

Guess Who Moved?

I remember a pastor I had growing up at Hollidaysburg Church of God telling this story. He was using the story to illustrate Revelation 3:20, which pictures Jesus standing at a door and knocking to gain entrance.

He said that his wife was complaining of a lack of closeness in their marriage. To bolster her claim she said, "When we were young in our marriage, we used to sit up against each other in the car." The pastor who always drove answered, "I sit where I've always sat. You are the one who is complaining, but you are the one who moved, not me!" The pastor went on to use this as an illustration of our experience of the nearness of Christ. He said, "if you don't feel as close to Christ as you once did, guess who moved? It wasn't Jesus."

Now I probably shouldn't criticize a fellow pastor, since I've probably told worse stories than that, but there are a couple of weaknesses in his illustration. First, it didn't show much sensitivity to his wife, and did nothing to draw her nearer. And, in the second place, Revelation 3:20 is not really addressed to the individual Christian but to a whole church. It is the church door that Jesus is knocking on. He is asking to be welcomed back into His own church. I want us to get that. It was the same John writing Revelation that wrote in the Gospel of John 1:11, "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." It's the same idea and the same irony. Jesus is asking to be received by His own people and is locked out of His own house.

It's sort of like this: your wife decides to divorce you and doesn't tell you about it. Her love has grown cold and so one day you come home from work and your house key doesn't work in the door to your own house. The voice from inside says go away I don't love you and I don't want you in here anymore.

As rough as that sounds, that is the spiritual reality of many churches in North America and in Western Europe. They may not admit it, but the truth be told, Jesus is no longer welcomed within their fellowships. One Christian leader said recently that the Holy Spirit could completely leave many of our churches and 95% of what we do would continue as if nothing happened. In other words, the Holy Spirit is already so little acknowledged that He would not be missed.

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Of course, when I say this, I'm not saying that such churches have stopped using the name Jesus or stopped teaching about Jesus. In fact most of them still pray and use the phrase "in Jesus' name" at the end of their prayers. They may also begin and/or end their services "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost." But, what I am saying is that if the real Jesus would show up, doing all the things He did and teaching what He taught before, in a modern context, many churches would throw Him out. If the Holy Spirit would show up in many churches today and would begin to do the signs and wonders seen in the book of Acts, many churches would want Him gone. Jesus would be too radical and the Spirit too unpredictable for many tastes. This is sad but also true. This is how far we have strayed from our spiritual and biblical roots.

Now, I want you to notice some things from our Scripture lessons this morning. Look first of all at II Timothy 3:1-5; Paul tells Timothy, "But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God--having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them." Now I could no doubt preach a sermon on each of the ungodly attitudes and actions mentioned in this passage, but the last thing is what I am most concerned about today.

These people whom Paul is talking about are said to have "a form of godliness" but deny its "power." Paul is talking about religious people, people who claim Christianity, but it's all show with no go. It's all form without substance. They have a form of godliness but there is no power. The living God, the resurrected Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, the Holy Trinity is absent from their experience and is not sought, nor would he be welcomed in their experience. The way Paul lays this out, giving us a long list of sins, that culminates with "having a form of godliness but denying its power," is meant to underscore the heinous nature of this state of sin. If this were written as a piece of music their would be a crescendo mark above it with the loud end of the megaphone resting on this last statement. There is nothing that saddens and angers the heart of God more than a church that has locked the door to His presence.

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Two images come to mind here. The first is Jesus grieving and weeping over the city of Jerusalem just prior to Palm Sunday. "How often I desired to shelter you like a hen shelters her chicks beneath her wings, but you would not." The second is of an enraged Jesus over turning the tables of the money-changers and chasing the sellers of sheep and doves from the Temple. He said, "My house shall be called a house of prayer but you have turned it in to a den for thieves." **Let us renounce our sins of complacency, fear, and unbelief. Let us seriously ask the Holy Trinity, to live and reign among us.**

Now look at I Corinthians 2:1-5, "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power."

One of the chief things that has drained the life out of many churches is that the truths of God are presented to the intellect while the issues of the heart are neglected. In this scenario religion is a mind game. The reasoning goes that if we can pump enough truth into people's heads, their hearts and actions will eventually fall into line.

