

Crisis In The Church: Incorrect Diagnosis

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Bible Text: Matthew 17:14-21

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The miracle recorded in Matthew 17.14-21 pictures the condition of the Church of Jesus Christ in the world today. The demon possessed boy depicts the world; the disciples show the Church.

In the passage, the disciples could not cure the sick boy. They attempted to cast out the demon, but failed. They were powerless to bring about a cure in him.

In similar fashion, the Church today, including perhaps even you, is powerless and helpless to affect the sinful condition of the world. The Church exerts an ineffective influence upon the world.

Your failure and that of the Church shows itself in at least four symptoms:

1. the defection from the Church;
2. the Church's disavowal of cardinal doctrines;
3. the Church's difference from the New Testament Church;
4. the Church's discord with the commands of Jesus Christ.

Jesus pointed out in Matthew 17.20 the cause of the disciples' failure: unbelief. They had failed to trust God. The disciples' unbelief blinded their eyes to the truth, to their condition, and to the difficulty of the demon possessed boy.

It caused them to depend upon human effort, which in the end prevented the intervention and display of God's supernatural power through them. As a result, the disciples failed to bring about a cure of the boy.

Their unbelief caused three errors that led to their failure:

1. an inaccurate diagnosis of the problem;
2. an incorrect solution to the problem;
3. insufficient power to solve the problem.⁽¹⁾

In like fashion, you fail to influence the world today for the same reason: unbelief. Christians doubt God and His truth concerning the nature of mankind. Further, believers question the Bible's statement of the nature of the enemy.

Unbelief blinds your eyes, causes you to depend upon human abilities, and prevents you from experiencing God's supernatural power.

Believers make the same errors as the disciples did. And the Church fails today as they did. These conclusions reveal the desperate need of the Church, perhaps even you, today: spiritual revival.

From this account Matthew 17, I want to examine with you one of the consequences of the disciples' unbelief: their inaccurate diagnosis of the boy's problem. This truth applies to the Church of Jesus Christ and your life today.

I pray that the Holy Spirit will clarify for you the truth, convict you of its need in your life, and use it to correct you to bring about a spiritual revival that will transform your life.

Inaccurate diagnosis

In their evaluation of the boy, the disciples failed to diagnosis properly his condition.⁽²⁾ They realized the true nature of his problem. It was not physical in nature, like blindness or a defect. Nor was it an illness.

They did recognize the signs of demonic activity. But they analyzed only part of his state. When they discerned his condition, they immediately attempted methods that they thought would work. Sadly, they failed.

Although they discerned demonic forces, they totally missed the severity of the problem. They fell short in their understanding the power of the evil one. They missed the persistence of the enemy.

Ultimately, they failed because they reached an inaccurate diagnosis of the situation.

Jesus' diagnosis

But, the Lord Jesus properly diagnosed the young boy's condition. He cast out the demon and healed the boy. When asked by His disciples to explain their failure, He told them in Matthew 17:21:

“...this kind...”

Jesus identified a difference in demon possession. Not all of them were alike. There were varieties of kinds. The boy had a different kind of condition than the disciples had previously encountered.⁽³⁾

Because Jesus properly distinguished between spirits, He could bring healing to the boy. Jesus discerned that the true nature of the boy's problem lay in the spiritual realm, not the

physical realm. He comprehended the full extent of the power, persistence, and presence of the evil one at the root of the child's difficulty.

Failure of the Church

At this present time, however, the Church of Jesus Christ fails to recognize the true nature of the problem that confronts it. It misses the point.

In general, the Church defines the nature of the problem as political, economical, or cultural. Worst of all, however, are those who do not see any problem at all.

Few of the Church's ranks correctly see the true nature of the problem, a spiritual problem. The Bible correctly identifies the true enemy of the Church in 2 Corinthians 10:3-6:

“For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: {4} (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) {5} Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ; {6} And having in a readiness to revenge all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.”

Like the disciples of old, you face a world controlled by the devil. The Bible describes some of his manifestations with these profiles:

1. the serpent (Revelation 12.9);
2. the dragon (Revelation 12.9);
3. the roaring lion who roams about seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5.8);
4. an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11.14);
5. the prince of the power of the air (Ephesians 2.2);
6. beelzebub (Matthew 12.24);
7. the accuser of the brethren (Revelation 12.10);
8. abaddon/apollyon (Revelation 9.11);
9. the spirit that worketh in the children of disobedience (Ephesians 2.2);
10. lucifer (Isaiah 14.12).

Because of the diabolical deceit of the enemy, he hides his true identity behind many disguises. But, the problems that believers and the Church face are spiritual in their character. That explains why the Holy Spirit through Paul clarified the truth in this passage. In addition, satan works through a well organized and well disguised kingdom. The Holy Spirit reveals the extent of this realm in Ephesians 6:10-12:

“Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. {11} Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. {12} For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, (and) powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in (heavenly) places.”

In this reference, God's word confirms the true nature of the enemy, not flesh and blood. Further, it identifies four divisions of authority in satan's kingdom:

1. principalities, or first level magistrates;
2. powers, or demons with superhuman delegated powers;
3. rulers of the darkness of this world, or devils who use strength to seize or retain authority over the darkness of error;
4. spiritual wickedness in high places, or wicked spirits in the heavenlies.

