

## ESSENTIAL CHURCH, PART 2: ALL ABOUT THE KING

Luke 19:28-44 (NASB)

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This is the second message on the subject of the essential church. There are two meanings of the word "essential" in this context. First, what are the essentials for a church to be healthy and dynamic? Second, what kind of church do people find to be essential to their lives—a church which engages their hearts and minds and gives them a powerful motivation to stay connected to the body of Christ?

These questions became crucial for Dr. Albert Benjamin Simpson, the founder of The Christian and Missionary Alliance, of which our church is a member. He began his ministry in the mid-1800's in a good church, and moved once or twice within the same denomination. But it eventually became clear to him that God was calling him to direct evangelism of the multitudes of people in New York City, especially the burgeoning immigrant population. He later wrote of his church in New York: "For two years I spent a happy ministry with this noble people, but found after a thorough and honest trial that it would be difficult for them to adjust themselves to the radical and aggressive measures to which God was leading me. What they wanted was a conventional parish for respectable Christians. What their young pastor wanted was a multitude of publicans and sinners" (*All for Jesus*, p. 44).

So he left to find the essential church, which for him meant a church which would be able to absorb and disciple people from every background. One of his former churches was patterned to disallow low-income people, especially blacks, from attending. This infuriated Simpson. He later wrote: "God put it on my heart to prove that it was practicable and I left my church to form a church for the people of all classes based on absolute freedom. ...My plan and idea of a church [is one] comprising thousands of members of no particular class, but of the rich and poor side by side." Furthermore, his idea was that to be an essential church the focus must relentlessly be upon Jesus only and his gospel. Simpson wrote a hymn to drum this concept into people's minds called *Jesus Only*. He insisted that "every program, every activity, every organization in the church...had first to serve the function of evangelism" (*All for Jesus*, pp. 51-52 *passim*).

To this end he structured his outreach and worship services to give people the maximum access to Christ with the fewest distractions and hindrances. As the Alliance history *All for Jesus* records: "...Simpson made sure the services were anything but tiring to the public. Music played a key role, both group singing and special renditions. The pastor kept his sermons short and refused appeals for money. Also lacking: any put-downs of other churches or groups" (*All for Jesus*, p. 53). You can see that while Simpson refused to speak ill of other churches, he also had a strongly held belief that there were many hindrances to the unchurched and new believer in most established churches, and he sought to pare these away for the sake of leading people to Christ and incorporating them into the body.

### WELCOMING THE KING—OR NOT?

A fascinating case study on the difference between human religious expectations and the express will of God is the day when Jesus Christ finally allowed his disciples and an entire multitude of hangers-on to acclaim him publicly as Messiah the King. We usually call this moment in history the Triumphal

Entry. But our familiarity with this account must not be allowed to conceal for us the complexity of spiritual motivations for what happened. I remember as a young believer thinking: "Yay, Jesus, you finally stopped telling them to keep quiet about you and the people finally gave you the honor you deserve!" That's not exactly what happened. Luke's account of the event reads: **"After He had said these things, He was going on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When He approached Bethphage and Bethany, near the mount that is called Olivet, He sent two of the disciples, saying, 'Go into the village ahead of you; there, as you enter, you will find a colt tied on which no one yet has ever sat; untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, "Why are you untying it?" you shall say, "The Lord has need of it."' So those who were sent went away and found it just as He had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, 'Why are you untying the colt?' They said, 'The Lord has need of it.' They brought it to Jesus, and they threw their coats on the colt and put Jesus on it. As He was going, they were spreading their coats on the road. As soon as He was approaching, near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the miracles which they had seen, shouting: 'BLESSED IS THE KING WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD; Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!'"** (Luke 19:28-38, caps in orig.).

Luke's account is probably one reason why I thought that all of the many people in the multitude were all agreed that Jesus is King because Luke calls them all disciples. He's the only one of the four gospel writers who does that. And yet some of those who acclaimed him as king showed up at another gathering in his honor in Jerusalem a few days later and shouted something else: "Crucify him!" By the time of the crucifixion, this multitude was down to a hundred and twenty

This should give us pause when we see huge events in Jesus' name. The true motivations of a crowd may be very different from simple faith. The crowd in Jerusalem included many people who had traveled to Jerusalem for Passover. Christ may have been a vacation entertainment for some of them: "Hey, while we're here, let's check out this Jesus guy we've heard so much about!"

