

Being and doing church 101

Scripture text: Matthew 16:13-18

David C. Dixon

“*Nisi Dominus Frustra*” has been the motto of the city of Edinburgh, Scotland, since 1647, even written on their coat of arms so that they won’t forget its truth: “Apart from the Lord, it’s all in vain.” This motto was taken from Psalm 127: “**Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord guards the city, the guards stand watch in vain.**” Last Sunday we focused on the vanity of trying to build our homes without Christ at the center of them. So this week we apply the same truth to growing the church, the testimony and Body of Jesus in the world. Without knowing Him deeply, giving His Word a major role in our lives, and making ourselves vulnerable to His transforming work, all we do together will be in vain!

The challenge of “being and doing” the church of Jesus in our post-Christian world is overwhelming! Maybe you’ve heard the term “**Liquid modernity**”, which is the name of a book written by Zygmunt Bauman (2000), Polish sociologist who suggests that the accelerating “liquefaction” of life is moving us toward a society where everything is fluid, including identity, relationship, and community. Our culture regards the church more and more as an outmoded form of community, too rigid, not relevant to mainstream society. Human bonding has become so fragile that we are only fooling ourselves if we think that Christian communion is real. So on this **planet adrift**, we are challenged to rethink who we are and to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. How do we do church in these times and impact our world with the “good news” of Jesus?

1) We must truly know what that **good news** is about – it has to impact our own life in the first place! Jesus showed His concern about this very question when He asked His disciples, “**Who do people say that I am? ... And who do you say I am?**” How we identify Jesus has eternal consequences, yet today there are so many false theories about Jesus that have become popular that people are confused. Was He only a good teacher, a social reformer, a Jewish martyr or a revolutionary? Peter’s confession was the exact truth: “**Messiah, Son of the living God.**” And that confession of faith was the very **rock** that Jesus said He would build His church on! Not “on Peter,” a mere human being predisposed to sin and error, as when Peter objected to Jesus’ words about being “delivered into the hands of sinners” and crucified.

Statistics in the US suggest that the American church is in serious decline. If the Christ we preach has nothing dynamic to offer, He won’t attract anybody, because people are only

seeking their own interest, comfort and diversion. There's a North American campaign sponsored by some wealthy believers that is attempting to improve Jesus' image, trying to get people to reconsider Him. But what is Jesus' primary marketing method? It's the church – you and I, His followers. So if we're not living the gospel the way He gave it to us, then this world and everything in it is condemned to the cosmic garbage dump (vanity)!

2) So if we're going to be a church that impacts its world with God's truth and love, **His Word** must occupy a major role in our day-to-day life (Mt. 25:34). Jesus' goal for His disciples was that God's truth should progressively dominate their inner life as He opened the meaning of Scripture to them. Bible-reading was never supposed to be just a pious devotional activity! **Manasseh** was the most perverse king that Judah ever had (2 Chr. 34). Copies of the law were made only for kings (responsible for its execution), but during his reign, God's Word was lost; he ignored the Scriptures and made altars to foreign gods inside the temple of Yahweh, and so led God's people into corruption. The Bible is a "lost book" for many people today, even Christians, not because it's unavailable, but because of our culture's disdain for the truth! Manasseh reigned 55 years and only at the end did he repent. But the damage he did to his family, his country, and the testimony of the Lord, was almost irreparable: destruction of Jerusalem and exile for his people, thousands killed, years of suffering. Pain and sorrow are the result when you neglect God's Word. Young people, please decide you will overcome the prejudices of our culture and cultivate the Word; don't let it become a lost book in your life!

3) If we would do church in a way that changes our world according to God's priorities, then we must let the **REIGN OF JESUS** transform our hearts! That was Jesus' ultimate goal with those disciples! Yet many people claim to be Christians for years without ever making it their goal to become more like Jesus! Spiritual transformation impacts my perspective, my feelings, my relationships – everything!

Reading and studying God's Word has the express **purpose** of making us "**wise for the salvation that is by faith in Christ Jesus**" (2 Tim. 3:15), the goal of which includes the transformation of our lives! **Reading the Bible is supposed to be life-changing**, so if you're reading the Bible (once in a while or regularly) and not being transformed by it, something is terribly wrong! This is why Jesus envisioned the church as the greatest change agent for good in our world – because of the power of living by His grace and under His sovereignty. He even declared that "**the gates of hell**" will not prevail against His church! So what happened to the church down through history? Two directions: on the one hand, it began to adopt the strategies of the world, *taking* control by human power, turning into simply another human institution (with politicking, power struggles, buying and selling favors, etc.); on the other hand, some churches, like in Colossae, Ephesus, Smyrna, Joppa, Jerusalem, etc., disappeared. All we have left of them is archeological remains and the record of Scripture. So did hell prevail against those churches? Absolutely not! But a lot of congregations down through history have been decimated by persecution and tribulation, so they were scattered into a "diaspora," one of God's favorite methods for transforming lives and sowing the Gospel! Many of us here have been affected by this missionary method, since you are probably the fruit of diaspora if you live in a country different from the one where you were born. So what is God calling us dispersed seeds to do in His name, together with those native to this place?

To proclaim His good news by knowing Him for real, going deeper in His gospel, building His church as a genuine community of love, and extending His Kingdom by being transformed by it! If we don't really understand the Gospel, if we're not truly into God's Word and being transformed by it, chances are pretty good that whatever we're doing in relation to the church is just frustrating vanity ... *Nisi Dominus frustra* ... So don't live your life in vain! May we not come together as a church in vain! Would you **covenant together** with me that we will get to know Jesus better together, go deeper into His Word together, and ask Him to make us more like Him ... together?! It happens in community, as members of Jesus' Body in the world.