

Notes for the Ekklesia Meeting

Sundays @ 10:00 a.m. Info: (651) 283-0568 Discipleship Training Ministries, Inc www.dtminc.org Today's Date: January 11, 2009

Keeping The Focus

by Dan Trygg

“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would straighten up what remains and station elders in every city...⁹ [one who is] holding fast the ‘according-to-the-teaching faithful word’, in order that he might be able both to come-alongside-to-help in healthy doctrine, as well as to expose the ones speaking against [the truth].¹⁰ For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and misleaders, especially those of the circumcision,¹¹ who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things which are not necessary for the sake of dishonorable gain.” Titus 1:5,9-11

As I was preparing to write these notes, I somehow got involved in a conversation with a middle-aged couple across the aisle at Perkins, where I often go to write. Twenty years ago, they had been involved with two very committed Christian organizations, and had been very devoted servants of Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, **some people in leadership had severely mishandled them, and they had left feeling very angry, hurt and defeated.** This, and some other negative experiences, left a very sour taste in their mouths, and they have not gone back to church for all these years. They apparently have not done anything to attempt to grow as believers, and, for all practical purposes, have no intentional spiritual life at all. How sad. It was interesting to watch their faces light up as they talked about their early experiences with Jesus, but then their countenances dimmed and they became guarded as they talked about what happened and where they are now. **They appeared to have no interest in attempting to awaken or revisit anything that had to do with that past life.** Their parting comment was, **“We have no time for organized religion.”**

Unfortunately, the experience of this couple is not unique. Over 80% of Americans call themselves Christians, and over 42% of the population says that they have had a definite “born again” experience. Only 59% of these “b.a.’s” attend church on a regular basis. Additionally, **from 1991-2004, there has been a marked increase in unchurched adults in general. Their numbers have nearly doubled, from 37 million in 1991 to over 71 million in 2004.** Of these, 62% call themselves Christians, and 44% said that they had made a personal commitment to Jesus earlier in their lives. **In most cases, these people have expressed a frustration with “organized religion”,** feeling that it is ineffective, irrelevant, intolerant or even dangerous. *In many ways, the church has been its own worst enemy in recent years, effectively aborting the young spiritual lives of thousands, inoculating thousands of others against even considering anything having to do with Jesus, while thousands upon thousands of others may have genuinely found Jesus, but their spiritual lives have “died on the vine”.* **They are anything but full of life, vibrant, or excited about Jesus or church. They are weary.** They may feel that there is more that God may have for them, but their experiences with church have been either empty, boring or even toxic, and they have all but given up on “religion”.

I can understand all of this. I sat through (dozed in) *dozens* of church services that did little or nothing for me. I, too, have been hurt by religious people. I, too, have been bamboozled, offended and censured by ignorant or controlling religious leaders. At one point in my life, I had abandoned going to church for a period of almost 3 years! The things that have kept me on track have been: an irrepressible *hunger to know God* and the truth of His Word, and the even more persistent *prodding and pulling of the Holy Spirit* in my life. Then, also God seems to have strategically placed *people* in my life to encourage or challenge me, when I may have otherwise slipped beneath the waves of frustration and disappointment. I have to say that *it has been God who has kept me on track*, because I have certainly been near collapse, or disaster, at various times in my spiritual journey. I am so grateful for those who, early on in my Christian life helped me to establish a *daily quiet time with God*. That has been the cornerstone of my spiritual life, the place and time where God has most consistently revealed Himself to me, and kept me moving and growing.

As I have pondered these things, I have come to see that **a great deal of the problem has been that the church of today is nothing like what the NT church was.** The enemy has succeeded in directing our focus off the things that are essential and healthy, and has distracted and deceived us with things which are profitless and unhealthy. What we call “the church” is a tragic, sometimes grotesque, caricature of what Jesus originally intended. What we do when we gather, what our expectations and objectives are, are tragically foreign to what we read about in the NT, ...except that we don’t even know *that!* **As I see it, we are going about things all wrong. Most churches are not even preaching the full message! We stop part way, never getting to the part that really makes a difference in our experience.** We talk over and over about forgiveness, but never get on to the rest of what God has in mind. **God has called us, and empowered us, to live a radically different life than most Christians experience.** Then, so many churches have an approach to ministry and leadership that keeps people immature. **We will never see what God intended for us until we**

can instruct and motivate the people to seriously invest themselves in developing their relationship with God, and to actively participate in Body life and service in meaningful ways.

