

What does the Church mean to the community?

The title of this column is “The Church in the Community”.

Past editions have addressed the Church’s attitude to various problems effecting our community such as ethics and corruption, morality, leadership, the water crises and climate change. And so they should.

To change tack slightly, what I would like to address this week is how the majority of readers view the Church and, for those who are reasonably well disposed to the Church, what are their expectations of her. I use the female term as the Church is known in scripture as the Bride of Christ.

At worst, the term hypocrisy comes to mind and that would be extremely appropriate given Jesus’ frequent references to the pharisees, the leaders of the religious faith of the day. His most serious criticism was that the pharisees would go out of their way to put on display their so-called righteousness, which were clear examples of self-righteousness.

According to Wikipedia, 79.8% of South Africans would identify themselves as Christians. I would be numbered amongst them, from the date of my baptism as an infant right through Sunday School and regular church attendance on a Sunday.

It was only in my 30’s that I understood that although I knew all about God, I did not know Him. Jesus addresses this transition in John 3:1-21 in his discourse with Nicodemus, a prominent leader among the Pharisees.

It was much later in my journey of discovering what God’s purpose was for me, that I came across Malcolm Gladwell’s book, “The Tipping Point”. In an interview he did after the book was released in 2000, he said, “the word “Tipping Point”, comes from the world of epidemiology.

It’s the name given to that moment in an epidemic when a virus reaches critical mass. It’s the boiling point. It’s the moment on the graph when the line starts to shoot straight upwards.” When I heard that phrase for the first time, I remember thinking—wow! What if everything has a Tipping Point? Applying Gladwell’s thought process to the Church, I wondered why this movement, first termed “The Way”, birthed 2000 years ago, which in most instances and certainly in the early centuries after Christ, would qualify as “a line shooting straight upwards”, has not yet achieved its goal of changing the world in a way that replicates Heaven.

A major reason is that this life we choose in a moment of time is more like a process. As with all disciplines there is a period during which we all learn from those more knowledgeable than us.

This process is referred to as discipleship “the process of someone becoming more like Christ” and is illustrated several times in scripture, e.g. Ephesians 4:13.

Secondly, and more dangerously, there is the sacred/secular divide, sometimes referred to as SSD, which aptly sounds like a disease.

People of faith have long operated on that basis. The saddest thing is that for many of us Christians, very little changes in our lives that is visible to those other than friends and family, as we erect a barrier between our secular and our sacred lives.

If there is no intervention of God's Spirit the barrier will begin to leak and those things we believe we have no choice but to do in our work life will start to affect our home life.

Even if we manage to prevent a leak, we have what has been called a leisure time Christianity, not a whole life Christianity.

The abundant life in Jesus involves living as material human beings. We are called to work with God to make the world a better place, to produce goods and services that benefit people to the glory of God.

To alleviate poverty by creating jobs as well as offering aid, to work to release potential through endeavour, iron ore into stainless steel, children into confident adults, disparate individuals into productive teams.

We would usually never see this as working with God, but the truth is if we do it intentionally to the glory of God it is exactly what we are called to do.

Thirdly, we have learned some false ideas about who is more important in the Church and thus whose responsibility it is to "change the world", rather than understanding that as indicated in the first of Peter's letters, chapter 2, verse 9 we are "...a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation...". There are no ranks denoting superiority, only those who are more mature in their faith than others.

Similarly, we imagine that only certain activities are worthy. Our Lord never saw the mundane activities as ordinary. Whether He healed the sick or sat around the fire with the disciples, He did not see one activity as spiritual and the other non-spiritual. Life was lived as a holy service to His Heavenly Father.

Many times, we fall prey to a spiritual hierarchy mentality. God's glory can be expressed in the most common task. Whether washing the dishes or attending school or college or shopping at the supermarket. When we begin to assign spiritual value to activities, we begin to give greater importance to those activities we deem spiritually higher in the hierarchy.

"Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Can we aspire to more? I will leave that for another time.

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