

GRACE OUTLET

Creating Churches That Dispense
the Unmerited Favor of God

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by Kris R. Eckenroth

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Creating Churches That Dispense
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KRIS R. ECKENROTH, D.MIN.

CHAPTER 1

Wholly Discontent

My groans come from an anguished heart.

—Psalm 38:8

TEACHING POINT

The Lord will often use the anguish of our hearts to move us in His direction.

Not What I Expected

When I was fourteen years old, my parents announced to my sister and me that our family would be spending Christmas in Williamsburg, Virginia. We had no family or friends in Virginia, but it was a wonderful place, as my parents described it, to spend the holidays. I, being a true Pennsylvanian homebody, was troubled by the thought of being away from home on my favorite holiday. In somewhat of a panic, I began to hurl all my concerns at my parents. “If we are in Williamsburg, how will we have a Christmas tree? Where will we go to look at Christmas lights? How will we eat our favorite Christmas meals? How will we watch *It’s a Wonderful Life*?”

My parents responded by describing the utopia of Christmas that they called, "Williamsburg." They patiently answered my concerns. "We won't have one tree, we'll have many trees. Christmas lights will be everywhere. You'll get to choose from all your favorite restaurants as we eat our meals out. There may be a real life play portraying the movie, *It's A Wonderful Life*."

With vivid descriptions of an enhanced Christmas, we agreed to go. And so, on Christmas Eve, 1991, we drove the five hours south to the real live version of Mel Torme's *A Christmas Song*, known as Williamsburg, Va.

By the time we arrived at the hotel, I was pretty excited. For five hours, my imagination had run wild envisioning crackling fires, live Christmas music, holiday parades, and elves with pointy green shoes serving hot chocolate.

We unloaded the car and made our way to our room. After putting our things away we returned to the car and headed to the first item on our perfect Christmas itinerary. We went to a holiday dinner theatre. We were extremely excited! Christmas music, Santa Claus, reindeer, oh yeah, the works! The hostess showed us to our table and, shortly thereafter, we were served. Once the main dish was served the program began. To our surprise, there was no Christmas music, no reindeer, and no Santa. In fact, I was quite disturbed by the main character, who they called, Father Christmas. By the time we got back to the hotel, we were all tired and anxious for morning to come so we could embark into Williamsburg for an old-fashioned Christmas.

When morning came we climbed into the car to find a restaurant for breakfast. My dad's first priority was to get gas. It didn't take us long to realize that this was a much harder task than we had first thought. We drove from one gas station to another realizing that they were all closed for the Christmas holiday. Driving on fumes, we pulled into what seemed to be the only gas station open on Christmas.

Now we were really hungry. But as we drove around, we were shocked to find that all of the restaurants in Williamsburg were closed for the Christmas holiday. After about an hour of searching,

we returned to the hotel and ate in the hotel's lobby restaurant, filling our famished stomachs. Revived, we launched back out to experience Christmas in old town Williamsburg. It was open. Well kinda. They celebrated Christmas like they did back in the 1700s. A Williamsburg Christmas consisted of gourds on the front door and oranges in the stockings hung by fireplaces. We also noticed quite quickly, that we were some of the only ones at Old Town Williamsburg. So we decided to ask some of the people who worked there for ideas of where to eat or get gas. They wouldn't answer us. They refused to break character and pretended to have no idea what a gas station was and were confused by the thought of a Ponderosa.

By lunch time, all four of us were quite disappointed and ready to head back home. A Williamsburg Christmas was not what we had expected.

The Bible is full of examples of people experiencing situations in a way they did not expect. Nehemiah was shocked to hear the condition of his beloved Jerusalem. The wise men were confused by the lack of celebration in Israel's capital city at the birth of the newborn king. Nathanael was puzzled by the idea that the Christ was from Nazareth. And Jesus, as He entered the temple, found it to be a market place instead of a house of prayer. None of it made sense to any of them. It wasn't the way they had imagined it. It wasn't the way they had been told it would play out. It just plain wasn't the way they had expected it.

