

Sermon- The State of the Body, Bleeding and Sputtering

Scripture: Luke 18:1-8

Sunday, May 2, 2021

This is the third and last sermon in the miniseries I have called, The State of the Body, detailing the most serious issues affecting the evangelical church from the book the Great Evangelical Recession by John Dickerson. Today I am going to focus on two things that the book talks about. The way the church is **bleeding** and the way the church is **sputtering**. This is not cheery stuff, but this is real and if we have the capacity to receive an honest assessment, then we will also have the capacity to be part of the solution. Also, the only reason I am talking about the Evangelical church in the US is because this is the church that we identify with.

First, we will address the bleeding. Last week when I brought up the issue of “giving” in the church I had said that the younger the generation, the smaller their giving as a percentage of their income. Well, it get’s worse. Young people don’t just have a “giving” problem, they have a “leaving” problem as well. I don’t think you will be surprised by the “leaving” problem, but you might be surprised by the scale of the “leaving” problem. It turns out that 260,000 young evangelicals walk away from the church every year. And it is not just the church, they are walking away from, they are walking away from faith altogether. At it is about 2 out of every 3 young evangelicals who leave by age 30. This is a great loss of the most strategic demographic of the church. Because it is the young people who have started movements in the church through the entire 2000 year history of the church. This “leaving problem” is a fact that is being confirmed by many different sources. Josh McDowell’s research indicates that 69% of evangelical teens leave the church after high school. As a result of this exodus, this group is called the “de-churched”. And the “de-churched” group forms the largest group of “unchurched” young people in the country today. Think about that. The largest mission field of young people in the US, is the group that was brought up in the church!

In a report Ed Stetzer looking at these hard numbers asks an even harder question, “What is it about our faith commitment that does not find root in the lives of our children?”

Some people when they hear this get defensive and say well it is not as bad as you make it sound because young people who leave eventually come back. Well, this has been researched as well. It turns out we think like this because in the 70s, 80s and 90s many young people who left did come back. But the numbers for prodigals today coming back are not great at all. LifeWay research has found that today about 35% of prodigals come back. 65% never do. And not only do they not come back but they also say that they don't believe in God and they don't believe in the Bible anymore. So this 65% of 20 somethings who leave the evangelical church are becoming atheists for good.

So think about this. Of the 3.7 million US evangelicals who are in the eighteen to 29 years age range, 2.6 million will leave the faith at some point between the ages of 18 and 29. That comes to a population bleed of 260,000 a year mentioned earlier. Now 35% or 900,000 of them may eventually come back. But when they do they are past the age where in the past they would have been on fire for Christ and started movements in the church.

If you are looking at the period from 2007 to 2027, the projected numbers are that 5 million evangelicals out of 22 million would have left the church. This level of bleeding John Dickerson writes, as you can see is not just a skinning of the knee but a gushing of a main artery. That is because this bleeding represents 10% of the most strategic demographic of the future church.

But millennials are not the only demographic that is leaving the church. Research has shown that two other demographics, singles and working moms too are walking out the door in significant numbers.

Now there is another kind of bleeding that is going on as well. The bleeding of faith in the young people who remain. If you ask young people in the evangelical church to articulate their faith or their relationship to God, it turns out that they are not able to explain their faith or proclaim it to anyone else. In a book called Soul Searching, by Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, they write that if you were to summarize the faith of the American Evangelical teenager you would get “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism”. That is a view of God that says, God exists in a remote location somewhere and he exists to make me happy and a little better than I would have otherwise been. In other words, it is a view that God is all about “me”.

And the scary thing is that is this not just a statement of an ill-informed evangelical teenage. To quote from Smith’s book, he says, and I quote, “it may be the new mainstream American religious faith for our culturally post-Christian, individualistic, mass-consumer capitalistic society” end of quote.

Here is something else that the Barna Group found in their research. That young adults rarely possess a biblical worldview. Consider these numbers. Less than 0.5% of young people in the 18 to 23 age group within the evangelical church possess a Biblical worldview. This as compared to 1 in 9 or about 11% in older adults who hold a Biblical worldview. John Dickerson asks, if evangelical 20 somethings do not possess a Biblical world-view, how will they pass it on to the next generation?

To summarize we are losing 10% of our most important demographic of young adults in the 18 to 29 year old category at the rate of 10% per decade. And of those who remain, they have already lost their Biblical worldview. They can’t explain their faith and they think that God exists to make them good and happy. Somehow this is the extent of faith that the older generation has managed to pass on to these young adults. The bleeding problem we have is that we are losing numbers and with every generation we are losing any meaningful faith that Jesus Christ would recognize as faith.

