

GOD'S CHOSEN INSTRUMENT: THE CHURCH

by Ray C. Stedman

I flew out of Denver, Colorado, to Peoria, Illinois, a few years ago. Not very many people go to Peoria, but I did, and I flew on Ozark Airlines because I wanted to get there the worst possible way! In the plane I picked up the little magazine that every airline has. My attention was caught by an advertisement on the back page that said in large letters, "When you understand that you can change the world, your life will never be the same again." Naturally, I was curious to know what it was that would make such a dramatic difference. Reading further, I saw that it was an advertisement for *Playboy* magazine. That irritated me a little at first, but then I thought that it is really true: *Playboy* magazine has changed the world.

A few weeks ago we had Brad Curl here with us. He told us how the *Playboy* mentality has brought immorality and open, recreational sex into public approval and this has absolutely changed the mores of this country. He also documented for us the things that the advertisements about *Playboy* never mention -- the terrible increase in teenage pregnancies, the sexual abuse of children, pornography directed only at children, etc. The result of all this mentality is that we are sacrificing our children upon the altar of our lusts.

Yet, as I was thinking of that, I thought, what a wonderful slogan for Christians: "When you understand that you can change the world, your life will never be the same again." You can change it, for the better -- that is the point.

I was in San Antonio just this last week for the dedication of the new buildings for Bible Study Fellowship. The dedication speaker was Dr. Francis Schaeffer. He, more than any other man in our times, perhaps, has become the prophet of our day, speaking to us in prophetic voice. He was weak from his struggles with cancer -- though it is in a stage of arrest at this time -- but he delivered a tremendous message to us about the Word of God. In it he made this statement, "The greatest creativity ever given is the ability of men, by their choices, to change the course of history." God gave man that creativity. That is the great dignity of humanity. The power to change the world -- that is what the church is here for.

We pick up that theme today in our study through First Timothy, beginning with Chapter 3, Verse 14. The Apostle Paul had left Timothy to take care of the church in Ephesus -- the city which I consider to have been the Los Angeles of the ancient world. (I have often said that San Francisco is the Corinth of the modern world, but, if that is true, then Los Angeles represents the Ephesus of the modern world.) Ephesus was the second largest city in the Roman Empire, the center of commerce, culture and beauty in the Empire. Its most prominent feature was the Temple of Diana, a temple dedicated to the worship of sex. In that city, given over to vulgarity, license, and sexual immorality, a church had been established for a number of years, and Timothy was sent to correct conditions within it.

The apostle has already reminded Timothy of the need for strong, clear, biblical teaching to counteract the widespread error in this church. Timothy is given careful instructions on public worship, with prayer and preaching playing a central part. He is also given practical guidelines on identifying the leaders whom the Holy Spirit chooses in each congregation, and how to bring them into the place of service and leadership that the Spirit intends.

In Verses 14 and 15 we have marvelous words from the apostle concerning the church itself:

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these instructions to you so that, if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth. {1 Tim 3:14-15 RSV}

As we look at these words together, I hope we will see how far removed Paul's view of the church is from the disparaging, often contemptuous view of the church prevalent all around us today.

I read the other day a contemporary poem, written about the church:

Outwardly splendid as of old;
Inwardly sparkless, void and cold.
Her force and fire all spent and gone,
Like the dead moon she still shines on.

A lot of people today think the church is an anachronism, a hangover from the past, with nothing to say to the present hour. It is nice for people with a religious turn of mind, they think, but it has absolutely no contribution to make to the real problems that we wrestle with in the world.

I hope that is not your view of the church.

It certainly was not Paul's, because he makes clear that the church is a tremendously significant body.

Do not be misled by the phrase in Verse 15, "that you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God," as if these are regulations on the behavior of Christians in church services. If that were the case, one would expect a list of do's and don'ts to follow, such as, speak in low tones; sit quietly; stay awake; pay your tithes promptly; don't criticize the preacher, etc. But that is not what Paul is saying.

The church is not a building, or a meeting in a building, despite the common idea that the church has something to do with a building.

One of our scribes told me this week that he asked the owner of a coffee shop on this block the question, "What do you think of the church?" The man made a face, and said, "To me the church is nothing but a great big dark building."

Many people would agree with that.

Much has been made of buildings in connection with the church. The current issue of *Christianity Today* has an article on the effect of stained glass windows and various styles of architecture on worship. But the New Testament has absolutely nothing of that at all. In the book of Acts it is impossible to tell what kind of buildings the early Christians met in. Nothing is said about these buildings except the fact that one young man fell out of a window, having gone to sleep under Paul's preaching! There is no emphasis at all upon buildings, however.

I am not saying that it is wrong to have nice buildings. I appreciate the changes that have been made in our own auditorium here recently. But buildings are secondary or even tertiary as regards the nature of the church. The church is not a building; The church is people. Wherever those people are, there you have the church; and whatever work they are doing is the church at work. That teaching pervades the New Testament, and we need to come back to it strongly today. You will never find any concept of a church in the New Testament other than the fact that the church consists of people who have been born by the Spirit of God and have entered into a new lifestyle because of the presence of Jesus Christ in their midst. That is the church.

