

Roy's Sermon for 4/10/2020

Pentecost Part 8 'The Birth; and the Growth Principles Of Christ's Church!'

Last time I looked at Acts 2:39-40: a sermon I titled 'Pentecost part 7: Children of the promise; and the warning.' Verse 39 "the promise is for you and your children and all who are far off." I explained that this is who all of us were: not Jews by birth, not Abraham's descendants in the flesh no. He is our father in the faith and we are his children, according to the promise of God and being born of the Spirit! Yes we were all "far off" not only by our natural ancestry, but also "far off" in our lives of sin. We are those "branches of wild olive trees" described in Romans 11, which have been "engrafted" to the root which is Jesus; and the natural plant, being the people of God through Abraham. So in effect, we were all parentless orphans, but then through Jesus we were adopted into the family of God! Our inheritance depends, not upon our human ancestry but upon the promise and power of being born again through God's Holy Spirit!

The other thing we looked at was: though it seems to have been lost by much of modern preaching, the gospel message of Jesus is a Warning. Verse 40 "with many other words he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Not that we can actually "save ourselves". "No one comes to the Father except by me", Jesus said". No we 'save ourselves' by responding to Jesus' message of *come*.

Jesus' gospel message is of warning that the day of eternal reckoning is coming. The signs of God's judgement in His Creation are warning us. They are not natural disasters because they are supernaturally sent by God. They are His merciful warnings to us that the day is drawing ever near! Yes the flashing lights of Christ's coming wrath abound today, (as Billy Graham preached many years ago), *the storm clouds are gathering overhead*. So heed God's merciful warnings or suffer and live with the eternal consequences!

This is where we pick up the text this morning and to our final look at Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost: 'Part 8 The Birth And The Growth Principles Of Christ Church!'

Verse 41 "those who accepted his message were baptised and about 3000 were added to their number that day." Wow, can you imagine? 3000 people giving their lives to Jesus in a day. In Acts 1:15 we learned that there were about 120 when Peter "stood up to address the believers" after Jesus was taken up into heaven, and Mathias was chosen in the place of Judas Iscariot. So it does seem that there was a 30 fold increase to the then existing Church of Jesus. Again, can you imagine if one day after the previous Sunday service the very next week 450 people turned up at the Burrill Lake hall?

Now of course this was an extraordinary occasion. This was no ordinary day. In a real sense, this was the birth of the New Testament Church of Jesus Christ. And it came as the fulfilment to the prophecy of the Prophet Joel and the pouring out of God's Holy Spirit! So although it would be amazing and even perhaps beyond our wildest dreams to see God glorified and the Name of Jesus lifted up and proclaimed in such a way; and though we can and should pray that God would bring such a revival of souls in that same way, we shouldn't covet or envy the size of any one's congregation! Not that we be lazy or resting up on our laurels spiritually, but that we simply remain faithful and continue to pray that GOD would act in accordance with His Will and Plan among us!

What we do need to see here though is how this was all brought about. The proclamation of the message! That message of repentance and warning of the coming Judgement of God. And the truth of the Saviour fulfilled in the coming, the life, the death, the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven. And with the stirring of the Holy Spirit over the waters of the souls of men, women and children! This and this alone is what brings people to Christ. Friends, I've said it before: you will never socialise people into the Kingdom. The humanities are good and we are indeed instructed and encouraged by the scriptures to love people in practical ways. But if the bedrock of such things is not the overtly proclaimed truth of and about Jesus Christ, (and I say these following things with all sensitivity), we can make as many meals and do as many nice things for them as we like, but sadly, we will only be fattening them up for hell!

No, only the proclamation of Jesus' Cross will bring people to repentance and Salvation. As Paul declared in first Corinthians chapter 2:2: "for I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified." Now Paul and the other apostles *did* take up the collection of funds, yet it was specifically for the provision of the needy believers. And it was always given out as God's provision for them, not merely a doling out of funds for food. It was again, God's provision for His church there is an eternal difference. They are both fulfilling a need, but one is saying these things come not from men but from God!

Friends, I'm not going to say much about baptism here. I take it that they simply responded externally to that which had already taken place in their hearts internally. As I've said before, an outward sign of an inward work. Yet this was the birth of the beginning of The New Testament Church of Jesus Christ. And it came, and continues to come about, through the preaching of His gospel!

