

IS IT TIME TO TEAR DOWN OUR CHURCH?

Pastor Daniel Bohlman had a problem. The front of his new church was very small. It only had enough room for a pulpit. When a prominent member died, Bohlman had to figure out where to place the coffin for viewing. The most reasonable place seemed to be in the back of the church, where there was more room. All they needed to do was move out one of the back pews for the funeral service, then replace it afterwards. Problem solved or so Pastor Bohlman thought. But certain members of the church were outraged that anyone would think of moving the back pew, even temporarily. How dare they tamper with tradition! The opposition was so intense that Pastor Bohlman would later write, "It was easier to rally people together to fight to keep a pew from leaving the church, than getting them to fight to put people into it!"

Our lesson today is from the 13th chapter of Mark. It is a stark chapter about the return of the Son of Man. But the chapter begins with a warning that you and I need to heed.

One day as Jesus was going out of the Temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" And they WERE wonderful buildings. The Temple looked like it would last forever. It was gigantic, covering all of the top of Mount Moriah. Some of the stones used to build it were forty feet long and eighteen feet wide. The building project took over forty-six years. In the front of the Temple were huge pillars, almost forty feet high. The Temple was made of pure white marble and parts of it were covered in plates of solid gold. When the sun hit the white and gold structure, it often gleamed so brilliantly that onlookers had to shield their eyes from the glare. Yet Jesus turned to this disciple and said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone shall be left upon another which will not be torn down."

What a stark revelation. The Temple was the center of Jewish life. More than anything else in their land, the Temple gave the Jewish people a sense of identity. And Jesus was telling them that one day this glorious structure would lay in ruins. There are people who are saying the same thing about the church today. The church is irrelevant. The church is dying and almost dead. The church as a vital institution is finished. But of course, they have always said that about the church. The difference is that today some of the people who are saying that the church will one day lay in ruins are people who love the church, just as Jesus loved the Temple.

Church Consultant George Barna has devoted years to tracking the impact of the church on society. In his book, "The Second Coming of The Church" Barna says, "At the risk of sounding like an alarmist, I believe the Church in America has no more than five years, perhaps even less, to turn itself around and begin to affect

the culture, rather than be affected by it.” Five years Barna warns or this temple we love will lay in ruins. Oh, the shell might be around for another century but the church as a live, redemptive force will be no more.

Should we be concerned? Of course. But let’s consider some important principles about the church and today’s society. First of all we need to see that the church has what most people want today. To be connected to other people and to God. These two concerns are at the center of who we are and what we are about.

Back in the 1700’s John Wesley, his brother Charles and Richard Pilmore, were holding an outdoor service, when a mob attacked them pelting them with stones. They were compelled to flee for their lives. They found shelter behind a hedge. When night came they found their way to a deserted spring-house, where they struck a light with a flint-stone, washed their faces in the clear, cold water, brushed the dirt from their clothes, and felt a moment’s security from the missiles which had pelted them. Charles Wesley had with him a piece of lead hammered out into a pencil. He pulled it from his pocket, and composed a hymn sung by Christians around the world: Jesus, lover of my soul/ let me to thy bosom fly; while the nearer waters roll, while the tempest still is high!”

Wesley was thankful to God for the shelter he had found in the spring-house. And he wrote of a place of shelter open to all in Christ. People still need a shelter from life’s storms. People still need a place of quiet refuge. People still need a place where they can connect with one another and with God. The church has what most people want today.

Several years ago a major car company had their sales personnel wear a button that said, “I am not a salesman.” It seems that surveys showed that the one thing the average person dreaded most in buying a new car was dealing with sales people. They associated car buying with high pressure and low ethics. isn’t it a shame that a time honored profession like automobile sales would fall so low in public esteem that sales persons were forced to wear a button that said, “I am not a salesman?”

But something like that has happened to the church in the eyes of many people. They want God at least in some form. They want spiritually healthy relationships with others, but the last place they want to look for these things is in a Christian church. So, what are we to do? Christ has called us to reach out to all the world. Where do we begin? We begin with ourselves. We need to continually ask ourselves what we can do to make ourselves more appealing to the world outside.

