

True Church (2)- A People Under the Word

(Psalm 119)

I. Introduction

- A. There is a booming market in the US for European antique stained glass
 - 1. Glass was from churches that had declined and buildings were in disrepair
 - a. So the church property was sold and the buildings were demolished
 - 1) Part of the land was kept for small chapels for weddings & funerals
 - 2) Much of furniture and furnishings was sold to antique dealers
 - b. So the church's stained glass ended up in upscale American restaurants.
 - 2. Why did European Christianity decline to where they sell churches for scrap?
 - a. **Secularization:** People came to have a worldview with no room for faith
 - 1) Man made up his own answers; there was no need for God or faith
 - 2) Liberal theology gave up and gave into this creeping secularism
 - 3) The church declined because it became just like the world around it
 - b. **Traditionalism:** Even as it declined, church remained wedded to tradition
 - 1) These ancient rites and rituals didn't serve to connect people to God
 - 2) They rather made church seem completely irrelevant to their lives
 - 3) **Example:** Catholic commitment to the celibacy of the priesthood
 - 3. **Irony:** While these contributed to church decline, they are polar opposites
 - a. One makes church like the world; the other causes church not to connect
 - b. But either of those extremes will make the church fail in its mission
 - 1) If we become like the values/ideals of culture, we have no message
 - 2) If we fail to connect with the culture around us, we have no ministry
- B. Last week we started a series looking at what it means to be a true church
 - 1. Past discussions of this focused on externals—organization, worship, etc
 - a. Friend had a guy show up at his office, "*Is this church a true church?*"
 - b. My friend, "*Why, yes it is!*" Man reply, "*So why do you have a kitchen?*"
 - 1) In this guy's universe, a true church had no kitchen (we may be safe)
 - 2) "*True church*" was determined in comparison to others who were not
 - c. Surely there is a better yardstick than that! What makes a true church?

2. Suppose I asked for volunteer to read **Psalm 119**? (*Text of our last 3 songs*)
 - a. Only one Psalm... and the longest chapter in the Bible—176 verses!
 - b. **Psalm 119** is a acrostic poem with 22 stanzas and 8 verses in each stanza
 - c. It's acrostic in that each verse in the 22 stanzas begins with same letter
3. These stanzas stress different themes about God and the word of God.
 - a. So Aleph (vs. 1-8) stresses the blessings of obeying God's word
 - b. Beth (vs 9-16) stresses how we remain pure by following God's word
 - c. Many of these themes blend, and major themes reoccur (*point of lesson*)
4. Psalm 119 reminds us to be a church, we must be a people under the word

II.A People Under the Word

- A. **First**, Psalmist loves word of God. "*I love your law*" used 10 times (**127,163**)
 1. The word "*love*" in Hebrew means "*affection based on close relationship*"
 - a. It also means "*desirability based on preference of one thing over another*"
 - b. He expresses "*delight*" for God's law another 9 times (**119:15-16, 70-71**)
 - c. Psalmist treats God's word as representation of God Himself (**119:47-48**)
 2. Several words are used throughout this psalm that represent God's word
 - a. These include "*precepts*" (**93-94**), "*decrees*" (**12**), "*commandments*" (**115**)
 - b. The most common word here for God's word is "*law*" (50x) (**18, 20, 30**)
 3. This expression of love for "*the law*" of God tends to surprise Christians
 - a. Face it, we are used to the law being spoken of in negative terms
 - 1) We see the law through the lens of the Pharisees in **Matthew 23**
 - 2) We view law thru the prism of Paul's teaching on grace (**Rom 3:21**)
 - b. But these texts deal, not with God's law, but a perversion in legalism
 - c. The Pharisees and Judaizers turned the law into something self-justifying
 4. But pious Jews understood law as something that reveals God (**Deut 4:7-8**)
 - a. Law didn't primarily reveal God's rules—it showed God, His character
 - b. This is why the psalmist is so obsessed with the law; God is in there
 - 1) Old story of the boy on his birthday happily digging in manure pile,
 - 2) "*There's got to be Pony in here somewhere*" (OK, not perfect analogy)
 - c. But the psalmist loves God's Law because God is in there somewhere!

