

The Church And The Culture War

As we are in the fight of our life in this country, where are the churches? We have small churches, big churches, mega-churches, and in endless variety. The people who lead and attend these churches are the people who supposedly care about the culture war we are in, but where are they in the culture war? We see lots of organizations like the Rutherford Institute, Alliance Defense Fund, Focus on the Family, and other such groups actually engaging the culture, but where are the churches? I know there are a few with specialized ministries that take on the fight in particular areas they are called to, but the vast majority of churches are not present in the fight. They do discipleship and teaching, but that is not fighting the culture war. Fighting the culture war is fighting the influences pushing homosexuality, relativism, and everything else that marginalizes Christian principles, which are the bedrock of our nation. All of these things have become 'political matters' which churches avoid. Churches have stepped aside and judiciously avoid any entanglement in these 'political matters', as if political matters are not spiritual matters. But how can anyone say that political matters are not spiritual matters? Abortion is a political issue. It is also clearly a spiritual issue. The fact that government claims the right to parent our children is a political issue. How is that not a spiritual issue? Doesn't God command us to raise our children in Godly homes? When the government interferes with that obligation, does it not become a spiritual matter?

Churches have been cowed by the IRS's rules regarding 501(c)3 organizations, which most churches are. Submitting to 501(c)3 rules is submitting to Caesar and not to God. Churches have never had a legal obligation to become 501(c)3 organizations. They can simply tell the IRS they are a church, and the IRS has to deal with that. There are many churches who have done this and, not surprisingly, had to deal with IRS harassment. Since when did God tell us we wouldn't get harassment for doing the right thing? Persecution is a sign that we're doing the right thing.

Let's take a look at what a church is. The book of Acts tells us that believers met from house to house (note: *not* church building to church building), sharing bread and fellowship. Paul says that when you come together, *everyone* has something to share. In the western church of today, where do we see these things happening? In small groups or Sunday schools, if anywhere. Most churches are set up around a main congregational meeting on Sunday morning, where anywhere from a few to several thousand gather together in one meeting for worship and teaching. Everything centers around the pastor's teaching and the worship that is led from the stage. And it all follows the standard western protocol: greeting, singing, announcements, teaching, singing, benediction. With few exceptions, no one but the pastor and staff get to share, especially not anything deeply personal. Everything that happens in a local church must be approved by the senior pastor and/or the elder board. Input from the congregation is seldom considered or asked for. When was the last time an elder or your pastor personally asked for your opinion? If input is asked for, it is limited or controlled in some way, like an on-line survey. It is simply not possible for modern church leadership to personally consider everyone in the congregation. Supposedly, the pastor and elders are 'in touch' with members of the congregation, and I'm sure that's true for a few of them, but most people either go along with what the pastor wants or they leave. They don't have a real choice to affect what is done in the church except by attending or not attending functions.

The result of the way modern churches are set up is that each church becomes the personal ministry of the senior pastor. Think about it: nothing happens without his approval. Even God can't do anything in that church without the pastor's approval. You may say that God is big enough to make anything happen he wants to, but ask yourself if anything in a church can happen without the senior pastor's approval. You have to admit the senior pastor makes the final decision. If he is not OK with

something, it will end. That makes the church his personal ministry. It is not a church where everyone shares and has equal input. You will frequently find pastors disagreeing with members of the congregation, and the pastor always makes the final decision on the matter. The congregant has to live with that decision. His input isn't as important as the pastor's. The pastor will insist that he understands things better than the congregant, but that is not always the case. In any case, the pastor is elevating himself above the congregation or the congregation elevates him, putting him in a separate category of 'pastor', and everyone else as 'laity'. You can't get around this. The pastor is always set apart as a member of a special class, and is given power out of all proportion to his legitimate place in a church. If you say the pastor should control the church, what about 1Co 12:28 where it says "And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues". 'Governments', which has to do with governing things, is way down the list. 'Pastor' is not even mentioned, and I don't think we can say pastors are apostles. An apostle is more of a roving ministry and not necessarily tied to one church, as the New Testament gives ample testimony to. And even if the pastor is an apostle, where are all the other ministries in a modern church? Prophets don't exist; neither do miracle workers or gifts of healings. There are lots of helps, though.

