

The Big Picture - Distracted From The Task

*Bible Reading:
John 17: 20-26*

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It was so sad to watch. First Church burned down, and there wasn't proper insurance to rebuild. So the congregation disbanded. It was the last proverbial nail in the coffin. Within short order a developer bought the property. A shopping mall went up.

And nobody noticed. Not really. The members of the congregation missed it for a while. But life went on in that urban centre. Didn't miss a beat. If anything, traffic flow grew more congested on the street what with the mall there now.

Which got me to wondering, what would happen if flames engulfed Calvin CRC? If our congregation disappeared tomorrow, would anybody notice? Would anybody care? Would anything change in the pace or quality of life in Ottawa? Would there be a hole in the community? And, if nobody noticed, beyond the membership, would that matter?

Should it matter?

We've spent considerable time this summer considering the issue of **worldview**, what are some of the core beliefs and values that shape our lives as Christians? How do we look at the world in which we live? And how does that looking affect the living we do in the world?

It's in that big picture context, then, that I ask the question about the disappearance of Calvin CRC. From the standpoint of a biblically-based worldview, what should be the answer? Ought we to fret about what kind of link there is between our church and the community;

or in a more fundamental way

between the faith we hold in our hearts and give expression to in this church, on the one hand, and the stuff that preoccupies the lives of all those zooming down Merivale Rd, as we speak.....

.....what kind of relationship is God looking for between us and them?

Let us hear from the Word of God:

John 17:6-26 p.1221

Luke 17:20-37 p.1182

One approach we could take to this issue says,

"There is no link between us in here and what goes on out there."

Well, that's not totally true.

We see ourselves as a Fire Brigade, called to rescue people from the world out there; get them detached from it and away from it and into life in the faith community. Beyond that, keep the contact as limited as possible.

Fortress Faith, on the one side.

The world of sin, on the other.

The death of a local congregation is tragic from the standpoint that there's one less lighthouse, one less fire station, one less rescue mission.

And we'd point to John 17's words speaking about us being in this world – acknowledging the fact that we walk and breathe on earth – but that we really are strangers here; we don't belong. We are not of the world (v.16).

We are to work towards the salvation of those who **are** caught up in the world (v.23); help get them out.

We'd probably also point to Luke 17, the coming of the Kingdom. Two in a bed - and only one left. If you buy into most of the popular books stocking shelves today and movies in the genre of *Left Behind*, you'd tend to say,

"See - that's the day of vindication. Christ will snatch us away, and the world will be left to suffer and collapse in on itself. We're outta here!"

If this was to be the line of reasoning we use, we'd be in a very old line of folk who spoke like this. Older than the New Testament, actually.

And many, many folk within our Reformed branch of Christianity have suggested, to one degree or another, that this is the way it is.

Being faithful to Christ in the workplace, then, becomes a matter of seeking to convert co-workers.

Being true to the Lord in business becomes a matter of being generous in tithes and offerings to the Church and other ministries.

Being christian in recreation meant being very careful not to get too involved in too many secular types of entertainment.

And having faithful worship meant ensuring that what occurred on Sundays in the sanctuary wasn't patterned after, and didn't look anything like the sorts of gatherings that may be found in other groups during the week.

Different furniture. Different music forms. Different instruments. Different pace. Different dress.

It means working hard to be **sacred**, and keeping clear of anything **secular**. There's a split between the two. And you don't want to be caught with one proverbial foot on the dock and the other on the boat.

Accept this approach to how things are, and you're essentially living with a two-track worldview; and "them 'n us" way of organizing life.

Which seems all pretty good.

Except, you know what? After a while it doesn't sit too well. A growing restlessness develops as you try to "wear" this approach to life for a time.

Beginning with John 17.

Because all the talk about still being in the world but not being of the world doesn't **have** to be taken to the extreme of isolating oneself from everything.

In fact, that's not at all what it means.

