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PASSION FOR THE CHURCH

Do you think you have a “passion for the church”? What does that mean? [Allow a few moments for answers.] We have many people who are considered to have a passion for building up a particular congregation or a particular denomination. Is that what passion for the church is?

During Martin Luther’s time, there were plenty—a very great deal, in fact—of this kind of passion for the church of the time. The hierarchy of the church, from the pope to the lowliest monk or nun, was intent on building up Roman Catholicism to a worldwide body that would cover the planet. Luther was one of those who had that same passion.

But as he studied the Bible for himself and learned that the leaders had left the path of God in some very important ways, his passion began to change—to re-form, to transform—into something different. First, he found himself filled with a passion for God and His magnificent free grace. As we saw in an earlier lesson, Luther said he felt as if he had been completely born again and entered into paradise already.

That passion for God led to a passion for people. (Which, after all, is what “church” means. People, not a building or a system of belief.) Over time, Luther saw that the church he loved refused to change and instead tried to threaten and intimidate him into turning against the truths he had learned (which meant turning against God). Reluctantly, he had to let go of his passion for the belief system or denomination of his childhood and youth.

His passion for God and for God’s truth and God’s faithful people led to a new and different form of worship that came to be called Lutheranism. Luther didn’t like this name. He is quoted as saying, “The first thing I ask is that people should not make use of my name, and should not call themselves Lutherans but Christians. What is Luther? The teaching is not mine. Nor was I crucified for anyone. How did I, poor stinking bag of maggots that I am, come to the point where people call the children of Christ by my evil name?” [Ebeling, Gerhardt. *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*. Translated by R.A. Wilson. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), p. 31.]

That passion for God, for truth, for grace, and for people swept the world in what we now call the Protestant Reformation, leading to the foundation of many new “churches,” that is for many new systems of doctrine and practice, but all true believers in the world are part of the body of Christ. Jesus said that He had “many sheep not of this fold,” meaning outside of Judaism (John 10:16). He could say the same of every human denomination.

So yes, passion for your denomination, so long as it does not depart from God or grace, is part of passion for the church, but more important is a passion for the ecclesia, the called-out ones—the body of believers. All believers. Passion for the church means a passion for people.

If we look at Christ’s life, we find that passion on display every single day of His life. We will look more deeply into His passion in our devotion.

DEVOTION

If you look through the gospels you will not find many (if any) places where Jesus seeks to build up Judaism. That's strange, when you think about it. He was, after all, the One who set up that system in the first place, giving the basics of sacrifice and prayer to Adam and Eve and their descendants, and then the full tabernacle system to Moses and the Israelites. Read Ex. 25:8, 9 and Heb. 8:5. What was the earthly tabernacle (or tent of meeting) a copy of?

By Jesus' time, the Jewish system had long since become merely a daily round of rituals, the same as they had been for hundreds of years, with very little sense of the inner meaning of the services. Of course, God has always had faithful ones, and there were always a minority, both among the priests and among the people, who did understand and seek to make God's love a reality in their lives, through the rituals and services. The rest seemed to think that there was some kind of magic power in the rituals themselves, and as long as you did them perfectly according to the rules, it didn't matter how you lived, or how loving you were—or weren't.

Jesus did much to combat this rule-keeping formality, and in that sense, did seek to purify and reform the Judaism of His day. In John 3, He asked Nicodemus why he, as a leader in Israel, didn't understand these eternal truths. But read what He said to the woman at the well, in the very next chapter. Read or have read John 4:23, 24. In what way does this build up the church? Was it the way they (or we) would expect?

God only instituted the sacrificial system as a temporary method of pointing toward the sacrifice of His Son as the true Lamb of God. It was a shadow, a sort of living, acted-out parable. The blood of lambs and goats had no power to save anyone. See Hebrews 10:4, also verses 12 and 13. Soon, that whole system would be obsolete.

So did Jesus have a passion for His church? Of course He did! His passion for those He loves is greater than we can even imagine, let alone imitate. All you have to do is look at how He showed love.

For church leaders: John 3, whole chapter; Luke 10:25-28. The term "lawyer" means a man versed in Jewish law. He was a leader in the church to whom Jesus reached out in love.

For church members: Luke 4:16 and onward, preaching in His home synagogue; all His sermons to the thousands who followed Him.

For those on the fringes: women with bad reputations, John 4, John 8, Luke 7:36-50; lepers, Matt. 8:1-4; Samaritans; Luke 17:11-19; demon-possessed people, Mark 5 and Luke 8.

We could find many, many more, and if we look to stories of our own time, there are thousands. Jesus has a passion for His church, revealed in His passion for people, including people who are not visibly members of His body—yet.

May God reform us to the point where we share that passion, and show it.

