

Waking the Sleeping Giant - 14

Wake up and Worship!

John Bisagno told the story of being a Pastoral candidate for the First Baptist Church in Houston. Back then it was a small Church, located downtown. He said that when he walked in there were few people in a dimly lit sanctuary. The service was very depressing. They were singing songs that were like funeral dirges. Later that day he was walking around the downtown area and saw a jewellery store having a grand opening. He went in and it was bright and cheerful inside. There was upbeat and happy music playing. There were friendly and enthusiastic people who greeted him. They offered him some fruit punch to drink and showed him around the store. He remarked that if they had given an invitation, he would have joined the jewellery store, not the Church.

Have you ever wondered why so many Church services became so morbid at some point in our history? At what point in our history did we decide that when we come into a Church building, we need to act in some religiously solemn way? Church, for many, became more like a memorial service than a celebration. But it isn't a memorial service for the dead. Jesus did die, but He didn't stay dead! So, a Church service should never be like a funeral. Someone suggested that it's a memorial service, not for the dead, but by the dead! Perhaps that explains it. Thankfully this has changed in many Churches over the past decade or two, but it is still a reality in many places.

I think the primary reason most Churches do what they do is because they have always done it that way. Most of us were brought up in Churches that followed the traditions handed down by other Churches, who followed the traditions handed down to them. Tradition has a great deal to do with why we do what we do.

We are all creatures of habit. We've become accustomed to doing things the same way. All you have to do is think about your own personal ritual for getting up in the morning. Most people go through the same routine every morning when they get up. Some switch the alarm clock off and lie there for just a few moments. Others sit on the side of the bed for a minute or two. Still others immediately spring forth to greet the new day. I'll bet you put your socks on the same way every morning. I'll bet that you put the same shoe on first every day. We all get into our routines. There's nothing wrong with that - it simplifies life somewhat and it makes us feel more comfortable.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with tradition. Some traditions are important. They can be valuable in communicating to us truth about God and truth about ourselves. One of my favourite musicals has been *'Fiddler on the Roof.'* I particularly like the opening scene when Tevye sings the theme song, *'Tradition.'* As he does, he explains to the audience the value of tradition as he sees it. He says, "*Our tradition tells us who God is and who we are.*" When tradition can do that, it is profoundly good.

Unfortunately, there are traditions which are not necessarily Biblical traditions that permeate many Churches today and tragically are thought of as essential. In fact, some things become almost holy and unchangeable. When those things are changed, people become very upset. It is as if we have wilfully flaunted a commandment of the Lord when we tamper with these things. I have known people to be upset over where the piano is placed, where the preacher stands, even how the offering is collected. It is amazing the baggage we can build up in the Church, and it doesn't take long to do it.

Our challenge today, as in any other day, is to be faithful to the Scripture. We Baptists have been called *'People of the Book'* because of our stubborn determination not to have any other rule than the Bible to live by. Yet many times we are guilty of having tradition inform how we 'do Church' more than the Bible. Think about this. If we did not have any previous tradition, no denominations, or anyone to tell us how to do things; if all we had was the Bible, how would we do Church? I know that we would do things differently. But that is the point! We should be doing things because we have been informed by the Bible rather than by traditions, however well-intentioned they may have been. In the early Church we have a wonderful example of the way they came together as a Church.

Acts 2:46-47a *"Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people."*

Notice the emphasis here on gladness and on praising God. Here is a joyously worshipping Church. The mark of a great Church is that it is a joyful Church. It is a Church which is characterised by praise. It is a worshipping Church. Here are Christians who are gathering together for worship every day. But it wasn't drudgery. It wasn't ritualistic. They were coming together because they had experienced the joy of knowing Jesus Christ. These believers were excited about their relationship with God. Their services and their lives were characterised by praise to God. When people entered into their midst, they knew these people were excited and alive. No sour-faced Christianity to be seen. Here were people who had come to know the joy of Jesus and that peace which passes all understanding.

It really does make a great difference when you come to a service in which people are excited, in which people are praising the Lord, where there is a real celebration of Christ's victory over sin and of His love for us. In the hymn we had at our wedding there is great line which says, *"Let the Amen sound from His people again."* When you are excited, it shows.

We really do have something to be excited about. We serve a Saviour Who loves us; a God Who has forgiven us; a Lord Who provides for our true needs; a Spirit Who empowers us. When you think of all that God has done for you, how can you not be excited? The only way I know not to be excited is either not to know Him, or to have drifted away from Him. And today, before you lie down to sleep tonight you can make sure that neither one of those situations is yours. If you don't know Him, you can come to know Him today. And if you've drifted away from Him, you can return to Him today.

