



# St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Fourth Sunday After Easter May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2007

✠ **In The Name of The Father and of The Son  
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.** ✠

Looking through the yellow pages one will find countless numbers of Christian Churches listed in the Baltimore area. Surely this forces the question upon us, "If all these churches were like the churches in the book of Acts, would life in Maryland be different than it is today?" There is no doubt it would be tremendously different.

Why are churches in general today so weak and ineffectual, having little impact upon society? Why is society degenerating while churches are increasing in number and in size? I agree there are dynamic churches here and there that are making an impact and reaching people. But we have to admit that churches like that are relatively rare. While this may sound like an oversimplification, I believe the reason for the change can be put in a very brief form: We have changed the strategy of the church. We are no longer operating as the Lord of the church instructed at the beginning. The church has filed away the original strategy and come up with one of its own which seems to be much more suitable for our day. That is why the church is steadily decreasing in power and influence.

Let us go back to the beginning, to the Upper Room discourse, where our Lord, the Founder of the church, describes to the original apostles the strategy that he plans to use. Jesus says:

"And when he [the Comforter] comes, he will convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no more; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged." {cf, John 16:4b-11 RSV} Everything is going to start, Jesus declares, with an inwardly transformed people. It is easy to miss that when you

read this paragraph. Most read the sentence, "When he comes he will convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment," as though it is a ministry which the Spirit directly performs upon the unbelieving society. But that is not what this is saying. The important thing in this paragraph is to notice *how* the Spirit convinces the world because, as Jesus points out very carefully here, the Spirit does not come to the world.

Earlier in this discourse he had said, "The world cannot receive Him because it does not know Him," {cf, John 14:17}. Here he is careful to point out that, when the Spirit comes, he comes not to the world but to the church. He says twice in Verse 7: "If I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you, but if I go I will send him to you." Thus what the Spirit does to the church is what is going to impress the world. That is the strategy of God.

What is the Spirit going to do to the church? To put it more personally, what is he going to do to you? Three things, Jesus says: He will convince the world of three things -- of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment. Our Lord goes on to elucidate on what he means.

First, he says, concerning sin "because they believe not on me." Unbelieving society, the secular system of our day does not believe in Jesus nor does it have any deep sense of its sin. Notice it does not say "sins" here, but "sin." The business of the church is not to convince the world of its sins but of its basic, fundamental sin. Sin is a violation of God's intention for humanity. It is a destructive force that wrecks and ruins the full glory and beauty of humanity as God intended it to be. A mere glance at what is happening in society will convince you how true this is. Here in America there is freedom to follow any lifestyle you

want. Yet people in this nation are just as hurting, lonely, and miserable inside; life is just as empty and as painful as it is anywhere on earth. Why is that? It is because of sin. But they do not know that. They do not understand what causes all the pain, hurt, and loneliness. They ascribe it to a lot of different sources, but when those are corrected the same pain, the same emptiness remains.

So what do they learn from watching transformed people in the church? They learn that the reason for their pain is that they are out of touch with basic reality. They are trying to play the game of life without any reference to the One who sets the rules. The first thing they learn when they see people who have been inwardly transformed by the presence of the Spirit releasing to them the life of Jesus is that here are people who have found the secret of life. Here are people who like themselves have suffered all the hurt and the loneliness of life who now have found the secret of calmness, peace, and forgiveness. They discover for the first time that the nature of sin is to ignore the One in charge of life. "They sin because they do not believe in me," Jesus declares. The secret to life, therefore, is to believe in and come to the Lord Jesus.

The second thing the world will learn, Jesus says, is the source of the gift of Righteousness. "Righteousness" is a term for what the Old Testament calls "holiness." What do we mean when we sing "Holy, holy, holy"? God is "whole," he is perfect. There is nothing out of balance or eccentric about him. That is what he is seeking to produce in this world -- "whole" persons. That is what the word "righteousness" means.

The good news of the gospel is that we do not have to make ourselves whole. Everyone is born into this world with the idea that the way to be "whole" is to work at it until all the pieces fit and you finally get yourself together. If you've ever said to yourself, "I'm going to get myself together!" That is an expression of a desire for wholeness. What the world will learn from Christians is that the only way to find that wholeness is to come to Jesus. That is the first thing he gives you by way of the Holy Spirit, an inner gift of wholeness. You are made righteous. Here is how St. Paul describes it. "He who knew no sin was made sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him," {cf, 2 Cor 5:21 KJV}.

The Old Testament has a wonderful term for that: "The beauty of holiness." We are talking about inner beauty. There is something beautiful about whole people. They attract us, they capture our attention.

The truly beautiful people, therefore, says Jesus, will be those who, despite all the failure and the weakness and the stumbling folly of their lives, have, by faith in Jesus, been made whole inwardly, and that inner wholeness then begins to transform, in a process, all of the outer life until they gradually reflect it in their behavior. That is what the world will learn.

Thirdly, Jesus declares, the world will learn judgment. It is true, there is a judgment day. We all must give account before God for the way we live. But that is not what he is saying here. He is not talking about the world learning that. That is a truth you learn after you come to Christ. But this is the truth of a judgment that has already happened: "The ruler of this world [Satan] is judged." All through this text Jesus has been referring to Satan in this way -- the one who is the leader behind the philosophy of the world, the invisible spirit who masterminds the psychology of non-Christians, distorting their thinking and leading them into illusions and wrong attitudes toward life. "The ruler of this world is judged."

What is Jesus talking about here? The word we would use to describe it is "liberty." The thing the world will learn by watching Christians is that here are people who have been set free, who know how to live, who are no longer bound by habits they cannot break. The Apostle Peter puts it this way, "Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil," {cf, 1 Pet 2:16}. This is what the Lord has come into our lives to do for us -- to set us free from all the bondage of the past.

***To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.***