

GODFIRST:

Kingdom Priorities for Christian Living 2;

“Making GODFIRST in our Church”

“Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.” Mt 6:33 NLT

As we begin the second in this series, GODFIRST: Kingdom Priorities for Christian Living; let me remind you of the definition of the Kingdom we will be using throughout this series. The Kingdom of God is the reign and rule of God in the Hearts, Minds and Lives of those people who love and follow God. The Kingdom of God is more a style of life, than a specific place. Today we are going to explore what the Church is supposed to look like in the Kingdom, or what a Kingdom Church might look like. Many people have mistakenly believed that the Church is the Kingdom, I don't believe that. I do believe however that each Church that desires to be God pleasing and God-Honoring ought to behave and be governed by Kingdom principles and priorities.

George Barna is a statistical and research analyst who has spent his career (25+years) polling, surveying, studying and writing about religion in America. Recently he has published a new book that has created quite a stir; it is titled *The Revolutionaries*. Following its release Mr. Barna was being interviewed and was asked; “What is the most troubling thing you observe about the church in America today?” He responded, “the most troubling thing I see about the modern American church is that it has almost no resemblance to the New Testament concept and image of the Church designed by Jesus, and defined by the other NT writers.” If Mr. Barna's observation is accurate, it behooves us then to rediscover what the NT says about the church, and how that NT Church ought to be functioning.

Though Jesus spoke over 100 times in the Gospels about the Kingdom of God, and only twice about the church; I believe that the NT Church, the Kingdom of God church can be defined in one word. I know that's dangerous, but the longer I prayed, and the more I searched, one word keep coming to my mind. The Church is not only to be a place of worship, or a house of prayer, or the body of Christ, or the family of God, or the fellowship of the saints, or even a disciple-making machine; as good and necessary as those things are. Making GODFIRST in our Church (or any church) is a matter of realizing and returning our Church to its original Kingdom of God priority which is:

TRANSFORMATION. I may have discerned this word, but I didn't make this up, it is not up to me to define what the purpose of the church is, or what a Kingdom Church prioritizes, it is the thread running throughout the New Testament, even the Old if we look deeper. I hope you see it with me in these three ways: The Kingdom Church Priority Number one is:

1. THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE HUMAN HEART

The word transformation comes from the Greek word 'metamorphoo' from which we get our English word Metamorphosis, meaning 'complete change'. This is what the Kingdom Church is all about; change; and it must begin in the human heart; our heart, not just our neighbor's heart!

The earliest church service recorded in the NT happened in Acts chapter two. Jesus had just departed, leaving the disciples with the charge that the Holy Spirit would come and give them power to witness. The Holy Spirit came, with what looked like tongues of fire. People were filled with the Spirit and danced and prayed and spoke and sang with much enthusiasm. Finally, Peter stood to preach, and the basic content of his message is summarized in verse 38:

Peter replied, "Each of you must repent of your sins, turn to God and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ to show that you have received forgiveness for your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Acts 2: 38

You can say what you want about what a Kingdom Church might look like, you can surmise and devise all kinds of strategies for growing a Kingdom Church. You can define and digest what a Kingdom Church might include; but you can't ignore that the basic foundational purpose of the Church is to change people's lives. And I'm not talking about adding a blessing to our overcrowded lives, I'm not talking about serving up a simplistic message to tickle our philosophical fancies; I'm talking about changing our lives from ones dominated by sin, to being forgiven and set free to follow Jesus Christ.

Many churches today have become just another consumer driven life enhancement program. Many churches today have abandoned the difficult parts of the gospel, the hard sayings of Jesus, the tough to understand passages of the Bible, because they don't want to offend or turn off potential members. The gospel of Jesus Christ is offensive to those who would rather wallow in their sins! The Good News of Jesus contains some bad news...WE ARE SINNERS! And if my declaring that to you in this public setting offends you, take it up with Jesus, cause I'm not making that up either!

A Kingdom Church will offer real transformation. People will be presented with an authentic declaration of the Gospel, in a medium they can understand, from the culture in which they live; and will be confronted with the reality that the wages of sin is death, but the Good News is that even while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. It is within our ability to understand this truth, and understanding is half the battle. We must each act on this reality.

There is no denying that sin reigns out there...but it also reigns in here (point around) and in here... (point to heart)! In this Kingdom Church, we are not going to try to address that reality, by whitewashing it with some feel good hope that “oh, we aren’t that bad, oh, we can work things out, oh, why can’t we all just get along!”

Transformation...real life-changing, admitting I’m a sinner, asking Jesus to forgive me; real transformation of the heart is the first distinguishing mark of a Kingdom Church.

The Kingdom Church Priority Number two is:

2. THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE HUMAN MIND

Though the concept of transformation is a theme running throughout the NT, there are only 4 verses in the NT where the word transformation is mentioned, twice in the Gospels where Jesus is transformed on the Mountain while Peter, James and John look on. The third is the most famous and is found in Romans chapter 12:

Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Romans 12: 2

Transformation of the heart is the beginning, but it is not a one-time, once-in-a-lifetime event...it is a life-long process of becoming more and more like Jesus Christ. In this passage Paul poignantly reminds us that that transformation happens in our minds. As I mentioned last week, God created us with brains, and minds, and wills, to be used to reason and rationally make sense of our life. The transformations God wants to see in His Kingdom Priority Driven Church will also include our minds.

