

# (New Wine in New Wineskins) 20. Our Distinctive Calling as a Church

by Zac Poonen

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*The true church must seek holiness and internal purity, not greatness and external appearances, to be a reflection of God's character.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 7:13

**Topics:** "Church Unity", "Spiritual Growth"

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## Description

Zac Poonen preaches on the distinctive calling of the church in different localities, emphasizing the need to prioritize holiness over greatness, internal transformation over external appearances, obedience over restless activity, and disciple-making over mere evangelism. He highlights the importance of New Testament giving based on quality and motive rather than quantity, the necessity of relying on the power of God's Spirit rather than human intellect, and the focus on building the body of Christ in unity rather than just gathering a congregation.

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## Transcript

What is our distinctive calling as a church in the different localities in our country where God has placed us?

There are at least seven areas where our emphasis is to be different from what is currently the norm in much of Christendom, if we are to be uncompromisingly true to God's Word.

### 1. Not Greatness But Holiness

Babylon (the false church) is called 'the great' eleven times in the Book of Revelation. Jerusalem (the bride of Christ) on the other hand is called 'the holy city' (see Revelation 12-21).

If we seek to be great in the eyes of the world as a 'church', then we drift towards Babylon. Jesus said that what men esteemed highly was an abomination in God's sight (Luke 16:15). We have therefore to check up constantly whether there is anything in our church (even if it be music or the preaching) that is said or done to impress men. Numbers are always impressive in men's eyes. If we are keen on presenting the statistics of the growth of our church to others, that is one sure mark of Babylon. This does not mean that God is not interested in adding to our numbers. He certainly is - if He finds that we are a flock that He can

recommend to others of His sheep (who are wholehearted). But growth in numbers is not necessarily an indication of God's blessing - for the heretical cults are also growing in numbers and so are heathen religions. And very often their statistics are more impressive than those of many Christian groups!

Holiness is the characteristic of the true church (Jerusalem). So growth in Jerusalem is measured by growth in holiness - which includes love for one another. Jesus said that the way to life was narrow and that few would find it. Those who proclaim the narrow gate as narrow as Jesus made it will find that very few join their church (Matthew 7:13, 14). If, on the other hand, we make the gate broader than Jesus made it, we shall increase in numbers easily. This is where much of today's Christendom has gone astray. Jesus spoke about the narrow gate and the narrow way in the context of the 'sermon on the mount' (Matthew chapters 5-7). The content of those chapters is therefore what constitutes the narrow gate and the narrow way.

1 Corinthians 3:13 makes it clear that it is the quality of our work that will be assessed by the Lord in the final day - and not the quantity. A ministry of quality can come only out of one who lives in constant self-judgment - "who lives with the consuming fire and the everlasting burning" (Isaiah 13:14).

Here, the church is to be different from all the denominations around us. Once this distinction is lost, we will end up as another dead denomination.

## 2. Not the External Life First But the Internal

In the old covenant, the emphasis was always on the external - "because of the hardness of men's hearts" (Matthew 19:8). The law emphasised cleanliness in the external. The new covenant, in contrast, emphasised cleanliness "inside the cup" first (Matthew 23:25, 26). Jesus said in that verse (verse 26) that once the inside was cleansed, the outside would automatically become clean, so that there would be no need to clean the outside at all. One can see this clearly from Matthew 5:21-30. If one has cleansed his heart from anger, there would be no danger of his committing murder externally. Likewise, if he has cleansed his heart from sexually dirty thoughts, there would be no danger of his committing adultery externally. Clean the inside of the cup and the outside will automatically become clean.

Where the emphasis in a church is primarily on the externals - avoiding cinema going, smoking, drinking, gambling and wearing ornaments etc., - such a church will only become an old covenant church! The way to get rid of external evils is not by concentrating on them first, but rather on the internal worldly attitude of mind which produces those external evils.

