

ESSENTIAL CHURCH, PART 15: LOSING GOD

Luke 10:38-42; Revelation 2:1-5 (NASB)

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In this study series we have been endeavoring to answer a crucial question from the Bible: What makes a local church essential? This is actually two questions: From God's point of view, what are the essential attributes of the true church? We have to know what these are in order to fight for them.

The second question is: From the human point of view, what attributes of a local church lead people to conclude that participation is essential to their lives? What makes them reprioritize their lives to put their involvement in church high on the list?

The answer to both questions is the same. God is the essential element. If God is present and active, no earthly imperfections of any kind will keep people away. The early Roman church met underground in catacombs with the skulls and bones of generations moldering around them—in contradiction of every human church growth principle. The Calvary Chapel movement exploded among the hippies in the '60s and '70s using the uncool language of the King James Version of the Bible. Those two examples point to tens of thousands of cases where the palpable presence of God overcame every human obstacle.

That raises an obvious question: If God has promised to be present whenever and wherever his church gathers, why does not every local church have a growth energy which never stops? One of the answers is disturbing. It is possible for believers and believing churches to lose God. How can God be lost? you may ask. After all, he's everywhere!

We are currently watching God being lost to Western civilization. The *Time* magazine cover from April 8, 1966 demands to know: "Is God dead?" The death of God is a central topic in the writings of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. He wrote in story form of a madman: "Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market-place, and cried incessantly: 'I am looking for God! I am looking for God!' As many of those who did not believe in God were standing together there, he excited considerable laughter. 'Have you lost him, then?' said one. 'Did he lose his way like a child?' said another. 'Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? or emigrated?' Thus they shouted and laughed. The madman sprang into their midst and pierced them with his glances."

"Where has God gone?' he cried. 'I shall tell you. We have killed him - you and I. We are his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained the earth from its sun? ...How shall we, murderers of all murderers, console ourselves? That which was the holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us? With what water could we purify ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we need to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we not ourselves become gods simply to be worthy of it?'" (from *Joyous Wisdom*, aka *The Gay Science*).

Nietzsche was not saying that he believed in an objectively real God. He was saying that Western civilization has killed God by driving him out of all thought and life. He has become dead to each of us in our experience of reality. And the madman states the grimmest reality, that the loss of God entails the loss of every positive value which comes from God. The world becomes evacuated of the good, the beautiful, and the true. And the only solution to that problem is for humans to become gods ourselves to refill the vacuum we have created. This is, of course, impossible. Welcome to the West, where the accumulated trauma of the abortion of fifty million unborn babies is not enough to stop us from doing it. Where, amidst the greatest social and scientific advances, we killed more people in one century than the wars of all history added together.

That's the lost world, you say. Christians could never lose God in that way. But surely we all understand that a church is a composite entity. What percentage of people in it are actually regenerate? As the number of actual believers declines the teaching and practices change. Pretty soon, just as Nietzsche's madman explained, God himself is out of the picture and has been replaced with all things human. The church becomes a club which is tediously all about its own members. The majority of churches in the West have gone that way.

One more time you may object that we are still talking about unbelievers. We—genuine believers in Christ—could never lose God, either as individuals or a local church.

THE PERSONAL LOSS OF GOD

An incident in the life and ministry of Christ tells a different story. Two faithful women named Mary and Martha came to have a regular ministry of hospitality to Christ and his traveling band. In Luke 10 we read: **"Now as they were traveling along, He entered a village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. She had a sister called Mary, who was seated at the Lord's feet, listening to His word. But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him and said, 'Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me'"** (Luke 10:38-40).

In this story, as so many others, we must be cautious to look for the main point and not over-interpret the details. Mary gave Jesus her full attention, and a place of high honor in her heart as displayed by sitting at his feet. Martha, on the other hand, paints for us a different picture. Yes, there was a lot to do to provide for the many disciples. Yes, there was the most important house guest of all time—the Messiah himself! With these things on her mind Martha piped up with a complaint about Mary's lack of assistance.