ACTIVITY SUGGESTION

1. Brainstorm some ideas of ways to share and show Jesus' passion for people.
2. Choose three, and go and do them.
3. Come together again at some point to share results.

SEVEN DAYS OF SOUL FOOD

SEVEN DAYS' WORTH OF DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind (Luke 10:27). To put it another way, body + heart + mind = one living soul.

We can't really divide ourselves into different sections, but it's useful to look at these different aspects of ourselves and be sure we have a well-balanced faith that uses all the avenues of a soul. Each of these starter kits will include a week's worth of food for your soul in each of these four methods of understanding and expression.

Write about each of the following in your prayer journal this week. Strive to use language of emotions, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY ONE: In your prayer journal, write your thoughts about passion for the church as it was before and after Luther, and as it is now. Do you have it? How do you show it? Is your passion for an institution, or for the God it worships and the people in it?

DAY TWO: *Heart:* Read 1 John 2:9-12. How does verse 12 make you feel? If you have been less loving than you wish, let this text comfort you. Now picture in your mind a person with whom you have a difficult relationship. Imagine that person when he/she was born, as an innocent baby, beloved of God. Would it help you to love that person if you remember that? Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and consider how God wants to work in your heart this week.

DAY THREE: *Mind:* Read Luke 10:25-37. As an expert in Jewish law, this man was a thinker. He was used to rules, and he probably wanted Jesus to give him a simple rule to add to his list so he could check it off and feel good. What story did Jesus answer with? Why do you think He did that? How does God want to work in your mind this week?

DAY FOUR: *Strength/body:* If you have access to the internet, look up “love and health” and see what you can learn about love making you healthier. Read Isaiah 58:11 and Prov. 14:30. What are the ways God wants to use your love for others to strengthen your body (and theirs) this week?

DAY FIVE: *Soul/spirit:* As you prayerfully ponder the heart/mind/body insights God has given you so far this week, write about why you think passion for others reforms us and makes us more whole.

DAY SIX: Passion for the body of Christ means passion for your family, community, and church, as well as for those outside those circles. What can you do this week to open the door to at least one person to enter that circle of love?

DAY SEVEN: Use day 7 to create something beautiful that reflects what you have learned.

- Write a poem or song or story.
- Create a poster.
- Write a letter.
- Paint or draw a picture.
- Make a sign.
- Do some sidewalk chalk art or writings.
- Build something.
- Create a podcast or blog post or Twitter post(s).
- Make food and give it to someone in need.

Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something.

Share the love!

a short skit

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A SHORT SKIT (ABOUT 10-15 MINUTES)

[References for this story are scattered, instead of being in one place as most of our skit stories have been, so they are listed here: Acts 18:1-3, 18-26; Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19-24; 2 Timothy 4:16-22.]

CHARACTERS

1. Priscilla
2. Aquila
3. Paul
4. Apollos
5. Some people for congregations or audiences
6. Narrator

PROPS

1. Some leather or cloth for Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila to pretend to work on.
2. A podium, lectern, desk or table for a speaker. Or it could be just a central chair. A Bible marked at 1 Cor. 16 and another opened to 2 Timothy 4.
3. A pitcher of water and a glass.

ACT 1

Scene: Some people are in a group in the middle of the front of the room, "being a city." You can get as creative with this as you like and have time for: they could be merely walking around, gesturing, silently pretending to talk, or you could even make a sort of little market street, with people pretending to buy and sell things. Priscilla and Aquila are there, working on their tents or selling them. They have the pitcher of water and glass with them. There must be some chairs there. Paul is over at one side of the room.

Paul: (Walking from side of room toward center front, sighing, maybe rubbing his back) I'm so tired! The people in Thessalonica caused an uproar, then came to Berea where people were actually accepting Christ and caused more trouble there. Then in Athens they were argumentative, and most of them just sneered at me when I told them Jesus rose from the dead. Well, at least a few believed. Praise God for that! I know Corinth won't be any better. Probably worse! It's a really wicked city. (He sighs.)

Priscilla: (Noticing Paul) look, Aquila, here comes a tired traveler. Let's greet him in Jesus' name.

(All others continue to silently masquerade their work or shopping while the following conversation takes place.)

Aquila: (Stands, if he isn't already standing)
Hello, brother, welcome! You look as if you've been walking a while. Here, have a seat.

Paul: (Sits gratefully. Priscilla hands him a glass of water.) Thank you. You are very kind.

Priscilla: We know how tiring traveling can be. We came all the way from Rome recently.

Paul: Rome! I've always wanted to go there. Why did you leave?

Aquila: Emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews. We had to leave.

Priscilla: We hope to go back someday. Why have you come to Corinth?

Paul: (Looks around at the others and sighs) It is a wicked city. It is very much in need of the story of Jesus the Messiah.

Priscilla: The Messiah! You know, we've heard some rumors about that. It isn't true, is it?

