

Ugly Religion in a Beautiful Church

by Jerry David

Everyone wants a beautiful church. We want to build them and we want to attend them. But the real question is “Are these beautiful churches just as beautiful inside? I am not talking about the color of the carpet or the chairs in the sanctuary. I am not asking about the baptistery or the babies’ room, not the sights or the smells. I am talking about the religion. Is it a beautiful religion?”

We read in Acts 3 the following account: “*And a certain man lame from his mother's womb was carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, to ask alms from those who entered the temple.*” There was something about this temple with the gate called Beautiful that gained the attention of all who came near.

So beautiful was the temple and its gate that history tells us that Herod turned the temple into one of the wonders of the known world. Its doors were 60 feet high, and the gate was 75 feet high, adorned with thick plates of silver and gold. The altar of the temple was bronze; the walls of the temple were cedar, and the floors were cyprus. Imagine the spectacular beauty of the polished bronze, gold and silver. It is not difficult to see why the temple and the gate within qualified it to be referenced to as “a beautiful church”.

Even in the midst of tremendous beauty, reasons for joining a church should never be based on the fact that it was artistically designed and beautifully constructed. As the account in Acts 3 illustrates, in the presence of that which is pleasing to the eye, one can also see that which is pathetic. In the sight of that which is called “beautiful” can be seen that which is actually “ugly”.

Peter and John were on their way to the temple, where amid the brilliant rays of polished gold and silver of the Gate Beautiful lay a man who had been lame since birth – a man who had apparently become part of the scenery as he laid by the gate and asked for alms day after day.

The pathetic ugliness of this picture stems not from the beggar or from his condition but rather from the ugly religion that surrounded him. The ministry of Jesus was about the business of making broken men whole, and religion becomes ugly whenever it sees suffering and doesn’t do anything about it – when it can’t do anything about it.

If the church ever comes to the point of being unable to do anything when it sees suffering, the question becomes “who is the lame man?” If the church steps over the lame man, is that, in fact, an acknowledgment that it has become impotent and incapable of altering the affairs of those for whom it was sent. When the church is lame, we are left to limp along on the crutches of contented Christianity, our ankles of activity tied up by the bandages of apprehension and fear.

What kind of religion do we have? We serve a Savior Who healed us by His stripes, but when was the last time we prayed for someone's healing? We serve a Physician Who has medicine in the hem of His garment, but when was the last time we helped someone to touch that garment? We serve a God Who is able to feed 5,000 with two fish and five loaves of bread, but when was the last time we fed the people in our own backyards?

Whenever the church assumes the prerogatives of the past and fails to appropriate the priorities of the present, the church will find itself on a collision course with the very One Who called the church into being!

But the course can be changed, as it was in Acts 3. Something occurred there that brought about a balance between theology and sociology and permitted a blend of action and attitude. When Peter and John saw the lame man lying at the Gate, Peter looked him in the eye and said, "Look on us!" Peter was in effect saying, "Look at us. We're a testimony of what God can do! You're not the only one to be crippled. God can still make something out of you! If you don't believe it, just look at me. I've never been in school and I was never that big on religion. The first time I made a testimony, Jesus had to change my name. He actually called me Satan and told me to get behind Him! When Jesus took James and John and me to pray one night, we all fell asleep! When the Lord foretold that I would deny Him, sure enough, I denied Him three times! And yet He used me...in spite of me! He's used me to preach the Gospel and see thousands of souls saved. So don't look down on yourself. Look up at me, and you'll see that I'm a testimony of what God can do in your life."

Peter exemplified to the lame man the result of experiencing the presence of beautiful religion in one's life. If the church is to have a beautiful religion, it must have a beautiful example.

Added to the presence of a beautiful example is the need for a sense of expectancy. Acts 3 says that the lame man "gave them his attention, expecting to receive something from them." Every time we come to church, we ought to come expecting to receive something. When our way has been rough all week long, we come expecting someone to tell us about a Way-Maker! When our friends have turned their backs on us, we come expecting to hear about a friend that sticks closer than a brother. When we don't know where our next dime is coming from, we come expecting to hear about the windows of heaven that will open up and pour out a blessing.

Beautiful religion must also have an exchange. Peter said to the man, "Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give to you." Then it says he took him by the right hand and lifted him up. If people walk into our church services with baggage and walk out with the same baggage, we have just been playing a kind of ugly religion in a beautiful church. If the church doesn't exercise the power of prayer and doesn't walk in the power of the Word, that's ugly! If the church is all talk and no walk, if it's long on what it says and short on what it does, that's ugly! If the church is more interested in its look than its mission, that's ugly! If the church is unwilling to look upon suffering or is impotent to minister to the situation, that's ugly!

If the church is to have a beautiful religion, it must connect itself solely to Jesus. Peter admitted that he had no silver or gold, but what he did have was the Name of Jesus.

This connection is the very basis for beautiful religion. We can model a beautiful example because Jesus has done a great work in our lives. We can enter the doors of our churches with expectancy because Jesus has promised in His Word that He will meet us. We can make an exchange because Jesus did a complete work for us on the cross.

Once we are connected solely to Jesus, we are endued with strength – like the lame man. He had never walked yet he received strength and immediately stood up and began to walk and leap and praise the Lord. Our families, our neighbors, our churches, our cities need this strength. But they will not find it in a beautiful church. They will find it in a beautiful religion.