

Its Influence

Rediscovering Church:

John 15:5-8

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Today is the last message in a series called *Rediscovering Church*. This fall I've shared with you what I learned searching for answers about why much of the American church has declined while forms of Christianity experience explosive growth on every continent. I learned that we are in a full-blown, worldwide reformation of the church. It is as profound as the one that gave birth to denominations like Lutheran, Presbyterian, and United Methodist. In this reformation period, many congregations and denominations are headed for extinction. Where these declining congregations are dominant, communities become hostile to Christianity and suffer many symptoms of moral decay. However, where this radical reformation is taking root, communities are experiencing transformation.

Did you know we have that kind of impact? Jesus used two metaphors (Matthew 5:13-16) to describe this impact. He called his followers salt and light. Salt makes food tasty or attractive. It also preserves. Jesus said that his followers attract the presence and favor of God to a community so that it is preserved. He also said his followers open eyes to reality where people otherwise wander in darkness. Additionally, Jesus told a parable:

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough. (Matthew 13:33, NIV)

Yeast changes the texture and shape of the bread, doesn't it? Jesus teaches that his church is the salt that changes the flavor, the light that changes the atmosphere and the yeast that

changes the shape of the community. Therefore, if a community deteriorates, whose fault is it? Is it the government's? Who is responsible? If the community has a terrible taste, what's wrong with the salt? If the community lives in darkness, what's happened to the light? If the community falls flat, what is wrong with the yeast?

At the time of John Wesley, England staggered in decadence and immorality, and descended to the brink of revolution. That happened not because the government was so corrupt (although it was), but because the church was so dead. God's people had lost their savor. They burned so dim. Their yeast was impotent. The reformation of the church and transformation of the country came not from the genius of Methodism's founder. It came from something greater that flowed through the faith and commitment of Wesley. Listen to the words of Jesus:

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples (John 15:5, 8; NIV)

Jesus made it clear. An authentic relationship with Jesus produces fruit. "He will bear much fruit," Jesus said. Jesus goes further. He says that it brings God honor for us to bear a lot of fruit. Jesus even says that it is a sign that we actually are his disciples. Jesus didn't teach his people to be ineffective or to lack influence with others.

Moreover, Jesus' life wasn't about developing moral character. It was about delivering people from destruction. Jesus wasn't saying that if you remain in me and I in you, you are going to be a really swell guy or gal. No, he was focused on salvation, not moral improvement. He was saying that the world is under deception and ruled by death. You are going to bring many to freedom from the forces that destroy them. You will be bearers of life.

When this "life," when this divine juice, flowing from the vine to the branches that Jesus spoke about, poured out through John Wesley, things happened. Sometimes, it was crazy. He

would preach or pray and someone would fall on the ground and start wailing. Sometimes, a good number of people would do it, even people who had been cursing him. Wesley and the Methodists were accused of being enthusiasts, people who were seeking emotional highs. There were some people doing that. At one point Wesley really looked for things like people falling on the ground to happen at his meetings. However, Wesley noticed that some people who had spectacular conversions were falling away. Soon he was less impressed with the conversion experience and more concerned with whether they were walking with Jesus in six months. That is why he formed people into small groups for growth and accountability. I remember what a Pentecostal preacher once told me: “It is not how high you jump, but how straight you walk once you land.” Powerful emotional reactions may or may not be present when God moves upon a person. Wesley learned that he was not in control. He was a conduit, a branch for the fruit that Jesus wanted to produce. How this divine juice affected others in terms of immediate reaction or emotion was not his responsibility. Wesley was to encourage and even confront people who wanted God’s salvation with the habits of discipleship and obedience. Jesus didn’t say, “Come and experience me.” He said, “Come and follow me.” To be sure, there will be experiences; but a relationship is more than an experience or two. It is a life-walk.

John Wimber led a West Coast church. One Sunday evening, he had a young guest speaker whose background was with the California “Jesus People” (Do any of you remember them?). Wimber was apprehensive because he heard he was somewhat unpredictable. Wimber wanted to protect his church from anything flaky or cultic, but at the same time he had heard that spiritual renewal had come through his ministry. Somewhat trepid, but believing it was God’s will, John listened to his powerful testimony. That was good; but then the young man said:

Well, that’s my testimony. Now the church has been offending the Holy Spirit a long time and it is quenched. So we are going to invite it to come and minister.

They all waited as the air grew thick with anticipation and anxiety! Then the young man said, “Holy Spirit, come!” (John Wimber was not leading a Pentecostal church. His people had little exposure and no preparation for what followed.) People fell to the floor. Some folks, who didn’t believe in the gift of tongues, spoke in tongues loudly. The man roamed through the crowd praying for people, and they would fall over with God’s Spirit resting on them. Wimber was aghast. His staff was alarmed. In the aftermath they lost church members; but as they searched the Scriptures, consulted friends and read John Wesley and others, they realized that this was God. Within the next 3 ½ months they saw seventeen hundred people experience conversion. Since that moment in 1979, Wimber’s church has multiplied into a movement that encompasses over a thousand churches worldwide with tens of thousands of believers.

In that same time period, American Methodism has declined. John Wesley never worried that Methodism would go extinct. He feared that we would have the form of Christian devotion, but deny or resist its power. Wesley knew that the link to fruitfulness is the vine, and that Jesus’ Spirit is that juice of life. Some people react to that juice, to God’s Spirit with great emotion. Some people try to counterfeit experience with God’s Spirit by getting emotional; but the point is to draw our life from Christ, not manufacture emotional highs.

If we are not growing and producing fruit, if people are not being converted and the community is not changing, it isn’t because of missing programs or inferior worship services. It is because we are separated from the vine. We’ve offended the Holy Spirit and quenched his fire among us. We’ve chosen comfort over conversion. God is reforming his church to be both centers of conversion and families that grow disciples. A birthing room, a delivery room is messy and emotional, but it’s part of a growing family’s experience. If we truly follow Jesus, we will welcome his Spirit in the mess of delivery and in the disciplines of growth. Welcome him.