

## **THE FOUR POSTURES OF THE CHURCH**

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I've called this message "The Four Postures of the Church." My text is going to be a survey then later we're going to get to the scriptures.

I've been thinking what if Jesus were to pay a personal, in the flesh visit and inquire about the state of his church. I believe that if the Lord personally, in the flesh, came to this area he would not be just concerned with how's Newport Mesa Christian Center doing? He would be concerned about every body of believers in this area that named his name and praised him. 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 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. And 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 the sects in the area. I 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 eight years has 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 and it's stayed the same since then. The Catholic community at 2450 has had the same number of seats throughout these eight years.

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

The average Sunday morning attendance was the second question. This of course makes no statement at judging the spiritual vitality of people in attendance. Whether they're 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 church doesn't have true believers. In the same way we can't guarantee that everybody in this church is a true believer. So we're 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 29 Protestant churches in this community 25 people less in church today than there was in 1972.

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Newport-Mesa Christian Center had a growth from 1972 to 76 of 300 to 600 and in 1980 about 750. Our growth in the last four years, you'll notice 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 coop.

Calvary Chapel has grown from 5500 to 7500 to 9000. Catholic parishes have gone down from 13,100 to 12,500 in 76 to 11,700 in 1980.

In 1972 the total Christian community had 26,445 in church on a given Sunday. And by the way, these are responses from pastors or church secretaries. And 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 has four 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 gets a little bit better. 78,000 – 78% not in church. Dropped one percent. But in 1980, 79% again, of the community, not in church. 108,380 people in these two towns are not in church in a given Sunday morning.

Granted there are people in Newport Beach-Costa Mesa that go outside the area to church. But also granted there are people from outside the area that come into Newport Beach and Costa Mesa on an average Sunday. It's probably a trade. We're guessing there's a trade. We have no way of 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 ten years ago to the church, I came ringing in my ears the voice of a pastor who said 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 or 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 that 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. Only one out of five people in our two towns are in church on an average Sunday morning. We've already indicated that Sunday morning attendance has grown by four persons in four years while population has grown by 7350 in these two towns. That suggests that church is actually losing ground in the area. Not even holding birthrate growth.

And by the way, I think these statistics would hold valid for Huntington Beach in terms of percentages or Fountain Valley or Mission Viejo... in fact in some communities I think the church going statistic would not be as high.

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There has been in the last eight 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 thirty Protestant churches, again excluding Calvary, eleven have decreased. Six have stayed the same. Only 13 have increased. Or more than half have either stayed the same or decreased in the last four years.

Therefore in spite of having 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 eight years in these two towns the church has not gained. Incredible!

My response and I realize that statistics never lie but liars use statistics so I try to be careful 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 as to what I should say to you today that the Lord indicated, kind of cleared my heart and gave me a 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 posture that we are to adopt in light of the need that is 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 their 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 who are few.

I want to tell you that 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 dependent 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 the disciples that they need to pray. Pray therefore. That's why I used this idea of kneel. Pray therefore the Lord of the harvest.

In a parallel passage to Matthew 9 in Luke 6:12 it 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

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to him his disciples from whom he chose twelve whom he named apostles.” When it was morning after all night of prayer, he called his disciples, from whom he chose twelve.

I have a theory, it’s not supported by anything. But it’s a theory 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 that church has not been a praying church. It began with prayer and sensing what the Lord wants and where his heartbeat is and where his priorities are.

So 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 heartbeat for this area?

I came up with a little acronym on prayer. It struck me that in helping me to pray I could use PRAY as a way, a litany, of praying.

P for praise. Begin prayer with praising the Lord for what he’s done and giving him thanks.

R for 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 for Asking. Ask whatever you will. Near and far.

Y for 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 the posture of prayer. We are to kneel.

I think a second posture the Lord wants us as a church to have is that we must Sit.

From kneeling to sitting. Matthew 5 is the beginning of the great teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. It says “When Jesus saw the multitudes he went up into the hills 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.” And 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 its fullness of teaching and we enjoy 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.

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We live in an age of spiritual fadism. Fads are prominent in the contemporary culture in which we live. And fads are prominent in the spiritual and in the charismatic climate as well. I have been in this church for 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. And now the fad of the church taking political positions. 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 the 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 that 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 and 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 are called upon to sit at the master's feet and listen to all that he has to say. Not to just one phrase and run out before he's done talking. I think 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 that I was going to amplify and all of a sudden you said, "That's such great news. I've got to tell somebody about it right now!" Wait a minute! 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 a church that has stability.

