

Myth #1. The point of the church is getting people to heaven. This myth probably emerged from a mixture of Greek thought with Jewish theology. Plato believed that the soul was separate from the body and superior to it. The soul is immortal, eternal, and real while the body and the material world is temporary and unreal, therefore emphasis should be given to the soul and not to the body. In Platonic thought, escape of the soul from the body was more realistic than a resurrection that gives dignity to both the invisible and visible aspects of creation. With the influence of Platonism, one aspect of the church became "soul winning."

If the soul's final resting place is heaven, then the primary role of the church is to get as many souls to heaven as possible. For a large number of churches, the "good works" mentioned by Paul in Ephesians is more about winning souls than in equipping people to live now as a template of the new creation in this world, awaiting consummation in Jesus Christ.

In my early ministry training I took classes in soul-winning. I became fairly successful in one-on-one evangelism and was sought after by some churches to help them become skillful in getting people to decide for Jesus, profess Him, and follow Him in baptism. My home church was evaluated by the other churches in our denomination by how many baptisms we had each year. Denominational leaders were chosen based on that figure. Anyone who wanted to be elected as a leader in ecclesial matters must lead a church that had many baptisms. The 20th century saw crusade evangelism rise as a major feature of the church's role. Billy Graham and other evangelists featured the question to candidates: *"If you died tonight, do you know for sure you would go to heaven?"* To God be the glory for the many who came to know Jesus through these efforts. I am thrilled they will forever be with the Lord. But that is not the only role of the church. We are not commissioned to get heaven full of souls while the world that God loves and redeemed is left to wither without the life of the resurrected Lord. New Creation kind of living is displayed in the lives of believers who know they are God's people on earth and demonstrate the glory of His grace by tending the garden assigned to them. The gospel affects the whole person, body and soul. We are here to magnify Him and His work. The darkness still in the world is waiting to be swallowed up in light, just like death has been swallowed up in His resurrection. Escapism is not the salvation Jesus purchased. We are not just shedding an old useless body and going to a paradise where only the soul survives. We are living now in the early stages of a new creation that began at His resurrection, and we shall receive a new body at His coming that is fully fit for life in the new realm.

It is not just our souls that are the issue. It is our whole selves.

Myth #2. The point of the church is to facilitate a moral improvement path for people who want to appease or please God and the right people.

The motto for this model of church could be: "Let's everyone try to do a little better for the sake of us all." Recognizing that perfection is impossible, the gathered church settles for relative religious righteousness. "Better" is our goal. A list of agreed upon virtues are kept sacred and protected from compromise. That list may or may not align with the values espoused by Jesus or warranted by His death. As a teen in church, I heard a lot more about the danger of dancing, smoking, gambling, and worldly music than I did about injustice, character, spiritual growth, destiny, serving the weak, or helping the poor. This model gravitates toward regulations and principles. Behavior regulation is the highest priority as is protecting doctrine. Doctrines and regulations give identity to our group. If we are diligent in keeping our unique regulations obeyed and our doctrines that support the regulations are in order, we can relax (and totally miss the opportunities to invest in the welfare of our world.) Proud that we don't indulge in sinful activity and that we believe our mantras, we are blind to those outside our regulations who are captured by fear, abuse, addiction, alienation, and injustice. We are diligent to police each other and control behavior by guilt, shame, pride, and praise. We ourselves are so conscious of violating the regulations that we spend a lot of time focused on us and our sin-consciousness.

Living by principles is the core of this model. It is simply the willpower to put them to work that is the issue. If we sow, we reap. If we are faithful in little, we get more. If we work hard, we get hired... But you don't need to be a Christian to practice wise principles. It doesn't take the miracle of the cross and resurrection to embrace this life - just some willpower and determination. Transformation is replaced by self-improvement. Personal failure is

covered up while guilt, shame, and self-loathing rule in the hearts of the people. Real character development through sharing life with the living Lord is sacrificed on the altar of potential, progress, and popularity.

This model of church serves more like a school room monitor than a working model of the new creation begun by the resurrection of Jesus. It eventually becomes a tool of the culture rather than the salt of the earth.

Myth #3. The point of the church is to facilitate the return of Jewish people back to the land of political Israel. This view sees the church as a temporary stage of redemption necessitated by the rejection of Jesus and His kingdom on earth by the Jewish people at the time of Jesus' earthly life. God's primary plan - to set up a messianic kingdom in the land of Israel with a Davidic king ruling from Jerusalem - was suspended until after the parenthetical "church age." In the future, Jesus will come again to win a world-class war for Israel and establish His kingdom on earth. The church will either be taken out by a special "rapture," or it will be subsumed into the Jewish kingdom.

