



MOUNT MERRION FREE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

[BELFAST NORTHERN IRELAND].



Pulpit Ministry of Mount Merrion Free Presbyterian Church

Lord's Day Evening 13th April 2008.

"Just How Do Sinners Come To Faith?"

Scripture Reading Matt Ch11:27-28

By. Rev. Paul Thompson.

In January of this year [2008], the Evangelical Times magazine carried an article regarding one of the largest churches in America, the Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, pastored by Bill Hybels. Approx 20,000 attend the services every week, between 4000-5000 attend the midweek. What fuels Willow Creek is ‘*evangelical pragmatism*’ were millions of dollars are spent on drawing the crowd through drama and music etc, there is no sustainable message. The article that appeared in the E.T. was really a confession of methodological failure at Willow Creek Church. Certainly on the outside Willow Creek Community Church seemed to be doing well. However, for a number of years the staff at Willow Creek Church had been conducting a ‘*Spiritual Life Survey*’ in order to measure the ‘*unseen success*’ of their work. The article recorded the words of Senior Pastor Bill Hybels “*After millions of dollars were spent to help our people grow and develop spiritually, yet when the data actually came back it wasn’t helping people that much! Other things that we didn’t put that much money into and didn’t put much staff against, is the stuff our people are crying out for!*”

Unlike Willow Creek whose problem was not numerical but Spiritual, the problem of many Western Churches on this side of the Atlantic is both numerical and Spiritual. It is true that we should not become intrigued with numbers, however, there does come a point when we should be concerned about numbers, that time is when the number of professions of faith that are being made are not being reflected upon the Church numerical. The test of a Church’s thirty-forty year cycle of evangelism is the number of middle aged Christians who are attending that Church today, progressing in the faith. However, as we see that is not the case, our Churches are not filled with the corresponding ‘*recorded*’ professions of those who do profess faith in Christ. In fact the professions of faith far outweigh the actual numbers of those physically present at the weekly services of the Church. We should be concerned about that!

It may not be surprising that such an admission is made by a church such as Willow Creek, however, let it be said that there are many churches today that are issuing similar lamentations. Ministers are lamenting the increasing number of recorded converts that pursue faith for a while but very soon are nowhere to be found! Another problem that the Church has encountered today is that of determining who is a Christian and who is not! There is a reluctance by Churches to say of one person or another that he or she is not in Christ, it seems that the Church is either afraid or does not know how to determine the Spiritual standing of a given individual. We had better not accept that condition in the Church. One primary reason for re-examining the issues is that we are dealing with the souls of men and women! If it means that we need to re-examine our evangelistic methodology then let us be humble enough to do so, and dispense with the fear that if we change our methodology many may become offended! There needs to be a re-examination of Biblical evangelism. One of the key questions that I personally believe will give a healthy foundation to the Church and give the much needed clarity as to the identity of the Church is this, “*Just How do Sinners come to Faith?*” In seeking to answer that question what better ministry to examine or person to begin with than Christ.

1) Christ’s Preparation. [v27], “*Neither knoweth any man the Father, save the son.*”

How true it is that men will never seek out medical help unless they feel sick, unless they know that I am sick and I need a doctor! Yet the spiritual application is that men will never seek Christ without first seeing their need, they will never come to faith in Christ. Words such as Matt Ch11:28 are meaningless to those never awakened to their need, the invitation and promise of Christ to give rest to the weary is meaningful only to those who recognise their sinfulness. We see that statement in effect all the time. Each time unconverted men and women are found under the sound of the gospel, the words of urgency and threats of eternal death are meaningless to them, it has no effect on the unawakened soul. So how do we preach to sinners? How then are sinners brought to a saving faith in Christ? How are sinners brought to see the sincerity and meaningful presentation of Christ’s words, ‘*Come unto me*’?

The Puritan preacher William Guthrie suggests in his book, ‘The Christian’s Great Interest’ four ways in which sinners are drawn to Christ. (1) There are some like John The Baptist who are called in the womb. (2) There are some like Zaccheus who are drawn in a Sovereign gospel way. (3) Some such as the thief on the cross, are graciously called at death’s door. (4) Most are called and prepared for Christ by the work of the law. In other words when man is confronted with the law of God which is holy and inflexible, yet has been broken

“*The Fear of God is the soul of Godliness.*”
...Dr. John Murray...

by him, he is shown his need and forcefully driven to Christ! Let us consider how Christ deals with those who are assembled before Him.

