

The Few or the Many?

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Introduction

In the famous Billy Joel song of a few years back, the singer lamented that he “didn’t start the fire: it’s always been burning since the world’s been turning.” Likewise with the current LCMS president, who has sought to set the Synod ablaze with a fire that, we are duly told with a knowing parental voice, has been sorely lacking. We didn’t start the fire – so, apparently, someone else had to.

Yet it can be argued that the fire has, indeed, “always been burning since the world’s been turning.” The fire is not the so-called “Worship Wars,” church growth methodologies, or endless battles over this or that point of doctrine. These are but the tips of the flames. The embers are what matters. The battle, I would submit, is an age-old battle between two understandings of Christianity. One view sees the faith as a fire that will engulf the whole world – taking the vast majority of humanity along with it. The other sees Christianity as a faith that will, by its very nature, always be limited and in a minority position. The true battle going on in the heart of Missouri and, I would argue, in the heart of global Christianity, is the battle between those who believe our faith will always be that of the many, and those who see it as always being the possession of but a few.

Leaven or Lump?

Christ, his prophets and his apostles seem to have had a fairly definitive view on this subject. Consider Noah, who alone with seven family members was saved out of the “mass of perdition.” Lest this be seen as a one-off event, Peter finds it quite applicable to the modern situation in his second epistle:

God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God (1 Peter 3:20-21, NIV)

Likewise one could put forward the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, in which not even ten righteous could be found to save the cities from certain destruction (Genesis 18:32, 19:12-13). Or the case of Elijah, who lamented that he was the last living faithful Israelite left (1 Kings 19:10). Rather than flatly contradicting him, the Lord comforted him with the knowledge that there were in fact 7,000 others (1 Kings 19:18). In the words of Kretzmann, “In the midst of a godless world he has a small crew, a small flock, indeed, but nevertheless loyal to him.”¹ Or consider the remnant theology found throughout the writings of the prophets, most especially in Isaiah.²

¹ Paul Kretzmann. *Popular Commentary of the Bible: Old Testament Vol. 1.* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1923). 596

² Used in reference to a small number who will remain faithful, the word remnant is occurs 7 times in Isaiah, notably in Isaiah 10:21-22 (NIV), “A remnant will return, a remnant of Jacob will return to the Mighty God. Though your people, O Israel, be like the sand by the sea, only a remnant will return.”

Perhaps one could put this down to Old Testament pessimism. Is not the old gone, and has not the new come? Yet Jesus' vision of the church's mission seems quantitatively, if not geographically, limited. Christ himself asked, hypothetically, is the Son of Man would find faith on the earth when he comes. (Luke 18:8). Jacques Ellul makes this point in his book, *The Subversion of Christianity*:

Jesus announced to his disciples that they were the little band. All the comparisons he takes up tend to show that the disciples of Jesus are by necessity few in number with little power. The leaven in the lump. The salt in the soup. The sheep amidst wolves, and how many other images. Jesus seems never to have had the vision of a triumphant Church triumphantly encircling the globe. He always shows us a secret force that changes things on the inside, that works spiritually; he shows us a community, which could be nothing else than a community.³

Is it epistle writers, then, who have the greater vision of Christianity than did its Founder? Does not Paul talk about all Israel being saved (Romans 11:26)? That may be true, but it is Paul who points out in 1 Corinthians that:

Our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, *God was not pleased with most of them*; their bodies were scattered over the desert. (1 Corinthians 10:1-5, NIV, emphasis the author's).

Paul gives this as a "type" – τύπος – of what might happen in the Christian church (1 Corinthians 10:6). Paul fully expects that in the end humanity, far from being converted en masse and filling church pews, will become "lovers of themselves...having a form of godliness but denying its power." (2 Timothy 3:2,5). John likewise is more concerned about correct teaching and instructing his "little children" than worldwide evangelism. The same goes for Peter and the other general epistles.⁴

It is true that the universal aspect of the salvation wrought by Christ is present in both the prophetic and apostolic writings. Ezekiel speaks of God's desire to see all be saved, as does Paul. Yet the desire and the reality never seem to match.

We Didn't Start the Fire

Despite this seemingly clear Scriptural teaching that the people of God will by necessity remain the leaven and not the whole lump, the Church throughout history has never been satisfied being

³ Jacques Ellul. *La subversion du christianisme* (Paris: La table ronde, 1984). 58. Translation the author's.

⁴ It is worth noting that the very word "evangelism", along with the word "lost" often used in reference for those not part of the church, do not occur anywhere in the epistles, likewise the general command to the church to "tell others" about Christ. Perhaps one could appeal to Romans 10, but even here Paul turns to the question of why "not all the Israelites accepted the good news" (Romans 10:16).

God's "minority report" in the world. Many groups have sought to widen their nets as fishers of men, looking to bring in more "fish for the Lord." The French Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal faced off against such a group in the 17th century, a new missionary group known as the *Society of Jesus*.⁵

The members of this Society, or Jesuits as they came to be known, were convinced that participation in the life of the church could be increased if only some of the church's more severe strictures could be lightened. Penances were limited, definitions of what was and wasn't a sin were altered, all in an attempt to get more people to the communion rail at mass.⁶ Pascal, himself a Jansenist and falling squarely in the camp of "the few," took aim at this growing of the church at the expense of church discipline. "It doesn't matter that the tables of Jesus Christ are full of abomination," he wrote condemning the Jesuits approach, "as long as the churches are full."⁷

Jacques Ellul, the French protestant writing four hundred years later, defended the idea of the "church of the few." He believed firmly that the Christian church of the 20th century was succumbing once again to the temptation of Satan to accept the rule of the kingdoms of the world:

The kingdom of the heavens is the smallest grain, a seed sown in the soil, a treasure hidden in a field, but if as the kingdom of God it is called to encircle the whole world, that is still not its role, neither that of the Church on earth...[Otherwise] we pass from "the little band" to the mass. How can we imagine this mass carrying a personal faith, deep, engaged, militant, enlightened? How can we imagine this mass abandoning its old prejudices, its old way of life, its old beliefs?⁸

Ellul goes on to quote Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish Lutheran pastor and philosopher, on this point. He believed that it was the State that concerned itself with size and numbers. The power and influence – indeed, the very life – of a state is directly proportional to its population and land mass. Not so with Christianity, for "one true Christian is enough to give [the Church] reality...When all have become Christian, the concept of Christian becomes empty."⁹ Therefore, both Ellul and Kierkegaard argue, the Church is by its very nature powerful in *indirect* proportion to its numbers, whereas it is the "kingdoms of this world" who seek to be powerful through their numbers.

Return of the Blaze

This brings us to the 21st Century, and the situation in which the LCMS finds itself, along with many other denominations. Most of the leadership of our Synod is ensconced in the "Church of the Many" mentality. A few examples will suffice. In the recent report of the Synod's "Mission

⁵ Blaise Pascal. *Les Provinciales*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1987)

⁶ As just one example, the Jesuits advised their confessors that murder was not a sin if it was done in response to what was believed to be a false statement made by the victim. (*Provinciales*, 120).

⁷ *Provinciales*, 257. Translation the author's.

⁸ *Subversion*, 58-59. Translation the author's.

⁹ *Subversion*, 59. Translation the author's.

21st Century Task Force,” the authors lament the “numbers loss” of the LCMS. They point out that this loss has occurred...

...During a time when U.S. population nearly doubled (from 152 million to 284 million). LCMS baptized membership in 1950 was 1,674,901. Today it is 2,512,714. Over 50 years, LCMS membership has grown by *only* 50 percent. (Note that the numbers used here are for U.S. congregations only.) A large number of congregations, and therefore the Synod as a whole, are aging. (*Emphasis the author's*)¹⁰

The underlying impression left with the reader cannot be other than, “We are doing something *wrong*.” What is the solution? The Synod’s focus has shifted full-gear into answering this pressing question. At the 2004 LCMS national convention, most of the plenary session bible studies were focused on “solving the problem” of diminishing numbers. One presenter,

...urged delegates to seek out and care for people who are lost. It is sinful to suggest that people who are lost must “find us,” he said. “To become so wrapped up in our selves, our parish, our people, our district, our Synod that we forget the lost, ignore the lost or simply are filled with apathy for the lost is and will always remain sin.”¹¹

What is the solution? A bigger and broader goal and a more daring outreach project: *Ablaze!* The convention passed the following resolution:

Praying to the Lord of the Harvest, LCMS World Mission, in collaboration with its North American and worldwide partners, will share the Good News of Jesus Christ with 100 million unreached or uncommitted people by the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017.¹²

A quick glance through resolutions submitted before convention from across the Synod reveals a similar emphasis on numbers and growth. The Northwest District of the Synod, for example, has set a goal of growing “from 82,000 disciples to 103,000 disciples by the end of 2006.” The very idea that, perhaps, the church was “over-sized” to begin with and is now returning to a more reasonable number is never raised.¹³ The possibility that faithful Christians in the Synod have been reaching out to the lost in their families and neighborhoods and that, like the Old Testament prophets, their words are being rejected, is unthinkable for those who believe the Church is destined to be “the many.”

All of this points to a deficit in our leaders of the Biblical view that the church is the leaven, the salt, the little band, and the seed. It will never be the lump, the soup, the 5,000 or the orchard on

¹⁰ This report, R1-8-01, can be found at www.lcms.org (as of August 12, 2004).

¹¹ A report on the Bible Study given by Rev. David Smith of Des Peres, MO.

¹² http://www.nwdlcms.org/Ablaze_Resources.htm (as of August 12, 2004).

¹³ If one takes the view of the Church as the “little band” and the “remnant,” one might expect no more than 10% of any country to be Christian even under highly successful evangelistic efforts. Since attendance of Americans in Christian worship hovers around the 30%-40% mark even today, one may well expect further decreases in denominational membership and attendance.

this earth, in this time-frame. This view needs once again to be heard and championed on our boards and committees, in our seminaries, and among our missionaries.

Conclusion

The bad news is that, as history has demonstrated, the tension between the view of church as “the many” and the view of church as “the few” will not be resolved. Indeed, it most likely cannot be resolved. It is in the creative tension between these two views that the Lord builds his church. The one view keeps the focus outward, on the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth. The other view keeps the focus inward, on the “pattern of sound teaching” (2 Timothy 1:13) which will make disciples from every nation and tribe and culture on earth.

Those who hold the view that church will someday be “the many” need to curb their enthusiasm, to understand that this was never Christ’s intention and is not the teaching of Scripture. To believe that the 200 million “unchurched” Americans simply need to be approached with the right method or technique in order for them to become Christian is a little too Jesuit. But those who hold the view of the church as “the few” need to understand that “few” does not translate into “status quo.” We do not know who the 7,000 are in our communities who have not bowed the knee to Baal. The pearl in the field may be buried in our next door neighbor’s house, waiting only for the Gospel proclamation to reveal it.

Let us not tire in finding ways of proclaiming the Good News to all nations. Let us also not forget that after Jesus’ teaching to the 5,000, there were still only twelve remaining willing to say, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).