

Are things going to get any better for the Church

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[0 : 0 0] Those of you who know a thing or two about marketing will know all about the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements.

That's where you get a successful person to promote a product, and then all of a sudden your product is successful by association. So for example, Roger Federer or Rafael Nadal are paid millions of dollars to promote certain products.

Even things like pasta and coffee, which has nothing to do with tennis. But all of a sudden, Barilla Pasta is really good because Roger Federer cooks with it.

The same goes with movie stars and certain fashion brands. On the other hand, when someone falls from grace, you see these organizations disassociate with them as quick as you could say boo, right?

These are quite superficial ways of gauging whether an organization is successful, but that's how people do it, don't they? Based on outward appearances and association.

[1 : 1 2] And judging on those terms, you could conclude that things aren't looking good for the church. After all, if you look at the latest Australian census, it's revealed that the number of people identifying as Christians has now fallen to 44% of the total population.

Now this percentage, mind you, has been falling for a few decades now. So it's not new. Part of this, I think, is just due to the fact of immigration. We are now a more multicultural society and country.

And the people that have arrived don't necessarily have Christianity as part of their history. But it's also partly explained, I think, by more people not willing to identify as Christians anymore, even though in the past they might have done so for cultural reasons.

And this is confirmed by falling Sunday church attendances. And those people who do attend are generally older. Although, thankfully, looking out today, that's not true of this congregation.

And even where Christians still condescending themselves as Christians, they may not always associate themselves with a church. And so the church itself, the body of believers, might not look very healthy as a result.

[2 : 3 2] And then to this, we add the recent revelation of scandals and abuse, which is rightly exposed to be exposed. And that makes it look even more dire, doesn't it?

We have to say that, thankfully, the church is now more vigilant, whereas I think in the past we may have been a bit too trusting and naive of everyone. And therefore became easy targets for predators, just like wolves know where to seek out where the vulnerable are.

Anyway, given all this media attention on the church, it may leave many to conclude, doesn't it, that the church is on its way out or on its way to an end.

But the question is, is it? Is the church really dying? Now, if you use measures of success like bumps on seats and financial giving and all that kind of stuff, then yes, perhaps it is.

And to some extent, too, as well, there is a knock-on effect, isn't it? Because if that in itself deters Christians to offer themselves to become pastors or ministry workers, then it becomes a bit of a vicious cycle, doesn't it?

[3 : 44] Where there are less people to do the work, and then therefore the church, which needs people to do the work, suffer as a result and are unable to grow. Now, there is also, I think, one other big reason why people may be turned away from church, and that's the view that the Bible can no longer be true because it's been disproved by science.

All the things that are in it about gender and sexuality are just outdated. Now, these are valid intellectual questions that shouldn't be dismissed.

But I have to say that if you have these questions, then it's important to discover what the Bible actually says about them, not based on hearsay from what other people write about what the Bible says.

Because sometimes people have a preconceived agenda or take the Bible out of context. That's why, as Steph was advertising, we're starting a course beginning next week called Christianity Explored.

In it, we get to explore the Bible for itself and help people understand the claims of Jesus and the claims about Him directly in the Bible.

[4 : 58] So you get to ask your questions, and then you make up your own mind. So if you're interested, then we're starting next week on the 7th of August at 3 o'clock right here down in one of the rooms across the building.

Come and talk to me afterwards. We'd love to have you join us. But one of the things the Bible talks about is the church itself. Jesus Himself makes claims about the future of the church.

And so today, I want to look at a couple of these claims so that we understand where the future of the church lies and also realize why the church is where it is at the moment.

I think we can understand that from what God is saying in His Word. And then the question is, are things as bad as they seem? Now, you may not be a church member at the moment.

You may have just come today being invited by someone. I invite you to just come along for the journey anyway. Then you can draw your own conclusions afterwards. So in your outline, let's look at the first passage, which is in Matthew 28, verse 18 to 20.

[6 : 03] This is at the point where Jesus, the risen Jesus, is about to ascend into heaven, and He gives His disciples final instructions. These disciples form the nucleus of the church, which will grow and multiply into what we see today.

So on the slide, if you don't have it in front of you, Matthew 28, verse 18, Jesus came to them and said, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded.