You need to qualify how *John 17* uses the word "world". It's the same way in which *John* speaks of "the Jews." You can see an example of that back in chapter 5. A man is healed of paralysis and goes to tell "the Jews" who it was that healed him. What is meant there is not a public declaration to **everyone**, but reporting to **the officials**, the **leaders** of the nation. In John 10 "the Jews" condemn and try to stone him. Again, that's not everyone. It's the leadership - the ones who pound the drumbeat for the nation.

Read chapters 14, 15 and 16 of *John* carefully, which is one long teaching of Jesus, and you come to see that "The World" is not a title for everything physical in life - rather, it is a phrase to represent the essence, the centre, the core of a life structured in such a way as to exclude heaven, to leave out Christ, that don't revolve around God. It represents a way of life that has values other than the ones that heaven would honour. It represents thinking, behaving, being in the legacy of the rebellion in Eden. It is life East of Eden; fallen, sin-driven life.

"The world" is not at all meant by John to be a catch phrase to include all things that are physical, tangible, day-to-day items of life; as opposed to heavenly, eternal, non-physically spiritual.

Which, unfortunately, too many people understand to be the case. They do that because of a preconception that they bring to their reading of the Bible. Their way of thinking develops what they think they hear from the Bible; rather than allowing hearing the Bible to develop their thinking for them.

And that same particular preconception, which I'll describe in a moment, also affects how folks read Luke 17.

It moves them towards understanding that the ones taken away at the coming of the Kingdom, pulled out of the picture, are believers in Christ. It is the non-believers who are left behind.

But before hopping on that bus, stop for a moment and let the text speak. Can we do that? Luke 17 - it **DOES** differentiate between people of "the world" and people of "the Kingdom"; those who follow these two

opposing ways of life - with Christ excluded, or Christ at the centre. One group remains to live on the earth. The other group is taken away.

Let me ask you, which group is which?

Never mind our preconceptions, or what the film suggested, or Peretti's book describes.

What does the Bible say?

Notice two comparisons it makes about the end of time. It will be like:

- the days of Noah (Genesis 7&8)
- the days of Lot (Genesis 19)

In both those Old Testament events one group of people remain and one disappear. Happens to be the same pattern in both events. So if Jesus says that the end will be **LIKE** those two events, seems like the pattern at the end will be like the pattern in those events. True?

And what is that pattern?

Who is left behind?

[pause]

It's **the believers!**

To make a fresh start on earth.

Unbelievers are destroyed and swept away.

Hear the words of Christ –

"Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it."

Same words are recorded in other places and mean that we need to place Jesus at the centre, let go of the control, surrender entirely to Him;

lose our life to the Saviour.....

..... and then we'll find it. We won't be swept away.

Teaching??

In the end, Jesus designs His people for living on this earth, being part of this world. Believers will, one day, be here to live forever.

Which is why Romans 12 tells us **not** to ignore our body, or consider the hum drum, bodily stuff of life as secular and indifferent to God.... or even bad, but work hard at dedicating and purifying it to the Lord:

Therefore, I urge you, fellow believers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind....

Spiritual worship shows best in day to day, bodily living when done in a pure fashion.

It's what Romans 8 speaks about in a prophetic way when it says that our bodies are groaning, from the deepest inside places for the day when they are renewed, redeemed.

It's what Colossians 3 talks about when it speaks to those who are working for others and tells them to do their jobs out of a dedication to the Lord, as if He were their employer. And employers are told to treat their employees with an awareness that they'll need to give a full accounting to the Master of All for their labor relations practices.

Labour, management issues, production, service – these are not peripheral items, secular fringe issues, non-spiritual fluff.

They are of central concern to our God.

Life on this earth matters to the One who created it.

He never made one subset of activities to count for more – things like bible study, hymn singing and evangelism;

and others to count for less – exam preparation, political debates, writing software, physical relations with your spouse, fishing.

