

'Being the Church' - Part 6

by Rev. Robert Griffith

In the late 1800's a book was published by Charles Sheldon called *In His Steps*. The story begins with a preacher, hard at work on a sermon. His text is 1 Peter 2:21: "...*Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.*" The rest of the book then offers a very honest and powerful explanation of what following in Jesus' steps actually looks like.

We are in the midst of a teaching series about *being the Church* and we have been examining the traits that God wants to be present in the Church which Jesus is building. Last week we talked about how God wants us to be a Church that worships, and we discussed what true worship entails. This week we shall see that God wants us to be a Church that learns from Jesus so that we can continue His mission on earth. In other words – a Church of disciples.

Speaking of those who would follow Him, Jesus said that "*everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher.*" (Luke 6:40, NIV). The context in which Jesus said this makes it plain that He considered this the goal for His followers: to follow in His steps. That is Jesus' expectation of us: everyone who is fully trained will be like his/her teacher. I am sure this is what Jesus had in mind when he uttered the words we read in Matthew 11:28-30:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Now "*Take My yoke upon you*" was an expression that meant "*Become my disciple*", or "*Become my follower and walk in my steps.*" Our world says that you can't live that way. It's just not possible. Some in the Church even believe we cannot live that way – Jesus was the Son of God, only He could live that way. Now I could share with you how the world is wrong; that you should do what Jesus did because His way is right and you will be a better spouse, a better parent, a better child, a better employee, a better person and Jesus called us to live this way. And I could also talk about how a life lived in devotion to God and His teaching is fun and exciting and fulfilling, and I could even argue today that the very best life you can have is one that is lived fully and completely for God's glory. But Jesus doesn't make any of those arguments or discuss any of those things. He just says that if we take His yoke upon ourselves, learn from Him and walk in His steps, He will give us *rest*.

This word *rest* is actually a promise of heaven. If we become His disciples, He will give us heaven - rest from the problems of life, rest from its pain, rest from sickness and sorrow, disease and death. Heaven. Now hopefully we know by now that when Jesus talks about heaven He is not just talking about our future hope after death. He is talking also about the here-and-now. Heaven on earth. Jesus is promising that, if we will become His disciples and learn from Him and walk in His steps and fulfill His mission, we will increasingly experience the *rest* of heaven right now – the rest from life's weariness, the rest from life's burdens.

Let's face it: Life at times is hard. It seems like sometimes you are doing fine, and then the storm hits, the wind screams, the dam bursts, the raging torrents flood us. Sometimes it's marriage problems. Sometimes it's kid problems. Sometimes it's parent problems. Sometimes it's work problems. Sometimes it's health problems. All sorts of problems, difficulties, tragedies and trouble make up this experience we call life.

Life can often make us weary to the point of despair as we carry burdens that would crush the best of us. And into that cold, hard reality Jesus speaks: *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."*

Jesus promises us rest from our burdens if we'll be His disciples, because He is gentle and humble, and He gives us a kind of rest deep in our souls which the world cannot give; our loved ones cannot give. Only Jesus can give us this rest. This doesn't mean that Jesus frees His followers from ever having problems in this life. When Jesus promised rest, He did not mean that He would eliminate our problems, but rather that He will give us the strength to make it through our problems. He will give us the comfort and peace we need to face any tragedy, and allow us to experience real joy in this life because we know Him. But He cannot give us this strength overnight or by some magical touch. Such strength comes through learning, day by day, month by month, year by year. Jesus promises that, if we will take His yoke upon ourselves and learn from Him, every day, every week, for all our lives – then and only then will we learn to truly rest in Him, in spite of our circumstances. He will give us a taste of heaven here and now and sustain us in the face of life's burdens and weariness.

You see, when we begin to learn from Jesus, when we begin to learn the words that He said and the things that He taught and did, we discover all these treasures that we didn't even know existed before. We find a peace that we never dreamed of. And we experience a hope brighter than any other. And we receive guidance to help us figure life out. As we learn Christ's words and apply them in our lives, we discover what the Apostle Paul really meant when he said, *"It's no longer I who live, but Christ Who lives in me."*

The whole reason Jesus remained among us and taught His disciples for three years is so they could pass that on to others. When it was time to go, Jesus then commissioned those men and women to go into the world and teach everyone what He taught them, always knowing that He would be with them at all times through His Holy Spirit.

This is what birthed the Church and this is why in that snapshot of the early Church we have in Acts 2:42-47 it says that the believers *"devoted themselves to the Apostles teaching.."* What was the Apostles teaching then? It was all that Jesus taught them! What is the Apostles teaching today? To what should we be devoting ourselves now? The New Testament! It's really *that* simple!

Now this doesn't mean we discount the Old Testament. It is vitally important in connecting the Christian Church and our journey this side of the cross of Christ with the whole Jewish story and their journey as God's people down through history. The entire Bible is important - but the teaching of Jesus, which then became the teaching of the Apostles, which then became the New Testament – is what defines the very nature and purpose of the Church. It is what explains the New Covenant in Christ and the whole reason we are still here today. So it is this teaching that we should be devoting ourselves to and in so doing, we are sitting at the feet of Jesus once again as His followers, His disciples, His co-labourers in the ministry of the Kingdom and the gospel of God's amazing grace!

Now we need to notice the language in Acts 2:42. It says, *"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching..."* Luke uses the intense Greek word *proskartereo*, often translated as *"devoted to,"* to report on the strength of their commitment here. The word literally means *"to occupy oneself diligently with something"* or *"to persist in."*

So if *being the Church* is important to us, we will be occupying ourselves diligently with the Apostles teaching. We will be persistent in our devotion to hearing the voice of God through the teaching of His anointed, called leaders and teachers.

