

Sermon: "Unfinished Business"

Text: Revelation 3:1-6.

Sermon Outline.

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Introduction ~ **Sometimes, to move ahead, or to finally get something right, you have to question what everyone just knows and assumes to be true.**

For example, Dr. Paul Ridker, a cardiologist, challenged the accepted dogma of the heart specialists about which patients are at risk for heart attacks. In recent years, the consensus among heart specialists was that the best predictor of heart attack was the presence of high cholesterol in a patient's blood. ***But Ridker discovered that about half of all heart attacks occur in people with normal cholesterol levels.***

Ridker began reviewing reports and other materials to find the real culprit. His research indicated that inflammation of the arteries might be responsible. So he began a large-scale study to gather the data to test his theory. All the physicians thought that the kind of low-level inflammation he desired to track could not be detected. "There were a lot of nay-sayers," says Ridker.

That did not stop him from checking things out. Ridker discovered that a substance called C-reactive protein (CRP) is present in the blood of those at high risk of heart attack. Tracking that substance is as reliable and as inexpensive as checking cholesterol. **In fact, it's a better, more accurate predictor than bad cholesterol (LDL). Ridker discovered all that because he decided to question conventional wisdom, what everyone knew to be the way it is in cardiology.**

For these next few minutes, I invite you to suspend what you know to be true about "the American cultural way of doing church." Put it all on hold for just ten minutes.

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What we're going to do together is compare and contrast three different ways of doing church.

Consider with me what God did in the first three centuries: the Early Church.

1. On the Day of Pentecost, there were **one hundred twenty (120) persons** in that Upper Room.
2. In AD 100, there were as few as **25,000 Christians** scattered throughout the Roman empire.
3. But in AD 310, there were up to **20,000,000 believers**.
From 25,000 to 20,000,000 in just two hundred years...

How did they do that? How did they grow from being a small people movement to the most significant religious force in the Roman empire... and along the way overturn the dominant cultural consensus?

- **They were an illegal religion** throughout that time-frame...
- **They didn't have any church buildings** as we know them until the 250's AD.
- **They didn't even have the Scriptures** as we know them for much of that period. The canon of Scripture was still being recognized and put together.
- **They did not have seeker-sensitive worship services**, youth groups, worship bands, seminaries or any para-church organizations for evangelism.
- **And they actually made it hard to join a church.** By the end of the second century, the process of being baptized and joining could take more than a year-and-a-half!

O.K. Now consider the house churches in China today. When Mao Tse-tung seized power in China in 1948-49, he instigated a systematic purge of all religion in China, and especially the Christian faith.

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1. **Back then, the church in China was modeled on Western church methods.** The church in China was guesstimated at **about 2 million followers.**
2. As the systematic persecution was implemented in all the provinces – except Taiwan,
 - ❖ **Mao kicked out all western missionaries,**
 - ❖ nationalized all church property,
 - ❖ burned all the Bibles he could find,
 - ❖ killed all senior leaders,
 - ❖ sent the other leaders off the slave labor camps,
 - ❖ and banned all public meetings.
 - ❖ Then, after all that, came the so-called Cultural Revolution, one of the most vicious persecutions ever seen.

What happened? What happened through all that?

3. **When Mao was gone in the late seventies, the church had grown to at least 60 million believers. From 2 million to 60 million believers in less than 30 years!**
4. **Today, by some estimates, the Chinese house churches have grown to 100 million believers... or more...**

And remember this: The Chinese believers have done this...

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- **without American missionaries,**
- **without American church methods,**
- **without western church growth techniques,**
- **without seminary-trained leadership, and**
- **without any American money.**

Apparently, God the Holy Spirit does not need to use any of that...

And like the Early Churches, the Chinese churches did all that without having any Bibles. At times, they could share only one page of a Bible between several house churches...

The churches in China are growing faster than anything anyone has seen in human history. It's as simple and as astonishing as that.

So, you tell me, the churches in America – How are we doing, really? ... Here's the part about questioning what everyone just knows and assumes to be true.

Alan Hirsch is the founding director of **Forge Mission Training Network**. He planted a series of churches in **Australia**. He's crunched the numbers on church growth there and here in North America. Hirsch writes this:

"Statistics right across the Western world... indicate that the *vast majority* of the church's growth comes from "switchers" – people who move from one church to another based on the perception and experience of the programming. There is precious little **conversion growth**... In fact, the church is on the decline right across the Western world, and we have had at least forty years of church-growth principles and practice." Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, p. 45.

Alan Hirsch and his team had the same experience trajectory as Bill Hybels and his staff at Willowcreek Church, that mega-church in the Chicago suburbs.

Like Hybels, Hirsch and his church-staffers also discovered that their adherents fell way short on almost

every meaningful measure of discipleship and Christian maturity.