The fastest growing churches in our land are churches that seek to understand the community around them and to fashion their ministry to meet the needs of the community. That may mean using videos in worship. It might be using more contemporary music. It might mean providing day-care for neighborhood children, etc.

Every community is different. But we need to ask ourselves whether we are focused on our own needs or whether we are focused on the people outside these walls. In a sense we might need to tear down our church, as we have known it, in order to build it up.

Secondly, we need to do a better job of telling our story. If you have met God in this place, you need to tell your friends and neighbors about it. If there is something special about this church in your heart and life, you need to share it with others. If a group of people in this church has ever rallied around you in a time of need, you need to tell that good news. If you are excited about some aspect of our church's ministry, you need to broadcast it. It is not that people today are not responsive to the church's message. People are confused about what that message is. And they don't know unless we care enough to tell our story.

Researchers say that 7 out of 10 people who don't presently attend worship services would seriously consider doing so. When will they do so? The answer is almost always the same: "We will go when someone asks us!" People outside these walls wonder if we care enough about them to tell them about our church. We need to look at our church and at the world outside and see if there are ways we can make our ministry more responsive to the world's needs. But we also need to do a better job of telling our story.

In 1978, when the Shah of Iran was deposed, a much more conservative, fundamentalist government took over Iran and began restricting the people's basic freedoms. Women were most hard-hit by the new laws. The new government banned women from most government and university jobs. The female cabinet minister in charge of education was executed. Women were not allowed out of their houses unless they were covered head to toe in thick veils. Women who let their hair or their wrists show outside their veils could be attacked and beaten on the streets. Figures of women were air-brushed out of art books. In many places, girls were kicked out of school and denied even the basics of education. But today change is occurring in Iran, and some women are using these restrictions that have been forced upon them to their advantage. That is, wearing lipstick or letting their hair show have become powerful forms of political protest. Now let's apply that to our situation.

In a society where people are floundering ethically, morally, and spiritually a person who has a vital faith in Christ, who is able to love as Christ loved, who is kind as he was kind, who is accepting as he was accepting, who is generous as he was generous will stand out in any group. There is nothing more appealing than a person who truly lives as Christ lived. The problem with our witness sometimes is that many Christians, by their attitudes and actions, resemble Jesus' enemies more than they do him. They are so sour, so judgmental, so unloving, that they do more harm to the Christian cause than good. And that brings us to the final thing to be said. We need to evaluate our relationship with God and with one another to see if our witness is authentic. The

key to a vital church is to have people who are vitally related to God.

There is a story about a Rabbi who was flying on a long trip. The Rabbi was quite elderly, and his grandson was on the same plane to help him on the trip. The Rabbi was flying up front where he would be more comfortable and the younger man was sitting in back where it was less expensive. The Rabbi was sitting next to a scientist, and they shared some pleasant conversation. The scientist noticed that the grandson kept coming back and forth to check on his grandfather, making sure he was comfortable, getting him food or drink, helping him up, whatever the old man needed. Real non-stop helpfulness and attention. Finally the scientist said to the Rabbi, "That's wonderful. Look how beautifully your grandson treats you! My children and grandchildren would never travel anywhere together with me, and certainly would never put so much effort into helping me out." The Rabbi replied, "It's really quite simple. You believe in evolution. By that theory, your children are one step further from the apes than you are. I believe that man was created in the image of God. By that theory, I am one step closer to God than my children are. So, of course, our grandchildren treat us correspondingly."

Now the point is not whether we believe in evolution or not. The question is, How close do we live to God? If we live close to God, it will show. We will be kinder, more loving, more generous, more accepting. The light of Christ will glow in our faces. I like the title of one of Tony Campolo's books, "How to Be a Christian Without Embarrassing God." Some church people are an embarrassment to God by their attitudes and their actions. But that is the exception and not the rule. Will the church, like the Temple in Jerusalem one day lay in ruins? George Barna say we have only five years to turn things around. We need to look at ourselves more closely. We need to tell our story more boldly. And we need to draw closer than ever to God.