

Run from Corrupt Community



Gary Wilkerson March 20, 2017

There's a popular phrase used by pastors today. On any given Sunday in churches across the U.S., a preacher says, "I invite you to engage in community." There are books on the subject of connecting with community. There are podcasts and sermons. And it all sounds good because they sound like they're talking about fellowship, the deepening of bonds between Christ-followers.

Yet, often what's behind the phrase "engage in community" is something else. As one author tells pastors, "Unless the people entering your doors connect with six friends in six months, they'll be out the door." That isn't gospel motivation; it's about keeping people coming. That's a lot different from God's purposes for community.

Pastors also think of community in another way. It's said to be the "glue" that sticks people together. That sounds good, too—after all, a disconnected church can't be very effective in doing the work of God's kingdom. But when some pastors use the word "glue," they're concerned about something else. They've been told their church's numbers will never grow if they don't maintain the numbers they already have. To keep people coming, they have to glue them together with "engagement."

Again, the motive isn't fellowship as prescribed in God's Word. Instead, it's to "grow" a church—to draw more people, build a bigger audience, and keep funds coming in to maintain buildings and expand programs.

Not all pastors have these motivations. But these are severe temptations to any minister, especially today as churches dwindle. The growth mentality is an after-effect of the "church growth" movement, which began in the 1980s. Supposedly that movement has ended, but its influence keeps reverberating.

I can't imagine Peter or John discussing these kinds of concepts. Peter preached with Holy Ghost power so that 3,000 people were saved in one day. I don't think it ever crossed his mind to wonder, "How can we keep these people on board?" Everybody present that day knew they had experienced a holy, supernatural move of God. People's eyes were opened to their need for Jesus, they became aware of their sinfulness, and they sought God with their whole being. And when the Lord got hold of them, their hearts were gripped with passion because he placed his very own heart within them.

Friend, when you see a world that has gone mad with sin, you want to know God's ways. And you long to be with others who know his ways. That is true community—people who love each other with conviction and the heart of their true Shepherd.

But none of that can happen if you're involved in a corrupt community.

As a preacher of Christ's gospel, I urge you to run from community that has corrupted biblical standards.

Be careful about those you attach yourself to or align yourself with. Don't be quick to join a Bible study. Be discerning about the books you read. And be smart about the friendships you have.

“Whoa,” you may be saying, “where did this come from, Gary? Have you suddenly become paranoid?” I understand why you might wonder. This isn’t the standard message you get from most evangelical pulpits. In fact, you’d probably be told the opposite: not to be quick to judge others. But I’m not telling you to judge others; I’m telling you to use judgment. And I want to give you some important reasons why.

1 Kings 13 contains an eye-opening story about a young man identified only as “a man of God.” Without knowing his name, we learn everything we need to know about him in a single verse: “Behold, a man of God came out of Judah by the word of the Lord to Bethel” (13:1, NLT).

This verse gets my heart pumping. Here’s someone who obtained a sure word from God—something pure and unadorned, real and truthful— and it was meant to pierce the hearts of a people who’d fallen into a lax, lukewarm condition.

How many of us could be identified the same way this man was—as simply a “man of God”? Could our neighbors look at us and say, “There goes someone who’s different. She’s not caught up in the things the rest of us are. When I talk to her, there’s a solidness about what she says and how she says it. You can tell she knows something of God.”

The unnamed “man of God” in Scripture was all this and more. He was set apart for God’s purposes, and he clearly disentangled himself from worldly things to know God’s ways. That alone qualified him to stand before a nation and a king and preach God’s truth. The next scene shows us that’s exactly what he did.

King Jeroboam had just committed a horrible sacrilege: “Jeroboam was approaching the altar to burn incense” (1 Kings 13:1). On the surface, this sounds like a good thing. A nation’s king goes to church to worship God and to give offerings. But the young man of God knew differently. Here’s how he responded:

“Then at the Lord’s command, he shouted, ‘O altar, altar! This is what the Lord says: A child named Josiah will be born into the dynasty of David. On you he will sacrifice the priests from the pagan shrines who come here to burn incense, and human bones will be burned on you.’ That same day the man of God gave a sign to prove his message. He said, ‘The Lord has promised to give this sign: This altar will split apart, and its ashes will be poured out on the ground’ (13:2-3).

It’s a mysterious-sounding prophecy, but it’s clearly horrifying. And that did not make the king happy. Next we read that Jeroboam “pointed at him and shouted, ‘Seize that man!’ But instantly the king’s hand became paralyzed in that position, and he couldn’t pull it back. At the same time a wide crack appeared in the altar, and the ashes poured out, just as the man of God had predicted in his message from the Lord” (13:4-5).

When the king went after the man for prophesying, his hand suddenly froze. It was a supernatural occurrence, but this scene contains a powerful truth: The Lord will stay the hand of anyone who moves in his own authority while calling it a work of God. That signals a corrupt community. And any such work will wither the way Jeroboam’s hand did.

