

Signposts to the Reality of the Church

by Tom Macartney

The sermon emphasizes the importance of pursuing spiritual reality in the church, recognizing that the church is a living body of believers with Christ as its Head and the Spirit as its guide.

Scripture: John 16:12

Topics: "Church Life", "Spiritual Reality"

Description

Tom Macartney preaches about the quest for the recovery of New Testament Christianity, cautioning against the pitfalls of human nature that can hinder spiritual reality in the church. He emphasizes that the church cannot be built by copying a blueprint but exists through divine life, energy, and movement, just like the universe is sustained by atomic energy. Macartney highlights the importance of the church being a reflection of God's family and home, with loving relationships, joy, and peace, governed by the Father's character.

Transcript

Many today are concerned about the obvious unreality of much of our church life. Although we go through the motions sincerely enough, God often seems to be absent. The vitality and joy of the early Christians is little known. What we find in the Book of the Acts was so obviously real. This concern inevitably leads to a quest for the recovery of New Testament Christianity, one often found in church history.

Now while it is surely right to seek spiritual reality both in the Christian life and in the church, it must be admitted that the pursuit of God's best is full of pitfalls because human nature always seems to spoil any new divine initiative or recovery of reality. This sobering fact may easily tempt us to a cynical abandonment of the quest instead of producing the humility without which it is doomed from the start.

One of the snares into which we may easily fall is the idea that if only we can set up a church according to the blueprint in the New Testament, we shall have the reality of the church. But, while the New Testament has a great deal to say about the church, it is not in the nature of a blueprint to be copied because the church cannot be built in this way.

To illustrate this: it is only this century that science has begun to understand the dynamic nature of matter, that everything in the universe, even the most solid-looking object, is in fact a bundle of energy. The understanding of the atom has revolutionised scientific thought. Now just as the universe is alive with atomic energy and only exists in this way, so the church too only really exists in terms of divine life, energy

and movement. Peter spoke better than he knew when he described Christians as living stones in God's spiritual house! To see the church in any other way is an illusion, it does not exist. The visible shape and order of the church is only the result of the life of God within it, just as all matter is the expression of its own atomic structure. Where there is no divine energy there is in fact no church whatever the notice-board says. As God maintains the universe in existence by the laws that govern the atom, so He builds and maintains the church by the energies of divine life through Christ by the Holy Spirit. It exists in no other way.

Unless the outward form and activities of a church are the outcome of spiritual life within, it is an empty shell. This is why it is important that a church does not crystallize in such a way that the meetings have to go on after life has ceased. How easy it is too to waste time and effort trying to resuscitate the dead. The Lord never gives artificial respiration. He is the God of resurrection, the God of new beginnings. He never puts new wine into old wine-skins.

The church cannot be built by merely following a pattern. It is built by Christ alone from the inside as He brings living stones together. When man builds he puts up scaffolding first and builds inside it, but God builds differently. He builds from the inside outwards with living stones that have their own inbuilt structure and stability.

It is useless to model things on the New Testament because everything there emerged spontaneously as the result of divine energy and activity. Take the matter of leadership and government: to appoint men to be what they are not must be disastrous, while to recognise them to be what they are is simple. On the outward stage of their first journey Paul and Barnabas appointed no elders in the churches for there were none among the new converts, but when they returned, men qualified by God had emerged and were ripe for recognition. God never asks anyone to act a part, everyone is to be himself in Christ. Everything with God is alive and real. It was man who invented the artificial.

We must remember too the difference between a church and a congregation. A congregation of well-meaning people does not make a church any more than sincerity makes a Christian. Christians may meet together without being an expression of the church. The church is more than the aggregate of Christians gathered together in a place. A heap of stones does not make a building. Only as the living stones are built together is there actually any house for God to dwell in.

Instead then of looking for a blueprint in the New Testament, we shall do better to look for God-given signposts to lead us into the reality of the church. God Himself will build His church if only we will stop arguing about our version of the blueprint and start following these signposts.

So clear and profuse are these that we must look at them under three major heads. As for the Christian life, so for the church, all of them really point to God for the understanding of God is the key to everything. The church is at the centre of God's great plan in creation; it is His chief means of expressing Himself. God explains the church.

