How a Great Church Goes Bad

June 1-2, 2019

Let’s begin with a prayer. Say after me: I love You, Lord…

*God of all creation, help me to stop and look around today. Help me to see whatever you hold for me. Whether it be in the budding trees, the face of a hungry man, or the smile of a child, show me how to love You today. I pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.*

Today I want to talk about church and how great churches go bad.

Take out your message notes. I’ve prepared notes. They are in your worship folder. If you find them helpful, please use them, write on them. If not, please ignore them.

You’ll remember that when Paul was traveling and sharing the message of Jesus Christ, one of his stops was in the city of Ephesus. If we pay attention, Paul has some lessons to teach us. I’m reading from the New Revised Standard Version, Acts 19, beginning in verse 8…

**An Amazing Start**

**8** He entered the synagogue and for three months spoke out boldly, and argued persuasively about the kingdom of God. **9** When some stubbornly refused to believe and spoke evil of the Way before the congregation, he left them, taking the disciples with him, and argued daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. **10** This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord. **11** God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, **12** so that when the handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, their diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them.

—Acts 19:8-12 (NRSV)

**Go where the harvest is. Ignore the weeds.**

As usual, Paul encounters resistance, but he has learned that among the weeds there is still a harvest to be gathered, so Paul persists, first for three months in the synagogue and then for two years in a lecture hall. He is unwilling to give up God’s mission in spite of the opposition. After all, he had experience with this before. And here’s where it gets interesting.

Reading in verse 13…

**13** Then some itinerant Jewish exorcists tried to use the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims." **14** Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. **15** But the evil spirit said to them in reply, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" **16** Then the man with the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered them all, and so overpowered them that they fled out of the house naked and wounded. **17** When this became known to all residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks, everyone was awestruck; and the name of the Lord Jesus was praised… **20** So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.

—Acts 19:13-17, 20 (NRSV)

**Shabby counterfeits don’t compare with real deal miracles.**

When you are confronted with the real deal, counterfeits are not only detectable, but detestable. And that nicely describes these seven sons of the high priest as they manipulated and deceived people with their magic. But the evil powers of this world had their way with them and they fled away, naked and wounded. Paul never had to do a thing.

**An open door doesn’t mean an easy passage.**

But success in one city or at one moment does not mean that the whole enterprise will be successful. There were still some who actively resisted the Gospel message and were willing to use uninformed people to do their dirty work. This is the pattern, isn’t it, for Paul and the disciples. Sharing the Gospel can be risky business.

We know from Paul’s letters that, after he left a place, he continued to correspond with the churches he had planted. Timothy must have written to Paul from Ephesus, asking Paul’s advice. And Paul freely writes back, offering to Timothy all his wisdom and guidance. Here is Paul’s advice…

**Early Warning Signs**

Paul warns Timothy to watch out for false teachers.

So, we know that dealing with charlatans is still a problem in Ephesus.

Prayer and worship are fundamental to belief in God. We are to depend on God and no one else. There is a spiritual problem in Ephesus.

And apparently there are some leadership issues, as well, for Paul makes it pretty clear that a bishop, a major leader of the church, ought to be a person of great character.

Deacons, sort of assistant leaders, are also expected to be of excellent character.

Not only is leadership a problem, but there is a problem with some taking on the appearance of holiness by adopting extreme living standards. But here the problem isn’t real holiness, but hypocrites looking holy and acting otherwise.

Paul also outlines some qualities that Timothy should embrace to be certain that he is being the person of God that he ought to be.

Paul goes on to tell Timothy how to deal with particular groups within the church.

And Paul denounces those who teach otherwise.

And he goes after those who are greedy.

So, Paul has outlined how a good church goes bad, how the little, but crucial things, can taint the message and twist the word of God. Each of these things is a symptom that there is an underlying problem in the church. Something is wrong and all these symptoms paint a picture of a church approaching crisis… a good church going bad.

**Bankrupt, But Still Writing Checks**

Switch gears with me for a moment. The last book of the Bible is the Revelation to John. John has a dream that he was worshiping on the sabbath and he hears a loud voice ordering him to write a letter to seven churches. He turns around and sees someone who looks like the Son of Man dressed in gorgeous robes. He was glorious in appearance. He tells John that he is the first and the last, the living one. And he tells John to write these seven letters. The first letter is to the church at Ephesus. Here’s what it says…

**1** "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:…

**4** But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. **5** Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

—Revelation 2:1,4-5 (NRSV)

**They had lots of passion for God— but little love.**

All the warning signs Paul listed are symptoms of a bigger problem at Ephesus. But it’s hard for **us** to figure out what the source of the problem is. The Son of Man, however, knew right off. “You abandoned the love you had at first.” They were just going through the motions, making noise as though they loved God and worshiped in spirit and truth, but it was just noise, not real worship. The Son of Man called them on it. That’s the problem, he said. You really want to be involved with God, but you stopped loving God somewhere along the way. Unless that changes, your lampstand, your light, your church, will disappear from its place in heaven.

Every company of worshipers can have this problem. It doesn’t matter if the church is small or large, in Ephesus or in Springboro. Unless we practice the disciplines we have been taught— prayer, fasting, meditation, reading and study of Scripture, collective worship— we slip away and find ourselves doing things because they are duties, requirements, jobs. When that happens, we have lost our love for God.