Alan Hirsch asserts that the 'mega-church approach' he himself once pursued siphons believers out of other churches while making few new converts and few disciples. A few churches grow... at the expense of other churches... without reaching the unchurched population. Does that sound at all like Pittsburgh?

Hirsch indicts something he terms, 'consumerism Christianity.' I'm quoting again: "We can't seem to make disciples (based) on a consumerist approach to the faith. We plainly *cannot consume our way into discipleship*. All of us must become much more active in the equation of becoming lifelong followers of Jesus. *Consumption is detrimental to discipleship.*" Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, p. 45.

What is 'consumerist Christianity,' the consumer approach to doing church? The real core values, "doing church" here in America, – the identifying characteristics sound familiar... Here they are:

1. **Convenience** – ministry as something designed for quick and easy access at the consumer's (church-go-er's) prerogative.
2. **Comfort** – not just comfortable personal surroundings, but emotional comfort as well.
3. **Choices** – multiple offerings and program options across the whole span of possible human situations and lifestyles.
4. **Minimal cost** – actually, minimal cost to the consumer church-go-er while maximizing the take-home benefits to self and family.
5. **Numbers and size** – to maximize the budget for program options and choices.
6. **Minimal participation time** – only a one hour-and-a-half time slot per week, max. Two time slots for those 18 years of age and younger...

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7. **And a minimal demand, requirement or expectation for any kind of personal change.** You can participate without changing anything in your personal life – ever. 'Do that, use that approach,' we are all told, 'and your growth and success is guaranteed.'

Well, what conclusion would you draw from these three different ways of "doing church?"

...Before you answer that question, remember that God is growing the churches in China with the exact opposite of the 'consumerist approach' to "doing church."

And as far as anyone can tell, while there are mega-churches in South Korea, there is not a single mega-church in China today. And yet, in terms of growth, *they are the cutting edge of the global cause of Christ.*

Isn't it time we learn from them? Isn't it time we learn from what God is doing through them?

Based on what God has done and what God is doing, I am challenging you to suspend your assuming, your support for, your belief in, what you know to be true about "the American way of doing church," that "consumerist approach" I described moments ago.

You see, I'm now convinced the church in the West, including the American church, most closely resembles the Church in Sardis. I'm convinced, the Lord Jesus would say to the American churches as a whole:

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"You have the reputation of being alive; but, in fact, you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die!"

Alan Hirsch offers still another provocative insight: **What if the house churches in China have rediscovered, recaptured and implemented the original, apostolic pattern, what Hirsch terms, "the Apostolic Genius?"** What if the churches in China have been forced to recover something like God's original plan for reaching people and planting churches by making radical disciples, believers with a white hot passion to reproduce their passion for Christ in other people?

? Our text in the Book of Revelation is a stunner when you look at it closely. The risen Jesus addresses the Church is Sardis and declares bluntly: "You all need to be raised from the dead." That's the core of verses one and two.

Does the Church in Sardis resemble the church in America?

The believers there in Sardis are **untroubled by heresy and false teachers**. The risen Jesus identifies **no sexual immorality within** that congregation, as He does with other churches... The Church is Sardis is **free from the distress of persecution**... and so are we, but for how long?

And yet, that church, like the American churches, has completely come to terms with its pagan environment. They have capitulated to a live-and-let-live toleration of a filth-ridden paganism. Sardis, the city of, is highly affluent, and has been for a couple of centuries. **The church there has become completely innocuous and inoffensive.** You could not tell the difference between believers and the surrounding pagan environment. Nominal Christians, Christians in name

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only, they made no impact on their city and region. Despite appearances, the Church in Sardis is spiritually dead.

Through the mouth of John, the risen Jesus declares, "You need to be raised from the dead. There is only one way for that to happen. You all as a group need to repent and come back to Me."

Friend, we've only just begun to unpack this marvelous text. We're going to continue on with this sermon next Sunday.

I believe the churches in China demonstrate the outcomes of a costly, not a convenient or consumerist, discipleship to Jesus. That costly discipleship is what the risen Jesus calls the believers in Sardis back to. That kind of costly discipleship raises a church from the dead. More on this next Sunday...

Conclusion ~ **Consider what it takes successfully to grow a Chinese bamboo tree.** This unique tree demands patience from its grower because all it visibly develops in the first four years is a little bulb and a small shoot. Although you've planted a tree, it appears you are growing nothing more than a big weed.

Nonetheless, a mighty tree is taking shape because those first four years are devoted to the development of a massive root system. Then, in the fifth year, the Chinese bamboo tree uses that incredible root system to launch as much as eighty feet of new growth in just one year.

Growth that can be seen and measured often does not occur until there is a strong enough root system upon which it can be built.

Friend, for you to become that dynamic disciple Jesus always intended you to become,

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**you need to sink a massive root system deeply
into Christ.**