Let me address the 6th and final issue that John Dickerson addresses in his book. He says the church is **sputtering**. First let me paint the picture of a literal example of sputtering John mentions in his book and then I will show you how he says the evangelical church is sputtering. In 1953 in Daytona Beach a NASCAR legend by the name of Fonty Flock held a full one-minute lead over his second place rival Dick Rathmann. That was an enviable lead to have on a race-track. But at that point, his 8 cylinder engine began to sputter. At the half-way point on the final lap, his engine completely stalled and his car came to a standstill on the track, as his rival Dick Rathmann blazed to the finish line. It turns out that Fonty Flock had run out of gas! Actual gas! What can you say to that?

How is Fonty Flock's embarrassing race a visual for the evangelical church in the US? Well, in the 20th century, the evangelical church here was full of big names and impressive ministries. Names like Billy Graham and Rick Warren who reached millions, ministries like Focus on the Family, who budgeted in millions, and conferences like Women of Faith that packed stadiums. With George W Bush, we had an evangelical even in the Whitehouse, for 8 years. So when you looked at the evangelical church in the US, as compared to the evangelical church in other countries, it had big money, big influence, big size and big fame. If the American church was in a NASCAR rally then it sure looked like Fonty Flock with his one minute lead when compared to the other influences on the American culture.

But now it looks like the engine of the evangelical church is sputtering on the tracks. And maybe there is good reason for it. Maybe, just maybe dollars, influence, size and fame were never Biblical measures of a churches health. It turns out that even the church is easily taken in by worldly standards. Remember the Jewish temple in Jesus' time was built to impress any eye that looked upon it. But when Jesus looked at it, somehow he was not overly impressed and that is when he said "break it down and I will rebuild it in three days".

John Dickerson says if you look at the Bible and ask yourself the question, what is the measure of a healthy church, he says the answer is embarrassingly simple. It is obedience to Jesus' command to "go make disciples". John says, you know if you are succeeding or failing, if you are making disciples. And that means valuing the **quality** of your kingdom relationships over their **quantity**. It means seeing if new disciples are being added to the church. It means seeing that these new disciples are being trained and transformed. It means coaching and modeling disciple making to those who are new and learning the ropes. It means teaching people to obey everything Christ has commanded. It means making sure that the church is growing spiritually.

And John says and I absolutely agree that if the church is not doing these things, then no amount of money or political clout can get the sputtering church to the finish line. A church that has forgotten to obey, is a church that is out of gas.

In the passage we read today, Jesus is telling the story of a persistent widow. She needed justice in some situation and had to go to this particular judge for justice. This judge neither cared of her nor had any fear of God that would have moved him to do the right thing. But the widow was so persistent as desperate people often are that she wore the judge down. So in the end, even though he did not care about her cause, he granted her petition, just to get rid of her. And Jesus says, well, you see how even this judge who did not care about the woman granted her, her petition? Well, God in contrast to this judge promises to provide justice immediately and willingly to his people. This is the first point of this parable but not the only point. Now most of us just focus on the importance of being persistent in our prayers and that is not wrong and stop at verse 7. But verse 8 is incredibly important to this story. Because in verse 8 Jesus is asking the question, when the son of man returns to the earth will he find faith? Well, he must have read this book, "The Great Evangelical Recession" when he made that statement 😊

But if you look at verse 7 and 8 together, what Jesus is saying is, God will promptly to his part, but is His church willing to do its part and hold on to its faith? Or is it going to fall away and dissolve into the world by the time Jesus Christ returns to start the next phase of history? Well, in the big picture, judging by what God is doing in other parts of the world, the global evangelical church in many of the most difficult parts of the world is doing it's job. We on the other hand in the United States have our work cut out for us, if we don't want to be caught sitting awkwardly in the middle of the race track, out of gas.

In this series we looked at six things that are ailing the church. We have an inflated image of our size, we are hated by the culture around us, we are divided and bankrupt and we are bleeding and sputtering. But the amazing thing is that for all six ailments, there is but one remedy that the church needs to resort to, obedience to Christ's command to make disciples and part of that obedience includes teaching them to obey everything that he has commanded us to obey. Obedience to Christ and making disciples as part of that obedience is the remedy for every problem in the church.

In the days to come I will begin a journey through the book of Acts to explore how the early church began to obey. As we do that, I do hope that we in this local church can be faithful in obeying Christ and getting busy with our own disciple making. That way when the son of man returns, He will **surely** find faith in the people that we have invested our lives in. Let us pray.