

The Road to Transformation

INTRO: With the new year, we begin a new series. The leadership has been talking a lot about the direction of the church, and how we can get refocused on the mission of Christ. Allow me to give you a few statistics that hopefully will startle you as they startled me.

- If you are old enough to remember Ross Perot, he used to refer to the national budget deficit as “the crazy aunt living in the basement that nobody wanted to talk about.”
- The Church has its own “crazy aunt” which is thousands of dead or dying churches. We love our crazy aunt, but in the end we are not sure what to do with her because we think she is hopeless and we try to ignore her.
- According to *Leadership Journal* in 2005 there were about 340,000 churches in need of revitalization.
 - That translates into 70-80 percent of churches in North America
 - Approximately 3500 to 4000 churches close their doors each year

I. There is hope

- A. The good news is that there are hundreds of churches that have taken hard looks at themselves and said, “That will not happen here! We will do whatever it takes to become a growing, vibrant, healthy church.”
- B. As I have been reading about churches that have been transformed and become healthy, I encountered churches that:
 1. Had just a handful of members and attenders left, yet they were given a focus by God, and vision of what their church could be
 - a) They made whatever changes they had to
 - b) And the church turned around
 2. I read of churches that had once been very large that had gone down in size to half or even one fourth of what they were
 - a) When they took the honest evaluation of themselves
 - b) They refocused, reorganized, and set out on a new course
 - c) Within the first year the church doubled for the glory of God
- C. I start this sermon this way in hopes of bringing us to a point of serious reflection and evaluation
 1. While statistically within the last year or two we have remained about the same
 2. That is still a problem - we have remained about the same
 3. That is what the church consultants would call a stagnant church
 - a) We see some new families come in and stick around
 - b) We lose some families too, and everything is just kind of status quo
- D. We can wallow in the statistics, get frustrated at the stagnation, worry about the future of the church - or we can do something about it

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1. In the next several weeks we are going to talk about some key components of transformation
 - a) These will be key areas for us as a church to be evaluating ourselves on
 - b) Key areas in which transformation can happen
 - c) This will include an online survey about many of these key areas
 - d) This survey will help give the leadership a better idea of where we are, and how we set a course for the future of our church
 2. And speaking of a course for our church, one key thing is we all have to pull together - much like when we sound the alarm for VBS or some other ministry
 - a) It will take all of us to help our church grow in health
 - b) It will take all of us depending on one another
 - c) It will take all of us depending on the Holy Spirit in prayer
 3. One of the things I have heard from some people in the church is talk of leaving the church
 - a) That certainly is an option
 - b) However, that option only weakens our church
 - c) What we need is for all of us to have the resolve to fight for the future of our ministry here at FCC
 - d) Let me say this as well
 - (1) It would be just as easy for me to cut and run and look for another church
 - (2) But I am not giving up on FCC
 - (a) When I hear talk like that, it makes me feel as if people are willing to give up on their brothers and sisters in Christ
 - (b) And it makes me feel like people are willing to give up on me
 - (3) I am not giving up on the people of FCC
 - (4) I have faith that with much prayer and concerted effort, the ministries will rise again, and we will become strong again for the glory of God
 4. My apologies if that seems very straight forward
 - a) You need to address the elephant in the room
 - b) Before you can do anything about the elephant
- II. If you are wondering what is required to make a transformation, Paul gives us a great answer in Philippians 1:21 (p. 1179)
- A. Before we look carefully at this verse, we need to establish, what is Christianity?
1. The answer is fairly simple - Christianity is Christ!

