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FIRST THINGS FIRST

Read Acts 2:37-47

Serious contemplation of the God-Story readily reveals our need for continual intervention and communication from our Living Creator. A belief in the need for repentance, renewal, and revival has been shared by many Jesus followers in history. Careful observation of church and secular history reveals that followers of Christ in any age must accurately assess their times. We live in times that are weak in prayer (God contact) and shallow in principled and passionate living.

We must learn to be men and women of **prayer**. We must embrace **spiritual heart strategies** that will put the axe to the roots of religious tradition, lazy agnosticism and weak atheism. We must engage in the painstaking, fruitful process of sowing the fresh and precious Seed of Jesus into our own hearts and into the world around us. Too often we emphasize getting to know people rather than knowing Christ, in functioning as an organization rather than as a living organism, and mastering our mission or program at the expense of being men and women with uncompromising hearts.

There is nothing worthwhile in this world apart from Christ. God can do in a moment through His Spirit what we can labor over for a lifetime. Time spent in this world is brief when compared to the eternal privilege of experiencing the inexhaustible depths of God. "Getting it right" is not the ultimate goal, because it is WHO we know and not WHAT we know that makes us spiritual.

The first Christ-followers cut deeply into the pages of past and future history. Through continual devotion to the apostle's teaching (the Word), the breaking of bread (the remembering), fellowship (the consuming desire to spend days and evenings together), and prayer, *It was the presence of God within them, around them, and through them that made the difference.* The world would never be the same. They were, quite simply, men and women of whom the world was not worthy. Though as common as you and me, their relationship with their Master eclipsed the temptation to be ordinary. *They were obsessed not so much with the dream of heaven on earth, as heaven in heart.* In my view there are several areas that reflect our current cultural need for intervention by the Living God so we too may experience *heaven in heart*.

1. WORSHIPPERS OR ACQUAINTANCES? Read John 4:21-24

There are many who are acquainted with Christ and the Gospel but few who worship Him in Spirit and in truth. People in America are often observers in worship, not necessarily dedicated to knowing God. This is an incredible shame, because the divine power that raised Jesus from the dead is the same power that opens our mortal eyes to see the immortal and inspires our souls to seed-sowing that is bigger than ourselves. God has many acquaintances in the American church, but how many are worshippers?

Jacob had a simple formula. Grasp

Him and don't let go until He blesses you. Peter's understanding was pure as well, "Where else shall we go Master, You have the words of eternal life."

There is no substitute for holding on to God. We were created to know God. All preaching, teaching, singing, discipling, retreating, and Bible studying that misses this is worthless. It is the hot and cold of life that is normal, not the exception. God meant our personal insufficiency to do good to drive us to Him. Here we find what only He can provide. This leads to a second very important issue:

2. ARE WE CHRIST-FOLLOWERS OR BELIEVERS? Matthew 10:34-39

It is clear from the Gospels that Jesus was exacting a great price from His disciples. The decision to be a follower far surpassed what we call being someone who “believes.” In America when someone “believes” it means that he or she is giving mere intellectual assent. This was not true in the Biblical time of the people of God nor in eastern cultures today. When Jesus said, “Come, follow me,” He was assuming a journey that would require much of His followers. Paul called this “dying to self.” Jesus called it picking up our cross...and following Him!

The very nature of Christ and His gospel requires everything from us. According to James “demons believe (in Jesus) and tremble.” To say we believe when we are unwilling to follow is to fly in the face of Christ and all of His teachings. This luxury of choice and convenience is Greek, Roman, American, and

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spiritually decadent. After all, are we not supposed to be “working out our salvation in fear and trembling?” Believers in America are often parasites of convenience. If the people of God wish to experience the power of God, then we will take seriously the command to follow. For it is the Lord Christ we serve. *Once this is settled in our heart, we move to the next thing our needy days demand:*

3. HOUSEHOLD RESPONSIBILITY IN THE FACE OF CULTURAL IRRESPONSIBILITY Read Ephesians 5:15-21

I am husband to my wife of 30 years and father to my three children. Neither the state, Sunday school teachers, High School teachers or college professors, peers, counselors...no one...is to fulfill my role as a partner and parent. When God voiced His expectation for a father to lead and teach, He did not qualify this role with how much someone worked, the status of a marriage, or how comfortable a man was with his role. He expected it then just as He does now. We are to let God build our house by His grace, teach our children to fear the Lord, and live with our wife in an understanding way. No excuses. No psycho-babble. No weak-willed compromise.