In this connection, I want to say a word about a subject that has always troubled me. Every now and then we hear mention made of "parachurch" ministries to describe organizations like Young Life, Campus Crusade, The Navigators, Wycliffe Translators, etc. I do not like that word, "parachurch." I think it is an invalid word. It refers to those organizations which are made up of Christians -- everybody knows they are real Christians -- but nobody quite wants to acknowledge that they are a church so they call them parachurch ministries. To me that reflects the ignorance that often prevails among Christians as to the biblical doctrines of the church. The Holy Spirit came only to build the church. He does not build parachurches, he builds churches, and people involved in those ministries are the church at work. They are as much a part of the body of Christ as those who gather in the local building on the corner. This is the church. We need very much to recapture that emphasis.

When Christians got together in the 1st century it was always a choice and valued experience. You cannot read

the book of Acts without seeing how they loved to get together -- in small groups, large groups, wherever, whenever they could -- because in such gatherings they began to sense in fresh and beautiful ways the reality of who they were and what had happened to them.

The Apostle Paul uses two descriptive phrases here to tell us what that was. He calls the church, "the house of God," which suggests intimacy and warmth, a family gathered; and then he calls it, "the church of the living God," which suggests excitement and power. That was what the church was, and is; that is the nature of the church.

We have largely lost our consciousness of what it means to be "the house of God." We have been so brainwashed by this sub-Christian concept that a building is the house of God that we have forgotten what the real house of God is. The temple and the tabernacle in the Old Testament are both called "the house of God," but it is made clear even there that they are only symbols of it. On that great day when the temple was dedicated, Solomon in his prayer said:

"Behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have built?" {cf, 1 Ki 8:27 KJV}

Though God filled the temple with the symbols of his presence, nevertheless it was nothing but a symbol of the house of God.

What is the real house of God? When you read about the tabernacle in the wilderness you see that it was the place where God dwelt among his people. It must have been an impressive sight to come up over the brow of a hill and suddenly see laid out before you the whole camp of Israel, 2,500,000 strong, gathered in tents around that central point, the tabernacle. There in the center of this great camp was this corral-like enclosure containing a rectangular building with a cloud, which flashed with fire by night, hanging above it. Within that tabernacle there was a holy glory, a strange, mysterious radiance that crept under the curtain that veiled the holy of holies, and made people feel a sense of awe and respect that God dwelt there. Yet, according to the Bible, that was but a symbol -- a vivid symbol -- but it was not the true house of God.

In the epistle to the Hebrews in the New Testament we are told, in the third chapter, that Moses served faithfully in that tabernacle as a servant in God's house, but Christ (the counterpart of Moses) serves as the Son in his house. Then come these electric words, "we are his house," {Heb 3:6b}. We are the house of God -- we Christians, we human beings, we are the true dwelling place of God. Does that do anything to you? God lives in us. In this decadent age the place to find God is in church, where the church is at work, where the people of God are. We are the house of God.

That is why, when we gather together in places small or great, like our gathering this morning or in smaller groups -- and especially when we set aside times to praise the God who lives within us -- we ought to do so with hearts that are moved by the marvel of this truth. God is our intimate friend. God dwells with us and lives within us. When we sing, we sing praises to the wonder and glory of that truth:

And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Savior's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! how can it be
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

That is what we sing about; that is what we praise God for when we come together.

That Thou shouldst so delight in me
And be the God Thou art,
Is darkness to my intellect
But sunshine to my heart!

We are the intimates of God. The amazing dignity conferred upon us by the Lord of Glory himself is that each

of us individually is filled with the Spirit of God, bearing the glory of God. When we gather together, the sense of that increases dramatically. We ought to be bowing in wonder and praise before the God who consents to dwell among his people. We are the house of God, the intimates of God.

The gathering of Christians is not only a time to rejoice in that intimacy of fellowship, however, for, as Paul goes on to say, we are "the church of the living God." That phrase was probably intended as a direct contrast with the temple to a lifeless idol, the Temple of Diana, which won Ephesus fame all over the Roman world. A strangely-shaped meteorite had fallen from the sky and superstitious pagans had seen in it some faint resemblance to a woman. They built a temple around it, calling it, "Diana of the Ephesians," and began to worship it. A lifeless piece of rock was the central glory of Ephesus and an object of worship throughout the Roman world.

But Paul says we are not like that. We do not have a powerless, impersonal God. We are in touch with "the living God." That suggests dynamic, and it ought to be a reminder to us that God himself is at the heart of life. This world does not and cannot function without the continual supply of life, vitality, and energy from the God who reigns over it all -- the living God. All the thrust and commerce of life is a result of his activity. As Paul said to the citizens of Athens, "In him we live and move and have our being," (Acts 17:28). Every human being in the world draws every breath by the grace of God. That is the God we serve -- the living God!

