

The Culture of the Kingdom The Present Kingdom Part 1

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The church in the world is in an identity crisis; it does not know what its unique function is among the nations of the world and it does not know how to adjust itself with the changing times. For example, in the United States the church has had a history in recent times of supporting political initiatives or of remaining in a bubble as if time is irrelevant. In other parts of the world, the church has become a hollowed out shell of its once pervasive and plenary power. As in Europe, the cathedrals stand empty and are crumbling for the most part and are largely tourist attractions. In the middle east, where the gospel once flourished, in places like Ephesus and Smyrna and Rome; those locations now barely have any evidence of the power and the authority of the early church.

So what has happened? One of the things that has happened is that the church has lost its identity; it does not know how to function because it does not know who it is. The church has taken on the cultures of various nations and in doing so, it has lost its unique relevance in the earth. As a result, it doesn't really know how to speak to the current issues because it is as much part of the problem as it is that it offers any solution. One simply has to look at the current state of the church and its involvements, to know that the controversy that surrounds the church is in fact part of the current decline in the earth. For example, in the historic churches, in the Roman church for example, the Pope on a recent visit to the United States, made a public apology for the grotesque behavior of priests throughout the Roman system and especially here in the United States for the misconduct of priests relative to the abuse of children. Now this is a worldwide and well known phenomenon that has cost the Roman church billions of dollars.

This is not contributing to the solution of the care and well being of children or even to the structure of society to produce a dependable institution, this is in fact part of the controversy, part of the decline of society. The British church, the Anglican church, has its own share of problems, while the nations of the earth still try to decide whether or not homosexuality has any value to their society, the church has rushed ahead in order to appear to be friendly to the populations of the earth in all of their varied permutations and embraced homosexuality at the highest level, so that the historic Anglican church (in America it's known as the Episcopal church but in the worldwide manifestation it's called

the worldwide Anglican communion) is being torn apart from the inside by this issue of homosexuals as bishops of the church.

Among the evangelicals, particularly in the United States again, there has been a history in recent times of supporting the Republican party. But now that that era is over, the church is scrambling to find a candidate among the republicans...whether that candidate be a Mormon or someone who has no professed faith in the LORD, simply that he is a republican or all of the extremes. The evangelicals are struggling to find a candidate whom they can support because it has derived its power (the evangelical church has derived its power) from its connection to political parties and principally to the Republican party.

All of this is going on at a time when membership in churches is plummeting and an entire generation of young people have voted with their feet, mostly they stay away from churches. About the only groups of churches that have young people participating to any degree are those who, on the one hand have promoted membership from inside, that is, the children of the members or who have concentrated on music and culture to try to attract young people into their circles. So they've become largely centers of entertainment and they call these things moves of God. What has happened to the church that Jesus started, what has happened to the church that produced people like Paul? The answer is that that church has been obscured almost entirely. We're speaking of theological things more from an historic application than from the representation of anything that is uniquely heavenly or Godly upon the earth. And when this happens, the institutions that grow up around these marketing ideas, do not in fact resemble the body of Christ. In most churches, there is no concept of the kingdom of God as the foundation of belief or practice. In fact, the historic church and most of the evangelical churches think that the kingdom will come when Jesus returns and that the kingdom does not exist in any fashion at the present time. Therefore, the emphasis has come to be on getting people saved.

I was in a meeting in Los Angeles, it was actually one of the many meetings around the 100th anniversary of the Azusa Street revival. And I heard a very prominent evangelical speaker passionately make the appeal that all the preachers present should return to getting people saved. And in fact he spoke of his father, a preacher, who on his deathbed was expressing the regret that he didn't get one more person saved. And of course, all the preachers in the room were ecstatic at the message and this famous preacher, in his conclusion, challenged all of them with this thought, he said, "I would dare any of you to say that winning souls is not the most important thing that we're called to do." And of course rowd and ruckus cheering followed that assertion because he was preaching to a culture that has accepted getting people to go to heaven and people in church going to heaven as the prime mandate of the church and that is because the church has no concept of the kingdom. Because if the church had a concept of the kingdom, then it would

understand that going to heaven is an end result, it is not a goal; you do not become a believer so that you could go to heaven, that's a natural result. And I personally, have nothing against going to heaven; when I'm not here on this earth you may correctly presume that I'm in heaven.