B. **Second**, the psalmist loves God's law, and he loves it all the time

1. His love for God and God's word is no passing infatuation—seeks
 - a. The image here is of constant study and meditation (**Psa 119:97**)
 - b. Psalmist has no clock; he stays up all night meditating (**Psa 119:148**)
 - c. He saw time spent meditating on God's law as time spent with God
2. You know, there are some wrong reasons to spend time with scripture
 - a. It's never a waste of time, but there is a wrong way to go to scripture
 - 1) If you go there to find what it is that you already know is true
 - 2) Have you ever done that? "*Where in the Bible does it prove...*"
 - b. What about doing your daily Bible reading because you know you gotta (*As I wrote that like in my notes, I realized that I had done my daily reading yet*)
 - c. This isn't just daily Bible reading, this is thinking about God all the time
 - 1) Remember **Psalm 63** that begins with a longing for God (**63:1**, NET)
 - 2) David also talking about staying awake to think of God (**63:6**, NLT)
3. Psalmist has a longing for God's word that sometimes keeps him awake.

C. **Third**, this focus on God's word helps to keep the Psalmist keep his life pure

1. We sang the song, "*How shall the young secure their heart?*" (**119:9**)
 - a. So what is the point of reading Bible? *Winning in Trivia Pursuit?*
 - 1) Who were the first man and woman? So what? Why know that?
 - 2) Do you think we should learn something from Adam and Eve?
 - 3) Are there lessons in temptation, sin and redemption to be learned
 - b. The point of Bible study isn't like, "*Alex, I'll take Bible Facts for \$100*"
 - c. Knowing God's word provided something that gave power for a holy life
2. **Point:** To focus on God's word helps keep us from sin (**119:11, 101, 133**)
 - a. Remember what Jesus did when the devil tempted him? "*It is written...*"
 - b. Point Bible study is that God's word is alive and powerful (**Heb 4:12**)
 - 1) That isn't true WHILE you are reading; you are usually safe then
 - 2) It's later when temptation comes that this word power comes to you
 - c. I've read stories of people being saved when a Bible deflected a bullet
 - d. Generally, you can't just carry a Bible to be protected— *we must read it*

III. Conclusion

- A. There was a Church of God in NC that was struggling financially years ago
 1. Someone suggested having chicken dinners on Wednesday as a fundraiser
 - a. Fried chicken was great, and the chicken dinners were a huge success
 - b. The budget balanced, but they continued to expand the chicken dinners
 - c. They closed the church and became “*Church of God Fried Chicken*”
(*Be a better story if they became Church’s Fried Chicken, but the two are unrelated*)
 2. It is all too easy for a church to get side-tracked and forget who it is
 - a. There are a lot of things that we do that aren’t primarily what we do
 - 1) We have been know to have chicken dinners— seem to eat all time
 - 2) We fellowship in formal small groups and informal friendships
 - b. There’s a lot this summer– *Upward, Camp Idlewild, Crocodile Dock VBS*
 - c. All of these can be helpful tools that point people to God and His word
 3. All are pointless unless they help us to live as people under God’s word
 - a. We can do a lot of things, but what makes us unique is scripture
 - 1) A true church is a community of people who live under the word
 - 2) That means that our choices, lifestyle, identity is molded by word
 - b. We are a people who know that somewhere in the book, we meet God
 - c. Thus we must be committed to reading, studying and following Bible
- B. I used to maintain a sermon-threshold was 40 minutes (that’s gotten shorter)
 1. Any sermon of 40-minutes became two sermons (finish on Sunday night)
 - a. Haven’t done that in awhile; we will tonight (*unless you want 40 minutes*)
 - b. Tonight I’ll make applications of what it means to be church under word
 2. Let me leave you with one more thought from the psalm (**Psa 119:79-80**)
 - a. The Psalmist prays, “*May my heart be blameless toward you decrees*”
 - b. Perhaps the problem with our Bible study is that it becomes academic
 - 1) We sit in Bible class, we run references and delineate the doctrine
 - 2) The psalmist here thinks that life depends on these words from God
 - c. He wants his heart to be blameless toward the decrees of scripture
 3. Is your heart blameless? Or does God need to gently break your heart?