And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. What we see in Jesus' words here are two things. There's a purpose, and then there's a promise.

He leaves His church with a very clear purpose, to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Now, baptism here isn't just about the water, the sprinkling or the immersion.

That's merely the physical symbol of incorporating a believer into the body of Christ, that is the church. Incorporation, then, is the more important element or aspect of baptism.

[7 : 19] But it's within this context of incorporation into the church that Christ's teaching occurs. It's within the church that God explains His word, so that it can be applied and then lived out.

And because so much of the Bible teaches, what the Bible teaches is about living well with others in community under the rule of Christ, the only place that this can be practiced properly is within the church.

Now, I often deceive myself into thinking, what a perfect person I am. And looking at me, you might be convinced. You know, I'm godly, I'm mature, I'm a pastor, you know.

I think I'm pretty perfect, until I step foot into the church each Sunday, or during the week, and have to start relating with others. And then I soon realize just, you know, how impatient I am, how insensitive I can be with the use of my tongue.

It's actually not easy, is it, to belong to a church, because it does bring out the truth about us. Uncomfortable truth, doesn't it? But it's also in this very setting that God is able to train me up to obey what Christ has commanded.

[8 : 43] And so with this purpose in mind, for the church, God then also gives us a promise, and Jesus Himself does. And the promise is this, Jesus Himself will be with the church, always, until the end of the age.

Now He's not, of course, here with us physically, He's here in the person of God's Spirit. But it's a great promise, isn't it? A promise of great comfort, because it means that the Lord Jesus wouldn't forsake His church.

He will remain with us. He will empower us to do the work that He set for us, even when things may not be looking so good.

But the question is, who does this promise apply to? Is it anyone that just gathers together, calls themselves a church, that the promise is for them, that Jesus is with them and will not forsake them?

Well, I think the answer lies back in the purpose, doesn't it? Because this promise is for those who pursue Jesus' purposes for them. That is, those who fulfill this great commission of making disciples of Jesus and teaching them to obey everything that the Lord Jesus commands.

[10 : 01] Where a church is doing this, then Jesus' promise, I think, is with them. And His presence will be with them. Now, how do you tell this? Well, I think there are two signs.

First, we can tell if a church is doing this, if firstly, they are taking the Bible seriously. Because you can't obey what you don't know, can you?

So, if you teach the Bible, then we will know what Jesus is commanding us to do. So that's the first sign. The second sign is then whether they are putting it into practice and taking that work seriously.

Now, that's not to say that Jesus' promise guarantees that there will always be success in the sense that if a church does this, then it will keep growing in numbers and all will be well.

That's not the promise, is it? Rather, the promise is an assurance that whatever the church is facing, Jesus will remain faithful to those who remain in Him.

[11 : 02] After all, God looks at His church, I think, with the big picture in mind. Right? We might think of our church as just this congregation or even just this church, people who come to this building.

But really, God's promise here, His plan for the church, is the universal church. Not just a single church like Holy HTD or St. John's.

And so, even though we're gathered in different churches, organized ourselves locally into local churches, God works out His plan for His universal church.

Now, He does it through the work of individual churches, of course, but at the end of the day, there is only one body of Christ. It's not like there are many little bodies and then Christ is the head of each of them.

No, there's only one head, Christ, and then one body of Christ. And so, that brings me to the other passage which was read today by Brendan in the New Testament, John's Gospel in chapter 15.

[12 : 04] Because Jesus describes Himself there as the vine and the disciples, the church, as the branches that grow from Him. So, let's look at it again and see what Jesus says.

On the screen as well, I am the true vine and my Father is the garner. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit. Well, every branch that does bear fruit, He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me and as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself. It must remain in the vine.

Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine. You are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit.

Apart from me, you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers. Such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

[13 : 03] If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

Now, let me just unpack a bit of what Jesus is saying here but the central image or analogy isn't hard to understand. Jesus is the true vine.

Meaning every other vine is false. And those branches that remain in Jesus are also true. But notice the process of gardening that the Father undertakes here.

There's cutting off. There's pruning. Now, what for? In order to ensure ongoing fruitfulness. Now, I don't know how many of you out there are gardeners.

Anyone? Yes? A few? Not many actually. Maybe too busy with your social life to be out in the garden. But all gardeners will understand what I'm saying as to how this works.