And Jesus had not disappointed them! While the crowds were in Jerusalem he had restored the sight of a blind man named Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52). That would have caused quite a stir by itself, but then Jesus did one of his greatest miracles in calling Lazarus forth from the tomb after three days of death had already begun rotting his body. What a sensation it must have been to have participated in the suspense as Jesus commanded the stone to be rolled away from the tomb and to hear him say: "Lazarus, come forth!" And then to see the dead man stumble out of the tomb still wrapped in his grave clothes! If I had seen that, I would have joined the multitude and thrown my coat down on the ground for his donkey to walk upon. It would have been quite natural to let the palm branches fly and shout along with everyone else.

And yet that would not have made me a disciple. Yes, there were true disciples in the crowd who not only hung on Jesus' teachings but obeyed his commands as their Master. It takes both to be a true follower of the Lord. But where did most of them go just a few days later? The crowd, most of whom could not have been with Jesus enough to know his teaching firsthand, would have been thinking that these miracles were proof that Jesus of Nazareth was the military Messiah for which they had been yearning to deliver them from the oppression of the Roman rulers. Then Jesus rode in on the wrong animal in the wrong spirit of humility trailing a retinue not of soldiers but a ragtag band of outcasts. This would have been the first reason for disappointment.

Then he did not follow up this triumphal entry into the capital city of Israel with the kind of moves a military leader might make. Many no doubt thought: *Well, Jesus, you had us going there for a while but you turned out to be another fake who was unable to do what we all want and need.* That disappointment would have been very easy for the murderous Jewish leaders to convert into hatred and mob rule. Such is the nature of human expectations. When we have our hearts set on something and we do not get it we can turn in a flash from hope to anger, from acceptance to rejection. So was this crowd welcoming Messiah the King, or not? A minority were certainly doing so—the true disciples who had a glimmer of what Christ was all about. But the majority were welcoming a king of their own imagination. For them it was an exercise in human expectations and desires.

Now we see that as believers in Christ we have a great challenge to discern motivations, starting with our own. Why are we doing what we do when we participate in worship of the King of Kings? Are we worshiping the King or is there a dangerous admixture of human expectations and desires which will cause us to stumble if we do not get what we want? By definition, essential Christians relentlessly focus on the will of the King above all personal desires, and so do essential churches. A. B. Simpson's decision to pare down the human religious aspect of his ministry has so far resulted in a movement of millions of people in over seventy countries. That should get our attention. It's all about the King.

## LIVING THE DIFFERENCE

Did the King himself know about the confusion in the multitude? Never forget that God sees the heart. In an earlier collision with the Pharisees Jesus revealed his awareness of the difference between outward religious acts and true worship from the heart: "**And He said to them, 'Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: "THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN'"**" (Mark 7:6-7). Are you prepared for Jesus to confront the same thing in your own life? Are you prepared for him to confront this in our own church?

You may find this odd, but this was my first "life verse." As a young believer I looked at Christ and saw purity and perfection, and I looked at his church—of which I was now a member—and saw compromise and confusion. At first I wondered: *Does Jesus know what we're really like?* And then I read this verse and knew that he does. I also wondered: *Who is going to protect me from the mixed up Christians?* And then I read this verse and knew that Jesus would. I cannot tell you how much it encouraged me to know that the King I worshiped was all about authenticity.

The group event we call the Triumphal Entry appeared to honor the King, but the hearts of many were far away from him. We must realize that there is no transformational power in events. Events can be a powerful pointer. That's the best they can be! But sometimes they are not even up to that. Have you ever sat in a church service or church event and thought: *We have to protect the new Christians from this!* That is exactly what A. B. Simpson thought. For example, Simpson ministered right after the Emancipation Proclamation which permanently freed American slaves. Most churches in the South still excluded African-Americans, and many churches in the North built balconies so the white Christians did not have to sit with the black Christians.

While Simpson did not address this issue on a political level, he did so on a church level. He stared the monster of racism in America in the face and his response was to cut away the human preferences and foolishness to establish an essential church on the following standard, as recorded in *All for Jesus*: "Giving testimony to faith in Christ and demonstrating a life consistent with that profession formed the only conditions for membership" (p. 53). That meant blacks and whites sitting together, field workers and professional people--people of every type whose earthly, fleshly characteristics were no longer the basis for fellowship. That radical challenge comes to us from our King as well. Are we all about honoring him with unquestioning obedience, or do we place conventional wisdom above his commands—our wisdom over his whenever it gets uncomfortable?

