

Churches that Grow, and Faithfulness to the Word

The director of the Glenmary Research Centre conducted a study and told the New York Times that he was “astounded” that growing churches were conservative, while “the more liberal the denomination, the more they were losing.” A person who responded to this sense of astonishment puts the issues on the table very well. He said, “There is nothing astounding about this. Churches that are faithful to their historic teachings, that offer transcendent truth to their congregants, that demand something morally of their people, and that believe in the need for personal conversion, have a strong incentive to grow. Churches that allow themselves to be defined by secular culture’s definition of ‘inclusivity’ and ‘tolerance’ have little to offer that will change hearts or inspire great loyalty, must less inspire membership growth.” [Source: “New Study Shows Conservative Churches Grow, Liberal Churches Declining” October 2, 2002].

Faithfulness to the Lord cannot be decided by statistical surveys. Large numbers are not an infallible mark of the church of Jesus Christ, because the kingdom of God is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rm 14:17), and only God knows those who are His (2 Tm 2:19). When the Son of God came to Judea, only a comparative few were still looking for the redemption of Israel. Jesus coupled God’s promise of salvation with small numbers, “Stop being afraid, little flock, because your Father has considered it good to give you the kingdom” (Lk 12:32). When Paul was discussing the sad fact that the majority of His own people had rejected their Messiah and Saviour, he quoted the Old Testament, “Isaiah exclaims concerning Israel: “Though the number of the people of Israel is like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved” (Rm 9:27). Of first importance is that each person looks at his own commitment to the Lord’s grace and only after that draws assurance from the conservative or liberal alignment of his church body. Indeed, many churches that were once faithful to the Lord’s Word have sadly gone wrong. Practising apostolic succession for clergy is no guarantee that the apostolic teaching continues in its purity. One can propose and defend a philosophy of the history of God’s people like this. Repeatedly a majority of people of who were once faithful to the Lord becomes apostate, and only a small remnant continues. At the time of the flood there were only eight people saved in the ark. At the time of the Judges there was a sad pattern of people turning away from the Lord. The Lord chastised them by handing them over to their enemies. When they cried out to the Lord, He raised up a deliverer for them, and then they returned to the Lord again, at least for a time. At the time of Elijah only ten thousand in Israel had not bowed to Baal. The ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom were taken into captivity and never returned. Those from the tribe of Judah who returned from exile were only a small fraction of the total number of Jews. The pattern continued in early church history. Egypt and North Africa around Carthage once had large numbers of Christians. North Africa supplied the Western Church with three important Christian writers, Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine. Now there are very few Christians in Tunisia and Algeria, and the Coptic Christians are an oppressed minority in Egypt. In the country where the Lutheran Reformation began, only about four per cent of the people now regularly attend church.

Philadelphia was one of the seven churches to whom the Lord sent a letter through the apostle John. The congregation was small. However, as with the persecuted church of Smyrna, the Lord had no words of blame for it. “Write to the angel of the church at Philadelphia: ‘The One who is holy, the One who is genuine, the One who has the key of David, who opens, and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says these things: “I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door, which no one can shut. For you have little strength, and yet you have been keeping My Word, and have not denied My name. Look, I shall make those of the synagogue of Satan, those who say that they are Jews, and yet are not, but are lying — indeed, I shall make them come and fall down at your feet and find out that I have been loving you. Because you have kept My Word of patient endurance, I shall also keep you from the time of testing that is about to come upon the whole world to test those who are living on the earth. I am coming soon! Cling to what you have, so that no one may take your crown.”’” (Rv 3:7-11) Particular points to note here are that the congregation was not large. However, they had a little strength, they had kept the Lord’s Word, and had an open door.

However, we agree that there is little that is astonishing in the survey. Children would have no respect for a teacher who taught two and two are four, but also tolerated five. When a church proclaims the Word of the Lord, with its profound issues of life for ever with God in bliss or punishment in hell for ever, it must say that there is no middle ground. The truth is truth, and error is error. Jesus told His disciples to shake the dust out of their sandals as a witness to cities in Galilee that rejected their proclamation. A person is more likely to take such an approach seriously than the approach of one who is prepared to compromise either the message of the Gospel or moral standards. People must understand that they reject God’s Word at their eternal peril. We can thank God

that it is His decision, and not ours, how much false doctrine and false practice any individual can tolerate before his or her faith is destroyed. Our duty is simply to avoid whatever is false and not be co-responsible for it. The Gospel according to John is a record of growing faith on the one hand and hardening unbelief on the other. When the dispersed Jews of the synagogues rejected the proclamation of Jesus as Lord and Christ, Paul and his helpers turned to the Gentiles. They did not pathetically keep appealing to them once their rejection was plain. People who listened to them knew that they expected results, either way. People are more likely to take seriously a person who speaks like Paul, "If anyone is preaching any other gospel to you than the one that you have received, let him be anathema!" (Gal 1:9).

Consider again the last sentence of the report above: "Churches that allow themselves to be defined by secular culture's definition of 'inclusivity' and 'tolerance' have little to offer that will change hearts or inspire great loyalty, must less inspire membership growth." There is a great deal here that should cause advocates of the modern falsely ecumenical movement some reflection. The movement is obsessed with external unity at the expense of clear confession of the truth. The Lutheran World Federation officially sponsors a policy of "reconciled diversity." Questions of the truth and faithful confession are submerged under this policy. It has resulted in the abandonment of the truth of the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Holy Supper in the interests of extending church fellowship to those who do not confess it under compromise formulas, as in the Leuenberg Concord in the 1970s. The Anglicans have been involved, in 1991 in the Meissen Declaration with churches in Germany; the 1992 Porvoo Declaration, involving several Lutheran churches in Scandinavia and Baltic regions, and the 1999 Reuilly Declaration with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of France. Anglicans and Lutherans in Canada entered into an ecumenical agreement, the Waterloo Declaration. Who is willing to stand up for the truth at the risk of losing popularity in such a climate?

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews referred to the nature of the Word of God. It "is living and active. It is sharper than any two-edged sword. It penetrates even as far as the dividing of soul and spirit, and joints and marrow. It also discerns the thoughts and intentions of the heart. No creature is hidden from Him. All things are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give an account" (Hb 4:12-13). A hammer with a cushion tied to it will not readily smash rock. Where the Word of God is not proclaimed clearly, hearts will not be moved to sorrow for sin and fear of God's judgment. When the sword of the Spirit is blunted, the souls and spirits of human beings are less likely to be stirred by the sweet message of God's grand rescue mission, His sending of His own Son to take our human nature and give Himself in sacrifice as the Sin-bearer of the world, and the proof of God's love and grace in the payment of such a great cost.

Each of us must consider his or her own commitment to the truth of God's Word, and then thank God wherever a church body proclaims it clearly and fearlessly. Each of us must pray for our own church, that that pattern of a large number becoming apostate and only a small remnant remaining faithful to the Lord does not include us in the apostate majority. Where iniquity abounds, and the love of many is growing cold, we must recognise the need to pray earnestly that our young will, with us, maintain their faith, remain unaffected by the "tolerant" and "inclusive" spirit of our humanistic culture, continue faithful to the end, and inherit the wonderful promises that the Lord sent to the congregation at Philadelphia: "I shall make the one who overcomes a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will certainly not go outside any more. I shall write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from My God, and My new name. Let the one who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (Rv 3:12-13).