

It's Our Time Now

Vision Sunday

Esther 4:13-14

Sunday, February 17, 2008

Pastor Chris McMillan

I love the local church. I believe in the church. I agree with Bill Hybels who says that the local church is the hope of the world. The church is the instrument that God uses to bring His message of salvation to the world. Everything that God does in this world He does through His church. Though not perfect the church of Jesus Christ is the greatest force on the earth today. The reason that I am a pastor and give my life to local church ministry is because I am convinced that the church has the greatest potential to change the world. I'm not talking about making a difference in the world but making the world different. I could do a lot of things. I could work in a parachurch organization or become a businessman or salesman. But as good and wonderful as those things are they will not last. But in a thousand years should Jesus tarry those parachurch organizations and businesses will be closed and forgotten but there will still be churches. Because I believe in the church I am willing to get planted in the church, to invest my time, talents, energy, effort and finances into the church. I want to get my children into the church. Investing in the church is a sure bet. It pays eternal dividends.

We need to change our thinking about the church. Sometimes we tend to see the church as just this nice little A-frame building where Christians go to sing, hear a sermon, talk to a few people and go home. We don't even realize the power or potential of the church. I love the metaphors that Jesus used to describe the church:

- Jesus said that we are the salt of the earth. Salt does several things. First it gives flavor. Church should add flavor to our life. Unfortunately most churches are about the most boring and flavorless places in town. Most churches are like rice cakes. Church should be exciting, fun, a place of life and celebration. Second, salt preserves. The church has been placed in our community to preserve against rot and decay. We can tell what kind of job the church is doing by the state of our neighborhoods. Is crime increasing? Are hungry people being fed? Are people coming off of welfare? Are the naked being clothed? Is justice being restored and meted out fairly? Someone once asked the question, "If your church closed its

doors today never to reopen would anyone even notice?"
Third, salt creates thirst. When people come to church it ought to create in them a thirst for God. We should be living such lives that we make people thirsty for what we have. But unfortunately when most people come into our churches all they see is hostility, political power plays, hypocrisy, backbiting, slander and gossip. Nobody is thirsty for that. Let's have a good report. Let's focus on the good things God is doing. Let's seek to make our church a place that when people come there is a thirst awakened in them for the things of God. Jesus also said that salt can become worthless. It becomes worthless when it is mixed with other substances. When the salt loses its saltiness it is good for nothing but to be thrown out. There are many churches that have lost their saltiness and they are good for nothing. Let's not be that church.

- Jesus said that the church is the light of the world. We are called to reflect the light of Jesus to the world around us. We are to illuminate our neighborhoods and cities and nations. Light not only illuminates it exposes. The church is called to expose the evil deeds that are done in darkness (e.g., corruption, injustice, violence, immorality, etc).
- Jesus said that the church is a city on a hill. A hill elevates whatever is sitting upon it and makes it visible. In Israel there were multitudes of villages built upon hills. At night the light shining from these homes would illuminate the path of travelers and pilgrims so that they could navigate through the night from one village to the next. We are a city of light that shines in the darkness that gives hope and points the way for those in darkness.
- Jesus said that the church would be unstoppable. He said that He would build His church and that the gates of hell would not prevail against it. In other words the church would be an unstoppable force in the world for good; it would be invincible. Consider the fact that the church has been viciously opposed ever since its very inception. Throughout the ages dictators, tyrants, godless philosophies and even rebellious Christians have sought to destroy the church but to no avail. The church is still growing and prospering. In the New Testament the Lord added to the church daily. Every day in Latin America 10,000 people are added to the church. In Africa 25-30,000 are added to the church daily. In China 35,000 people are added daily.
- Jesus said that His church would be fruitful. Many people believe that all God requires of us is to be faithful. While I do not want to minimize the importance of faithfulness Jesus said

He wants us to be fruitful (Jn.15:16). True faithfulness will produce fruitfulness. Churches that haven't grown in years say they are being faithful but where is the fruit? In Matthew 13 Jesus gave a parable about a mustard seed that was planted and soon became a large tree that had branches large enough for birds to come and nest in. In other words, what starts out small doesn't have to stay small. God wants His church to grow because He wants people to come to the knowledge of salvation. The mission and purpose of our church is see our entire city and region come to know Christ. Some people might say I like a small church. Well you won't like heaven. Every church starts small but it doesn't have to stay small. In Acts 19 Paul goes to Ephesus and finds 12 people in the church. Within a two-year period that number had grown to the point that the whole of Asia heard the Word of the Lord.

