

GOD'S ADVENTUROUS FUTURE

- I. The year was 1983, I was in Amsterdam, Holland attending the Billy Graham sponsored Conference for Itinerant Evangelists. On Sunday morning, Mennonite leaders, Myron & Esther Augsburgers accompanied me to the Singelt Mennonite Church in Amsterdam for worship. This Mennonite church building dated from the 1600s.

-on this particular Sunday a small...a very small...a handful of worshippers, about 30, I think, were gathered together...dwarfed by the size of the sanctuary which seats hundreds with two tiers of balconies. The congregation had dwindled to a small group of believers which is typical of most all the churches in the Netherlands and throughout Europe.
- II. After lunch we attended an organ recital in the Nieuwkerk, an even more imposing church structure with its gothic architecture and awesome spire towering above the neighboring buildings which for centuries stood as a testimony of the Reformed faith in Holland.

-but as inspiring and awesome as that church building appeared... there was no life within its walls. It is no longer an edifice for a worshipping congregation...it has become a museum run by the state.

-as we looked at this historic structure, we saw evidence of a once glorious past. I thought of the spiritual vitality that this structure once represented. As we took our chairs for this organ recital in the sanctuary we looked at the stone floor beneath us.

-Esther Augsburgers turned to me and noted that important church leaders of the past were buried under the floor of the sanctuary with slabs of stone marking the spots with names and dates affixed. She said: "Do you realize we are sitting over the bones of some dead patriarch of the church."
- III. Then it hit me...the only thing this beautiful, once thriving church building contained were memories and dead men's bones. This church building was simply a shrine and not the meeting place of a vibrant, flourishing, alive church. The only thing that had breath at Nieuwkerk...was the pipe organ.

And in that moment I saw a glimpse of Ezekiel's vision: "The Spirit of the Lord set me down in the middle of the valley; and it was full of bones."
- IV. One does not need to travel to Amsterdam to find oneself in a valley of dry bones. In my previous denominational position I touched base with many congregations across North America and interacted with many leaders in those churches, and what I found all too often were churches treading in tradition rather than marshalling in mission. They were mired in the memories of a once glorious past rather than focused on God's adventurous future!
- V. Let me be quick to say: praise God for our heritage and for saints of the past who laid a solid foundation for the faith. Praise God that the Mechanic Grove Church has been surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. But we cannot dwell in the past. We cannot rest on our laurels nor enshrine the past. The writer of Hebrews challenges us with these words: "Let us run with perseverance the race that is set BEFORE us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

VI. Unfortunately, I have seen all too many churches who have dropped out of the race toward Jesus entirely or other churches that are not running the race set before them, content instead to merely run-in-place. Some are only focused on the starting line. They are not yet dormant or dead. In fact, there may be a lot of activity going on. They may be expending a lot of energy only to find themselves not getting anywhere in terms of advancing the Kingdom of God.

-some congregations are little more than glorified social clubs or service organizations. Fellowship and service are integral parts of church life but often there is something missing. Some have lost sight of God's adventurous future and have thrown in the towel in discouragement and despair.

-one Presbyterian pastor recently told me that his congregation is all older people. He said: 'I am 65 years-old and I am the youngest member of the congregation.' Praise God that Mechanic Grove has a strong group of young families, children and youth. I would say we are an active church.

VII. But let's be sure in all our activity in church life that Jesus Christ is not missing as our central focus in all that we do. Church growth leader Lyle Schaller said: "Churches need to emphasize the main thing: Jesus Christ." I agree. The church is more than a Rotary Club or Lion's Club or Country Club. The church is the body of Christ and Christ needs to be at the center in all of our church life. Yes, all too many churches are not running the race set before them; they are just running in place.

-I certainly do not believe that is the case with the Mechanic Grove Church of the Brethren but churches can so easily fall into funk...forget their primary purpose and lose their passion...and forsake their first love; content to merely run-in-place rather than run the race with Jesus and toward Jesus. We need to be vigilant and on our guard that we not become a valley of dry bones. I have seen all too many churches where the leadership is lethargic... people are pessimistic... laity are lukewarm and saints have become cynics...they have lost sight of God's adventurous future.

-I recently worked with a church that had a lot of good things going for it but I found out they had not had one baptism in over three years...not one new convert...not one new disciple...not one new person to their fellowship in three years and it did not seem to matter to them. They were content.

VIII. As a matter of fact, several years ago the statistical report of the Church of the Brethren showed 1,100 churches with over 400 of those 1,100 churches reporting that they did not receive one new member during that calendar year.

-the words of the prophet Amos can certainly ring true in our day for the people of God. Amos said to the people of Israel: "Woe to the complacent in Zion!"

-friends I think complacency is one of the principle problems for churches today. How easy to fall into apathy and accept mediocrity and run-in-place without a vision rather than running the race toward the goal. Theologian Jacques Ellul said one time: "Mediocrity is the besetting sin of Christians."