Now I'm not sure what you all think about preaching, teaching and authority or how God speaks to His people today. I am not sure where you place people like me who devote their lives to being oracles of God and conduits of His life-changing Word. But you need to wrestle with this question if *being the Church* is important to you in any way. Even a cursory reading of the Bible will show us that God speaks to His people in a myriad of ways. He speaks through creation. He will speak through a talking donkey if He needs to! He will also use any human being to bear witness to His Word. However, the most common way God has spoken to His people is through a messenger - through the prophets and teachers whom He calls, equips and sends across the earth with His message. I have such a calling on my life and I take that calling very seriously.

I have also been doing this long enough to know that God can and does deliver His Word, His will and His empowering through this crazy thing the Apostle Paul called '*the foolishness of preaching.*' He called it *foolishness* because most days, from our end, that is exactly how it feels. How on earth can I even dream of being the channel of God's voice to others? How can a fallen, sinful, imperfect person be used by God to speak life, hope and power into other human beings? It only seems like foolishness because we have lost sight of this being God's preferred means of communicating to His people.

The Scriptures we value so highly and upon which our faith is based, are nothing but a collection of the stories, teaching and preaching of fallible people like me whom God has raised up to speak His truth, write His truth and declare His Word at every point in history. But for that teaching to actually impact our hearts and lives or change the way we live and relate to each other and to God, we need to embrace it. We need to respect it. We need to believe it is God Who still chooses to speak this way. We need *proskartereo* – devotion to this teaching.

It doesn't matter how passionate or gifted the teacher is; it doesn't matter if the teacher is Jesus or the Apostles themselves. Those who are being taught decide if they will *devote themselves* to that teaching. If they don't, then the Word of God will continue to elude them and the power of His Kingdom will remain a future hope, not a present reality.

Now, as a preacher, I know of no greater joy than to see someone devoting themselves to this teaching and to then respond to God's Word through something I have said or written and to see their life totally transformed by His Word. I have letters and cards from people over many years who have shared how their entire lives were turned upside down and inside out because of teaching they received from God, through me. How was that possible? It wasn't because I am a brilliant preacher. It happened because those people knew what '*devoting themselves to the Apostles teaching*' really meant. **They took responsibility for their own spiritual life and growth.**

They persisted in digesting every morsel of truth from every sermon. They committed themselves to a home group every week so they could allow God to unpack that teaching even more in their own lives and in community. This is what '*devoting themselves to*' actually looks like. But it gets even better! Those same people became teachers in their own way. A few became Pastors – but most remained exactly where they were in their chosen vocation – they just became channels of God's Word, God's grace, God's wisdom and God's kingdom power.

When we truly devote ourselves to the Apostles teaching, we truly become disciples of Jesus and everything in our life changes, and I mean everything! I know this from my own experience and the experience hundreds and hundreds of men, women and young people whom I have seen totally transformed before my eyes. People whose lives are never the same again and all they did was make a daily choice to deliberately, intentionally, persistently engage with the sermons and the teaching in their local Church. That's all they did. God did the rest.

Now I know that I've only been in this Church a short time but I can assure you that the teaching which I have given in this place over that time – all of which is now online and available to the world – is sufficient to trigger a renewal and revival in this Church which nobody dreamed possible. I don't say that because of the quality of those sermons or my oratory skills – I say that because it is true and because I have seen congregations set on fire by the Holy Spirit with far less teaching and in less time. How? The only way possible – when the people of God once again believe that God has something important to say through that man or woman up front each Sunday and we had better listen if we have the slightest desire to see His Kingdom come and His will done right here as it is in heaven!

Sadly, most of the words preached from most of the pulpits across this nation hit the floor dead before any of them have a chance to lodge in someone's heart. How do I know that? I know that because the Church is not in revival and this nation is not on its knees before God! I know that because our congregations are shrinking, our sermons are getting shorter, much of our preaching is no longer Christ-centred and our people are no longer listening for God in the sermons.

Jesus commissioned us to go and **make disciples**. He didn't say to make converts to our religious club. He said make disciples of Christ. And we see what a disciple is in Acts 2. They are the who devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching, which was the teaching of Jesus. They chose to take His yoke upon them and learn from Him. They were devoted to this important learning process – not just at the beginning – but for their entire life!

That's what a disciple does and *that's* what *being the Church* has to be all about or we are not the Church Jesus is building! We are nothing but a hollow religion with a dusty ancient book and some powerless rhetoric passed on from a dead, powerless teacher.

Listen, I beg you, in Jesus' name listen to what the Spirit of God is saying to the Church today ... to *this* Church today ... to *you* today. Listen. God will not continue sending His servants to preach His Word to people who are not listening. God is patient. God is gracious. But God is also firmly committed to the mission of Jesus Christ to advance His Kingdom on earth and He will not waste His Word or His servants on people who don't want to change; don't want to grow; don't want to live and move and have their being in Christ as His disciples.

Jesus doesn't need friends. Jesus doesn't need PR people. Jesus doesn't need lip service. Jesus doesn't need our latest programs or innovations or trendy ministry ideas. Jesus just needs DISCIPLES. That is the only thing He has ever needed. That was His entire purpose in coming to earth. His birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection all pointed to one objective – making disciples who could join Him in fulfilling His mission to reconcile all of God's lost children to their heavenly Father.

Sadly, in 2018, the Church seems to have many priorities. Our focus has been drawn towards all manner of good deeds and community programs and welfare initiatives and ministries which bless people. However, Jesus birthed a Church which had a singular focus and it never, ever strayed from that intentional focus. Jesus called and commissioned us to do exactly what He was called and commissioned to do: make disciples. But friends, we cannot make disciples until we learn how to be disciples ourselves. Then, and only then, will we understand what *being the Church* really means.

"Speak Lord, Your servants are listening."

Are we really?