

FOUR POSTURES FOR THE CHURCH

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I've been preaching through Corinthians for over a year now for over a year and if we were opening to Corinthians today which we are not the passage we are at "Now concerning the collection." When I began preaching through Corinthians I had no idea that October 1980 would be a time of special stewardship emphasis in the church. That's always a confirmation in my own life to open that and see that we're right exactly where we should be at this moment in the life of our church.

I'm going to speak confidently to you this morning and share with you a matter that's on my heart. I've called this message the Four Postures for the Church. My text is going to be a survey and then later we're going to get to the scripture.

I've been thinking. What if Jesus were to pay a personal, in the flesh visit to Newport-Mesa and inquire about the state of his church. I believe that the Lord personally in the flesh came to this area he would not be just concerned with how is Newport-Mesa Christian Center doing. He would be concerned about every body of believers in this area that named his name.

Sometimes it helps us, it certainly helps me as a pastor, to back off and get the larger look at what the Lord may be doing in an area and what the need might be in a whole area.

In 1972 we phoned every church in Newport Beach and Costa Mesa and asked them two questions – how many seats do you have if you were to set everybody down at one time? And secondly, how many people are in those seats on an average Sunday morning.

We asked that question in 72. Four years later we followed up and asked every church those two questions again. In 1980 we have just completed the survey once more. Every church we asked to cooperate, cooperated.

We have learned again some interesting things. The Protestant community in 1972 excluding Newport-Mesa Christian center and Calvary chapel had 8765 seats, 29 churches. This did not include any of the cults or sects in the area. It just included mainline Protestant churches. In 1976 there had been an addition of 105 seats. In 1980 the stats are the same as they were in 76. So the Protestant community, 29 churches in 8 years have added 105 seats. Newport-Mesa between 72 and 76 went from 200 to 375. Calvary Chapel went from 1800 to 2500 from 72 to 76. The Catholic community at 2450 have had the same number of seats throughout these 8 years.

In a total of 8 years the total Christian community has gone from 13,215 seats to 14,195 seats, a gain of 980 seats in a year.

The average Sunday morning attendance was the second question. This of course makes no attempt at judging the spiritual vitality of people in attendance whether saved or not saved. Some of the Protestant churches are known as theologically liberal churches. It might be our suspicion that they do not have a high ratio of people who are born again. But that's not to say there aren't those people in those churches. We can't guarantee that any particular churches

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doesn't have true believers in the same way we can't guarantee that everybody in this church is a true believer. So looking at things we can access and judge we can't read the human heart.

Protestant community, 29 churches of all stripes in 1972 had an attendance of 7545 gained a few hundred in 1976 to 8366. And came back down in 1980 to 7520. There are in 298 Protestant churches in this community 25 people less in church today than there was in 1972. Newport Mesa Christian center had a growth from 72 to 76 of 300-600 and 1980 to 750. Our growth rate you notice in the last four years has slowed. This is part of what church growth experts call sociological strangulation. In the south we call it chickens die down to the size of the coup. Calvary chapel has grown from 5500 to 7500 to 9000. Catholic parishes have gone down from 13,100, 12,500 in 76 to 11,700 in 1980.

In 1972 the total Christian community had 26,445 people in church on a given Sunday. These are responses from pastors or from church secretaries. In 1980, 28,970 people. If you notice the bottom line between 1976 and 1980 after four years the total Christian community in these two towns have 4 more people in church on an average Sunday morning than it had in 1976. That's one person a year for all churches combined.

When you compare the average Sunday morning attendance to the population you come up with some additional startling conclusions. In 1972 123,480 people versus 26,445 in church or 79% of the community was not in church on an average Sunday. In 1976 the statistic is a little bit better. 78% not in church – it drops one percent. But in 1980, 79% again of the community not in church 108,380 people in these two towns are not in church on a given Sunday morning.

Granted there are people in Newport Beach and Costa Mesa that go outside the area to church. But also granted there are people from outside the area that come in to Newport Beach and Costa Mesa. We're guessing there's a trade. We have no way certifying that.

I draw some conclusions from these. They're part of why we're approaching this whole effort of relocation.

When I came about 10 years ago with the voice ringing in my ears of a pastor who said that the pastor must never make the error of considering himself as pastor to the people who are currently in the church. But that the pastor must see himself also as responsible before the Lord for all those people who are not in the church. If we ever adopt the mentality of philosophy that says, We've got the building full; we can set down and be at ease. Then we have missed God's heartbeat for a whole area.

