

### **The End of the Church as We Know It Out of the Saltshaker**

When I was in high school I visited with a lady in her late 90s in a nursing home who had moved to Kansas when she was 8 years old girl in a covered wagon train. As a teenager I could hardly get my mind around that concept. My first full-time church in Dexter, Kansas was more than 100 years old. We had an elderly lady there that would tell stories about coming to that church as a young girl and all of the horses and wagons tied out front.

But think about this. We have some people sitting here today that when they were born, they did not have electricity or indoor plumbing in their house. They can remember a time before television. They'll tell you stories about the whole family sitting together to listen to a program on the radio. Have them tell you about party lines. Some of you younger people can't remember a time without smartphones and Wi-Fi.

Airplanes, space exploration, moon landings, microchips, smart phones, satellite television, robotics, genetic engineering, cloning, nuclear medicine, nuclear weapons, genocide, biological warfare, terrorism, the list of life-changing developments goes on and on. Scientists and historians tell us that every five years we acquire as much knowledge as we used to every hundred years.

This constant change is redefining how people see life and what they expect from it. You see it's not just science and technology that's in a constant state of flux. Culture, values, beliefs, and morals are changing as well. A hundred years ago in this country who would have thought of things like abortion, hyperloops, colonies on mars, Caitlyn Jenner, or Kim Kardashian.

What's the church to do with all of this? Over the last few weeks we've seen some of what it's doing to the church. It's changing the church as we know it. The church came into this century modeled on assumptions and ideas that were geared in large part to the world of 1900. It will not make it out of this century the same way.

Last week we looked at Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:13, "*You are the salt of the earth.*" We talked about salt and its importance in Jesus' day. It was used not only as a seasoning to flavor food, but it was relied on as a preservative and as a medicine that made their world possible. In this verse, Jesus is calling us to be a seasoning, a preservative and a

healing influence in our world. In some ways, the church never changes. Our calling remains the same until our Lord returns.

This morning I want to try to put some handles on some of this. How can we be salt in our world? We've talked about this tidal wave of change that is slamming into the church. But what does this mean for us? What should we do? How should we respond? Let me say up front that I don't have a bunch of neat, tidy answers. We are dealing with some territory that is uncharted here. We can't say, "Here's how you handle this situation," because we haven't been in this situation.

I will be doing some dreaming out loud today. It's going to take some imagination and creativity. It's going to take some courage. And it's going to take a whole lot of prayer and trust in God. Sure we will stub our toe, and skin our knee along the way, but God's grace will pick us back up and we will keep on going.

For salt to do its work it must be applied. It must be sprinkled on, stirred around, rubbed in. It must penetrate and permeate. It does no good when it's kept to itself. Salt kept to itself seasons no food, preserves no meat, and heals no wounds. For decades now the church has piled up our salt in our churches, and we've told the world, "You need salt, We've got it, so come and get it." And for many years people did come and get it, but they don't any more. We can't just pile up our salt and expect them to come and get it. No, Jesus tells us to go. We must go to them and be the salt of the earth. The church must go in a new direction.

This new direction will mean changes for the church. There are three very significant shifts that are going to need to take place in the life of the church. I want to talk about those three changes this morning.

### **I. Outwardly Focused**

The first thing these changes will require of us, if we really want to be salt, is that we must be outwardly focused as a church. That means both as a body and as individual believers, we need to focus on what God would like to accomplish through this church beyond the walls of our building and beyond the immediate benefit of our members. We need to be mission minded, not just member minded. As a church, our people and programs need to be

intentionally aimed outward. Salt can't do its job in the salt shaker; we've got to be rubbed into the world.

Being outwardly focused is a lot easier to say than do. Steve Sjogren writes in his book, *Seeing Beyond Church Walls*. "The average church is by emotional and organizational default inwardly-focused." Church people have learned by example and by teaching all of our lives for generations how to do church a certain way. Most of it is very inwardly focused.

