

A Seat at the Table

In 2002, George W. Bush was in the second year of his first term in office, and there was a congressional election held that November. The results of that election left both the US House of Representatives and Senate, as well as the presidency in control of the Republican Party. I remember listening to the radio show hosts, and reading the headlines in the newspapers in the weeks following the election, in particular, from members of the Christian Coalition. Their ideologies aligned significantly with many evangelical churches and were represented by many planks of the Republican party platform. There was euphoria in the streets. Roe V Wade was dead; Darwinism was dead. If you would allow me a gross paraphrase, "All would now be well, because morality could now be legislated."

It is now 11 years later, so how are we doing? Roe V Wade is as entrenched as it's ever been, Creationism has not replaced Darwinism in the institutions of higher learning in this land. And there has been a cultural reinterpretation of the Christian sacrament of marriage unlike anything we have seen in this country. So what happened!?!?

This is why they only let him preach once every 7 years!!! Please understand that I am not up here to engage in political discourse. I am the wrong man for that! Nor am I here to speak ill of those of you who engage in the political process. Yours is a noble, and often thankless calling. We need you right where you are, fighting for truth, combatting injustice, and the whole way letting your faith in Jesus Christ guide you.

My purpose today is really to ask a question. In 2002, did the church get lazy? Did we, with our pre-crash bankroll and our assumed political "control", unintentionally or otherwise, hand over the responsibility of spreading the gospel to institutions, in particular, our government? Did we miss the example that Jesus set before us?

In his day, the hope of an entire nation was that Messiah would come and re-establish a kingdom on earth, where there would be no persecution from Rome, and the theocracy of God's people would be re-established. Isn't that right, my friend (to Judas). Jesus had demonstrated incredible power and authority, he had the support of the people, and his talk had always been about the coming kingdom. So if it was Jesus purpose to create "Kingdom on Earth", why didn't he storm Rome and say, "This is the way things ought to be", and make it happen? Why didn't he walk into the Sanhedrin and make Israel into the "kingdom" so many people wanted it to be? He had the power, he had the authority. Instead, he washed feet, he served the poor, the fatherless, the widow, the sick; the outcasts of society; and for some, it was just too much.

So What is this kingdom then? Is it the church? Jesus charged the 11 remaining apostles just before he left this earth to, "**go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.**" Those men responded to that command, and 2000 years later, the Christian church, in some form, exists on every continent on the earth, and today numbers nearly 2 billion people.

Pretty impressive, huh? But the bride of Christ has not emerged 2000 years later radiant and glowing in the eyes of the world. Ask today's culture their impression of the church, and they will often use words like, "irrelevant, fundamental, old-fashioned, or worse; intolerant, hateful, bigoted, thieves, hypocrites, haven for the perverse." They will attach all those labels to any institution claiming to be "church", put us in a box, and stick us on a shelf and say, "I know you! You are irrelevant to me, and my world. I don't have to deal with you; you don't have any say in my life.

I can't say that I blame them. Unfortunately, they don't often see the side of the church that feeds the poor, cares for the needs of the community, and preaches the gospel of grace through Jesus Christ. Too often, all they see is the Westboro Baptist Churches of the world, who wield their understanding of "Truth" with the grace and tact of a tank. The only thing heard in that kind of "Truth" is hate, not the message of the gospel that Nicodemus heard, that Christ didn't come to condemn the world, but instead to save.

In his book, *Deep and Wide*, Andy Stanley told stories of growing up his dad's church. His dad was Charles Stanley and the church was First Baptist Church, Atlanta. This particular story involved a particular Sunday in which the GLTB community of Atlanta had switched their pride parade from whatever day they usually used to a Sunday morning, and timed it so that the parade would be passing by First Baptist about the time church was letting out. That's pretty shrewd! The potential for fireworks was huge, and if nothing else, the gathered media would get footage of a parade that looked much better attended than it actually was.

Wanting to be equally shrewd, First Baptist decided on that Sunday to let services out 15 minutes early, and they encouraged their congregation to leave out the back doors, "So as not to impede the parade passing in front of the church." It was the neighborly thing to do, right?

Well, tell a preacher's kid to go quietly out the back door, what do you think he chose to do? Andy charged out the front door and found the best perch he could to observe the coming activities. Do you know what he saw? The church across the street had also let their congregation out 15 minutes, but they didn't send them out the back door. They sent their congregation out the front door, and they were armed...with water bottles, and they were carrying signs that read..."Jesus Loves You." Notice what the signs didn't say. "We support you" "We don't support you" This church simply stepped out their front door and said, "On a hot Atlanta morning, you might be thirsty, and we can offer you a cup of cold water in the name of Jesus." And while we have your attention, we want you to hear the most important message you will ever hear, "Jesus love you!"

That is a great story, and a great picture of the church of Christ behaving like Christ. Unfortunately, no one ever hears that story! All they hear is the Westboro Baptist Churches of the world. And that is sad!

So how can the church, in this cultural climate, continue to carry out Jesus command to preach the gospel? They won't even come in our doors! Maybe we missed the example of Christ. You see, while Jesus was on this earth, he didn't set up an institution, he didn't form the first church. That happened after he left. He grabbed 12 men, wandered the Judean countryside, and sat across the table from a

lot of people. And to those people he spoke words of revelation and truth, words of healing, words of life, words of forgiveness, words of restoration. And their lives were irreversibly changed.

Two weeks ago, I sat in this room with 300 or so people, who were here to celebrate the life of Cathy Reese, and support her family and each other as they mourned her passing. For two hours we sat and heard story after story of a woman who was known by her peers as a follower of Jesus Christ. They testified to how that looked in her life, how her living out her faith in front of them made an impact, and for some, how it changed their life. They didn't come to this understanding because it was known that she was part of this church. They came to this understanding because for years, she sat across the table from them/the desk from them, and had coffee, or dinner, and talked business, family, vacation, dreams, and even faith. And when and where the depth of relationship could bear the weight of truth, she would speak those words of truth, of life, of forgiveness. And the gospel of Jesus would go forth.

Today we celebrate communion, and we do so with the words of Jesus fresh in our ears, "As often as you do this, do so to remember me." Today, as you come forward to the table to receive communion, remember these two things. 1, Jesus Christ is Lord, and his death and resurrection offer to you through faith forgiveness and eternal life. And 2, remember that you have been charged by Jesus himself to bring the gospel to the world, and if you follow his example, you will find yourself across the table from your friends, your family members, your co-workers, your neighbors, that guy you can't stand, or that woman you know you share nothing in common with. You will find yourself there. Embrace it!