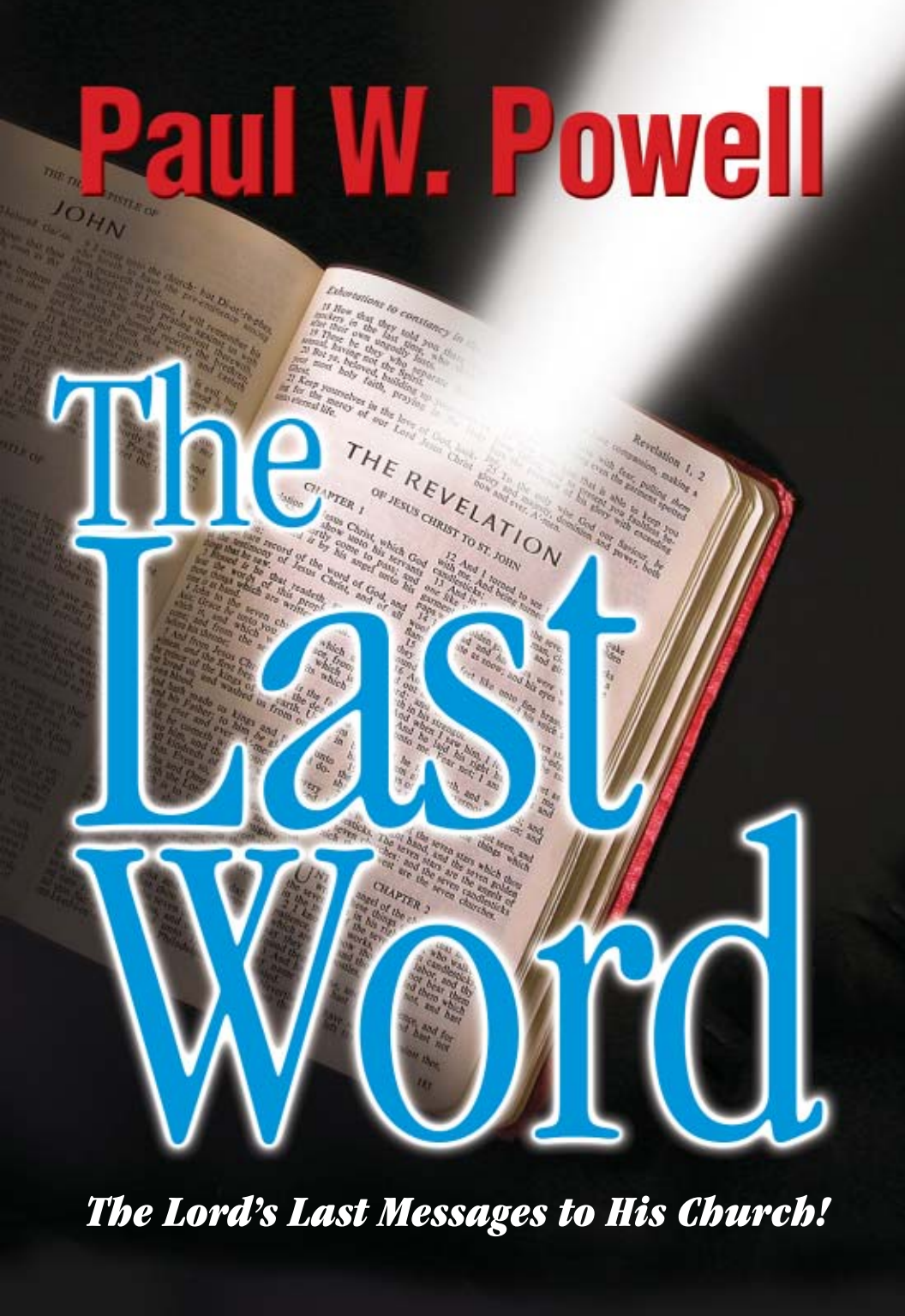


Paul W. Powell



The Last Word

The Lord's Last Messages to His Church!

© Copyright 2004
Paul W. Powell
5603 Elderwood Drive
Tyler, Texas 75703

Printed in the United States

All Biblical quotations contained herein are from the King James Version of the Holy Bible.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior written permission from the publisher.

Dedication

*To the faculty and staff of
George W. Truett Theological Seminary,
who make being the Dean a joy!*

Table of Contents

Introduction	7
1. The Lord of the Church	9
2. The Loveless Church	21
3. The Loyal Church.....	33
4. The Lax Church	47
5. The Liberal Church	59
6. The Lifeless Church	71
7. The Laboring Church.....	83
8. The Lukewarm Church	97
9. The Local Church	111

Introduction

The book of Revelation is addressed to the seven churches of Asia Minor—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. These were seven actual churches, but they are also representative of all churches of all ages.

Since the book of Revelation is the last book of the Bible, these are the Lord's last messages to His church. The message to five of the seven is the same—"repent!" They needed revival. Five out of seven: that's seventy percent. That is about the same percentage of our churches that need revival today.

Many churches do not seem to know the difference between revival and evangelism. Evangelism is the proclamation of the gospel in an effort to win lost people to Christ. Revival is a movement of God in the church that leads people to get right with Him and with one another. Revival is a new beginning of obedience to God. It means self-examination, rededication, and reconciliation.

Most revivals begin with the idea that the church membership is in good shape. The Lord doesn't do that, and neither should we. He makes no effort to gloss over the sins or cover up the weaknesses of His churches. While He recognizes the good they may be doing, He is forthright and candid in his reproof. He minces no words when it comes to their failings or their shortcomings, and He does not hesitate to tell them to turn from their sins.

Each of these seven letters closes with the same admonition, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." We all have two sets of ears. We have physical ears with which we hear audible sounds, but we also have spiritual ears with which

we hear the voice of God. Don't mistake the two.

I once had a Unitarian lady who attended the church I pastored every Sunday. She, along with her husband, sat near the front, and she always listened intently. One day I received a note from her that read, "If I had known the difference between your voice and the voice of God, I would have come forward and been standing by your side last Sunday." Obviously the Spirit of God had spoken to her. I called her on the phone and said, "Jenny, you don't fool me, so don't fool yourself. You know the difference between my voice and the voice of God." So do you!

The psalmist once prayed, "Cause me to hear Thy lovingkindness in the morning; for in Thee do I trust: cause me to know the way wherein I should walk; for I lift up my soul unto Thee (Psalm 143:8). That should be the prayer of every one of us..." "Cause me to hear...cause me to know."

Along with the admonition to each church, there is also a promise to all who "overcome." The Lord wants us to be victorious. He wants us to be faithful and true, and we can and will be, if we will listen and obey. Listen! Are you listening? God has a word for you that you don't want to miss.

Paul W. Powell
June 2004
George W. Truett Theological Seminary
Baylor University
Waco, Texas

1

The Lord of the Church

Revelation 1:4-8

Ralph W. Emerson said, “The name of Jesus is not so much written as it is plowed into history.” When you consider the number of books written about Him, the number of songs dedicated to Him, the number of buildings built in His memory, and the number of people who claim to follow and worship Him, you can understand why.

But fascination with Jesus is not limited to the church. The secular world is also interested in him. For instance: Peter Jennings hosted a primetime television special dealing with the person and times of Jesus; the late Arnold Toynbee, the most imminent historian of our day, gave more space to Jesus of Nazareth than to any other six great men who have ever lived, including Mohammad, Buddha, Caesar, Napoleon, and George Washington; and the Encyclopedia Britannica gives 20,000 words to Jesus.

Thinking men of all lands who have an opportunity to investigate the evidence agree that Jesus is the greatest personality the world has ever known. They recognize that He is the greatest teacher, the greatest example, the greatest leader, and the greatest influence for good who has ever lived. As one church sign put it, “His cradle rocked the world.”

We, therefore, are bound to ask, "Who is Jesus?" E. Stanley Jones said, "Call him a man, and you will have to change your idea of what man is; call him God, and you will have to change your idea of what God is."

The Book of Revelation, the last book written in the New Testament, is a book by Him and about Him. It was written to the seven churches of Asia Minor. He addresses each one by name and has a specific message for each one of them. While they were seven literal churches, they are, in a way, representative of all churches. As He delivers His message, He identifies himself in a different way in each letter. The titles and the descriptive phrases He uses for himself are small cameos that, all together, give us an understanding of who He is:

- He is the Almighty God (v. 1:8).
- He is the creator of the universe (v. 3:14).
- He is the head of the church (v. 2:1).
- He is the Savior of the world (v. 1:5).
- He is the coming King (v. 1:7).

God With Skin On

First, Jesus is the Almighty God. He introduces himself as "the first and the last" (2:8). He says later, "[I am] he that is holy...[and] true" (3:7). In the Old Testament, these are titles that belong only to God (Isaiah 44:6). To use them is to say He is nothing less than God. In chapter one of Revelation, He says, "I am the Almighty" (1:8), i.e., the absolute ruler of the universe.

Anthropologists and archeologists have long studied the civilizations of the world, both ancient and modern, and they have never yet found a civilization without some form of worship. They have found civilizations without theaters, without stadiums, without

schools, but none without religion. Man is instinctively and incurably a believer.

However, the anthropologists have found no uniformity in worship or in people's understanding of God. The result is that there are eleven major world religions and thousands of national or tribal religions. Men everywhere believe in God, but they are confused as to what God is like.

Why all this misunderstanding and confusion about God? It is because God is a spirit (John 4:24). You can't see a spirit. You can't touch a spirit. You can't take a picture of a spirit. You can't make a statue of a spirit. So, if we are to know God, He must make himself known to us in a way that we can understand.

That is what Christ did. In Colossians, Paul calls Jesus the "image (likeness) of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). The writer of Hebrews said that Jesus is the "express image" of God (Hebrews 1:3). The word "express" means "exact." So if you should ask me, "What is God like?" I would answer, "He is like Jesus Christ." And if you should ask me, "How much like Jesus Christ?" I would respond, "He is exactly like Jesus Christ." In the vernacular of a west Texan, "Jesus Christ is the 'spittin' image' of God."

In Revelation 3:7, Jesus identifies himself as ". . . he that is holy, he that is true." The word "holy" is the name and the title and description of God himself (Isa. 6:3, 43:15). All through the Old Testament, God is the Holy One. Now that title is given to the risen Christ. To say that Jesus Christ is holy is to say He is nothing less than God, and He is called "true." That word means "real," or "authentic." In Him, we do not have a substitute or a shadow for God, but God himself.

The essence of Christianity, then, is this: Jesus Christ

is God. He is not just sent from God. He is not just a part of God. He is not just a representative from God. He was and is God. Jesus is God with skin on.

Religion, then, is man attempting to reach up to God. Christ is God coming down to man.

Little Johnny was drawing in class. The teacher asked, "What are you drawing?" He replied, "A picture of God." She said, "But, Johnny, no one knows what God looks like." He answered, "They will when I get through." When Jesus was through, we knew what God was like, because He was God who came to live among us.

Tony Snow wrote in his syndicated column, "Jesus is the only great religious figure ever to claim that he was not just sent by God, inspired by God, or used as God's stenographer, but was, in fact, God. So was he? This is the key question. It won't do to venerate him as a saintly guy with a penchant for performing miracles as God—in which case, his gospel teaches us profound, difficult, and comforting things about reality—or dismiss him as a lunatic who deserved crucifixion. Christianity is the easiest of all religions to dismiss, because it offers no middle ground: either Jesus was God or a charlatan" (*Dallas Morning News*, 24 December 2000).

The Big Banger

Second, Jesus is the creator of the universe. In chapter three, He calls himself "the beginning of the creation of God" (3:14). That does not mean that Christ was the first creature created. Rather, He is the one from whom creation took its beginning. He is the origin of all that is created.

Mankind has always been curious about origins. We are not satisfied just to exist. We want to know where

the world came from and how it got here, and where we came from and how we got here. Inherent in that is who we are and where we come from. There are two possible explanations.

One is the theory of the evolutionist. Simply stated, evolution says that matter is eternal and that somewhere in the reaches of space and the ages of time, an explosion took place, and from lifeless matter, life spontaneously emerged. And from that beginning, life evolved from the simple to the complex. It is sometimes called "the big bang theory." It, of course, is just a theory, an unproven assumption. No one was there to see it happen, and it cannot be duplicated. So, at best, it's a guess.

The other is the view of the creationist. Creationists believe that God alone is eternal and that He created all things separate and distinct. It accepts the scriptural statement, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). This does not discount the possibility of some evolution within species; i.e., people are getting bigger, but there is no evidence a dog ever became a horse or an ape ever became a man. Creationism is also a faith assumption, because no one was there but God, and we can only take his word for it. Since creation occurred only once and can't be repeated, we must choose between human speculation and divine revelation. I choose revelation. It makes more sense and takes less faith to believe.

The scriptures declare that Jesus was the agent of creation. John, who wrote the Revelation, wrote in his gospel, "All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:3). If there was a big bang, He was the big banger!

Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, writes that God created everything "in heaven and...in earth, visible and

invisible” (Col. 1:16). We don’t know the size of the universe, but when we look at the sky, we see only a small part of it. He created what we can see, and He created what we can’t see.

Climb aboard a rocket with me and take an imaginary journey through space. It will allow us to catch a glimpse of the greatness of Christ’s creative work. We will travel at the speed of light, 186,282 miles per second. At that speed, we can circle the earth seven times in one second. That’s not as fast as my wife drives, but it’s fast.