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2. John Stott said, “The person and work of Christ are the foundation rock upon which the Christian religion is built... Take Christ from Christianity, and you disembowel it; there is practically nothing left. Christ is the center of Christianity; all else is” peripheral.
 3. So Christ is Christianity - without Him we have nothing
 - a) All the songs, all the rituals and practices, the readings, the recitations, all of it
 - b) Without Christ, all of that goes away, or becomes emptier than one can imagine
 4. In 1967, the Soviet Union launched a space probe to crash on Venus and gather data.
 - a) The space probe stopped transmitting 3774 miles from the center of the planet - it was assumed the probe had crash on the surface
 - b) The information the probe gathered seemed sound and unquestionable - it even suggested there could be life on Venus
 - c) However, scientists have determined that the radius of Venus is only 3759 miles (a difference of 15 miles), meaning the space probe stopped transmitting 15 miles above the surface of the planet
 - d) All of the data was misleading - it gave the readings for everything 15 miles above the surface of the planet, not the surface
 - e) In the same way, lots of well meaning people stop receiving data when they are miles from the heart of Christianity
 - (1) For some it stops with contact with those that claim to be Christians
 - (2) Or they identify Christianity with Christian’s behavior, and since many Christians have far to go to become like Christ - they have a false impression
 - (3) Others get to the atmosphere, the church, and conclude Christianity is the organization
 - (4) Still others get to the ceremonies, and are even thought to be Christians because they participate. The reality is those people weaken a church because they still have not found the center
 5. The point is simple - Christianity is a person - Jesus Christ.
 - a) Nothing about Christianity can be rightly understood without faith in Christ
 - b) Without a personal relationship with Him
- B. Christ was the heartbeat for Paul - “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”
1. This is a statement that Paul made near the end of his life

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2. He is sitting in prison awaiting his trial or execution - and he did not know how it would turn out
 3. And he makes this statement - "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain."
 - a) That is a pretty bold statement
 - b) In life - whatever Christ is about, I am about
 - c) In death - I am going to be with Christ
 - d) So life and death are all about Christ
- C. We need to compare this statement with something Paul said at the beginning of his Christian life - Galatians 2:20
1. "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."
 2. This was Paul's focus from the outset of his Christian life - he was dead to his old self, and alive to Christ
- III. Philippians 1:21 And Galatians 2:20 hold a lot more for us - we can see the faith in Christ, fellowship with Christ, and following after Christ
- A. Faith in Christ
1. When we acknowledge that Christianity is Christ, it means that Christianity is faith in Christ
 - a) It is understanding, and trusting in the fact that there is nothing you can do to save yourself
 - b) That because of your cosmic treason against the God of the universe, you absolutely deserve hell (a point that many find hard to believe because they are nice people)
 2. It was Christ, dying in your place that took the punishment you deserved
 3. Faith in Christ means trusting Christ to not only be your Savior (meaning saving you from the punishment of your sin and opening the way to heaven), but trusting Him to be Lord (He is in charge)
 4. Understanding the background of Galatians 2:20 is crucial
 - a) Paul founded these churches and visited them multiple times after founding them
 - b) Some other guys came along preaching a different gospel
 - (1) Their gospel said, "Yes, believe in Jesus, but also convert to Judaism. Also trust circumcision. Also keep Jewish holy days."
 - (2) Paul was less than happy with these guys
 - c) In fact, this is how Paul puts it
 - (1) "I can't believe that you are abandoning Christ for a different gospel! Even if an angel or we ourselves preached a different gospel than what we first told you, let them be under God's

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curse!” And he says that twice about being under God’s curse.
(Gal. 1:8-9)

- (2) Paul is deadly serious about how imperative the gospel is - that Christ’s work on the cross, and NOTHING we add to it is what sets us right with God
5. So when we consider faith in Christ, two things:
 - a) Do you have faith in Christ for your salvation?
 - (1) Or are you trusting the things that are 15 miles from the center of Christianity? Creeds, rituals, understanding of Christianity from Christians?
 - (2) What is your faith truly in?
 - b) Second, Is that faith in Christ the heartbeat of your life?
 - (1) Can you say like Paul, “For me, to live is Christ...”
 - (2) Is EVERYTHING you do done for Christ?
 - (a) We will talk about living as a missionary in our own town
 - (b) Do you think like that? You are a missionary, and you need to think about how everything you do reflects Christ?
- B. The second aspect is fellowship with Christ
 1. We cannot divorce faith in Christ from fellowship with Christ
 2. No impersonal faith here
 3. A.W. Tozer, great devotional writer and theologian wrote, “The modern scientist has lost God amid the wonders of His world; we Christians are in real danger of losing God amid the wonders of his Word. We have almost forgotten that God is a Person and, as such, [a relationship] can be cultivated as any person can.”
 4. John does a great job of putting things in perspective in 1 John 1:3 “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”
 - a) I have told you this many times, practice follows doctrine
 - b) In this case, fellowship (practice) follows doctrine
 - (1) Christ died for your sins to restore your relationship with God
 - (2) Fellowship follows doctrine
 - (3) Christ did not just died to take away your sins, He died to restore a broken relationship
 5. The sad part is some Christians experience the joy of the cross, but never move to the joy of the relationship
 - a) Put another way, many Christians have experienced Jesus as Savior, but never as Emmanuel, God with us