The next things I'd like us to look at this morning are the growth principles of the Church of Jesus: how His church grows. Now I'm not talking about God's role here, (Father Son and Holy Spirit), but the role which we as His People are to play. And my reasons for doing this are simple. Firstly, to do away with what many are suggesting today are the reasons why a church does grow. And this first one I guess, is a real pet hate of mine. Many years ago while at theological college, part of the curriculum was a course called 'Church Growth Principles', which was also the title of the textbook. After getting a good way into the book it was clear to me that I was going to fail this course: the reason being that I totally disagreed with the author and premise of the book. This was because, although not blatantly, it was also clear to me that the writer was suggesting that if we got all of the correct ingredients together, a church would grow! So if we were to examine what happened, (or didn't happen) in one place successfully, for one of a better description, we could then apply those things to another place and then hey presto, that church too will grow. (We are talking numerically).

For example, let's make it seem not like church, not like the worship of a Holy sin hating God. Let's do away with words like Reverence, Holiness, Righteous fear. Let's do away with the words Sin, Sinner, Judgement and Hell. Let's do away with those old hymns which have been sung by the Saints for hundreds of years. And in the place of all of these things, let's put in dancing in the aisles. Bouncing up and down during the singing. And of course, loud amped up music. Let's not hear sermons anymore which speak of an accountability to God for one's own sin. Let's have short 10 minute talks. Which motivate us. And make us feel good. Yes these are the sorts of things which we can invite people to and they might like us. They might even join us. How wonderful. But let's certainly not do or say anything which is going to offend people. Let's call it church, for the unchurched!

Brothers and sisters, the problem with all of this kind of thinking is that it leaves no room for the Holy Spirit to “blow where He wills”, as the scriptures say. And also, Romans 12:1-2 “therefore I urge you brothers in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. This is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” But what is Paul saying? The church should not be like the world! When people come among us because of our example having been “transformed” by the word of God, if they would be with us and desire to be of us, then they too would seek to become more like Christ. As we saw earlier in this series, bringing the world into the church is a recipe for disaster. We are not to be transformed by the world; it needs to be transformed by us!

And perhaps the greatest tragedy with this ‘church growth principles’ kind of thinking comes when people are choosing a place to worship! Very often people don't come to a decision of where they fellowship with their spiritual eyes open. They look only with their eyes of flesh. I don't know how many times I've heard someone say: ‘Oh we've decided to go there because the kids like it’. Or, ‘we are going there for the kids’. Beloved, if there is a less upright and less biblical reason to attend a congregation, I don't know what it is. For a family, to be LED spiritually because of the physical needs of the children is absolutely horrendous. Proverbs 1:8-9 “listen my son to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching. They will be a garland to grace your head and a chain around your neck.” And Proverbs 22:6 “train your child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.” What was King Solomon saying? A child's upbringing depends upon its parents not only physically but spiritually. It was never intended by God to be the other way around. A child learns from their parents to “Keep the Sabbath holy” . If the family's focus upon the Lord's day is the pursuit of a child's sporting prowess and achievements and commitments, it is little wonder then when they don't walk in the ways of Jesus. To choose the place of worship because it suits your children: what could God possibly think of this?

Instead, these are the questions which should be explored when finding a spiritual home: Firstly, does the place honour God? Secondly, do they preach the truth of God unbridled? Thirdly: Are they biblically sound? Fourthly: are they a loving church? Fifthly: Do they seek to live what they proclaim? Sixthly: Do they welcome all who come? Seventhly: Do they embrace you as one of their own? Eighthly: Is there a need in this place that God has given me the gifts and abilities to meet? (This question, may I suggest, that you will have to dig long and hard to find if anyone amongst those looking for a place to fellowship is actually asking). Yes “Lord here am I send me”.

Friends, I love this about our gatherings: though we are a small group of Christ people, there is always someone who is ready to put their hand up. Praise God. It's such a blessing. And if we would really like to know Christ's Church growth principles for His church, we have them all spelled out before us in verse 41: “they devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” Listen to how the old Collins dictionary defines the word devoted: ‘To vow. To dedicate. To consecrate. To give oneself wholly to’. So they vowed, they dedicated, they consecrated and they gave themselves wholly to “the teaching of the apostles.”