In 1999, I graduated with a degree in theology and a minor in Biblical languages. Two years later, I graduated from seminary with a master's degree in divinity. I was armed with theological training and ready to get dangerous in living out a bold ministry for Jesus. My first assignment was an associate pastor's position for two churches. A year later I accepted a position at a Southern Adventist University, Collegedale, Tn. There my job entailed traveling around the globe speaking to and providing ministry training for youth and young adults. Three years later I accepted a position as the youth and young adult ministries director for the Pennsylvania Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

In each of my three positions, I thoroughly enjoyed ministry. I had the awesome privilege of meeting and working with thousands of great people. However, in the midst of it all, I was disturbed by what I saw and experienced. Church was not what I had expected. It wasn't the way I had imagined it. It's not that the religion professors had painted a utopian picture of church, it's just that what I was experiencing did not seem to match the Bible's description of the early church. Maybe I had built it up too much in my head. The New Testament church in the twenty-first century seemed to be missing much of what was central to the first century church. It was these experiences and observations that prompted me to ask these three questions as they pertain to the twenty first century church:

- Where were the meaningful relationships?
- Where was the heartfelt worship?
- And where was the culture of mission service to the local community?

Where Were the Meaningful Relationships?

One of the main components of all the jobs I have had has been to work with young adults. The problem was that most of the churches I worked with had very few young adults. Of course the very large churches had young adults, but as I traveled from medium-sized to small-sized churches, I found that the attendance and participation of young adults was very slim. Typically, the young adult group is defined as the segment of the church from ages 18 to 35-ish. To my surprise, if the churches had any young adults, it was typically less than 5. The Hispanic churches that I worked with certainly did a much better job with a much higher average. However, the English speaking churches were just a plain disappointment in this regard. So I began asking the leaders and members of the church where their young adults were. I began to consistently hear statements like, "We use to have one but they got a job in another state." "They married a non-believer and no longer come." "We just can't get them to come anymore." "They work during church time." "Ever since _____ happened, they no longer

come.” Typically the fill in the blank was some event in the young adult’s life that caused them to no longer feel comfortable attending church. They got pregnant out of wedlock, they were arrested, someone rebuked them for some behavior, etc.

Without having to spend thousands of dollars on research, the answer to my question, “Where were the young adults?” was simple and easy. The young adults were not at church. I mention young adults because young adults thrive on and crave meaningful relationships. But so do youth, and so do those beyond the young adult age range. Church is a body of individuals working together in the framework of community. It troubled me to see stronger relationships outside the church as opposed to inside the church. The soccer moms, the dads leading the cub scouts, the bar community, and the softball teams, all had deeper, more meaningful relationships than Christ’s church.

Where Was the Heartfelt Worship?

As I drove from church to church, I saw sincere dedicated people going through the motions. Many of the same people who would raise their voices, even hands, at the sight of a touchdown scored while watching their favorite NFL team, sat lifeless as we “worshipped” our God. You may be thinking that I am about to make a case for a contemporary worship style. On the contrary, I encourage churches by telling them it’s okay to sing traditional songs and use traditional instruments. Likewise, it’s okay to use the guitar and trap set. But what I am going to make a case for is worship.

Heartfelt worship is not in a guitar, drum, or words on a screen. Heartfelt worship is not found in an organ or in a hymnal. Heartfelt worship has little to do with an organ versus a praise band. Heartfelt worship is worship from your heart. I would describe heartfelt worship as the head knowledge of Jesus and your heart’s gratitude for Jesus smashing together. The result of this cataclysmic event being the outpouring of heartfelt worship of our Lord. This type of worship may show its fruit with unabashed singing. It may be your stillness or silence. It may be the bended knee. It may be obedience that goes against the grain of culture and society. No matter how

heartfelt worship reveals itself, it certainly is distinguishable from the moments when we go through the motions because it is part of the program.

Where was the heartfelt worship in our churches? It seemed that there was a disconnect between the head knowledge of what Jesus had done on the Cross and the sincere reaction of gratitude by His followers.

Where Was the Culture of Mission Service?

When you read the stories found in the Gospel accounts of Jesus, you quickly notice how He spent His time. In some cases you will find Jesus at the temple or the local church, the synagogue. However, more often than not, you will find Him going from place to place meeting and interacting with people. Sometimes while He was out and about you can imagine Him using an old tree stump as a pulpit to preach His message, “The kingdom of Heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). But Jesus spent more of His time doing something else, even more than preaching. What was it? It was meeting people’s physical needs. Jesus said, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). Jesus was ever busy giving His life away in service to His hurting community. He was this God-Man on a mission to serve people by giving away His time, His listening ear, His words of compassion, His spiritual and physical healing, and His love. Jesus not only lived this way but instilled this culture among His disciples by telling them, “Freely you have received, freely give” (Matthew 10:8).