Those of us who know Jesus, ought to be an example of enthusiasm in the Church. Some of you may know that the etymology of the word *enthusiasm* traces back to the Greek word *entheos*, which is a compound of *en* (meaning *in*) and *theos* (meaning *God*). So, true enthusiasm means that we are truly in God and God is in us. Enthusiasm is how someone filled with the presence of God acts.

To be filled with God is to be filled with life, to be filled with love, to be filled with joy, to be filled with hope, to be filled with faith, to be filled with peace, to be filled with power. How would that make anyone feel and act? Well, they certainly would not act like they were in mourning, would they? No! They would demonstrate and manifest the life that was in them.

This was true of the early Church when they came together. Notice, it says that they had glad and sincere hearts, and that they were praising God. They were involved in joyous worship. So should our worship be. Of course, the worship of these early Christians was nothing new to them. They did not invent something new.

They were informed by another Biblical tradition, from what we call the Old Testament. It was the only Scriptures they had. Jewish worship was a celebration. They would sing, lift their hands, clap their hands, and even dance! This, of course has a great precedent in the Old Testament Scriptures. Here are just a few of the many examples:

Psalm 33:1-3 *“Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him. Praise the LORD with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre. Sing to him a new song; play skilfully, and shout for joy.”*

Psalm 47:1 *“Clap your hands, all you nations; shout to God with cries of joy.”*

Psalm 66:1-2 *“Shout with joy to God, all the earth! Sing the glory of his name; make his praise glorious!”*

Psalm 71:23 *“My lips will shout for joy when I sing praise to you - I, whom you have redeemed.”*

Psalm 95:1-2 *“Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.”*

Psalm 98:4-6 *“Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; make music to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing, with trumpets and the blast of the ram’s horn - shout for joy before the LORD, the King.”*

Psalm 100 *“Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.”*

Psalm 149:3 *“Let them praise his name with dancing and make music to him with tambourine and harp.”*

Psalm 150 *“Praise the Lord! Praise God in His sanctuary; Praise Him in His mighty expanse. Praise Him for His mighty deeds; Praise Him according to His excellent greatness. Praise Him with trumpet sound; Praise Him with harp and lyre. Praise Him with timbrel and dancing; Praise Him with stringed instruments and pipe. Praise Him with loud cymbals; Praise Him with resounding cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord!”*

There is no way you can read the Psalms without being gripped by the celebratory aspect of worship. God is a God who deserves our praise - with our whole heart, mind, soul, and emotions.

It has always struck me as funny how many people change when they come to Church services. In Church they are all solemn and serious. But if you see these same people in a family dinner, an office party, birthday party or football match, they suddenly become excited and enthusiastic, and in the case of the footy match, some become raving lunatics. We are emotional people and emotions are good. In Church, we should be free to be enthusiastic in our praise to God. We certainly should be joyful and happy. There is much to be excited about. Our text also says that they not only were involved in a joyously celebratory worship, but that they were enjoying the favour of all the people. People were impressed with this early band of joyful, loving, giving, united disciples.

The world still needs to see that we are excited about Jesus. So often the image that is portrayed is of a group of people having no fun and seeking to keep anyone else from having any fun either. But that is not Christianity – that is religion – and God hates religion!

What the Church needs is a fresh revelation of the greatness of God and of the sheer number of things that our God has done for His people. Too often we walk around totally unaware of even a fraction of the blessings He has poured out upon us. If we could somehow catch a glimpse of just a small portion of the multitude of ways we have already been blessed by God, it would blow us away. We are the most blessed of all people. Think about it. Pray about it. Ask God to show you how He has blessed you. Ask Him to reveal to you the things for which you should be thankful every day. Ask Him to give you a glimpse of His glory and a glimpse of His love for you. Such a revelation will change the way you worship. Such a revelation will change the way you live!

I love how those in heaven praising the Lord are portrayed in the book of Revelation. Throughout the book of Revelation, we catch glimpses of heavenly worship. The people are in the actual presence of the living God. John's vision transports us into heaven where we see that a chief activity is praise.

Revelation 5:11-12 *"Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang: 'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!'"*

When you think of how we will be able to praise God when we leave this earthly kingdom and embrace the fullness of the kingdom of heaven, it is exciting. But what is even more exciting is the fact that we get to start right now! When the sleeping giant awakens, brace yourself for a wild ride as our worship explodes with life and power and joy – as the reality and power of the kingdom of heaven explodes among us and within us.

Bring it on, Lord!