That feeling that I've had all these years is reinforced by some of the conclusions that this survey has taught us.

First, for every person who is attending a Protestant or Catholic church in Newport Beach and Costa Mesa this morning there are four persons at home or elsewhere – not in church. One out of 5 people in our two towns are in church on an average Sunday morning. We've already indicated that Sunday morning attendance has grown by 4 persons in 4 years while population has grown by 7350 in these two towns. That suggests that the church is actually losing ground in the area. Not even holding birth rate growth.

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By the way, I think these statistics would hold valid for Huntington Beach in terms of percentages or Fountain Valley or Mission Viejo or Laguna Niguel or Laguna Beach or El Toro. In some communities is think the church going statistic would not be as high.

There has been in the last 8 years in Newport Beach and Costa Mesa a net gain of zero churches. A few have closed. One or two have started. But a net gain of zero.

Protestant church attendance excluding Calvary Chapel has declined 7% since 1976 and Catholic attendance has declined 6% since 1976.

From 1976 to 1980 out of 30 Protestant churches (again excluding Calvary) eleven have decreased, 6 have stayed the same. Only 13 have increased. Or more than half have either stayed the same or decreased.

Therefore in spite of having the reputation of being a strong Christian community which this area has that reputation and in spite of the efforts of 35 Protestant and Catholic churches and in spite of intensive saturation by Christian television and radio which has made enormous claims about the number of people being saved, and in spite of Christian programs on secular television and secular radio the statistics show that essentially in 8 years in these two towns, the church has not gained. Incredible.

My response: I realize that statistics never lie by liars use statistics, though I've tried to use the same methodology every four years we've taken the survey. I look at this and say, What is to be done? We realize as one church we obviously cannot do all that needs to be done in the area. But God has called us to be part of the solution of bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ to our area.

It seems to me as I prayed about this and waited before the Lord about what I should say to you today that the Lord indicated clear to my heart and gave me visual imagery of a church that adopts four postures. These postures that the church adopts are appropriate to describe our own life individually.

The first we're to adopt in light of the needs that are around us of persons who do not know the Lord is we are to kneel. Matthew 9:35-38. "Jesus went through all the towns and villages teaching in the synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest therefore to send out workers into his field."

Isn't it striking that the Lord identified the problem not as a shortage of the harvest but a shortage of the workers. He said the harvest is plentiful. It's the laborers that are few. I want to tell you after ten years of pastoral experience in this church that Jesus is right on target. The diagnosis hasn't changed one iota in 2000 years – the harvest is still plentiful and the reaping of the harvest is directly dependant upon the number of people who will commit themselves to do the work of the Lord and be faithful at it.

Jesus puts the first position before his disciples as they need to pray. Pray therefore. That's why I used this idea of kneel. "Pray therefore the Lord of the harvest."

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The parallel passage to Matthew 9 is Luke 6:12 that says “After Jesus had said this he went up into the hills to pray and he continued all night in prayer to God.” In other words what he asked his disciples to do, he himself did.

Then Mark 3 goes on to say, “And when it was morning he called to him disciples from whom he chose twelve whom he named apostles.” When it was morning after an all night in prayer he called his disciples from whom he chose twelve. I have a theory, not supported by anything, but a theory as to how Jesus made the final cut list of twelve from the many disciples which he had. The theory is that when the Lord said in the late afternoon, “Pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into the harvest.” I kind of think that he had an eye out for the disciples that actually went out and began to pray. He himself continued all night in prayer to God. I do know this. That no Christian life, none of our lives individually are ever really productive without prayer. And I don’t know of any church that God has ever used that hasn’t been a praying church. It began with prayer and sensing what the Lord wants and where his heartbeat is and where his priorities are.

I simply say in response to the need, let’s not go up and get on our horses and charge around with banners. Let’s begin praying. Lord, what do you have us to do? Can we feel your heart beat for this area?

I came up with a little acronym on prayer. It struck me in helping me to pray, I could use PRAY – as a way, a litany of praying. P – praise. Begin prayer with praising the Lord for what he’s done and giving him thanks. R – Repentance. Taking the needs that are in my life and the sins that are in my life, the commissions and the omissions and bringing them to the Lord. A – Asking. Ask whatever you will, near and far. Y - Yielding. When it’s all said and done and the Lord puts his hand on my shoulder and requests something of me. Am I ready to yield myself to the work of the Lord.

In regard to what lies before us we must adopt a posture of prayer. We are to kneel.