As I spent time with God’s people, I was prompted to ask the question, “Where was the culture of mission service?” Service to the community seemed to be tied to special events or flashes of service. In most cases, it wasn’t part of the culture of the church. Service is predicated on giving yourself away. Naturally, none of us want to give ourselves away. It’s why this type of culture is often scarce. One way you will know that mission service is a part of your church is by the answers you get when you ask the members, “What does your church believe in?” If the answers all revolve

around doctrines like state of the dead or day of worship, service is not yet part of your churches culture. However, if you get some of the doctrinal answers and also hear, “We believe in meeting the needs of people through community service,” then you’ll know the Lord is creating His kind of culture in His body.

Wholly Discontent

In the fall of 2006, I returned to my alma mater to begin a doctoral degree in ministry. In addition to the excitement of starting this academic journey, my wife and I were equally excited to see her family. My wife’s family was from the area and this provided the opportunity for us to spend some quality time with them. After classes finished one Friday morning, I received a call from my wife’s Uncle Jerry. Uncle Jerry had befriended Muhamad Ali and was wondering if I was interested in joining him for a visit to see the boxing legend. After a quick look at my schedule, I decided that I could fit some time into my busy day to allow Muhamad Ali to meet me.

About an hour later Uncle Jerry picked me up and we headed over to the Ali estate. Though the car ride was short, I began to imagine what it was going to be like to meet one of the greatest sports legends of all time. In addition to Ali’s great boxing achievements, he had made quite a name for himself as a civil rights activist, a quick witted personality, and a man with all the confidence in the world. After defeating Sonny Liston he had shouted, “I am the king of the world.” With these things in mind, I knew I was in for an afternoon I would never forget.

When we arrived, we pulled up to the house and then went into a separate building close to the house where Mrs. Ali had her office. We went inside and sat down in a common area within the building. A few minutes later the champ entered the room. The man, the myth, the legend, who was larger than life was standing before me. Uncle Jerry introduced me and I stuck out my hand to shake his. He immediately put up his fist and acted as if he was going to punch to me. My hands went up in an act of surrender. He smiled and then we shook hands. He was quiet and clearly

affected by the Parkinson's disease taking over his body. Although hampered by his ailment, his personality was still there. However, he wasn't cocky or arrogant. The man who still retained the title of one of the best known athletes in the world, began to perform magic tricks to entertain his guests. It was like I was spending time at an old family friend's home and "grandpa" was performing his age-old, time-tested magic tricks that no one ever got tired of. When it came time to leave, Mr. Ali gave me a signed picture and pretended to punch me again. The man who had made so many other grown men uncomfortable in the ring, had just made me feel right at home on the Ali property. My experience with Muhamad Ali was like nothing I could have imagined. It certainly was not what I had expected.

Jesus arrived at the home of the synagogue ruler after he had been told by a messenger that the little girl had died. The story is recorded in Matthew 9 and Mark 5. When He arrived at the home He found it to be in a way He did not expect. The Bible says, "When Jesus came into the ruler's house and saw the flute players and the noisy crowd wailing, He said to them, "Make room, for the girl is not dead but sleeping" (Matthew 9:23-24). Jesus' arrival and response to what was happening at the home reveals His clear discontent. It clearly is understandable why the community would be mourning the loss of this little girl. However, Jesus' questions and commands lead us to believe that He was discontent with what they had done with what they knew. It is almost as if Jesus is saying, "Did not the messenger who came and told us of her death, then return ahead of us to tell you I was still coming?" (Mark 5:35). In other words, their knowledge of His soon arrival to the home should have affected the demeanor in the home and changed everything.

In the final chapter of the New Testament, John quotes Jesus three times. These three quotes all say the same thing. "I Am coming quickly." Jesus will soon return! He is calling the church, His body, to be about His business. The culture that He instilled in those early followers is to be the culture among us today. Where are the relationships that build up? Where are the relationships

that edify and foster accountability? Where is the heart-felt worship? And where is the Christ-like culture of service that should be woven into the DNA of every church? I wasn't seeing it. I wasn't experiencing it. I wasn't seeing others experience it either. I knew others needed this type of church just as much as I did. Did that type of church exist? I found myself to be discontent with what I saw and personally experienced in church.

