



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

13025 Bell Air Drive, Auburn, CA 95603 (530) 823-3916 apc@auburnpresbyterian.org

“Who Needs Saving?” Philippians 2:1-18; Luke 7:39-50

Yesterday, Ron Markham, Silva Stearn and I represented our church in the meeting of the Presbytery of Sacramento. In the morning session, a lot of time was given over to a guest speaker, Pastor Kent Carlson, one of the founders of the sizeable Oak Hills Church in Folsom. That church has had an interesting story. Started near the time we started here in Auburn, this Baptist church met in small rented facilities—including our Presbyterian church in that town. But then they adopted a model pioneered by Willow Creek Community Church, the megachurch near Chicago, and the group here really boomed, growing to some 2200 members in a quick amount of time. A few years ago, however, the leaders of that church were on a retreat, and had a “God moment”, when God seemed to show up and got them to face the lousy job they were doing in maturing the believers who came there, most of whom had come from other churches. This caused a radical reorientation of their ministries. They moved from a “spectacular worship and event ministry” to a “spiritual formation” ministry, and according to some of the material I picked up yesterday, I’m very impressed.

But they paid a price. Not everyone there wanted to become mature in Christ. They’d rather be entertained; after all, they’d been shaped for that by a church that had adopted the success-oriented consumer-needs-driven culture. The new emphasis turned off a lot of people. They suffered the loss of 1500 members. (Can you imagine what that was like?) But the leaders have stuck with it, convinced that this is their call from God. They are pioneering a different kind of church, and I will be looking over a lot of their materials with our leaders in the months ahead, as we pursue a similar objective—what we call “Mission One”—to be disciples who makes disciples who make disciples of Jesus.

The book I am reading currently for my Doctor of Ministry studies makes a similar point—this is Rodney Clapp’s book, *A Peculiar People*, a title based on an old translation of 1 Peter 2:9. But there’s nothing old about Clapp’s critique of the church in our American culture. There is nothing peculiar or special about us, he says; we fit in so well with our culture that there is no statistical difference between the behavior of Christians and unbelievers.

Clapp traces the church after Bible times this way: with the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine in the 4th Century, the church and the state became entangled in a dance that would prove fatal to the church. As the church became more centralized—a legitimizing part of the Holy Roman Empire, princes of the church vied for political power with political princes and kings. This trend accelerated greatly during the Reformation, which saw the virtual merging of church and state—and the emergence of “state churches”. The Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant churches regularly created or abetted conflict between political units.

This was the heritage that had been absorbed by the Europeans who migrated to this country, where they resolved to avoid such sectarian conflict they had experienced in “the old country”. The separation of church and state—better called “the establishment clause” in our national Constitution—prohibited setting up an official theocracy or state denomination here.

Cut off from political power, American religion (especially the Protestant variety) became more and more privatized. Faith became a personal affair; my beliefs are no one else’s business. Faith also became psychologized, and a Christian community life evaporated. Soon any faith—a recognized religious doctrine or a do-it-yourself, feel-good faith—became as good as anyone else’s faith. President Dwight Eisenhower said, “Everyone should have a faith, and I don’t care what it is.”

Reactions against this long running trend that has pushed the church to the margins have come with both liberal and conservative expressions. Conservatives tout America as a Christian nation, and thrust Christianity forward as the answer to all that ails us, in hopes the government will enforce the conservative agenda of personal morality. Liberals seek to use the government to enforce their agenda of social class neutrality.

With this now-totally-privatized faith, the church today is largely seen as a something like a personal fashion accessory, not connected with the real world where important things get done. Faith’s purpose has become to meet our own needs; those who bother to attend church at all feel totally justified to seek another church if they are not “being fed” the diet that agrees with their present concepts and desires. So Clapp’s analysis matches nicely with what Pastor Kent Carlson told us yesterday.

