

“The End of Christian America?”

Introduction

Last Sunday I suggested to you that we have to rethink the way we do Church at First Christian. A few of you listened and said, “I don’t know preacher. A lot of good things have happened around First Christian in the last few years. It kind of looks like we’re doing something right. Why do we change anything around FCC?”

Here’s a story that contains my answer. Suppose one morning we all decided to sail from Galveston to Belize. We all load up on a big ship and away we go. The day is absolutely perfect for sailing. The sky is blue. The sun is shining and the water is like glass. There’s a light wind blowing. Let’s make me the captain and some of you know enough about sailing to put all of the sails up and we’re flying across the water. The men are dressed in khakis, polos and deck shoes and the women have on pastel colored sun dresses. We’re all having a great time, sitting in lounge chairs and sipping on ice tea, enjoying an absolutely gorgeous afternoon.

Then without warning the weather begins to change. The sky turns begins to darken, and the wind freshens. The waves kick up and before we know it we’re in the midst of a full-blown storm. The waves are crashing over the sides of the boat and the ship is filling with water. The sails begin to rip under the strain of the high winds. In just a few minutes we have gone from enjoying a pleasant sailing trip to a having our very lives threatened.

There's nothing wrong with the ship. The weather has changed. Another way of saying it is to say that the context in which the ship finds its self is different.

In the story it wouldn't make any sense for us to keep drinking ice-tea, and talking about the party tonight. If we want to stay afloat and get to our intended destination safely, we better lose the fancy clothes and put on foul weather gear, get to those sails down and make whatever other changes are necessary to see that we don't sink and that we do get to our destination.

In real life, there was a time when the weather was favorable for the church. Most of the people around us in the culture said they were Christians and the culture agreed that being a Christian was the right way to live life.

But now we are caught in the midst of the perfect storm of disbelief on the one hand and hostility on the other hand. The number of people around us who identify themselves as a Christian is shrinking and promises to shrink even faster as the older generations die and are replaced by new ones. On the one hand the people around us are disinterested in living their lives as Christians. And on the other hand, they are beginning to believe that everything that is wrong in the culture can be laid at the feet of Christianity.

It's not that there's anything wrong with FCC. It's just that the weather has changed and we need to adapt to that change in the weather if we're going to stay afloat and get to our intended destination. I hope that helps

you to understand why I believe we must change the way that we do church.

Last week I suggested the first thing we needed to change is the way that we live under the authority of Jesus in our daily lives.

So far none of you have argued with me that we shouldn't or don't have to live under his authority. You heard Jesus say in the first part of the words of the Great Commission that:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”

To continue the analogy of sailing, in these new sea conditions being a fair weather Christian just won't do. In these conditions we must live as people surrendered to the authority of Jesus and Jesus alone.

You know what a fair weather sailor is don't you? A fair weather sailor is a sailor who checks the weather before deciding whether or not to go out on the ocean. If the weather's going to be good, they can't wait to get into the boat. But let the weather turn disagreeable and they quickly decide to stay on the dock where it is safe and comfortable.

A fair weather disciple is obedient to Jesus when it is easy and convenient but when Jesus commands us to do something disagreeable or hard or dangerous, the fair weather disciple declines to obey and does what he or she wants to do rather than what Jesus has commanded them to do.

It never really has been ok for us to obey Jesus when it is easy or enjoyable but to do our own thing when he tells us to do something hard or disagreeable. But it is especially true in the new context we find ourselves. In the new context of a perfect storm of disinterest and hostility fair weather disciples simply won't do.

Let me get very specific here about what I mean. And here I'm going to talk specifically to two groups. First, let me talk to a group I'm going to call students. This is what I'm talking about in language I hope you can understand. Let's say you're at youth group on Wednesday and everyone is there and in a good mood. The game is fun and Mark's lesson is good and you are really feeling God's love warming your heart like the afternoon sun. In those kinds of moments it's easy to obey the commandment to love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind.

But then the next morning at school your best friend tells you he's got an advance copy of the new video game, God of War III and it's all about raining down carnage and destruction on your enemies, and he wants you to come over that night and play the game with him and you're about to say yes when you remember Jesus' command "to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." And you remember that at the very moment Jesus' enemies were driving nails into his hands and feet he prayed and asked God to forgive the people who were swinging the hammer.

All of a sudden obeying Jesus gets really hard. It means you're going to have to tell you friend that you're not sure that as a Christian you can play that game. It probably means that you won't get to have fun playing the

game and your best friend may think you're weird. To be more than fair weather Christians you are going to have to find ways of being entertained that are in keeping with Jesus' commands.