We live in a time where everything that can be shaken is being shaken. The family, personal lifestyle, personal morals, leaders in the church falling by the wayside because of immorality. We live in a terribly difficult and painful time and 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 be stable.

And 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 hurts to see people leave whom you have loved. 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 sit by may have been here ten years ago and they have just come this Sunday. That's why it's important that we grab a hold of one another and

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recognize that in this church we don't have time by and large to be great oak trees but we can be potted vines and grow a little bit more and be repotted somewhere else as God calls us.

Somehow in all of this 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 us, it will mean the same thing and more than that ten years from now. That we would like to see as God 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 God has assigned in the area. True to its doctrine.

I think a fourth posture that I desire for this church is we must reach out.

I debated here between walking and reaching out. It seemed to me "reaching out" better expressed what I wanted. Reaching out to one another. Jesus, when he calls the first four fishers in Mark 1:17 says, "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 says 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 he appears to them on the lake of Galilee and they put the net on the other side to catch a great bunch of fish numbering 153. John is so astonished by this miracle he says "and the net wasn't torn." So many fish but the net wasn't torn.

Sometimes we're afraid if God grants growth to the church that the nets will be torn. That our relationships will be torn. That doesn't need to happen at all. 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 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 is present and it's always waiting to get into a church. It's called the disease of *koinoniatis*. From the Greek work *koinonia*. 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 feel how much we love one another? If we let outsiders in this wonderful fellowship is going to be all broken up. *koinoniatis*. God delivers us from *koinoniatis*.

The church that adopts a maintenance philosophy is dead in its tracks. That just simply says "God's called us to maintain. We've filled the building. Thank the Lord. He'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 at the rate of three to five hundred people. We believe that from now on when we start a new church we need to take as many people as are in the sanctuary right now and send them out somewhere and start a new church. That's our goal and our dream.

We build a new sanctuary and fill it we're not going to say, Thank the Lord we've reached out goal. We've only just begun when that happens. We've only just begun.

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I am concerned too about the kind of growth where all of a sudden people become strangers. We just get the idea of numbers. Don't fold, mutilate, or staple. We don't want any of that kind of thing. We believe that God will help us maintain webs of relationships so the nets won't get torn.

There's 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. The Lord says "In as much as you have done it to the least of these brethren you've done it unto me." I'd like to see us have that attitude toward one another in all relationships.

I guess the real vision the Lord has given me for this body is that it centers around the word "Christian." Or "Christians." We've sought in this church fellowship not to divide the body up into categories and sub departments. We have said this local church out to strive to have the same breadth that the body of Christ has everywhere. If the body of Christ is composed of Christians and Catholic movement and the Protestant movement, composed of Lutherans and Baptists and Nazarene and Assemblies of God, if it has such a wide perspective, if it's composed of the rich and the poor, if it's composed of the professionals and the laborer, if it's composed of the young and the old, then that's what his 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 nametag 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 too that I not only love all the people who feel the same way I do. But even love the people who feel that the kind of boundaries should be drawn. It's possible to be liberally liberal. So wide in your view that you become intolerant of anybody who has a different view than you. But to be open to what the Lord is doing and seek the diversity of which he seeks to build in the body. To reach out. Reach out to everyone.

Four years ago my boy who was then seven years of age, put it all together for me. Trying to explain to George what I was going to preach about the coming Sunday. How we wanted the church to have breadth and we didn't want to divide people up whether they were post tribulation or pre tribulation. We wanted people to feel welcome no matter where they stood on it. We didn't want to get divided up over eternal security or non-eternal security or denominational distinctive. We realize that for centuries in some areas there have been tensions in the church over these matters that are doubtful. In Newport Christian Center we're not going to solve that tension. But we're going to recognize it is there and be charitable toward one another. I was trying to explain what the Lord was doing. People were coming to the church fellowship from many different backgrounds. We're thankful to the Lord for that. He seemed to get with what I was saying. He said, "Dad, I know! We'll call the balcony the KG balcony." That hit you just like it hit me. KG balcony? What's that? He said, "It's for all the Catholics and Jews so they'll feel right at home." The K of course for Catholic and the G for Jews.

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We want to make this whole church a KG church. We're reaching out to people and loving people and caring for them in the Lord's name.

I think that 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 set. To listen to what the Lord has to say and to let his word agree with us. Rather than our looking to 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 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 as we did all our life as Christians. And to reach out in loving and caring toward 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 aren't standing on very firm ground in their own life. I pray, Lord, 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 they've never been before. And that you would undergird each person with your strength. That you would say into 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 how you must look at it. And to be willing, Lord, 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.