This is the “water” of market-driven, consumer culture we “fish” swim in. Less and less do people in our time see the church as necessary; to the unchurched, the church is just one more private institution seeking support for its own maintenance. And Christians over the centuries have let this happen, looking more for the approval of the powerful (the State) instead of the approval of Jesus.

Clapp calls on the church to resume its role as a Christian-forming culture, which is more likely to happen in smaller groups where we can really know one another and can practice together “the imitation of Christ” of Philippians 2. We form each other under the Spirit of God, conformed to the Christ of the Bible, in love with the Father of Creation.

With this background, let’s listen to that text, from Paul’s letter to his faithful friends at Philippi. Find Philippians 2 in your Bibles, and keep your Bibles open after we read. You’ll have a part here, too, in the version I’ve put up on the screen. When you see the text turn from yellow to blue, the blue words are for us to say together. Here is the Word of God—listen to these words, and listen for God’s voice. *Come, Holy Spirit!* [text]

The key verses are 12 and 13, starting with that word, “therefore”. When you see Paul write a “therefore”, you know that’s a hinge on which he’s about to turn to an important conclusion toward which he’s been building. “Therefore, . . . continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and act according to his good purpose.” This is one of the places Paul teaches us, “salvation is a process, not a transaction”.

Salvation is new relationships, not a set of new rules. Look at the words at the start of chapter two here. Look how relational they are. Verse one: “united with Christ”; “comfort from

his love”; “fellowship with the Holy Spirit,” (that’s ‘communication among friends’); “tenderness and compassion”. All in verse one, and all relational. Paul goes on. Be “like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.... In humility count others better than yourselves.... Each of you should look ... to the interests of others.” All relational.

Salvation is not a decision; it’s a character change. Salvation is more than forgiveness. Yes, it starts with forgiveness, it starts with a decision, but it’s much more. We evangelicals hammer so much on the decision. But because we’re all caught in this individualist consumer culture, we ignore (and thus kill) the rest of the salvation process. We think that’s just for the religious fanatics, the especially devout.

Salvation is a giving up of self--like Jesus did--to serve others. That’s what the famous “Christ Hymn” in this chapter tells us. Jesus took up his cross by his choice (the physical cross, once for all; the sacrifice of self for others, every day). He told us that we must similarly take up our cross, by our choice, daily, putting others ahead of ourselves. Only with such a radical commitment to each other can we possibly come to “one mind, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose”. How much more relational can you get?

“Working out our salvation together” is a choice to crucify the consumer culture in us—die to it, die to it dead—and to move into a community of people who, together, show the world a kind of love and life that shines like stars in the universe. You see, it’s not primarily as individuals that we are Christian. It’s as a body—a church—that we show “Jesus today” to the world. That’s how Roman observers in the early years of the church could say, “See how these Christians love each other!”

Now, I’ve covered centuries of history and some very big ideas in a short amount of time here. I’m hoping I’ve made it clear how far from “the church of Jesus” are most all of the American Christian churches today. No wonder there is little spiritual power, personal transformation, and social impact from our churches. We may believe in Jesus, but we’re not really committed to following him. We may believe in Jesus, but we don’t really believe in his church—believe that we owe Jesus everything and that means we owe each other everything because together we are the body of Christ.

The big point today is that we have all grown up as “consumers”, and that “the market”, or “commerce” is the god we really worship. That’s the first huge barrier we face that blocks our experiencing “the church of Jesus” that makes a difference in the world—“turning the world upside-down”, as was said about the first churches.

But there is another major obstacle between us in our normal American churches, and “the church of Jesus”. We can see Jesus confronting that barrier during his ministry.

Put yourself now in the house of Simon, the Pharisee, when Jesus and his men were guests at Simon’s dinner party. The account of this is found in Luke’s gospel, chapter 7, verses 39-50. Once again, you have a part. When the text turns from yellow to blue, those are words for you to read aloud with me. Let’s listen again for God’s Word to us, here and now. *[text]*

If the first barrier to working out our salvation in the Body of Christ is our consumer culture we have internalized, the second barrier is our goodness. We’re just not all that bad, so we think we don’t need forgiveness all that much. We’re only a “little bad”, so we only need “a

little forgiveness”—perhaps packaged in a “take away box”, so we can grab it and go on with our lives.