Most churches have a club member mentality. People look at their church as a club and their membership should bring benefits to them. Studies show that the vast majority of people who go to church go to the church they go to because of the benefits they get out of it, and usually these aren't spiritual things like great Bible teaching or good evangelism training.

Church today is very consumer driven, and built on marketing. This explains why so many can jump from church to church, even churches with vastly different, even contradictory and unbiblical doctrines and teachings. They are just going to get the latest benefit, the newest gimmick being offered. Churches compete to offer more and more benefits, but often they're just competing over the same group of members as opposed to reaching people who don't have a relationship with God.

But we aren't here to compete over club members. We are here to help people have a relationship with their Creator, and to love them and help them in their spiritual journey. Sadly though most churches don't look outward unless they think it will benefit them in some way.

I recall a time several years ago when in a previous church we had several new families and individuals who started attending and getting involved with the church. Several of them were people and families with less than perfect pasts. They had a lot of baggage. They had issues they were dealing with. Their lives were messed up. They didn't have a lot of money or immediate talents they could contribute to the ministry of the church. Instead they needed to be ministered to. They didn't fit the image of a good church person.

Then a new family came. This was a picture perfect upper middleclass family. He had a good job and they had lots of church experience, and one of our church members came up to me and said, "Now that's the kind of people we need at church." Several people made similar

comments to me. That's why Jesus said "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick," and "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners."

We need to start looking out. We need to look at the people Jesus spent his time with. Those who criticized Jesus accused him of being a friend of tax collectors and sinners, of welcoming them and eating with them. It should be our hope and prayer that we could be accused of the exact same thing. The future of the local church hangs in the balance of understanding her position not as a place to be consumed or fixed, but a place to be inspired, equipped in order to continue on mission throughout the week. What if we lived our lives as though we were on a missions trip? How does this happen? How do we become outwardly focused? Well, let's unpack this a little more.

## **II. Community Minded**

If we're going to be outward focused we need to be community minded. How will we ever impact the world for Christ if we don't even make a difference right here? We need to impact our own community. We have to think outside of the people, programs, and facilities of this congregation. We need to redefine how we look at and do ministry.

When we talk about ministry we almost always mean what someone does at church for church people. When we tell people to be involved in a ministry, we usually mean something at church. When we talk about people using their spiritual gifts, we usually mean doing something at church for the church.

Ministry isn't just about what we do at church. Ministry is what the church does for the world. Reggie McNeal writes in *The Present Future*, "The idea that God has gifted people only for church jobs flies in the face of his redemptive mission in the world." Ministry isn't just to benefit other club members.

God didn't save us just to get you busy in church work. This is why so many are tired, burned out, and unfulfilled from ministry. They are exhausted from doing church stuff for church programs for church people. They sense that something is lacking. They intuitively know that there should be something more, but they don't know what.

It's hard to get all excited about spending all that time, and effort and money to build a church to get more people to come and help us build the church more to get more people to come... well you get the idea.

God didn't put us here to build the church. He put us here to show his grace and love to the world. He will build the church. He will build his church. He will grow it thirty fold, sixty fold or a hundred fold. Our job is to plant seeds, and if you want to plant seeds you've got to get out there in the dirt to do it.

We need to shift our focus from church activity to community transformation. This is why we're doing the backpacks. This is why we're involved with ministries like Choices pregnancy center and Webster County Food Pantry. We want to make a real difference in real lives. There's a new ministry we are now supporting called Freeway Ministries. It is reaching out to those caught in the clutches of drug addiction and find themselves entangled in the legal system as a result. We will be hearing more about this ministry in the near future.

We need to not only encourage and equip people to be involved here at the church building, with church programs, for church people. We need to encourage and equip people to be involved in the world. We need to release them from the walls of our institutions, and let them go be salt in the world. We must get rubbed into the culture so we can season, preserve and heal.