My children are to be taught to be servants of God, contributors to what is good in society, and to flee and oppose what is undesirable or evil. I am supposed to love my wife and my daughter with a godly, protective love. I am to teach my boys to become men who love God, respect women, and hold to high integrity. I, and I alone, will be held responsible for the father-picture of God in my home. If my wife is my partner in this, I am blessed. If she is not, I am not off the hook. If I am a woman alone or a woman alone with children, I set my face toward the Living God who is my protector and my husband. If I am unmarried, I embrace my freedom from concern with joy, and design a life-style that blesses Christ and furthers His kingdom.

I am to discern what is garbage in my society and call it what it is. I am to reject sensuality, greed, anger, envy, and strife. I am to reject pornography and the degrading of women, expend my heart on my family rather than myself, and constantly teach my children what it means to be a man or a woman who embraces their destiny as the seed of God in the world.

Together with my wife, we form a partnership to advance God's kingdom and bring God glory. If I experience the privilege of co-laboring for the Gospel with my children, I am doubly blessed. I am to see parenting as the highest calling apart from my marriage to Christ and my commitment to my wife. This leads us to point four. *I need friends who hold the same values and convictions as I do.*

MY THOUGHTS ABOUT THESE THREE "FIRST THINGS":

4. RELATIONAL LOVE BASED UPON TRUTH Read 1 Peter 1:22

Jesus summed up all of Scripture by saying we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love our neighbor as we love ourself. This is why the Church exists. We are to help each other love our neighbor as ourselves, because "if we cannot love our neighbor whom we can see, how can we love God whom we do not see?"

The Church has evolved in America to focus on the WHERE rather than the WHO. This is a critical error. We must wade through multiple layers to uncover the relational reality that we ARE the church. Often the church is more of a club than a community, an organization rather than a living organism. If there are often so many layers that those who follow Christ never discover community, how will the unbelieving community ever see it or understand it? And yet, we are to be marked before unbelievers by our love for one another.

This higher relational calling is built upon the foundation of love spoken and lived toward one another. It is not as elementary as modern psychology's belief if we can just change behavior or environment, our problems will be solved." This calling is built upon a third Person in our relationships where people love others the way God is loving them RIGHT NOW. The Church becomes a community where merely being right is not the goal, but, rather, our quest is fulfilling our ongoing debt to love one another. Community occurs as a group of people love one another despite our personal shortcomings and sociological, economic, and even theological differences.

This kind of love for one another is something that our culture avoids. It is messy. It is work. And it costs us a huge piece of ourselves. It cost Jesus and His Father dearly.

In a world where relationships are discarded like out of date clothing, love based upon truth has heart, fortitude, and commitment. It has sacrifice at its root. It is the inevitable measuring stick on the pathway that has been blazed by the One who IS love. It takes a brave man or woman to "go first." It takes courage to love others the way God loves us, and to speak the truth in love. *We have been gifted by God to apply this kind of love to others:*

5. TALENTED OR GIFTED? Read 1 Peter 4:7-11

According to the Scriptures, when Christ ascended to heaven He gave gifts to men. These gifts, when activated by the Holy Spirit, were to make the Church a supernatural community. Christ-followers were to band together with their gifts and together become far more than they ever could have been alone. This necessitated being submitted to one another in love. This supernatural living also demanded that time, gifts, and treasures be released completely for the sake of the Kingdom of God (one another). Not one day in seven but seven days a week were to belong to God. We are to give more than a "leftover" commitment of hours and even our work and leisure time are to be submitted to the discretion of our Creator. It is not a question of giving 5, 10, or 20 percent of my time, talents, and money, but a commitment to use all of my resources to build the kingdom of God.

The church today functions much more on experience than gifting, on human drive than divine empowerment, and on who is

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available rather than who evidences mature character and needed gifts. Our leaders are often untested or visible leaders in commerce and community, and then assumed to be good leaders for the people of God. Our workers often see God as needing to be integrated into life, rather than our whole lives being given over to God. Our confidence is many times based in our ability to plan and execute and our prayer lives are puny in comparison to our gallant efforts. The ministry of the Spirit is either divorced from the Word or the Word is absent of the Spirit.