There can be no inward cleansing without self-judgment. It is impossible to build the church unless this inward cleansing is constantly preached. The Bible tells us to exhort one another daily in the church to avoid being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Hebrews 3:13; 10:25). Most Christian 'churches' have no interest in such preaching, except perhaps occasionally. Certainly not daily!. Hence they breed Pharisees with cups clean on the outside only. Here the bride of Christ must be different.

## 3. Not Restless Activity But Obedience

The emphasis in denominational Christianity is always on 'activity' - street preaching, house to house visitation, missionary work, etc. All this is good. But unfortunately it has taken the place of total obedience to God's word in the minds of most believers.

Jesus said that we were to teach all Christians to obey all that He had taught (Matthew 28:20). God requires obedience more than sacrifice (1 Samuel 15:22). It is a heathen concept that God requires us to go through various forms of physical suffering in order to prove our love for Him. This is very prevalent in the heathen culture in India and has unfortunately pervaded Christianity in our country as well. Spirituality is therefore seen as giving up one's job and going out to some difficult place, undergoing various hardships, etc. All this may involve much sacrifice, but it can never be a substitute for obedience to God's Word.

Our love for Jesus is not proved by sacrifice but by obedience to His commandments - as Jesus Himself said in John 14:15. To obey everything that Jesus has taught us in Matthew 5-7 is a far greater proof of our love for Him than even giving Him 50% of our salary or giving up our job and becoming a missionary.

Denominational Christianity is clearly pictured in the restless activity of Martha (Luke 10:39-42). She was sincere, sacrificial, unselfish and zealous in her service for the Lord in the kitchen. Yet the Lord rebuked her. Her spirit was sour and critical of her sister Mary who apparently was not doing anything sacrificial for the Lord. Mary was sitting quietly at the Lord's feet waiting to hear His word before doing anything for Him.

This is to be our attitude - not restless activity but hearing what the Lord has to say to us and then obeying that - not doing what our own reason suggests but doing the will of God.

#### 4. Not Evangelism Without Disciple-Making

Some believers consider God's Word as having almost only one command - to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15). This command must certainly be obeyed by the total body of Christ worldwide - particularly by those who are given by Christ as evangelists to the body (Ephesians 4:11). But the work will still be unfinished, if this command of Christ is not balanced by His other command to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19).

We thank God for all those who, at much personal cost, have gone out into all the world and preached the gospel to those who have never heard the name of Jesus. But it is a sad fact of twentieth century evangelism that the threefold command of Matthew 28:19, 20 - to make disciples, to immerse them in water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and to teach them obedience to all of Jesus' commands - is almost totally ignored.

When multitudes of believers are emphasising evangelism without making disciples, it becomes our task to restore the lost emphasis - to make disciples - and to complete the unfinished task.

Many think only of the unfinished task of various areas of the world yet to be reached with the gospel. God gives that burden to those who have that evangelistic calling. But to others God gives the equally important task - the more difficult task - of making these converts into disciples.

This can be illustrated by a carpentry shop engaged in making tables where multitudes of carpenters are busy making just the four legs and very few are employed in making the table tops to complete the tables. The result is that the shop is piled high with unfinished tables and the carpenters are still busy producing more half-finished jobs. We can be sure that Jesus, in the carpentry shop at Nazareth, always finished a table before moving on to the next one. He always believed in finishing a task begun (even as He cried, "It is finished", on the cross) and He is the same today. We are co-workers with Him and must also believe in a finished job. All converts must be made into disciples.

## 5. Not Old-Testament Giving But New Testament Giving

Most believers are totally ignorant of the difference between the old covenant and the new covenant. This has led to preachers taking advantage of them by imposing on them the Old Testament 'tithe' as a command.

When Jesus spoke to the Pharisees, who were still under the old covenant, He told them to tithe - for Moses had commanded this (Matthew 23:23). But when speaking to His disciples and introducing them to the new covenant, He never spoke a word about the percentage of their gifts but only about their motive (Matthew 6:1-4). The quality of our giving is what is emphasised in the new covenant and not the quantity (See 2 Corinthians 9:7 also). The only question that now remains is whether we want to be Pharisees or Jesus' disciples!