Now let me talk to those of you who are old enough to be called adults. Let's say you go to your small group and everyone's there and everybody in a good mood. The discussion is good and you're all pretty much on the same page and the prayers really touch your heart and you leave feeling as if God is as close as your next breath. In those kinds of moments you also find it easy to obey the commandment to love God with all your heart and all your soul and with all your mind.

But on Monday you pick up the newspaper and read that Obama wants to reform health care and bring socialized medicine to this country and it makes you so mad that your blood almost boils. And you want to tell somebody that the guy is a nut. And you want to shut him up and you just want to hit him. Or worse still you want to tell a joke about him that is disrespectful and tinged with racism so that you can discredit his ideas by discrediting him.

And then you remember something Jesus said about loving your neighbor as yourselves and you try to convince yourself that he's not your neighbor but you can't do it. In those moments everything in you screams, "no. I can't love that guy." If we are going to do more than be fair weather Christians we are going to have to learn how to love even those neighbors with which we disagree.

Both of you listen to me. Jesus is either Lord of all of your life, or he is not the Lord of your life at all. Fair weather obedience to Jesus simply

will not work in the midst of the perfect storm of incredible disinterest in Christianity on the one hand and rampant mistrust and hatred of it on the other hand.

I want you to know that I have been working on the two questions that I gave you last week. If you go to my blog on our website you can see a couple of things I've come up with and I promise you there will be more there soon. I hope that you are working on your lists as well. I hope that your commitment to give Jesus absolute authority over your life was more than just words or thoughts that crossed your mind for a few minutes in this room and then dissipated like the morning fog.

Now let's press ahead with our look at what is called the great commission.

In verse 19-20 which come after verse 18 where he asserts his rightful authority, and this is point number one in your outline

1. Jesus commands his disciples to continue His work of disciple-making.

As soon as Jesus has reminded his disciples that He has been given authority over heaven and earth, he begins to exercise that authority. He dares to command them by saying,

Listen again to what he says in verses 19-20a:

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” Verses 19-20a

This command by Jesus to his disciples comes at the conclusion of the twenty eight chapters of Matthew's Gospel. The first three chapters of the book document the genealogy of Jesus, the birth of Jesus, the visit of the Wise Men, The escape of the Holy Family into Egypt, the preaching of John the Baptizer, and the baptism of Jesus. The next twenty three chapters can be lumped together under the general heading of "Jesus busy making disciples."

From the very first moment that he stepped began his public ministry almost every moment of Jesus' time has been spent making disciples. He will devote the vast majority of his time and energy to the task of transforming these fishermen and tax collectors into disciples. Walk with me through the gospel of Matthew and watch as Jesus carries out the work of making disciples.

The story of Jesus making disciples picks up at chapter 4, verses 18-22. There He invites Andrew & Peter, James and John, Matthew and Judas to follow him, to become his disciples.

In chapter 4:23-25 Jesus preaches the good news, and heals the sick. Jesus is giving a demonstration of what disciples are supposed to do.

In chapters 5, 6 & 7 Jesus sees the crowds, chooses instead to go up a mountain, where he sits down and teaches his disciples the truths that disciples need to know.

He concludes his teaching with the comment that everyone who hears my teachings and puts them into practice is like a wise man who builds his house upon a rock. Just like rain and rising water and wind cannot destroy

a house built upon a rock, the life of a disciple who hears Jesus' teaching and puts them into practice will survive the storms of life.

Then in chapter 8:1-4 Jesus he heals a man with leprosy. He continues to give those who are following him a demonstration as to what a disciple looks like and what a disciple does. A disciple brings healing and wholeness to the persons that everyone else stays away from because of fear.

You can continue reading Matthew's gospel and what you are watching is Jesus making these fishermen into His disciples.

The gospels are in one sense a sort of encyclopedia of what you and I need to know in order to be disciples of Jesus. If we really want to be disciple of Jesus we don't need do anything else other than open up the gospels and watch as Jesus transforms Peter and Andrew, James and John from fishermen into disciples. In that process we can discover what it will mean for us to be disciples as well.

But there's something else here that is so obvious we have overlooked it. As he taught them to be his disciples, he was also teaching them by example how to make disciples.

The gospels are not only encyclopedias that contain all that you and I need to know in order to be a disciple of Jesus. They are manuals for making disciples as well.

Conclusion

Let me close by asking you a question. Can you make a list of the men Jesus poured his life into in order to transform them from fishermen into disciples? If I gave you enough time, I bet that you could name most of the twelve.

Whose names are on the list of people that you are pouring your life into in order to transform them into disciples?