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- b) We have missed the part that God is with us - the Holy Spirit lives inside of us
- c) We have the ability to commune, even called in Scripture “friendship” with Christ
- 6. If you feel disconnected from God, or His people, your church family, it may be the activities of life that are wearing you out
 - a) Remember Mary and Martha
 - (1) Martha expressed her faith in Jesus when her brother died
 - (2) She even ran to meet Him
 - (3) When Jesus came to their house, Martha was the one busy with activity while Mary sat at Jesus feet
 - b) Jesus told her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”
 - c) ONE THING IS NEEDED! We so often reverse the two.
 - (1) We think our service is needed and fellowship is dispensable
 - (2) We need to learn that NOTHING is a substitute for being in, enjoying, and cultivating the presence of God
- C. The third thing we get out of these verses that display the heartbeat of Paul’s life is following after Christ
 - 1. Christ is the center of Christianity
 - 2. Christ is on the move in the world
 - a) Christ’s call has always been, “follow Me”
 - b) It is less about fellowship in the living room, and more like fellowship as a soldier under the eye of the commander
 - 3. We can’t follow Christ unless we forsake anything that keeps you from Christ
 - a) Peter and Andrew left their nets
 - b) James and John left their dad
 - c) Matthew left his money tables
 - d) We need to leave our sin behind us
 - (1) Personal aspirations that are not wrong but are not from God
 - (2) Even our own conception of who we are
 - (3) And we do this throughout our Christian life
 - (a) That is why Christ said we pick our cross daily
 - 4. For this to be possible Paul says that there must be a crucifixion
 - a) Paul said, “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”
 - b) He also said, “The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

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- c) But before all of these things Paul said, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.”
 - (1) There must be a tearing away of the flesh, a shedding of blood before the spirit of the disciple is set free.
 - (2) It is not easy - carrying our own cross never is, but if it were easy, everyone would do it
- D. I tell you all of this for one reason
 - 1. If you have been crucified with Him, if Christ really is your life, than all we are going to talk about for a new direction is not a big burden
 - 2. If He is your life, serving Him, having a burden for your town, longing to see the kingdom expanded as a result of the ministry of this church - none of that is outside of the boundaries - because Christ is your life
- IV. What that really means is we have a missional attitude for our community
 - A. The word, “missional” is a buzz word for churches
 - 1. When it is defined properly it is a great word
 - 2. So here is its proper definition: living in your community, serving your community, and sharing Christ in your community like a missionary would
 - B. Being missional means a great deal of things, and these will be woven in and out of the other messages in the series
 - 1. First and foremost it means that Christ is your life, and you live your life in that way
 - 2. It means understanding that God placed you in this town for a reason at this time
 - a) Acts 17:26 “From one man [Adam] he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.”
 - b) God set you here in this town, at this stage of human history for a reason
 - (1) Do you believe that?
 - (2) God set you here for a purpose and that purpose is to glorify Him by helping expand the kingdom - talking to others about Christ
 - C. When Christ is our life, we love what Christ loves
 - 1. Our heart beats for the same things His heart beats for
 - 2. Our passions are the same as His passions
 - 3. Luke 13:34 ““Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.”

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4. The only other time I remember Jesus mentioned as weeping was at Lazarus' death - Luke 19:41 "As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it..."
 5. You could conclude that what broke Jesus' heart was Jerusalem, or look a little wider and understand that it was the people
 6. Luke 10:2 "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore to send out workers into his harvest field."
 7. People is what was on the heart of Jesus
 8. People is what should be on our heart's as well
 - a) I could continue to pile on verses, but I hope you get the point by now
 - b) Being missional, having Christ be your life means loving what He loved
 - c) And Jesus loved people
- D. So that is where we will begin the road to transformation - with people
1. Learning to love those God has placed in our path
 2. Learning to love our community the way Jesus loved Jerusalem
- E. Each week I am going to send you home with a prayer challenge - a simple prayer to pray in faith, with a sincere heart
1. Lord, help me to see the people around me as You see them. Help me to love the people around me as You love them. Break my heart for the people of Almont. Amen.
 2. I'm going to ask you to pray this every day this week
 - a) Pray it multiple times a day
 - b) Allow God's heart to beat inside you for the people that we have been asked to reach