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I LOVE A PARADE

When you travel with the Teacher you get used to crowds. Most people think that it is just thirteen of us wandering around. Most of the time there are at least 150 in our group. I remember when the Teacher sent out seventy people at once, and there was still a crowd around him. If it weren't for the Teacher healing people, some towns would probably drive us off. There are even villages whose populations double when we walk into town. It is not unusual for us to walk into a town and people are lining the street. OK, in a town as big as Capernaum that might be "streets," but in most towns it is singular, "street."

The last time we went through Jericho the crowds were unusually heavy. People were on the rooftops and looking out of upper windows. The street was crowded. It was almost as if they knew this might be the last time they would get to see the Teacher. Or maybe everybody was in town anyway to prepare for the holiday that was coming up in a week.

Suddenly the Teacher stopped and went up to a mulberry tree. This wasn't unusual. Sometimes he might talk to some of the boys that climbed trees along the way. I did think it a bit strange when he said, "Zacchaeus, you come down here right now." He didn't usually scold boys for climbing the trees to see him.

Then I saw who was coming out of the tree. It was a little, old man. Well, old may be stretching it a bit. But when you expect to see a teenager, this guy was old. Little wasn't stretching it at all. In fact, he looked like he could use some stretching. He was no taller than a long drink of water. No wonder he had climbed a tree. He couldn't see over the crowd. And this crowd was certainly not willingly going to let him get in front. I thought Matthew was a snappy dresser, but this guy's outfit made Matthew look poor. He was obviously a tax collector. He had money, and this crowd hated him for it. Of course, this crowd would have hated any tax collector, no matter how he was dressed. So it was even more unusual to hear the Teacher tell him, "I have to eat at your house today." It wasn't unusual for the teacher to associate with tax collectors. It was just strange for him to tell a complete stranger that he had an appointment with him. But the Teacher could be like that.

Whenever we enter a town, the leaders of the synagogue and the town tended to walk near the Teacher. Perhaps they were trying to look like they were part of his entourage. Mostly, I think, they were trying to catch him in something he said. When they heard that he was going to Zacchaeus' house, they said, supposedly to themselves but loud enough to be heard by the crowd, "This man goes to be a guest with a man that is a sinner."

Before the Teacher could say anything, Zacchaeus looked at him and spoke loudly enough for the leaders of the synagogue to hear. "Teacher, if you check my records you will find that half of what I earn I give to the poor every year. Anyone here can tell you that whatever I have taken by false accusation, that I have restored fourfold. And that has not happened very often." He seemed barely able to restrain himself from adding, "And they call *me* a sinner?"

The Teacher then said something that proved to be prophetic. "This day salvation has come to your house." I can't guarantee that he was calling himself salvation, but in the light of the events of the following week and a half, he could have been doing so. As if in answer to Zacchaeus' unspoken barb, the Teacher added, "For the Son of Man has come to seek and save those who are lost." Several times in the previous couple of years he had said it more sarcastically; "The righteous don't need a savior."

The Teacher went on to speak of God's kingdom. Then we went and ate with Zacchaeus. I haven't eaten that well in a couple of years. I was sure glad he stopped under that tree.

(Based on Luke 19)

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MY PERFECT CHURCH

Nobody's perfect. We say that, but we expect people and institutions to be perfect. Of course, we usually define perfection in our own terms. I am a basically lazy person, so my perfect church would involve a minimum of action on my part. Here are some of the aspects of what, to me, would be the perfect church. Each of these different aspects can be found in one or more religious groups available today. So far I haven't found perfection in any one group. Maybe I should start my own church, and this is what it would look like.

No entrance requirements

I wouldn't have to join this church. In fact, I wouldn't even have a choice whether to join or not. Groucho Marx said, "I don't want to belong to any club that will accept me as a member." In my perfect church he would have no choice. God would automatically choose who would be a member, and who not, just as long as he chooses me. And just as long as he doesn't choose that person over there that I don't like.

Not only would God choose me without an application, he would accept me into my church without

In my perfect church, if I am comfortable in my particular sin, I won't have to give it up.

any effort on my part. He would even accept me into my church without forgiving my sins.

