

## The State of the Body-Inflated and Hated

Scripture: Luke 12:54-56

Sunday, April 18, 2021

In this next season of our church I will be starting a journey through the book of Acts. The book of Acts as you know is the record of the things that happened at the birth and early years of the church of Jesus Christ. It is a record of an incredibly vibrant and faithful church that was growing at an unimaginable rate across both the Jewish and Roman worlds and spreading across all of Asia and beyond. The early church is our gold standard and we can gauge the health of any church by comparing it to the early church. But if we want to get any place we also need to figure out where we are, right? Because to navigate we need at least the knowledge of current location and destination. So before we get into the weeds of the book of Acts, I will be spending three weeks addressing the present condition of the church in the United States. And as we see the bigger picture, we can figure out for ourselves where we stand locally in the context of this bigger picture.

To set the stage for our look at the church in the times we live in we are going to start with Jesus' words to those around him as He preached about the kingdom of God. You see in those days, the Jewish people were waiting for the Messiah. Scripture was full of indications of when where and what kind this messiah would be. But when the Messiah came, the majority of the people were not impressed with the Messiah they got. So the Messiah had to call the people out. And He calls them out this way in our Luke 12 passage. He tells them, when you look at the sky you know to read its look and recognize what kind of weather is coming. You can tell whether it is going to rain and whether it is going to be hot. But he points out that when the Messiah is telling them about the coming of the kingdom of God they are suddenly unable to read the signs. So Jesus' message in Luke 12 is learn to recognize what is happening around you and

discern what God is about to do because **God is always showing His hand to those who care to pay attention.**

So in the next three sessions, we are going to focus on what is happening around us. We will look at what is happening to the larger church in the US and we will also be reading the culture around us. And we are going to do it with the help of the analysis of the award winning journalist and pastor, John Dickerson through his book, “The Great Evangelical Recession”. Today I am going to focus on two topics, the size of the evangelical church in the US and how the church is perceived by those outside it. Before I proceed let me clarify that when John Dickerson is talking about evangelical Christians he is talking about Christians who believe that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation as John 14:6 declares it and that the Bible is God’s authoritative Word. If you compromise these two things, then Christianity is reduced to a cultural practice. And at that point it becomes irrelevant to both God and the world at large. It is what the Bible describes as salt that has lost its saltiness that gets thrown out to be trampled underfoot.

So focusing on the church that claims to represent Christ and His will, the evangelical Christians, first we need to understand how many of us are there. First, I will start by discussing how many we think we are. You may have heard it said that the US was founded as a Christian nation and the majority of the US population is Christian. In fact, I have heard it said in different places that 70 to 80% of the US population are church goers. Well, it does not feel like that is true even in a Red state like Kansas and we are in any case interested not just in church goers but evangelicals right? Apostle Paul in Rom 12:3 says this in the NKJV, “***...don’t think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.***” So thinking as soberly as we can and focusing on the evangelical Christians, the best data we have according to John Dickerson is that we are looking at just 7% to 9% of the US population. The last population census of 2012 had a US population of 316 million people. Of that

number, the evangelical population accounted for 22 to 28 million people. But it is not just this single digit shocker we have to face. The other hard reality is that we are not even holding on to this low percentage. The research indicates that we are also losing evangelicals at the rate of 2.6 million or 10% per decade. This double whammy of low numbers and year over year drop in this percentage is confirmed by another fact. In a survey of 2000 church leaders in a 2011 Christianity Today poll, 82% of the leaders polled said that they were losing influence in the culture. The author writes, in no other country in the world did Christian leaders lose that much influence!

Here is the list of reasons according to John Dickerson that we are losing influence. It is happening because we are shrinking in numbers. We are losing influence because the culture around us is changing much faster than we can understand it. We are losing influence because the US population is growing faster right now than it grew during the baby boomer years and evangelical growth rate is not keeping up. John Dickerson says we are also losing influence because the culture at large is becoming aware that we are not the force we once were and therefore even more inclined to ignore us.