This was true in the German Reformed Church in which John Winebrenner, the founder of our denomination, served in the early 1800's. It was all about knowing the right facts and being able to agree and to affirm that these certain biblical propositions were true. Having any kind of experience with the living God or seeing God work in power to transform lives, was the furthest thing from anyone's mind. The Enlightenment of the 18th Century had pretty much declared such spiritual manifestations to belong to a former pre-scientific world. No educated person could take them seriously any longer. The Bible was "demythologized," which means that all the "juicy stuff" was removed, leaving in its place a set of moral principles to be followed carefully and strictly by stiff upper lipped Germans and anyone else who wanted to be saved. If you ever think that my sermons are long and boring you should have heard some of the preaching that was going on back then!

But John Winebrenner and many of his contemporaries had a hunger for something more. Winebrenner was introduced to some early Methodists and Brethren people who were experiencing an intimacy with God and workings of the Holy Spirit that he knew he was lacking. He began to pray and seek for a deeper understanding of the living God. Here is a part of his testimony in his own words:

"For five years I remained in connexion with the German Reformed Church. During this period, some glorious revivals of religion took place both in town and country, and scores of precious souls were happily converted to God. These moral phenomena being new and strange things to the people, intense excitement and vehement opposition ensued. In consequence of these, I was brought to conceive more fully and clearly the errors and corruptions of the church, in her ministry and membership. This led me to a closer and more careful study of the Scriptures; and this, in turn, led to a change of views, in relation to the subjects of baptism, confirmation, feet-washing, church titles, government, discipline, &c. Under God, and through these marvelous changes and reformations, I was led to fall back upon the primitive and Scriptural platform of establishing churches, administering ordinances, and teaching the way of the Lord more perfectly."

What he doesn't say in this testimony is that he was locked out of his German Reformed Church in Harrisburg. He stood at the door of his own church and knocked but no one would let him in. Undeterred, Winebrenner went down to the Susquehanna River and preached there and many experienced Christ. He then baptized them in the river. That's how the Churches of God began. Winebrenner knew that the preaching and teaching of God's word was in vain unless and until it led the hearers to a personal encounter with the living God. Knowledge alone would never be enough.

Now some Christians and their preachers today will tell you that God doesn't choose to work the way He worked in the past. They will tell you that the age of miracles is no more and that the gifts of the Holy Spirit belong to a by-gone era. They won't tell you that God has removed His Holy Spirit from the church, but they will act like He has nonetheless.

I want to be clear that I do not believe that God has moved or that Jesus Christ has changed or that the Holy Spirit has flown

the coop! God changes not. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The Holy Spirit is ever available and is infinitely more powerful than the wind that knocked out lights and blew the shingles off our roofs Wednesday morning. The Holy Trinity stands at the door of the church and knocks; if anyone will hear his voice and open the door, He will come in. He longs to come in. God is available to work in powerful ways among us. He's just as available as He has ever been before, and If we don't feel close to Him any more or open to what He can do among us, guess who moved?

And so now, in the name of Jesus, I renounce every demon and every attitude and every spirit of unbelief that would refuse the living God or hinder the movement of the Holy Spirit among us here at Fourth Street. In the strong name of Jesus Christ, I announce freedom to anyone who is bound or intimidated about freely expressing his or her love for Jesus out loud. You have the freedom to raise your hands in worship or fall on your face in adoration. You can come to the altar when you feel led to come. You may let your tears flow, and your joy show. You may present yourself for prayer and for the anointing with oil for the healing of deep wounds and all manner of sicknesses. And, although we are not going to tell God what He has to do, we aren't going to stand in the way of what He wants to do either.

What we want is to be completely open to the working of the living Lord among us. We believe He is alive. We believe He is here: You can read it off the wall: "The Lord Is in His Holy Temple." We believe He is here to save, heal, empower, and to transform lives. Our prayer is for His anointing on this church that no one can come in here without experiencing His presence and without being touched and transformed by His powerful and living Word.

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Guess Who Moved?

I Corinthians 2: 1-5, II Timothy 3: 1-5,
Revelation 3:14-22

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