But my point is that our call is not merely to focus on going to heaven, that's a natural result, it's a natural result of being saved. Why then are we saved? If it isn't the purpose of being saved that we go to heaven, why are we saved? And what does it mean to be saved? Well for most people, for most preachers and for most religions, being saved is about being relieved from the burden of your sin by the finished work of Jesus on the cross so that when you die you can go to heaven. But Scripture gives us a different concept than that. And by the way, such a notion does not exist in the Scriptures, precisely because the purpose of being saved is more than to go to heaven. So what is that purpose? Look at this from the book of Colossians chapter 1 verse 13. In Colossians 1:13 the following is said...I want you to see this. Let's read verse 12, "Giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light, for He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves."

Now the word for 'translated' or being brought into the kingdom is the word 'methastephanie' which means 'to exchange', 'to turn away', 'to transfer'; it is in the same fashion as is used in I Corinthians 13:2 in which the writer Paul says, "Even if you may say to a mountain to move itself and you do not have love, you are nothing." In other words, to command the mountain to move, to translate, to have radical action from one place to another, from one perspective to another. So we were 'translated', we were released from the control of the evil one and brought into the kingdom of the Son of God, which kingdom is called The Kingdom of Light, it is also called The Kingdom of Heaven, it is also called The Kingdom of God. And here the juxtaposition of light and darkness has to do with where we were versus where we have come to be, "God has translated us from the control of darkness," which means that until we are saved, all of our decisions are decisions made in darkness and He brings us into the kingdom of the Son of God. Which means that salvation is to save us from decision making based in darkness, to bring us into the rule of Christ. Now once you've come into the rule of Christ – because a kingdom is about rule – under the rule of Christ, where He is, there is where you're going to be. He was once on the earth, and we yet are upon the earth, but He now is seated upon the throne.

So we are seated in heavenly realms in Christ Jesus and when we die, when our bodies no longer keep us here in the earth, we will be with Him. So wherever He is, His rule predominates. Before He ascended to the Father, He gave us a commission and that commission is based in the recognition that He has all authority in heaven and on the earth. So He says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me, go ye

therefore and..." this is what you are to go and do, "make disciples of all the nations." How do you do that? You see, we have interpreted "make disciples" to mean "go and make converts" and so we concoct these evangelistic crusades and bring multitudes of people into an intellectual belief structure and even the father of this notion, Billy Graham, has concluded that if you look at the residual result, over time it is a diminishing result. For example, if ten thousand people quote/unquote "make a confession for Christ" in a crusade, if you go back and investigate how many of those people five years later have any active life in Christ, of that ten thousand, five years later, you will find about ten percent. Which means, of ten thousand...one thousand. Ten years later, of that ten thousand, you'll find five percent, and they didn't keep statistics after that. Which means that five hundred after ten years...this is a declining result; if this were a business model, no one would follow it because it guarantees, in this progression, that you're dealing with a reducing business.

Jesus' model of making disciples is quite different; He had twelve, whom He said the Father gave to Him. Now of all the people who could have gone and preached to multitudes and made converts of them, He could have. And He did speak to multitudes, but He only discipled twelve and in discipling twelve, we get the picture of what He meant when He said, "You go and make disciples," and He's saying this to the ones who were His disciples, He's making the point to His disciples. Jesus says, Matthew 28:18, "Go and make disciples of all the nations." Now He himself had been involved for three and half years in making disciples and the ones to whom He's saying, "Go and make disciples," are His disciples; the very ones He's discipled for three and a half years. Do you suppose He knows what it means to make disciples and do you suppose that the ones He had discipled understand what it means to go and make disciples? Of course, it's a one-to-one correlation. You know what's funny, it's how tradition dictates our understanding of Scripture but have you noticed in the world today, nothing that used to be hidden is remaining in darkness? Everything that has been hidden is being brought into the light.