When Jesus came He unleashed not only the authority of truth but the daily reality of a Living Holy Spirit, supernaturally revolutionizing the souls of men. If we aspire to only what mere men, even great men, can do, then we rule out our need to rely upon Christ to work through us. When God's strength is obvious God's glory will not be confused with our own. To mature in love and effectiveness by supernatural gifting is the heart of the Church. *And if we are to be men and women of renewal and revival in the power of God we must be willing to:*

6. CHOOSE RELATIONSHIP OVER RELIGION Read Mark 7:1-23

The Church is not a gathering point where people meet to find their identity, it is a "place" to celebrate our identity.

The work of God is done on our behalf because God is gracious - not because we are able to perform well enough.

It is human nature to develop traditions. Traditions are not evil in and of themselves, but when elevated to a level of the Word of God (or above it), they suck the spiritual life right out of a living community. This is why Jesus had such fiery words for the Scribes and the Pharisees. Eventually their traditions not only eclipsed commandment, they invalidated them. A healthy community of believers will avoid and put to death religion (the traditions of men) wherever they are found.

The Church is not a place for people to find their identity, it is a place to celebrate it. The work of God is done on our behalf because God is gracious not because we are able to perform well enough. Obsession with personal recognition is a powerful result of being in a fallen world. This stronghold of Satan, along with the accusation that we are worthless, runs deep in our humanity. It drives leaders, workers, homemakers, and children every day. Yet the essence of the message of the Gospel is that God loves us and has rescued us not only from sin and Satan but from self (and self-effort).

Little seeds become large plants. When "church" became a place we GO rather than who we ARE, American Christianity suffered. In our culture we are hard-pressed to find believers (let alone unbelievers) that don't associate God with what goes on in a building. In the face of "calling no man father" we elevate priests and pastors to a higher order. But the main quality of men and women of faith in the Bible was the extraordinary work of God in very ordinary people. Though they were just like anyone else (and sometimes worse) they had learned the secret of "Christ in me." We bicker and fight over worship styles, petty dogmas, the color of carpet, and the articles of our worship. And all the while our relevance gap with our dying world widens right along with our inflated views of our traditions and ourselves.

Galatians gives us a simple formula: The GOSPEL + SOMETHING = NOTHING. When time and energy serving our traditions carries the bulk of our time and heart, it is time to beg God to deliver us. If tradition's foothold is so strong that we lose our ability to pray, dream, and believe, then it is time to slit the throat of tradition. *We can then turn our eyes onto the fields, white for harvest:*

7. GOSPEL RELEVANCE FOR OUR DYING WORLD

There is a chasm in our culture. Most undecided Christ-followers perceive church people or "Christians" as religious to the point of being self-righteous. Even when this isn't true, most Americans still view becoming a Christian as getting behaviorally better. If we just could kick smoking, quit drinking, reject drugs, escape premarital and extra-marital immorality, go to church enough, wear different clothing, and change our language from crude to "christian-speak," then we would be good enough for God. Despite the fact that this flies in the face of the Gospel of grace, the "church" does little to defuse such fanciful notions. In fact, we even reinforce them, depending upon just how religious we are. Perhaps it is because we are struggling so much with our own identity in Christ, or busy perfecting our newfound Christian altar-egos, that we have so little to talk about with our "brothers in Adam."

The world is a dying place that needs Jesus. It doesn't need "church." KING FIRST. KINGDOM SECOND. and CHURCH is the outworking of the "King in me!" The world doesn't need perfect people to bring the gospel to it. It doesn't need people with all the right answers, ready to "dump the truck" rather than give salt-seasoned responses. The world needs people who care enough to introduce others to Jesus. Because He is all-powerful God He can and will take care of the rest. The world needs people who understand the power of God. Committed people who know that presenting Jesus is more powerful than presenting "me" or my "church." *In this way we "hold out the word of life!"*

SOME CONCLUSIONS:

It is my belief, and our secularizing numbers substantiate it, that America is the "lost mission field" of the twentieth century. As we launch into the 21st century, Jesus must be experienced and represented by courageous communities of Christ-followers who worship with all our hearts and who take responsibility for our lives, blemishes and all. We must be those who love one another fervently from our hearts, who use all of our gifts to bless the King and His Kingdom, and who uncompromisingly live above religion.

In these last days God needs people who take Him at His Word. He is my KING. His KINGDOM is me! The Church is the "called out" expression of God's richness dwelling within our hearts.

Dare to be courageous. Dare to engage. "Eye has not seen or has ear heard what God has prepared for those whose heart is perfect toward Him!"

MY THOUGHTS ABOUT THESE LAST FOUR "FIRST THINGS":

LISTEN TO THE GROWING STRONG WITHIN THE STORY OF TIME VIDEO HERE.