[14 : 11] If you're a gardener, then you know pruning is essential for the health of a plant. Isn't it? In fact, sometimes if you happen to go into maybe your parents' garden or something and you look at the rose bush at the moment, the pruning can be very aggressive, can't it?

So that, you know, the only thing that's left really is that little stem that's poking out of the ground and a few thorns. Now, when you look at a rose bush like that in the depth of winter, it may appear like it's just dead wood, right?

But we know that come the new season, it would spring back into life and health with lots of leaves and flowers. What is happening is that the cutting off of dead branches and the pruning in the off-season serves the purpose of ensuring that all the precious nutrients in the soil are channeled towards producing the best fruit.

Without it, you know, a plant may sometimes have lots of leaves but no fruit. And Jesus makes it clear here that the branches that are being cut off and the branches that are remaining are two different things, aren't they?

It's those for whom in verse 7 Jesus' words remain in them, these are the branches that remain. These are the branches that will then bear fruit from it.

[15 : 42] And so, as with Matthew 28, it's all about being faithful, isn't it, to the teachings of the Lord Jesus. And so, if you look around the church in Australia, you know, ask yourself, is it a dying church that you're seeing?

Based on all the statistics and all that and, you know, what the media are always saying that the church is on the nose, are we seeing a church that's dying? Well, I think it depends on whether you're looking at the branches that are in the process of being cut off or you're looking at the branches that are being pruned.

And there's a big difference, isn't there, in terms of what God is doing. And sometimes, it is hard to tell. You know, if a church is responding to a crisis of decline or something like that, it may be discipline for moral failures, then what it needs to do is to repent and recommit itself to the Lord's purpose for it.

But at that point in time in the history of that church, we may not know what's going on sometimes, is it? It may be that the church will reject what the Lord's wanting of them and therefore end up being cut off.

On the other hand, it may, however, be that the church is responding, even though it's hard and may be losing members and all that kind of stuff, but it may be responding in repentance and obedience.

[17 : 07] In which case, what's happening is that this church is being pruned so that later on, in time, it will bear fruit if it remains in Jesus.

Now, I know that many people see the church and its failures and, you know, sometimes, when these things are happening in the church you're in or you see it in a church that your parents are in or whatever, it's tempting to leave, isn't it?

In a way, a lot of people say they never have a problem with Jesus. They only have a problem with His church. And in some ways, you can understand that reaction, can't you?

But really, leaving the church is not an option, is it? If what Jesus says here is true, then to remain in Christ requires us to be part of a community of believers, to be part of a church.

Because it's not practical, is it? If you're by yourself, as I said, you always think of yourself as perfect, aren't you? You need to be in a community of believers with other believers in order to live out Jesus' commands.

[18 : 19] Jesus is the single true vine. And we can't just all be individually connected to Him. We need to be connected to each other and together then, remain in Christ.

There's only one body of Christ, isn't there? You see, church isn't meant to be easy. That's why some people say it's not a hotel for saints.

It's a hospital for sinners. And Jesus Himself said this in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 2, verse 17, on the screen there. It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.

I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. And the Pharisees of Jesus' day, when they heard it, they hated it because they thought that they were the righteous. And they felt that Jesus was having a go at them for not receiving Him rightly.

But ultimately, pride and self-righteousness, that's the ultimate sin, isn't it? Jesus is right. He's come for the sinners, not for the righteous. And if we think we're righteous, then we don't need Jesus.

[19 : 26] We will think we don't need Jesus. We will think that we're better than others. So if we call ourselves Christians, then we mustn't fall into this mindset. We need to rightly repent and be humble, don't we?

Now some of you may be part of this growth group that I started, not started, but when we first met together as part of the Young Adults a long time ago, I suggested that we call ourselves Repenting Pharisees.

I don't know whether, is that still the name of that group? I hope you have stuck with it. And I said that the reason for that was that it's right to call ourselves Repenting Pharisees because we are all prone, aren't we, to be like the Pharisees, to be self-righteous.

And yet, if we say we are Repenting Pharisees, then what we're saying is that recognizing our tendency to be self-righteous, we keep reminding ourselves and humbling ourselves so that we repent of that.