The part of the passage at the top of this study that grabbed my attention was the last half of vs. 11, "...teaching things *which are not necessary* for the sake of dishonorable gain". At the core of the dysfunction of the church in America is the misguided teaching which is often promulgated from the pulpits. Paul here indicates that it is possible to be "teaching things which are not necessary". Stop and think about that for a moment. **Paul says that elders ought to be teaching things that were in agreement with the doctrine of the "faithful word"**. There seemed to be some common standard which he was referring to. In Acts 2:42, the standard of the early church was "the teaching of the apostles". **Apostolic teaching was the standard.** Furthermore, in Tit. 1:9, "**the effective elder should be able to come alongside the believers with teaching that produces health**, and to be able to expose the ones speaking other things, ...things which are in opposition to, or an unhealthy alternative to, the healthy teaching of the faithful word.

Here is where the meat of the issue comes to the fore: **the majority of teaching coming from pulpits across America is not producing this kind of health**, nor is it effectively exposing the impostors. This may have to do with the fact that most preaching is not "coming alongside to help", ...it is preached from an ivory tower. **It is academic, maybe entertaining and even inspirational, but it is not practical and helpful. It is often just so much needless information.** Am I being harsh? Yes, but for good reason. **We are not producing mature Christians in this country. Something that we are doing is horribly wrong! We are teaching "things which are not necessary"**. Things which are not practical, helpful, constructive, applicable.

The problem is much deeper, however. **We have patterned our church experiences after the crowd preaching we see Jesus doing in the gospels, but we miss the fact that He did not train His disciples in this environment!** The apostles, however, did *not* miss this fact. They instituted small, home groups immediately. It was in the small, interactive setting of a home group where people began to be known, began to have their personal needs aired and met. **The small, interactive home congregation was the centerpiece of Jesus' strategy to develop people**, ...and we are quick to pass that by as quickly as possible in favor of a larger setting where we can preach to a crowd. **Crowd preaching will never accomplish what can be done in a small, intimate, personal setting of a home congregation.** Lecture halls cannot compete with Body life for developing maturity in people, yet we want to rent and move into a larger setting, where we can no longer effectively exercise Body life, as quickly as we can afford to. The larger setting *looks more successful*, and will be able to house an even *larger* crowd. It looks like growth, but is it, really? Somewhere we bought into the lie that it was the *teaching of content* that was going to make the difference between maturity and immaturity. It is not the *hearing* of the word that produces maturity, it is the *doing* of it! **People need to be healed, nurtured and developed.** We pastors have missed Paul's instruction to "come-alongside-to-help". Pastors are not to simply "preach at" the people. They are to "oversee" and "come alongside". They cannot do their job without relationship time. Pastors and elders are not to be a corporate board, or a general and his staff of officers. They are to be like nursing mothers and gentle, nurturing fathers, building up, encouraging and guiding those in their charge (I Thess. 2:7-12). They are to be shepherds, watching to see what the people need, and being quick to supply it. Their job is to serve Jesus by serving His people. **The focus of ministry should be on winning, building up and training the people, so that they can come to where they function effectively according to their gifts and fulfill their callings.** They are not "go-fer's" or "pawns" to serve the pastor's vision for a big ministry. They *are* the ministry! **Leaders are supposed to serve the people, not the people serve the leaders** (II Cor. 3:3; 4:5; Lk. 22:24-27).

Someone rightly observed, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." **What are some of the main things that are central, critical truths that should define what we do?** Let me try and lay it out for you. We are in a spiritual war between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. Satan effectively enslaved humankind with sin, and took over planet Earth. God sent Jesus to buy us out of bondage to sin and Satan. Not only did He pay the penalty for sin, He also liberated us from its power, from the power of the flesh, and from the dominion of the devil. Through Jesus, we can now learn to walk with God in the leading and power of the Spirit. God wants to use us to set other people free and take territory away from the prince of darkness. **Our primary task is to make active, healthy, obedient disciples** (Matt. 28:18-20). We need to help believers become equipped to understand who they are as God's children, and how He can work in and through them. **God's strategy to reach lost people involves the demonstration of His Spirit through the lives of His people**, as we change in our character and conduct, and as we serve one another in love and reach out to those around us through good deeds of grace (Jn. 13:34,35; Matt. 5:14-16). Body life is essential for this (Eph. 4:11-16). The demonstrations of unusual love, changed lives, and answered prayers open opportunities to share God's word with people. The Spirit uses this to draw people to Christ, and start the process over in new people.