

Reflections by the Pond

THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S. LAMPEL

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ST. JOHN 20

CHAPTER 20

knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe.

36 For these things were done, that the scripture should be fulfilled. A bone of him shall not be broken.

37 And again another scripture saith. They shall look on him whom they pierced.

38 And after this Joseph of Ar-i-ma-thæ-a, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus.

39 And there came also Nic-o-de-mus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight.

40 Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury.

41 Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid.

42 There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jew's preparation day; for the sepulchre was nigh at hand.

THE first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre, and seeth the stone taken away from the sepulchre.

2 Then she runneth, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and saith unto them, They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid him.

3 Peter therefore went forth, and that other disciple, and came to the sepulchre.

4 So they ran both together: and the other disciple did outrun Peter, and came first to the sepulchre.

5 And he stooping down, and looking in, saw the linen clothes lying; yet went he not in.

6 Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and went into the sepulchre, and seeth the linen clothes lie.

7 And the napkin, that was about his head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself.

8 Then went in also that other disciple, which came first to the sepulchre, and he saw, and believed.

9 For as yet they knew not the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead.

10 Then the disciples went away again unto their own home.

11 But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping: and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre.

12 And seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain.

13 And they say unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? She saith unto them, Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him.

14 And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus.

15 Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away.

16 Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rab-bo-ni; which is to say, Master.

17 Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.

18 Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that he had spoken these things unto her.

19 Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you.

20 And when he had so said, he shewed unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord.

21 Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you; as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.

22 And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost:

23 Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.

THE DYING CHURCH

We are witnesses to two extremes that illustrate the precarious health of the local church today.

At one end of the scale is the anemic, dying congregation struggling just to have a nominal quorum each Sunday morning. At the other end of the scale is the “megachurch,” packed to the gills, with thousands of “seekers” in regular attendance, having their ears tickled by the theatrical celebrity-preacher.

Jesus weeps over both of these. Neither represents the biblical picture of a healthy, effective, God-honoring and God-worshiping local church.

Not without exceptions, of course, the local church has lost its way. The message of the gospel and the truth of God’s word have been lost in a maelstrom of “programs,” “ministries,” and “inclusiveness.” God’s authoritative word has been superseded by the corrupt wisdom of the age.

There is nothing new under the sun. God and His Christ have been relegated to an after-thought many times before during man’s history.

But this is our watch.

We are now responsible to right this sinking ship and get it back on course.

COBWEBS & MAMMON

Someone once expressed to me his frustration over the condition of his local church—a church practically in its death throes. He, of late senior years, and a designated lay-preacher in his denomination, lamented the poor Sunday attendance, the general lack of interest, lack of enthusiasm in a congregation comprised almost exclusively of seniors. It was obvious to him the church was dying, but what to do about it? He shared with me the few remedial ideas he had considered: outreach to the homeless and poor, offering them evening meals in the church basement; attractive youth programs to get younger people back in the church. After listening for a while I offered him my impassioned opinion: *Preach the word! Exalt and worship the holiness of God! Get back to the basics, and they will come.* But he demurred.

His is a picture of the aging church gasping for oxygen because it has lost its way; sinking in its traditionalism, it founders, grasping for survival at inadequate, even useless detritus floating by in the waves. Its members have listened to so many decades of insipid, topical pap from the pulpit, they long ago forgot their first love.

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall.”

Matthew 7:24-27

They stopped listening to Jesus, and now they are knee-deep in the quagmire of the flood. They stopped studying Him and obeying Him, so they are no longer abiding in His love—nor that of the Father. They have become little more than a geriatric social club.



There are other churches gasping for breath from their deathbed who do not yet know—or refuse to admit that—they are dying. By all appearances and by the standards of this world they are thriving, their walls bursting with bodies. The institution requires ever larger facilities: they do not build churches, but amphitheaters, stadiums. Their coffers overflow, so their leaders live in palaces, are transported in limousines and private jets. They measure success by the number of bodies in seats and the size of their bank accounts. These counterfeit temples have become the living embodiment—the fulfillment of prophecy, as it were—of that heresy spoken of in God’s word.

