***Dedication Ceremony at the Alton Project June 30, 2013***

***By Kent Ellett***

Why are we building houses on Alton Street? Because we are…

*Spiritual* ***AND*** *Religious*

They do not really know how preachy they are… which is the worst kind of preachy… By that I mean the “spiritual but not religious” crowd. There probably isn’t a local bar nor seminary, ballpark nor opera house, work place or vacation spot near Indy that doesn’t this moment sport at least a couple of these hip people claiming to be “spiritual, but not religious.” Likewise, there probably ain’t a bum under an underpass who doesn’t have more self-respect than to admit that he religiously tries to do good even when he’s spiritually burned out. A religious person who is trying and failing at times to be that spiritual—well, that’s an honesty that looks so hypocritical we just have to shame the expletive.

Talking with expletives—breaking down the division between the sacred and the profane, in fact-- is part of this new spiritually irreligious crowd’s tendency to level everything and commit to nothing. In respecting everybody and everything they commit to nothing and nobody in particular. The cry against organized religion is not a call for disorganized religion. Lord knows it disorganized enough. It is a cry for a spirituality without specific obligations to a specific set of people with special obligations which call for organization. When scripture says the *Churches of Christ salute you…* it’s not naming the church—it’s a text that just assumes that the primitive church saw itself in terms of local groups or congregations that had enough cohesiveness to collectively greet the world. It takes collective religion—not just individual spirituality-- to speak with such a concerted voice. This, is what the irreligiously spiritual are running from.

Preachers in particular are the target of this anti-religious but supposedly spiritual witness. They think they are telling me something when they point out how easy it is to be free from the terrible mess of church. Churches are only sometimes less of a mess than humanity as a whole. For close to thirty years I’ve been a veteran of church fights. After experiencing endless varieties of exegetical inanities as a kid, in ministry I’ve tried to head off legal trouble, and criminal investigations, late night nervous breakdowns, and all day-shouting sessions. I’m more than vaguely aware of what these spiritual but anti-religious people are talking about. I’ve been shot at by more lies and half-truths, which were believed by more supposed friends, than you can shake a stick at. But profoundly spiritual but irreligious folks still want to tell ***me*** that there are problems with the churches.

Well… Duh. If that were a good enough reason for leaving people in the dust, then I’d have shook my feet off long ago and left myself in my own dust pile. Jesus himself told us at times shaking the dust off is the thing to do. But the simple fact of the world’s mess is not a good enough reason to do it. He did not abandon us in our mess, but he came into that which was his own even when his own didn’t receive him. My dust pile is probably as big as any other pile, but in shaking the dust off my feet as I left church I’d have had the satisfaction of knowing that my own dirt is my business and I need not worry with those who’d like to clean me up. I would have long ago left them in their own dust to worry about. That kind of spirituality is very tempting. Today I want to let the spiritual but not religious crowd in on a secret: I get it.

I have long wondered if I were religious enough to be a preacher, anyway. I don’t drink nearly as much as C.S. Lewis or seem to enjoy everything in life like he did, but I do drink on occasion. I smoke my Dad’s pipe some on holidays, and on evenings when it’s pleasant out on the porch. It’s better for the lungs than sitting around a camp fire—certainly better for your heart than ingesting all those fats and addictive toxins at McDonalds. Occasionally, I even use a Pauline word to describe legalism. Contemporary religious Pharisees say I love too many Christians and don’t care much for worries about religious specifics which I think other Christians are just imagining while justifying their prejudices. And so they have run me out of more churches than the spiritually irreligious crowd has thought about darkening. And I suppose I could startle you with admissions about how I’ve considered joining this spiritual but not religious crowd. Well, maybe… just the not that religious crowd…

The truth is, one of the reasons the spiritual but not religious bunch doesn’t have much use for church is that the church, in its own way, tries to be spiritual when it’s not particularly religious or practical or embodied in its witness.

1. Church at times has been about changing my individual spirit without even thinking about my well-being in my relationships in my wider community. Community involvement was seldom even mentioned in the church of my youth. Church often misses that spirituality and community are intertwined.
2. In my early days church was not a challenge to Caesar in favor of a greater king and coming kingdom. Church did not involve the assertion that the meek will inherit the earth. Rather, we all patriotically left the earth to the government (even gave them the hospitals) and intended to fly away and rest in heaven in the end.
3. Sometimes the church reads Paul’s negative references to the “flesh” not as selfish, self-protective instinct, but to our very bodies. Too often the church has been so spiritual that it can’t talk about sex and human longing, human desires—though everyone knows that fornication and the distortion of disire is the primary cause of every major social problem.
4. We live in an age where wide swaths of the church dispense with the doctrine of resurrection and treat the body as if it’s a carcass to be discarded rather than a temple to be redeemed.
5. Most churches still think the Lord’s Supper so spiritual that they have taken all but a pinch of nourishment out of it.
6. We have known church so spiritual that it thinks that the parable of the talents is about most everything besides money. We have been a church so spiritual that “forgive us our debts” couldn’t possibly have anything to do with our pocketbooks or the economy of an alternative community. As such a spiritual church we have trouble imagining why it’s harder for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Perhaps this is because we refuse to realize the Kingdom of heaven is an alternative government on earth to be entered now where debts are forgiven where those that are hired at the end of the day are generously treated—not according to their economic worth but according to grace. The Kingdom of heaven requires much economically of those to whom much is given—that’s the reason it’s hard for the rich. And we should give them special love and appreciation—not because they are above us—but precisely because they know they are not.
7. As a result of much of this, you and I both know folks who are so “spiritual” that participation in church is all about whether “I get anything out of it.” They are so spiritual, in fact that they think, “I need not attend.” When they do attend at times they demand that church scratch their aesthetic itch so they can enter some internal, individual, ecstatic experience of the divine. So much for living for the other and singing to others in their language to build them up as an act of love and worship. That’s too cross-like and community oriented for the hyper spiritual church which ends up committed to the worship wars as much as anything else.
8. More directly to the point today, of course, is the fact that most of our churches have been so spiritual that they cannot conceive of why the church would ever rent houses. They say, “That’s physical. That’s worldly.”

