

Message #84 of *Scripture Beneath The Surface*

"Churches - Big and Small"

With Randy Smith

(269) 763-2114

Preparation Ministries, Inc

PO BOX 475 OLIVET, MI 49076

preparationministries@gmail.com

(Please feel free to call, or send messages)

Web Site: <http://www.preparationministries.net>

Broadcast Schedule

WOLY AM 1500 - Battle Creek, Sat. 10am - Sun. 9:30am

WLQV AM 1500 - Detroit, Sun. 10am

Also, Internet Stream - www.am1500wlqv.com

WFPM

99.5 FM in Battle Creek - Fri. 3:30pm

99.9 FM in Albion - Fri. 3:30pm

103.7 FM in Jackson - Fri. 3:30pm

Also, Internet Stream - www.wfpmradio.org

Hello! Thanks for being with us. Today I'd like to talk about going to church, and about various church lifestyles. In Christianity today there are about as many different types of churches as there are Christians. Even the denominational churches differ considerably within their own denomination, and if you attend one Baptist church, you might find it to be very different from another Baptist Church. It's the same thing for any other type of church. However, you might find the greatest differences between independent churches. In each city there are many of these. Actually, the independent churches aren't noticed as much as the denominational churches, because the independent churches are generally smaller in size. The mainline denominational churches are generally bigger because they seem to appeal to a larger section of the Christian population. But, why? Why do the bigger denominations seem to appeal to a larger section of the Christians population, and the independent churches seem to appeal to a smaller group of Christians? Is it because these larger denominations have a better understanding of scripture? Actually, you might find that a greater degree of truth exists in the smaller independent churches. Let's take a couple of minutes and think about this concept, and ask the question, "Do the larger churches have a more perfect doctrine and form of worship than the smaller churches, or do the smaller churches have a clearer understanding of doctrine?" Certainly there can be pros and cons to both questions, but let's take a look at them anyway, and let's start by looking back at history.

Originally, we know that there was only one Christian church. Contrary to some popular belief, the original Christian church was not the Catholic church which we know today. Actually, the original Christian church had no name at all. It was just the body of Christians who existed at

that time. Initially, the church was established in Jerusalem, and then Christianity spread out from there. Although certain groups of Christians were sometimes referred to by their locations, still, the church was all one church, and were all recognized as one religious organization. As the church expanded, the term 'catholic' was applied to it, from the perspective that the church was still the church even though some groups of Christians were separated by distance from other groups of Christians. The term, catholic, means, universal, or all inclusive in a general sense. As the church spread out, it was still one church, just a great body of Christian believers who were located in various places around the world. Each group of Christians were included in the universal church, and only separated by location, not by doctrine.

During the course of history numerous doctrinal divisions erupted. In some instances, the universal church overcame the schism either through dialog or by force, and in some instances, the divisions continued. The division between the Eastern and Roman Catholic church is an example of this. Later, in the 16th century, the Protestant Reformation took place, causing an extreme separation of the Christian church. Incidentally, the name Protestant, is taken from the original action which started the Reformation, in that the people who broke away from the mainline church were protesting. Because they were the ones who protested, they were called Protestants, which is just a different pronunciation than saying, prō-testants.

Since the time of the Protestant Reformation, further divisions have taken place. Today we have an almost unending number of denominations, and a much greater number of independent church organizations. And, in each and every case, it is the interpretation of scripture which has been the determining factor which caused the separation.

Those of you who are listening today may be Catholic, may be Lutheran, Baptist, Presbyterian, or some other denomination. It may also be that some of you do not attend church at all. In fact, those who call themselves Christians and yet do not attend any church are probably more numerous than many people suspect. It's not very hard to imagine a significant number of people who have become disillusioned with the church and have given up trying to be a part of it at all. Some of these people attend church from time to time, and some of these people don't attend church at all. Some of these people might consider a particular church as being their church, but, only because that was the last church they attended. And contrary to popular opinion, these people are probably not all weak in the faith. Many are just so frustrated with churches that they have given up trying to attend.

Certainly, large churches draw the biggest crowds of people to their services. However, on the other hand, there are more small churches than big churches, and because of this there may be as many people attending small churches as those attending large churches. Yet, people make the decision to attend one church or another for various reasons. Let's consider, first of all, large churches of at least three or four hundred. There are some things which are significant about churches which are this large. One significant fact of these larger churches is that the people do not know everyone who attends the church. This means that any church fellowship within the church will be by groups of people rather than the whole church coming together in fellowship.

This is actually a type of church division, but it takes place within the church. This is not necessarily a bad thing, except when the grouping is accomplished by separating out a race or class of people. When we begin to choose the type of people we fellowship with, we humans have a tendency to shun others who do not fit into our own personal mold. Of course, that happens to a certain extent even in the small churches, in the sense that a person chooses to attend a certain church, many times, because of the type or class of the other people who attend there.