Jesus makes church,
church. Therefore, when
a church loses focus on
Jesus, it loses *everything*.

Pastor Alistair Begg

For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in

the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For



they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

Romans 1:21-25

The leaders of these fraudulent “churches” know who God is, but they have turned aside to worship mammon instead. Week after week they spout lies to tickle the ears of the gullible and unknowing, bringing shame to the name of the Lord they claim to love. Absent repentance, they will meet a terrible end.

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There will always be the aging, impotent church with cobwebs growing in the corners of its worn oak pulpit and sparsely populated pews. There will also always be the dynamic, bursting at the seams “megachurch,” led not by the Spirit of God but by the spirit of this fallen world. There are many variations between these two extremes, and, just as with the poor, unhealthy churches will always be with us. ☘

A FAMILIAL BOND

Can we know what a healthy church should look like? Does God offer us a template? Jesus gave His disciples the framework for a prayer; do we have something similar for the church itself?

Luke, in his chronicle of the early church, offers us just such a template—if not a point-by-point checklist, at least a picture of a congregation of God-ordained health, peopled by “as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself” (Acts 2:39).

This was an epochal moment in the days following Christ’s ascension. What would happen now? With the loss of their Master, would the individual disciples—the Twelve, and others—simply drift away from each other and the gospel that had been entrusted to them? Would they remain faithful to a now-absent Lord? Or would it have all been for naught? Would they obey the last command of their Master?

Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, “Which,” He said, “you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”

Acts 1:4-8

They obeyed.

On the subsequent day of Pentecost the disciples received the Holy Spirit, which fulfilled the promise made by Jesus before He ascended. The Spirit—now dwelling *permanently* in them and all who would believe—would be their umbilical to the Father; their surety, their pledge of belonging to His family; their reliable counsel; and the engine by which they would worship, spread the gospel, and minister in the Lord’s name.

The work of the Holy Spirit in their lives was immediately manifested for all to see. The gospel went forth not just in their native tongue, but from them in a multitude of languages hitherto unknown to these mostly common folk.

And when some in their midst mocked them for this *charisma*, accusing the apostles of being “full of sweet wine,” the apostle Peter stepped forward and, with brand new Spirit-empowered wisdom for a fisherman, delivered a powerful apologia for the gospel of Christ, concluding with,

“Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.”

Acts 2:36

With the full force of the convicting Holy Spirit behind them, Peter’s words stabbed those assembled down to the very marrow of their being. Each person in his hearing had just had an earthquake tear at their very soul—and now they would never be the same.

The Spirit had done His work: the good news of Jesus the Christ had convicted them. Their response? “What do we do now?”

The real church of God—the scattered local churches comprising the church universal—has a strict membership requirement. One does not join by just walking in the door, or signing a document. One does not become a member by osmosis, or lineage. One does not buy one’s way in with money or talent or good looks. And certainly one does not become a member by simply wishing to join. There is only one qualification for membership and, in this fallen world, it is perhaps the hardest of all.

Repentance.

There is a cascading sequence of events that results in salvation and membership in the Body of Christ: the church of God in Christ. It begins, from the human perspective, with the conviction by the Holy Spirit of the individual’s *need* for Christ—that is, the conviction that he is a sinner, and only the sacrifice of Christ Jesus, the Son of God, is able to atone for his sins and justify him before a holy God. The individual’s response to the Spirit’s conviction is key: if he ignores or rejects the Spirit’s touch, he remains a sinner, and lost; his acknowledgment of his sin and need for Christ is manifested in his repentance of that sin and his turning to Christ as his one and only hope for salvation. He is then regenerated (“born again”), justified before God, and adopted into His family.