The remarkable thing is that the church is his instrument for change. He will not use anything else. He has committed himself to this body of people called the church of Jesus Christ. No matter how weak they may be, because of ignorance or refusal to understand and act upon what they are, God will never propose any other scheme to do what he has come to do in this world. It is no use trying to set the church aside. God will never permit it. He is committed to the church, so do not ignore the church. He is going to work through it, and only through it. As Jesus announced right at the very beginning, "On this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it," (Matt 16:18). He guarantees that to be the case. That is the church.

The potential for dramatic change that is present in every gathering of Christians is simply beyond belief. As I travel around, speaking to many different congregations, I am often amazed by the failure of Christians to know who they are, and what they can do:

- Every church gathering has within it, first, a silent, invisible power unlike any other power known to man. This power is absolutely unavailable to any secular source, but is the most dramatic and powerful force ever turned loose among men. It is called resurrection power. It does not make any display; it does not seek any propaganda or any support from outside sources; it does not need it. It does not rely upon money, though it can marshal great quantities of money if need be. The Scriptures teach us we have it: "according to the power at work within us," {cf, Eph 3:20}. Every Christian gathering has that power.
- Every Christian gathering also has new and uniquely individualized equipment that the world knows nothing about, called spiritual gifts. We all have them, every one of us. Spiritual gifts are given to us to build a dramatic new kind of lifestyle that keeps us alert and on our toes, expectant of what God is going to do next. Under pressure, under bombardment, under attack, yes, but never bored because God is at work through us.
- Every congregation is promised wise and pervasive guidance that knows its way through life, that understands opportunities, channels and doors to open that we have no idea even exist, but to which we will be led if we expect the Spirit of God to work in our midst to guide us. You cannot program it; you cannot anticipate it or build a five-year plan to incorporate it because you do not know what God is going to do. But the book of Acts is dramatic proof that God will work in that way.
- Every Christian congregation likewise is supplied with powerful and nonviolent weapons -- faith, hope, love, prayer, righteousness -- all these things. These are marvelously powerful means of attacking the social issues of our day and doing something at the gut level, the grass roots level, so that the problems not only are solved, they are in a sense dissolved; they start to disappear. That is the way the church is to work.

Nothing is more frustrating to me than to see the people of God, who are equipped with such wonderful possibilities, setting them all aside as though they were nothing. They then borrow the weak and futile approaches of the world to try to wrestle with these problems in the same old, tired, useless ways. Why do that, when we are "the church of the living God"?

Paul describes the role of the church in two dramatic words: the church is the "pillar" and the "bulwark" of the truth. The great reason for the existence of the church is to introduce truth back into a world saturated with error, with fantasy, a world that follows will-o'-the-wisp ideas that are paraded and exalted as though they were the acme of knowledge and wisdom. We live in a confused world and it is getting more confused all the time. In fact, if you are not confused it is because you are not thinking clearly! The church is called upon increasingly to speak the truth in the midst of that confusion, to point out that the Emperor does not have any clothes on, and to speak things that everybody thinks are heresy and radicalism because they are so different from the confusion of the society around us.

The church is the pillar and ground of the truth. You all know what a pillar is. The ancient temples had great pillars, several feet thick, supporting them. That is the idea: The church is the support of the truth. The uniqueness of the church is that it has been made by God the dispenser of the missing secrets that make human life function as God intended it.

These secrets are never found in secular authorities and writings. That is why every age makes the same mistakes, and every age repeats the same pattern. The world looks like it is going to go somewhere but it always ends up wrestling with the same terrible problems, generation after generation, world without end. The church is called on to shed light on that confusion; to teach people who man is, and what is his relationship with the living God.

Everywhere, on every side, you find people hungry for this. The cry of the world is, "Who am I?" "I've got to be me!" "I need to find myself."

It is to answer that poignant cry that the church has been sent into the world. The church is to tell us who we are, and what God has made us to do. The church is the pillar and the ground, the support, the defense, the bulwark and the buttress of truth. The church recovers truth when it is lost. That is why all moral recovery in a nation always begins with the church, with the people of God.

Any hope that we in this country will ever recover from this downhill slide into degradation and despair lies in the presence of the church in our midst.

But that also highlights the tragedy of an untaught church, a church that does not realize what it really is. In traveling around this country -- which in my judgment probably has the best taught churches of any country in the world -- it is shocking to realize that, for the most part, we have a biblically illiterate church in America. People do not know the Bible. It is not being taught; it is not being unfolded before them in useful and compelling ways. People are being given surface truths that everybody knows; Sunday morning messages become a parade of the obvious which everybody understands anyway. Little challenge is given to understand and see what is producing the world in which we live, and how vital it is that we function as God intended us, so that the world might be changed, and liberty and beauty be released into human society once again.

So the church is "the pillar and bulwark of the truth." The Apostle Paul understood that. He knew that the church was sent into the world to make a difference. He exhorted Timothy in this letter to help the Christians in Ephesus understand the mystery of their own being, and to understand that central mystery which we will take up next in the passage that follows immediately after this, the mystery of godliness -- the central mystery of faith.

God grant that we may learn again who we are and what, under God, we can do.

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