

The Last Days Identity Crisis

Like 'bookends' to His earthly ministry, Jesus' declarations to His disciples in Mat 5 and Mark 16 initiated and punctuated His message to (and mission for) the Church. In this day in which western Christianity is often being confused with economic, political and entertainment/popular values, we would do well to study and understand again what He said in them.

His great declarations in Matthew five are:

You are the salt of the earth.

And...

You are the light of the world.

His great commission in Mark sixteen is:

Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.

Now, both of these are saying basically the same thing – let's see how...

First, we'll consider salt. The first mention of salt in the scriptures is in what we would most likely deem to be a negative context. In Genesis 14:3 we read of a battle between nine kings that took place in the valley of Siddim which is explained to be the same place that became the **Salt Sea**. This is the Dead Sea. Now the reason the Salt Sea is called the Dead Sea is because it's dead. Nothing lives in it, no fish, no plants, not even bacteria. There's just too high a concentration of salt in the water.

The second mention of salt is also seemingly uninspiring; in Genesis 19:24-26 we read, "*Then the LORD rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the LORD out*

*of the heavens. So He overthrew those cities, all the plain, all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. But his wife looked back behind him, and she became a **pillar of salt.**"*

At this point, you may be thinking, 'Wow, I'm not so sure I like the fact that the Lord said we are the salt of the earth!' But, hang with me.

In the next mention, we learn that every offering to the Lord was to be made with a 'dash of salt'. (Lev 2:13) And in the next, we learn that an eternal covenant was termed a covenant of salt. Later in second Kings, the prophet Elisha healed a spring of poisoned waters by casting in some salt.

Continuing on to the New Testament, Jesus said, "*For everyone will be seasoned with fire, and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt.*" (Mark 9:49) And "*Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.*" (Mat 5:11-13)

Paul wrote, "*Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.*" (Col 4:6)

So having these verses in mind, what did He mean? What was Jesus saying when He asserted that believers are the salt of the world?

First of all, salt in too high a concentration is deadly. In fact, the primary meaning of the Hebrew verb,

to salt, is to tear away or to disperse. Jesus was saying that our purpose is to spread abroad, to disperse, as in "*Go into all the world...*" You know, the Dead Sea is dead because it has no outlet. Fresh water flows in but has nowhere to go. In like manner, the water of the Word of God or the Spirit of God can flow into the concentrated group of believers but without 'dispersion'...muchas problemas.

Next, why did Lot's wife, while looking back longingly to Sodom become a pillar of salt? Why not carbon or granite? Why sodium chloride? In a previous letter entitled, "Remember", we studied the symbolism of this in some detail. In examining the original language, we found that it could be that she simply vanished. However, whether she became salt or 'thin air', Jesus said, "*Remember Lot's wife.*"

If she became salt, it is still indeed a poignant picture. Christ warned us that the last days would be similar to the days of Lot. Recall, Lot, his wife and two of his daughters were physically taken out of Sodom before its judgment. She however, at the point of calamity, refused to "disperse", to be "torn away". In like manner, Christians today are highly over emphasizing the value of larger and larger 'concentrations' (congregations). In a sense, they are spiritually repeating the folly of Babel.

You recall the story. "*And they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.'*" (Gen 11:4) What you may not know is that the word "tower" can also mean "pulpit" and comes from the word meaning "to grow, become

great or important, promote, make powerful". In too many cases, it would seem that as church growth has become our modern 'mantra', the person behind the pulpit is inevitably faced with celebrity rather than servanthood. A pillar of salt is a powerful picture as is a tower of brick. Both illustrate the unwillingness to obey God's command to disperse. Both reflect a rebellious attachment to the world and its values.

Yet on the positive side every offering, every sacrifice was to be made with salt. You see, just as faith without works (i.e. offerings) is dead (James 2:17) so works without faith is valueless and vain (Gal 2:16). Yes, Jesus was also saying, "You are the salt", that is, "You are the faithful".

When the Bible speaks of a covenant of salt, it is referring to its preservative quality. Just as salt rubbed into meat keeps it from rotting, so an everlasting covenant was known as a covenant of salt. In addition, you can consider such a covenant as requiring its parties to remain faithful to it.

