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Church at Kalasa

From Thursday, June 22 to Tuesday, July 4, 2017, I had the privilege of traveling to Uganda, East Africa, to represent Church Planting International at the third General Assembly of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Uganda (RPCU). This is the denomination that grew out of the churches we have helped to plant there and whose leaders I have helped to train in previous missions over the last fourteen years. I addressed the General Assembly three times, twice in teaching sessions and also in a sermon, while serving as a consultant to the national leadership. I also preached at three local churches and did quite a bit of networking with local and national leaders of the RPCU.



Church at Kalasa, interior

On Sunday, June 24, I preached at Kalasa, a village outside of Kampala, the capital city. In the message I used for all of my sermons in local churches, I looked at Peter's experience of denying the Lord as recorded in Luke 22:54-62. This denial did not come out of the blue, I said. It was preceded by early warning signs of backsliding which we should take more seriously than the early warning signs of cancer. First is a proud, misplaced confidence in self or in the flesh. Peter has just boasted that he would follow the Lord even to prison and to death. This was not a godly confidence in reliance on the Lord but a proud self-confidence which was humbled most bitterly. The second early warning sign is a neglect of Bible study and prayer. Peter had repeatedly been told that Jesus was going to be a suffering servant, not a military Messiah. But in the Garden at the arrest he pulls his sword to attack the high priest's servant. This is the act of a man who has not been paying attention. Peter had been taught the Lord's Prayer with its petition, "Lead us not into temptation," and specifically warned in the Garden to watch. Yet Jesus returns to find him sleeping. Again, this is the act of a man who has not been paying attention. If Peter had been seriously praying, "Lead us not into temptation" in the Garden, would his performance in the courtyard have been different? Alas, we will never know.



Choir, Church at Kalasa

When proud self-confidence in the flesh leads to the neglect of God's Word and prayer, the result is the third danger sign—no longer an early warning sign but a clear and present danger: a deliberate effort to distance oneself from spiritual things. And so we find Peter following "at a distance" and actually trying to lose himself in the world by melting into the crowd. And so he hears the words he never intended or expected to hear coming out of his mouth: "I do not know him." And so he goes out and weeps bitterly. This failure did not happen out of the blue, but was prepared for by arrogant self-confidence, neglect, and following at a distance. To avoid the bitterness of backsliding, never let the beginnings of it get started.



Preaching at Kalasa

This passage not only gives us the beginnings of backsliding but also the way back from it. Peter's denials come to an abrupt halt when Jesus looks at him and he "remembers the word of the Lord." What did Jesus convey in that look? Was it a disappointed "How could you?" Was it a triumphant "I told you so!" I think we know the Lord better than that. We also know human psychology well enough to know that such glances might lead to self-hatred and despair but would be very unlikely to foster godly repentance and restoration. I think we know what the Lord's gaze conveyed. "I love you." In the midst of my trials, in the very midst of your denial, I still love you. There was a lot of self-hatred in Peter's weeping at first, no doubt, but there was also godly sorrow leading to repentance, and we know this because of the end of the story. "Peter, do you love me? Feed my sheep."



Worship Team at Ssanga

What is the way back from backsliding? There may need to be counseling, there may be many lessons that need to be learned or unlearned or relearned, many faulty doctrines, assumptions, or spiritual practices that need to be corrected, but the way back from backsliding doesn't *start* with any of that. It starts with "Jesus loves me, this I know, / For the Bible tells me so." So heed the early warning signs and change course now, but if you are already far down that path, the way back to your first love is remembering the love of Jesus. Pastors and people in each location professed to be mightily warned and encouraged by this message.



Preaching at Ssanga

On Tuesday, June 28, the General Assembly of elders from across Uganda convened at Grace Fellowship in Kampala. Tuesday through Thursday were given to teaching and workshops, and Friday was the business meeting. I was asked to address the Assembly twice in teaching sessions, on Mission and Church Growth. I stressed first the mission of the church, because you cannot judge whether it is experiencing healthy growth or cancerous growth until you have a clear grasp of what its mission is. It is given in the Great Commission: "Go ye into all the world and make disciples of every nation." The mission of the church is to make disciples. That is the only imperative verb in the passage. We have to "go" in order to reach all nations, but we do not fulfill our commission by going but by making disciples when we get there. And our mission is not to make *converts*. It is to make *disciples*. Now, of course we have to make converts in order to make disciples, but our mission is not fulfilled until these converts become disciples—not just casual believers in the Lord but active learners from the Lord committed to following Him.

To know Christ . . . to make Him known.



Teaching at the General Assembly

I then spoke of church growth from Ephesians 4, where the apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers are to equip the saints for the work of service until the proper working together of each individual part causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love. No mention is made in the New-Testament concept of church growth of numbers, buildings, budgets, or programs. Biblical growth is not in those things; it is growth in Christlikeness, growth that is in the number of adherents that are becoming serious and effective disciples. If that kind of growth is happening, growth in numbers will normally follow as a byproduct because Christ is being lifted up and thus will draw people unto Himself, so that more disciples are being made. But if our focus is on growth in numbers rather than on growth in Christlikeness and discipleship, the church may get bigger but it will not be growth as the New Testament understands the term. It may not be the growth of healthy tissue in the body at all, but rather of fat cells or even cancerous tumors, a grotesque parody of biblical church growth.



Executive Committee leads the business meeting

On Friday I gave a sermon to try to set the tone before the business sessions began, on Ephesians 3:20-21. “Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all we can ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.” The church is the arena where God wants to glorify His Son. How? Without controversy, the greater the task accomplished, the greater the glory that comes to the one who accomplishes it. And Jesus does two things in the church that set Him apart from all other religious figures. In Eph. 2:1-10 we were dead in our sins and transgressions but God has made us alive in Christ. All other religions try to make bad men good, but Christ alone succeeds in making dead men live. Then in Eph. 2: 11-22, He reconciles Jews and Gentiles together in one body, the church. Suppose you walked into a room, I asked them, and found Karimajong and Massai loving and serving each other? Baganda and Banyoro loving and serving each other? (These tribes are notoriously hateful and deadly enemies.) Would you not ask yourself, “Who can do this?” The greater the task, the greater the glory that comes to the one who accomplishes it. And where can this be seen but in the church? That is why Paul’s doxology is the fitting conclusion to his argument in the previous chapters. Let us conduct all of our business, all of the business of His church, in this light and in this spirit, I exhorted the brethren. More than one of them went out of his way to tell me afterwards that the meeting was conducted in a better spirit because of that message.



Preaching at the General Assembly

I also preached at the midweek service at Ssanga, another village church outside Kampala, and on Sunday, July 1, at Luwafu, a suburb of Kampala. As is my custom, any funds that were given that I did not need for personal expenses I left behind to help with the ministry: \$200.00 to make possible surgery needed by a pastor's wife, \$200.00 to purchase a generator for the church at Kalasa, \$200.00 for Bibles in the Northern dialect. Monday I was headed home, exhausted but rejoicing that God is His incomprehensible grace and infinite resourcefulness still finds ways to use me in His service. Pray for the brethren in Uganda as they seek to build on the foundations I tried to help them lay. Many thanks to those who gave to make this mission possible!



Elders considering business of the church



Children's Choir at Ssanga