It reminds me of this poem I read some years ago, “Three Dollars’ Worth of God”:

*I would like to buy three dollars worth of God please.
 I would like to buy just a little of the Lord.
 Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep,
 Not enough to take control of my life; I'll keep
 Just enough to equal a cup of warm milk,
 Just enough to ease some of the pain from my guilt.
 I would like to buy three dollars worth of God, please; I would like to find a love that's
 pocket-sized.
 Not enough to make me love a black man
 Not enough to change my heart; I can only stand
 Just enough to take to church when I have the time,
 Just enough to equal a snooze in the sunshine.
 I want ecstasy, not transformation.
 I want the warmth of the womb
 But not a new birth.
 I would like to purchase a pound of the eternal
 In a paper sack,
 Guaranteed or money back.
 You see, I would like to buy three dollars worth of God, please; I would like to hide some
 for a rainy day,
 Not enough to make people see a change in me,
 Not enough to impose responsibility;
 Just enough to make church folks think I'm O.K.,
 Just enough to exhibit once a week on Sunday.
 I would like to buy three dollars worth of God, please.*

(Submitted by David Lusk, Dallas, Texas)

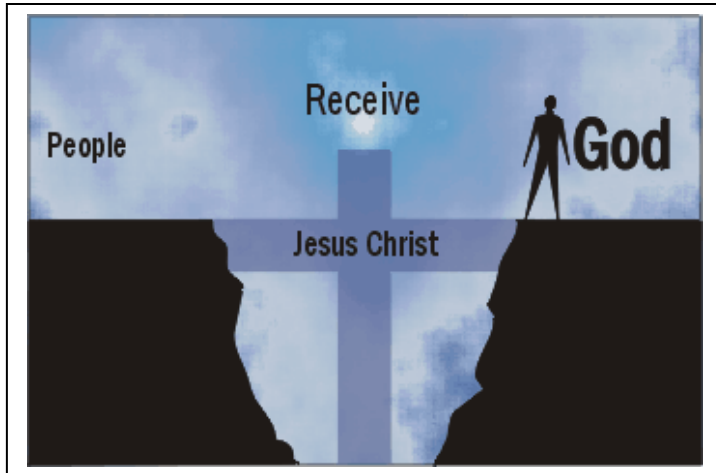
I hope this helps us get in touch with how much the “church of Jesus” has been swallowed up by consumer culture. But the Bible shows us the real “church of Jesus” is a family that is dedicated to making each of its members all they can be with Jesus, for Jesus, in Jesus. In “the real church of Jesus”, we give each other the right to mess with each other’s lives. We give each other the right to make mistakes. We have the right to fight with each other. It’s messy, it’s inefficient. We have to learn to practice forgiveness. It would be so much easier if we could just take a class, or read “The Book” (or some other book) on our own.

A man spoke with the Lord about Heaven and Hell. "I will show you Hell," said the Lord and they went into a room which had a large pot of stew in the middle. The smell was delicious and around the pot sat people who were famished and desperate. All were holding forks with very long handles which reached to the pot, but because the handles of the forks were longer than their arms, it was impossible to get the stew back into their mouths. Their suffering was terrible.

"Now I will show you Heaven," said the Lord, and they went into an identical room. There was the same pot of stew and the people had the same identical forks, but they were well-nourished, talking, and happy. At first the rabbi did not understand. "It is simple," said the Lord. "You see, they have learned to feed each other!"

THAT's the real "church of Jesus", where we serve each other, enjoy each other, feed each other, depend on each other. That's the "salvation workshop" of "the real church of Jesus".