Discontentedness vs. Holy Discontent

A friend of mine emailed me a sermon by Bill Hybels, founder of Willow Creek mega church near Chicago. I only listened to 2-3 minutes of the sermon, however, those few minutes provided a label for what I was feeling and experiencing. Pastor Hybels was talking about Holy Discontent. His main point was that often times the Lord will create a rub in our hearts. This rub is caused by something you are discontented with because it goes against God's holy purpose for that thing, organization, or ministry. That's exactly how I felt about church. It wasn't the way it was supposed to be! I was wholly discontented with what church wasn't and felt that the Lord was using this feeling to create change.

Being part of the body of Christ can be and should be one of the most satisfying experiences on earth. Joy will be brought into our hearts and into our experience when we fulfill our part within Jesus' body to fulfill His mission. At the same time, there are moments when being part of the body brings stress, disappointment, and frustration. There is a clear difference between being discontent and holy discontented. Often times we are discontent with how things are run at church because it's not the way we would do it. We are often discontent because we were left out of the process by which the decision was made. Or we may be discontent because complaining is not only contagious, it's addictive. This kind of discontent is wholly different from experiencing holy discontent.

Holy discontent has its focus and heart in the Lord's will, not ours. Holy discontentedness is jealous for God's will to be accomplished when it clearly is not. It is important for us to understand

that just because you may be experiencing frustration or disappointment with your church, it doesn't necessarily mean you need to leave and start a brand new church. The Lord may be calling, and usually is calling, us to be part of the change within the existing church or ministry. When you feel the "rub" and begin to experience holy discontent and it begins to take over your heart to the point that you become wholly discontented, it is a sign that you need to take action. Discontent with your church may simply be a clear indication that you and the church need to stop and pray consistently for the Lord to change things. It may mean that you and your church need to re-evaluate a specific ministry or ministries within your church. It may mean that you as a church need to make some important but painful decisions. The Lord uses this type of discontent to move people to start and to rebuild His ministries. Nehemiah is a great example. He was moved by the condition of his home town, God's holy city. He was so disturbed by what he heard that it moved him to pray like he had never prayed before. Before he knew it, He was on his way to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls with the king's letters in hand.

My Wholly Discontent

I was feeling this type of holy discontent. I write "holy discontent" because I was disturbed by what I saw, experienced, missed, and knew God wanted. It moved my "whole" being. Where were the meaningful relationships? Where was the heartfelt worship? Where was the mission-driven church of the New Testament?

The answers seemed obvious to me. The meaningful relationships were not at church. They were more readily found in the bar or neighborhood. The heartfelt worship was something not yet found by the church or somehow had gotten lost in the process. And the last day church was attempting to be mission inclusive, instead of being mission-driven. The mission of Jesus was something we were trying to bring in as an additive, as opposed to the mission driving every ministry of the church.

I began to wonder if others were feeling the way I was. Have you felt this holy discontent?

I believe that one of the ways you will truly know the Lord is applying holy discontent to your heart is when you see Him applying it to the hearts of others, too. In the case of Nehemiah, the Lord applied His grace to the heart of the king to pave the way for materials to be provided for Jerusalem. In my case, after having prayed about this feeling for quite some time, I found that the Lord was causing others around me to feel the same way. It was out in a parking lot one afternoon that three of us began to discuss what the Lord was putting on our hearts. We found that the discontent was uniform and consistent. It felt good to know that I was not alone and that the Lord was placing this on the hearts of others, too. But now what? Walt Disney once said, “The way to get started is to quit talking and start doing.” And so we decided then and there to start doing something. We picked a time and a place where we would begin the same way the early church did. “These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication...” (Acts 1:14). We would begin with prayer. All holy discontentedness must bring us to this place. It is the place where we are unified in prayer. It is the kind of prayer that continues and does not move until He does. It was the anguishes of our hearts that were moving us in His direction.

Team Activity

1. Are you feeling content, discontent, or Holy discontented?
2. Biblically, what is church suppose to be like?
3. If a church could only do three main things, what should they be?
4. Identify common themes of holy discontent among your team. This is not a complaining session. This is a time to identify areas where you are jealous for the Lord’s will to be established.
5. Establish a specific and consistent time for your team to come together to pray about this.
6. Seek to increase the size of your team by inviting those of like mind to join your prayer sessions.