A Church for All Times

Jerry Watts

1 Corinthians 9:19-27

* We’re in a mess. As a country, we’re in a mess. Just take a look at our national politics. While many of us believe God intervened in our Presidential election, our president-elect cannot solve our problems, God may have granted us 4 years for His Children to act.” As a culture, we’re in a mess. Our morals have disintegrated. In my short life span, we have gone from moral to immoral & to amoral. As a community, we’re in a mess. Drugs, gangs, & teenage pregnancy is running wild. But also as the church in America, we are in a mess. When we take an honest look at our culture, country, & communities, we discover disintegration that is unparalleled.
* For me, it is no coincidence that at the same time the country is in decline that the local church is in decline. Depending on who you read (and believe), between 70% up to 90% of local churches are plateaued or declining. And of the 10%-30% of churches listed as ‘growing churches’, a vast majority are not baptizing many at all. Churchleadership.org tells us that we start 1000 new churches every year in America. That sounds good until you are faced with the complete report which says that 4000 churches close their doors every year. If this is not bad enough, 2.7 million church members fall into inactivity each year.
* **This world has a deep need for the authentic church, that is, an authentic church** – BIBLICALLY.
* Taking a look at the USA church is somewhat disturbing. Because the only hope for this world is Jesus, the only hope that this world will find Jesus is found in HIS CHURCH, and the only hope for HIS church to give Jesus to the world is for the church to take hold of the never changing gospel & give it to an ever-changing culture speaking the language that the 21st century lost person will hear and understand.
* IN just a second we are going to read out text and I will offer you 4 things which every Authentic Church needs to become “A Church for Today.”
* Before I get to our text, may I offer you one snippet, it comes from 1 Thessalonians 5:17. We need to have Consistent Prayer always. – Paul tells the church at Thessalonica to, among other things, “Pray without ceasing.” In other words, make prayer your first option, not your last resort. Prayer is not simply the pause before a meal (although you do that), the ending of a service (we do that), or the beginning of some meeting (we should do that), prayer is the one time in our life that we speak to someone who has the ability to take care of anything we need. Prayer is the avenue by which we develop our relationship with the Creator of the universe. Today I call you to pray. Pray daily, regularly, passionately, & consistently. Pray like everything depends on your prayers. Don’t simply be a church that prays, but be or become a praying church. The story is told of a church that was having a ‘debate’ over a hotly contested issue when the pastor suggested that they ‘pray about the matter.’ The lady sitting on the second row said, “Oh goodness, do you think it’s come to that?” Here’s what you and I know, it never ‘comes to that’ rather it always IS that. Candidly, you can do nothing UNTIL you pray. It is only out of your prayers that you can know & discern God’s heart & His plan for you. By the way, this is essential to your relationship, it’s like frequent phone calls. (READ SCRIPTURES)
1. Clear Purpose – Purpose drives who and what we are. Read Paul’s words & discover his purpose. Jesus was the most purpose driven person to ever walk the face of the earth. He said, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which is lost,” His stories told about finding the lost & bringing them in.
* He found the lost, did something about it by dying on the cross, & then He gave us the mandate to ‘do what He did.’ In our text we see Paul who said, “Everything I do is for the purpose of saving people.” The Jews, the legalist, the non-conformer, & everyone else who didn’t know Jesus as Savior were the people who Paul set his face toward.
* The church for today must have a simple purpose; to reach the lost & disciple the saved. While we may do many others things (I.E. fellowship, ministries, etc), we must be clear about our PURPOSE in our purpose. Candidly, many churches struggle because they either don’t know, have forgotten, or have replaced their Biblical purpose.
* Twenty-five years ago, we sat in our first meeting with a Pastor-search team as a candidate to become the next pastor. After their questioning was completed they asked me if I had any questions of them. As I reached for my notebook full of questions I simply asked, “What is the main purpose of this church?” Have you ever sat in a meeting with 10 people & encountered 60 seconds of silence? It’s awkward. Finally, one of the most talkative member sheepishly said, “To win the lost?” Dear friend, in our two counties the statistics tell us that over 60% are lost or unchurched. My prayer is that we will covenant together in partnership to make our main purpose reaching those outside of Christ & His church. Churches do so many good things & have many good things. Sadly, some of which they are recognized for & others they are not. The danger for today’s is to replace the Biblical purpose of reaching & discipling people with something that is more culturally accepted.