The position becomes an office, with titles and responsibilities, and the pastor becomes a dignitary. That's all well and good as far as the pastor is concerned, but it becomes quite a burden when he has to be pastor to everyone in the church. A true pastor knows his flock, and cares about each one. It is simply not possible for a pastor of a large church to do that job. It is physically impossible. So how can he be a true, scriptural pastor? He can't. He becomes the head of a hierarchical organization, complete with offices, functions, and obligations, and he effectively becomes a CEO. He becomes ultimately responsible for the budget, business functions, legal obligations, and numerous other things. He can delegate those functions to others, but he ultimately controls them. The church is his baby.

What ends up happening is that his job becomes that of perpetuating his organization. If the church runs out of money, he is out of a job, so he has to keep the organization functioning. If there is a lawsuit, he has to deal with it, thus we have lots of rules to prevent the possibility of a lawsuit. That's why there are so many restrictions in churches on working with children, the homeless, or virtually any other area of ministry that has potential legal ramifications. The rules are implemented ostensibly 'to protect the children', or 'protect' whoever else it is that the rules apply to, but what is really happening is that the ministry is being diminished in order to perpetuate the organization. A lawsuit could cripple or destroy the church, so even if it hurts a ministry, rules will be imposed in order to avoid a lawsuit.

The notion that the rules are implemented to protect people is a fiction. They are implemented to protect the organization. The thinking is that protecting the organization protects the people in it, which may be partially true, but it changes the whole focus of the organization from ministering to people to perpetuating itself. As the culture war heats up, churches will be forced into protecting themselves to the point that they won't have a ministry. They will be in a fight for their lives, and many of them, if not most, will submit to the government's rules and give up their scriptural purpose in order to stay alive. Which means they are already dead.

So you have a pastor who is reduced to the scriptural function of teaching and the job of perpetuating the organization, which divides his attention. He would rather spend his time teaching or pastoring, but the job of perpetuating the organization continually intrudes on his consciousness or dominates his existence. Although he will deal with personal issues of the congregation, there is simply no way he can get to know every member of the congregation and be a true pastor with organizational concerns on his mind. He cannot do the scriptural job of pastor.

So how is the modern church a new testament church? It is not. Frank Viola makes it very clear in Pagan Christianity that virtually every practice of the modern western church came from paganism. As a matter of fact, he has a chapter titled: "The Pastor: Obstacle to Every-Member Functioning". Thinking about it another way, how is Christ the head of the pastor's church if the pastor makes all the final decisions? Anything with two heads is a monster, and I don't see Christ allowing any pastor to make final decisions in His church. If the pastor makes all the final decisions, Christ will abandon him to his own devices. Inasmuch as he seeks the Lord, the Lord will help him, but he is operating within a structure that forces him to make the final decisions on anything concerning his church. Godly men, of course, will seek the Lord on anything of consequence. Pastors will protest that leadership is necessary or everything will get out of control. How was everything out of control in Jerusalem without a given pastor of the whole shebang? The apostles were around, but twelve guys just can't do the modern job of pastor with a church of thousands of people meeting in hundreds of homes all over the city all week long. I'm sure they made a few meetings, maybe a lot of them, but you can be sure most of those meetings happened without an apostle present. For the most part, it was believers meeting together, seeking the Lord, and sharing whatever the Lord moved someone to share. And I think I can confidently say that all, or most of the people who attended those meetings were able to share whatever concerned them, very unlike what happens in a modern western church meeting on Sunday morning. Which is the difference between a vibrant, growing group of believers and a dying institution.

So where am I going with this? Obviously, I don't think the modern western church represents God's model for the church. The centralized control inherent in the modern church stifles the Holy Spirit's work in the believers in that church, and no matter how godly or good the pastor is, he can't change that. House churches are obviously the way to go. The house church movement is exploding around the world, and the reason is that Christ is present, *and running the meeting*, at those house church meetings. Christ knows how to run a meeting, and is perfectly capable of impressing the right people to stand up and take leadership, share, minister, get ministered to, or whatever. If He needs someone to control the meeting, He will move someone to do so. The way leadership in house churches develops is organically. That means that when someone has a natural ability to lead, sing, teach, or whatever, that person is allowed to do so. They aren't required to have a degree from seminary, the conservatory, or any awards. If the ability is there, the Holy Spirit empowers them to share, and opens other hearts to receive that ministry. I admit this is simplistic, but it is an ideal that can and does happen. Try that in an institutional church and see what happens. If the pastor doesn't agree that a person has a particular ability, that person won't be free to share. He will be stifled.