Now that is the clear and unmistakable intent and design that Jesus had for His church. Is that the church we see in our cities and towns today? Absolutely not! Something is broken in the church today. Jesus promised that His church would be a prevailing church yet 80-85% of churches in the America have plateaued or are in decline. Hundreds of churches shut their doors every year never to reopen. In Europe the beautiful cathedrals and stately churches are now empty and being used for nightclubs and other unholy purposes. It is time for us to rise up and build the church that God had in mind. I'm not interested in building the church that the Assemblies of God has in mind, or Bill Hybels has in mind or Rick Warren has in mind (I really like and appreciate these men by the way), I'm interested in building the church Jesus has in mind! We are living in the last days and it is high time to begin to be the church Jesus wants us to be.

In our text today we meet a young woman by the name of Esther. Esther is a young Jewish woman who was the queen of the Persian king Ahasuerus. A member of the royal court by the name of Haman is scheming behind closed doors to kill all the Jews that live in Persia. The only hope that the Jewish people have is that Esther would go to the king and intervene on their behalf. But there is a problem. No one could just enter the king's presence without his invitation. The king had not called for Esther in some time. But on the eve of the Jew's destruction Esther's uncle persuaded her to go before the king. Mordecai's words to Esther are the same words that I believe God is speaking to His church today. We have been brought to the kingdom for such a time as this. It is time for us rise to the challenge and become the church that God wants us to be. We are facing great

challenges but God has promised to empower us to reach the world. It's our time now! It's time to exchange the status quo for the fresh and new. It's a new day and God wants to use our church to accomplish great things.

Esther was a woman of great courage. It took great courage for her to risk her life by appearing before the king without an invitation. Imagine how afraid Esther must have been? Yet she didn't let fear keep her from her destiny. God is calling His church to a new level of courage. If we are going to do anything great for God it will require courage. It will require us to stop being so fearful and start taking risks. The reason that many churches never live up to their potential is because leadership doesn't have the courage to risk. We seek to be men-pleasers rather than God-pleasers. Building healthy and fruitful churches is not easy. If it were everyone would have healthy and fruitful churches. We must have the courage to act. So many churches have committees and task forces that have meeting after meeting talking about what we need to do yet we never act. We need a lot less meetings and a lot more action! Daniel 11:32 tells us that the people who know their God will be strong and do exploits. When Moses died and Joshua was appointed the leader and was ready to lead the Israelites across the Jordan River into the Promised Land God repeatedly told him to be courageous and to not be afraid. If Joshua was going to lead Israel to possess the land God was giving them then the people had to be courageous. They had to begin to think differently; they had to begin to act differently. If we are going to be the church God had in mind and possess the land then it will require us to think and act differently as well.

What are the consequences of not acting courageously? Notice that Mordecai told Esther that if she didn't go before the king that deliverance would arise from some other means. In other words even if Esther missed her destiny God's will and plan would still prevail. I hear the Holy Spirit saying to the church that if we don't rise to the challenge and embrace our moment and act courageously then deliverance will arise through some other means. God will raise up another church that has His heart and will accomplish His purposes through that church. So while we may miss our destiny as a church God's plan will still be accomplished. But we don't have to miss our destiny. We can seize this moment and become the people God wants us to be. It's our time now!

Interrogative Sentence: How can we become the church God wants us to be? How can we fix what's broken?