But an important aspect of any church is the doctrinal viewpoint. How a particular church worships and fellowships is dependent on their doctrinal view of scripture. The form of worship, and the particular rites and rituals, are determined by the leadership of the denomination or heads of the local church. Hopefully, this leadership is made up of a great portion of the church body and not just by an individual person. When an individual person controls the church congregation completely, we have a cult situation. A cult is basically a religious organization that bases its allegiance mostly to one person. Doctrine, when interpreted by only one person, is a dangerous proposition if people follow it without having further witness of it being truthful. Of course, large churches are generally established through a mainline denominational source, and therefore they may be more secure, or safe. But, there is a danger of large churches having a doctrinal viewpoint which can destroy souls rather than save them. This can happen when a church has a doctrinal viewpoint which is so universal, so general, so catholic in concept, that everyone who attends is automatically considered a good Christian.

Let's explore this concept a little further. In Matthew 7:13-14, we read the words of Jesus which say, "Enter in at the narrow gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leads to destruction, and many there are which go in there: 14 Because small is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leads to life, and few there are that find it." Now, it seems to me that when we read these verses we can easily see that there are more people who will be lost than those who will be saved. Notice that these verses specifically tell us that there will be few who find the narrow gate, as opposed to the many who will go in the broad way to destruction. The important thing that I want you to consider is that most people do not truly want Jesus Christ to be their Lord and Savior. When we read these verses in Matthew 7, we recognize that most people are not looking for true religion. Actually, most people are caught up with the stimulations of this flesh and blood body. Think about this for a moment. If you were a person who didn't want to go to hell, yet you really didn't want to serve Jesus Christ either, which kind of church would you attend if you attended a church. I believe that those people who don't want to go to hell but are deceived into thinking they are Christians when they don't really apply the life of Christ to their life, would choose a large church to attend because the general doctrinal viewpoint is less strict and therefore less offensive. A large church appeals to a greater type and class of the population than do small organizations. Generally speaking, you will attend a church where you feel accepted, and where you receive the type of instruction you're looking for. In this sense, churches which teach the easiest form of Christianity would most likely draw the greatest crowds.

Now, I'm not talking about you who are good Christians. I'm talking specifically about those people who claim to be Christians but have no true desire to apply the principles of Christianity to their lives. I'm specifically referring to people who are headed in the broad way toward eternal destruction. These people, if attending a church, will look for a church which is not offensive. They will look for a church which will not require an excessive amount of conformity to the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Please do not misinterpret what I am saying about large churches. I am not condemning large churches, but am only pointing out that in many of these organizations a person who is looking for an easier way to heaven, so to speak, will look for a church which will allow them to continue their frivolous lifestyle. Let's face the truth. If you were a person who was trying to appear as a Christian, but didn't really have a heart for God, the last church you would want to attend would be one which preached a doctrine of self-sacrifice and separation from the things of this world. In scripture there is a very significant emphasis on imitating the life of Christ and in becoming a living sacrifice for him. However, if you happen to be a person who did not want to give up your own worldly desires, but you still wanted to escape hell, you might very well look for a church in which to worship which catered to your will rather than to God's will. I'm not saying, and please understand this, I'm not saying that the people who attend large churches are not truly saved. However, what I am saying is that generalized doctrine, that doctrine which can appeal to a majority of people, may not be in line with scripture. And, you may not be able to recognize my reasoning for this, but as I see it, the very fact that scripture says that there are only a few that will go through the narrow gate into life eternal, and that there are many who will go through the broad gate to destruction, indicates that if a certain denominational viewpoint is excepted by a great percentage of people, then there is every reason to suspect that the doctrine is too generalized.

Of course, there are no absolutes to this question. There is no doubt that you could find good or bad doctrine in either a large or small church. But we can't escape that concept of scripture which emphasizes that the large crowd will not make it to heaven. In every church, large or small, I'm sure there are those who are saved as well as those who are not. Yet the very concept of a church drawing a large crowd is indicative of a doctrine that is so generalized that it will accept more people than it rejects. And actually, the desire to separate from a universal doctrine in order to practice a more strict adherence to scripture is what drives people into establishing new independent churches. No, it may not truly be successful, and the result may not be as the people hoped, but the actual underlying reasoning for the establishment of an independent church is based on a desire for stricter adherence to God's word. Generally speaking, no one starts a new church work unless they are dissatisfied with the scope of their current church organization. In almost every case a new church is established outside of the current denomination because the organizers of the new church felt that the leaders of the original church were not properly fulfilling the call to God's word.

This was the basis of the Protestant Reformation. The Catholic church, the Universal Church, taught a form of worship which the protesters felt was inconsistent with the word of God. We

know that Martin Luther was one of the most significant leaders in the Reformation, and in 1517 he nailed a document to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany which included 95 points of church doctrine in which he felt the universal church was in error. Of course, looking at history, we see that this protest was the beginning of a major separation of the church into denominations. Today there is no end to the number of different churches. We see churches wherever we go. And many churches exist which are not seen. These are the home churches which have grown up in every city of the world.