-my prayer for the church...my plea for the Mechanic Grove Church of the Brethren is that of Psalm 85 "Restore us again, O God of our salvation. Will you not revive us again so that your people may rejoice in you?"

-my prayer is that that we might grow: spiritually...numerically... missionally ...relationally and claim that we want to be part of God's adventurous future for our church!

- IX. The Bible is clear in saying "Where there is no vision the people perish!" Likewise, where there is no spiritual passion the people will perish! Christ has called us to be fishers of men and women but too often I fear churches are content to be keepers of aquariums...more comfortable with the constant, rather than risking revitalization...enjoying a holy huddle rather than seeking the stranger...satisfied with the status quo...embracing the seven last words of the church: "We never did it that way before."

The story is told of a church building that caught fire one night. The fire chief, who was an inactive member of the church, was the first one on the scene. The pastor spotted him and just couldn't resist saying..."This is the first time I have seen you at church." To which the fire chief responded promptly "This is the first time I have seen your church on fire."

-we need to be prepared to run the race the Lord has set before us and how do we do it? The writer of Hebrews says: "by laying aside every weight and sin."

-might there be something weighing us down as a congregation? Is there something weighing you down as a Christian? Some hurt? Some critical comment? Some brokenness in your life? Have you lost your passion for the Lord? Have you been negligent in fulfilling the vows YOU made at your baptism to be loyal to the church, upholding the church with your prayers, your presence, your substance and your service...loyal to the church despite its shortcomings...loyal to the church despite its faults and failures...loyal despite its disappointments.

- X. God is calling us to run the race and not be content to just run-in-place. You can expend a lot of energy training and running-in-place but it will not get you anywhere. In a recently published book entitled *The Pietist Option: Hope for the Renewal of Christianity*, author Chris Gehrz says this:

"Precisely because we're so eager to have the best possible programming, scheduling, curriculum, volunteer training, and so on, it's possible that any or all of those good things can easily divert our attention from Jesus himself."

- XI. As a church we need to run the race and be sure that we are not just being busy by running in place but truly running toward the finish line which is accomplished by looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Our race may be a different course than our forbearers ran but the goal is still the same...looking to Jesus...and following in His footsteps.

-in 1762 Charles Wesley wrote the hymn: "A Charge to Keep" with these words: "To serve the present age, my calling to fulfill, oh, may it all my powers engage, to do my master's will."

-we are in an age vastly different from our forbearers of even a generation ago. Frankly, I find it a little scary...almost like being part of a different land and culture, maybe even a different planet!

- XII. Years ago, Fanny Grove, a long-time member of the Spring Creek church said to me: “I feel like I have not left the Church of the Brethren but the Church of the Brethren has left me.” The church she knew of years past changed and will continue to change. Let’s be honest...not all change is good...not every change draws us closer to Christ and to a deeper commitment to Him.

-God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, but the church will and must change with the times to be relevant to the culture in which we live without compromising the Gospel message....like it or not.

We are moving away from generations shaped by Guttenburg to a new generation formed by Google. There is new technology that we will need to employ to reach this new generation. There are even new definitions for words, like Word. John’s Gospel says: “In the beginning was the Word.” Today ‘word’ is associated with computer software. Icons were those religious paintings of saints that inspired the orthodox churches. Today different types of icons appear on smart phones and computer screens.

-there may be a new language emerging, but it is still the same God...who was, and is and ever will be...unchanging in His love and plan for His church and for humankind. This pandemic period may indeed force us to reevaluate and change our way of doing church and being the church in this new reality.

- XIII. Annual Conference Moderator, Paul Mundy, had this to say: “Frankly, we live in one of the most complex, jarring eras in modern ecclesiastical history. Numerous issues not only rumble among us, they tear at us, threatening the very fabric of our denominational being. As we acknowledge such reality, it’s hard to be optimistic. But it’s wise to be expectant- even hope-full – for God moves among us, calling us beyond our bewilderment and discord. Scripture bears testimony to God’s audacious initiative: (Isaiah 43:19) ‘Look, I am about to do something new. Now it begins to happen! Do you not recognize it? Yes, I will make a road in the wilderness and paths in the wastelands.’”

- XIV. Hebrews 11:1 reminds us: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Don’t dwell in the desolate desert of dry bones! Claim God’s promises for an adventurous future! God wants to do a new thing among us.

-are we open to a fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit who might be wanting to do a new thing among us which might change us and transform us to a new reality?

-once again hear the words of Hebrews chapter 12 as the Message version paraphrases it:

“All these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans of the faith are cheering us on. It means we’d better get on with it. Strip down, start running ...and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins.

Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished the race we’re in. study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed- that exhilarating finish...in and with God.”

-that, my friends, is what it means to lay claim to God’s adventurous future.