He is not working His great plan of salvation in Jesus so that one day we won't ever have to come back to earth..... and let whoever stays behind rot.

God loves this world.

He will one day see to the full restoration and re-Creation of this world.

Those who remain faithful to Christ will be the ones who, in full shalom, will be allowed to live on, work and play in that re-newed Creation with renewed bodies and minds and hearts.

The Christian life is not about escape. It's about the miracle of restoration, of renewal, of resurrection.

The end of the Bible doesn't speak of Jesus coming to take us away.

It speaks of Jesus coming back to purify.

And for **that** we pray, "Come quickly, Lord Jesus."

As Christians we need to recognize that there is a **duality** in life. There are two spiritual centres that vie for our allegiance. There is Christ. And there is the Devil. We strive to submit in everything to Christ.

What we don't want to fall victim to is accepting a **dualism** in life. That some areas matter to Christ. And other areas don't. That some are holy. And others, just by virtue of being what they are, are unholy and to be ignored or shunned.

We don't want to say that it is so **great** when somebody hears a calling and goes into "full time Christian work"..... and, oh yes, her brother got a job at So-And-So Inc.... guess that's ok, too.... but not quite as special.

We don't want to get suckered into thinking that we are Christians **and** policy analysts; Christians **and** musicians – somehow splitting the two.

Know where that came from? I've already said it's an idea older than the New Testament. It comes out of Greece. Plato. Aristotle. They each taught different forms of dualism. The non-bodily side of life, the "spiritual" is what really matters. The physical side - to be tolerated, endured at best; avoided if possible.

That sort of thinking was sucked right up, deliberately, by many early Christians. They even called these thinkers "pre-Christian" - paving the way for Christian thought!

Augustine, one of the founding thinkers of Western Christianity, once wrote that farming, the military, law, trade and (I hate this one!!) *sailing* were but "rivers of Babylon." They would pass away. They were temporal, not eternal. You could not truly exercise a Christian calling in one of these professions.

[Walsh Middleton *The Transforming Vision* p.99]

Thomas Aquinas - same sort of thing.

We still struggle with the basic issue today.

That's why some Christians can write off whole areas of creation in a dualistic fashion.

Christians simply don't do whatever. Cinema, dance, cards, labor unions, rock music - those are some of the favorite targets. They're not proper areas for Christians to venture into, we're told.

Dualism — stay away!.....

.....Rather than challenge the **duality** that appears in them, and ask the question,

"How did the Fall corrupt these areas of Creation, and how will the Saviour one day restore them?

Is there a way that I can work towards, long for, anticipate that final day of restoration through renewed-mind involvement in these areas of Creation even today';

a way that I can look forward to the coming of the Kingdom, New Heaven and New Earth, to the time when Christians will be left behind to enjoy them?"

A Christian worldview that remains free from the stain of Greek philosophy driven dualism will mean for believer that,

in addition to seeking to win our co-workers over to Christ,
and in addition to honouring God with joyful tithing and giving,
and volunteering to take time out to attend or lead bible study,

we'll start to ask questions like:

What is the purpose of doing business?

What about ecological responsibility?

What social dynamics matter?

What is the place of entertainment in culture?

What about beauty, aesthetics, art forms? How did our Creative God design them to be explored?

We'll use church as a gathering point for people who ask these questions, and need encouragement and dialogue together to help find answers. It becomes home base for people who long to have **everything** we do, to be done to the glory of God.

Which brings us back to the first question -

What about Calvin CRC? Would anybody notice if this community disappeared? In the renewing and restoration of lives and institutions and patterns in Ottawa and beyond - does our presence make a difference?

It's summertime. Everything's in idle right now. Rest time for a few more weeks.

But a new season is just around the corner. And when it does -

How will you help formulate an answer to that question?

- In a way that is distracted from the task?

- Or in a way that, by its actions, will live out the prayer, "*Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!*"??