Now I don't know about you brothers and sisters, but this is a real slap on the back of the head for me, because yes, there are moments of real commitment; but to vow, dedicate, consecrate, give myself wholly to? No my life is not filled with these things. No these descriptions speak of the Bereans. Acts 17:11 “now the Bereans were of a more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.” The Bereans “devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching.” It wasn't a casual or a passing interest for them. They studied these things in a manner as though they're very lives depended upon them and they did. And yet Beloved, it wasn't their physical life which

determined their zeal, it was their Eternal life! Devotion. Dedication. An avowed commitment. In all honesty, when putting this message together I felt like such a hypocrite, because more often than not, this is not who I am!

But friends, if our great desire is to see our testimony about and for Jesus grow in this place, then this is who we all need to strive to be! Luke begins his instruction to us by explaining the great devotion, the great hunger, (which the early believers had for God's word as taught by the apostles), which they had received from Jesus. Matthew 28:19-20 "therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And lo I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

And notice: "everything I have commanded you." Why do we need to study the scriptures so deeply? Why was there such a hunger in the belly for the early believers to open up God's word? Because the subject is so vast, even eternally so. And our need to know Him is so great. If we truly desire to live for Him in this world, where evil abounds. And where Jesus says "everything" in Matthew 28, clearly He is teaching us to beware of focusing only on those parts which we like, while neglecting those parts of the Bible which make us squirm. Those parts which cut us to the core!

Beloved, Bible study is not that place where a bunch of spiritual giants get together. It is that place where we can informally all come to learn. Sermons and worship are crucial for everyone who calls himself Christian. Hebrews 10:25 "let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another, and all the more as you see the day approaching." Yes worship is crucial, and yet where we truly grow as Christians, I believe, is at fellowship around the study of God's Word. So if you have wanted to come, but have I guess, felt intimidated or out of your depth, don't, because we will all sink or swim by God's grace together!

Then next Luke explains, that they "devoted themselves to the fellowship." In verse 44 he elaborates: "all the believers were together and had everything in common." Verse 45 tells us that they were very generous to one another as they had need. So this devotion" to God's Word, and their understanding of it led them in Christ's love, to in turn be devoted" to one another. Jesus said in another place "by this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you have love one for another". What is He talking about? Family. We are to love one another as Jesus did, unconditionally. We are to, with genuine care and consideration, bear with each other's weaknesses, as well as being blessed by their strengths.

The teaching; the fellowship; next is "the breaking of bread." Now although the same phrase is used when speaking of ordinary meals together in verse 46, here it means the ordinance of the Lord's Supper. Because think about it: the Teaching, the fellowship: what were these things all about? What bound them together? How did the believers get there? Do you remember Jesus' very own words? Luke chapter 22:19-20 "and he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying this is my body given for you, do this in remembrance of me. In the same way after the supper He took the cup, saying, "this cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." They needed to do all these things in Remembrance that it was only by Christ's blood were they saved.

Beloved, it is only by Christ's blood are we saved. It is only His Blood which binds us all together. We are people from different backgrounds, different languages, different places of birth and even different nations through our ancestors. And yet we have one Father, because we have One Saviour.

Brothers and sisters, these are the first three pillars of Christ's church. They are the first three growth principles of His Body, His Family, His Church.

And the final one, which seems sadly to be the least valued of them all today but is the foundation of them all: "they devoted themselves to prayer." It has been said by many preachers throughout the ages that prayer is the powerhouse of God's church. Without a real commitment to prayer the church's fuel tank is empty. We can make all of our plans and formulate all kinds of programmes, but without prayers being offered up to God, petitioning and pleading on one another's behalf; and for Jesus sake, so all things are done for His Glory and in His Name, we simply go in our own strength. And we fool ourselves that we are doing His Work!

So we need to pray. We need to commit ourselves to pray. Whether you pray out loud or in your heart. Or if you Amen what someone else prays. It matters not to God. When Hannah prayed for a son while in the temple of God when Eli was priest, not a single word came from her mouth. And yet God answered her by blessing her with the boy priest Samuel. No it matters not to God how we pray, for He hears the prayers of our heart. So, "the apostles teaching of God's word, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer." These dear friends are the four pillars of growth of Christ's church. And with this all important footnote: Verse 47b "and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."