I think a second posture that the Lord wants us as a church to have is that we must sit. From kneeling to sitting. Matthew 5. The beginning of the great teaching on the Sermon on the Mount it says, “When Jesus saw the multitude he went up into the hill and when he was sat down his disciples came to him.” They were ready for the content of his teaching and ready to hear him out as he taught.

Luke 10:39 Mary sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. The Lord tells Martha that she needs to do the same thing. Sit at his feet and listen to what he has to say.

Acts 2:2 on the day of Pentecost before the great explosion of the church we find that they were in a house sitting. In a sitting position we both enjoy the teaching of the Lord and the fullness of his teaching and the fellowship of being with one another. Sitting.

To me sitting stands as a symbol of taking into our lives the totality of the Lord’s teaching and what he wants us to apply to all of life. Taking all that is in his word to fit all that is in our world and all of our needs.

We live in an age of spiritual fadism. Fads are prominent in the contemporary culture in which we live. Fads are prominent in the spiritual and in the charismatic climate as well. I have been

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in this church enough time to see four fads come down the pipe. The fad of demonism. The fad of servanthood or submission. The fad of the positive confession movement. Now the fad of the church taking political position. I would make a distinction between a political position and a moral position.

It's easy to go riding off every time the new fad or the new emphasis comes down the line. To ride off with a few Bible verses that can be lifted out of the text and seem to make a wonderful kind of a thing and go charging. One of the things that I believe this church and this pulpit has stood for is that we will want to be bound by the whole counsel of the word of God. Not go riding off to the latest thing that seems to have a few people enamored for a while. But ultimately causes shipwreck in their lives and in the body of Christ. We're called upon to sit at the master's feet and listen to all that he has to say not just one phrase and run out before he's done talking. Some people treat the Bible like walking out in the middle of a teaching. I'd feel very badly if you walked out in the middle of my sermon. Especially if I said something I was going to amplify and all of a sudden you said, "Great news! I've got to tell somebody about right now!" But wait. I've got to qualify that and amplify that and get it out totally for everyone.

As a church we're committed to sit at the feet of Jesus and to hear what he has to say to us. To be submitted to that. We are to be a sitting church.

We're also to be a standing church. Another posture. We must stand. Acts 2:14, the day of Pentecost. Peter stood up with the eleven. There is a time to stand up, to take one's place. I suppose "standing" for me represents two things. It represents evangelism and it represents stability. Standing in a secure place. In point 4 I'll talk about evangelism so I think here for standing I'm going to talk about the church that has stability. We live in a time when everything that can be shaken is being shaken. The family, personal lifestyles, personal morals, leaders in the church falling by the wayside because of immorality. We live in just a terribly difficult and painful time. Christian marriages and Christian lives are not immune from the shaking that is going on around us.

I want a place to stand. In my own life, in my family life, in this church I want us to find secure ground in Christ. I want people to be in fact what they are in confession. I want us to actually do what we say. To practice what we preach. To stand. Consistently to stand and to be stable.

All that is taking place in the reeling currents that are around us.

It's very difficult to have stability in a church which in the area in which we live has such a high rate of people moving in and moving out. I want to tell you that it takes every effort that we can bring to bear on the situation to maintain sanity with losing so many people all the time. It hurt to see people leave. But the Lord sends others. We know that 30% of this congregation is moving out every year. Moving somewhere else. Most of them are not moving away because they're mad at the pastor. That means 30% of new people are coming in every year to hold the same number we had last year. This means things are never quite settled. The person you set by may have been here ten years ago and they may have just come this Sunday.

Somehow in all of this though, there needs to be some stability in the church. Satan attempts to defeat the church by picking off the leadership, by dividing the body, by persecuting or seducing the church. But somehow what this church means today in the community if God enables it to will mean the same thing and more than that ten years from now. We would like to see as God

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enables it to come to pass stability. For us as a body as people come and go and feel the call of God to leave or to come that this body of believers will remain true to its calling, true to its perspective, true to the mission that God has assigned it in the area.

I think a fourth posture that I desire for this church is that we must reach out. I debated here between walking and reaching out. It seemed “reaching out” better expressed what I wanted. Reaching out to one another. Jesus when he calls the first four fishers in Mark 1:17 said “I will make you to become fishers of men.” They were fishing with nets, not with a hook and line. They were getting many fish at one time not just a single fish. The Lord said I’ll help you to fish. Meaning there’s going to be a plentitude of catch. When the Lord’s ministry on earth is coming to a close and he is resurrected and he appears to them on the lake of Galilee and they put in the net on the other side to catch a great bunch of fish, number 153. John is so astonished by this miracle that he says and the net wasn’t torn with so many fish. The net wasn’t torn.