We still need ministry here, sure, but we must broaden our perspective. Here is my vision. It is better to be involved in 1 ministry here and 1 out there somewhere, than just 2 here. If we all do this, we can make a huge difference in the world

### **III. Kingdom Oriented.**

Thirdly, we must become more kingdom oriented. For years the focus has been on growing the church. In the future the focus needs to be on growing the kingdom. We must shift our emphasis from the congregation to the kingdom. We have assumed that anything that grows our congregation, grows the kingdom. That is true to an extent, However, not everything that grows the kingdom, specifically benefits the local congregation. As a result the church has overlooked and neglected many important ministries because it doesn't directly benefit them.

Understanding our biblical purpose helps with this shift in focus. The church is part of the kingdom, but the kingdom of God is much bigger. The kingdom is global, eternal, and powerful. The kingdom is already, but not yet. It is coming but at hand. The kingdom is in your midst but it is not of this world. The kingdom is good news. The kingdom is within you. The kingdom brings righteousness and healing. It's grows like a seed, spreads like yeast, and is worth everything like a treasure hidden in a field. The kingdom is open to those who come like children, but hard for the rich to enter. The kingdom is like a banquet where the invited don't come, and the uninvited are brought in. The kingdom is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. The kingdom is the rule of God in the hearts of people. It is life as God intends it to be.

To be kingdom oriented means our goal as a church is not to get people to come to us. It is to get them to come to God. Being a part of the church is one of the results of having a relationship with God, but it isn't the goal. God hasn't called us to "church" people. People aren't lost because they are unchurched. Our purpose isn't to develop good church members, it is to develop fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.

We need to be willing to do what's good for the kingdom whether we receive direct credit or benefit from it or not. We have to remember that God is in control of this deal, and we have to trust that if we are faithful in fulfilling His purpose, that He will take care of us.

Sister congregations will have to quit thinking and acting so independently. We need act like different parts of a whole. Usually we compete with each other and try to duplicate each other's efforts instead of working together, building on our varying strengths. I think in the future we will have to act like different branches, or different campuses of the same church.

Rom 16:3-16

*<sup>3</sup> Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. <sup>4</sup> They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. <sup>5</sup> Greet also the church that meets at their house.*

*<sup>19</sup> The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house. – 1 Corinthians 16:19*

<sup>15</sup> *Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.* – Colossians 4:15

It's not about the congregation. It's about the kingdom. There will have to be greater cooperation between various tribes and traditions. Our differences will not disappear. Some of our differences are real, but they are minor in a pagan world. We can treasure our heritage. We can celebrate our distinctives. We can even discuss and debate them in a loving way. But the bomb throwing has to stop. Listen to where John draws the lines in 1 John 4:1-3:

<sup>1</sup> *Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.* <sup>2</sup> *This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,* <sup>3</sup> *but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.*

Sometimes I wish he said more. I wish he'd drawn more lines. That doesn't mean our differences aren't important, but in the face of a post-Christian world, those differences need to take a back seat. In Mark 9, the disciples see a man casting out demons in the name of Jesus. The disciples tried to stop him because he wasn't part of their group. Jesus told them not to stop him. *"whoever is not against us is for us."*

I was walking in San Francisco along the Golden Gate Bridge when I saw a man about to jump off. I tried to dissuade him from committing suicide and told him simply that God loved him. A tear came to his eye.

I then asked him, "Are you a Christian, a Jew, a Hindu, or what?"

He said, "I'm a Christian."

I said, "Me, too, small world. . . Protestant or Catholic?"

He said, "Protestant."

I said, "Me, too, what denomination?"

He said, "Baptist."

I said, "Me, too, Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Baptist."

I said, "Well, ME TOO, Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist."

I said, "Well, that's amazing! Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist or Northern Conservative Reformed Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist."

I said, "Remarkable! Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region or Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Eastern Region?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region."

I said, "A miracle! Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912."

I said, "DIE, HERETIC!" and pushed him over the rail.

Sometimes we have to unite on the basics we agree upon.