We blast off, and in two seconds, we have shot past the moon. In eight and one-half minutes, we have reached the sun, 96 million miles away. Five hours later, traveling at the speed of light, we reach the end of our solar system, consisting of the sun and the nine planets that revolve around it.

We must travel for almost 100,000 years to cross the Milky Way, our own galaxy. After that, we must travel at least 4,500 million years at the speed of light before we reach the area of the universe that cannot be seen with the telescope from our planet. And who knows how much lies beyond that? But whatever there is, He created it, for He created all things “in heaven and . . . in earth, visible and invisible” (Col. 1:16).

Not only was Christ the agent of creation, He is also the adhesive of the universe. “By him all things consist” (Col 1:17). The word “consist” literally means “to hold together.” The sun is the center of our solar system, but it is only one of 100 billion stars in our galaxy. And there are 100 billion other galaxies in space.

The sun is so big that, if it were hollow, you could put a million planets the size of our earth in it. There are some stars in space so big that they could hold 500 mil-

lion suns the size of ours. All of these billions and billions of planets are swirling around in space continuously. What keeps them from colliding? Who directs traffic in space? Jesus does. He created all things, and by Him all things are held together.

A few years ago, we learned how to split the atom. The atom is the basic component of all matter. Everything is composed of atoms. It is not the smallest particle of matter, but it is one of the smallest. Atoms are made up of electrons, protons, and neutrons. Atoms are so small that there are 100 million of them in a single drop of water.

When scientists learned to split the atom, it released atomic energy. We then produced an atomic bomb by splitting the atom. On August 6, 1945, an atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan. When the smoke had cleared, 100,000 people were dead. Sixty-two thousand of the 90,000 buildings in the city were destroyed, and temperatures at the center of the blast reached 6,000 degrees.

If all of that happened when the atom was split, what holds the atom together in the first place? The scriptures tell us. It is Jesus Christ. Some scientists refer to the cohesive force of the universe as the "Colossian factor." It comes from this passage of scripture and means that Jesus Christ is involved in the universe in such a way that He keeps it from flying to pieces.

Absolutely and Forever

Third, Jesus is the head of the church. In Revelation, chapter two, we are told that Christ holds the seven stars (pastors) in His right hand and walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks (churches) (2:1). The word "hold" is a strong word. It means He has complete con-

trol over the churches. It shows His presence in and power over the churches.

There's an old saying that every organization is the lengthened shadow of one man. Dig into the history of any company, any organization, any movement, and you will find some individual—not a committee—who had a dream, and that one man turned the dream into a reality by his leadership.

The church, then, is the lengthened shadow of Jesus Christ. It is His body on earth. That means that we are His hands, His feet, His eyes, His ears, and His voice. We are here on earth to do what He did during the days of His flesh. For thirty-three years, He incarnated himself in a human body. Now He has a new body, His church. He lives in us and wants to work through us.

It is significant that He addressed each church and its members directly and individually. There is no bishop or overlord suggested. He is the real head of the church. It is His possession. It is He who owns it. Many times, men act as if the church belongs to them—as if they have a right to administer and to govern the church to suit themselves and their own purposes—but the church and every congregation within belongs to Jesus Christ, and all who are in the church are His servants. In any decision regarding the church or any part of the church, the decisive factor must be, not what any man wishes the church to do, but what Jesus Christ—the master, the owner, and the Lord of the church—wishes to be done. If we could get that one idea across to laymen, to deacons and to pastors, all church strife would end.

Baptists have always emphasized the autonomy of the local church. From the beginning we were slow to form associations and conventions for fear that a committee, a board, a convention, or a potentate might in-

terfere with a church's freedom to respond to Christ. When Texas Baptists initially formed an association in 1840, the first thing they did was to assert the authority and the autonomy of the local church. When Texas Baptists formed their first convention in 1848, they disclaimed "absolutely and forever" any authority over the churches. Why? To guarantee that they would be free to respond to Christ.

I heard a preacher say once, "If a Baptist church chooses to ordain an orangutan as a pastor, it is free to do so." And a few have done it! But that's not what autonomy means. To say that the church is autonomous does not mean it is free to do what it pleases. It is free to do what pleases Christ. Autonomy means that no board, no individual, no convention can stand between the local church doing what it is convinced that Christ, its head, wants it to do.

I Wasn't Aware We Had Quarreled

Fourth, Jesus is the Savior of the world. John declares that Christ, "loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood" (Rev. 1:5). So far as we know, it cost God nothing to create all things, but to save us cost God His dear Son.

This is one of the clearest pictures in scripture of what Jesus, the Savior, does for us: He loves us; He liberates us—He washes us from our sins by His own blood; He lifts us—makes us kings and priests unto God. In Colossians, Paul put it this way, "Having made peace through the blood of his cross, [He] reconciled all things to himself" (1:20).

In the old movie, *Father Knows Best*, starring William Powell and Irene Dunn, there comes a time when the wife realizes that her husband, raised an Episcopalian,

had never been baptized. She asked, "Have you made peace with God?" And he responds, "I wasn't aware that we had quarreled." Later on in the movie, his wife says, "I can't believe you haven't made peace with God." He replies, "We were getting along just fine until you stirred Him up."

Many people do actually have a quarrel with God. In the book, *Marx and Satan*, written by Richard Wurmbrand and published by Crossway Books, Wurmbrand points out that as a young man, Karl Marx claimed to be a Christian, but when he finished high school, "something mysterious happened in his life: he became passionately anti-religious. A new Marx began to emerge. He wrote in a poem, 'I wish to avenge myself against the One who rules above.' He was in a quarrel with Him."

Even if we do not have an open quarrel with God, God has a quarrel with us (Jeremiah 25:31; Hosea 4:1; 12:2; Micah 6:2). We have all sinned, and our sin has separated us from God. We may not take sin seriously, but God does. It drives a wedge between Him and us that must be dealt with.

God has a quarrel with us, and no one is getting along fine without Jesus Christ. By His blood He paid the penalty for our sin and made it possible for our sins to be forgiven. Earlier Paul declared that through Christ, "we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sin" (Col. 1:14).

In what is perhaps the greatest verse in the New Testament, Paul declares, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself" (II Cor. 5:19). I don't understand how a Jewish carpenter dying on a Roman cross in the first century could have any bearing on my life now, but I know it does. What He did on the old rugged

cross dealt with my sin and made it possible for me to be reconciled with God and to have peace with Him and peace in my heart.

He Cometh With Clouds

Finally, He is the coming King. "Behold!" John says. "He cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him" (Rev. 1:7). He died for our sins, but He also rose again. Now He is coming again.

A man came to a small West Texas town and checked into its only motel. He said to the owner, "Do you have a telephone in the room?" The owner said, "Nope, we don't believe in that around here." The man said, "Do you have a television in the room?" The owner said, "Nope, we don't believe in that around here." The man continued, "Well, do you have a newspaper?" The owner replied, "Nope, we don't believe in that around here." The man then said, "What do you believe in?" He answered, "We believe in the second coming of Jesus." The stranger replied, "Well, if he's ever been here before, I don't think he'll be coming back."

Jesus has been here before, and He is coming back! That's a promise (John 14:1-6). I don't know when, and neither does anyone else. I don't know all the events that will precede and accompany it, and neither does anyone else. But I do know that the world has not seen the last of Jesus Christ. He will return, this time as King of kings and Lord of lords.

In a time when Christians were being pressed to declare "Caesar is Lord," John's Revelation assured them, and assures us today, that Jesus is the only true Lord. I read a church marquee that said, "Today's forecast—Jesus reigns." That's the message of Revelation.

Because of all this, Christ should be preeminent in

our lives (Col. 1:18b). He is preeminent in revelation; He is preeminent in creation; He is preeminent in organization; He is preeminent in salvation; and He will be preeminent in consummation. And such a one as Christ deserves first place in your heart and life.

Jesus once said to a young man, "Follow me." The young man responded, "[Let] me first go and bury my father." Jesus replied in no uncertain terms, "Let the dead bury their dead; but go thou and preach the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:59-60). He was saying in effect, "I don't come next. I come first or not at all." That's His call to us today. "Come and follow me—but I must be first. I do not play second-fiddle."

W. E. Sangsten once prayed, "Lord, we care not who is second so long as Thou art first." That is our prayer also.

2

The Loveless Church

Revelation 2:1-5

Napoleon once pointed to a map of China and said, “There lies a sleeping giant. If it ever wakes up, it will be unstoppable.” The same can be said of the church. It is a sleeping giant. Each Sunday church pews are filled with members who are doing nothing with their faith except “keeping” it.

The great need of the church is to wake up. Its need is not more money, larger buildings, increased activities, or even more members. It is revival. The church needs to return to its first love. That is the message of the risen Lord to the church at Ephesus, when He says, “Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love” (Revelation 2:4).

The Lord begins with a commendation. He commends Ephesus for its works, its patience, its orthodoxy, and its faithfulness. Their weekly schedule was full of activities. They were busy serving the Lord, and it was not half-hearted service. They labored. They toiled. They worked their fingers to the bone. They worked day and night.

They were patient. Ephesus was a pagan city, and the Christians there had to endure persecution. It was hard to live for Christ, but these Christians hadn’t quit. They were standing up under the pressure and contin-

ued to live for Christ.

They were orthodox. Jesus had warned that there would come into the fold “[wolves] in sheep’s clothing” (Matthew 7:15). The apostle Paul had sounded that same alert (Acts 20:29). The Ephesian elders had taken seriously the warning and would not tolerate those teachers who were perverting the gospel. And they were faithful; they were continuing in their Christian journey.

If the Lord had stopped there, one might think that this was a near perfect church that any minister would want to pastor and any Christian would want to be a member of. But He doesn’t stop there. He says, “Nevertheless, I have somewhat against thee...” What could the Lord possibly have against a church that was working, standing up under the pressure of persecution, staying doctrinally pure, and remaining faithful?

The church had lost the fervor and love that it first experienced. The honeymoon was over. Their faith had become “old hat.” Routine. They were carrying on the active program of the church, but their heart was not in it. They were doing all the right things, but for the wrong reasons. They had lost the enthusiasm and thrill of their faith. They had lost that fervent, personal, joyous relationship they had known when they first began to follow Christ. The deacons were still attending their meetings, discussing church business, and voting on crucial issues, but their interests were elsewhere. Teachers were still standing before their classes each Sunday, but their teaching lacked passion. The choir continued to rehearse and perform, but they sang with their lips and not with their hearts. The love and enthusiasm had gone out of their Christianity. The excitement and the joy were just not there.

Love for, and devotion to, Christ is the heart of the

Christian faith. Christianity is not submitting to a ritual, joining an organization, accepting a creed, or making a sacrifice. It is coming to know and love a person—Jesus Christ. The Ephesians had lost that, and none of the things He commended them for would suffice for the loss of their first love. Things never do.

Work will not substitute for love. Paul wrote, “And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing” (I Corinthians 13:3). It is not enough to work; we must ask ourselves, “Why do I do this? Is it because I ought to? Is it because somebody has to? Is it because I was elected to? Or is it out of love for and devotion to Christ?”

Orthodoxy will not substitute for love. You can be as straight as a gun barrel theologically and as cold as a gun barrel spiritually. Zeal not motivated by love can be dangerous. Hot heads can have cold hearts. In fact, orthodoxy carries an innate danger of causing people to be severe, critical, judgmental, and proud.

Nor will patience and faithfulness substitute for love. Toby Frost said one day his wife was reading her Bible and began to weep. He asked her what was wrong, and she replied, “The Lord has impressed me that I am more in love with Christianity than I am with Christ.” The same thing can happen to us. Love for the people, love for the services, love for the buildings, love for the traditions can actually mean more to us than Christ himself.

Nothing substitutes for love. A man may lavish gifts on his wife—houses, cars, jewelry, and furs—but if she senses that he’s not really committed to her, that she’s not number one in his life, that there is another in his life, nothing else matters much.

Ephesus is typical of many churches today. They permit worship to become a mere formality, a ritual; they go through the motions. It becomes boring. Most things lose their luster with time—silver tarnishes, iron rusts, ink fades, paper turns yellow, wood rots, paint peels, cement cracks, and “love. . . [can grow] cold” (Matt 24:12).

What happened to Ephesus can happen to us. For this reason, the Lord calls on the church to remember, to repent, and to return to their first works. These are not three separate acts. They are three parts of one act. We need to remember how excited we once were about our faith; how anxious we were to please the Lord; how hungry we were to learn; how eager we were to share Him with others; and that those things are no longer true.

Then we need to repent, to turn from our lovelessness without making excuses or trying to blame anyone else but ourselves. And we are to return to do our first works—to do what we did previously when we first came to know the Lord.

What is that? What must we return to do again if we are to regain our first love? There are four things we must do:

- We must worship sincerely.
- We must walk obediently.
- We must wait quietly.
- We must witness faithfully.

Neither Idol Worship Nor Idle Worship

First, if we want to return to our first love, we must worship sincerely. Somebody has said that our priorities in life need to be right. They ought to be worship, work, and play, but far too often we worship our work, we work at our play, and play at our worship.

When we play at worship we indicate that we have lost our first love and need revival. Malachi, the prophet, paints a gloomy picture of Israel playing at worship. The people were still going to the house of God and offering sacrifices, but they were giving animals that were blind, crippled, and diseased. They were giving that which they did not want themselves. Half-hearted worship is never satisfying. So as they went through their meaningless worship, they said to themselves, "Behold, what a weariness is it" (Malachi 1:13).