As Elisha healed the waters by adding salt, so a faithful person can bring health to a poisonous situation. Proverbs says, "*...a faithful ambassador is health.*"

Finally, it is significant that Jesus prefaced His statement in Matthew five about the faithful being salt by a promise of persecution for in confirmation, the book of Hebrews in its famous "Hall of Faith" Chapter 11, says, "*...Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned,*

they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented— of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, having obtained a good testimony through **faith**...” (Heb 11:35-39)

Even when Paul says in Colossians, “Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with **salt**...” (Col 4:6) we recall that he also wrote, “For by grace you are saved through **faith**...” (Eph 2:8) Yes, as a **believer**, you are the **salt** of the world, the **faithful**.

But Jesus also gave a warning as well:

“But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.” (Mat 5:13)

As a believer, your constant witness – your lifestyle -- is a demonstration of your faith. It preserves, it seasons every situation you are in. If, however, for any reason you cease to be Christ’s salt in this world, if the world influences you more than you influence it, you’re losing your savor, your witness. Christ will never throw you out – but your witness in this world will be good for nothing. Men will cast it aside.

Consequently, to keep our savor so to speak, we must exhibit a faithful life before the world. That includes dispersing.

And next there’s the light. You know, light was the first item on God’s agenda when He saw that the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the

deep. That’s right, top of the list. I suggest the principle this illustrates is that the first thing needed in an empty wiped out situation, be it planet earth or the hearts that inhabit it, is light. Spiritual light. (Psa 18:28)

So when Jesus said, “You are the light of the world.” He implied that we would be introduced into dark environments. Let’s see what else the Bible says about this light:

- In the holy place, the light was always provided by oil, pure olive oil which most of you recognize as a type of the Holy Spirit. (Ex 27:20)
- David declared, “The LORD is my light and my salvation;...” (Psa 27:1) So again, the source of true light is always the Lord.
- The psalmist also said, “The entrance of Thy words gives light;” (Psa 119:130) Entrance here means door and brings to mind that Jesus said, “I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved...” (Jn 10:9)
- It is also noted that, “the path of the just is like the shining sun that shines ever brighter unto the perfect day.” (Pro 4:18)
- Darkness, the opposite of light is declared to be death’s shadow. (Mat 4:16)
- John began his gospel by saying of Jesus, “In Him was life; and the **life was the light** of men.” (Jn 1:4)
- And Jesus said, “I am the Light of the world; he that follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the **light of life**.” (Jn 8:12)

From these and many other verses, it is clear that light is synonymous with life. But it’s not the existential life you and I are used to. You see, its attributes are God Himself for John wrote, “...that God

is light, and in Him is no darkness at all.” (1 Jn 1:5) Yet at the same time the Word also tells us that, “... God is love.” (1 Jn 4:8) Clearly there is a linkage or perhaps an overlap or most likely, they are all virtually one in the same. **Light...Life...Love**. He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. (1 Jn 2:9)

And as with the salt, Jesus gave us a warning concerning this light – “A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl.” (Mat 5:14) There are basically two ways for light to be ineffective; first, as stated here, it can be hidden. Love and Life that are not expressed are hidden. Second, it can be absent. This happens when you have no oil. No Spirit of God - no Light; and since the primary fruit of the Spirit is Love – no Love either.

As light is active, we are called to be actively living out the gospel, walking and talking it. The world may not recognize it’s value, yet it’s our loving response to our loving God. Paul put it this way:

- “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the **light** of the **gospel** of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” (2 Cor 4:4-6)
- “... grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has

destroyed death and has brought **life** and **immortality** to **light** through the **gospel**.” (1 Tim 1:9,10)

So there it is – salt and dispersal or going into all the world as well as light and actively preaching the gospel. This is who we are in Christ. Honestly, you can throw the Dove awards away; tell the Christian Booksellers Association to stop the marketing hype; let us turn away from the seduction of ministerial notoriety and turn toward our servant-savior Jesus.

“... the average Christian in the average church is almost indistinguishable from the rest of society. The fundamental moral and ethical difference that Christ can make in how we live, is missing. When our teens we claim to be saved, get pregnant and do drugs at the same rate as the general teenage population - when the marriages of Christians end in divorce at the same rate as the rest of society - when Christians cheat in business, or lie, steal, and cheat on their spouses at the same statistical level as those who say they are not Christians - something is horribly wrong.”—

George Barna,

“Either our lives are counting for good and for God or they are making an impact for evil and the enemy.... The way we live, the things we say the attitudes we entertain, the life style we adopt... are continuously producing either positive or negative results in society.... Our lives, whether we are aware or not either count for God or against Him. There simply is no middle ground.”— Phillip Keller

We cannot afford in these last days to have a spiritual identity crisis.

We are salt and light.