

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

PETER J. VIBERT, PASTOR

JULY 22, 2007



Matthew 16:13-20 "The Church – Where Is It Going?"

Today's question in the "Ask the Pastor" series is: "Why do I hear "this is the end of the Church age"? What does that mean?"

I thought at first this was a general reference to the declining influence of the Church in Western culture, until I "Googled" the phrase "end of the church age" and found it has a very specific meaning. In the past five years or so, Harold Camping, the founder and president of *Family Radio* who broadcasts on 150 radio stations, has been proclaiming that "the church age is over," and that "true believers should leave the churches." In his vision of the times, the "Great Tribulation" has begun – perhaps in 1994, when he predicted Christ would return – and now *all* local congregations and churches are under the control of Satan; the Holy Spirit has left, and the work of God is now going on *only outside* the churches.

Even among Camping's devoted followers, this has created major confusion; it seems that a few people have left churches, but the stronger reaction is that this time he has gone way too far! Camping counters this, saying that biblical prophecy makes clear that churches will become more and more apostate in "the end times," and that by the end, "local churches will only have unsaved people as members." True believers are part of the invisible "eternal church" whose

members are known only to Christ, and "since the Great Tribulation began, the eternal church no longer has *any* identification with the local church."

What should we say to such things? Biblically, we reply that the Church is the creation of Jesus Christ, that the "gates of Hades will not prevail against it," that the Church is "the body of Christ" in the world today, that the Church is "the bride of Christ" who will one day be presented to him "spotless and without fault." We do not need to fear that the Holy Spirit who has been sent to be "within us" and "among us" will ever leave those who are "in Christ."

1) *The Invisible Church in the World*

But of course Camping has touched on issues that the Church has long wrestled with. That the Church is a "mixed bag" is an idea that goes back at least to Augustine, who emphasized that Jesus' parable of "the wheat and the weeds" (which will grow together and cannot be separated until the final harvest) applied to the Church. (Augustine in the early 400s was struggling with the issue of whether church leaders had to be free of known past or present sins to be leaders – his answer was no). In the 1500s, John Calvin emphasized the existence of the "invisible church," which was not to be identified with any particular

church or group – he was of course thinking of the claims of the Roman Catholic Church to be “the only true church,” an issue that is still alive today, as you may have read recently. But Calvin also gave simple tests to see if a particular church was a “true church”, and he was sure God had not removed his Spirit from the churches.

At issue from the beginning has been that the Church of Jesus Christ is embedded in culture, or more accurately in many different cultures as the Gospel has spread around world. How is the Church to function in relation to those cultures; what aspects of each culture can it accommodate, what must it reject? How may and must the Church change over time as cultures change, and how may it not change if it is to remain faithful to the Gospel?

The early New Testament church was multi-ethnic and multi-cultural, and through the 1st C. remained fluid, communal, and led by “charismatic” people on whom the Holy Spirit was judged to have placed gifts of teaching, leadership, caring. Over the following centuries, it became more institutionalized; bishops taking on more power over larger areas, and hierarchies and approved ordinations becoming important. The Church was becoming a culture of its own in the midst of declining Greco-Roman culture. When the Roman Emperor Constantine embraced Christianity, and in his Edict of Milan in 313 AD made religious toleration the law of the empire, Christianity entered a new era.

From the year 800, when Charlemagne was crowned Emperor of the “Holy Roman Empire,” through until the 1800s, central Europe was the heart of what came to be called “Christendom,” where the Emperor and the Pope together ruled the religious, social and political life of millions of citizen-believers. There were plenty of theological developments in that period, but the sense that the Church was the over-arching influence on culture was never in question. But from the early 1500s when the Protestant Reformation began, through the

Enlightenment years of the 1800s, that consensus was shattered.

Luther’s church reforms, and his translation of the Bible into German that “every plowman could read” - likewise Wycliffe and Tyndale in England - meant that the power of the clergy over people’s beliefs and everyday lives changed dramatically. Protestantism also forever changed the relationship between church and state; and by the time of the French Revolution in 1789, “anti-clericalism” was a major force that caused France in the early 1800s to be the first Western nation to adopt a fully “secular” constitution. The political power of the Church lingered but slowly dwindled in states with “established churches” like the Scandinavian and German Lutherans, the English Episcopalians, the Scottish Presbyterians.

A new wave of Christianity emerged in the American colonies, where English “Non-Conformists,” “Dissenters,” “Separatists,” “Puritans” and “Pilgrims” established a new “democratic” form of church life. (Of course a few Episcopalians settled in Virginia, but their influence on American culture was much smaller). The “Great Awakenings” that historians notice in American history since the 1600s were centered in the old Congregational and Presbyterian churches of the East coast, and later among the Methodists and Baptists as they took the Gospel to the new Western frontier states. In all this, the church grew visibly and invisibly; never perfect, always changing, but more vital and more numerous in North America than anywhere else on earth for over 300 years.

2) *The Church in Modern Times*

But then came the 20th C., where everything changed again, and very much faster. At the start of the 21st C., we now live in what author Thomas Friedman has called a “*Flat World*.” That means not the disappearance of hierarchy, but the flattening of distances geographically and culturally by the *communications* we have developed in the past 40 years. Telephone, television, film, cable TV, cell phones, the Internet, have

made the world a much smaller place. Distance matters less and less; cultures intermingle constantly. Major American corporations now have manufacturing plants in Asia, and customer service offices in India and Pakistan. Jihadists can now recruit worldwide over the Internet.