The worship of the people of Israel was characterized more by a yawn than a shout. They sat in church, looking at their watches, and wondering, "When in the world is the preacher going to get through so we can go home and get on with something important?" They were not willing to abandon worship altogether, but neither were they willing to give God their best. So they settled for a meaningless ritual.

Religion is either an acute fever or a dull monotony. It is our sincerity in worship that makes the difference. We talk today about contemporary worship. We need to be talking about contemptible worship—the kind of worship that insults God, because we are not sincere.

The prophet Isaiah describes worship as it ought to be. He says that in the year King Uzziah died, he saw the Lord sitting on His throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.

Around the Lord were angels who cried, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory."

Then Isaiah said, "Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts."

Then one of the angels took a live coal from the altar and laid it on Isaiah's lips and said, "Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged."

Then Isaiah said he heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And Isaiah responded, "Here am I; send me" (Isa. 6:1-8).

How long has it been since you worshipped like that? When we worship sincerely there is more "Woe is me" and "send me" than there is "whoopee." Our problem today is not idol worship, but idle worship. We come into the presence of the King with casual dress and, worse, with a casual attitude.

Can you remember the last time in worship when you saw the King and felt the sting of sin? How long since you have felt a hot coal on your sinful soul? How long since you said a hearty "amen" in church? How long since you shed a tear over sin in your life or the lostness of a friend? How long since you knelt in humility before God and man? How long since your heart pounded during the invitation, because you felt you needed to respond? How long since you rededicated your life to Christ? How long since you heard and answered the call of God to service?

If you're going to church more and enjoying it less, you need to rediscover your first love. You need revival. You need to pray, "Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation" (Psalm 51:12).

Half for Me and Half Against Me

Second, if we want to return to our first love, we need to walk obediently. Jesus' first call to Simon Peter was, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19), and immediately Peter left his work and fol-

lowed Him. And he followed for years. Then came the night of Jesus' betrayal, arrest and trial. While the other disciples ran like scared rabbits, Peter "followed afar off," literally and figuratively. As the Sanhedrin carried Jesus through the mockery of a trial, Peter watched and listened. Someone built a fire in the courtyard. As the trial wore on, the night grew cool, the fire grew hot, and Peter grew lukewarm. When asked if he were a follower of Christ, Peter denied knowing Him—not once, but three times. It was after those denials that he met Jesus by the Sea of Galilee and was reinstated in his apostleship. The question Jesus asked him was, "Simon, lovest thou me?" Three times, Jesus asked him. And each time as Peter answered in the affirmative, Jesus said, "Feed my sheep" (John 21: 15-17). If Peter really loved him, he was to go to work for him.

And to us, He says, "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). Love demands that we do as He says; that we live a holy life; and that we walk obediently. The Lord did not save us to sit and soak and sour. He saved us to serve Him. With many Christians, the main thing seems to be to sit in a corner pew and be fed. Well, every creature needs to be fed, from a pig upward, but there is more to the Christian life than just being fed. In time, we need to take off the bib and put on an apron. The Lord says to us, as He said to Peter, "If you love me, get on with my work."

It becomes harder and harder to get people to work for the Lord. One half of our members are called "inactive." There really is no such thing. Jesus said, "He that is not with me is against me: and he that gathereth not with me scattereth" (Luke 11:23). One preacher had it right. When he was asked how many members he had in his congregation, he replied, "One hundred." Then

he was asked, “How many are active?” He replied, “All of them—fifty for me and fifty against me.”

That’s what Jesus said. You’re either for Him or against Him. You’re either gathering in, or you’re scattering abroad. There is no neutrality in the Christian life. And while half of our members are inactive, we must coax, beg, plead, bribe, and shame the other half to get them to work. Most church nominating committees meet thirteen months a year. They will take anyone who walks and breathes. If you can see lightning, hear thunder, and say “yes,” you’re in.

There is one thing worse than not going to church. That’s going to church and not doing anything about what you hear. James said, “Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves” (James 1:22). It is easy to fool yourself into thinking you have done all you need to do simply by hearing God’s word. We are to practice it. We are to walk obediently after Him.

Listening As Well As Listing

Third, if we want to return to our first love, we need to wait quietly. We must not get so busy working for Him that we have no time to spend with Him. That’s what happened to Martha. She became so preoccupied with cooking for Jesus that she neglected the main thing: spending time with Him, listening to Him, learning from Him (Luke 10:38-42).

For us, that means we must have a time of private prayer and Bible study, and we can’t just breeze in and blow off steam. We’ve got to spend some quiet time with Him. The trouble with most people who pray is they say amen and rush off before God has a chance to reply. Frank Laubach reminds us, “Listening to God is as important as giving Him your ideas.”

A friendship will die if it is not nourished by continual contact, and the most powerful way to connect with another person is just to listen. It is in silence that we most often meet God, as the scriptures remind us, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). If we are reverent and will hush for a moment, God may whisper in our ear. If we aren't still, we are apt to miss Him.

Mother Teresa, the little saint with the big heart, wrote a profound poem about silence and the soul. She said:

We need to find God,
and he cannot be found in noise and
restlessness.
God is a friend of silence.
See how nature—trees, flowers, grass—
grows in silence.
See the stars, the moon, the sun,
how they move in silence.
Is not our mission
to give God to the poor?
Not a dead God, but a living, loving God.
The more we receive in silent prayer,
the more we can give in our active life.
We need silence
to be able to touch souls.
The essential is
not what we say,
but what God says
to us and through us.
All our words will be useless
Unless they come from within.
Words
Which do not give the light of Christ
Increase the darkness.

Are You A Real Friend?

Fourth, if we want to return to our first love, we need to witness faithfully. “The primary qualification for a missionary,” said Hudson Taylor, “is not a love for souls, as we so often hear, but a love for Christ.” The apostle Paul’s love for the lost stemmed from that love. He wrote, “Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved” (Romans 10:1). That kind of longing for our friends needs to be in the heart of every believer. We are living in a world where millions are dying untold. The world is crying for answers, and God’s people are stuttering.

J. Wilbur Chapman, famous evangelist, recounted several years ago that, “The New Testament records forty people, each suffering from some disease, who were healed by Jesus. Out of those forty people, thirty-four were either brought to Jesus by a friend, or Jesus was taken to them by a friend. Only six out of the forty sufferers found their way to Jesus without assistance. Using these numbers as an illustration, 82% of the people meet Jesus only because of the concern of a friend.”

Are you a friend? You’re not if you are willing to let your friends go to hell without an effort to bring them to Jesus Christ. Oscar Hammerstein once handed Mary Martin a poem written on a crumpled piece of paper. It read:

A song is no song till you sing it,
A bell is no bell till you ring it,
The love in your heart was not put there to stay.
Love is not love till you give it away.

If we really have love for Christ in our hearts, if He is our first love, we will want to share Him with other people.

There is a well-known story about an elderly man and his wife driving a pickup truck down the highway one day—he behind the steering wheel, she next to the passenger's door. Suddenly a young couple whipped around them in a sports car. The young girl was sitting close to her boyfriend, and his arm was around her shoulder. The old lady turned to the old man and said, "Pa, remember when we used to be like that? What happened to us?"

The old man replied, "Ma, I haven't moved."

If you are not as close to the Lord as you once were, make no mistake as to which one of you has moved. That is why He says to us, "Remember . . . repent . . . and scoot back over."

3

The Loyal Church

Revelation 2:10

On April 2, 1984, Georgetown University won its first and only NCAA basketball championship by beating the University of Houston, 84-75. With all of their starting lineup returning, there was talk of a repeat the next year and of Georgetown being on the verge of a college basketball dynasty.

John Thompson, coach of the Hoyas, responded to these suggestions by saying, "I think our chances are terrible. The hardest thing in the world is to come back. These kids will be cocky. A repeat will be very, very hard."

He was then asked about his starting lineup for the next year. He responded, "I put little emphasis on who starts. What is most important is who finishes."

That is what's important to our Lord also. So He says to the church at Smyrna, "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life" (Revelation 2:10).

Faithfulness is an oft-repeated theme in scripture. Jesus said, "No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62). Of the apostolic church, Luke records, "...they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine...(Acts 2:42). These Christians had staying power. They could

be counted on.

Repeatedly, we are told to “stand fast in the faith” (I Corinthians 16:13), to “stand fast in the Lord” (Philippians 4:1), and to take up “the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand” (Ephesians 6:13).

After his great treatise on the resurrection, the apostle Paul admonished, “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord...” (I Cor. 15:58). And he reminds us, “...it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful” (I Corinthians 4:2). We are not required to be successful; we are required to be faithful.

Just about anyone can start well, but few stay long enough to finish well. That’s why the reminder to the church at Smyrna is so important. The Lord is speaking to a church that is facing severe persecution. Some of them will be cast into prison because of their faith. They need a word of encouragement to stay faithful. We today do not face the same trials, but we face the same difficulties in staying faithful to the Lord.

The Lord’s challenge to them and to us is to be faithful unto death. We’re not to be faithful until we’re tired...or until we’re retired...but until we are expired. We are to be faithful unto death.

The scriptures tell us that nothing can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:35-39). He is faithful to us, even if we are not faithful to Him. There are at least five obstacles to our faithfulness. They are self-sufficiency, bitterness about life, materialism, disappointment in others, and secret sin.

What do we need to do, what can we do, to better assure that we shall remain faithful to Him unto death? I offer these suggestions:

- Develop a disciplined devotional life.
- Accept life as hard.
- Be a good steward of your possessions.
- Remember that the church is both human and divine.
- Keep your sin accounts up-to-date.

We're Just Going To Do It

First, we must develop a strong devotional life. The Christian life is like an appliance. It must have power to operate. Prayer and Bible study are the two prongs of the plug to hook us up to God's power. If we neglect prayer and Bible study, we short-circuit our spiritual lives and neglect our souls.

We must begin with prayer. That's how we talk to God. If God can get us on our knees, He can keep us on our feet. It is impossible to lose your footing when you are on your knees. Missionary E. Stanley Jones said, "I have found that I am better or worse as I pray more or less."

Then we must study our Bible. That is how God talks to us. At its best, it must be done in quietness and meditation. You can't waltz into a Sunday School class with a quarter in one hand and a quarterly in the other and get all the Bible knowledge you need. John Adams, signer of the Declaration of Independence and second president of the United States, wrote to his son, Charles, a Harvard student who was inclined toward too much sociability, that "A scholar is always made alone. Studies can only be pursued to good purpose by yourself. Don't let your companions then, nor your amusements, take up too much of your time" (David McCullough, *John Adams*, p. 365). We can and should put ourselves under gifted teachers, but nothing can substitute for a

personal devotional life.

If you neglect your devotional life, you'll begin to drift. You can't stay close to a person you don't communicate with. If we'll be reverent and hush for a while, God may whisper in our ears. We all need a quiet time with God, so that we can listen to Him.

Some of you are saying, "I just don't have time for that." Valerie Young, a financial marketing specialist from North Hampton, Massachusetts, learned an important lesson about doing what is important in life. She was commuting two hours a day and wishing she were somewhere else, when her mother died suddenly of a heart attack—only five months before she was to retire. It wasn't simply the loss that affected her so deeply. It was her awareness of the countless dreams and hobbies her mother had postponed.

"You start thinking that the future isn't necessarily going to come," she said. So she changed her life, changed jobs, and stopped postponing the important things of her life.

One day she called her seventy-year old father, who lived nearby, about having lunch. Knowing his daughter was busy, he said, "Someday when you have nothing to do, give me a call."

"You know, Dad," she replied, "I'm never going to wake up and say 'I have nothing to do today.' We're just going to do it" (*Reader's Digest*, October 2000).

That's the way we must be with our devotional life. We're never going to wake up one day and say, "I have time for this." We just have to do it. It's essential to staying faithful unto death. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "Anyone who thinks his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God or his brother, but only for himself and his own follies."

Life Is Hard...God is Merciful...Heaven Is Sure

Second, we have to accept the fact that life is hard. Ted Turner, founder of CNN and Turner Cable Network, is the largest private landowner in America. At last count he owned 1.7 million acres of ranch land in New Mexico, Montana, South Dakota, and Nebraska. He has been called “the mouth of the south” for his over-the-top public behavior. A few years ago, he pledged one billion dollars to United Nations charities, to be paid in ten payments of \$100,000,000 each. Unfortunately, he is a devout and outspoken atheist.

In 1990, speaking to the American Humanist Association convention, Turner said, “Christianity is a religion for losers.” Though he apologized for the wording of this quote, he still believes in its message.

Ted Turner grew up in a church-going family, and according to his former wife, Jane Fonda, he even considered becoming a missionary until a family tragedy occurred (*Dallas Morning News*, 1 July 2000). His sister, Mary Jane, contracted lupus. She struggled for five years with the painful disease, sometimes creating nightmarish scenes at home with her tortured screaming. “God, let me die! Let me die!” she would implore. Finally, at the age of 15, she did die, and Ed Turner, her father, was inconsolable. When a man counseled the grief-stricken father with, “The Lord works in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform,” Ed lashed back. “If that’s the type of God he is,” he replied, “I want nothing to do with him.” He never returned to church, and young Ted also abandoned the faith (*Reader’s Digest*, September 1998).

That kind of thing happens to a lot of people. Unless we can accept the fact that suffering is a mystery, we too may succumb to bitterness. Why do the innocent suffer? It remains a great mystery. There are really

several answers to that question.

