

“...not your own doing...”

The church is different things to different people. A refuge. A nuisance. A social anchor. A place of learning. A challenging, complicated organization. A lifeline.

The church also ***intends*** different things at different times. The church has been rescuer and oppressor; champion of tradition AND a catalyst for radical change. A safety net. An accuser. And occasionally, a marker of hopefulness.

We are guided in this (we say) by the Spirit – and we follow (we claim) the pattern laid down by Jesus. Clearly this is harder than it sounds.

It is also easier than we make it look.

There are those who cannot see past the harm done by religion (of any kind.) - people who refuse to imagine that there could ever be such a thing as divine grace – let alone abundant life in the service of God. **The blame for that falls squarely on the institutions that are built on expressions of faith** – the generations of people who were certain that they were acting in good faith.

People who trampled different cultures and vilified other expressions of faithfulness. People (who maintained the institutions) that promoted and approved of slavery, colonialism, and toxic masculinity. The church (and that means all of us) has, down the years, presented doctrine and dogma that reduced certain people, ideas, or cultural expressions, to positions of ‘lesser-than.’ We need to recognize that, own it, and repent of it.

We make the mistake of hearing the third chapter of John’s gospel as an ultimatum. Believe or perish.

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We lean in to the sentiment by making the preceding verse the most widely known bit of Scripture in the Christian world. **John 3:16.**

We hold this verse out as the simple key: Believe and live!

But what we do to encourage that belief is often reprehensible.

We paint non-believers as enemies. We insist that OUR way is, not only the best way, but the only way to recognize God. We forget that world into which Christ comes is loved by God. We presume that it is our job to see that no one fall prey to evil – never mind that – as Ephesians reminds us – ‘we were by nature children of wrath.’ Too often our enthusiasm for the hope that God offers in Christ shows itself in harmful behaviours. This is OUR own doing, and the church is what it is today because of all of that.

But I have good news. WE have good news.

The gospel is **not** simply whatever we say it is. The gospel is the story of God’s intervention in the world, understood, in every age, in ways appropriate to the time and place. The gospel is still proclaiming itself, wherever compassion and hopefulness, and generosity and love are being shown. The gospel is not an ultimatum. The gospel is an open invitation.

Paul is desperate for us to understand this. The reminder, in his letter to the Ephesians, of our inclination to wickedness is not a trick – it is an observation of the human condition.

We don’t need to look far to see that he was on to something.

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He is speaking to folks who have seen evidence of God’s activity in the world; folks who have heard of Jesus and his teachings – his life and death and resurrection. Jesus’ story has brought hope to their circumstances, and Paul reminds them – twice - that this hope comes by God’s grace.

The folks who made up the church (as it was) in Ephesus did not rescue themselves. They do not hold the patent on the good news.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Created IN CHRIST for good works. Encouraged IN CHRIST to lay aside our inclination to wickedness. Our goodness is not our own – it is a gift from God.

Jesus lived, died, and rose to show us another way. His default was God-centered. His approach was grace-filled. He understood the nature of God’s gift – he embodies God’s gift – and invites us to receive that gift. Jesus wants our lives to be changed by grace, and grace is not coercive. It cannot be forced. That is our mistake.

In an attempt to demonstrate our faithfulness, we hold out an all-or-nothing proposition. Repent or perish. But grace is subtle and pervasive. God’s grace does its own work – opening minds and changing lives.

It is revealed in those changed lives – loving hearts – cheerful, hopeful followers of Jesus. Not our work, but God’s work. And that will make all the difference.