Now everyone is tuned into some network all the time. So people come to church on Sunday having listened all week to Harold Camping or James Dobson, Pat Robertson, and Charles Stanley, David Jeremiah and Joel Osteen early on Sunday. They get their Bible teachings from Joyce Meyer and Beth Moore. In a very real way, *the "church age" is ending*, and Christianity is being de-centralized, becoming – as computer scientists would say – a “distributed network.” It is not just the Pope who can't get anyone's attention any more; it's the church pastor or the local Bible study leader. The Church has not only lost its political influence – for good or ill – but is also increasingly losing its structural, hierarchical, denominational, and even congregational authority and influence. N. American Christianity is ever more personal, private, eclectic – “I choose the parts that suit me.”

The communications explosion is only one of the huge cultural changes that surround and penetrate the life of the Church. *Visual imagery* now dominates most people's lives, especially our children's, so that the “word-oriented” culture of the Church seems less and less relevant. Many churches have changed their worship and their teaching methods to accommodate people's preferences for visual interact with information.

And in this “flat,” networked and visual world, the *Gospel has gone worldwide* in a way that 19th C. missionaries would not believe. The fastest growing churches are now in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and South-East Asia (and we do not even know with any certainty how fast Christianity is spreading in China). Most Christians now live south of the Equator, and they are more theologically conservative, more interested in political and social liberation, more familiar with spiritual

battles against evil spirits, more desirous of “health and wealth” than the old churches of Europe and N. America. It is African bishops who are now giving their more liberal British and American Episcopalian brothers and sisters a hard time over the life and practice of the Anglican Church!

And the greatest growth of world Christianity is among *Pentecostal* groups. In Latin America, the Roman Catholic Church has seen millions convert to Pentecostalism; there are millions more Pentecostals in Africa, and in Korea, even though the predominant flavors of faith there are still Episcopalian and Presbyterian. And American Christianity has become more and more Pentecostal in the past 100 years. Since the Azusa Street revivals in Los Angeles that began the modern American Pentecostal movement in 1908, no churches have grown faster than the Assemblies of God and the Church of God in Christ.

And the effects of Pentecostalism have been felt everywhere. Our hymnals have compositions by Four-Square Gospel pastor Jack Hayford; we have all adopted the singing of simple, repetitive devotional Christian music we call “praise songs.” Mainline, Evangelical and Fundamentalist churches all now routinely conduct surveys of their people's “spiritual gifts.” The “Charismatic Renewal” movement that entered many Catholic, Episcopalian and Methodist churches in the 1970s has left us with leaders like “charismatic” Anglican Nicky Gumbel to re-introduce basic Christianity with a Pentecostal emphasis to thousands of churches through his *Alpha Course* (which is a long way, I can tell you, from the Reformed Evangelical Anglicanism I was shaped by 40 years ago through people like John Stott and J.I. Packer – represented today by scholars like Alister McGrath and N.T. Wright).

The Church is changing fast; faster than many of us can keep up with or are comfortable with! Apart from Pentecostalism, the other great change we have lived through in one generation has been the *dissolving of denominational barriers* and theological

distinctives. Nobody much cares any more whether a particular church is Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational; even Catholic and Protestant roots are no longer hallowed by generations of family tradition as they were only 50 years ago. In some ways that is all to the good – we were too divided over things that were too small. The growing threat of secularism and unbelief, and even of Islam, has made many Christians happy to celebrate the beliefs and practices that we all hold in common, rather than emphasize our differences.

The downside of this, of course, is also clear. Lack of common traditions means any congregation now includes a very wide spectrum of views on how to “do church.” Disagreements over which doctrines or practices are essential, and which are not, can become problematic. The loss of denominational identity and the growing independence and autonomy of local churches means that any given congregation can wander off in any number of directions over time.

My own sense is that there is one major benefit to this mingling and diversity: that we are slowly moving back to where congregations are *community-based* and not denominationally-based (more like a *parish*, in fact). People no longer want to drive 30 miles to a church whose theology and practice “they agree with,” but would rather be part of a congregation of people drawn from their own community. In a day when other forms of “community” are becoming rarer, I think that is a good thing, and a rediscovery of a part of Christianity that has always been vital but too often forgotten.

But these “good things” have to be balanced against the discomfort that many people feel: that their church is “not the way it used to be.” That is true, and it never will be again – and as we get older, that becomes harder for some of us to deal with! The boundary lines have been moved; in some cases, they have been erased, and all in a generation. It used to be very clear to everyone what it meant to be Catholic, or not; what it meant to be a

Lutheran, or a Presbyterian. Today you may still know who you are if you are a Baptist.

But if you are a Congregationalist, it varies from one congregation to the next; one decade to the next. Many other streams of Christian tradition have diluted the old-time strict Calvinism on which churches like these were founded, whether we approve of that or not. But in all this, I have no doubt that God is doing something that needs to be done, that his Spirit is still evidently at work in the churches (despite what Harold Camping thinks) – and that Christ is still preparing for himself a spotless and beautiful bride that is his church – tho’ her appearance may turn out to be quite different from the visions of female beauty that we grew up with!

Let us pray...