

How the Community Influences the Church By Paul R. Blake

(The following question was sent by a fellow preacher to me and several other preachers. What follows is my response. It may provide some insight into why carrying the gospel to this part of the country is so difficult. prb) "I have pointed out four areas that I believe are important issues the church faces today: Religion, Legal, Moral and Materialism. In a few words, what do you see from where you are that might impact the church in all or some of these areas?"

Your question about local external influences on the church requires an answer from a sociological theology perspective. That's just a fancy way of saying how the world impacts the church. The Bible speaks to this matter indirectly by warning against worldly influences, and also by example as seen in the locally oriented aspects of the epistles of Paul and John (Revelation) to the churches. Therefore, discerning those influences will be a matter of individual experience, wisdom, and perspicacity.

Here in the cold north, the spiritual climate of communities reflects the temperature, cold. One can draw a line laterally across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia and find no faithful, sound churches of Christ north of that line (2/3s of the state). South of that line there are less than a dozen churches. Religiously, PA is Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic, Lutheran, and Congregationalist, all churches that are liturgical and require very little of members. Pennsylvanians follow the European model religiously, that is, religion is part of family or cultural tradition but has little impact on daily life. In addition, they are very secularly minded; they consider that earning a living and taking care of one's family and possessions is the greatest good they can do. Pittsburgh differs somewhat from the rest of the state in that they tend to be more family and community oriented rather than material minded. Most PA communities tend to be insular and reluctant to change.

These factors combine to create an atmosphere that makes it difficult for churches of Christ to take root and grow. My personal experience here is that people in the communities are religiously lukewarm to cold and are content to remain so. They are reluctant to change and unwilling to even discuss the tenets of their faith in a Bible study.

This spirit also spills over into the lives of some members of the church. They must deal with the tendency to remain a faithful Christian because it is a family or community tradition or because it is their duty, as opposed to serving the Savior out of love and joy. They must overcome the regional "matter of fact" abrupt way of interacting with others in order to become welcoming and warm toward strangers. This often leads visitors to think that PA congregations are made up of Christians just going through the motions and not strongly interested in the Lord or in other Christians.

On the other hand, and intending no offense toward any other part of the country, I have discovered that while northerners may appear distant and matter of fact in their interactions with others, instead they are entirely dependable when others are in a pinch. Ironically, northerners who spend time in the south often misunderstand the warm and expressive treatment they receive from others as an implication that they will be there for them when in a bind, and are disappointed when they realize that the warm treatment they experienced often only implies a casual and not necessarily committed

relationship. It is possible that the effusive, warm approach of some southerners that is casual and not necessarily committed, may also be reflected in their expressive professions on behalf of the Lord's church, while in practice they may be only casually involved in the local church. This is based on my experiences in Tampa, FL and Blytheville, AR, and is not necessarily true of all southern or northern disciples or congregations.

PA churches have to fight inertia: 1) keep doing the same thing because it is the same thing--change is not good or desired, 2) keep the relationships they have rather than making the effort to create new ones--new people are suspect and will require more commitments, and 3) hold onto the old ideas--new ones are suspect and may require change. It is difficult to keep these northern attitudes from creeping into local churches. Happily, there are some congregations that are aware of this and are endeavoring to overcome these local influences. Tomlinson Run is one such place.

Most Prized Possession

"For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Gal. 5:14).

An incident is told about two soldiers who had recently been released from a prison camp in Siberia following World War II. "We did our best," said an officer, "to repatriate the men as fast as possible, but many were still there when winter threatened to close up the port." Only a limited number could board the last small boat. Among those waiting to be transported were two who had been chums all through the war. One of them was selected, but the other seemed doomed to remain behind. An order was given that those who were leaving could take only one important item of luggage. The heart of the man who was chosen went out to his buddy, so he emptied his duffle bag of its prized souvenirs and his personal belongings and told his companion to get into the canvas sack. Then carefully lifting the bag on his shoulders, he boarded the ship with his friend as his single, most precious possession. This man truly loved his neighbor as himself. (From Bible Illustrator)

Entertainment at Church By Mike Thomas

When Jesus was on earth, He felt it necessary to rebuke the Jews who were misusing the Lord's Temple. It was intended to be a place of worship and sacrifice, but by the time of Christ many were using it as a place of business and corruption. Jesus' response was simple. He pulled out a whip, overturned their money tables, and drove them out with the charge, "Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!" (John 2:16).

The Jewish Temple has long since been removed from God's will. The closest representation of it today is the Lord's church (1Cor. 3:16-17; Eph. 2:21). Christians are to be priests who offer spiritual sacrifices in worship (1Peter 2:5). Unfortunately, like the Jews, many are using the church for things Jesus never intended: entertainment, business, politics, and corruption. Churches not only engage in entertainment and social programs, they depend on them to survive. Thus, the continual circus-like atmosphere

in many outreach programs centered on carnivals, concerts, and candy. If we think Jesus would be silent to this if He were on earth today, we are of all men most foolish. That whip of His would be used so much it'd be worn down to a shoestring!

My good friends, where is our faith? The power to save man from sin is the gospel (Rom. 1:16). The work of the church is spiritual (Eph. 4:11-16). When Christians tried to make the church a place for social meals, Paul rebuked them saying, "Do you not have houses to eat and drink in?" (1Cor. 11:22, 34). There's nothing wrong with social meals and activities; it's just not the purpose of the church to provide them. The Lord's work is much too important to reduce it down to food and entertainment.

When we stand before God in judgment, to give account for our life (2Cor. 5:10), what will have mattered most from our time on earth: entertainment or salvation from sin? Then that's the kind of work the church should be doing. Anything less than that will be overturned by Jesus.