

BECOMING A GLORIOUS CHURCH

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Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, July 13, 2008

John 15:1 "I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more. ³ You have already been pruned and purified by the message I have given you. ⁴ Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me.

⁵ "Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ Anyone who does not remain in me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned. ⁷ But if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted! ⁸ When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father.

I have a question for you: ***What must we do to become the church that Jesus loves?*** Be obedient? Trust God? Worship God? Love our neighbors? Pray? Tell the truth? These are common answers. Now, I will give you mine: Nothing. Not one thing. Jesus loved us first, before we knew Him or cared to. He loves outright sinners, and gave Himself for them.

I have another question: ***What must we do to become the church that honors Jesus?*** All those things we already thought about, and more. A great deal. We can do nothing to earn His love, but it *what we do* that brings Him honor. "Let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father" (Matthew 5:16).

Much of the younger generation finds our brand of Christianity decidedly unchristian. After three years of intensive research among Americans in their twenties and thirties, the Barna group, led by David Kinnaman, released their findings in a book titled, "unChristian." The research identified six themes of misrepresentation.

Without question, the age group that they surveyed is a skeptical generation. 40% of them (24 million) are "outsiders" to the Christian church. Sometimes their criticism is meant to push our buttons, but that is not always the case. Many young people are genuinely seeking understanding, yet finding that the church — instead of helping them get *on* their way — stands *in* their way.

Another important statistic that may surprise you is this: close to the same percentage of 20- and 30-year-olds who are *inside* the church share similar perceptions of the American church.

These perceptions should be important to us for at least two reasons:

1. They represent the next generation of leaders in the church and the world.
2. They are the present field of our mission, the people of our lifetime that we are responsible to reach.

If we fail to faithfully present Jesus Christ to them, we will have failed God in our generation. If we fail to reach them with an accurate depiction of the Gospel, the church will be immeasurably impoverished in the next generation, and our world's leadership will become more irreverent and worldly.

The six themes of outsiders' perceptions are these:

1. *Hypocritical*. Outsiders consider us hypocritical — saying one thing and doing another — and they are skeptical of our morally superior attitudes. They say Christians pretend to be something unreal, conveying a polished image that is not accurate. Christians think the church is only a place for virtuous and morally pure people.
2. *Too focused on getting converts*. Outsiders wonder if we genuinely care about them. They feel like targets rather than people. They question our motives when we try to help them “get saved,” despite the fact that many of them have already “tried” Jesus and experienced church before.
3. *Antihomosexual*. Outsiders say that Christians are bigoted and show disdain for gays and lesbians. They say Christians are fixated on curing homosexuals and on leveraging political solutions against them.
4. *Sheltered*. Christians are thought of as old-fashioned, boring, and out of touch with reality. Outsiders say we do not respond to reality in appropriately complex ways, preferring simplistic solutions and answers. We are not willing to deal with the grit and grime of people's lives.
5. *Too political*. Another common perception of Christians is that we are overly motivated by a political agenda, that we promote and represent politically conservative interests and issues. Conservative Christians are often thought of as right-wingers.
6. *Judgmental*. Outsiders think of Christians as quick to judge others. They say we are not honest about our attitudes and perspectives about other people. They doubt that we really love people as we say we do.

The book is valuable reading, because it is based in actual in-depth interviews with hundreds of people, and includes responsive commentary from a wide variety of Christian leaders.

It is helpful to read because, though its content is intense, it is not dry, and the author has done an excellent job of digesting the research and providing practical suggestions for our response.

It is especially important to read, because it is always wise to know as thoroughly as possible what the challenge is before us, even if it seems daunting, so that we may offer informed prayers for God's guidance and help.

Having barely introduced its content, I will leave the chewing to you, and encourage those who read it to find others who have also read it and begin dialogue about its implications for your lives and our church.

Today, I will simply make a few general comments about the process of change or renewal that must evidently take place.

It does not begin with behavior modification. It begins with heart transformation.

Behavior modification is the designed outcome of legalism — the application and enforcement of stringent rules for the sake of appearances. And legalism is antithetical to Biblical Christianity.

Behavior modification produces hypocrisy, elitism, self-righteousness, and condemnation, because those who manage to change become puffed up about their achievements and inevitably look down on those who have not managed so well. And soon enough, their own resolve fails, but out of shame they manage to keep up appearances — to pretend.

Heart transformation — sometimes called spiritual formation — is not an outcome, so much as a process. While definite changes *are* produced, they are not the end in themselves, but more like mile markers along a journey of thousands of miles — each significant, but only a tiny piece of a much

larger goal. It is a journey of many ups and downs, fits and starts — all wrapped up in persistent faith in God.

For heart transformation is the result, not of personal merit or effort that might be applauded, but of God's grace that has been effectively welcomed — to God be the praise.

One of the profoundly startling things that happened to me in the first weeks of following Jesus was the discovery of changes that had begun from the inside out, without any particular attention or effort by me. Things I had formerly loved and considered necessary, I felt altogether indifferent about. And things I had formerly disdained and despised, I was growing to appreciate and desire.

I had prayed a simple prayer: "Jesus, I don't even know if you exist. But if you do exist, I want you to come into my life and give me the truth that you have to give me." He answered that prayer! This was not me deciding to adopt religious behaviors. This was the Spirit of Jesus Christ at work within me. This continues to be one of the most convincing experiences of my spiritual life. *He changes me!*

Heart transformation produces these qualities: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (You may recognize them from Galatians 5:22-23.)

These are the "fruit of the Spirit." In other words, heart transformation is the what the Holy Spirit produces in our lives — not *our lackluster imitation* of what He produces.

The fruit God values is not what we can do *for Him*, but what *He can do* in us.

Eugene Peterson introduces his translation (The Message) of the Letter to the Hebrews with these words:

"It seems odd to have to say so, but too much religion is a bad thing. We can't get too much of God, can't get too much faith and obedience, can't get too much love and worship. But *religion*—the well-intentioned efforts we make to "get it all together" for God—can very well get in the way of what God is doing for us. The main and central action is everywhere and always *what God has done, is doing, and will do for us*. Jesus is the revelation of that action. Our main and central task is to live in responsive obedience to God's action revealed in Jesus. Our part in the action is the act of faith.

"But more often than not we become impatiently self-important along the way and decide to improve matters with our two cents' worth. We add on, we supplement, we embellish. But instead of improving on the purity and simplicity of Jesus, we dilute the purity, clutter the simplicity. We become fussily religious, or anxiously religious. We get in the way.

"The act of faith [in Jesus is] the one human action in which we don't get *in* the way but *on* the Way."

Jesus Christ is able "*to present to himself* a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish" (Ephesians 5:27) He does not require our assistance; He only requires our allegiance. He said, "I will build my church" (Matthew 6:18). He is entirely capable, and He intends to do it Himself. I wonder if we are willing to wait and trust Him... to see for ourselves and to demonstrate to others that He *really does* exist?