

Its Instructor

Rediscovering Church:

John 14:15-26
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Did you know that despite the fact we have no money for it, despite the fact that neither worship service is full, despite the fact that the growth of our church has been slower than we like, we Bethany leaders are beginning to explore, as a real possibility, the acquisition of a full-time pastor of church planting? Much more will be said on November 8th when we hold our annual meeting. However, something like this seemed to me totally irrational, even irresponsible only ten years ago. It may seem irrational and irresponsible to you now, but it won't seem that way if you are observing what the Holy Spirit is doing to Jesus' church.

Two weeks ago I shared about the massive reformation unfolding in Christianity around the globe. Observers began reporting this about 10 years ago. In 1993 United Methodist consultant Bill Easum wrote *Dancing with Dinosaurs*. He understood that much of what we think and do in church is going extinct like the dinosaurs. In 1995 Presbyterian consultant Mike Regele wrote a book called *Death of the Church*. He believed that by 2020 much of the church we knew and even some of the denominations we grew up in would be gone. Similarly, United Methodist consultant Lyle Schaller wrote that year of *The New Reformation*. Within a short time more observers from various denominational families wrote more books recounting massive and radical changes in global Christianity. They carried titles like *Churchquake*, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, *Unlearning Church* and *Discontinuity and Hope*. All of these changes

forced me to look at how I see the church. Did I carry errant notions about the church that interfered with us fulfilling our purpose and realizing our potential? How much of my vision and work was out of touch with what God's Spirit was doing? How many of my efforts were ill-conceived and poorly timed and eventually would end up in history's scrapheap?

We dealt with some of those errant notions last week as we discussed the identity of the church. The church is not mystical, a nonphysical entity. The church is not an organization or institution. It is not a building or property. People do not go to church. They assemble as the church. The church is not a tradition. The church is people that God's Spirit assembles together in a covenant with Christ and one another to embrace and share the salvation of God.

Truthfully, the church is not a work of people. It is a work of God. The church was born as God's Spirit overshadowed and filled 120 people who had gathered to pray. God assembled the one hundred-twenty to pray; then God's Spirit visited them and baptized them with himself. Immediately, their hearts overflowed with love and praise.

When I look out at you who have assembled here today, I don't see individuals and families who chose to come here. I see people that God chose and led here. I see you as members, friends and visitors that God assembled today. How did God do this? He did it by visiting and working with you and me in the spirit. This may seem mystical because there is mystery in this; however, God also works in obvious ways. Let's consider the obvious work God did through Jesus.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter said this about Jesus:

People of Israel, listen! God publicly endorsed Jesus of Nazareth by doing wonderful miracles, wonders, and signs through him, as you well know. (Acts 2:22, NLT)

Although many people had turned away from Jesus, God's Spirit was loudly and visibly speaking and acting through Jesus. God's Spirit was commending Jesus to the people.

Today, much of Western society is not open to this kind of endorsement. We grew up in a culture that is suspicious of the supernatural. Our church leaders are educated and trained in institutions that are suspicious of healing the sick, exorcising demons, multiplying food, foretelling the future and commanding storms. In preparing to be a pastor and attending theological school, I never had a course on any of this. While Christianity has shrunk under Western-educated church leaders like me, it has exploded in Africa, Asia and Latin America where these signs are reported and affirmed.

When I lead a newcomer class or a membership class, I often ask, "Who or what influenced you to check out or put your faith in Jesus?" Now when that question is asked in Latin America, Africa or Asia, according to some observers, the answers often include a healing, a prophecy or some miracle. I've yet to hear that once in a new members' class. Here, people nearly always point to the faith, compassion and integrity of another believer who may have endured great trials. Obviously, this validation of Christianity is much slower, but no less authentic. Authentic, obedient believers are letters from God. They are the workmanship of the Holy Spirit.

However, if God was only going to validate Jesus through his character, there would have never been a crowd blessed or healed. There would have never been disciples trained and released within a period of three years. There also would have been grave doubts about Jesus by many, because so many character traits are seen only in close relationships. In reality, our character confirms or betrays the gospel, but God's Spirit is not confined to the inner life of

human beings. The one who made all of nature can work in all of nature to reveal himself.

Listen to what the Apostle Paul wrote the Corinthian believers:

My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power. (1 Corinthians 2:4-5, NIV)

If you read the book of Acts, you discover that the church of Jesus Christ lived and served just like Jesus. They did the same miraculous deeds and carried the same message and quickly multiplied. Over time, people developed much of the same character as Jesus; but that wasn't an easy or short journey.

Jesus attributed everything he did to a conversation or communion with his Father. Understand that God did not appear in bodily form with Jesus and stroll through the garden in the cool of the day as he once did with Adam and Eve. Jesus' fellowship with his Father was through the Holy Spirit. Now as Jesus was about to leave this earth, listen to what he said and how he expected his followers to learn and grow:

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth... I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you... He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him. ...and we will come to him and make our home with him... the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. (John 14:16-18, 21, 23, 26, NIV)

Do you understand what Jesus was teaching? Jesus did not lay out a law for the church to organize itself by. Jesus did not say, "Okay, I'm going to give you a new idea called democracy. You are going to have a board of trustees, a church council, some committees and the will of God will be revealed by majority vote." Jesus did not say, "Okay, there are going to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. I'm creating five offices and you will be governed by these officials. Now, get my government right." Jesus did not say, "I would have put all my

leaders through rabbi school if I had the money; and when you have the money, put all your leaders through school so that you will be led by qualified, educated leaders who do whatever is most reasonable and biblical.” What did Jesus actually say?

He told us that he is not going to leave us alone. He told us that we are not going to be orphans. If we trust his word and obey his commands, he’s going to show himself to us and make a home with us, right here on this planet. He said that he is going to give us a counselor who will do two things: (1) teach us all things and (2) remind us of everything Jesus taught.

If you believe Jesus and what he said, then the greatest issue (and even the greatest crisis humanity suffers) is how do we welcome and hear the Holy Spirit. Isn’t it curious how the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus as he went through the baptism of repentance? What do you suppose that signals to us? Isn’t it interesting that the first thing the Spirit led Jesus to do was fast and pray for forty days? What do you suppose that means for us? Isn’t it amazing how temptation and obedience took place in that context? What does that imply? Isn’t funny how obedience and continued prayer (sometimes all night long) marked Jesus’ whole life? What does that suggest? Have you noticed how the church in Acts continually sought direction from the Holy Spirit? Have you noticed the prominence of repentance, fasting, prayer, and obedience?

We have no substitute for the Holy Spirit. Education is not a substitute. Majority vote is not a substitute. Our interpretation of the Bible is no substitute. Our acts of piety and good deeds are no substitute. The Holy Spirit is responsible to teach us *all things*. The Holy Spirit is responsible to remind us of *everything* Jesus taught. That doesn’t leave room for tradition, interpretation, majority vote or anything else. The Holy Spirit may use some of these things, but he doesn’t have to; and he may not. The key question is what role will the Holy Spirit play in our life as a church and in your life as a believer? Are you following Jesus’ example?