One of the visual aids we often draw when we are explaining salvation to someone is the "chasm diagram". You've probably seen this before—I use it in APC 101. Here's the chasm

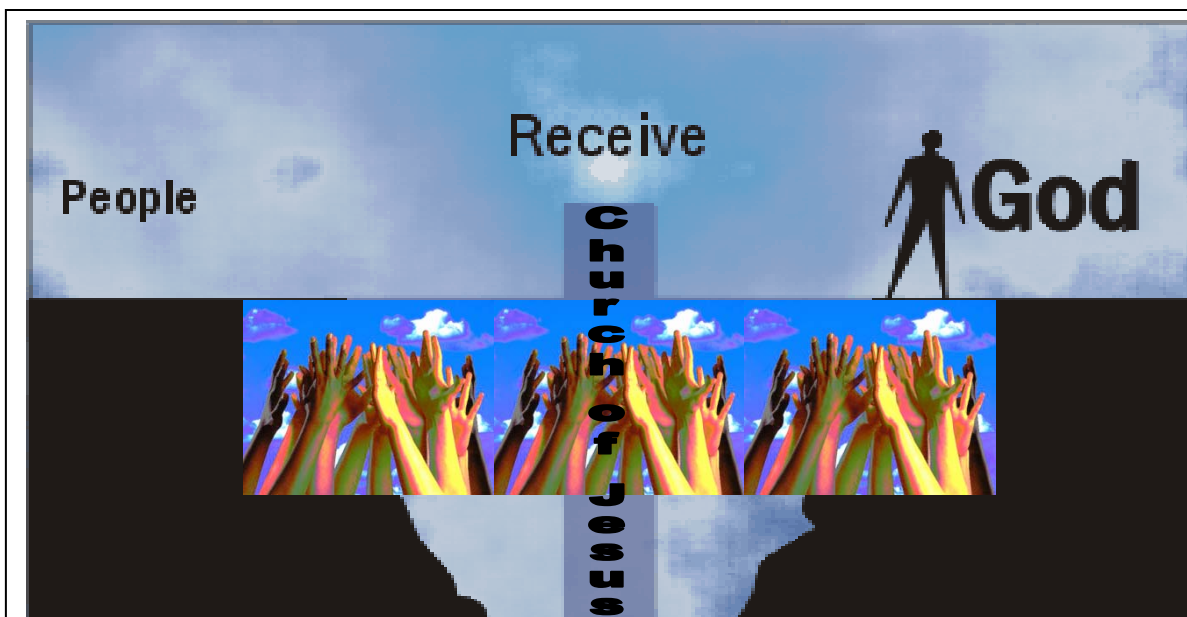


separating humanity and God, and here's the cross God puts in place to create a bridge over which AN INDIVIDUAL can walk. Even our visual aid assumes an individual consumer; once you've crossed the bridge, you're IN!



But what if we could use our X-ray vision on that cross, and zoom in. Do you know what we would see? We would see the people who have been praying for us.

We would see some people of our Life Group who came to dinner at our home last night and



heard our family's pains and angers, and gave us a new idea for forgiveness and showing love to

each other. We would see the saints who have gone before, eagerly watching and cheering for us. All these people have taken up their cross—the cross of Jesus--for us!

Who needs saving? **WE ALL DO!**

Let's stop playing the Christian equivalent of "Peter Pan and The Lost Boys", who refused to grow up. As Paul writes to the Ephesian Christians, "... [S]peaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ," (Ephesians 4:15, NIV) As Peter writes, "Like newborn babes, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation." (1 Peter 2:2, NIV) "...[L]et us throw off everything that hinders [the consumer self-centered culture], and the sin that so easily entangles [our pride that makes us think we're not "that bad"], and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." (Hebrews 12:1b, NIV)

Lest Paul and all the saints before us feel that they have given their lives in vain, **LET'S GET MOVING, GROWING UP TOWARD FULL SALVATION. TOGETHER!**

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on September 21, 2008, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]