

“The End of Christian America?-Part One”

Introduction

In some ways this is hard for me to realize but when this day comes to an end I will have completed my twelfth year as the Senior Minister of First Christian Church. It was on June 1, 1997 that my family and I first sat among you and worshipped. At the end of that service we came forward and became members of this congregation.

A lot has changed in those twelve years.

Here are some of the biggest changes that I see.

Some of the people who were here twelve years ago have gone to be with the Lord: Evelyn Fain, Ven Brice, Carl Harris, Dan Lay to name a few.

We are worshipping in a different place this morning than we did that first Sunday: old sanctuary vs. new sanctuary.

We are worshipping in a different ways that we did on that first Sunday: traditional service vs. contemporary service.

And the change that is most obvious of all is there are more of us worshipping here today than did on that first Sunday. Back then FCC Nacogdoches had about 320 members and averaged 140-150 in one

worship service. Today we have about 579 members and average just over 300 in two worship services. The Lord has been good to us and today we are stronger and healthier as a result of His blessings.

But while things on the surface appear to be good here, the news isn't so encouraging when you back up and look at the Church of Jesus Christ in America. I just finished reading an article that John Meacham wrote for Newsweek Magazine entitled "The End of Christian America" in which he documents the decline of Christianity in America. Here's some of what he and others are saying.

In the last ten years from 1990 until 2009 the number of self-identified Christians has fallen 10 percentage points, from 86% to 76%. Translated into raw numbers that means the number of self identified Christians has dropped from 258,000,000 to 228,000,000. That's 30,000,000 less Christians for those of you who like me aren't good in math.

The prospects for the future are even bleaker. The fastest growing segment in every religious survey is those who check "none". It is up from 5% in 1990 to 12% in 2009. And when you take America apart generation by generation it gets even worse. It's accurate to say that the older you are the more likely you are to identify yourself as a Christian and the younger you are the less likely you are to identify yourself as a Christian. A survey of "Generation Next" (that's 18-25 year olds) revealed that 20% of these folks identify themselves as having no religious affiliation or as atheist or agnostic.

The picture that is coming into focus for me becomes even more disturbing when you look at what I want to describe as the level of

participation for those who self-identify themselves as Christians. Most of the surveys I've seen suggest only 40% of those who profess to be Christians actually participate in the life of a congregation with any regularity. Translated into cold hard number this means that 228,000,000 people in this country self-identify themselves as Christians but only 91,000,000 actually participate in the religion they claim to be a part of. And many people including me want to suggest that really only about 25% attend worship with any regularity. That means only 57,000,000 out of 300,000,000 Americans actually bother to participate in the religion of which they claim to be a part.

And that's still not the worst of it. There is a lot of evidence to suggest that these 57,000,000 self-identified Christians are indistinguishable from their pagan neighbors. For example, alcoholism rates, divorce rates, and the rate for premarital sexual activity among unmarried persons is the same or nearly the same for self-identified Christians and their pagan neighbors. And no less than George Barna writing in 1984 had this to say about American Christians:

“Two out of five Christians maintain that an individual is free to do whatever pleases him or her, as long as it does not hurt others, Thus effectively rejecting the unconditional code of ethics and morality taught in the Bible.

Three out of ten Christians agree that there is nothing more important in life than having fun and being happy.

One out of four believers think that the more you have, the more successful you are.

The fact that the numbers of Christians who affirm these values is equivalent to the proportion of non-Christians who hold similar views indicates how meaningless Christianity has been in the lives of millions of professed believers.” (George Barna, Vital Signs,1984)

To put it bluntly, the current state of affairs among self-identified American Christians is not pretty and it likely to only get worse. It may be that I have overstated the facts. I don't think so. If anything I think I may have understated the case.

All of this is leading many people to say that it is past time for us to change the way we do church in America. The way in which we do church in this country may have worked once but it is not working anymore.

All of that is troubling but I want to move it from out there to right here. What does all of this mean for FCC, Nacogdoches?”

You heard me say earlier that in the last 12 years FCC has actually grown. There are more people worshipping here on an average Sunday morning than there were 12 years ago. Does that mean we have already made the necessary changes in order for the faith to be vital and real and for it to grow and that other churches should look to us for guidance in turning this situation around?