Transitional Sentence: I want to share with you a three-fold strategy for seizing our moment. It all boils down to getting back to the mission of the church.

1. Reach those who are far from God.

Our mission is to reach our world for Jesus. Jesus gave us the Holy Spirit not so that we could have goosebumps or speak in tongues but so that we could be witnesses. God has placed this church in Laurel in order to reach our community and region and the world. There are 8.052 million people that live in the D.C./Baltimore corridor. We have the potential to reach over 8 million people. How can we reach them? It's going to take dedication, commitment, prayer and creativity.

Some of the ways we are seeking to reach people in 2008 is:

- Shoe of Hope Outreach. We are going to provide a free pair of athletic shoes to the first 300 kids that walk through the doors. Then we are going to share the gospel with them.
- WinterHaven. We are providing shelter for the homeless in our area for an entire week. We want to show them that they haven't been forgotten and that Jesus loves them.
- Heaven's Gates Hell's Flames. This powerful drama is coming for three nights in June. I am believing that it is going to be a catalyst for spiritual renewal in our region. This same drama was performed for 28 days in Modesto, California and 33,000 people made decisions for Jesus Christ.
- Back 2 School Rally. We have a back to school rally scheduled for August in which we are going to give away free backpacks and school supplies.
- Thanksgiving Feed the Hungry Event. At Thanksgiving we are going to feed the hungry once again.
- Adopt-a-family. At Christmas we are going to adopt-a-family and give them a nice Christmas.
- Servant evangelism. Throughout the year we will also be doing some free car washes and give-a-ways to the community.
- Nursing home ministry.

2. Teach them to live successful Christian lives.

We can't just stop at reaching them. Our ultimate goal is not just to have people make decisions for Jesus but to become disciples of Jesus. We want to grow a biblically literate mature people who aren't tossed about by fads and hip teachings. We are living in a day in which people have itching ears. They don't want to hear sound doctrine. Yet God's command to preach the Word has not changed. We want to teach people who they are in Christ. We want to teach people how to live in victory everyday. We want to help people heal from brokenness and become whole. We want to empower people to fulfill the potential God has placed inside of them.

How are we going to do this?

- Sunday Worship Experiences. Every Sunday we gather to worship and hear God's Word expounded. If you want to grow you have to get planted and be faithful (Ps.92:13).
- Wednesday Bible Study. Wednesday night is an informal time when we can come together in an open forum and learn the Bible.
- Life Groups. We have life groups in which you can build relationships and grow and mature in your faith.
- Kids groups. We have ministries for your kids that will teach them about Jesus and grow their faith.
- Celebrate recovery. We are going to help people overcome their addictions.

3. Unleash them to change the world.

God has not called us just to sit inside of our churches. He has called us to go into all the world (Matt.28:19). The Bible tells us that each one of us has spiritual gifts that God has given us that can be unleashed in helping the church to become all that it can be. Stop sitting on your gifts and unleash them to change the world. We want to equip people for the work of the ministry (Eph.4:12). We want to train and send out leaders into every sphere of society (e.g., the arts, education, politics, government, athletics, business, science, medicine, etc). God wants us to be a sending station. Not to judge our success by our seating capacity but by our sending capacity.

How are we going to do this?

- We are sending a missions team to Jamaica to help plant churches.
- I am going to Lagos, Nigeria in April to encourage pastors.
- New people are coming into leadership.
- Monthly team church meetings.
- In October Dr. Ron McManus will be here for a leadership training weekend for all of our church workers.

Conclusion: We have come to the kingdom for such a time as this. Let's seize the moment and embrace our destiny as a local church. It's our time now!

e have a 3-fold vision and strategy

Reach, teach and unleash.

It's scary to try new things...Esther was certainly scared to go before the king.

But she was told that if she didn't rise to the occasion that deliverance would come through someone else. If we don't heed the call God will raise up a church and advance His purpose but it won't be through us. That's the scariest thing I can imagine. To be passed over because we weren't willing to have the courage to do what's never been done before.