From both of these Biblical references, I want to identify several common elements important to the diagnosis of the Church's ineffectiveness in the world.

First, the nature of the enemy is not human in its source. Although it often disguises itself as human (e. g. political, economical, or cultural symptoms), and it may attack believers in these human ways, it is not a human enemy that you face. It is a spiritual enemy.

Second, your enemy is strong and well organized. Despite this truth, however, he is not omnipotent, omniscient, nor omnipresent. But God is. God has eternal authority over him and all of his evil kingdom.

Finally, victory over the evil one rests upon spiritual weapons, not carnal or human ones. Thus, any attempt to influence the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ by reliance upon human weapons will fail. Only spiritual weapons that are mighty through God can and will bring victory for you and the Church.

Importance of diagnosis

As you can now see, the wrong diagnosis of the problem of the Church leads to disaster. This disaster reveals itself in at least four ways.

First, it creates incorrect solutions. This failure causes reliance upon human methods, manpower, and mechanics that cannot touch the spiritual foe nor overcome him.

Second, the wrong diagnosis of the Church's problem causes an ineffective Church. It is unproductive from within, lacking spiritual vitality and life. It is impotent without, ineffectual in its mandate to the world.

Third, the wrong diagnosis of the Church's problem consents to the continued control of the devil. The wrong diagnosis leaves the enemy unaffected. He continues his diabolical works unhindered by the Church.

In the end, the wrong diagnosis of the Church's problem curbs the work of the Holy Spirit. It leaves the invalid as he came, demon possessed, and unchanged.

What can the Holy Spirit accomplish in your life today with these truths? He can comfort you with them. They will comfort you when they reaffirm to you the truth.

For the obedient and the faithful, the truth provides many benefits. These truths can:

1. set you free from doubts and fears, from ignorance and error, and from the wiles of the devil and the power of evil;
2. ground you in the faith;
3. edify you in the faith;
4. give hope for uncertainty;

It will encourage you to know the truth and to apply it in daily experience.

Second, the Holy Spirit can clarify for you the truth. For those lacking knowledge of the truth, the Spirit's revelation of them to your heart and mind will teach you Biblical doctrine to believe and obey.

They reveal the certainties about the true nature of the Church's and your problems in the world. I pray that the Holy Spirit has opened your eyes to understand and believe them.

Third, the Spirit can use these truths to convict you of sin. The truth rebukes those who do not believe and obey it. Where has He identified today your failure to apply these truths in your life?

Perhaps, you, like many others, have believed that the problems which confront you and the Church today are not spiritual ones, but political, economical, or cultural.

What conclusions about your spiritual condition has the Spirit revealed to you? Has He approved or reproved you? Has He found you innocent or guilty? Do you fail to believe Biblical doctrine?

Do you, then, experience these consequences that accompany your unbelief?

1. To trust the flesh ends in defeat. You will lack spiritual power and God's glorious presence in your life. The failure to understand and believe them means that you will fail to seek and experience God's power for victory.
2. Their absence robs God of the glory, honor, praise and obedience that He rightly deserves. It dethrones His sovereignty, abases the truth of God about Himself and mankind, and degrades His character and nature.
3. Unbelief of these truths rejects the power of Christ and minimizes His works and victory over the evil one on the cross.
4. To doubt them causes you and the Church to sin against the Holy Spirit. It grieves Him, quenches His power, and rejects His work.

In addition, God's Spirit can use these truths to correct you from sin. They show false doctrine to avoid. They disprove the common fallacies of the day that the Church's prob-

lems center in political, economical, and cultural issues. These false beliefs pervade the Church today.

Then, too, the healing of this boy gives us sinful practices to shun. Because of false beliefs, people erroneously offer solutions based upon these assumptions. It results in incorrect solutions, an ineffective Church, an unmoved enemy, and an uncured mankind.

Surely, it gives you an example to avoid. To follow in the footsteps of the disciples defies mankind and dishonors God.

The resulting sin causes the disapproval of God and His judgment upon it. It drives the helpless offender to Jesus Christ for deliverance and relief.

Last, the Holy Spirit can use these truths to conform you to them. Repentance produces fruit. You conform your thoughts, opinions, actions, and beliefs to God's word.

It humbles the transgressor and glorifies God. The repentant one brings praise and honor to the Father. The Spirit conforms you to the image of Jesus and exalts Him in your life.

How will you respond to these truths that the Holy Spirit has revealed to you? You can reject Him by taking refuge in lies that will keep you from faith and obedience to God.

If you make this choice, realize what will happen to you when you refuse to believe and obey the truth. You will:

1. stand accountable to God for your sin;
2. see the consequences of your sin;
3. sustain God's judgment for your sin;
4. suffer the removal of God's presence from your life.

However, you can repent from your sin and respond to these truths in your life. You can rely upon the Holy Spirit to empower you to obey them and to enable you to believe the truth.

I pray that the Holy Spirit has shown you your true condition before God and the necessity of His supernatural work to apply these Biblical truths to your life.

I pray that you will experience the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit in your life today. I pray that He will bring you to repent of your sin.

I pray that the Holy Spirit will apply these Biblical truths in your life and find relief through the blood of Jesus Christ.

May the Holy Spirit come to you in grace and bring a spiritual transformation in your life today.

References

1. Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones. Revival (Crossway Books, Westchester, IL) 1987, p. 10.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.