

# 20 Sent into a Changing World

*“My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.”*  
(John 17:15-18)

The wedding was beautiful. The reception that followed was relaxed elegance. It is a day that I will never forget—September 8, 2001. Following the wedding, my daughter, Elizabeth, and her husband, Seth, traveled to New York where they would set sail for a honeymoon cruise to Bermuda. As they sailed out of the New York harbor on the morning of September 9, they stood on the top deck, looking at the skyline. They were going to take some pictures but decided to wait until they returned. That return trip never happened—at least not to New York. Following their cruise, they were directed a week later to the harbor in Philadelphia. They would they not return to New York as a result of September 11, and they would not return to the same world from which they had departed as newlyweds. They were beginning their married life in a world that changed overnight.

Prior to September 11, the world seemed to function with certain predictable rules and outcomes. There was a certain routine to life that many found comfortable and secure. Since that time, life seems less familiar and secure.

Although unrelated to September 11, this is not a great deal different from what is going on within the Church today. The Church of the 50's and the 60's existed in an environment that was friendly and familiar. I remember well how my first-grade teacher would read to us from the King James Bible and then pray the Lord's Prayer to begin each day. This was

in the public school! The church was accepted and influential within society.

The times have changed. It did not happen overnight, but it has and is changing fast. When I first came out of seminary, one out of four couples lived together before marriage. Now it is closer to three out of four. Instead of referring to “families,” it is more accurate to refer to “households” because of so many different blends of relationships living under one roof. The traditional family is almost the exception rather than the norm. Lately we hear of courtroom battles challenging “one nation under God” in the pledge of allegiance and “In God We Trust” on currency. The battle for defining marriage intensifies over questions that were almost unthinkable just fifty years ago. For those of you who are old enough, do you remember Elvis and how on the Ed Sullivan Show the camera would not scan down to show his shaking hips on television? The times have changed.

In all of this, the Church, for the most part, has not changed. In many ways, that is good. The teaching based on God's unchanging truth is the same. The Cross is central. Christ is Lord. In other ways, though, it is not good. The church is perceived as not struggling with the issues of the world. In fact, there are many who would view the Church as being immoral, because they do not see the Church as wrestling with the serious issues of abortion, poverty, homosexuality, or Aids, to

mention a few. When I first heard this, I was offended and insulted. I thought, “How dare they.” The more I thought about it, though, I began to wonder. Does the world see the Church as issuing moral judgments with no serious dialogue going on among people? When was the last time I encouraged serious conversation to occur over these issues? Don’t get me wrong. I stand with the Church on these issues. However, how can we engage in a meaningful conversation with those who are increasingly viewing the Church as being irrelevant and disconnected with the real issues of life?

It is important to struggle with this question, because the world is spiritually very hungry and thirsty. There is a spiritual revival going on in America. It is just not happening within the Church. When I was growing up, Billy Graham was viewed as America’s pastor. Today, I believe that Oprah Winfrey would be identified more in that role. I asked my eighth-grade religion class how many knew of Billy Graham. Two out of twelve raised their hands.

Many churches today find themselves struggling to hold their own with rising finances and decreasing attendance. Meanwhile, there is the Wal-Mart mindset that creeps into the church. People’s expectations as to what the church should do for them continually increase.

It all sounds depressing, doesn’t it? In one way, it is. Yet, in another way, it is not. There is a bright and hopeful future for the Church—not for the church as I’ve known it; I believe those days and that church are of the past. The Church, however, of my faith’s confession is alive and well throughout the world today. In the Nicene Creed, we confess, “I believe in one holy Christian and apostolic Church.”

The word apostle means “one who is sent out or away.” When we confess our faith in the “apostolic Church,” we are not only saying that our church is rooted in the apostles’ teachings but that we, like they, are

sent out. In other words, everyone within the local church is a missionary. Each person is sent out. Could you imagine the two men who walked with Jesus to Emmaus staying there with what they learned? Could you imagine them sitting at the table saying, “Let’s wait until the rest come to us, and we will tell them who we met along the road”? No, they immediately got up and hoofed it back to Jerusalem to tell the others, “It is really true—He is alive!”

We are not to sit back. We are sent out with the saving message that God loves the world. He shows that love by giving us His only Son. It is His Son, Jesus, who takes our punishment upon Himself, so that we can now call God “Father.” Enjoy and appreciate the rich and precious gift that is yours to call God “Father.” We had lost that right in the rebellion and disobedience of our sin. Not everyone born is a child of God. A creation of God? Yes. A child of God? No. Only those who know Jesus as their Savior and brother are able to call God their Father. This is a message that is unique to the world. No other religion lays claim to this. While the Islamic faith rejects outright any thought of God as Father, a recent survey of six hundred former Muslims who had become Christians reveals that one of the factors in their conversion was the emphasis on the love of God and the intimacy that we have with Him as our heavenly Father (Sproul, p. 33).

We are the “sent ones” into a world that is hungry to hear the Good News. This is not some new thought or fad. This is the prayer of Jesus. As He faced His own brutal death, most on His mind and heart was the future of the Church. He prayed,

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Jesus understood that the disciples would have to be sent. The world was not about to come to them. They would be engaging the world on its home turf. Back in the 50's and 60's, the world surrounding the church, at least in America, was familiar. The church was playing on its own home field. In sports, home field advantage is key. The crowd is friendly. The playing field is known. I grew up watching the Red Sox play in friendly Fenway. The little nuances of home field, not to mention enthusiastic fans, gives teams an edge. In the life of the church, we have lost the home field advantage. Today, we are not living in a churched culture. That does not cause me to despair. It does, however, cause me to say with even greater boldness, "I believe in one holy Christian and apostolic Church."

Elizabeth and Seth's ship had come back to a different harbor and to a different country

than the one they left seven days earlier. As a result, now more than ever, we need to see that the vessel of "one holy Christian and apostolic Church" is not a cruise ship for the comfort of its passengers, but a rescue ship sent out with a life-saving mission. Ships are safe in the harbor, but that is not what ships are built for. The vessel of the Church has been sent out to sail into the waters of a changing world with an unchangeable message of God's love in Christ Jesus.

**Prayer:** Father, the world has changed so much. There is little that I can count on remaining the same, with the exception of you. Your love and your Word are constant and unchanging. You are the same faithful and loving God that Adam, Moses and my believing ancestors worshipped. I praise you for your unchanging grace. Give me wisdom to carry your message into the world that is changing every day. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

**Challenge:** Where might you be able to enter into the world this week to engage in listening and conversing over the issues of the day?

**Scripture Reading:** John 20

**From the Book of Concord:** "Therefore, in his immeasurable goodness and mercy God provides for the public proclamation of his divine, eternal law and of the wondrous counsel of our redemption, the holy gospel of his eternal Son, our only Savior Jesus Christ, which alone can save. By means of this proclamation he gathers an everlasting church from humankind, and he effects in human hearts true repentance and knowledge of sin and true faith in the Son of God, Jesus Christ. God wants to call human beings to eternal salvation, to draw them to himself, to convert them, to give them new birth, and to sanctify them through these means, and in no other way than through his holy Word (which people hear proclaimed or read) and through the sacraments (which they use according to his Word). [1 Corinthians 1\[:21\]](#): " (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II: Free Will, pp. 553. 50).