You see, if we realize that church is a gathering of people who are deeply flawed, sinners, but graciously saved by God, then we will begin, don't we, to extend the same grace and forgiveness to each other.

[20 : 41] We will learn how to be patient and forbearing, to learn how to bear with one another's failings, and in the process to help each other to grow. We realize that church isn't easy, but we will take joy in it.

Why? Because we realize that the people gathered in it have all been saved, just like me and you, by the work of Jesus on the cross. We, each and every one of us, has received the same grace from God, not by our own works, not by our own righteousness, but only by God's mercy.

So, does the church of God have a future? Well, I believe absolutely, based on what Jesus has promised. But at times, it may look like a severely pruned vine.

Yet, it's the ones that remain on the vine that are the true branches, which will bear fruit in the end. And the Bible does warn us in that other reading in the Old Testament, that during such times, there will be testing.

At such times, there is a temptation to make the choice whether to remain in a vine that looks really pruned, or to just walk away, because it doesn't look like its success.

[22 : 04] We are being asked to decide, aren't we, whether to remain faithful and to persevere, or to let our hearts grow cold. And so Daniel warned in verse 10 of chapter 12, which was read by Jennifer, many will be purified, made spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be wicked.

None of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will understand. And so the question for us is whether we are wise enough to understand what's going on with us in the church, even when such times occur.

So, let me close by asking each of us to think where we might stand as far as this question is concerned. Now, if you don't yet belong to a church, then let me encourage you to stick with us and to look at the Bible and see if what we're saying is true.

And therefore, the church is part of the true vine in Jesus. If, however, you've been coming along to church and yet you're not fully committed, then let me encourage you not to be like that.

Because the idea of remaining in Christ requires us to be doing it consistently and in an ongoing fashion, isn't it? It's not about jumping in when you feel like it and then stepping out for a bit.

[23 : 25] That's not remaining in Christ, is it? Remaining means to be there consistently in an ongoing fashion, to be committed. So, let me challenge you.

if you're not doing that, to do that. Because, you know, when you see branches that are sort of like maybe heartbroken or whatever, that's not a good sign, is it?

The sign of being cut off, I think, is very real, the warning or the risk of being cut off. And even if you don't fully believe in Jesus just yet, let me encourage you to stick around for a period of time, because it gives you a chance, doesn't it, to be part of the community and to see how this Christian faith works itself out.

It's so easy to come in, see something not right, and I'm okay, let's move on. But no, that's not, as I said, that's not how the church works, is it? Because we're a community of grace, you come in and yes, you will see things that are wrong, but then allow us, or at least allow God, to show you how this process of grace, forgiveness, and growth works itself out.

And that takes time. It doesn't just happen and then something bad happens, next week it's all solved. No, this all takes time because we're all flawed, aren't we? But God is patient with us, and so that takes for people to stick around and see God doing that work of changing deeply flawed people into people that become more like Jesus.

[24 : 52] But I want to encourage you not to see the church just from its outward appearance. It may look like the church hasn't got a future, but you would be wrong to think that it's in terminal decline, because that's not what Jesus says is happening.

Rather, it may be undergoing a period of pruning, of having dead branches cut off. And yes, during that process, there will need to be repentance for moral failures, and those who don't repent will be cut off and tossed into the fire.

Yes, all those things will happen, but those who do will be preserved as branches, that going down, further down the track, will be very fruitful.

Not because we're great or whatever, because the Father is working to produce that fruit in us. I've got a slide here of a pruned apple tree.

Not very impressive, is it? Not very attractive. not even sure if it's dead or not.

[26 : 03] But then look what happens when it finally fruits. Not bad, isn't it? It doesn't just happen like that. God takes his time.

But that's the process of what's happening, isn't it? When there's pruning, and then one day, whether it's in this world or in the world to come, this will be the result of all those that remain in the true vine that is Jesus.

Let's pray. Father, forgive us as a church when we have done the wrong thing, and therefore you have needed to prune us in order to make us more fruitful.

Help us to be humble so that we are open to these times of chastening. Help us also not to lose heart even when we see the church we love struggling under such testing times.

But comfort us in the promise of Christ's presence with us, and teach us to keep making disciples of ourselves and of others, to learn and to teach others to do all that your Son has commanded us.

[27 : 13] In Jesus' name we pray.