The fact is, most of us belong to institutional churches headed by a pastor and an elder board, including myself. Do we stay or leave? At this point, I am staying because I have believing friends who attend the same church and my Sunday school class functions almost like a church. If I am offered the opportunity to serve in my church without being restricted by a straitjacket of legal responsibilities, I'll get involved. As it is, rules have been imposed on the ministries I have been involved in to the point that I am not free to serve others as God created me to serve. I must submit to what I consider unscriptural and invasive restrictions in order to serve in my own church, so I have declined to serve. All of these restrictions flow from the fact that the 'institution must be preserved'. They do not facilitate ministry, although that is their ostensible purpose.

So, back to the culture war. What will it take for churches to get involved in the culture war? It will take house churches, where everyone present is free to share, and in depth discussions of what is going on locally that a given group of believers can address. These kinds of discussions simply don't happen in institutional churches because they are 'political'. The pastor will shut it down immediately if he

hears about it, because he is scared to death of incurring the wrath of the militant secular atheists who control our government. He knows they will bring down every legal or other type of action on his church if he does allow it. Or he's afraid of internal dissension. Aren't we supposed to be of one mind? How can we be of one mind if we're not allowed to discuss something that affects us as deeply as politics? So nothing happens in the institutional church. Only in a group of believers who are free of organizational restrictions can a serious discussion of the issues happen. Any centrally controlled institution will not allow any discussion that could potentially threaten its existence. So true spiritual freedom does not exist in the institutional church.

The institutional church in America or anywhere else will never take a principled stand in the culture war. There will always be a few exceptions, but they are exceptions. The reason is that the institutional model does not reflect God's purpose for his church. Only a group of believers meeting freely, with the freedom to discuss or pursue anything they all agree on, will take a stand in the culture war. That is why we have so many para-church organizations taking a stand and fighting. They are organized around the purpose of fighting for something the organizers believe in. They are the personal ministry of the organizers, and there are believers who want to fight in the culture war, thus joining those organizations and taking the fight to the enemy. There are thousands of things churches could do to join the fight, and individual churches could end up with multiple ministries taking the fight to the enemy, but they never will. The ministries that churches involve themselves in are the safe ones, like helping the poor or homeless, evangelization, foreign missions, food pantry, helping people move, or any of hundreds of different fairly innocuous activities. God forbid, though, that they take on an abortion clinic or the local chapter of the ACLU. Try getting involved in the court system or getting rid of an ungodly judge. Those kinds of things are just too political. They would stir the pot, cause trouble, bring down a lawsuit, or something else of that nature. What do you expect in a fight? Do you honestly think your opponent is going to just sit there and let you wail away on him? As it is, the modern church just sits there and lets the culture wail away on it, to the point that the modern, pastor-led church is virtually irrelevant. George Barna testifies to this and says the modern church is dying. The modern church is dying because it is already dead. It absolutely refuses to fight the battles that count, and God has abandoned it to its own devices. Sure, you'll get good preaching on all the standard biblical subjects, but the culture will never get challenged where it really counts. Eventually, you will be forced to give up your faith to keep the church alive (like the Chinese three-self church) or go underground and join a house church.

Don't think God will allow an institution that has the power to change the culture and doesn't to continue to exist. The modern pastor-led church is dying, and it is dying because it is becoming ever more irrelevant to the culture. It will either turn into a mealy-mouthed fountain of sanitized Christian propaganda, like the Chinese three-self Church, or God will soon remove it from the landscape.

I will end this article with a quote from Martin Luther: "If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the Word of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Him. Where the battle rages there the loyalty of the soldier is proved; and to be steady on all the battle front besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point." — Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*. Weimar Edition. *Briefwechsel* (Correspondence), vol. 3, pp. 81f.

May 19, 2011