The tendency would be to focus upon the words of v28, “*Come unto me*” Yet before Christ gives the words “*Come unto me*” He prepares men for those words of invitation. The invitation that is given in v28 is prefaced by the words “...*neither doth any know the Father, save the Son and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal him.*”

i) Revelation. Man must first take to heart his own condition, he must know some things. Christ prepares man by revealing man’s ignorance of God. One of the results of the fall upon man was that man lost all knowledge of God. When man died his knowledge of God died also. Man was acquainted with God, he was fully conscious of the perfections of God, I.e. that God was holy and righteous with no imperfections whatsoever. However, man as a sinner has no conscious knowledge or acquaintance with those perfections in his present condition [John Ch17:25], “*O Righteous Father, the world hath not known thee.*” Clearly men are in a position that they know not God, “*neither doth any know the Father, save the Son.*” His breaking of the law has rendered him ignorant! How does he see his ignorance? It is by God revealing it to him! [v27], “...*neither doth any know the Father, save the Son and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal him.*” See also Luke Ch10:22. A knowledge of God must precede any genuine profession of faith, a terrifying, living concept of who God is!

ii) Christ’s use of the law of God.

Man’s need of Spiritual Revelation arises from the fall of man into sin [the breaking of the law see 1John Ch3:4]. We said that man must know some things of himself, Christ gives man this knowledge by the law! Turn to John Ch8:1-8. The adulterous woman is accused of open sin by the Scribes and Pharisees [v3]. In v5 they point to the law of Moses. Christ stoops and with His finger He writes on the ground [v6; v8]. What they saw written on the ground convicted them in their conscience [v9]. It is accepted that Christ wrote the law of God on the ground, the very finger that had inscribed on the tablets of stone the Ten Commandments [Ex Ch31:18]. These very Scribes and Pharisees were being shown that in their hearts they were guilty of breaking the Fifth Commandment and therefore were liable to the penalty of death of which they accused this woman. It is true that not all men who have the conscience awakened flee to Christ, [e.g. Cain, Judas, Pharisees etc]. The law informs man he is a rebel and that God will not hold him guiltless but guilty!

Evangelism today needs to return to a presentation of the law, in order to show this world its ignorance of God. The example of the missionary who could not convince the native of the severity of an untreated head wound. The doctor borrowed a mirror, after handing the looking glass to the native the tribesman for the first time recognised the danger he was in, it was only then that the pleas and the exhortations of the missionary became meaningful, up on till then the doctor’s word were discarded as worthless. When the mirror of the law is brought upon the unregenerate, it like a schoolmaster takes the sinner and drives him far from himself to the remedy for sin. He first hears its demands ‘*obey me*’, he then sees its enormity, he consciously realises I cannot keep that which God demands of me, he then listens with horror as the law pronounces its curse upon him, “*The soul that sinneth it shall die*” [Ezekiel Ch18:4; Ch18:20]. Finally in their anguish and desperate need they cry out, “*God be merciful to me a sinner.*” [Luke Ch18:13]. The person truly convicted of his sin is content to have salvation on God’s terms, yea even on any terms, as the Jailer’s question implies, “*What must I do to be saved!*” [Acts Ch16:30]. By the law Christ causes men to discover a sight of themselves! Sinners this evening have not yet discovered a true sight of themselves! Guthrie, ‘*Christ does so to chase them out of themselves.*’

2) Christ’s Invitation. “*Come unto me all ye that labour.*”

In v28 we have wonderful words, “*Come unto me all ye that labour.*” These words of Christ serve as a reminder to man of his true condition, “*all who are*” expressing a condition that is already existing. The word ‘*labor*’ relates to man as a toiling creature, the term ‘*heavy laden*’ speaks of a burden, man is a labouring and burdened creature. Yet it remains that this burden under which he labours and must carry, is the result of his own sin. If you turn to Genesis Ch3 we have the Lord’s own words concerning man who fell, “*In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread....*” It is so easy to miss the ramifications of the text. When God created man from the dust of the ground, he was created never to return to the dust. However, the labour that resulted from the fall would be such that would bring Adam down to the grave. He was created to work, but his employment is now

“*He who attempts to stress Christian living by disparaging Christian doctrine is guilty of a most serious blunder. He neglects the important fact that Christian living is rooted in Christian doctrine.*” R.B. Kuiper.

cursed, man must now labour with the sweat of his brow. Labour was an institution of God, but cursed labour was man's own doing. He is yoked in sin!