We have got to be ruthless with ourselves and repent of the sin of honoring our preferences above the will of the King. We have got to rebuke our wayward brethren, like the guy who told me only white shirts were allowed in church. I never heard about justification by faith from that man, but I learned about shirts. So far have we drifted from the will of our King in this matter today that catering to human preferences has become the main concept for church growth today. GIVE PEOPLE WHAT THEY WANT is the clarion call. I say that the essential church is all about giving the King what he wants.

I do not say that we should ignore cultural trends. We must incorporate them into our manner of communication because unless we do, no one will understand what we are saying. Even knowing the massive confusion of the crowd in Jerusalem Jesus finally permitted his public acclamation as Messiah the King after holding it back for years. Why did he do this? Think about what he communicated by agreeing to the Triumphal Entry. He communicated the fulfillment of prophecy that Messiah would do that very thing. He communicated that it was right for him to receive acclaim as the coming King. He communicated to the murderous Jewish leaders that he refused to back down from his claim to be the rightful Messiah King. And he knew these communications would drive events toward his eventual crucifixion in fulfillment of prophecy, the will of his Father, and his own will. It was an event which had to happen, as Christ explained: "**Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Him, 'Teacher, rebuke Your disciples.' But Jesus answered, 'I tell you, if these become silent, the stones will cry out!'"** (Luke 19:39-40).

And Jesus knew that the crowd was more representative of the national response of Israel to his presence than the small band of true disciples. Luke records: "**When He approached Jerusalem, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, 'If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side, and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation'"** (Luke 19:41-44). The *kairos* moment for Israel's King had come, and he knew that they would throw palm branches and shout hosannas but in their hearts they would not honor him. We also learn from the deep sobs of Christ what moves the heart of our King: the salvation of the lost.

Essential Christians learn how to live the difference between outward religious actions and genuinely obedient hearts which honor Jesus Christ as the King he really is. And only essential Christians can have an essential church, because if we will not commit ourselves to the crucifixion of our personal preferences we will always fill the environment with things which the King does not care

about or simply does not want. We will be all about palm branches and coats flung in the road. We will be all about us. When we construct worship events like A Vibrant Life Easter the goal is not to reduce worship to a lightweight palatable fluff which pleases people according to human preferences. Our goal, which reflects our DNA in The Christian and Missionary Alliance, is to maximize the accessibility of Jesus Christ the King by removing impediments.

So we may substitute a breakfast for Sunday School one Sunday. Not because discipleship is not critical to our mission, but because our class attendance may get in the way of getting our friends, family, and neighbors near Christ on that day. We maximize the welcome, we serve breakfast as an object lesson of grace, we shorten the worship service not merely to make it easy but to create a diamond sharp focus on the reason Christ wept: our King wants to be honored by our leading people to the salvation found only in him. It's what he's all about.

Even the most focused believer among us needs to confess, on a regular basis, that the sin of personal preferences which mean nothing to our King keep creeping into our religious lives and distracting ourselves and others from him. You should consider giving up requesting that old hymn that only you know how to sing. You should consider forgetting about playing heavy metal praise songs in church. You should consider that your politics may be in the way of honoring the King. Your personal take on worship clothing or church decoration may need to be confessed as an impediment and cast on the flames.

Do we really want to face Christ at his return and say: Lord, our human preferences may have kept a lot of people out of church but we sure enjoyed ourselves? Our founder, A. B. Simpson was not willing to say that. The Alliance was born because Simpson did not want to be all about the human things. An essential church is all about the King. I invite you to go on a journey with me to recapture our DNA as a local church. It will cost us something, but the payoff will be immeasurable for the Kingdom of Our Lord and Savior.

May this be our song, as Simpson's hymn, *All for Jesus*, goes:

Jesus only is our message,  
Jesus all our theme shall be;  
We will lift up Jesus ever,  
Jesus only will we see.

Jesus only, Jesus ever,  
Jesus all in all we sing,  
Savior, Sanctifier, and Healer,  
Glorious Lord and coming King.

(*Hymns of the Christian Life*, Harrisburg: Christian Publications, Inc., 1978, p. 398)