

The Church in Decline

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I was sitting with a good friend on the porch at the Ponderosa recently. He asked me a very searching question. "Spiritually speaking, where do you think local churches are today?" It is something that I have considered many times. I could only answer from my observations as a pastor of many small churches here in the South over the last several years.

It remains true that Jesus Christ has not ceased to build His church – His spiritual kingdom. He will do so throughout history. It is also true that there are many birds (unbelievers) positioned in the branches of the tree that He is building (Matthew 13:31). There are many who comfortably sit in the congregation year after year who have never embraced the gospel of God's magnificent grace. They have learned to speak often-repeated Bible language, but they do not know the meaning of the language.

The proof to me is that people that I have had the privilege of sharing the gospel with and seeing them come to faith in Christ have been people that were members of local churches for many years, but they had missed the gospel. They have become comfortable with their supposed profession of faith in Christ, but in truth they had been subjected to a different gospel mentioned by Paul (Galatians 1:6-9). They would be numbered in the category of those mentioned by Jesus who had said to Him, "Lord, Lord," but in reality, they did not know Him (Matthew 7:21-22). This confirms to me that God's great adversary, Satan, is very good at blinding people to the truth of the gospel – very good (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).

The second observation is that there are many who have truly embraced the gospel but have remained baby Christians. They have failed to grow to maturity. Peter said, "As newborn babies desire the pure milk of the word that by it you may grow" (1 Peter 2:2). Note the phrase "the pure milk of the word." The Greek word for "pure" means "unadulterated" or "not watered down." Many in the local church have become dependent on what others say the Bible says and have come to lean on that alone as their source of Bible truth. These teachers have watered down the pure milk of Scripture. Weak Christians are drawn first to one teacher then to another. They vacillate and are never able to come to a knowledge of the truth. They have never learned the doctrines of grace. This prevents believers from receiving the necessary pure milk.

Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, "And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual (people) but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal" (I Corinthians 3:1-2). The word "carnal" means "fleshly." Paul had taught the people the ABC's of grace, and they had received it quickly, but when he began to feed them solid food, they spit it out. He had given the people ample time and necessary teaching for them to have grown up. They should have become profitable to God, but they had failed to do so on all counts. The result was constant division and strife in the body.

“For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, ‘I am of Paul,’ and another, ‘I am of Apollos,’ are you not carnal?” (1 Corinthians 3:3-4).

According to Paul, the indicators that there are babes in the congregation are jealousy and the tendency to follow human leaders. This becomes the source of constant turmoil.

The writer of Hebrews spoke of this same truth. He was teaching on the subject of Melchizedek. This teaching was hard truth. It would be considered by Paul to be strong meat of the Word. The result was the same. The hearers did not understand the truth of Melchizedek. The reason is that they had become “dull of hearing” (Hebrews 5:10-11). They spit out the meat.

The people had been given sufficient time and teaching to become teachers themselves, but they still needed someone to teach them again the first principles of the oracles of God. They had never learned the ABC’s of scripture. They still needed milk and not solid food. He then made his point. Everyone who receives only a steady diet of milk are unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. “But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil” (Hebrews 5:14).

I’ve heard these words repeatedly from the congregations that I have been led to: “That teaching is too hard.” The reason should be obvious. Christians have become content with drinking the milk of the Word time and again, and they never have moved into the realm of spiritual meat – the steak. We are living with the results in many local churches today. How do we motivate the congregation to keep coming? We entertain the sheep! We compete with the world for their attention and their loyalty.

But there are some. Some who have come to faith in Christ and stayed the course by taking in the Word and growing in grace. It is my view that today, in our secular age, this group is the exception and not the rule. They are living illustrations that Christ is truly still building His church, and He will continue to do so until He comes.