The text says that Martha was distracted, but it says so in the passive voice leaving us to guess what was doing the distracting. The burden of hospitality is not enough to explain Martha's state of mind. We can only take Martha's words at face value. God himself was in her house and she was focused on the merely human and earthly level rather than the Messiah of Israel, Savior of the World.

Jesus' next words reveal the components of her peevishness, which means "easily irritated, especially by unimportant things" (cf. dictionary.com, and below). He said: **"But the Lord answered and said to her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things...'"** (Luke 10:41). The first component is worry, which means "thoughts and images of a negative nature in which

mental attempts are made to avoid anticipated potential threats." Martha had focused on what might go wrong with her hospitality. That was her action. Then Jesus described her attitude, which he called bother or upset using a Greek word which means "to annoy especially by petty provocation."

This is a sad picture of peevishness. Peevishness is a sin. Let's all repent of it when we fall into it. But the emotional failure was not Martha's main failure, which was spiritual. For that moment, Jesus Christ, in whom all the fullness of deity dwells, was sitting in front of her and her attention was utterly and absolutely distracted from him and fixed on the human element. God was lost to Martha at that moment.

Don't tell me you've never seen this and you've never done it yourself! You've gone about your daily business fixated on someone or something other than God and Christ. As you drew that human, earthly thing closer to your eyes your view of Christ became blocked. You became all about the human element in life—the part least worthy of attention, and became critical and peevish. Me, too!

C. S. Lewis described this problem in an article called "First and Second Things." He wrote: "...By valuing too highly a real, but subordinate good, we...come near to losing that good itself. ...The woman who makes a dog the centre of her life loses, in the end, not only her human usefulness and dignity but even the proper pleasure of dog-keeping. ...It is a glorious thing [for a man] to feel for a moment or two that the whole meaning of the universe is summed up in one woman—glorious so long as other duties and pleasures keep tearing you away from her. ...You can't get second things by putting them first; you can get second things by putting first things first. From which it would follow that the question, 'What things are first?' is of concern not only to philosophers but to everyone" (C. S. Lewis, *Essay Collection: Literature, Philosophy, and Short Stories*, London: HarperCollins, 2000, p. 247).

The sequence goes like this. For whatever reason, you choose to put something else above God, even for a moment. Nietzsche was right to say that this act causes you to lose everything of value. Now the assignment of value and the production of satisfaction becomes your problem. As you stare at the thing which you have elevated you discover that it does not satisfy, but embitters. In the end you lose God and every good thing God has given you.

And so it is no wonder that my pastoral alarm bells ring wildly when I talk to Christians who only speak to me relentlessly about human and earthly things. Maybe our eyes have become fixated on earthly government, the church, moral failures of our society, or any other earthly thing. I sense a black shadow at that moment where the blazing light of God should be shining. And I share this struggle to keep my own eyes above the merely human level along with everyone else.

Jesus prescribed actions of faith we must choose to counteract this universal tendency. He concluded his admonition to Martha with the following words: "**...But only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her**" (Luke 10:42).

Only essential Christians can form an essential church, and we may discern three things essential Christians do. The first is that we "**choose the good part,**" meaning that we put first things first, and God is the unique preeminent thing in the universe! Second, we adopt the life posture of the person who has put God in first place by being "**seated at the Lord's feet.**" Finally, we actively receive what the Lord is telling us by constantly "**listening to his word.**"

The punch line of this story is not that Martha should have stopped what she was doing, but that she should have done it in such a way that it displayed that in her life, first things were first and second things were second. Then she would not have lost God for a moment, and her service would not have caused her worry and bother.

THE LOSS OF GOD BY A CHURCH

So it is possible for individual orthodox Christians to lose God, at least for a time. One might call it temporary spiritual insanity. But what about a solid Bible-teaching local church? For the answer to that question we turn to the message of Christ to the church in Ephesus which is found in the book of Revelation: **"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: 'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place-- unless you repent. Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate'"** (Revelation 2:1-6).

