

## AMC Sermon- The State of the Body: Divided and Bankrupt

Scripture: Matt 12:22-28

April 25, 2021

This is going to be our second dive into looking what ails the church in the US today. Last Sunday we saw that when we look with sober eyes we see that the evangelical church forms a smaller percentage of the US population than many in the church used to think. We also saw that the culture around the church is growing more and more hostile to what the Bible names as sin. All opposition is not the same, however. External opposition to us does not automatically mean we are doing a bad thing. Some opposition comes because you are doing the right thing. But you have to be able to have the strength to stand against this opposition. Also, a lot of opposition we face is not because we are doing the right thing but because we have badly messed up our job as Christ's ambassadors. But whether it is the church's fault or not, opposition is increasing folks. And author John Dickerson describes our state to be like a tree that is suffering internal rot while great big storm clouds gather on the horizon. Today I am going to raise two issues that feed the internal health of the church.

And the first issue is unity in the church. In Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17:21 he spoke these words, ***"I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me."*** Unity of the future church as you can see was a great concern to Jesus when he was on earth.

In a different context in Matt 12:25 Jesus said, ***"Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand"***. Any community whether it is a kingdom, city or even a single household will not be able to

stand if it is not united. So, if Christ himself had warned us about the necessity and power of unity in the church, let's look at where we stand on this today.

Well, the situation is like this. If you look at the church in the US it looks like it is a church that is sharply divided over one question. "Is the US a Christian nation?" The Christian Right will tell you that of course this is a Christian nation, founded on Christian principles and populated by Christians and shaped by Christian values. The Christian Left will tell you, of course not, this country has never been a Christian nation. Even though many of the founders were Christian they wrote into the Constitution something called the "Establishment clause" which says, "Congress shall make no law respecting an **establishment** of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof". That means these Christian founders thought that the government they were setting up was operating in a different sphere as compared to the sphere of the church. This is what a little later, became known as the concept of the "separation of church and state". So two very different perspectives on the church's relation to the state. The government of the nation operates in a sphere over here and church operates in this sphere over here.

Now it is possible to see why claiming that the US is a Christian nation is an attractive one. Nations have power. And when it comes to power, the US is the most power. So if Christianity is associated with that kind of power, it makes Christians feel very powerful. It is the same feeling that Muslims get when they go to Mecca in Saudi Arabia and see the power of their state backing all their religious activity. And this power comes with many perks. With state power, Christians can enforce our values on everybody else. We can pass the laws we want and those who disagree with us can't disagree too much because if they do they will come up against the might of the state. Now when you are in a rapidly changing culture that you are helpless to influence, you can see why having state and political power seems very reassuring. Except that in the Bible we were warned about putting our trust in chariots and horses. Way back in the days of King

David, Ps 20 says, ***“Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God”***. Many Psalms and the Prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah have emphasized these themes of not putting your faith in princes or in military might. But most importantly Jesus Christ when he was giving an account of himself to a worldly ruler Pontius Pilot told him, ***“my kingdom is not of this world”***. At yet, for much of the evangelical world in the United States that is brooding over its powerlessness to stop the culture from drifting away, grabbing on to the straw of political power seems attractive even over the warnings of the prophets and Jesus Christ Himself!

Of course this is only part of the story. There is the other half of the church represented by the likes of Pastor Boyd, the founder of a mega, Woodland Hills church in Minnesota. He says that *“the Christian message is being compromised by the tendency to tie Evangelical Christianity to the Republican party and Christian nationalism”*. John Dickerson says, *“many evangelicals are splitting away from the right, not because they disagree with its positions but they disagree with its methods, priorities or message to Americans at large”*. I could not agree with Pastor Boyd and Pastor Dickerson more. This part of the church would like to take a compassionate and proactive view when it comes to public policy issues like immigration, social justice and environmental stewardship. But then they also tend to be quieter on issues like abortion and sexual orientation and practice because these are individual sin issues that would take Holy Spirit conviction in an individual to overcome.

So to summarize this division in the larger evangelical church, John Dickerson points out that the left and right flanks of the church has embarked on two very distinct approaches to the “Is the US a Christian nation?” question. One side of the church responds by crying foul and says that we are a Christian nation but the culture is rapidly becoming non-Christian and so we need to leverage all the political power we can get to force the country to adopt our values. The other side of the church, which is composed

of the younger, educated, big city believers say as John puts it and I quote, “we have to abandon political rhetoric and elevate the Gospel by focusing on Jesus’ message to the post Christian world that is not our home. They see the marriage of Jesus and the flag as a pollution of Christ... and a distraction from Jesus and His message”.

I make no secret about which side I support. I support the side that says don’t mix the flag of the United States with the message of Jesus Christ. They are not on the same level. Jesus Christ is bigger than any nation and belongs to all of them. But even though I support a particular side in this debate, I will also say this. I will never have this debate outside the church. I have never seen Jesus complain about the Pharisees to the Gentiles. When he has something to say to the Pharisees, he says it to the Pharisees. For many reasons, we should not take our differences out in the open and throw stones at each other in public. One of the things that both the left and right wings of the church has been doing that I disagree with is publishing editorials against each other in the New York Times, one of the biggest platforms of the secular world. That is like making the secular world a judge of our affairs and that is what Paul in 1 Cor 6:1 tells us not to do. That indicates that we are a deeply divided church.