I went back and looked and the majority of what we have described as growth here at FCC has been what I am going to describe as the shifting of eggs from one basket to another. The growth here at FCC can't really be described as growth of the Kingdom of Heaven/God because most of our

growth has been by the transferring of members from other congregations. The size of the God's Kingdom hasn't really changed. So the answer to our question must be no.

So the only conclusion that I feel justified in drawing is that we must consider changing the way in which we do church here at FCC. Exactly what those changes will look like has yet to be determined. It will take all of our best efforts to figure out what needs to change and what needs to remain the same.

Let me be clear about this at the outset: our core values won't change.

Jesus was, is and always will be the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

The Bible will remain as the only rule of faith and practice.

The Lord's Table will always remain at the heart of our definition of worship.

Baptism by immersion will remain our method of baptism.

The preachers and the people in the pews will always share the leadership role of the church.

We are and always will be a congregationally governed congregation.

But it is pretty clear that something about the way that we do church must change and we need to identify what those things are.

Some of you are not going to like these changes because they are going to mean that you are going to have to change the way in which you do life, or change churches.

But a part of the reason that I am willing to start this conversation is I believe that most of you are hungry for these changes because you are hungry for more from your faith, you are hungry for a deeper, closer walk with the Lord.

We are going to start our thinking about these changes by looking again at what Jesus said to His Church in Matthew 28:16-20. It's always been my stated policy that when in doubt as to what to do you ought to consult the instructions. I will admit to you freely that I haven't always done that in my life and in my ministry. but at this age and stage in my life and our life together I don't really feel comfortable suggesting anything else to you.

In these verses I think we will find some important truths about the church Jesus meant for us to be. And I will also add that the church that Jesus meant for us to be looks a lot different from the church that we are. But I will leave you to make your own decisions in that regard as we look at these verses.

As a side note, I should tell you that this will very likely be a two part sermon. We're probably going to get through the introduction and point number one this morning. That means we'll cover point number two and three next week.

Both this week's sermon and next week's sermon will be available in manuscript form on our website for you to download and study and read.

So you can finish this even if you are not going to be here next week. And this look at the changes that we need to make will take us six months or a year or maybe two or three years.

Without further ado, let's dig in.

You cannot understand this passage without first understanding its context so let me lay out for you the context for the passage. This passage forms the conclusion of Matthew's gospel. In these words, the main character of that gospel, Jesus will speak the last words that he will speak to his disciples before returning to be with the Father.

In that gospel, we have read about Jesus' birth, his life and especially his public ministry and finally his crucifixion, death and burial. Then on the third day God has raised him from the dead. In a series of appearances to a variety of people the Resurrected Jesus has said that his disciples should go to Galilee and he will meet them there. Our text says that the disciples go to Galilee and when they see Jesus they worshipped him but some doubted. We'll come back to those words in a minute. Then Matthew in verse 18 of this text records words in which:

1. Jesus asserts his authority over everything in heaven and on earth.

Listen to them again.

“Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.’” Verse 18

Throughout Matthew's gospel Jesus has referred to himself using the title of the "Son of Man." You can read the following passages from Matthew to see this habit of Jesus:

Matthew 8:20, 9:6, 12:8, 13:37, 13:41, 16:13, 16:27, 16:28, 17:9, 17:22, 19:28, 20:18, 20:28, 24:27, 24:44, 25:31, 26:2, 26:24, 26:45, 26:64

Jesus has borrowed the title "the Son of Man" from the description of a dream had by the prophet Daniel which is recorded in the seventh chapter of the Old Testament book of Daniel. In the dream four beasts appear to Daniel each one more frightening and terrifying than the one that comes before. Then in a dramatic conclusion "the Ancient of Days," (God the Father) takes his seat while the last beast is slain and destroyed. In the final scene Daniel watches as one like a son of man is lead into the presence of the Ancient of Days (God) and he is given:

*"authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations, and men of every language worship him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom will never be destroyed."*7:14

In the words of our text Jesus is stating a fact for the benefit of the disciples which of course includes you and I. He is the Son of Man who has defeated the final enemy of God's kingdom and now been given all authority in heaven and on earth.

One of our favorite hymns says, "What a friend we have in Jesus," and Jesus is our friend. But we must never forget this truth. Jesus is so much more than just a friend. He didn't come to this earth just to lay down his

life for his friends. He came to this earth in order to reassert his rightful rule as the sovereign Lord of Heaven and Earth.