All these signs Paul warns Timothy about… all these things develop when love goes missing and church becomes something we have to do. So, how do we love? How do we keep it alive and growing? How do we live so that we honor God?

Love is foundational to belief in God through Jesus Christ. God is all about love. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, given to us out of God’s pure and perfect love, tells us that. As human beings, we simply cannot receive total love of the scope and magnitude and completeness that God gives us and not respond with the all love we have. Without love, we can’t live into any of the disciplines. We can’t express who we are and why we breathe. We are helpless without God’s reckless love and amazing grace.

But here’s the thing:

**If I love God in Jesus Christ… I obey God’s commands.**

**All of them, not just the ones I agree with!**

**15** [Jesus said,] “If you love me, you will keep my

commandments.”

—John 14:15 (NRSV)

**36** “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” **37** He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ **38** This is the greatest and first commandment. **39** And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ **40** On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

— Matthew 22:37-40 (NRSV)

When we have love for God, we do what God asks us to do. Well, God doesn’t really ask, God commands. But we are glad to obey the commands because they are given to us so we might become closer to God, to live more wonderfully on earth with each other, and to humbly bear the name of Christian. God’s commands make us better people, more beautiful people inside and out, happier people, people with a purpose and a desire to be close to the One we love.

Love is so central to God and Jesus that when we love each other we are identified as followers of Jesus. That single thing reveals our identity as Christians. Love. It reveals our desire to imitate Jesus and our goal of growing toward perfection in love.

Paul went on to describe people who had love, maybe not perfect love, but good love, real love. Here’s what he said…

**4** Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant **5** or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; **6** it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. **7** It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. **8** Love never ends.

—1 Corinthians 13:4-8a (NRSV)

When we aspire to this kind of love as individuals, then we grow toward God. When we aspire to this standard as church, then we avoid the obstacle that nearly derailed the church at Ephesus… lack of love of God.

Then I read this, written by Matt Laney, the Senior Pastor of Virginia Highland United Church of Christ in Atlanta.

*Just when I thought I had heard every possible reason why many nominally Christian folk avoid church, a good friend divulged this: "I would go to church, but I don't like Jesus all that much."*

*I was astounded. I mean, what's not to like, and love, about Jesus? So I asked.*

*"He's confusing," she said.*

*It's true. [It seems like] Jesus was, at times, intentionally cryptic.*

*My friend wasn't finished dropping bombshells.*

*"And often, when he makes sense, I find I don't agree."*

*As startling as it was to hear out loud, I understood this, too. There's more than a few teachings of Jesus that ruffle my feathers like forgiving enemies, giving away all my stuff, and not cherishing opinions (a.k.a. judging), for starters.*

*Instead of agreeing with her, I croaked out a one-sentence sermon on the Christian call to see and live very differently blah, blah, blah.*

*"Sure," she said, "and when I find a church that does, maybe I'll go."*

*Well that shut me up. Hypocrisy is an all too common and convenient reason for avoiding church. And yet it reminded me that Jesus would be less confusing, and the church more attractive, if his followers were more committed.*

**Being an Out-of-Control Disciple**

So, today, I challenge you to be “out of control” in love with Jesus. Len Sweet is a wonderful church scholar and futurist. He wants us each to become Out-of-Control-Disciples of Jesus Christ, completely in love with Jesus, completely surrendered to God.

And I’d like us to become the Church of Out-Of-Control Disciples.

Here is how I understand that. I once was a control junkie, but now I am an Out-of-Control Disciple. I’ve given up my control of God. I trust and obey the Spirit. I’ve jumped off the fence, I’ve stepped over the line, I’ve pulled out all the stops, I’m holding nothing back. There’s no turning back, looking around, slowing down, backing away, letting up, or shutting up. It’s life played without Goal Lines other than, “Thy Will be Done.”

I can’t be bought by any personalities or perks, positions or prizes. I won’t give up, though I will give in… to openness of mind, humbleness of heart, and generosity of spirit. When short-handed and hard-pressed, I will never again hang in there. I will stand in there, I will run in there, I will pray in there, I will sacrifice in there– in fact I will do everything in there but hang.

My face is upward, my feet are forward, my eyes are focused, my way is cloudy, my knees are worn, my seat uncreased, my heart burdened, my spirit light, my road narrow, my mission wide. My fundamental identity is as a disciple of Jesus– but even more, as a disciple of Jesus who doesn’t walk through history simply ”in his steps,” but seeks to travel more deeply in His Spirit.

Until he comes again or calls me home, you can find me filling, not killing time, so that one day he will pick me out of the lineup of the ages as one of his own. And then… It will be worth it all…to hear these words, the most precious words I can ever hear:  “Well done, thou good and faithful… Out-of-Control Disciple.”

With you, I want us to make to up our minds to be a church of whom God is proud, a church that follows the call of Christ, a church that is so deep in its love of God that all those around us are blessed by our presence. Let’s be the church that enjoys the ministry we do and is constantly seeking new ways to demonstrate our love of God. Let’s be the church of love… love of God and love of one another. Let us be the Church of Out-of-Control-Disciples.

Pray with me…

*Almighty God of Love and Life, direct me today so I might show my love for you in every action I take and every step I make. Let my love for You shine, my heart rejoice, and my voice praise Your name. Teach me to love better and deeper. I pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.*