Sometimes we’re afraid of God’s growth of the church that the nets will be torn, that our relationships will be torn. That doesn’t happen all the time. It’s not scriptural that it’s going to happen. God wants to make the nets that are in the web of relationship in this body to be able to absorb the catch which is in the sea.

I want to warn you about a spiritual disease in churches. I haven’t found it here but it’s always present. It’s always waiting to get into a church. It’s called the disease of *koonitis*. From the Greek word *koonia*. Meaning fellowship. It is the kind of mentality which begins to say God, we sure are comfortable with our four and no more. Aren’t we a wonderful fellowship. Isn’t it wonderful to look at the same people every Sunday and to see how much we love one another. If we let outsiders in this wonderful fellowship is going to be all broken up.” *Koonitis*. God delivers us from *koonitis*.

The church that adopts a maintenance philosophy is dead in its tracks. It just simply says God’s called us to maintain.

We’re going to build one more building and when it’s full from then on we’re going to start new churches. We feel that God wants us to have a large enough church size to be able to start new churches.

I am concerned too about the kind of growth where all of a sudden people become strangers. We just get numbers. We believe God will help us maintain webs of relationships so the nets won’t get torn. There is an importance of welcoming one another in this body. I’d like for us to see one another as the Lord Jesus present in the worship service. You came in this morning and you looked around and sitting next to you was Jesus Christ. Wouldn’t that be great! The Lord says “In as much as you have done it unto the least of these my brethren you’ve done it unto me.” I’d like to see us have that attitude toward one another in all the relationships.

I guess the real vision the Lord has given me for this body is that it centers around the word “Christian.” We sought in this fellowship not to divide the body up into categories and sub departments. We have said this local church ought to strive to have the same breadth that the body of Christ has everywhere. If the body of Christ is composed of Christians and the Catholic movement and the Protestant movement, if its composed of Lutherans and Baptists and Nazarene and Assemblies of God, if we had such a wide perspective. If it’s composed of the rich and the poor. If it’s composed of the professional and the laborer. If it’s composed of the young and the

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old. Then that's what this body ought to be like. We ought to seek for that kind of breadth among us. No one ought to be excluded because of some name tag they wear in addition to the nametag "Christian." Neither ought we to let incidental doctrine separate us from having fellowship with one another. There's a difference from denominational doctrine and biblical essentials. We have said on the essentials we must stand but on those matters where Christians have for centuries have divisions of opinions we're not interested in perpetuating those divisions. We're not interested in arguing over them in this church. We're interested in loving one another as Christ has taught us to do.

I want to be careful that I not only love all the people who feel the same way I do. But even love the people who feel that tighter boundaries should be drawn. It's possible to be so wide in your view that you become intolerant of anybody who has a different view than yours. But to be open to what the Lord is doing and to seek the diversity which he seeks to build into the body. To reach out. To reach out to everyone.

I think what's true for the whole church can be true for us individually. It seems to me this is a sound way of living. To live beginning on our knees to hear what God is saying to us, to think God's thoughts after him, to come in dedication and thanksgiving before him and repentance. To pray, to kneel. Then to take time in our life to sit. Listen to what the Lord has to say and to let his word agree with us. Rather than our looking at those parts which agree with the particular thing we want to do, taking the whole counsel of God's word and letting it impact what we believe and how we behave. Then standing. To ask God to give us a stable life and a consistency in our Christian walk so that if a person comes up to us five years from now should the Lord tarry they'll find us living the same consistent Christian life and behavior that we did all of our life as Christians. And to reach out. Be loving, caring towards others in the name of the Lord because he himself is reaching out and we want to reach with him.

Lord, you have said that you would give us the desires of our heart. We desire to be these things which we have described today. Help us, Lord. We pray first for individuals in this congregation who maybe today aren't standing on very firm ground in their own life. I pray Lord, that as they come to you now in this time of communion that their own hearts would be open to your presence in their lives in a way that they've never been before. And that you will undergird each person with your strength. That you would say to our inner man "Lo, I am with you." Lord, you've come here today to help us put foundation in our life and give us a place to stand. Help us, Lord, as an entire church family to not be locked up so much in what our own visions are. But to see an entire area and region from how you must look at it. And to be willing to do anything for you. To love you and to care for you by loving and caring for your sheep that are not of this fold. Lord, as we share this time of communion may your Spirit fall upon us. We ask in your name. Amen.