

Getting the Essentials of the Church

Eph. 2:1-10, 19-22 1 Peter 2:4-9

The words "conspiracy" and "cell-group" have taken on rather ominous meanings in our post-911 world haven't they (this year is the 10th anniversary of WTC attack).

Even the definition of these words are frightening: a "conspiracy" is a secret agreement between a group of people to commit an illegal or subversive act -- and a cell-group of course is a small cluster of such conspirators.

So we U.S. citizens have been instructed to watch for suspicious activities – to look for conspirators planning any illegal or subversive acts against our country, our homeland.

But may I suggest to you (without be branded an anarchist) that not all conspiracies are bad, and not all cell-groups are evil. It all depends upon the culture or the laws which are being subverted.

In his day, Martin Luther was branded an enemy of the State, condemned to death and hunted throughout all of Europe. Had certain conspirators not risked their own lives to hide him – there would not a Protestant Church today.

And those who signed our Declaration of Independence were also conspirators their actions labeled subversive. As Benjamin Franklyn noted just before adding his signature: "*We must, indeed, all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately.*"

And In WW2 there were cell-groups in Germany conspiring to end the war by eliminating Hitler – sadly they did not succeed.

And whether we in the West recognize it as such, the organization in which you now claim membership continues to be the largest conspiracy and the most active subversive group on the planet – the Church of Jesus Christ.

Think about this For the first 300 years of its existence to be identified as a Christian to be a member of a church was to be branded as a conspirator and enemy of the state.

Can you imagine that? 300 years of secret signs and symbols, little cell-groups meeting underground or on back streets. Occasionally receiving a letter of instruction and encouragement from their leaders, or hearing that sister Sarah or brother Bob had been arrested by the police and were being tortured for a confession. And if they didn't recant their faith – they might be featured at this week's bonfire.... And then the people would then pray for strength for Sarah and Bob to give the good confession to be bold "witnesses" for their faith – which is what the word "**martyr**" means.

And for a time, in the western world, Christianity has succeeded in subverting the old order and turning culture and Government towards God. But in the same time, Asia and most of Africa were lost, the far East hardly even penetrated. Now Asia, Africa, and South America are being newly regained while Europe and North America are slipping back into the old way of doing things.

So, even today, Across this planet, in more places than you realize, Christianity lives as the forbidden religion as the oppressed religion, with Governments passively or actively aligned

against its spread; with peoples arrested or murdered for embracing or preaching the Christian faith, with cell-group churches formed in defiance of Government bans.

But after all – that’s what the Church has always been about: subverting the pagan State, to flipping fallen culture’s values upside right. Rescuing people from darkness and training them to live as children and witnesses to the light.

That real Christianity has always sought to do this peacefully by generosity, love, transformed lives and by courageous witness makes no difference – we have been placed here to be subversive.

And, in a sense that has always been what the Kingdom of God has been about of which, we the Church are now the representatives. That is why Jesus told stories about salty salt & cities on hilltops, of yeast spreading quietly through all the dough and tiny mustard seeds growing into giant plants.

Where is this “Church militant” thought line coming from? From the entire Bible.

Beginning with the Creation story, the Bible not only tells the story of God’s rescue plan for his erring Creation, but it also interweaves a meta-narrative (a story above the story) that with the fall of Adam & Eve, they lost more than life in a garden, they also lost title to the planet – that the rulership of human activity on planet Earth passed to the Prince of the Power of the air – the Devil.

And from that day forward Earth was transformed from a garden to a battlefield with a fierce war being waged between the kingdom of darkness and the Kingdom of light, complete with heroes & villains, traitors & spies. Battles have been won and lost:

- The Garden of Eden was a loss, the flood a stalemate.
- The formation of the nation of Israel, protecting the lineage of the messiah, the birth, life, and death of Jesus – all major campaigns in a global spiritual contest that will only end when Jesus returns as Kings of Kings and Lord of Lords, and the triumphant angels sing:
the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our God.

Now before you start thinking... preacher have you been watching too much late night t.v. on the Battle channel. Realize how much militaristic language fills the Bible story.

Christians are warned that Satan roams around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. 1 Peter 5:8

Just as the Devil can masquerade as an angel of light, so can his servants disguise themselves as ministers of righteousness 2 Corinthians 11:14

And that the Devil’s primary goal is to *"blind the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ 2 Corinthians 4.4:*

That is why the Apostle Paul urged the Ephesian Christians to
be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against

enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Ephesians 6:10-17

And the day that you or I forget and fail to see ---that just beyond the hustle and bustle of our physical lives an unseen spiritual war is being waged for world domination, a war that is being waged mainly through human interactions but sometimes even with guns and bombs.

And the day that you or I forget and fail to see --- that every person we meet is an active participant either for one side or the other – that there is no neutral ground, no neutral persons, (as C.S. Lewis noted there are no mere mortals, only angels or devils t=in the making)

The day we forget and fail see these the world this way, the day we lay down our breastplate of righteousness, our shield of faith, our helmet of salvation, this is the day we begin to fall victim to “*all the flaming arrows of the evil one.*” This is the day that we become a casualty of spiritual warfare.

Ok preacher, now that you have us scared, where do we run to, where do we hide?

Run -- yes, hide – no! you run to the Church (a group of gathered Christians assembled for your nurture, support, protection, and training for the fight).

You join with the Church in healing your wounds, strengthening your faith, and training you for service.

The Church is God’s embassy to this fallen world,
the Church is God’s shelter,
God’s halfway house for Christians recovering from the world,
the Church is God’s foothold in the kingdom of this world

You see the Church anticipated in the Old Testament and the Church being framed out in the New: The book “the Acts of the Apostles” tells of its spread through the Roman world. The letters of the Apostles are communiqués to those underground cell-groups springing up on the backstreets of Corinth, Ephesus, Thessalonica, Rome.

To better see the Church let’s return to today’s scripture lesons.

Ephesians chapter 2, first talks about how & why we have been saved: it is s gift given by god’s grace and received through our faith.

But then it goes on to state the purpose for which we were originally created and, to which by our rebirth into God’s family we have been restored: *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.* Ephesians 2:10

(think about that for a moment)

Then our portion concludes that we, together with other believers, are being *built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.*

WE are the Church – a holy temple for the Lord, a dwelling place for God.

That is why in his letter, the Apostle Peter urges **all of us who have Come to Jesus**
To *,,, like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*

(think about that – be a living stone, let God build you into His Church)

you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

*Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.*

--(pause) –

Onward Christian Soldier.