What does Christ intend by the word 'Come'? Coming to Christ and exercising faith in Christ are synonymous terms in scripture. Turn to John Ch6:35, "*I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.*" Spiritual hunger and thirst are only disposed of by faith in Christ, a faith that God alone gives. Who are those who come to Christ? Those who believe on Christ? Those who have been shown their need of Christ, who now see themselves as being weary of sin. There are many who gather with the saints of God for worship each week yet are not weary of their sin. It stands to reason that as yet they have not been shown their weariness.

There are two elements in coming to Christ. You must come believing [faith] and you must come penitent [repentance].

i) What Is Faith? Eph Ch2:8-9 *Faith is the gift of God.*

What is coming to Christ? Coming to Christ is believing! It is essentially faith! A ready acceptance of heaven's method of saving sinners! How does a man come to Christ or believe in Christ? He comes when his soul is spiritually enlivened by the Holy Spirit, when the soul has been prepared by the Spirit to see that there is a Christ who is for him, calling him to exercise that God given faith, by trusting Christ. Do note that, faith does not originate with us. Coming to Christ or as we noted the synonymous term '*believing in Christ*' is always preceded by the work of the Spirit. We do not believe in order to be born again, we believe because we are born again [regenerate]. Faith and repentance is always the fruit of the Spirit's work. Unconverted you require that! Any other coming to Christ that is not produced by the Spirit of God is false. The Spirit alone convicts of sin and makes Christ's invitation meaningful to the sinner!

ii) What is Repentance.

The type of evangelism that is clearly biblical emphasises a message of repentance. John preached repentance [Matt Ch3:1-2]. Christ preached repentance [Matt Ch4:17], "*from that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, repent...*" Yet again like faith, it is a gift of God [2Tim Ch2:25; Acts Ch11:18], "*God...granted repentance unto life.*"; "*If God peradventure will give them repentance.*" The Westminster Divines state that repentance is were a "*Repentance unto life is a saving grace whereby, sinner out of a true sense of sin and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ doth with grief and hatred of His sin turn from it unto God, and with full purpose of, and endeavour after new obedience.*" [Shorter Cat Q87]. This repentance that God grants to sinners is one that does not fizzle out, it implants a hatred of sin in the sinner, he abhors not only his sin, but himself! He throws himself on Christ for cleansing!

When Christ says "*come unto me*" it is not an isolated call to exercise a choice but is rather a call to faith and repentance, see Mark Ch2:17, "*I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.*" John Broadus in his commentary on Matthew states, "*To His mind [Christ] there was no contradiction between Sovereign, electing grace and the free invitations of the Gospel.*" "*Come unto me*" Christ says. The words literally mean '*come hither to me*'

Your inability does not diminish your responsibility to believe, God holds you responsible!

3) Christ's Promise. "*I will give you rest.*"

What is the outcome of '*faith in Christ*' or '*coming to Christ*'? For those who do come to Christ in faith and repentance, there is a promised rest. This relief promised is both given by Christ and is to be found in Christ [v28;v29]. His pardon gives rest to the weary soul through reconciliation with God, yet the moment a soul receives that rest, instantaneously discovers a whole life of rest opening up before it, resting in Christ what a sweet and blessed grace! [v29], "*Take my yoke upon you and learn of me...and ye shall find rest*" No teacher or pupil has ever associated rest with learning, no labouring man has ever connected the yoke with rest, the terms speak of sweat and toil, yet Christ says with my yoke ye shall find rest! Richard Baxter spoke of '*The Saint's Everlasting Rest*' We are continually in that rest while we are in Christ, and so shall it be always!

By. Paul Thompson.

“This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them.”

Hebrews 10:16