The first signpost points to the Father. As the supreme revelation of God is that He is Father, so the church is first and foremost the Father's family and the Father's house, where God is at home in the midst of His children. To realise this is to see the church in terms of loving relationships, joy and peace, warmth and simplicity, informality and freedom, and love's authority expressed in order and discipline, with the doors ever open to all members of the family. Nothing inconsistent with the ideas of a Father, a family and a home has any place in the church as God intends it to be. Here the Father's character governs

everything. No room for the unloving and ugly, the cold and formal, for narrow selfinterest or pride of position.

The very idea of a home underlines the simplicity of the early church in its life and service. In contrast the complex Christianity of today, man's invention, simply mirrors the nightmare of the modern world. It is as much a fallacy to think that the church needs to keep up with the times as it is to think that the gospel needs updating to suit modern man. Nothing fundamental has changed through the centuries. However did those early Christians manage without our endless round of meetings and activities designed to cover every age group, need and interest? However did the churches manage till around 200 A.D. without even their own premises? Obviously very well!

The second signpost points to Christ, the Father's Son, the Head of the family. There would be no family without Him. He gave His all to secure the family the Father wanted and now sustains it by His life. We are only sons because He is the life-giving Son. To realise this is to see that only as Christ is the life and controlling-centre is there any church. At the heart of the atom is the nucleus around which all revolves. Christ is the living heart of the church, all revolves around Him, all is sustained by Him. Without Him at the centre there is no church even though we sing our favourite hymns and feel better for it.

The Bible illustrates this further by speaking of Christ as the head of a body. We are members of the Father's family and of the body of Christ. Now a body is lifeless and useless without a head, yet in practice the church often tries to live without its head. It cannot be done. No head, no church. Only as Christ is really head is the reality of the church possible.

If Christ be our head, then we are all interdependent. Each member is important and has a part to play in the body, in the family. It is an odd family where one or two members do everything. Some will be required and equipped to give a lead but never to take over the family business. Their job is to see that everyone is playing his part to the full, not to play all the parts.

What diversity of gift and responsibility the scriptures indicate within the one family. Each member must make his God-given contribution, for only the church can build the church. True, certain gifts are of special importance and some members will have special responsibilities, yet all will have their place. Must we not admit that in the church today the control of Christ is largely unknown and many of His members are in a state of paralysis? Our thoughts and ways have displaced God's. Many a gifted servant of God is unwittingly undermining the development of gift in the local church and his own wider usefulness. Instead of moving around among the churches and supplementing their 'home-grown' ministry, like Paul and his fellow-workers, they have settled down and taken over, making normal church-life impossible.

Are we prepared to give our Head His rightful place and His members their proper freedom of movement?

The third signpost points to the Spirit of truth, sent forth by the Father and Son as their agent and to be our helper. He effects all the Father's plans for His Son. He is the church's leader and guide, usually leading through the scriptures, through men gifted by Him to lead and shepherd and through family fellowship. To think of Him is to see the church in terms of freedom and flexibility, freshness and spontaneity. Yet His' is an ordered liberty, for liberty and order go hand in hand with God, a combination this world can never achieve. No invitation to join in is extended to fallen human nature. The church is a new creation, not a religious club or 'free for all'.

Like the wind the Holy Spirit is unpredictable, yet always moving within the bounds of the scriptures He wrote. How predictable we are in contrast! No inflexible, stale routine with Him. He is always free to change direction, while we bind ourselves hand and foot in one way or another. Like a great river He flows irresistibly onwards and outwards the whole wide world as His goal. No narrow self-centredness with Him. Like fire He burns with love's unquenchable energy and enthusiasm, burning up everything base in His path. Only where these evidences of the Spirit's presence are known is the reality of the church found.

We have used the word signposts advisedly because we shall never know the full reality of the church here on earth. That glory awaits us! But we are meant to follow these signposts and have a foretaste of that reality so that the Lord may be able to express something of Himself through us here and now. The church exists to know and transmit the presence of God. This is the great thing. The spiritual consciousness of the divine presence, which is neither merely emotional excitement nor mental appreciation, may be known by a worshipping church. Yet how seldom we know the deep hush, the burning light and the overflowing vitality of His presence, how seldom the world has to exclaim, "God is among you!" The known presence of God is the one thing needful for every individual and church. God is the source of all reality.

Bible references: Matt. 16:18; John 16:12-15; Acts 2:44-47; 14:23; 20:7-8; Rom. 8:29; 12:3-8; 16:3-5; 1 Cor. 12-14; 2 Cor. 3:17; Eph. 2:19-22; 4:1-16; Pet. 2:4, 5; 4:7-11; Rev. 21:22 - 22:5

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