For one thing, we suffer because we live in a world cursed by sin. When human nature fell, physical nature fell also. Storms, floods, earthquakes, and volcanoes are the result of a world under the curse of sin. Just to live in such a world is risky. It's like going into an isolation ward in a hospital with no mask, gown, or gloves on. You expose yourself to danger simply by entering.

Some suffering is due to human freedom. When God made man, He faced the options of making us like robots, with no choice; like animals, with limited choice; or like Himself, with freedom of choice. God chose to make us in His own image.

If we are free, then we are free to sin. That means a person can get drunk, get behind the wheel of an automobile, and kill himself or kill you. That means a person can get high on drugs, rob a convenience store, and kill the clerk or kill you while you're in there. It's the price of freedom.

And we are free to do foolish things. Trouble so often comes because we're asking for it—we were driving too fast, or on the wrong side of the road, on a curve, on ice. The psalmist said, "He gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul" (Psalm 106:15). The tragedy as well as the comedy of this life is that people often get exactly what they pray for.

Some of us smoke. Nicotine is a poison. It is used as an insecticide to kill plants. The people who use it endanger their own lives. I've had one sister die from lung cancer caused by smoking. I have another sister who smokes and now has lung cancer. When it was discovered, my mother said to me, "Pray for Emma." I asked, "Has she quit smoking?" Mother replied, "No."

I said, "Then I'm not going to pray for her. It's fool-

ish to pray for a person who has lung cancer and is continuing to smoke." The fact is, that's like sowing your wild oats and praying for crop failure. It doesn't make sense.

Will smoking send you to hell? No, but it will make you smell like you've been there. Will smoking keep you out of heaven? No, but it may get you there sooner.

Some suffering is due to Satan. Remember Job? He was a good man who suffered the loss of health, wealth, and family. None of his suffering came from God. It was the work of the devil.

Jesus once healed a woman who had been bent over, probably from scoliosis, for eighteen years. When He was criticized for healing her on the Sabbath day, He responded, "Ought not this woman...whom Satan hath bound...be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?" (Luke 13:16).

The apostle Paul described his "thorn in the flesh" as "the messenger of Satan to buffet me" (II Corinthians 12:7). The word "buffet" literally means "to beat, to punch, to hit." It's the same word that is used to describe what the soldiers did to Jesus at His trial. They punched Him, hit Him, and struck Him.

Paul's affliction kept him beaten down, whipped down, to the point that he was totally dependent upon God. He spoke of this affliction as a "thorn in the flesh." The word "thorn" suggests that it was intensely painful. The word "flesh" locates it. It was an intensely painful physical affliction that kept him beaten down. He does not blame it on God. He clearly says that it was "a messenger of Satan."

Satan is such a deceiver that he causes most of the suffering in the world, and God gets blamed for it. When have you ever heard of a person going through a diffi-

cult time saying, "Why has Satan done this to me?" We always say, "Why has God done this to me?" Satan is the culprit, and God gets the blame. That's how deceptive he is.

Some suffering comes as a discipline from God. The psalmist said, "Before I was afflicted, I went astray; but now have I kept thy word. It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes" (Psalm 119:67, 71).

Hugo Torres Gomez grew up in Cuba. He attended a Quaker school and early in life felt a call to the ministry, but he wanted to be an accountant. So after high school, he attended college and earned a degree as an accountant. By the time he finished college, civil war was waging in Cuba between the army of dictator Fulgencio Bautista and Fidel Castro's rebels. Hugo believed that the military was a glorious and honorable career, and so he enrolled in the military academy.

When he graduated Gomez could have gotten an office job because his next-door neighbor was a high government official. Instead, he opted to go to the mountains and fight with Bautista against the Castro guerillas. Five times he was wounded in warfare. On one occasion he received such a severe wound in his shoulder that he almost died. He had to walk fifteen miles to get adequate medical attention to survive.

Hugo soon discovered that the army was actually corrupt. Bautista was supplying arms to the guerillas, because he thought the civil war was good for the country. Hugo said he woke up one day, and the government was gone and all the officers were gone. Bautista and his people had fled the country, leaving it to the rebels.

Hugo and the other soldiers had no choice but to

join Castro's forces. Then he saw Castro's men line up hundreds of people before a firing squad, kill them, and bury them in mass graves dug by a bulldozer. That's when he decided he had to leave the country.

Hugo fled to the United States, came to Tyler, Texas, and began working for an accountant at Delta Drilling Company. He and his wife found their way to our church and became active members. Again he felt the call to ministry and this time he answered! He became the pastor of a Hispanic church in Henderson and at my last contact with him, he and his wife, Felicida, were serving as missionaries in Mexico.

When he gave his testimony in our church, Hugo said, "When the weather changes, I have an ache in my shoulder (pointing to the place where he had been wounded), given to me by God as a reminder of my disobedience."

That happens to many people, but most suffering remains a mystery. We simply do not know why it happens.

Phillip Yancy writes that his father-in-law, a life-long Bible teacher, had strong Calvinist roots, but he found his faith troubled in his final years due to a degenerative nerve disease that confined him to bed, impeding him from most of the activities that gave him pleasure. His thirty-nine year old daughter battled a severe form of diabetes, and financial pressures mounted. During the most severe crisis, he composed a Christmas letter and mailed it to others in the family. Many things that he had once taught, he now felt uneasy about.

What could he believe with certainty? He came up with these three things: "Life is difficult. God is merciful. Heaven is sure." These things he could count on. When his daughter died of diabetes complications the

very next week, he clung to those truths even more fiercely.

We must do the same if we are to avoid bitterness and remain faithful.

You Can and You Can't

Third, we must be good stewards of all our possessions. Adversity may be hard, but 100 people can stand adversity for every one who can stand prosperity. When things are in the saddle, they tend to ride us. They don't belong to us; we belong to them.

We all face two dangers in life. The first is that we may not get what we want in life. The second is—we may. Both have built-in perils. To be preoccupied with possessions more than anything else prevents us from noble living. Material possessions can be one of the most destructive forces in life. You cannot walk in selfishness and walk with God. To walk in selfishness is to walk downhill.

Jesus reminds us, "No man can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon" (Matthew 6:24). You can't serve God and mammon, but you can serve God with mammon (E. Stanley Jones).

A friend told me about Red McCombs, a San Antonio businessman who is a multi-millionaire and owner of the Minnesota Vikings. The Vikings are worth \$500 million, and McCombs recently gave \$50 million to the University of Texas. He grew up in a Christian home. His father was a mechanic and just eked out a living. He was paid in cash, so he brought the money home every week and laid it on the kitchen table. The mother put aside 10% for their tithe to the church, and they lived

on the rest. She said to Red later in life, “Someday I hope I’ll be able to give something to my church.” He responded, “Mom, you’ve been giving all your life.” She replied, “No, that was the tithe. I owed that. The other is what you give” (Used by permission).

Jesus reminds us, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6:21). If we will put our money in the kingdom of God, then we are more likely to keep our heart there. It is a help toward faithfulness.

Born Premature and Never Caught Up

Fourth, remember the church is both human and divine. I often say to young converts, “Before you get heavily involved in the church, you need to get a good grip on your faith. People will disappoint you and shake your faith in God.” Any person who gets involved in the life of the church soon discovers that many church members are harsh, insensitive, judgmental, dogmatic, vindictive, and unloving.

It helps to remember that the church is a family—a family of faith—and it is made up of people of all ages and stages of development. Just as a family may have parents who are adults, teenagers who are in their adolescence years, and little children, so the church has people at many stages of development. We don’t expect babies to act like teenagers. We don’t expect teenagers to act like adults. Neither should we expect every member of the church to act like a mature Christian.

One of the first successful missionaries to India, E. Stanley Jones, founded a Christian community there, where converts could live together, learning the faith and avoiding persecution. In this community, called the Ashram, each member was expected to do chores, which were often menial. One of the converts in the Ashram

was a member of the upper class, a caste called the Brahmins. This Brahmin refused to do his chores, citing his superior caste. When the missionary explained that everyone was expected to serve in this humble way, the Brahmin exclaimed, “Brother Jones, I’ve converted...but not that far!” If you look around the church long enough, you’ll discover some members who have not been converted far enough yet.

Branch Rickey, owner and manager of the old Brooklyn Dodgers, was the man who broke the color barrier in sports by bringing Jackie Robinson into professional baseball. If there had been no Branch Rickey, there would have been no Jackie Robinson. Branch Rickey was a brilliant man. He earned two undergraduate degrees and a law degree from the University of Michigan. He was a Methodist lay minister who neither drank nor cursed. Known for his wit, he once wrote a scout report on a pitcher, saying, “He was born premature and has never caught up.”

Some church members seem to fit that mold—born premature, and they never catch up. Don’t put your eyes on people; put them on Christ. The scriptures admonish us to keep “looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2). If we do otherwise, we are bound to fail.

And remember this—if any person, even a hypocrite, keeps you from God, they are closer to the Lord than you are.

Put your eyes on Christ. It will help you to stay faithful.

Don’t Expect Too Much

Fifth, keep your sin accounts up-to-date. I was startled by a late-night ring of the telephone. I looked at

the clock, and it was 11:30 p.m. On the other end of the line was a member of my church, a recovering alcoholic. He had gone out that day and gotten drunk, the first drink he had had in over nine months.

He apologized for calling, but he needed to talk to someone. He was so disappointed in himself. He said, "Paul, I need help. I've been reading the Bible and I believe in God, but it's just not working for me. Maybe I'm expecting too much." There are more people like him than we would like to admit. I reminded him that when God saves us, he doesn't drain the red blood from our veins and fill them with buttermilk. We still face temptations and trials.

After conversion, we have two natures—the old sin nature and our new nature in Christ—and they continually war with one another. I further reminded him that Peter struggled and fell down, but he got up. He got knocked down, but not knocked out. It happens to all of us. We can't be sinless, but we can sin less, and God has made provision for that.

John writes, "My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and he is the propitiation (covering) for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world" (I John 2:1-2).

The blood of Jesus Christ saves the sinner when he believes and the believer when he sins. If we will daily confess our sins and repent of them, it will help to keep us on our feet.

Luther Rice was one of our first two American Baptist missionaries. He went to Burma under appointment by the Congregationalists, but on his journey he was converted to the Baptist way of thinking. Upon arrival, he

submitted himself to baptism by immersion and became a Baptist.

He returned to the United States to organize Baptists for the support of his fellow missionary, Adoniram Judson, who had also gone to Burma to serve as a Congregational missionary and converted to the Baptist faith.

As a result of Luther Rice's efforts, the Triennial Convention, the first Baptist organization for the support of missions in the United States, was organized. On one occasion, Rice had an opportunity to take an offering for missions. As they were counting the money following the offering, they found a note in the collection plate, obviously the handwriting of a child, that said, "I give myself."

Some of the counters thought the note was just a joke. They could not know that the child who wrote the note was Lewis Shuck who later became one of our earliest missionaries to China.

We don't know what anyone else gave in the offering plate that day, but we do know that Lewis Shuck gave more than anybody else. He gave himself. That is what we need to do. Give ourselves to Christ, and then remain faithful unto death.

4

The Lax Church

Revelation 2:12-17

Mark Twain tells that early in his life he moved to a mining town in Colorado. The city he moved to was a wide-open town with brothels and bars on every corner. He said, "I immediately recognized it was no place for a Presbyterian, so I decided not to be one."

There are many people who, when they find it hard to be a Christian, either quit trying to be one or they compromise their convictions. It was the temptation to compromise that led our Lord to write a word of warning to the church at Pergamos (Revelation 2:12-17).

Pergamos was a hard place to be a Christian. It was so wicked that it was called "a place where Satan's seat is." It seems to me that is a good place for a church to be. The gospel needs to shine in dark places. The Christians in Pergamos had an opportunity to be a pinch of salt in a putrid place.

That is what every church needs to be, but it's not always easy. One of the members of the church at Pergamos, a man named Antipas, had already been martyred for his faith. Others were facing the possibility of a similar fate. The Lord knew what they were going through and commended those who were staying faithful to him, but He said, "I have a few things against thee..."(v. 14).

Now, when God has something against you, you've got troubles. What did the Lord have against this church? There were some in it who were holding to the doctrine of Balaam, and others who were holding to the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes. Who was Balaam? Who were the Nicolaitanes? And what was their sin?

Balaam was a prophet of the Old Testament and the king of Moab tried to hire him to put a curse on Israel (Numbers 22-24; II Peter 2:15). As Israel came out of Egypt, they approached the land of Moab. The king, Balak, was afraid of them, so he tried to hire Balaam to curse them.

Balak offered Balaam a position of high honor and great wealth. The Lord appeared to Balaam and told him that the Israelites were His people and forbade him to curse them. Balaam wanted to be true to God, and on two different occasions, he responded to the servants who had brought him the offer from the king, "If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord my God, to do less or more" (Numbers 22:18; 24:13). In short, he sent word back to the king that he was not for sale.

But the king kept upping the ante until the temptation was more than Balaam could resist, so he sold out (II Peter 2:15). If he could not curse Israel, he would corrupt them. He suggested to the king of Moab that he throw a sensual feast and invite the men of Israel to it. They accepted, and they fell into sin with the women of Moab. As a result, the judgment of God came upon them, and 24,000 Israelites were slain.

What was Balaam's sin? It was the sin of compromise. He compromised his convictions, his character, and his calling for safety and security. He sold out for what it would gain him personally.