The king realized God had intervened, and it shook him to his core. Frantic, “The king cried out to the man of God, ‘Please ask the Lord your God to restore my hand again!’ So the man of God prayed to the Lord, and the king’s hand was restored and he could move it again” (13:6). Jeroboam was so grateful to be healed that he invited the man of God home with him so he could reward him. But the young man replied, “Even if you gave me half of everything you own, I would not go with you. I would not eat or drink anything in this place. For the Lord gave me this command: ‘You must not eat or drink anything while you are there, and do not return to Judah by the same way you came’” (13:8-9).

I love this young man’s obedience. He chose it over a path that could have made his life more comfortable. He’s an example of someone who chooses God’s way over the false appeal of corrupt community.

False teachers promise that we can follow both the world’s ways and a faithful life in Christ.

It’s easy to identify the world’s corrupt ways. It’s a lot harder to identify corruption in spiritual places where we don’t expect to find it. That’s when things get dangerous.

The young man of God had done everything according to God's word up to that point. But on the way home—on the road God directed him to take—he came across an older prophet.

"Then (the older man) said to the man of God, 'Come home with me and eat some food.' 'No, I cannot,' he replied. 'I am not allowed to eat or drink anything here in this place. For the Lord gave me this command: "You must not eat or drink anything while you are there, and do not return to Judah by the same way you came.'" But the old prophet answered, 'I am a prophet, too, just as you are. And an angel gave me this command from the Lord: "Bring him home with you so he can have something to eat and drink.'" But the old man was lying to him. So they went back together, and the man of God ate and drank at the prophet's home" (13:15-19).

Here was a very different circumstance from King Jeroboam's invitation. The young man was inclined to listen to an older prophet, a man with a ministry and a following, someone who'd been around for a while. That made the temptation a lot subtler. And in this instance, he disobeyed God.

Note the phrase the old man used to tempt him: "An angel said to me by the word of the Lord..." Does this remind you of a certain Bible passage? Paul admonishes, "Let God's curse fall on anyone, including us or even an angel from heaven, who preaches a different kind of Good News than the one we preached to you" (Galatians 1:8).

The words of Christian leaders carry a lot of weight, and so it was for the young man of God. The older prophet assured him, "You don't have to continue in your hunger. You've done your job. It would be legalistic to stay in this rigid mode of obedience. It's time to relax, to chill a little. Take it easy." That's actually the tenor of a lot of preaching today. We hear very few sermons on subjects like leading a holy life. Tell me, when did God ever change the path his people are to walk?

Paul has some tough talk for those who would mix the way of the Lord with the way of the world: "You cannot drink from the cup of the Lord and from the cup of demons, too. You cannot eat at the Lord's Table and at the table of demons, too" (1 Corinthians 10:21).

It wasn't the fallen world that entangled this godly young man in sin. It was the corrupt church—a false prophet who had deviated from God's way. What a tragedy: The young man had such spiritual authority that his words caused a king's hand to shrivel. But he was derailed by the soft words of a supposedly godly leader.

The next scene is tragic: "The man of God started off again. But as he was traveling along, a lion came out and killed him" (1 Kings 13:24). Throughout Scripture, from Ezekiel to the New Testament, false teachers are described as ravenous wolves ready to kill and devour. This young man's death was literal, while the lesson to us is spiritual: Spiritual deception from a corrupt community leads to destruction.

Do not listen to false teachers who would have you believe God can be used like a genie to grant your wishes. Don't ever put a dollar in a church offering hoping to get more back. God is grieved by that kind of false teaching and by the parishioners who embrace it. Our prayer can't be, "Lord, bless me," but rather, "Lord, align me. Set my heart right. Make straight my path. Then no lion can devour me. And I'll have your authority to do the works of your kingdom."

It's always best to run from corruption before it can happen. Over and over in the Bible we see God removing his people from corrupt situations. When he commanded Noah to enter the ark, it was to remove his servant from a corrupt world. When he led Israel into the Promised Land, he was removing them from Egypt's oppressive bondage.

Yet it's not just a fallen world or false church leaders that corrupt. Finally, there's the issue of our own sinful hearts. When popular preachers tell us, "You can have a prosperous life today," something inside us stirs—especially if we feel our life has been disappointing. But our motive for approaching God can't be, "Can I get something from him?" If it is, we're pursuing the wrong god.

I don't preach messages like this very often. But I can't backtrack on anything I've written here. Friend, run from the Bible study that exists only to make you feel good. Avoid the relationship that takes you deeper into pleasure-seeking and away from Christ-seeking. Find a different faith community if yours labors to get you in the building instead of training you to take Jesus everywhere. Run—and know that God is pleased with your obedience. Amen!

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