This certainly applies to providing opportunities for people to grow, but it is taking on new wineskins in this 21st Century. In church days gone by, the Sunday School was the front door of the church. I personally wish that were still true today, but it doesn’t seem to be. I don’t think it has to do with offering quality classes, or securing qualified teachers, I think it has to do with the ways people learn, and process information, and “consider” the faith.

In all but a few instances, gone are the days when a SS Superintendent would stand before a class of adult, youth or children and teach them the meaning of the Christian Faith. This is not to say there is no longer a need to disseminate the faith, just to say that the way we teach, is changing.

Transforming human minds today is a much more interactive activity. From the youngest children who desperately need to see the Bible Stories come to life, and see how those stories can impact, even change their little lives. To the young people who need caring adults to accept their nuances, while they work through their questions together. Heck even us middle agers who are wrestling with making the remainder of our lives count, are finding great merit in talking, laughing, and living out the Christian life together. I anticipate as I get older that even then I'll not be so content teaching or being taught, as corporately practicing the reality of my faith, and hoping my life legacy has made a difference in some way.

We have long-ago discussed the fact that what we think determines what we believe, and what we believe determines how we live, and how we live determines how we will die. I trust that our church will be one that chooses to embrace people all along their journey, and assist them in making sense of the faith, by living out our questions, our doubts, our struggles, our victories...TOGETHER. The Kingdom Church in the 21st Century will enable people to continue their heart transformation, by assisting them to transform their minds. The Kingdom Church Priority Number three is:

3. THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

Heart transformation is the essential beginning point...mind transformation is the eternally necessary next step...and all along the way, we must remember that the Kingdom Church of Jesus Christ has been given the mandate to transform the world.

It was true (though often ignored) in the OT; it was true (and sometimes ignored) in the NT, and it could not be any truer today. (and unfortunately in many churches it is still being ignored).

It is not enough that we get it...we have to give it! It is not enough that we are saved and going to heaven...we have to do all we can to bring others along! Listen again to the Apostle Paul:

Since god chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you...above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony...live wisely among those who are not believers, and make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be gracious and attractive... Colossians 3:12-14, 4:5

A Kingdom Church understands that it exists primarily for those who are not-yet believers. That doesn't mean we ignore those inside, but we strike a balance between what we do for ourselves, with what we do for others! Churches with only an internal focus are on a fast track to death, the larger the church the longer the track, but death none the less. The fact that too many churches have lost this 'reason for being' is the primary explanation (in my mind) of George Barna's troublesome definition of our modern church.

It is high time we as a Church recapture John Wesley's passion for the lost, and his vision for the world. It was not enough that his personal faith saved his soul, and enriched his mind, he was captured by the commission to reform (transform) the world and spread Scriptural Holiness across the land. I'm not interested in beating us up with a reality we know exists and has defined even us. I am more desiring that we might also be captured by the passion to win the world for Jesus Christ.

We all know we bear this responsibility personally, we are to be kind, do good deeds, to offer a cup of cold water, to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, visit the prisoner, and care for the widow.

What I want to drive home is how much more we can do together, than we can each do individually. Your gifts to a University in Africa might not make much of a difference, but our gifts to two Ghanaian students will eventually change that country, they have already changed many of us!

The Kingdom Church in the 21st Century will no longer view the culture as an enemy from which we retreat to our Christian bookstores and coffeehouses; but an essential opportunity for us to continue our personal transformation, and our corporate privilege to help someone find Jesus. The Kingdom Church in the 21st Century will redefine itself not in terms of members on the roll, but ministers in the field; our homes, schools, offices, courthouses, hospitals, even shopping malls. The Kingdom Church in the 21st Century will reinvent itself as a soul-saving-rescue-mission that doesn't maintain church buses to bring people to a building, but operates with an ambulance mentality, offering assistance where people are immediately hurting, wherever our lives intersect theirs.

I'd like to tell you a parable in closing.

In the Greek Islands, one can seek out the home of Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine. In the area, one can also find an olive tree, supposedly dating from his time. If this is so, this tree would then be some 2400 years old. The trunk of this tree is very large but completely hollow. The tree is little more than thick bark. There are a few long, straggling branches, but they are supported by sturdy wooden poles every few feet. It has an occasional leaf here and there and might produce a few olives each year.

In the fields around, however, are olive groves in many directions. The strong, healthy, young trees with narrow trunks are covered with a thick canopy of leaves, under which masses of olives can be found each year. The tree of Hippocrates can still be called an olive by nature, in that it still shows the essential unique characteristics, but it has long since ceased to fulfill an olive's function.

Tourists file up to inspect this ancient relic, having some link to a dim history, but the job of the olive tree passed long ago to many successions of replanted trees. Do you know any churches (or even people) like the tree of Hippocrates? The form is there, but the function is not. They have stopped reproducing and are satisfied just being big, or having a noble history. They have lost their mission...TRANSFORMATION.

I don't know about you, but I'm excited about us making GODFIRST by becoming a Kingdom Church; transforming our hearts, our minds, and our world. It's a huge task, and begins with one first step!

"Each of you must repent of your sins, turn to God and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ to show that you have received forgiveness for your sins. Acts 2: 38

A second step: *"Be transformed by the renewing of your minds"*

And finally a third: *"make the most of every opportunity to live wisely among those who don't yet believe."* Let us pray.

Ask them to come to altar, be baptized if they'd like.

Kneel in their pews sit where they are in prayer...

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