The Nicolaitanes were followers of Nicoliaus, who taught that it was okay to live a life of self-indulgence and that immorality and loose living were acceptable. He taught that Christians could live like the world and participate in heathen practices without it hurting their spiritual lives.

The sins of both Balaam and Nicoliaus were the same—they were the sins of compromise, the sins of worldliness. It is interesting that the two names are the same. The name Balaam is the Hebrew form; Nicoliaus is the Greek form. The name Balaam is derived from two Hebrew words that mean “to conquer the people.” The name Nicoliaus is derived from two Greek words that mean “to conquer the people.” If the devil can get us to compromise, then he can conquer us. He can win the spiritual victory in our lives individually and in the church.

Both of these doctrines sought to adjust Christianity to the level of the world rather than to lift the world to the level of Christianity. They taught the people to go along in order to get along. In short, to compromise.

The risen Christ makes it clear that God hates these things (verse 15). He hates cringing cowardice. He hates compromise. He does not hate the followers of Balaam; He hates the doctrine of Balaam. He does not hate the Nicolaitanes; He hates the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes. He loves the sinner, and He hates the sin. And one of the most damnable sins in the world is to compromise.

Repeatedly in scripture we are warned against it. The most common word for the Christian in the New Testament is “hagios.” The basic meaning of that word is “different” or “separate.” The temple is hagios, because it is different from all other buildings; the Sabbath is hagios, because it is different from all other days. God

is hagios, because He is different from all other beings. The Christian is hagios, because he is different from other men.

The apostle Paul commands, “Come out from among them, and be ye separate” (2 Cor. 6:17). Again, he says, “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed” (Romans 12:2). And once again, “Let everyone that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity” (2 Tim. 2:19).

Old Sam Adams, the patriot of the Revolutionary War, said, “Beware of compromise lest by one concession after another you wind up in complete submission.” The church today needs to beware of compromise. If Satan can get us to compromise, he can conquer us. We wind up in complete submission to him.

There are at least three areas in which we must not compromise:

- We must not compromise our convictions.
- We must not compromise our character.
- We must not compromise our commitment.

Some Non-Negotiables

First, we must not compromise our convictions. The early Christians made a profound impact on their world. They did something because they believed something. Our problem is that we’re trying to do what they did without believing what they believed. A cartoon in a religious publication spoke volumes about the church today. It pictured a church sign with the name of the church at the top—*The Lite Church*. Beneath that sign were listed some of its beliefs: “We offer seven of the ten commandments; three of the four spiritual laws; five percent instead of ten percent tithe; etc.” The painful truth is that the cartoon is far too accurate.

The late Kenneth McFarland talked to a skeptical college student once about his religious faith. The student responded, "If you believe all of that, why don't you stand up, instead of folding up, to make it acceptable to us? Why do you cut it before you try to sell it to us?" That's a fair question, and an indictment on our wishy-washy preaching and teaching today.

In *Fiddler On The Roof*, Tevye is a loving father who is confronted, one at a time, with things his children want to do that displease him. He at first denies them, but when he is alone, he begins to weigh both sides. He says to himself, "On the one hand," as he considers the aspects of that particular side of the issue. Then he says to himself, "But on the other hand," as he lists the other factors involved. He then allows that particular child's request, although it goes against his beliefs. But when one of his daughters wants to marry a young Russian Communist, he forbids her. As he begins to reason with himself in the same style of, "On the one hand," and "On the other hand," he cannot allow it. So he loudly affirms, "There are some things that have no 'on the other hand.'"

There are some non-negotiable things in the Christian life. There are some convictions that we must not compromise. There are principles we believe so strongly that we would be willing to suffer personally rather than go contrary to them.

For one thing, we cannot afford to lose our convictions about scripture. They are the inspired, authoritative, and sufficient word of God (2 Tim. 3:16-17). A little girl asked her mother, "Mother, do we believe the Bible?"

The mother said, "We sure do."

"Do we believe the whole Bible?"

Her mother said, "Yes, we sure do."

She said, "Do we believe the story about God creating the heavens and the earth?" Her mother replied, "Yes, we do."

She said, "Do we believe the story about Noah and the flood?"

Her mother replied, "Yes, we do."

The mother then told the little girl to go upstairs and dust her room. In a minute the little girl ran down the stairs and said, "Momma, do we believe the part of the Bible that says, 'From dust thou art taken and unto dust thou shalt return?'"

The mother replied, "We sure do, honey."

She said, "Well, Mom, you'd better come upstairs. There's somebody under my bed, and I don't know whether he's coming or going."

We can't afford to lose our conviction about sin. We are masters today at renaming and redefining sin. We call adultery an affair, pornography an art form, homosexuality an alternate lifestyle, and drunkenness a disease, as though alcoholism was like rheumatism, something you can't do anything about.

None of us knows how old the human race is, but I think you'll agree it's old enough to know better. The words of Isaiah are appropriate for us, "Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil" (Isaiah 5:20). All this is an effort at self-justification. It is like the old story of a man who killed his parents and threw himself on the mercy of the court because he was an orphan.

Finally, we can't afford to lose our conviction about salvation. Salvation is through faith in Christ alone. A prominent theologian was being questioned on "Larry King Live" about the Christian faith. When he declared that Christ was the only way of salvation, Mr. King asked, "That's rather arrogant, isn't it?" He replied, "No, not if

it's true. If it's true, it is an act of love." And so it is.

These are non-negotiables. These are convictions we must not compromise.

You Are The Message

Second, we cannot afford to compromise our character. We are the children of God, and we must live like it. Emerson said, "It's bad when believers and unbelievers live in the same manner. I distrust that religion." And well he ought to.

Niccolo Machiavelli, the Italian statesman and father of the modern science of politics, taught us that, "The end justifies the means. . . Do whatever you have to do to achieve your end." But he also taught something else very important. He said, "If you want to know what the prince is like, look at the prince's aides." Just so, Jesus, the Prince of Peace, is judged by those of us who are His servants. If we don't live like children of God, who will want to follow Him?

Several years ago, Harvard University did a study on non-verbal communication and was stunned at its conclusions. The research revealed that there are thousands of different ways to communicate without words: a frown, a raised eyebrow, rolling the eyes, clearing the throat, and thousands more. This knowledge must serve as a constant reminder that we do not just speak a message; we are a message.

A poor Armenian said, "I've never seen Jesus, but I have seen Dr. Shepherd." And seeing the Christ-like service of that great medical missionary in the Near East, he came to believe more in Jesus. The Lord wants to incarnate himself in us.

The apostle Paul put it succinctly, "Ye are our epistle...known and read of all men...written not with

ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart" (II Cor. 3:2-3).

Somebody said, "Don't worry that your children never listen to you; worry that they are always watching you." The world is watching us. They do not expect us to be perfect, but they do expect us to be different.

A fellow pastor tells of eating in a restaurant one evening, and as he left, he noticed a sign above the exit, "My reputation is in your hands." It was signed, "The Management." In heaven, God must be looking down on us and saying, "Church, my reputation is in your hands." We cannot afford to lose our character.

We Accept No Excuse

Third, we cannot afford to compromise our commitment. The late William Flemming, an early benefactor of Baptist causes, once said, "Baptists have all the money, numbers, and organization to do anything that ought to be done. They are short only on commitment."

We Baptists today are many, but we are not much. We are like the proverbial river—a mile wide and an inch deep. Dr. John R. Sampey will always be a great name in Baptist history. The keynote of his life was to "give Jesus Christ all the keys." Dr. Sampey began his life of service as the custodian in a country church. He determined to be the best sexton that the church ever had. From that lowly beginning, he began to grow in spiritual stature until he eventually became the president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and, then, president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

When Dr. Sampey first became pastor of a rural church, he asked the church clerk to let him see the church roll. Looking over the names, Dr. Sampey saw

the initials “NG” after many of them. “What do the initials ‘NG’ mean?” asked Dr. Sampey of the clerk. His reply was, “Oh, those initials mean ‘no good.’ They don’t come. They don’t give. They are just not interested.”

Beside the names of many in our churches today could be written “NC” —no conviction—no character—no commitment. They have an interest in the church, but no commitment to it or to Christ himself.

There is a difference between interest and commitment. When you’re interested in doing something, you do it only when it’s convenient. When you’re committed to something, you accept no excuses, only results.

Someone has said, “A great commitment to the great commandment and the great commission makes a great church.” To that I would add also, “The great confession.”

We need to be committed to the great commandment. What is the great commandment? Let Jesus answer: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40).

Nothing else matters if we do not love God. Someone put it this way, “When it comes to family living, the answer is—love God. If your children are driving you crazy—love God. If your teenagers are rebelling—love God. If you have newborn children or grandchildren and anxiously wonder what kind of world they are going to inherit—love God. As you learn to practice these core Christian values in your Canaan, remember God’s ultimate call on your life—love God!”

I attended a small country church recently, and it happened to be layman's day. A Tyler police detective named Tony shared his testimony. He said that there was a time when he had drifted away from God and was not living as he ought to. As a result, he didn't want to go to church. His wife asked him one day, "Tony, don't you love God anymore?"

May I ask you that same question? Don't you love God anymore? That's what He wants more than anything else.

But there is a corollary. Jesus added that we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. We're to have compassion on those around us. Fourteen times in the gospels, we're told that Jesus had compassion on people. The word "compassion" literally means "to suffer with, to feel the same thing as, to enter into an experience with." That's what Jesus did when He encountered the need of people in life. That's the way we are to be.

Years ago when the Salvation Army was just beginning and going like wild fire, a newspaper became interested in why it was growing so rapidly. The paper sent a reporter to spend two or three days with the Salvation Army to write a report on the secret of their meeting.

As the reporter approached one of the meetings, a massive man, perhaps 6 feet, 5 inches tall, was walking up the steps with a little boy. The little boy slipped, fell, skinned his knees, and began to cry. The big man reached down, took him by the hand, and lifted him up, saying, "We're a part of the army of the Lord. We don't cry over little things. We shout 'Glory, hallelujah!' and that drives the tears away." So the little boy got up to his feet, shouted, "Glory, hallelujah!" and dried the tears away.

The reporter went to the meeting and heard the

people sing and pray. After several days, he wrote what he believed to be the secret of the Salvation Army. He said, "Any community of faith that will lift up people from the hurts of life and cause them to shout, 'Glory, hallelujah!' has the power of God in it."

That is to be the work of the church. We're to lift up the fallen, dry tears away, and give hope to the hopeless, causing them to shout, "Glory, hallelujah!" If we ever lose the compassion for people that causes us to do that, then we might as well take down our sign and lock our doors. We must be committed to the great commandment.

We must not lose our commitment to the Great Commission. Jesus gave it to the church when He said, "All power is given to me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:18-20).

We call that verse the Great Commission; we ought to call it the great omission. We have learned it by heart, but we have not taken it to heart. We can recite it, but we don't practice it.

Christ's commission begins at the end of our nose and our toes, and it goes and goes, until we have told everyone we can reach, and sent others to those to whom we cannot go ourselves, to tell them that Jesus saves. That makes a great church.

But let me add one more—we must not lose our commitment to the great confession. The great confession was made by Peter when Jesus asked, "Whom say ye that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Matthew 16:15-16). Jesus is

both the subject and the object of our faith. Christianity is neither rules nor rituals; it is a relationship.

Our faith centers in Him. Remember what Jesus said, "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me. And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life" (John 5:39-40).

The late, great Presbyterian preacher, Peter Marshall, once prayed, "Lord, help us stand for something, lest we fall for anything." We must be people of principle. We must be people of conviction, of character, and of commitment. We must not compromise on those things.

In the message to this church, the Lord says, "I have a few things against thee..." (v. 14). Is there any contention between you and the Lord? Are you true to your convictions? Is your character exemplary? Are you committed to Him?

If not, settle it now. There will never be a better time.

5

The Liberal Church

Revelation 2:18-29

The movie, *The Preacher's Wife*, starring Whitney Houston and Denzel Washington, is the story of a pastor and his wife who serve St. Matthew's Church in the heart of a ghetto area in New York City. It was a difficult and discouraging work, but the church was still the most vibrant thing in the community.

A developer wanted to buy the church for one of his large commercial projects, and, in return for the property, offered to build the congregation a beautiful, modern, new facility in a more desirable part of the city, away from the ghetto, if only they would sell to him.

The offer was tempting and the pastor and his wife were torn between the enticing possibilities and the need to stay and minister in that difficult area. As they struggled, the Lord sent an angel who said to the preacher, "St. Matt's is the glue that holds this community together. If it goes, the community goes."

In a wider sense, your church, my church, "the" church, is the glue that holds every community together. It alone stands for morality, righteousness, and eternal values. The government doesn't. The school can't. Business won't. Only the church is there to point people to God. None of us can fathom what our country would be like without the influence and impact of the church.

If society is as bad as it is with the church, think how bad it would be without it.

If it seems to you that society is coming unglued today, it may be because the church has failed to stick to its guns, i.e., its mission, its message, and its methods. Thus, it has become weak and anemic because of its tolerance. It happened once; it may happen again.

The risen Lord tells us about it in His message to Thyatira (Revelation 2:18-29). The fault He found with this church was that it "suffered" (allowed) a woman to teach heresy. She is called Jezebel. Who was Jezebel? The Old Testament presents her as one of the most evil, sinister women who ever lived (I Kings 20-22). She was the notorious wife of Ahab, King of Israel. She was the daughter of the king of Tyre and Sidon and a Baal worshipper. After she married Ahab, Jezebel set up Baal worship in Israel and led the people to idolatry. Part of their idol worship was immorality in the name of their god. She was one of the most seductive, evil women who ever lived.

