

“Let’s Walk with Christ – Individually and Communally”

I have been struck by many things as we have been studying the letter to The Seven Churches in Revelation...

How quickly the church loses its new car shine...we are still in the first century and most of these churches are somewhat of a mess. We all long to see the church beautiful and orderly and joyous and holy. But lo and behold these churches are messy, they are wishy-washy and morally compromising, they struggle with faithfulness, obedience and single-mindedness. And as long as I am in the church, and you, the church will always be that way. And the Lord Jesus still loves her madly, as a new groom loves his gorgeous bride.

Another common aspect to the content of these letters and to the life of these churches is that of pain and conflict. Persecution and pain from the prevailing culture has almost always been a given for the church of Jesus Christ. As Christ-followers seek to bless the cities wherein they find themselves, resistance at least, and persecution more often, have been their welcome. Proclaiming and living out the uniqueness of Christ and the demands of the Gospel are too often met with hostility, as bad news to a dark and pagan world. It makes me that much more grateful for the freedoms we enjoy here and it makes me grimace that much more over the petty annoyances that so often occupy our passions.

A third observation I make from the Lord’s words to the churches in Revelation is the balance between addressing the corporate body and the individual believer. So often Jesus will speak to the church at Ephesus, or to angel of the Church in Sardis. He will then continue by elaborating on their deeds, what the corporate body has been doing well and what they need to work on. Also addressed is that body’s role or place in the city at large. For example to the Sardis assembly, the Lord refers to their “reputation.” It would be like today in our area someone saying, “Oh, you know The Chapel it’s that church in the Akron area that...” Or when you hear the name “Willowcreek,” or “Saddleback,” or “Parkside,” you might think specific things about each of these strong ministries. And of course also there are individual Christ-followers in each of those churches, with individual strengths and needs and faith.

For one thing, this reminds me of our need for balance. A careful balance must be sought between an overemphasis on the individual, which in some ways has been the trademark of the 20th century American Evangelical Church. And an overemphasis on the “communal,” which at times seems to be where the church may be headed. May I propose that an unhealthy over emphasis on the individual leads to spiritual narcissism? And that an overemphasis by the church on the communal leads to religious socialism.

A strength of the 20th century evangelical church was the call for personal faith and accountability. Coming on the heels of the social gospel of liberal Protestantism,

contemporary evangelicalism was born out of call for personal evangelism and an individual's decision for Christ as one's personal Savior.

And yet one may observe that the American church in not being carefully balanced, too easily slid into a primarily "individualistic" enterprise, all about meeting personal needs, making individuals feel good as they dwell on their "personal relationship" to Jesus. This narcissistic trend created a rather therapeutic model of doing church. At its worst, an over-emphasis on the individual created not worshippers of the holy God but consumers and selfish saints.

The effect of individualism has been felt on the communal level...In local churches, individual tastes and needs often rise above the collective "best" for the entire body. Even the very nature of "local" churches has been affected. Whereas in the days of the 7 churches of Revelation when a local church referred to the specific locality (the Christ followers in Smyrna were naturally members of the Church in Smyrna. Like it or not, it was the only "show" in town), today one's local church refers much more to one's personal and theological style and tastes rather than their home address. (Every Sunday we all drive passed many local churches to arrive at the one of our personal choosing. Not to say that is good or bad, it just is.) Over the centuries the multiplication of churches has made the choosing of a church a matter akin to shopping for a comfortable pair shoes.

An over emphasis on individualism in the church has also effected the society at large. A stereotype of the 20th century evangelical church is that it turned a deaf ear or gave only an angry voice to the social ills and injustices of its community. And while largely ignoring or at least sanctimoniously criticizing the cultural sins of the day, little thought was given of how Christian presence and action can actually bless the city.

Now to every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. So if rugged individualism has been the blight of 20th century American evangelicalism, a new reaction has been making its way onto the Christian landscape. An emphasis, at it's best, that takes the call of Christ to be salt and light to a decaying society very seriously. An emphasis away from the selfish extremes of spiritual individualism and one that calls the church back to being the church as well as back to the city it finds herself in with all of the injustices and ills that sin can muster.

Of course this communal emphasis pendulum swing can also go too far. If over-emphasis on the individual led to spiritual narcissism then over-emphasis by the Christian on communal can devolve into religious socialism. By that I mean the development of good works and programs to address the social ills of the day, but devoid of the cross of Christ. Without an acknowledgement of sin (individual and societal) and of our guilt before a holy God, the fundamental root of our problems goes ignored. Any

religion or government agency worth its salt can and should try to tackle social ills but only the church armed with the Gospel of Christ can get at the root problem.

The beauty of the letters to the churches, the beauty of Christ's Words to his covenant people is that they express a balance between the individual and the communal. His redemptive power applies to both realms. The God who is his Father is both transcendent and immanent. He is the sovereign who providentially oversees all of his creation and he is the personal God, who cares about me, who knows my name and who sent His Son to die for my sins.

We must seek that balance. This will be a balance that comes about when eyes are not transfixed on me (the individual) nor on the crowd (communal) but on the Lord, the transcendent and immanent one.

God is huge and he does care about the colossal issues that affect the world (from poverty to disease, to racism, to injustice). All of which have resulted from the fall. And he is sovereign over the community of his church. Calling us to build each other up, hold each other accountable, encourage each other. In his name, his will for us is to work together and accomplish great and spiritual things for the world and his kingdom. All part of the Gospel.

And our God is immanent. The personal shepherd, who cares about his sheep, you and me, and calls us by name. We can't lose that. Christ is indeed the lover of my soul. He died for my sins. He does long for me to know him and worship him. He wants more than my busy hands and grandiose plans, he wants my heart, he wants me.

As individuals and as a community, with our eyes on our Great God, let's work hard at that faith relationship each of us are called to in Christ and with Christ. And let's work together, that our collective spiritual journey may have significant impact in changing His church and this world for the sake of the gospel and Christ's kingdom.