

ARM Prison Outreach International

"Ministers' Minute" Volume 8 Number 10

SERIES: "WHAT THE NEW GENERATION THINKS ABOUT THE CHURCH -- WHY IT MATTERS AND WHAT WE SHOULD DO ABOUT IT"

Editor's Note: This "MM" is the 10th email message of 2008 in a series that ARM is sending as an encouragement to preachers, chaplains, and Christian workers around the world. The message sent earlier in October was a "golden oldie" sent only a few months ago, so I'm sending this NEW message today. This month's message is the first of four to be sent in the next few months. Larry Farthing, my older brother, deals with some crucial issues for the church and its reputation in each community. In this age of rapid change, a deteriorating culture, and expanding technology, IS THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST PUTTING IT'S BEST "NEW TESTAMENT FOOT" FORWARD? It is my prayer that this message will encourage you and those you teach, lead, and encourage. May God bless your labors! -- Rod Farthing, Development Director

SERIES: "WHAT THE NEW GENERATION THINKS ABOUT THE CHURCH WHY IT MATTERS AND WHAT WE SHOULD DO ABOUT IT"

#1: "What 'Outsiders' Are Saying"

SCRIPTURE: Acts 2:46, 47

"Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

INTRO:

The Jewish religious leaders, by and large, did not look upon the church with favor, but, apparently, the rank and file did. What was it, do you suppose, that impressed them about that early church? Do you suppose it might have been their sincerity and joy? Or the way they showed their love for one another? Or the way they treated 'outsiders'?

I believe the early Jerusalem Christians conducted themselves so "Christian-like" that people respected them.

In discussing proper behavior for a Christian, Paul wrote in Romans 14:17, 18:

"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men."

I want to pose three questions this morning, the first of which is:

HOW IMPORTANT IS IT THAT WE ENJOY THE FAVOR OR APPROVAL OF NON-CHRISTIANS?

Some might point to the Sermon on the Mount, as recounted by Luke, where Jesus said, **“Woe to you when all men speak well of you...”** (6:26). Does that mean we should not seek or even be concerned about what those outside the church think?

A study of the context reveals that Jesus was talking about something irrelevant to our question.

In answer to the question, however, I suggest that we should be concerned about what outsiders think of the church, especially when they view us in a very negative light. Why? Because Christian living should be admired and respected.

Historically, Jesus has been admired and respected, especially by the rank and file. Even those who have not accepted Him as the Christ have had great admiration and respect, both for Him and His teachings.

When His followers live out His teachings, outsiders think well of them; they respect and admire them. Even atheists speak well of them.

In a sense, Jesus Himself gave the world the right to judge us. In John 13:34 and 35 He said, **“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”** Love is one of the cardinal expressions of Christianity. When we do not live out Christ’s teachings about love, the world has a right to accuse us of being unchristian.

God set the tone of attitude toward outsiders when He told Abram in Genesis 12:3, **“...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”**

Through the prophet Micah, God told His people Israel that they should be known for acting justly, loving mercy, and living humbly (6:8).

Jesus taught that we Christians should love those who seem to be our enemies and pray for them (Matthew 5:44). He taught that we are to have a special place in our hearts for the forgotten and overlooked people of society (Matthew 25:34-40). He taught that the greatest role in life is in service to others (Mark 9:35). He said He came to save the world, not condemn it (John 3:17).

Paul wrote that we are to have the attitude of Christ (Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 1:21-22). One of the qualifications required of an elder in the church is that he has **“a good reputation with outsiders”** (1 Timothy 3:1-7). He wrote in 2 Corinthians 3:2, **“You yourselves are our letter, written on your hearts, known and read by everybody.”** In Colossians 4:5 and 6 he wrote, **“Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”**

Peter assures us that God wants all people to repent and turn to Him (2 Peter 3:9).

From all of this, I conclude that we ought to be very concerned when people accuse us of not

being very “Christian.”

The next question is:

WHAT DOES THE YOUNGEST GENERATION OF ADULTS THINK OF THE CHURCH AND CHRISTIANS IN GENERAL?

“When a person ‘reads’ your life, what does it say? What does your faith look like to outsiders?”

“A major new research project...describes the increasingly negative reputation of Christians, especially among young Americans.

“The research shows that Christians are best known for what they are against. They are perceived as being judgmental, anti-homosexual, and too political. And young people are quick to point out they believe that *Christianity is no longer as Jesus intended*. It is unchristian.” (Unchristian, Baker Books, 2007, Front Cover Jacket)

EDITOR'S NOTE: I just want to clarify at this point: We believe Christians MUST take a stand against sin and immorality. We believe Christians MUST be salt and light in the world and have an affect on culture including politics. But the point the author is making is that we are BEST KNOWN, sometimes EXCLUSIVELY KNOWN for what we're against RATHER than what we're for: love, truth, mercy, patience, service, etc.

Their recent survey reveals some rather disturbing things...

Of young Christians polled, two-thirds expressed that they believed that most outsiders have a negative image of Christianity. One-third said the way most Christians act and the things most Christians say cause them to be embarrassed to be Christians.

The survey also revealed that the younger generation of adult Christians is very concerned about the way in which Christians in general engage people of the world and the poor image they have among outsiders.

It was discovered that the majority of “outsiders” perceive churches as judgmental, boring, insincere, arrogant, old-fashioned, irrelevant, etc. We Christians are often perceived as unrealistic and not transparent.

We might respond with: “Non-Christians really don’t have the capacity to appreciate what Christianity is and who Christians are.” Granted, they do not have the Holy Spirit, therefore they do not properly perceive spiritual things, but they can recognize love, mercy, and humility when they experience it, and they’re saying that they don’t experience much of those things in their dealings with us.

David Kinnaman writes:

“Millions of young outsiders are mentally and emotionally disengaging from Christianity. The nation’s population is increasingly resistant to Christianity, especially to the theologically conservative expressions of that faith. Of course we have always had detractors, but now the critics of the faith are becoming bolder and more vocal. And the aversion and hostility are, for the first time, crystallizing in the attitudes of millions of young Americans. A huge chunk of a new generation has concluded they want nothing to do with us. As Christians, we are widely mistrusted by a skeptical generation.

“This is difficult to take. Our research findings are a punch in the gut to Christians, and they are particularly challenging to theologically conservative Christians.” (*Unchristian*, p. 39)

And finally,

WHAT DO OUTSIDERS THINK OF YOUR CONGREGATION?

I have found that, by and large, outsiders don't know much of anything about many churches beyond knowing that the building is at "such and such" a street address.

What about the 'outsiders' from right in your town and county? What do they think of you and your congregation? What have you heard that reveals what they think of you and your church?

(Optional Congregational participation...)

CONCLUSION:

So, what can we do about it? How can we, like the early Jerusalem church, gain the favor of outsiders? Do we need a “PR” ministry? Did the first century church “aim” at getting the favor and respect of non-Christians? Hardly. They simply lived their Christian lives daily. They walked their talk...and the world watched admiringly. What does your life look like, from the outside looking in?

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