Now get this. The projection made at the time of writing of the book in 2012 was that in 3 decades from that point, evangelicals will be just 4% of the population. Now if you want to visualize what 22 million of the 2012 percentage looks like, well imagine the population of New York State. If you visualize the map of the US and imagine that New York State is in red with evangelicals just imagine and all other 49 states in blue. Now remember we said that even that number is shrinking. By the time we get to 2020, the number is closer to 15 million. So imagine that fully red New York state is now only 3/4<sup>th</sup> red and everywhere else is blue. So the first thing we need to face with a very sober mind is the fact that only 15 million of the 330 million people in the country that was once thought of as a Christian nation is actually evangelical Christians. This is only one of the problems we face today.

But besides the small and shrinking size problem we have, the second issue I told you I would talk about is how we are perceived by our external environment. Before we talk about the perception, let me point out a few things about our environment.

Firstly, we live in a rapidly changing culture. In fact it is changing at a faster rate every day so that the kind of changes that are happening in months now would have taken years or decades previously. This is because of the communication technology we have available to us. We have the capacity to put something on the internet today for all the world to see. And that means ideas move at the speed of light. Now that is well and good if the idea relates to the way people find information or shop or have meetings. But when the ideas are anti-Christian or pro-homosexuality, these ideas too are being absorbed by the culture extremely quickly. John points out that right now we have a bit of cushion left. By 2020 as a percentage of the population today we are 5 or 6% of the population, but numbers are skewed to the top two or three generations, the greatest generation born in the 1920's and the baby boomers who were born in the 1940's and then to a lesser extent the Generation X which is my generation. These are the generations with the most evangelical faith. Even the non-evangelicals in those two generations shared some evangelical values. But guess what? The two oldest generations are going to pass on in the next 30 years. When that happens, evangelical faith in the US will crash. And at the same time as this crash is taking place, anti-Christian sentiment and pro-homosexual sentiment will continue to grow and be even stronger than it is today. To give you an idea of the growth of the pro-homosexual attitude, from 1952 to 1973, homosexuality was defined as a mental illness. In 1973 it was removed from the list of mental illness according to the APA or American Psychiatric Association. By 2007, the same APA stated that "a counselor who tries to change a gay client's sexual orientation may be harming them". This is causing evangelicals who are counselors to be thrown out of their programs. If that was not bad enough, there is discussion to add a new mental illness to the APA. It would be called

“intolerant personality disorder” and would cover three things, racism, sexism and homophobia. Now for a person to be considered a homophobic, they need not commit any acts against a homosexual. Homophobia is simply believing that homosexuality is a sin. And in Europe there is already discussion to make even such thoughts a crime that will be punished accordingly. In other words, if you take the Bible seriously, presumably, you will also take what the Bible lists as sin seriously. But when you have a culture that does not care about the Bible, they take offense to the fact that the Bible calls certain things sin. When the culture is offended and the culture is 95% of the population and growing, that is some intense anti-Christian sentiment a shrinking church is going to have to deal with.

John Dickerson describes the two issues, the shrinking evangelicals and the culture turning against it with a powerful image. Imagine a big old oak tree like we had next to our parsonage. He says what ails the church within is like an internal rot taking place in the tree. And just as the big old tree of evangelical Christianity is weakening from the inside, serious storm clouds are gathering on the horizon.

There are more issues to name when it comes to the internal and external challenges facing the church in the coming years. We will continue this exploration in the coming weeks. But I am not bringing these things to your attention so that you will be filled with despair. No! I am sharing these things so that when we are aware of the cancer in our bodies we can get the treatment needed and stop and even reverse this decline.

Remember these three sermons are only the set-up to into our journey through Acts. Let me remind you that the church in Acts had a tougher environment than we are dealing with. The environment of the early church was the same environment that crucified Jesus and almost all of the apostles except for John who died in exile instead of crucifixion. And yet the early church flourished and became the ground floor of the

universal church supporting layer upon layer of the subsequent generations of the church.

My prayer is that as we pay heed to the times we live in and the state of the church. My prayer is also that this will make us even more open to the words of the Messiah to go make disciples and teach them to obey everything that the Messiah has commanded us to do. That is the only remedy for the ills we face as a church in the US. We have more lessons to learn about the state of the church. But in the meantime let us remember that even as we learn about the disease, Jesus is the answer. He can overcome and He will help us overcome if only we care to listen. Let us pray.