THE FUTURE CHURCH

Romans 4:13-21, Matthew 16:13-18 (NASB)

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The church today is facing a Mega shift. Generations Z and Alpha have little use for the pattern of the church as we know it. A longitudinal survey by the George Gallup organization reveals that some forty million Americans stopped going to church between 2000 and 2020. The Southern Baptist Convention has lost more people in the last few years than the entire membership of the Alliance. In one year they lost 1200 churches. One good thing is that evangelicals held people better than other categories, but still lost energy. How does the church go forward in those conditions? What will the future church look like? How will it come to be?

That’s a concern on a wide level. But there are also many things which impact the future of a specific local church. Both COVID19 itself and the controversial public health policies it brought caused many churches to get knocked backward. The inability to find pastoral candidates is impacting many churches. Our own district has nine or ten empty positions. I can’t tell you how we will fill them.

I recently heard that Clarks Summit University and Baptist Bible Seminary have permanently closed. Add those names to Alliance University, Alliance Theological Seminary, Davis College, The King’s College, and Northeastern Bible College and we have a shocking picture of the decline of Christian higher education.

As Americans our tendency is to think immediately of means and methods to address these issues. I think the Lord would first have us not ask how to do it, but who can do it. Paul the Apostle said that he worked as “a wise master builder.” That does not start with methods, but in the heart.

WHAT GOD PROMISED ABRAHAM

A look at what God promised Abraham, our father in the faith, will help us understand how God works with servants like us who cannot imagine how he will achieve his purposes. The foundational set of promises are found in Genesis 12:1-3: **“Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your country, /And from your relatives /And from your father's house, /To the land which I will show you; /And I will make you a great nation, /And I will bless you, /And make your name great; /And so you shall be a blessing; /And I will bless those who bless you, /And the one who curses you I will curse. /And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.’”** (NASB). The key promises are a land, a seed, and a blessing, which includes not only Israel but all the families of the earth. There are no maybes in these promises. The command of the Lord to Abram was clear, and the promises of the Lord were, too. And they all would have seemed impossible to Abram.

ABRAHAM’S RESPONSE TO GOD’S PROMISES

Paul dug into this in the book of Romans. As we examine Abraham’s response to God’s promises, we can see six actions we can take to position ourselves spiritually to build the church of the future, the one which does not yet exist:

1. Radically distrust yourself and your capacities. **“For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law…”** (Romans 4:13a NASB).

The Law is about works and performance, and human capacities and purposes. It did not exist in its final form when Abraham was alive, though there is evidence that believers knew quite a bit about what the Lord required. But the performance-based life is a failure every time. Why do we keep trying it? Abraham did not have the capacity to achieve or create the future things which God promised. Neither can we do so for the church. This does not mean that we do not have a crucial servant’s part to play, but we must start by abandoning any shred of trust in ourselves. And trusting ourselves is our first instinct!

1. Embrace unbelievable things because God says them. **“For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation. For this reason it is by faith…”** (Rom. 4:13-16a).

Facing the unbelievable commands of the Lord is the first step of faith in life and ministry. God said: “Abraham, leave everything in Ur—your family, your livelihood, your property—and go where I tell you.” The evidence that Abraham embraced this inwardly is proved by the fact that he did it outwardly. That’s how faith becomes real. As he traveled he had time to meditate on the unthinkable promises which were to be mediated through him.

So we have: **“Go and make disciples of all nations.”** We have the challenge to embrace Christ’s promise to build his church, to be all in, and not hold back, even when we cannot tell how it will happen. The question is not whether it will happen. It will. The question is whether we believe God when he says it will, and then act on that belief. What role has Christ asked you to play? What spiritual gift has God given you to invest in others?

1. Wrench yourself open to the grace of God. **“For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all…”** (Rom. 4:16).

First, we must open ourselves to God’s grace as a necessity to bring change in our own lives. How will we ever overcome sinful habits in which we are stuck? How will our hearts ever change? How will we learn to love the unlovable? From there we need to open ourselves to work by grace in ministry to others. How are we expecting to help the persistent substance abuser? Or the married couple who have never really loved each other? God is not obliged to bless our good efforts. Abraham’s standing before God and performance of his servanthood were staked on the grace of God. He was faced with the same challenge we face, that if God’s grace does not go to work nothing will happen. But when it does, all things become possible.

1. Dive into the risk of faith. **“… (As it is written, "A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU") in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist”** (Rom. 4:17).

This is where the rubber really met the road for Abraham. What do we really believe about God? Abraham believed that God gives life to the dead. He traveled days with his son, Isaac, to the mountain upon which he was to sacrifice him to the Lord without knowing what would happen. Isaac asked his father: “Where is the lamb for the sacrifice?” “God will provide,” he replied. With no solution in sight, Abraham raised the knife. And then the Lord provided a ram, stuck in a thicket. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that Abraham believed he could go through with the sacrifice, and that God had the power to raise Isaac from the dead. Do we believe that God can give life to churches which outwardly seem dead, to people who seem to have no interest in spiritual things?

Abraham also believed God to bring the promised land, seed, and blessing into existence in the future. Do we believe that God will raise up the believing church of the future? Our specific church?

If we believe these two things, that God raises the dead and calls into being that which does not exist, we will dive in. The risk is that we can fall flat on our faces, and sometimes we do. But the risk of not diving in is greater! Not diving in means that we have refused our servant role as the means by which God does these things. And that is a total fail.

Dead people and things can live by the impartation of life from God as a gift. Things which have no reason to exist can come to pass with nothing more than a word from the Lord. Count on it!

