

Wilderness Christianity: A Challenge to the 21st-Century Church

The church in the United States sits atop a fulcrum, teetering between going on with God or settling for a weekly dose of good news and a handshake.

The problem is, not to go on with God makes for a church that is 1,000 miles wide and only one inch deep. To go on with God means to break through the self-made boundaries of experience and feelings and could hold incredible implications for the multitudes in the valley of decision.

I have always challenged believers to consider this: You are as close to God as you choose to be.

It's time to stir the pot. In this three-part series, I am going to put forth three statements for your consideration, your prayerful consideration, and then allow the dust to settle where it will. The first may not have the sting of the last two, but it is no less critical in the all-important plea for churches to think long and hard about discipleship.

Simply put, too many of us are more content with 40 years in the wilderness ... the desert, and far too content with simply having Moses go up the mountain to meet with God and then come back and tell us what God has to say ... or in the modern vernacular, we will do what we do all week long and then have the pastor tell us what God has to say to us on Sunday.

The momentum so desperately needed at this hour is the simple work of transformation and being transformed. It's basic Romans 12 kind of stuff.

Rebuke No 1: *It is absolutely possible to love God with all of*

your heart, even to serve Him regularly, and not have His mind on many of the most critical issues of our day. It is possible to LOVE Him, and yet not KNOW Him. For so many in our churches today to not have His mind on the issues of the day, secular and spiritual, places the church in a very precarious position both inside and outside the walls of the church.

Ray McCauley, pastor of a 48,000-member church in South Africa, spoke to our staff one week and told us of his early days as pastor and of this much smaller church in its infancy. He said Apartheid had so entrenched the culture that it affected even the church. He said he knew he had serious issues to confront in the early days. He said this: They (the church members) would go to church as racist as they could be, have incredible Holy Ghost services (in their mind), sing their praises, pray their prayers and have great services. But when they walked out the door, they were still just as racist as when they walked in.

Central to this issue is the paradigm shift of the 21st century to such a strong emphasis on the Sunday-morning experience. Many times this experience comes at the expense of the educational and discipleship programs that were once hallmarks of the evangelical church. The Sunday morning experience—and even special events and conferences—can absolutely provide the inspiration and the motivation that can bring a person to a point of decision, even action, and therefore has incredible value in the life of the believer and the life of the church. As an educational model, it falls far short of building the foundational truths into the life of a Christian. It simply does.

So where does that leave you, and what implications does this have for your congregation, or for you as a believer? It means that it does not matter how you feel every week when you leave church, no matter how powerful the preaching or how incredible the praise and worship. The stuff of life happens in the Monday-through-Saturday part of the week, and for that, you

will need more. Our people will need more.

Our people simply must begin to add more truth to the truth they already have and commit to grow in their faith and in their knowledge and understanding of the Word of God. To do less will result in spiritual starvation and lives ruled by the confines of your mortal mind, despite that “belly full” feeling you have every Sunday when you leave church.

I remember attending a really large event once—over 500,000 people—most of whom were teens. They had been at an open-air conference all week long in the evenings in Denver, Colorado. But on Friday of that week they marched from what was then called Mile High Stadium all the way to a field in Cherry Creek. After a great and emotional service that night in that field, and after a long night of camping out, there was to be a huge service that Saturday morning to cap off the week. It was amazing.

But what happened about two hours into that morning’s festivities is something I will never forget. As the heat and altitude began to kick in, teens started dropping like flies. It a near disaster and the National Guard was even called in. I spent the next two hours scooping up teens in my arms and rushing them to medic tents, and some were then transported to local hospitals.

In the week after that event, I remember watching the news reports closely to see how it would be reported. As it turns out, there was a very commonsense explanation for what happened. The kids had basically filled up on junk food and soda all week long, and then when they had to function in that August Colorado, heat their dehydration kicked in and their bodies simply could not hold up.

Now catch this: They had all they wanted to eat, and they had all they wanted to drink, but in the heat of the day, what they chose to eat and drink could not sustain life. They

“felt” full and didn’t “feel” thirsty ... but their bodies lacked the nutrients needed for life ... a life lived in the heat. Far too many believers in the U.S. are living on a diet that will not sustain life in heat of their week if something does not change.

Barna has conducted studies over the years that show, time and time again, that so many of the beliefs and values of the world are not much different within the walls of our churches on issues such as cohabitation, gambling, adultery, homosexuality, abortion, pornography and profanity. How can this be?

How can a person stand with hands raised to God, weeping and crying out to Him in love and worship, yet walk out thinking and acting just like the world? Simply put, any decision to follow Christ does not supernaturally impart the wisdom found in God’s Word. That takes work. Too many want the relationship without doing the things that make for a healthy relationship. Am I suggesting a salvation based on works? Of course not, but I am saying that any good relationship takes work—it just does.

I believe there are sincere Christians in the church today who truly love the Lord their God with all of their hearts and with all of their souls but not with their minds—some by ignorance (they simply do not know what God says about this or that) and some by willful rebellion (they want to be their own boss). But for far too many, the problem lies at the feet of a church that does not disciple, teach, or mentor the rank-and-file attendee. Far too often, we “service” them with powerful services and send them on their way, feeling better but unchanged in their thinking and in their understanding of God’s word and His ways.

“Churches can function and even prosper numerically for a time without being biblically sound or focused. God removed His presence from the Temple as recorded in Ezekiel 10. Even so,

temple worship continued for hundreds of years.” –Richard Ross

Simply put, the mind of man will never think the thoughts of God without a transformation of the mind. It is in this transformation that two things will be required: (1) Surrender of our right to be independent, self-determining agents; and (2) Submission to the authority of God’s Word and His will. Our love for Jesus is not measured by our deeds or even by our worship or devotions ... no that love is tested in light of Luke 6:46: *But why do you call me “Lord, Lord” and do not the things which I say?* And again in 1 John 2:3-4: *“Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, ‘I know Him’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.*

In my recent article, “Re-thinking Discipleship” on , I outlined keys to developing an effective discipleship program. But really the question is simply this: How are you growing your people *beyond* the Sunday experience? How are you equipping? When are you teaching God’s Word *beyond* the Sunday service?

I believe the true health of your church lies a whole lot more in the answer to those questions and a whole lot less in your numbers and Sunday experiences. Our people must walk into the heat of day the minute they leave your front doors ... give them soil to put down roots into the truth of who God is, His ways, and His purpose. They have made decisions at your altars to help them know the miracle of transformation by the renewing of their mind. Grow them. Mentor them. Walk with them. There is a hunger ... and a window.

Note: In part two of this series, I’ll address praise and worship—could these God ordained activities be one of the greatest obstacles to spiritual growth? {eoa}

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