Jezebel's name became, and is still today, synonymous with seduction and wickedness. If you want to really insult a woman, just call her a "Jezebel."

A good woman is one of the best things on earth. Women were the last ones at the cross and the first ones to the tomb. Christianity has gone forward largely on the shoulders of godly women. It owes a debt to women just as women owe a debt to Christ, but there are few things worse than an evil woman, and Jezebel was evil.

It is doubtful that this was the lady's real name. We don't name our sons "Judas." We don't name our daughters "Jezebel." She was, in all probability, a "Jezebel type" woman—evil and seductive. She claimed to be a prophetess, i.e., an inspired preacher, and taught the people

that immorality and idolatry were acceptable. Parenthetically, it is obvious that women were permitted to preach and teach in the New Testament church (Acts 2:17; 18:26; 21:9). The problem was not that she was a woman, but that she was a heretic.

Jezebel did not claim to destroy Christianity. She simply offered a newer, improved, modern version of it. She made it easier to live in sin. Any teaching, any philosophy, any doctrine that makes it easier to sin is of the devil, and any teacher, man or woman, who makes it easier to sin, is of the devil. Her teachings fit that category.

The problem with the church is that it permitted this, allowed it. The church as a whole was not guilty of immorality or idolatry. Quite the contrary, the Lord commends this church for its works, its character, its service, its faith, and its patience. In fact, He couldn't seem to say enough good about it.

But in the name of freedom and open-mindedness, the church allowed this woman to teach heresy. The problem in Thyatira was not outside the church, but inside. Some of the churches, such as Pergamos, were facing great persecution. Antipas, a member of the church at Pergamos, had already been martyred for his faith. Some believers at Smyrna were being imprisoned for their faith, but that was not happening in Thyatira.

In some ways, harassment from the outside is preferable to heresy on the inside. Harassment from without tends to draw people together. Heresy from within tends to drive them apart. The best way, then, to defeat any group is to infiltrate it and weaken it. Any church can be weakened by people who get into it and begin to teach false doctrine, or, just as bad, sit and do nothing.

What happened at Thyatira is happening in many churches today. A part of the reason society is coming

unglued is that we, too, have become too tolerant. We often talk about the sin of intolerance. What about the sin of tolerance? The danger is that we shall become so tolerant that we lose our convictions—so anxious to be acceptable to our culture, so afraid of being called narrow-minded, so afraid of being called bigoted, so afraid of being called prejudiced, so afraid of being called fundamentalist—that anything goes, everything is acceptable, and nothing is wrong. I remind you that what one generation tolerates, the next generation embraces. We can, in fact, become so open-minded that our brains fall out.

It is not wrong for Christians to oppose heresy. It is unchristian not to. The apostle Paul wrote, "Though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed (damned)" (Galatians 1:8). There is not much toleration in that.

I am not narrow-minded. I am not bigoted. I am not a fundamentalist, but the time has come for someone to extol the virtues of intolerance. General Bramwell Booth, son of William Booth, who founded the Salvation Army, said as he walked in the slums of the east end of London, "My God, how I detest the enemy which hath wrought this havoc." Without such indignation rising to a boiling point, evil would have continued to flourish.

Things like slavery and child labor were eradicated because someone decided they were intolerable. That person said, "We will not allow this to go on." And our nation today might still be ruled by an autocrat if someone hadn't said, "God is tired of kings."

It is time for us to be intolerant—intolerant of profanity and pornography in entertainment, drunkenness on the highways, abuse in homes, dishonesty in busi-

ness, corruption in government, injustice in society, and hypocrisy in the church. Rivers must have banks. A river without banks becomes a swamp, and a church without doctrine soon becomes a moral and spiritual swamp. The banks, the boundaries of our faith, are the scriptures, but within them there's plenty of room to "roll around." There's plenty of room for interpretation, but we cannot move beyond the banks. We must not tolerate that.

There are at least three things we need to be intolerant about today:

- Commercialism in the church.
- Relativism in society.
- Universalism in the pulpit.

Big Is Not Always Better

First, we ought to be intolerant of commercialism in the church. Commercialism is the attitude that emphasizes success at any cost. It is the measure of all that is really important. It says that success is the standard by which all things are measured. If it's business, then you measure it by its profits. If it's sports, you measure it by its "Ws" (wins). If it's entertainment, you measure it by its ratings. If it's the church, you measure it by its numbers. Unfortunately, the church has adopted the standards of the world.

Recently, the *Baptist Standard* told of a church that hired an entertainment firm to design its children's sanctuary. It's called "Toon Town." It features a children's baptismery built inside a fire truck. When a child is baptized, a bell rings, and he or she is sprayed with confetti. The president and CEO of the designing company said, "It's a pretty big deal to get baptized at _____ Church" (*Baptist Standard*, 20 November 2000).

Have you ever seen a child who didn't love a fire truck? Have you ever seen a child who didn't want to climb up on a fire truck? Think of all the children who are going to be baptized just because it's in a fire truck, and they will never know Christ as Savior. Think what John the Baptist could have done if he had had a fire truck instead of the Jordan River! That's what happens when a church adopts the standards of the world and makes success and numbers the most important things.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta, India, was less than 5 feet tall, but God used her to speak to millions of souls. She and her sisters went to New York City to open a new ministry for the poor on one occasion. A reporter asked her how she would know this new endeavor was a success. She looked into the camera, smiled, and said, "I don't believe our Lord ever spoke of success. He spoke only of faithfulness in love."

I want to go on record as saying I am for growth, and I am for success, but we must not equate the two. Big is not always better. We've almost created a complex about being small. I hear someone say, "We're just a small church. What can we do? What difference can we make?" More than you may think. I'm not so sure but that a small church is a more effective church than a large one. After all, an ocean liner would hardly be the thing for catching fish. You'd do better in a small boat.

G.K. Chesterton reminds us that "The man who lives in a small community lives in a much larger world. . ." The reason is obvious. In a large community, we choose our companions. In a small community, our companions are chosen for us. In a large community, we tend to hang around with folks just like us: people who have a college degree, drink only Starbuck's Dark Roast Coffee, and listen to our kind of music, but in a smaller group

(in small churches), we are forced to rub shoulders with everyone.

Again, in one of his writings, the world-renowned Quaker theologian, Elton Trueblood, testified that, except for small congregations like those that gather in tiny meetinghouses, he would not have been reached for the kingdom of Christ and His service. Being small is not a limitation. It may even be an asset.

I remind you that the Great Commission is not about numbers; the Great Commission is about disciples. The true health of a church, then, is not determined by the *number* of people who sit in the pews. The health of the church is determined by the kind of people who sit in the pews. We need to develop intolerance for the cheap commercialism and ethics that characterize a lot of churches today.

Are Your Morals Determined By the Media or the Master?

Second, we need to be intolerable of relativism in society. Relativism is the idea that there are no absolutes. All truth is relative to the individual and to the time and place in which he acts.

Recently, Julia Phillips died at the age of 57. She was a movie producer, who in 1973 made Hollywood history as the first woman to win a best picture Oscar—for *The Sting*—and who became the talk of the town almost 20 years later with her scandalous autobiography, *You'll Never Eat Lunch in This Town Again*.

In an interview following her death, her son-in-law, Modi Wiczysk, said that Ms. Phillips based her life on a two-word philosophy: "No rules" (*Dallas Morning News*, 9 January 2002). A lot of people live by that philosophy.

Ted Turner is another proponent of relativism. As

previously noted, he is a very generous man, but an unbeliever. He also believes that the Ten Commandments are “obsolete,” but he realizes that there must be some rules in society, and so he does have his own set of beliefs that he spells out in what he calls “Ten Voluntary Initiatives.” He said that these arose out of his frustration that “there is no amendment procedure to the Ten Commandments” (“Meet Ted Turner” by Dale Atta, *Reader’s Digest*; September 1998, page 222).

There are more people who share Julia Phillips’ and Ted Turner’s beliefs than we would like to admit, but understand this—God is not into initiatives; He is into imperatives. He doesn’t offer suggestions; He gives commandments. There are rules, and none of us can violate them without being guilty.

Right is right, because God said so, and wrong is wrong, because God said so. If a thing was right yesterday, it’s right today, and if the world shall last a thousand years, it will still be right. And if a thing was wrong yesterday, it’s wrong today, and as long as time shall last, it will be wrong.

Truth, God’s law, and ethical behavior are not relative. They are absolute, but a word of caution—if you watch television or read the press more than you read the Bible, your values, your morals, will be determined more by the media than by the Master.

It’s an awesome thing to own a Bible. If you have God’s word, then you are responsible to abide by it. “Unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required” (Luke 12:48), and as the Apostle Peter reminds us, it would have “been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them” (2 Peter 2:21).

The Way of the Cross

Third, we need to be intolerant of universalism in the pulpit. Universalism is the belief that ultimately and finally all people will be saved. Regardless of what people believe or how they live, we will all go to heaven.

After *B.C.* comic strip creator, Johnny Hart, a devout Christian, tried to show that Judaism found its fulfillment in Christianity, a well-known Baptist pastor said, "It seems to me it represents the regrettable continuing tendency in some of Christianity to dismiss Judaism and to suggest that Christianity now is the only viable religious perspective" (*Dallas Morning News*, 15 April 2001).

Even Pope John Paul II espoused this belief recently. In the religious news service from Vatican City, an article read, "Tempering a controversial Vatican declaration on salvation, Pope John Paul II said Wednesday that all who live a just life will be saved, even if they do not believe in Jesus Christ and the Roman Catholic Church." He went on to say, "All who seek God with a sincere heart, including those who do not know Christ and his church, contribute under the influence of grace to the building of his kingdom" (*Dallas Morning News*, 12 December 2000).

With all due respect to the pastor's and the Pope's right to their opinions, one of the most strategic, historic biblical principles—indeed, the central one of them all—is that Christianity IS the only viable religious perspective.

Jesus is the only way of salvation. Listen to the man whom Catholics have long said was really the first Pope, Simon Peter. He said, "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Which pope are you going to believe?

W. C. Fields, the actor, lived a raunchy life. Toward the end of his life, one of his friends came into the room, and W. C. was reading the Bible. The friend began to chide him and ask him why. He replied, "Looking for loopholes." Sorry, Mr. Fields, but there are no loopholes. It's Christ, or else.

The Pope suggests that sincerity is the key, but you and I both know that a person can be sincerely wrong. Sincerity can never be enough. We must put our faith and trust in the Savior. There is no other way (John 14:6). Jesus said, "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me. And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life" (John 5:39-40).

In 1291, The Charring Cross was erected in London. It was one of twelve crosses erected along the route where Queen Eleanor's funeral stopped to rest on its way to her burial at Westminster Abby. The original cross decayed over the centuries and was taken down in 1865. It was replaced by a replica at nearby Charring Cross Station, but the spot where The Charring Cross first stood is the official center of London. All distances are measured from there.

Years ago, a small boy got lost in London, and the police, trying to help him find his way home, questioned him about where he lived, but he could not remember. Finally, one of the policemen asked him if he knew where The Charring Cross was. He said, "You mean the big cross? O, yes, if you get me to the cross, I can find my way home."

The hymn by Jessie B. Pounds says it best:

I must needs go home by the way of the cross,
 There's no other way but this;
 I shall ne'er get sight of the gates of light,

If the way of the cross I miss.
The way of the cross leads home,
The way of the cross leads home;
It is sweet to know as I onward go,
The way of the cross leads home.

Years ago when Lyndon B. Johnson, at that time President of the United States, was mealy-mouthed about Vietnam, his continued popularity declined. Finally, his aides said to him, "If people don't love you, at least make them respect you."

A mealy-mouthed church gets neither love, nor respect. If we want respect, we're going to have to stand for something. We're going to have to become bold and vocal. Some things must not be tolerated.

Billy Graham said, "The most prominent place in hell is reserved for those who remain neutral in the great issues of life." What about you? Are you going along to get along? Have you taken your stand for Christ?

6

The Lifeless Church

Revelation 3:1-2

A young minister went to an older church with hope of reviving it. He had stars in his eyes and great hopes in his heart. He thought he could turn it around, and he gave it his best effort, but nothing seemed to work.

Finally, he gave up and announced in a local newspaper that the church had died, and that on Sunday afternoon there would be a funeral service at the church house for all who wished to come to pay their respects to the dead. For the first time in years, the place was packed as people came to see this most unusual funeral service for a church.

To their shock, as most of the people arrived 20 or 30 minutes early to get a good seat, there was a casket down front, smothered with flowers.

After he finished the eulogy, the pastor told the people that they could pass by and view the remains of the dearly beloved that they were putting to rest that day. Then he slowly opened the casket, pushed the flowers aside, and the people walked by, one by one, to look in. Inside the casket he had placed a large mirror, and when the people peered in, they saw themselves. As they walked away, they knew why the church had died.

When a church does die, it withers and dies, not because the brick and mortar and carpet and pews get old

and begin to crack and rip and crumble. A church withers and dies, because the people inside wither and die. As Edgar A. Guest wrote in *It's The Laymen*:

When you see a church that's empty,
Though the doors are opened wide;
It's not the church that died,
It's the people inside.