Paul: (Earnestly) Oh, it's true! It's the word of God for all, beginning with us Jews!

Aquila: We want to hear all about it. Why don't you stay with us?

Paul: I would be very grateful! I can earn my keep, too—I see you are tentmakers, and so am I!

(They get up and go away together. Others move chairs into rows at one side of front and sit down as if in synagogue.)

Narrator: So Paul stayed in Corinth with Priscilla and her husband Aquila. They were faithful Jews, and not only did they accept the story of Jesus with joy, but their passion for the people grew as great as Paul's. They, too, began to preach and tell the story, and in fact, they went to Syria by sea with Paul when he went. For reasons we don't know, they stayed in Ephesus when he went on to Caesarea and Antioch. They even started a church in their home, and since Priscilla is almost always named first when they are mentioned, it seems that she was the stronger character and leader, though of course we can't know that for sure. While they were in Ephesus and Paul was away, a great speaker named Apollos came to town.

Act II

Scene: Apollos stands before the people sitting in the chairs and raises his hands to speak. Priscilla and Aquila join the group.

Apollos: And so, my friend, John the Baptist was the one who pointed out Jesus of Nazareth as being the one God had promised to our fathers centuries before. John even baptized Jesus.. Some of his disciples became Jesus' disciples. I, too, have been baptized into repentance, as John said. I invite you to be baptized as well.

Priscilla: (In a low voice, as if she is whispering to Aquila, but be sure she can be heard) Aquila, he doesn't seem to know the whole truth. He's only talking about John's baptism.

Aquila: (Also "whispering.") Yes, and he hasn't mentioned the Holy Spirit once.

Priscilla: We don't want to embarrass him in front of people, though. Let's invite him to dinner.

(People get up and move away as if the meeting is over.)

Aquila: Brother Apollos, may we speak to you?

Apollos: (Smiling) Certainly!

Priscilla: We'd like you to come to our house. (The three walk away together slowly while having the following conversation.) Brother, we noticed you were speaking of John's baptism, but not of baptism into Christ.

Apollos: I don't know about that. Is there more?

Aquila: Oh, yes, much more! Do you know about the Holy Spirit?

Priscilla: Well, you see, after Jesus died, He sent the Holy Spirit to be with us always...(Her voice fades away and they walk to the side. While Narrator reads next section, Priscilla, Aquila, and a few others quietly move the chairs into a circle as if it's a living room, and gather in them. Priscilla has the Bible marked at 2 Tim. 4, and Aquila has the one marked at 1 Cor. 16.)

Narrator: We don't know exactly what Apollos preached about, but Acts in 18:24 and 25 we learn that he was "mighty in the Scriptures, fervent in spirit, and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus," but that he only knew about John's baptism. However, he listened with great interest to Priscilla and Aquila as they taught him the rest of the truth they knew, and accepted what they taught him. We know that he became a leader who also had a passion for the church because later Paul said in 1 Cor. 1:12 that some people were claiming to be "of Paul" and some were claiming to be "of Apollos." Paul reminded them that we're all only "of Christ," not of any one man. Reminds us of Luther, doesn't it?

Narrator sits down.

Act III

(Priscilla, Aquila, and the others look very sad, wiping away tears as if they have been crying.)

Priscilla: I just can't believe he's dead! (Others murmur and shake their heads sadly.)

Aquila: (Speaking with horror) The emperor had him beheaded! Oh, Lord, keep us strong!

Priscilla: At least we have his letters. Let's encourage ourselves by reading some of them.

Aquila: Look, remember this one that he wrote to Corinth while we were together? (Reads 1 Cor. 16:19-24, sadly.) Those were such good days!

Priscilla: We'll never forget them. Here's the last letter he wrote. Remember, he sent it to Timothy, and Timothy shared it with all of us. We've made copies, too, and sent them on to the churches. I remember thinking he sounded discouraged. Listen to this part. (Reads 2 Tim. 4:16.)

Aquila: Yes, I think we all knew then that his days were numbered. But he was still so compassionate, even to those who got afraid and deserted him. I was so touched that he made a point of greeting us by name at the end of that one. Paul was such a good friend. (Stops for a moment, putting his hand over his eyes. Then lifts his head.) But read on, Priscilla. The next bit is my favorite part.

Priscilla: (Reads verses 17-18. Remains silent for a minute, then raises her head, squares her shoulders, and says firmly) And so He will. God will rescue him, even from this evil deed of execution, and bring our brother Paul safely to His kingdom! Listen to how he ended the letter: (Reads verse 22.)

Aquila: (Also raises his head and squares his shoulders. Others in group do the same.) We must be strong. We must stand for God and His church just as Paul did. The Holy Spirit will be with us. Let us pray.

(This can be the closing prayer for the meeting if you wish.)