The first thing that you and I need to come to grips with is that a disciple submits themselves to the authority of Jesus. If we are to call ourselves “disciples of Jesus” then we will have to submit ourselves to His authority.

Asserted authority and accepted authority are two different things. He can say it all day long. The question is are you willing to allow him to exercise absolute authority over you? Does Jesus have authority over everything in your life? Are you willing to do whatever he asks you to do? Change whatever needs to be changed? Give up whatever needs to be given up? Sacrifice whatever needs to be sacrificed

I have put two questions in your outline that I am going to be spending some time with over the course of the next few months. And I give you permission to ask me how I am doing with these questions any time that you want. I also give you permission to hold me accountable if you see something in my life that conflicts with my stated desire to be absolutely surrendered to Jesus.

I want to ask you to spend some time with them as well. And if you take me up on the permission that I have granted to you, I’m going to assume that you are giving me the same kind of permission in your life.

Here are my questions.

A. Am I doing something that Jesus doesn’t want me to do?

B. Is there something that Jesus wants me to do that I am not doing?

Are there television shows that you are watching that you couldn't watch if Jesus was sitting in the room with you? Wait a minute don't talk to me about my television viewing habits. That's my business.

Are you spending money on things that you could spend it on if Jesus was with you? Wait a minute don't talk to me about the way I spend my money. That's my business.

Are you treating people in ways that you couldn't treat them if Jesus was present? Wait a minute don't talk to me about how I treat the waiter in the restaurant or the check out girl in the line at Walmart, that's my business

Are you dating someone who you couldn't date if Jesus was with you? Wait a minute don't talk to me about my dating life, that's my business.

Are you active sexually with someone that you could be active with if Jesus was with you? Wait a minute, don't talk to me about my sex life, that's my business.

Are you actively expressing your love for the last, the least the lost? lack of care for the last, the least, the lost, I go to church. I donate to the cause of Christ. That's my business

Until you are willing to surrender your will to His will in every area of life, you might want to think about calling yourself His disciple. I'm not

going to try and get you to reconsider whether or not you actually belong to him, just whether or not you can really call yourself a disciple.

Are you raising your children to be successful or are you raising your children to be disciples of Jesus?

It seems to me that one of the first things we need to change here in this congregation is the notion that Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.” That you can be saved and then reject the authority of Jesus over your life. That you can be saved and live the way you want to without any regard for how he wants you to live or what he wants you to do.

Therefore I make a pledge to you this morning. It is my intention to place my whole life under the control of Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God

The Greek King Alexander is usually referred to as Alexander the Great because he was and is considered to be the greatest King the Greek people ever had and one of the greatest if not the greatest military geniuses of all time. In just 13 years he conquered most of the known world and was never defeated in battle.

There is a story that has come down to us from one of his military campaigns that I want to tell you. Alexander and his armies appeared at the gates of a large fortified city and demanded that the authorities of the city surrender to him. The authorities took stock of their situation. The walls of their city were high and thick and seemingly impregnable. They had known that Alexander and his army were coming for many months and had filled the store houses of the city with at least a year’s worth of

food. Everything bit of food that they hadn't moved into the city for miles around they had destroyed. There was a source of water within the city that had never dried up in all the years that the city had been there. Their answer to Alexander was no. You cannot take our city. We won't surrender to you and your army.

In response Alexander had a company of his soldiers line up in full view of the whole city. Then he order them to turn right and forward march. A few yards away from the first soldier to their right was a high cliff. The line of soldier following the orders of their king and general to a man marched straight off that cliff to their death.

The city promptly surrendered because they knew that no one could defeat an army so obedient to their king.

Brothers and sisters that is the kind of obedience Jesus expects from those who belong to him. And that is the kind of obedience that will be required if we are to be the kind of congregation that helps to turn the situation that I began this morning with around.

Well that's about all that we have time for this morning. We'll continue this next week.

Conclusion

Let me close with this word of confession.

That has not been the kind of obedience that I have been giving him. So I have come confession and repentance work to do with Him. I am

confident that He will forgive me and cleanse me of all unrighteousness but I have to turn from my wicked ways and ask Him for that forgiveness.

Have you given him that kind of obedience? Do you have some confession and repenting that you need to do?