Now I will say this, unity does not mean that we have to go along with everything said or done in other parts of the body so that we can pretend to be united. Jesus prayed “let them be united”, because unity is a powerful benefit and blessing if it exists. But unity does not mean compromising our obedience to Christ.

And today, the church is split on the question of whether the US is a Christian nation.

I want to bring to your attention one more issue the church faces today. The problem of money.

And the problem at the basic level is this. If you look at the financials of the biggest Christian institutions and pattern of overall giving over the last few decades you will

notice that not only is the church shrinking, but its finances are shrinking even faster than its people. Couple of big examples of this. You may have heard of the Crystal cathedral founded by Robert Schuller. It is an example of church building grandeur of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was inaugurated in 1968 to the glory of God and came with a 13 story Tower of Hope on a 40 acre campus and of course a lot of stained glass. By 2010 it has incurred debt to the tune of \$48 million. They were not able to pay even their janitors and now the grand edifice stands unused and uncared for. We have to be really careful what we proclaim declares the glory of God! Regent University, a big Christian university founded by another big evangelical name, Pat Robertson recently required an infusion of \$95 million from the Christian Broadcasting Network to keep running. D James Kennedy, another big evangelical icon who founded the Center for Reclaiming America reached such a financial squeeze that they had to close down their Washington DC office in 2007.

In case you think these are just individual stories, let me give you a big picture statistic. Author and pastor, John says that unless something drastic changes, total giving in the evangelical church is going to come down by a whopping 70% in the next 30 years from what it was in 2012. You know why? Because 68% of the evangelical donors are no longer going to be living 15 years from today. John points out that people over the age of 75 give four times as much of their income as people who are in the 25 to 44 age range. Every generation gives a smaller percentage of their income as tithe than the previous generation. Because of that, when you look at the total budgets of all evangelical organizations put together, 46% of those budgets come from people who are 65 and older, 22% comes from those who are 55 to 64 and people under 35 only contributed a grand total of 4% of the entire evangelical institution budgets. Here is another number for you. 17% of Christians say they tithe, but only 3% actually give 10% of their income. That is why as our most generous givers pass on to glory, it is not going to look very glorious for the church that has been left behind.

Now please don't use these statistics to conclude that I am pointing out somethings about any individual giver in our local church. Your individual giving to God's work may be exceptional for your age category. I don't get to see individual giving but I do know that our church has always had exceptional givers. As a church we have also been frugal in our expenses and generous when it comes to helping those who need it. When we look at a whole year, we continue to spend less than we take in, even though we are a tiny fraction of what we used to be. Because of these habits we do have a fund for a rainy day. But remember that I am talking about the larger church and even we need to be aware off these patterns if we are going to think of our church in the long term.

There are some remedies to the generational giving problem. Today young people think that giving 3% is what is sacrificial to them. However, they are willing to give their time to causes they believe in. If we are able to bring in our young people and get them involved, statistics are that their giving will increase as well. But this too is easier said then done.

Stepping back for a second, in raising this diminishing giving trend, I don't want to give the impression that God's work runs on the power of money. No it does not. God's work runs on the power of the Holy Spirit. And churches and ministries that are more dependent on the dollar than the Holy Spirit deserve to close because they are not doing God's work in God's way.

On the other hand, God's people have to tithe and be generous for their own spiritual health. A believer that gives less is demonstrating a weak spiritual life and spiritually weak believers are going to make a spiritually weak church. That is how the lower giving is going to affect the true church I believe and not because of the direct impact of the loss of the churches budget. But the fact is that every generation in the US is giving less than the previous generation. And in the long term if this pattern is not accounted for,

many evangelical institutions will suddenly have to close their doors and the spiritual impact will be felt immediately.

So we have a division problem and we have an ongoing slow motion financial crash problem in the institutions of the evangelical world. We don't have the power that comes with unity and we will not have the power of a generous giver. What are we to do?

I will say this. We should not be blaming the outside hostility on our internal problems because outside hostility has been a positive factor in every location that the church has grown and flourished spiritually. If we are serious about having healthy church we have to be serious about addressing our internal issues. Two of those issues is our loss of unity and slow loss of our most generous givers. We can recover our unity, if we can recover our love for both Christ and our siblings in Christ. The Bible says, love covers a multitude of sins. By love I don't mean papering over serious issues. No by love I mean being able to have the most difficult conversations with empathy and respect to our fellow believers whom we don't agree with. That kind of conversation is rare in the outside world. But if we are able to practice it in the church world and are able to come together, the world will really see the love that we have for each other as something exceptional and attractive. They will also see Christ in our love and that is what Jesus says in his John 17 prayer.

And when it comes to finances, we have to pray for our young people come and work alongside of us so that they see upfront our values and then want to emulate some of that for themselves. I will end with this prayer for Ps 90 verse 16 and 17

***May your deeds be shown to your servants,  
your splendor to their children.***

***17 May the favor<sup>[a]</sup> of the Lord our God rest on us;  
establish the work of our hands for us—  
yes, establish the work of our hands.***

May God establish unity and grow our generosity so that we can be strong to withstand the external fires of purification to come. Let us pray.