1. Teach your heart to hope against hope. **“In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, ‘SO SHALL YOUR DESCENDANTS BE’”** (Rom. 4:18).

Abraham chose to hope against hope. It was not an accident. We must develop this practice for our own sakes, and for the sake of the ministries God wants us to do. We must shepherd our hearts which naturally lose hope when faced with seemingly impossible things. We also naturally hope in the wrong things. Abraham looked at the impossible things and told himself the truth, as found in verse 21: **“…And being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform.”** Life and ministry present us with things we cannot do every day. We cannot do them, but God can! So teach your heart to hope in the sovereign Lord by speaking truth to yourself. Our God is able!

1. Give glory to God with nothing held back. **“Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God…”** (Rom. 4:19-20).

This is the spiritual challenge to stay in the position to receive grace upon grace by crediting God for every good thing, first in our hearts and then out in life. Abraham glorified God by his faith. The last of the five *solas* crafted by the Reformers is *soli Deo gloria*, which means “to God alone be the glory!” The primary intent of that statement is not merely to say that we should praise God all the time and for everything, though that is included. The intent is to urge us to honor God by ascribing every good outcome to the working of his sovereign hand. We are, in fact, his servants, but we can do nothing apart from him. This is not a method or formula, but a position of soul and spirit. Do you believe in God’s sovereignty in the church—the way it is governed, the unique power of the gospel, and God’s wisdom in general? We glorify God when we align with all of that.

WHAT CHRIST PROMISED US

What we have just discussed is how Paul explained Abram’s response to promises of things which did not exist. What non-existent things has Christ promised us? Matthew 16 records a pregnant conversation he had with his disciples: **“Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘****You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it’”** (Matthew 16:13-18).

Christ has promised that he will build his church, the future church which does not yet exist, and nothing and no one will stop him. Hallelujah! This should give us encouragement to forge forward even when things do not seem to be happening.

He further says that he will build his church on **“this rock.”** Whenever you have a demonstrative pronoun like “this” you must determine to what it refers. This is both grammatical and theological. This particular question has set the hair on fire of many theologians and Bible scholars. Let me give a simplified analysis, because our response to the promise of Jesus will depend on it.

It cannot be Peter as a capable man, even though his name means “rock.” Nothing in God’s kingdom is built on human capacities. It also cannot be Peter’s faith, as praiseworthy as it was in this instance. Faith is not a thing or a substance. It is merely our connection to God. One more option is that Jesus was saying he would build his church on broken people like you and me who are willing to walk by faith. This is possible.

But I believe the immediate context gives the best answer. Jesus had recently upbraided his disciples when they had forgotten to bring bread to eat on the road. “Woe is us!” they said. His critique was not about their forgetting, but their failure to embrace his identity as the multiplier of loaves and fishes. They had seen him do it multiple times! And then he drove the point home by asking who people said he is, and also who they said he is. And Peter got it right: **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”** It is the identity of Jesus Christ, son of the Living God, which is the rock upon which our faith rests. This name encompasses all of who he is, his attributes, and his powers. This is the name above every name. This is the name upon which his promise to build his church rests.

We have been called to build, as good servants, a church which does not yet exist. I have a story about that.

As I served my church back in the 1980’s the Lord showed me that the sanctity of human life is one of the biggest spiritual battlegrounds of our day. If you can kill your baby at will—and I mean both men and women—you are making a bid for godhood over that child.

There were more abortions than live births in the county in which I lived, with four thousand live births and five thousand abortions. So I started walking the road in front of our local abortion facility with some others who were already doing that. I preached about the sanctity of human life to my church, and once to that band of protestors in the street through a bullhorn. I participated in prayer vigils. But when I heard about the ministry of crisis pregnancy centers I realized that this would be my pastoral focus to address the overwhelming problem. Several local prolife leaders had enlightened me about CPCs and urged me to consider starting one. So I did. Powerless me, and a hardy band of other powerless believers. We started with absolutely nothing.

I installed the first phone line for the ministry in the basement of the parsonage. It was a cheap phone and a cheap answering machine telling callers to contact the CPC in the next county until we were ready to open.

Several of us went to churches of many denominations casting vision and showing a clip from a movie on fetal development. I am compressing a big story, but the Lord started generating a wave of support. A treasurer, an attorney, an executive director, some plans for establishing such a center, and some money came into existence right in front of us. And then professional space to lease. We opened in 1987.

I say this simply to share my experience of the Lord calling something into existence which did not exist. It is still operating thirty-eight years later. The three years it took to get it off the ground were tough on me as the chairman of the board because I was in my first senior pastorate and had a young family. So yes, my work to be God’s servant to get the CPC off the ground was hard and long. But it was clear to everyone that everything about the founding of the Rockland Pregnancy Counseling Center was a miracle. And since the mid-eighties, hundreds of babies have been rescued, and hundreds of people have prayed to receive Christ. Many of these are people who would never have become part of the church without that ministry. God called something into existence which was not there, and he gave life to the dead.

To sum up, building the church of the future will require excellent thinking, plans, and leadership. Sometimes it seems like the main challenge is getting those things. But those things mean nothing if God does not give life to spiritually dead people and call a church which does not yet exist into existence. Abraham’s life has given us six keys of soul and spirit to keep us in the place to receive God’s miraculous working:

1. Radically distrust yourself and your capacities.
2. Embrace unbelievable things because God says them.
3. Wrench yourself open to the grace of God.
4. Dive into the risk of faith.
5. Teach your heart to hope against hope.
6. Give glory to God with nothing held back.

Nothing is impossible with God! The church of the future will be built. May the Lord grant us to be the servants he chooses to bring it to pass.

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