And just as the marriage union between man and woman pictures the wedded union between Christ and His church, so too the familial bond of the members of the local church pictures in miniature the familial bond between members of the universal family of God. Thus the local church is essential to the life of every believer. If that local church is unhealthy, if it evinces a distorted, inauthentic picture of God and His word, it can have a devastating effect on its members and, by extension, the church as a whole, as well as its witness to the community.

Sadly, this world is filled with examples of unhealthy, even heretical churches. What does a healthy, God-oriented church look like? ❧

“For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.

Ephesians 5:31-32

LORD OF THE SABBATH

Reach your dreams.
 You are stronger than you think.
 You are victorious.
 Don't be against yourself.
 You've been armed with
 strength for this battle.
(from joelosteen.com)

Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Reading Luke's account of the first church in Jerusalem, one is first struck by what is missing.
 No membership drives.
 No gimmicks to "get them in the door."
 No palatial trappings.
 No softening of the gospel to make it more "inclusive."
 The apostle Peter just delivered a Christ-centered sermon and "when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart."

There is one more thing missing. Except for Peter and the rest of the apostles (those communicating the gospel), there is no mention of individuals. The emphasis is not on the individual, but on the group as a whole: the brand new family with Christ Jesus as its head.

One can easily be drawn to an assembly led by an attractive, charismatic speaker. That speaker spends most of his time making promises for things that will abound to the congregants: success, money, good health, a pleasant life of ease. But these are all lies—lies from the bowels of hell. Jesus preached just the opposite.

"If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me."

John 15:19–21

Later, when the Lord was commissioning Saul of Tarsus (Paul), He made clear to His messenger Ananias that this man, this vital component for the spread of the gospel, would not have an easy life.

But the Lord said to [Ananias], "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."

Acts 9:15–16

And when Paul was near the end of his life of trials and sufferings, he passed along the following counsel to his son in Christ, Timothy.

Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

2 Timothy 3:12

In the lies and empty promises regurgitated from the pulpits of the “prosperity gospel,” where is the devotion focused? What do they worship?

Self.

Instead of Christ Jesus and Father God, it is *self* that they worship. That is their chosen god.

An individual can also be drawn to an assembly that preens in its cultural *inclusiveness* (Diversity/Equity/Inclusion, DEI). In these pagan temples God’s word, the Bible, is discarded in favor of the theology and doctrines of this fallen world. God’s holy word is demoted to little more than a handy door stop in a congregation that celebrates homosexuality and the dark, twisted gospel of LGBTQIA++... Under the guise of “welcoming love,” this church loves what God hates, and hates what He loves.

In the heretical philosophies and meaningless pap delivered from the pulpits of the these temples of inclusion, where is the devotion focused? What do they worship?

Once again, instead of Christ Jesus and Father God, it is *self* that they worship, but in this instance it is self in its darkest perversity, shaped and painted by the mindless of this world.

This is their chosen god.



photo by Raphael Renter on Unsplash

Is it any wonder that much of the reverent, authentic joy of the Lord has vacated so many of our churches. In a world where entire church denominations are being led by avowed atheists, what else can we expect? When the created has replaced the Creator upon the heart’s throne, reverence has been lost in the arrogance and presumption of fallen flesh.

But what *joy* was present that day in Jerusalem! A sizable number of brand new believers were publicly baptized to witness to the change that had taken place in their hearts—and the first church came into existence. The Holy Spirit, manifested for the first time in individuals not for a specific, temporary purpose, but as a permanent companion and counselor, wrapped Himself around this fledgling group of believers and fashioned them into a robust and energetic family.

And this was a *hungry* family—hungry to hear even more about Jesus, hungry to be with and support each other, hungry to pray together and take their meals together. One gets the impression that those who were part of

“For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself...” So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone

kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Acts 2:37-39, 41-47

this family could not bear to be apart from the others; the church was now the center of their lives. They were all of like mind: they were earnestly devoted to growing up together in Christ—in the ways of Christ, in the teachings about Christ, in the very words of Christ.