In this apocalyptic picture Christ is the One, he is holding the seven stars which are the leaders of seven historic churches in his hand, and he is walking among the seven lampstands which represent the divine establishment of these churches. It is a picture of the headship of Christ over his body, which is the Church.

Let us remember that the church in Ephesus, which is in modern-day Turkey, became the epicenter of an explosion of church growth. The body of Christ grew rapidly in Ephesus proper, but it also spun out daughter churches in many surrounding cities. Many miracles were done there, the apostolic teaching of the word of God was their solid foundation, and the church thrived.

We see from Jesus' commendations of the church in this passage that they worked hard for the kingdom and persevered in the faith. The church had a sound moral foundation and was willing to take action to exclude evil people. The church used its excellent foundation in truth to test the claims of leaders, causing them to reject some who were falsely claiming to be apostles. In their hearts they shared the hatred of Christ for the falseness of the Nicolaitans, who were probably a sect teaching that the forgiveness of Christ gave them license to indulge their lusts. We should add to this that the church must have possessed a well-rounded overall ministry of teaching, discipleship, worship, prayer, and evangelism, all done with great zeal in a pagan city which resisted the church at every point.

And yet they had lost God, as Christ explained: **"But I have this against you, that you have left your first love."** How is it possible for them to be doing all of the things we just listed and lose God? It does not say that they were doing sinful things. Just the opposite. And yet in spite of their good works and sound teaching they received an existential threat from Christ himself: **"... Remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to**

you and will remove your lampstand out of its place." The lampstand of a local church is its divine right to exist, its commission from the Lord. Christ was threatening to shut them down.

The inevitable conclusion is that even a sound, dedicated church can lose God by focusing on things the church is doing as ends in themselves. Programs can take on a life of their own. Sometimes the vibe or feel of a church becomes paramount. Doctrine can become an end in itself. And—dare I say this in church with the middle name "missionary?—even the mission of the church can be wrongly construed as a primarily human activity to be pursued through human means.

To that God says: Farewell. The second things have been put in first place with the result that both the first and second things are lost. Do you know what happens to believers in a church like that? Spiritual starvation, because programs, vibe, teaching, and mission cannot feed the human soul in the absence of God. God himself is the essential thing for the true church, the church we all want to attend.

Let me be frank. Our local church faces this existential challenge. I have never been in a church which has pushed me violently so often to focus on the human and earthly level. Even when we have a powerful worship time on Sunday where the voice of God has resounded in our souls, I often come back to a church on Monday morning which is all about human problems, complaints, committees, reports, programs, staff issues, and organization. And we are a good church—even a great church with a marvelous heritage.

This does not make us worse than any other church on the planet. If Jesus had to speak this way to the Ephesian church which dwarfs us in every respect, then the danger of losing God by focusing on the second things is an issue for every church.

Jesus' admonishment to this church is the same as what he gave to Martha and could be paraphrased like this: Keep going, but do everything you do because I'm first in your life and you love me above everyone and everything, even life itself. Every time you find yourself putting second things in first place, repent of that sin, turn from it, and resolve it do it no more.

Jesus said that putting second things first causes us to lose God, and Nietzsche was right in seeing that the loss of God entails the loss of the meaning of everything. Surely Western society is experiencing the loss of the meaning of everything. Perhaps our first inkling that we are losing the preeminence of God is a sense of dissatisfaction with the second things. Our Bible study will go flat, our prayers will seem lifeless, and worship becomes a duty.

Only essential Christians can have an essential church. Put God at the top of everything in your life, love him from the heart above all things, and receive his word with a grateful heart. If those things are true of us, then the presence of God will be sensed among us and it won't matter what the second things are like. We will see the second things as the means to the end for which God gave them to us, which is to glorify him and point us to himself.

And the sweetness of God will then bind us together with a bond which can never be undone, because we would never willingly give it up. **"O taste and see that the Lord is good!"**