

Words for an Emerging Church

Wednesday, August 4, 2021

Principles, Fellowship, and Life and Death

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. —Ephesians 4:29

I have long been fascinated by Alcoholics Anonymous and the Twelve-Step movement and continue to urge all folks to visit at least one AA meeting. The Twelve Steps, the founding principles of AA, were greatly influenced by Christian thought, and though AA is not a church, they do call themselves a spiritual fellowship, and can occasionally teach *us* a thing or two about being the Church.

Recently I heard the work of AA presented as a combination of two key elements: a set of **principles** (or truths if you please), and a **fellowship**. They have received a set of principles which they have found to be true and liberating. The work of recovery is that of walking this path of wisdom. The other major part of AA is their endeavor to be a fellowship. They gather, sharing a common affliction, but more significantly sharing a common recovery and walk of sobriety. As they support one another in this walk through encouragement and mutual accountability, they find the strength to overcome. Although it is not a church, we see in AA a definite likeness of the Church. We gather to celebrate and embrace the Truth, who is Jesus Christ our Lord. This truth sets us free (John 8:32). Then there is the matter of fellowship. We have been put together as a family to support and help one another in this walking in the Truth.

The similarities are a fascination to observe, but what is especially interesting are some of the differences. AA takes the matter of fellowship seriously—much more seriously than we do. To most of us the term sounds light and fluffy, but to one in recovery it is a matter of life and death. One in recovery needs to be held accountable. They need to be encouraged. They need company to join them in this journey of life, and they need to give these life-giving gifts to others. Without fellowship there is no Alcoholics Anonymous and there is no recovery. We people of the western world think of ourselves as individuals and do not naturally gravitate toward real fellowship. “Just give me the principles and I can take it from there,” is our preferred response to matters of faith. We too easily neglect, or even reject, the imperative of fellowship. The Church can learn a lot from AA and a deeper understanding of fellowship is a lesson we need to hear!

Presently we are experiencing a recurrence of the COVID virus. Our health and political leaders are trying to make sense of the new variants, of the statistics, and

how they can put together a coherent and workable public policy. These are difficult times, and though the worst of the bug is behind us, we apparently have a ways to go. My deepest concern in these days is the matter of the return of masks and isolation, which is even being urged for the vaccinated. The experts are quick to argue that “one can’t be too safe,” and that “extra precautions can only help,” and in saying this they are very wrong. To experts, living in their own comfortable and somewhat isolated worlds, putting up barriers between people is a harmless precaution which has all positive benefits, and only the most minor negatives. “No one should mind a little inconvenience,” is the line of thinking.

But in the deciding of public health policy there are other concerns than the virus which need to be taken into consideration. There is the matter of fellowship. This may sound silly and insignificant to the world, but look again. While it is always difficult to make sense of the world of statistics, I have heard of an additional 30,000 deaths due to overdoses in the past year. Such is the harm done when the “lesser concern” of fellowship is not taken seriously. Not only does the recovering addict need fellowship, but we all do, more than we realize, and a lack of strong fellowship does great damage to the general population. How could this not be considered a part of the discussion in determining a full orbbed public health policy?

My prayer for the nation, for the Church, and for our national and state leaders is that we all find the wisdom and insight to be able to see the big picture. The germ is not the only enemy which we face. And yes, it is *very* difficult to find the path of wisdom in the discerning of a proper public policy and our own daily practice. In the meantime, let us do all that we can to *build others up* and *speak hope that is benefiting to those who listen*. Let fellowship be strong. Whether we realize it or not, it is a matter of life and death.

Blessings,

Pastor Jim

Lord of the Church, enable your people to be the Church—a redeemed people, a holy people, a united people, a missionary people, and in all things a people gladly submissive to the truth you have shown us in yourself, Jesus Christ our Lord. —Michael Sward