In those early days before the gospel was recorded and the apostles had penned their letters, the Lord God continued to witness through “signs and wonders” through His designated apostles. This had a powerful effect on not just those following Christ, but those in the community at large who were observing it all. What was going on in the church, the community of believers, was contagious, impacting the entire community. The average man or woman in the street could not avoid or easily dismiss the wonder that was taking place. Just as today, some were repelled by what was happening in this group, or they were struck with fear over its supernatural aspects. Others, however, were filled with a new and powerful sense of awe. They could literally *feel* God working in and through this group of believers; it was emanating from them like a beam of light piercing through the darkness in their lives. They were being “pierced to the heart” as well.

That first church was marked by its *devotion*—it was devoted to God and His Christ, and devoted to God’s word. As a result, its members were devoted to each other. Out of this devotion flowed everything else. Their mutual love for Christ resulted in an extravagant love for each other, and they eagerly shared their worldly goods with their brothers and sisters in the family. In its authentic sincerity, their joy was boundless—and magnetic. As they celebrated the Lord, worshiped Him, and sang His praise, many others were drawn to what they had. They found “favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

At its fundamental root, the church is not about us. The purpose of the church was, and is, *Christ*, for it is *His* church.

Do you want your church to not just stay alive, but actually thrive? Worship the Lord in joy and holiness, in Spirit and truth. Proclaim loudly and faithfully the authentic gospel—the *cross*. Teach and preach the word of God clearly and accurately.

Proclaim the *truth* about Christ, for it is His church.

He is its Light.

He is its Lord.

He is its Head.

It is *His* glory—not ours. ☩

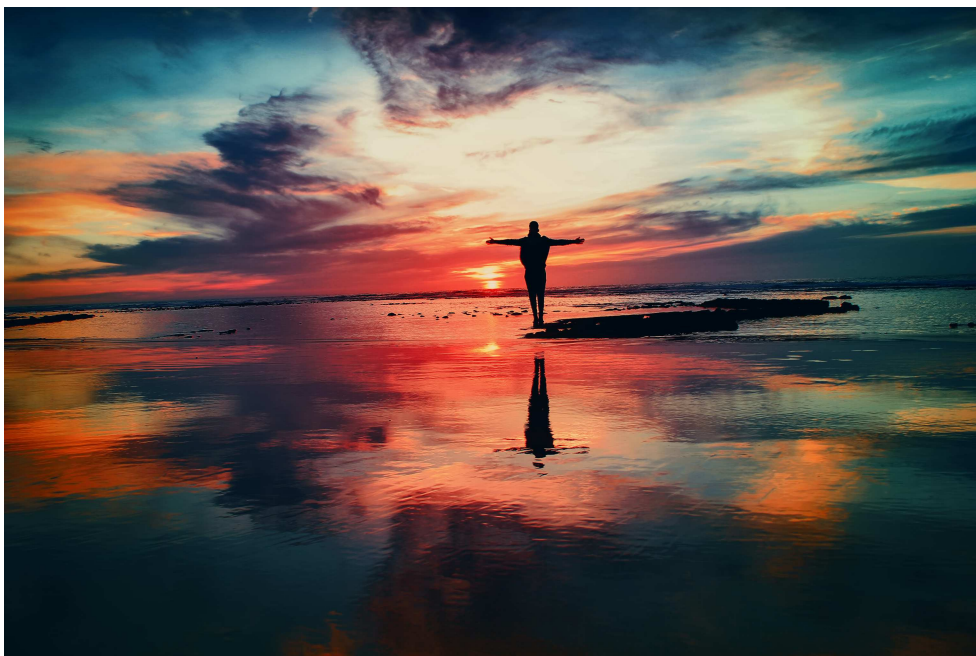


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