

3 Things the Church Is Not

"If we can just get them in church." I have heard those words time and again from a desperate parent; a hurting wife; or a co-worker of someone needing a life change.

How will going to church help?

Take a deep breath, pastor. I am not anti-church. I better not be, since I have spent two-thirds of my life pastoring local congregations.

I may understand what the statement means, but I wonder if they understand what it means?

The church is not like going to Rotary, Altrusa or Lions Club. Those are fine social clubs that do a tremendous amount of good in a community.

Church is not like that.

The Scripture calls church a covenant fellowship of people who have been called out of darkness into the light of Jesus Christ. The church is a family of brothers and sisters who have the same Father and Elder Brother because they have been born again through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit.

The church is not just a weekly gathering to attend and hear a good motivation talk or receive the latest self-help infomercial.

The church is not a club or organization to be joined. Most local congregations have a membership roll and give opportunity to those attending to unite in membership. The membership class and requirements may seem like joining a society or a club.

Indeed, there have been times in history when the church organizations have allowed themselves to devolve into that

level of organization. The generation between the Pilgrims and Puritans who settled America and the generation of the First Great Awakening had become just that. The church was losing the younger generation, who were moving into new regions of the frontier; busy building homes; and starting businesses. They were not committed to the faith of their fathers and grandfathers; rarely read the Bible and were not consistent in church attendance.

In an effort to hold onto the younger generation, the church's leaders came up with the "halfway covenant." That would allow those who had not been born again to join the church but with limited privileges.

A similar time arose in the American church during the close of the 19th century and the early years of the 20th century. The revivals of D.L. Moody were over. Higher Criticism had leaped the Atlantic and was making its way into the universities and seminaries. Churches that carried the torch of the gospel and opened their pulpits to Moody, Billy Sunday and the great evangelists of the previous era were now focused on the social ills and providing societies and clubs for curing such ills. The message, "You must be born again," was no longer being heard in those pulpits.

God was faithful. A fresh wind of the Holy Spirit gave birth to a new move of God in the southeast, the mid-west and California. It would sweep the world, bringing the fire of the Holy Spirit and the life-transforming message, "You must be born again."

Jesus made it so clear. "Truly, truly I say to you, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). When the crowds heard the sermon of the apostle Peter on the Day of Pentecost, they asked, "What shall we do?" Peter answered, "Repent and be baptized every one of you." That is what brings true change in life. If we are getting them to church so they will hear the call to be born again, that will

make the difference.

Have we forgotten mankind's heart is desperately wicked? From the womb we are born with a heart that runs after sin. There is evil in the world because the hearts of men and women are evil. It is not self-help books; 12-step programs; or psychotherapy that will change them. They must have a heart change.

The heart of a person will only change through the regenerating power and new birth of the Holy Spirit. That is what the apostle Peter was talking about when he called the people to "repent and be baptized."

New birth and regeneration takes place in the heart that will truly repent and confess their sins to the Lord Jesus Christ and allow the Holy Spirit to wash their heart and give them new life.

As the apostle Paul said, "Do you not know that we who were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him by baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:3-4).

Motivational sermons are encouraging.

This busy culture needs good time-management skills.

Marriage and parenting skills are desperately needed.

People are broken, emotions are damaged, and minds are troubled.

But the message that will bring the life-transformation is, "You must be born again." They don't need a religious experience that will inoculate them but a heart-changing experience with the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit that will make them new men and new women.

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