Jesus spoke of such a church when He said of Sardis, "Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God" (Revelation 3:1-2).

The church of Sardis had the name of Christ, but not the nature of Christ. It was the kind of church that would have had a good reputation in the community, statistics to make it look good in the denominational office, an influential membership, and a full program, but there was no excitement, no sense of mission, and no vision. They had the form of godliness, but denied the power thereof. In this church, there was plenty of outward activity, but no inner spirituality. No doubt it was perfected and running smoothly. On the outside looking in, one would see the ideal church so far as the outward manifestations go, for there are few things better organized than a graveyard. Nobody ever gets out of place. But it is also the deadest place in town.

There are, as you know, different kinds of churches. There are coliseum churches—entertainment centers for spectator Christians. There are museum churches—preservers of the past. And there are mausoleum churches—resting places for the dead. Sardis was a mausoleum church.

There are churches like Sardis all over America to-

day. They haven't closed their doors; they are still carrying on activities, but the sickness of death is upon them. They are like a ship that is slowly sinking; like a business that is slowly going bankrupt; like a well slowly drying up; like a person in the hospital slowly passing away.

Here is a warning: A church can be crowded with people and be a beehive of activity and not necessarily be a real church. It's quite possible a church has crowds because people come to be entertained instead of instructed, and to be soothed and petted instead of challenged and confronted with the facts of sin and salvation.

A church may be packed with many activities, but the center may have been lost. It may be a highly successful club, rather than a real Christian congregation. I've been asking myself lately, "Why do churches die?" I have come to three conclusions:

- Churches die from strangulation—they get in the grip of a few negative people who keep them from going forward.
- Churches die from starvation—they fail to do things that nourish their spirit.
- Churches die from suffocation—they stay inside their cloistered walls and do not go outside to minister.

Get Moving

First, churches die from strangulation. They get in the grip of one or more negative people who choke the life from them by keeping them from going forward and fulfilling their mission.

This is no new thing. It goes all the way back to the first century church. The apostle John wrote his third

epistle to reprove a man in the church named Diotrephes, who was opposed to helping traveling missionaries. These traveling missionaries were itinerate preachers who were vital to the spreading of the gospel in the first century. As they traveled from place to place, they were dependent on the hospitality of the churches to do their work. But Diotrephes would not help them, and he threatened to excommunicate anyone else who did. John described him as one who, “loveth to have the preeminence” among the brethren (3 John 9). The phrase “loveth to have the preeminence” literally means he was “fond of being first.” Diotrephes wanted to run the show.

We don’t know whether Diotrephes was a layman or a pastor, and it really doesn’t matter. What we do know is that he was a strong-minded, aggressive, opinionated, outspoken man who was running things, and by the sheer force of his personality, or through family ties or through friendships, had a stranglehold on the church so that it did only what he wanted. By his negative, domineering attitude, he was clearly an obstruction to the work of God.

The descendents of Diotrephes are still with us today. They lose sight of the mission and turn inward. They are negative people who oppose everything. If the church needs a new building, they oppose it. If it needs additional staff, they oppose that. If it wants to add a new program, they oppose that also. They don’t want to do anything, and they don’t want anyone else to either. So they keep their thumb on things to keep the church from going forward. As a result, in most churches the only thing that moves is the collection plate.

The church must have leaders, but it does not need leaders who keep their thumbs on the church to keep it from doing things, but leaders who keep their fingers

on the pulse of the Lord to keep the church doing the *right* thing.

Christ is the head of the church. In fact, the only other place the word “preeminence” which John uses for Diotrephes is used in the New Testament is in reference to Christ. Paul declares, “That in all things he might have the preeminence” (Col. 1:18). He is to be first in the church. His will is the only one that matters.

Our job is to increase the population of heaven. We can’t do that by sitting around singing “Just As I Am” to one another. We must ever keep that vision before us and work to accomplish it, if the church is to live. We obviously can’t keep doing business as usual.

If God has allowed you to serve in a place of leadership, you must not reflect the mindset of the community or even the congregation. You must rather challenge them to go onward and upward for God, and you must never stop doing that.

The made-for-TV movie, *Alive*, was the true story of an elite Uruguay rugby team whose chartered plane went down in the Andes Mountains in a snow storm in 1972, when the pilot became disoriented and clipped a mountain peak. It was a gripping tale of how sixteen of the forty-five people on board survived without winter clothes or tools for 72 days in temperatures that dipped to 35 degrees below zero. With no other food, they resorted to eating the flesh of dead comrades to survive. After more than 60 days, three of the survivors decided to leave the fuselage of the plane and walk for help. Rescue squads had long since given up the search, assuming that everyone was dead. As the three trudged along, their feet wrapped in plastic placed under rugby shoes, one of them sat down exhausted, saying he did not want to go on. The leader of the group reproved

him saying, "We're going on. If we die, we'll die walking." That's the spirit and attitude leaders need in order for the church to survive.

I remind you, it is the nature of dead things not to move. So the church must never stop starting. It must keep moving on and up and out for Christ. We must never rest on our laurels. We must never be satisfied with things as they are. If we ever stop starting, the church will die.

As a postscript, the sixteen survivors see each other frequently in Uruguay's capital city of Montevideo, and they have all changed their birth dates to December 22, the spring day on which they were rescued.

Prayer, Unity and Enthusiasm

Second, churches die from starvation. They fail to do the things that nourish their lives. Churches do not live by buildings or budgets or bureaucracies alone. There are some intangibles that are necessary to nourish life. What nourishes the life of a church?

Prayer is one thing that nourishes the life of a church. The church is the only army that marches on its knees. One of our major problems is that we're trying to do God's work in man's strength. If we rely on promotion, we get what promotion can do. If we rely on money, we get what money can do. If we rely on organization, we get what organization can do. If we rely on personalities, we will get what personality can do. But if we rely on prayer, we get what God can do.

J. C. Watts, a Baptist preacher and U.S. Congressman from Oklahoma, said, "Our greatest asset in America is our knees." Have we forgotten that? We need to stop whining that prayer is no longer allowed in the public schools and start praying in our churches and in our

homes. Besides, as long as there are tests in school, there will be prayer in the classroom, no matter what the Supreme Court says.

Unity is another source of nourishment in the life of a church. We are often admonished to have love and to have unity. Why? Because it's so hard to attain and maintain. It is so fragile that one or two people can break it. A church in civil war is in peril of its life. The average church member is not interested in some church fuss and lost people sure aren't. They've got enough troubles of their own without the church adding to them. They're trying to hold their marriage together, pay the mortgage, keep the kids off drugs, and hold on to their jobs. And if the church doesn't love and encourage them, they will leave...and I don't blame them.

The scriptures warn, "The law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another" (Galatians 5:14-15). That's Christian cannibalism!

I was driving through west Texas recently, and as I approached the town of Stanton, their welcoming sign read, "Welcome to Stanton! Home of 3,000 friendly folks and a few old soreheads." Every community and every church has a few old soreheads. That's to be expected, but it can be overdone. Pastor Jessie Berthold told me that he had a deacon in his church who was called "the terminator." He was noted for running off pastors.

I know some folks like him. They act like God has called them to be the pastor's thorn in the flesh. I realize the Lord called me to be a fisher of men—but occasionally I want to throw some back.

The late Casey Stengle, famed manager of the New York Yankees, once gave the secret of being a successful

manager. "Keep the five guys who hate you away from the five guys who are undecided" (*Dallas Morning News*, 2 September 2000). That may be the secret to a successful pastorate also.

Martin Luther King was right, "We must learn to live together as brothers or die together as fools." We can destroy ourselves.

In the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, Australia, Iranian Hossein Rezazadeh set a new weight-lifting record by clean-jerking 572 pounds. But I have read that if we could get all the muscles of our body pulling in one direction, we could lift 25 tons. The church that pulls together is strong and resilient.

Another source of nourishment is enthusiasm. Many of our churches suffer from spiritual frostbite. They seem to have a prejudice against showing any excitement or enthusiasm. A preacher met one of his parishioners on the street and said, "I haven't seen you in church lately, Jim." The man replied, "No, preacher, you know how it is. The kids have been sick, and it's rained and rained and rained." The preacher said, "Well, it's always dry in church." The man replied, "Yes, that's another reason I haven't been coming."

When a church caught fire, two church members stood watching. One turned to the other and said, "Jim, this is the first time I've seen you at church in 10 years." Jim replied, "This is the first time this church has been on fire!" Let the church catch fire spiritually, let the staff and congregation believe and act as though they were doing something eternally important, and people will come.

I've been to some cemeteries that had more life than most Baptist churches. I was preaching in a church recently when one of the deacons sitting on the front row

died. He just keeled over right in the middle of the service. The ambulance arrived, and they carried out three of them before they found the right one.

Some bitter preacher wrote, "Tell my deacons when I am dead that they should shed no tears, for I will be no deader than they have been for years."

There's enough dullness in the world without the church adding to it. So when we come to church, we ought to greet one another warmly, sing with gusto, pray with passion, listen intently, and respond joyfully.

Charles Wesley, who was at the heart of the movement that gave birth to Methodism, said, "Set yourself on fire, and the world will come to watch you burn." Some churches are afraid of excesses. Don't be. I'd rather be in a church that needs to be hosed down than one that needs to be fired up.

The Second Reformation

Third, churches die from suffocation. The people stay inside cloistered walls instead of going out in the community where the people are.

Early in Christian history, the monastic movement developed. People moved into monasteries, behind cloistered walls, and separated themselves from the rest of the world to live in seclusion, hoping to attain true holiness by not mixing with the sinful world.

In 1947, an American expedition working in the Sinai Peninsula looking for the place where Moses received the Ten Commandments was astonished to find one such ancient monastery, St. Catherine's, lost in a mountain cranny, far from any normal route. Built in 340 A.D., it was perched 5,000 feet above sea level. The monks who lived there had largely been forgotten. The American expedition was astonished to talk to Father Tachomius,

who had not set foot outside the walls in 50 years. He had never even heard of World War I which ended in 1918, or World War II which ended in 1945. (*Reader's Digest*, "Which Mountain Did Moses Climb?" June 1973, pages 209-215).

Many churches die from a monastic mentality. They meet behind their cloistered walls called a sanctuary, secluded from the sufferings of society, and they put out the "Do Not Disturb" sign. All they do is meet and eat and greet. They build walls that become tombs and lead to spiritual death.

The church is not to be a bald-headed monk cloistered in a cave or a fat lady sitting in her rocking chair collecting her Social Security checks. It's to ever be a serving maid, actively doing the work of God.

Jesus was no monastic, nor should we be. He knew that living in seclusion doesn't make you a saint any more than living in a hole makes you holy. Jesus spent His time preaching, teaching, healing, feeding, and loving people. When John the Baptist sent word to Jesus asking, "Art thou he that should come? or look we for another?" Jesus responded, "Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached" (Luke 7:20-22).

It was as if Jesus was saying, "When John knows what I am doing, he will know who I am." It is the same with us. Our activity, our ministry, is a dead giveaway. If we are the real people of God, we will minister to our needy world.

When a church turns inward, thinking only of its own needs instead of reaching out to others, it will die. We've got to stop asking, "How do we employ more staff to

meet our needs?" and start asking, "How do we deploy more saints to meet the needs of the world around us?" We are His body, and we should be doing in our day what He did in the days of His flesh.

We are pilgrims by calling. We are to be people passing through and on the move, but how easily the pilgrim becomes the tenant, and how quickly the tenant aspires to ownership. "Let's stop here" soon becomes "let's build here," till finally, it is "let's die here." From tents to temples to tombs, the allurements of permanency is always with us.

Someone has said the first reformation put the Bible back in the hands of the people. The second reformation will put the ministry back in the hands of the people. When that happens, the church will come to life.

Can a dead church live again? It can! If it will free itself from the stranglehold of negative people. If it will recommit itself to the mission of increasing the population of heaven. If it will be enthusiastic about God's work, be loving toward one another, and be involved in ministering to the community. And if it will get on its knees before the Lord.

Ask yourself, "What kind of church would my church be if every member were just like me?" Live churches are filled with folks with Bibles in their hands. Dead churches are not. Live churches are glowing and growing. Dead churches are not. Live churches have parking problems. Dead churches do not. Live churches move by faith. Dead churches move by sight. Live churches support missions very heavily. Dead churches want to keep it all at home. Live churches focus on people. Dead churches focus on problems. Live churches are filled with tithers. Dead churches are filled with tippers. Live churches have the fresh wind of the

spirit, love, flowing through the congregation. Dead churches are given to bickering. Live churches evangelize. Dead churches fossilize.

Are you holding the church back by your attitude or disposition? Have you grown complacent? Have you developed a fortress mentality? Are you isolated from the sin and din of the community? If your church is dead—look in the mirror, you'll see why.

Harry Emerson Fosdick put it like this: "The first requirement for a funeral is a willing corpse." If you aren't willing for the church to die, it won't die. And it can live again. I can tell you about a church that once was down to 20 in Sunday School and ready to close its doors. Today, it's a thriving congregation with more than 500 in Sunday School.

That church meets in the same building on the same street in the same neighborhood of the same city, and it has the same Bible. What has changed? It has new leadership and a new spirit—not necessarily different leadership, but new leadership. The people have come alive in Christ, and when the people are alive, the church is alive.

Former Prime Minister of Israel, Shimon Peres, spoke as a part of the Distinguished Lecture Series at the University of Texas in Tyler on February 19, 1999. He said: "I heard someone say once, 'It's only the Communists who can bring down Communism.' In the end, that's what happened."