1. Correct Philosophy - Theology is what we believe while philosophy is how we do what we believe. For the sake of time I will only mention this briefly – although Paul makes a big deal of it. Look at what He says beginning in verse 20 “To the Jews I became as a Jew, To those under the law I became as one under the law, To those outside the law I became as one outside the law, & To the weak I became weak.” In summary, “I have become all things to all people” in other words Paul says, “I will do whatever it takes to fulfill this mission which Jesus gave me when He saved me on the Damascus road.” Did you catch that? In his book “7 Habits for the Highly Effective Person”, Steven Covey writes to ‘begin with the end in mind.’
* Here’s a question: what if we were to come to this part of Greene County from a distant place & there was no church building, no history, no tradition, and no ‘trappings’ of a church; and we came simply to bring the light of the gospel of Christ here that people would be saved; what might we do differently than we are doing now?
* The correct philosophy for the church is to embrace our purpose seeing what our Lord expects us to do, then through our prayers we form or fashion a way that will fulfill the purpose that Christ has given to us. I have often wondered how this might change the church, if we were to do this. What would change? Knowing Jesus’ commission, are we fulfilling it?
1. Common Passion – Sometimes we Baptists get nervous when the preacher talks about being passionate as believers. It’s not like we’re an ‘unpassionate’ or ‘dispassionate’ people, but we are quite selective of what we are passionate about. For 10 years in Alabama I preached hard that we should be as passionate about Jesus as we were about our football. Jesus deserves as much energy & enthusiasm as a football team does. Paul uses the illustration of a competing running who gets ready to run a race. In Paul’s view, no one runs just to run – everyone runs & even trains for running with one goal in mind – TO WIN!! Paul is telling us to the run the race for Christ with the same passion we run the race of life – TO WIN!! Dear folks, Jesus didn’t suffer the pain & shame of the cross that we could take a laid back approach to our eternal destiny or the eternal destination of those in our frame of influence. He wants us to be so passionately in love with & committed to Him that we offer Him our best, give Him our best, & show the world His best in us. A church for today, a church that will bridge the generation gap and reach the next generation is a church that is passionate about Jesus & His mission.
* Have you picked up these 4 attributes? How can it be that we embrace, “Consistent Prayers, Common Passion, Clear Purpose, & Correct Philosophies?” The answer is found in verse 19:
1. Changed People – Paul says, “I am free from all men, traditions, & anything else which might hinder me.” Paul knew what it was to be controlled by flawed philosophies, false traditions, & a faulty belief system. He was literally in bondage UNTIL He met Jesus. When He met Jesus on the Damascus road, His life, His purpose, His heart, & His all was changed; & do you know why? Yes, you do because if you have had your Damascus road experience of being saved – you know that changing lives is EXACTLY what Jesus does. He doesn’t touch a life without changing that life. What kind of God & Savior would He be if He came into a life & left it the same? The church for today must be filled with people whose lives have been radically altered by the saving power & the forgiving power only found in Jesus. Changed people. Many in this room understand this truth because you’ve experienced it. It not simply about walking the aisle, being baptized, & having your name on the role (although all those things are important), rather, it is about allowing Jesus to walk with you, control you, guide you, & advise you in everything you do.
* Being changed means more than walking an aisle, taking a preacher by the hand, getting dunked in the baptistery, giving money, attending each Sunday, singing, teaching, preaching, ministering, or even going mission trips. Certainly all these should have a part in the changed life of an authentic Christ followers, but the change comes before the following. (2 Cor 5:17) The only way for the church you’re a part to be a church for today, is for you to be a Christ Follower today.