The church has historically thrived on the ignorance of people, but you cannot deny the fact that at the end of this cycle, things simply are not working. Now the ones who are pushing these ideas of church and discipling and going to heaven and so on, when they're confronted with this undeniable falling away from church, undeniable rejection of the values of church, what do they come up with as an explanation? Do you think they say, "Well, we should change,"? Do you think they say, "Well, we should understand what the people find objectionable about our perspectives," or "We should talk to God and see what He has to say about why we are facing these declining conditions,"? No, they simply blame the people. It never occurs to them that the systems - of which they are the champions - are the problem and that these systems have nothing to do with what the Scriptures themselves say. The Pope, for example, in his American visit, lamented the declining membership in the Roman church worldwide.

All of the historic religions are facing the same thing. And in some instances, in countries with orthodox churches, where the culture of a population has been co-opted by the church to the point where the people know no difference between what it means to be an Italian Roman catholic or a Spaniard Roman catholic or an Irish person....they have no idea what it would be like to just be a person of that nation apart from the entwining with their culture of the Roman church. The fact is, the people who are handing out this religious idea, the propagators of religion, the ones who prop it up, who keep it going, the ones who are the power behind it, they never say to themselves, "Maybe it's our traditions that are wrong, maybe God has something else to say about what we're doing, maybe the Bible might be a source from which we might quote 'reinvent ourselves'." But they don't say that, they blame the people; they say the people are the problem. It's not the people... it's not the people, it's that the systems and the presumptions inherent in these systems, have run their courses.

The churches will 'reinvent' themselves, that's true, but when they do they will become even further distanced from the truth and what value remains to the church will be part of a dying culture; part of a culture that is reinventing itself and leaving the church out of it. For example in America, the culture of racial segregation in the church was at one time that which dominated the society as a whole because the church simply adjusted to the social norms of 50 to 100 years ago. And in fact if you understand the social and the legal history of the United States, you will understand why the church took no active role in changing society even though there were Christians from every color and race in all the churches, they simply had segregated churches. But now, there is a black man running for president of the United States, there is a white woman running for president of the United States, to name two of the candidates who are different. And the nation itself, especially the young people are speaking about being in a post racial society, which means they no longer buy into the idea that the races must be kept separate. The most segregated hour in American life is Sunday morning between 10 and 11 o'clock, or the most segregated time in America life is when the church meets between 10 o'clock and noon on Sundays.

My point is while the rest of society is reinventing itself to accommodate to the realities of the present time, the church remains struggling to hold on to a culture to which it attached itself early on, but that very culture is changing. Now it is not just that the people who have left the churches are malcontents, it is that throughout the nation, especially among the young people, they see the hypocrisy and the irrelevance of the church culture and they have moved to distance themselves from it. But the church, relative to those members who used to be members who have left, can only come up with the idea that maybe the problem is with the members who have left, whereas all the other evidence indicates that society is changing but the church is the last one to change. But when it does change (and it will) and even to the extent that it does, it rushes ahead

'helter skelter', 'willy-nilly' without any consideration of Scripture and embraces a new culture and as in the case of the episcopal church that's rushed ahead of the line and embraced the culture of homosexuality.

This is not at all a church that understands Scripture, this is a church that's based upon culture and once it sees that it's foundations are giving way... it is rushing ahead to try to reinvent itself by becoming even more irrelevant and what will happen is that the culture will move on and the church will become increasingly out of step. What about all those people who have left the church or who have no interest in church but have a deep desire for heavenly things, for a spiritual life? Well, oddly enough, some of these people in the interim are turning to talk show hosts who have invented themselves as high priests and high priestesses of spirituality, which is this strange mixture of narcissism and eastern philosophy with a good dose of self help and wealth to try to spin together an acceptable philosophy of the present age. That is perhaps the worst of all things because it has none of the true nature of transcendent realities and it promises nothing beyond your living now and here; here in the present, and now in time. What is the alternative? The alternative is to understand that God once offered to man a kingdom and this kingdom has come and it's culture is meant to fulfill all of the needs that human beings have; physical needs and spiritual needs.

I hope you will join me as we continue to discuss this series, The Culture of The Kingdom. I'm Sam Soleyn, I'll see you then. Bye bye.