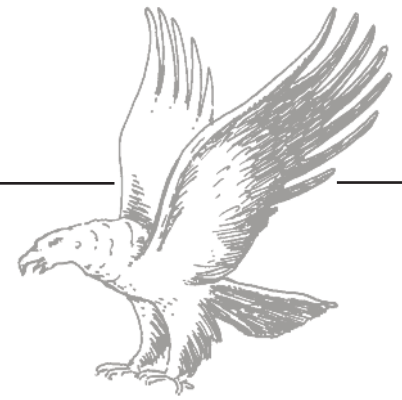


Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



December 6, 2015

Is One Church as Good as Another?

To hear some folks talk, it really doesn't matter which church we go to, so long as they believe in Jesus and the Bible. But there's more to a church than that, if we're serious about our faith.

“I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent” (Rev. 2:4-5).

To a culture that holds toleration as the ultimate virtue, these words of Jesus to the church at Ephesus are harsh. It contradicts the common view that one church is as good as another.

But the reasons for Jesus' condemnation of this church should not be hard to understand. Throughout history, for every good thing that God gives man, Satan offers a dangerous substitute. God presents Himself to man—but Satan distracts us with a host of false gods. God gives us a moral code to live by—but Satan gives us a more relaxed moral code, or no moral code at all. God gives us capable teachers to guide us—but Satan gives us false teachers whose smooth words will lead us astray.

It's no different with churches. God has given us the church as a vital source

of spiritual and social support. But not all churches discharge that role as they should. So conscientious disciples sometimes are confronted with a difficult decision: Do I stay in a group that has left God, or do I look for another group that still honors Him?

What criteria should we use in making such a judgment?

There are three tests that should be applied when evaluating a local church. First, *from what source does this group get their marching orders?* Most churches will say “God” or “the Bible”, but don't take their word for it. Listen carefully for clues indicating allegiance to an earthly institution or clique. If they really are using the Bible alone as their guide, we should expect to see vigorous discussions among the members over how to understand and apply its teachings. A group in which discussion is squelched in order to preserve the status quo is more likely to be a dead church stuck in a time warp.

Second, *what do they see as their mission in this world?* Here, too, glib responses like “to glorify God” or “to

defend the faith” don't really answer the question. Jesus was quite explicit in His description of what constituted our duty in this world: to love God and love our fellow man (Matt. 22:37-40). The New Testament epistles expand on how that love is displayed, both among ourselves and toward the world around us. If a group is more concerned about keeping house than aggressively impacting the world around it, they're probably not doing their job (in fact, they sound suspiciously like the church at Ephesus).

Finally—and most ironically—*do they display humility?* There are quite a few churches who, judging from what emanates from their pulpits and media, see themselves as models of righteousness, who have everything figured out. But just as with individuals, churches that cannot openly acknowledge their weaknesses and failings will never grow in their effectiveness.

No church is perfect. But some are definitely better (or worse) than others, and we should exercise wisdom when looking for one to work with. Our salvation could depend on it.

— David King