Christian magazines these days are full of exhortations to believers to tithe and to support various ministries and preachers. Almost all Christian magazines have become polluted by this commercial spirit of Babylon - begging for money for various projects in the Name of Christ.

The apostles never once engaged in this type of begging for money for their own ministries. Jesus never did it either. What we see today is in direct contrast to the examples of Jesus and the apostles. Yet most believers are totally ignorant of this fact, and continue to blindly support this type of begging, thus polluting themselves as well.

The New Testament speaks much more about giving our bodies to the Lord than our money (Romans 12:1). And this is what we must always emphasise in the church. Our financial needs will be taken care of by the Lord if we seek His kingdom first (Matthew 6:33).

## 6. Not the Power of Man But the Power of God

Human soul-power has become a deceptive counterfeit of Holy Spirit power in Christendom today. Much of charismatic Christianity today is riddled with soul-power masquerading as the power of the Holy Spirit. To discern between soul and spirit is the great need of the hour if we are to escape deception; and this is where we have to focus the light of God's Word strongly in these days in the church.

God works through human weakness. He has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise (1 Corinthians 1:27). God's truths are hidden from the wise and the intelligent and revealed to babes (Matthew 11:25). Where theologians preach with human cleverness, there you certainly have Babylon - even if those theologians are evangelical in their doctrines. Babylonian Christianity has discarded God's method of using foolish people to do God's work.

The exaltation of human intellect is the surest way to build Babylon. This danger is ever prevalent in the church too, if intellectually-minded people, who have not understood the necessity of pouring out their soul to death, depend on their clever minds to do God's work. In the church, the one who depends on his cleverness is actually a hindrance. God does not do His work through proud scholars, but through humble, God fearing men.

Eldership in the church must therefore always be on the basis of a person's life and never on any other basis. The power of God is always manifested through the Holy Spirit and the word of the cross (See 1 Corinthians 1:18 & 2:4) - not through domineering human personalities.

Where a church fails to emphasise the power of God's Spirit and the way of the cross, the door is invariably left open for human soul-power to manifest itself. Human cleverness and ability, instead of the revelation and power of the Spirit, then take the stage and Babylon is built - even if they preach holiness!

## 7. Not Gathering a Congregation But Building the Body of Christ

In the Old Testament, it was impossible for God's people, the Jews, to become one body. That became possible only after Jesus ascended up to heaven and poured out the Holy Spirit to indwell man. Now, two can become one. In the Old Testament, Israel was a congregation. The nation grew in size, but it was still a congregation. In the New Testament, however, the church is to be a body, not a congregation.

If two do not become one, then all that you have there is a congregation. The important thing in Christ's body is not size but unity. And by this standard it becomes difficult to find a 'church' that is not a congregation. Everywhere one finds congregations that are increasing in size - but not in unity. Strife and jealousy and competition are found even at the leadership level.

God desires to have an expression of Christ's body in different places all over the world. Babylonian Christianity cannot accomplish this. But God's work still goes on through a remnant who realise that the mark of Jesus' disciples is fervent love for one another and not largeness of number.

In the body of Christ, each person is valued, even if he is not gifted. He is valued because he is a member of the body. In fact, it says that God gives greater honour to the member who lacks gift so that there may be unity in the body (1 Corinthians 12:24, 25). In the church, we have to follow God's example and honour even those who have no gift at all, if they are God fearing and humble. In Babylon, the gifted preacher, the gifted singer and the converted astronaut are honoured. But in the church (God's tent), we honour those who fear the Lord (see Psalm 15:1, 4).

There is a world of difference between Babylon and Jerusalem.

Today God calls us to come out of Babylon and build Jerusalem (Revelation 18:4).

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