This Zionistic model identifies modern Israel as the true people of God. The church as well as all Gentiles exist to serve this nation. It is the apple of God's eye and has special favor from Him. The church is expected to preach the evangel to the Gentiles while it features and facilitates the Jewish agenda to return to the land. How a person or nation treats modern Israel determines either blessings or curses on themselves. The church is secondary and temporary. The true hope is the restoration of Israel and its temple. "Peace will only reign when Jerusalem rules."

In order to extract this agenda from Scripture, one must be trained to "rightly divide" the texts of the Bible according to which refer to Israel and which refer to the church. The two don't mix. The complication of this system of interpretation locks the Bible away from ordinary saints and gives the keys

to dispensationalists whose charts mystify even serious readers. The gospel of the kingdom that Jesus brought to earth is denied by postponement. The judgment on unbelieving Israel in 70 AD is reinterpreted and couched in a cut and paste hermeneutic that entices the curious with fantasies about Anti-Christ, Armageddon, great Tribulation, secret rapture, and Israel's exaltation. The church is replaced in time by a Jewish nation centered in a physical temple, which rules the world from Jerusalem.

Yet in the clearest text in Scripture that addresses the church, Paul presents the church as God's final temple, and each believer in Jesus the Messiah as a member of His body. In this view, we now enjoy the beginning of the new creation. The Holy Spirit is both the down payment on the final consummation and the power that energizes the new community on earth as it displays the true nature of God and the glory of His grace. The coming new creation already has an outpost on earth occupied by the church of Jesus the Christ, the world's Lord. The church is permanent and eternal. It is the goal of redemption. The ultimate nation of renown is the kingdom of God. Jesus rules in that kingdom now from the right hand of the Father, and He will rule forever. The old testament people of God played their part in bringing the Messiah to the stage. His people - those who trust Jesus as the Christ - are the apple of God's eye, and they are both Jews and Gentiles who have been made one new humanity by abolishing the wall between them. Jesus did that in His death and resurrection. There is no Jew nor Gentile in that nation. No political nation on earth can rightly claim God's favor above another. God has not and does not make decisions about blessings and curses based on race.

Myth #4. The point of the church is to liberate the politically and economically oppressed.

Jesus' life demonstrated continual mercy toward the poor and oppressed, and He has given his people the same heart to care for those who need it. However, this happens most effectively when His people are focused on the crux of the matter: the

cross and the resurrection. Working for social justice is noble and right, but not at the expense of the doctrines that define the work of God on earth through His Son.

We can see this dynamic displayed in the history of our country. As revolutionary as Martin Luther King, Jr and his fellow civil rights leaders were, their vision for a utopian society of equality still falls short. These leaders did much to change the laws that permitted injustice to go unnoticed, but they did not erase racism. Changing policy is good, but it will never lead to heart transformation, and it is heart transformation that yields true change in society. While the church is called to care for the poor and oppressed, its chief mission must always remain the proclamation and embodiment of the gospel of Jesus. We have yet to witness the power of the multiethnic church living as a display of new creation life, offering hope to a world locked into the narrow confines of hate, fear, and hostility. The gospel erases racism, destroys slavery, and raises the dignity of every person regardless of race or color to be one seated at the right hand of the Father. Hope in social determinism and revolutionary change will disappoint because it cannot reach the heart.

There is a dream for sure, but not a dream based on the flimsy promise of social justice or politics. The dream is the unshakable promise of God's word that "upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." That church was purchased by Jesus' blood, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and is thriving under the gracious care of the eternal Father. It will not and cannot fail. The vision of the future looks bright. As surely as Jesus' resurrection began the promised new creation, the church will display it as a working model until all things are realized in fullness in Jesus the King.

What does Paul tell us about the purpose of the church? God has always had the plan of a community of His people united in the common faith in His grace, but different in ethnicity, gender, geography, status, and culture. This community is the

outpost of the new creation and its first fruits. It is now in the world and in the process of preparing the whole world to be restored in the new creation of heaven and earth united in Jesus the Christ. The church is not just about getting people to heaven. It is about heaven and earth being united, and the people of God living in that dynamic intersection between heaven and earth. The church is not about making fallen humans better, but in transforming them into His displays of a new creation. He came to tear down walls and restore humans to the dignity and destiny for which they were created. The church is not about serving a political nation. God promised a seed and an inheritance. Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise. He rules now and forever in the kingdom He brought to earth. It is made up of a new humanity that defies Jew and Gentile separation. God loves justice and promises a day when all injustice will be righted. Until then He has placed justice in the hearts of His people, and they long to abolish injustice with the power of grace through the love they have found in Jesus Christ. The church does not depend on the governments of this world to bring justice. It marches through the world declaring the rule of Christ over all things. The church addresses injustice in society and seeks to bring truth where deception keeps people in oppression, and it seeks to restore broken people through the healing power of love. It offers hope to all whose star has fallen from the sky and whose destiny is in doubt.

The Messiah fulfilled all previous hope. After Pentecost, His church displays His rule. This is the point.

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