There are churches that meet this requirement of my perfect church. John Calvin, for instance, proposed that if God wanted to save somebody, that person could not resist even if he wanted to. Furthermore, if a person wanted to be saved he could not if he wasn't on God's list. Of course, he had an out. He further proposed that nobody could want to be saved that had not already been selected, and nobody could want to reject salvation that had not already been rejected. You could not choose to be saved or lost because you could not choose. There are others that say no effort is required on our part; that God carries us from start to finish. Some of those hedge their bets a bit and say you have to pray to God for him to accept you. But that group doesn't count for my church, because they believe in "works salvation." Even then,

though, they tell me that I can become a member of my church without forgiveness of sins.

That sounds like a pretty perfect church, if I were to have it my way. The problem is, God doesn't think that is exactly the perfect way to become part of his Way. He says we have a choice. "And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." (Joshua 24:15) We can choose his Way or to follow other gods. But choice involves an act of will. Some say that not making a choice is a choice. In the context of my perfect church, though, just having a choice violates the conditions of enrollment.

Not only do we have a choice, God says that we cannot join his Body without the removal of our sins. "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God?" (1 Cor 6:9) His kingdom is a sinless kingdom. So to enter or join it, we have to have our sins removed. Now here's where some churches try to redefine salvation. They say we are saved from not being saved, rather than saved from our sins. Therefore, when God says, "Repent, and be immersed for the purpose of forgiveness of sins," (Acts 2:38) he says you can't enter his kingdom, his body, his way, without being immersed. When he says "immersion saves you," (1 Peter 3:21) he says I have to get up off my chair and do something, not because it is a legalistic command but because my conscience knows that without this I cannot be a part of God's congregation. Somehow, my perfect church is not God's perfect church.

I don't have to change

Change is difficult. "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." "You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink." Even folk wisdom says change is hard. Most people do not like change. I, on the other hand, don't not like change; I despise and abhor change. I am comfortable the way I am, in the job I am in, with the people I know. My perfect church, then, will not require that I change. If I am comfortable in my particular sin, I won't have to give it up. If I like the people I like and don't like the people I don't like, so be it. After all, change is hard work, and I don't like hard work. If I have to change, things and people around me will change and that will make me uncomfortable. And my perfect church is all about my own comfort.

Strangely (or not), there are churches that agree with me. They say you don't have to change to be in their

church. In fact, to make a sinner change his ways is considered unloving and intolerant. Since God is a loving God, he must accept people as they are, not as he would like them to be. In fact, since God is a loving God, not only do you have to do nothing to join his way, there is no other way but his way. Everyone will be saved because it would be unloving to condemn anybody or any action. Not only that, God didn't really mean it when he set certain standards. Are you a celebrity? Just make sure you join their church. It doesn't matter what you do as long as you are somebody. Do you not intend to give up homosexual acts? That's OK. To make you change your lifestyle would be intolerant. Change is unnecessary.

That may be good enough for political candidates and best-selling authors, but it is not good enough for God. Just as you cannot enter his kingdom without forgiveness of sin, so you cannot be in his kingdom without giving up sin. "Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor those who commit homosexual acts, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such *were* some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God." (1 Cor 6:9-11, emphasis mine) "How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" (Rom 6:2) The whole point of God's family is change. "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." (Lk 15:24) Somehow my perfect church is not God's perfect church.

I don't have to relate

Since my perfect church does not involve change, it must define church in a special way. Church, in my lazy man's perfect church, is defined so that participation is optional. If I don't want to go to church I don't have to. I can sit at home and watch church on TV. Or I can sit at home and ignore church altogether. That is because church becomes a place, to which you can go or not go. It becomes stones and benches. It becomes a place where professionals do your worship for you, so you need not even be there. It becomes a building you can point to and proudly say, "That is my church," even though you might only have been inside once or twice.

There are a lot of people who seem to be in my perfect church. They pay for their pew, but never sit in it. Church is where they go for weddings, funerals, and maybe certain holidays.