And there, you see, is the error. It is the error of Plato. It’s an error that confuses physicality with worldliness, the earth with the world, the body with the flesh, mutual exchange with mammon, and neighborhoods with temptation. It’s a whole spirituality based on escape—escape from the body, eschatological escape from the earth, escape from economy, escape from problems, and dare I say it… escape from neighborhoods. It is the escapist spirituality that leaves deserted places of this world’s empire—that fails to see the blessing, the resources, and the sacredness of this place. I have long been tempted to escape the obligations of religion. And given this whole spirituality of escape it’s not surprising that we are now faced with a generation on our hands that have decided that the church itself is something to be escaped...

I get it. I think I know how I could move to Carmel or to the country. “And make a living,” as they say. Go mountain-climbing in June and boating on the weekends. Get up at 10 on Sunday instead of 3:00 AM. Like a preacher buddy of mine has said, “I like birdies and sunsets.” That’s considered spiritual, evidently. I already recycle. I’m particularly fond of mountains and gardening—I hoed more organically- grown potatoes before I was 16 than these urban gardening hipsters have dreamt about. A few modest changes might be necessary. I might have to trade my work-boots for expensive sandals, but I could gripe about corporations as much as I do the government and then I could fit in with this non-conformist, spiritual but not religious crowd. At first, I wouldn’t miss giving 15% of my income to church and its ministries. I think there are easier ways to make a living than dabbling in little abandoned houses. I wouldn’t have to be the phone directory for the church anymore. I could dump most all of my obligations, and, as unspiritual as I can be, I might even be able to do this while thinking myself a pretty good fellow and a spiritual person… of sorts.

But you know I will not do this. Because I would then I’d miss out on all of you. I’d miss Jeff nailing up the fascia. I’d miss Suellen planting flowers. I’d miss Steven and Steven on the roof, Madison getting her head up there in the insulation and I’d miss Woody bossing everybody around. I’d miss all of you in your own way making this project your own. And I’d miss out on the experience of being forgiven, myself. I’d miss the experience of really mattering to others. The experience of having a reason to live other than my own pleasure—a reason just as mysterious but profoundly more important than union with a blade of grass… Christian spirituality is not about escaping into the mysterious and uncertain state of all natural things. Christian life is about building relationships of love—relationships that will last, love that will last when the Tetons are eroded and canyons are filled. I would miss doing this—changing the world, one house and life at a time. Because what we are doing here at Alton is not done without organized religion… It is only done when you can join together with commitment to people and place. Scripture doesn’t ask me to imagine an escape on a celestial shore—but to imagine a world where the Lion lies down with the lamb, in a world where people contribute to the kingdom rather than pay rent to a bank or landlord. Scripture beacons us to imagine a a world where foster parents can be supported by those who share their vision of adoption, of a place where retirement couples don’t have to live in a secular home to find care, where nobody has to say know the Lord, but from the lowest to the highest they love God and the whole community network is animated by God’s spirit—where spirituality can’t be divorced from love—where loving God involves loving your neighbor, and it’s just that simple and that hard. The Bible calls us to imagine a world where jobs are given not in order to make somebody rich but in order to create a better world. Imagine a world where sharing trumps hoarding, where abundance trumps scarcity where healing turns back sickness and death is swallowed up in loving neighborhoods that need no new source of life. That is what Jesus shall bring when he comes, because he is committed concretely to this people and this place.

Why are we building houses and building community in this abandoned place? “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” commits us to the earth. We are committed to the earth because when Jesus said, “The meek will inherit the earth” he made it our inheritance. It is our future. We do not pretend that we are harbingers of this renewal. We cannot raise the dead. And our work does proclaim that the dead will rise. We can only resurrect houses in a broken earth. Only God can make that renewed earth what Peter and the prophets envision as, “the home of righteousness.” That itself is an echo of Isaiah 1, where the prophet looked forward to the day when the renewed Jerusalem would be called the “city of righteousness.” We look forward to the day when the new Jerusalem shall come down and renew the whole earth and make it a home. We are building houses because our whole spirit soul and body will be kept blameless on that day. We are building houses because we know we can’t be truly spiritual without a religious commitment to an embodied people and place.