Home churches are, generally speaking, quite small. These groups meet in living rooms and family rooms, basement recreation rooms, or even in garages. They probably average only six to ten people per church. However, just because they are small groups does not mean that they are small in their intensity. The essential thing to keep in mind about home churches is that most likely each one of them was started because of a desire for a greater intensity in Christian service.

Now, large churches are not evil. But neither are small churches. But, in looking at the size of churches, an important thing to look for is whether or not the large size of the church indicates a lack of fervency toward godliness. Are they large because they teach an easy doctrine and accept everyone just as they are, no matter what kind of Christian life they are actually living? Now, once again, I want you to understand that I am not suggesting that large churches are bad, but that large churches may be houses of worship that have forsaken the pure word of God and exchanged it for a generalized religious view which encourages attendance by those Christians who do not want to be told a doctrine which points them to a separation from the world. Worldly Christians want a church that will not offend them. They want a church which tells them that they are O.K. just as they are. And this is the value of the smaller churches to some extent, in that they have separated from the large organizations because of a desire for greater spiritual intensity.

If you are in a large church, I'm not suggesting you should leave it and join a smaller church. Certainly there are many smaller churches, and even many living room churches which are nothing more than vehicles for an egotistic leader. Yet, if you happen to be looking for a greater relationship with God, and your desire for service through Jesus Christ is intense, you just might find that a smaller church or even a living room church will fulfill your needs. We Christians have always gravitated to divisions concerning church doctrine. Prior to the 16th century, the church was able to stifle other denominational moves. There is ample historical evidence of the church killing those people who attempted to form church groups which were in opposition to the ruling church hierarchy. Yet, in this present day and age, the threat of death from forming a new church has been generally overcome. And instead of the universal church being the supreme authority for the interpretation of scripture, the church of today has finally moved into the arena of the original scriptural instruction of looking to the Holy Spirit for truth.

The large denominational structures still try to intimidate the smaller organizations, and they still try to insist that they themselves are the only true church authority. These large church organizations seem to think that their theologians have a better grasp on the truth of scripture

than the little churches, and this self-assumption of authority is evident in their approach to small denominations or to independent groups. It is the element of authority which has been the greatest hindrance to Christian growth through history, in that instead of helping the other groups to grow, they attempt to stifle them.

And, just for the record, I will explain something that will prove my point quite well. The large denominational organizations in existence today use business and marketing techniques to increase the size of their denominations. They count numbers, and attempt to spread the gospel by giving a watered down easy form of God's grace in order to draw in more people. There is a significant movement in progress in evangelical type denominations which present the gospel of Jesus Christ in an upbeat modern secular fashion. The term they generally use is, "meeting the people where they are at." They don't require people to change, but just to come to church. The worship music of these organizations has progressed to modern rock in an attempt to give sinners the type of music they are used to in order that they might feel comfortable in church and therefore will keep coming back. There is a significant push toward keeping the message of the gospel very simple and short so as not to offend anyone. But this is not in conformance to the word of Jesus Christ. Jesus did not make it easy for people to receive him. He just presented the word of God plain and straight forward, and left the rest up to those who heard. And for the proof of what is happening in the large church denominations, I give you this. In every organization they keep track of the growth in the number of members and in the number of churches established from year to year, and they compare these figures against other denominations. They have a rating scale which tells them year by year which denomination is first, second, or third in the ratings. They make changes according to the ratings, and change the techniques of missions or ministries when the figures don't add up. They do not rely on the power of the Holy Spirit, but on business form and modern techniques.

The new Protestant denominations have come full circle with the Universal Church, and have gone back to relying on the power of their own authority instead of relying on the power of the Holy Spirit. In Zechariah, chapter four, it tells us that it is not by might or by the power of our own hands, but by the Holy Spirit that we should overcome. Even churches who use this motto of Zechariah 4:6, do not really rely on the Holy Spirit but rely on their board meetings and planning committees. The church of today is under attack by Satan just as strongly as ever, and it is, just as has always been, an attack from the inside. It is within the church that the greatest enemy lies. It is from within the church that true worship and service sees its greatest danger. Just as Satan desired to take power in his own hands, the church still tries to take power in their own hands and to rule over Christians. Although authority is certainly a necessity in the church, the real authority of church leaders must be by the Holy Spirit and not by the strength of man's own imaginations. Just as history has pointed out excesses of evil by church leadership, today's church is no exception. We have many examples of current day ministries which have been revealed to be wicked. I believe we have only seen the tip of the iceberg, and that there is much which shall yet be revealed from our large church structures.

But, the bottom line for you is not that big is bad or that small is good, but that you must be careful not to assume the church is good, just because lots of people like it. Lots of people will go in the broad way to destruction. Following the crowd will get you nowhere. If you're looking for more from God, you may want to look for a smaller church which also has this same desire. The results may be worth the move.