Did you know that the word church is not even in the Bible? What some translate as church really means a group of selected people. It is a congregation, which implies the act of people congregating. Church is not a place, it is a people. You cannot go to church because you either are the church or you are not. God's family, his

body, his church if you must. If the church is a gathering of people, that kills the lazy man's view of church. It means that to be part of the church you must be part of a group. It means that if you do not gather with others, you are not in the group. But it is more than just gathering together. "By this shall men know you are my disciples, if you have love one to another." (Jn 13:35) Being part of God's church (to use that word as a familiar shorthand) involves interacting with people. It involves getting to know people well enough to interact. There are some gatherings of people that do not require that you even know anyone else. At a sporting event, for instance, you may be part of the crowd, but you are not necessarily interacting with the rest of the crowd. Paul describes God's people as parts of a whole. "Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another." (Eph 4:25) We cannot sit back and refuse to assemble. We are members of one another. The finger that is cut off from the body withers. The marriage in which the husband and wife never interact is doomed. I can't define church as a place, because it is part of me and I am part of it. If I don't

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congregate, I am not part of a congregation. If I don't participate, I have no participation in Christ. Somehow my perfect church is not God's perfect church.

There might be any number of other characteristics of my perfect church. In that church, I am the final authority. God will communicate with or through me directly, and I am the final arbiter of what he says. The Bible, then, would be worthless because it is not authoritative; I would be. In my perfect church I could worship the way I want, regardless of what God says. If I want to dance or play the clarinet that would be acceptable. Oh, and they would not take my money. Somehow my perfect church is not God's perfect church.

We look for perfection in a church based on our standards and our desires. When a church does not meet those criteria we look for a different one that does. That is why people refer to "my church" and "our church." When I look for God in my perfect church I will never find him. That is because he is looking for me in his perfect church.

ONE IN FIVE

I admit that I am rather Victorian in my thinking. Therefore, this article is going to be hard for me to write. I have seen something, however, that annoyed and alarmed me, and so I feel I must write it, other sensibilities notwithstanding.

I have been seeing an advertisement on television that has me concerned. In it, a doctor, or an actor portraying a doctor, claims that one in every five American adults has a particular sexually transmitted disease (STD). It is not a life-threatening disease, merely an uncomfortable one. He goes on to say that so many people have the disease because people can pass it on without knowing that they have it. Then they say that someone taking their drug will not be cured of the disease, but will stand less of a chance of passing it on. Never mind that the only sure way to keep from transmitting an STD is abstinence. The only sure way of never contracting it in the first place is for a man and a woman to wait until marriage, and then remain faithful to one another.

The facts of the STD rates are alarming enough, although to a former sailor they should not be too surprising. What should be alarming to Christians, however, is not the number of people having the disease but what that means in a larger context. If 20% of all American adults have this particular disease, and since it is only passed on under certain conditions, that means that anywhere from thirty to sixty per cent, or possibly more, of American adults are having sex with someone to whom they are not married. If the STD rate is 20%, the fornication rate is much higher. In addition, a certain number of those, no doubt are married. Thus the rate of adultery is also high. And when adultery results in disease, the innocent suffers with the guilty.

Even these figures may not be alarming to some. This country has become so inured to such high numbers. After all, it is not just in the commercials but in the dramas and comedies that television portrays sinful sexual acts as normal. When the seeming majority of sex acts implied or specified on television are between unmarried people, the rates implied by this one commercial become expected.

What I fear, though, is deeper than just the numbers. "Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people." (Prov 14:34) How can any nation that so blatantly disregards the word of God claim any more, if ever it did, to be a Christian nation? How can we who try to spread the word of God and the message of Christ succeed when other nations are saying, "But even by your own standards we are more righteous than you?" When approximately 86% of the nation claims to be Christian and even as low as 30% are ignoring the word of God on something as basic as fornication, then there is necessarily a significant overlap; people claiming to be Christians are among those who flaunt the word of God that "neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers ... shall inherit the kingdom of God." (1 Cor 6:9-10) Thereby is the name of God dishonored.

I don't intend to sound like some gloom-and-doom, America-will-be-destroyed-for-her-sin preacher. If God is going to destroy us as a nation there are many other reasons he would do so. Nevertheless, if American Christians are going to preach the good news to a lost country we need to be aware of the magnitude of some of the problems we face. We need to be aware that the problem exists even among those who claim to be among us. Only then can we know how to reach those who need to hear the word of God.

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