It is my conviction that the same thing is true of the church. It is only Christians who can kill the church. So we must avoid strangulation, starvation, and suffocation for the church to live.

7

The Laboring Church

Revelation 3:8

One of my early pastorates was in a small town that had a large university. One day in conversation with Dr. E. O. Wiley, a retired professor, he said to me, "If we keep working at it, we may eventually make the First Baptist Church a Christian institution."

The First Baptist Church of San Marcos was well over 100 years old at the time, but the old professor put his finger on an important truth. No matter how long a church has been in existence, it has to keep working at being all the Lord wants it to be.

What does He want His church to be? Jesus said, "Is it not written, My house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer?" (Mark 11:17). The root meaning of the word "prayer" is "to progress," "to travel," "to take a journey." The idea is that the church is to be a place where people go to meet God.

So we come to church to worship, to praise God, to confess our sins, to experience forgiveness, and to hear and receive His call. We come to study, to learn, and to grow to be more like Him. We come to find support, inspiration, and encouragement to the highest kind of living, but all this coming, except for worship, is for the purpose of going. We are to go to seek and to save and to serve. In fact, if we don't go, the coming is in vain.

To this end, the Lord said to the Philadelphia church, as well as to His church today, "I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it" (Revelation 3:8). The open door here and elsewhere in the New Testament represents an opportunity to share the gospel. It is a common analogy.

In their first missionary report to the Jerusalem conference, Paul and Barnabas related how they first took the gospel to the Gentiles, saying that God "had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27). When Paul told of the challenges he faced at Ephesus, he wrote, "A great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries" (I Cor. 16:9).

When Paul related how the gospel was first taken to Europe, he wrote, "When I came to Troas to preach Christ's gospel, and a door was opened unto me of the Lord, I had no rest in my spirit...but...went...into Macedonia" (II Cor. 2:12-13). And when he wanted prayer for his missionary work, he asked the church to pray, "that God would open unto us a door of utterance" (Col. 4:3).

To my knowledge, Paul never asked the church to pray for the lost. The nearest thing to that was when he wrote, "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they might be saved" (Romans 10:1). But that is more of a wish, a longing, than a prayer. What he asks is that they pray that he will have an open door to witness, that he will have the courage to witness, and that he will have clarity in witnessing (Col. 4:4).

Here the risen Christ, using that same analogy, says, "I have set before thee an open door and no man can shut it" (Rev. 3:8). Chuck McDonald reminds us, "Opportunity never comes. It's here." Opportunity is always there for those who have eyes to see it and the

courage to seize it. That is never truer than with the church today.

We live, always have and always will, in a day of opportunity, but it occurs to me that while the Lord has set before us an open door, we don't have to use it. No man can shut it, but we don't have to go through it. Tragically, today that's what most churches are doing. In a day of unprecedented opportunity, we are hiding behind open doors.

Christians and churches have had nearly 2,000 years to labor in the field of the world, and still the harvest waits. There are big churches with fine facilities, big budgets, excellent programs, large staffs, and still the harvest waits. There are thousands of smaller churches with significant resources in money and people, and still the harvest waits. There are the best-trained leaders of all time in the churches and denominations, and still the harvest waits.

It is time to say it—it is not the strength of the enemy that's holding us back. It is our own internal weakness. We are pressed by the menace of mediocrity. As someone has said, "We no longer need a 'Fasten your seat belt' sign in the church, because we no longer fly."

We are sitting in the hanger—hiding behind open doors. Why is this? There are several reasons.

- Skepticism—We don't really believe people are lost.
- Indifference—We believe it, but we don't care.
- Preoccupation—We are busy about lesser things.
- Shame—We aren't living as we should.
- Fear—We don't trust God to give us victory.

Do We Really Believe?

First, we fail to go through open doors because of

skepticism. We don't really believe people are lost. A young missionary related that in her last year of nurse's training, a young doctor asked her, "Do you really believe that all men who never have heard of Christ are lost?" She answered, "Yes, doctor, I do." Again, he asked, "And do you believe that those who have heard of him and have not accepted are lost?" And she answered, "Yes, I do." Then with a look of utmost seriousness, he said, "Well, all I have to say is that if you believe that, you cannot live like the rest of us do."

Let me ask you, do you really believe that people who have never heard of Jesus Christ are lost? Do you really believe that people who have heard of Him and have not accepted Him are lost? No, no, I mean, do you *really* believe that? Not, do you give lip service to it. We all give lip service to it, but apparently we do not all believe it. For as the young doctor said, "If we really believe that, we could not live like the rest of the world."

In America there is a creeping universalism that says, "One religion is as good as another." It isn't! It says, "It doesn't matter what you believe." It does! And it says, "Everyone will eventually be saved." They won't! One-half of the people believe like that, and many of them are in the church.

But I remind you that Jesus said, "Wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: because straight is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matthew 7:13-14). And then I remind you that He said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). He is not "a way." He is not even "the best way." He is the only way. And I remind you, "There is none other name under heaven given among men,

whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

A sardonic British skeptic of the late nineteenth century said that three words should be carved in stone over the entrance to every church, "Important if true." If what the scriptures say is true, if we really believe them, we cannot hide behind open doors. We must share the gospel.

Any Lost Sheep Reporting Here

Second, we do not go through open doors because of indifference. We don't really care that people are lost. A man was asked, "What do you think is the biggest problem in America today, ignorance or indifference?" He replied, "I don't know, and I don't care." Too often that's our attitude.

We are like the young man who applied for the usher's job in a theater. That was in the day when ushers stood at the head of the aisle with a flashlight in hand and escorted people to a seat. The manager, trying to determine his qualifications, asked, "What would you do if a fire broke out?" The young man responded quickly, "Oh, don't worry about me; I'd get out just fine." That's us. Content to get ourselves out, and leave others to find the exit on their own.

We're all much like the man who prayed, "God bless me, my wife, our son, Ben, and his wife...us four and no more...Amen!"

According to George Barna, "The average church in America allocates about five percent of its budget for evangelism, but approximately 30 percent for buildings and maintenance." The airlines know that they have a tremendous capital investment in airplanes, but the only time they are producing a profit is when they are in the air and full of people. In the same way, we have a lot of

tremendous resources in our buildings, but the only time they are producing (toward evangelism/disciple-making) is when they are full of people. Southern Baptists have constructed \$6,000 in buildings for every man, woman, and preschooler who attends their Sunday Schools, and still they often are not full.

Unless we are right with God, we don't care if people go to hell, but when we get right with God, He gives us a burden. If you have no burden, you need a renewal of your faith. We need to pray with the missionary statesman, Frank Laubach, "Lord, forgive us for looking at our lost world with dry eyes."

It's not, of course, that we are totally indifferent. It's as if we put up a sign, "Any lost sheep reporting here will be taken care of." But they have to come. We certainly aren't going after them. No, we're hiding behind open doors.

Whatever happened to songs like the following by Leroy Sedgwick:

Lead me to some soul today;
O teach me, Lord, just what to say;
Friends of mine are lost in sin,
And cannot find their way.
Few there are who seem to care,
And few there are who pray;
Melt my heart and fill my life,
Give me one soul today.

If we sing them at all, we sing them while hiding behind open doors.

Rearranging Pictures in a Burning House

Third, we don't go through the open doors of opportunity because of preoccupation with lesser things.

The Old Testament relates a story of a man captured in battle. His captor put him in the custody of one of his servants with strict instructions that he was to guard him with his life. But when the captor returned, the captive had escaped. The servant responded saying, "As thy servant was busy here and there, he was gone" (I Kings 20:40).

Idleness is the devil's workshop, but so is busyness if, while we are busy here and busy there, we fail at our main responsibility. Martha, the sister of Mary and Lazarus, ought to be the patron saint of Christians today. She is running around for Jesus. What's the matter with running around for Jesus? You can lose Him while serving him. Centrifugal force says that the faster something spins, the more it gets thrown to the edge. The more we're in a spin for Christ, the more He gets thrown to the edge.

A man who was a member of another denomination was considering joining the church I pastored. Sitting at my desk one day, he said, "I have served in every capacity in my church—on the session, as an elder, as a deacon—but I never did anything significant. All we did was decide on the color of the carpet for the sanctuary and whether we would have grape juice or real wine for communion. I want my life to count for something significant. I want to really be involved in the work of God."

Much of what we do is like a squirrel in a cage—lots of action but no progress. Tragically, the man could have just as well been a member of a Baptist church. Far too many times we have substituted church work for the work of the church.

We must beware of an obsession with the insignificant. Speaking to a gathering of students at a mission's

conference, Dr. Bill O'Brien said, "As long as the agenda of a Baptist church is softball, ceramics, inerrancy, and keeping women out of the ministry, the world is going to hell in a fruit basket." His point is well taken. Just recently I read of a church in Dallas that has a minister of jazz music. What does that have to do with winning a lost world to Christ?

D. L. Moody said, "We are like firemen rushing into a burning house and rearranging the pictures on the walls." For heaven's sake, if the house is on fire, get the people out. Forget about interior decorating.

Thales, the early Greek philosopher, was so intent on counting stars that he kept falling into potholes in the road. That can be the misguided faith that people are always trying to count and measure. But it also says we've got to get our heads out of the clouds and our eyes on the crowds if we are to seize the day. We need to stop measuring churches by their seating capacity and start measuring them by their sending capacity.

No Arguments, But Exposure

Fourth, we don't go through open doors because we're ashamed. We aren't living right, and we know it, and we know that others know it. Dick Morris, former President Clinton's political strategist who was dismissed for his own moral indiscretion, wrote a book about President Clinton entitled, *Behind the Oval Office*. He entitled his introduction, "How We Re-elected Our Sunday Morning President and Ended Up With Saturday Night Bill." Later, commentator Brit Hume said concerning President Clinton, "I believe there are really two Bill Clintons—a Saturday night Bill and a Sunday morning Bill."

We all knew about the Sunday morning Bill walking

out of church with a smile on his face and a Bible as big as a New York City telephone directory in his hand. What we didn't know about was the Saturday night Bill who was an altogether different person. Tragically, there are not only Saturday night Bills and Sunday morning Bills in the White House, there are also some in the church house.

By the way, in America we love to talk all that egalitarian stuff about how anybody in the United States can grow up to be President, but unless the President outgrows the rest of us, he ought not to be there. For all our talk about a guy like us being President, what we really want is somebody special. We don't want a President we can see eye-to-eye with. We want one we can look up to—morally and ethically as well as in terms of talent.

The most famous shipwreck in history was the sinking of the Titanic. Touted as unsinkable, that's about the only thing it ever did. On its maiden voyage from England to New York on April 14, 1912, it hit an iceberg that tore a 300-foot gash in the starboard side of the ship, and in two hours and forty minutes plunged 12,000 feet to the floor of the North Atlantic. Of the 2,200 passengers on board, 1,517 died at sea.

Early theories said it was a faulty steel plate in the hull that caused the great ship to sink. But when the sunken ship was found at the bottom of the North Atlantic, it was discovered that the rivets that held the hull together were made of improperly annealed iron, and as soon as the impact occurred, the heads simply popped off, causing a seam to open in the hull.

Think about it! A 46,328-ton ship sank because of a faulty 8-ounce rivet. Our Christian witness is often wrecked the same way. Not by some great sin or crimi-

nal or immoral act, but by not paying our debts, by losing our tempers, being rude to a clerk or waitress, or being vindictive to a neighbor. It's the little things that silence our witness. Jesus said we are to be in the world, but not of the world. Unfortunately, we are most often of the world, but not in it. We are hiding behind open doors.

Tony Campolo, in his book *Following Jesus Without Embarrassing God*, relates a line from the movie *Oh, God!* John Denver plays a character who gets messages from God. On one occasion, he confronts a preacher in the middle of his discourse with this message, "God wants you to shut up, because you're embarrassing Him!" May we never embarrass God by our lives or our witness, but may we ever seek to exalt Him.

Most people are not won by arguments, but by exposure. They need to see Christ in us. We don't have to be perfect, but we do have to be different. We should live by different values, adhere to different morals, treat people differently, have a sweeter disposition, and speak a different language.

Paul said to the Jews, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you" (Romans 2:24). May that never be said of us.

You Can "But" Anything To Death

Fifth, sometimes we don't go through the doors because of fear. We don't trust God to give us the victory. Years ago, Dawson Trotman asked, after years of laboring in the harvest, "What is the need of the hour? Is it more money or better equipment or better resources?" Then he answered, "No! It is for people who believe that God will do everything He promised." The bottleneck in God's work has always been laborers. People

are more willing to hear than to tell. They are more willing to receive than to share...and trust.

We know from Sunday School that the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years, but they didn't have to. Eighteen months out of Egypt they came to the borders of the Promised Land. There the Lord said, "Here is the land that flows with milk and honey. It's yours. Take it!"

Do you know what they did? They appointed a Promised Land search committee. For forty days and forty nights they met. That's about how long most committees meet today and with the same results. They came back with a divided report. There were two who said, "Go," and ten who said, "No." They agreed that the land flowed with milk and honey. It was everything God said it was...but...

Watch that word "but." You can "but" anything to death. You can even "but" yourself clean out of the will of God.

"But there are giants in the land. And there are walled cities, heavily fortified. And we were in our own sight as grasshoppers," they said. They were full of fear instead of faith and failed to take stock of their divine resources.

Our eyes are always focused on one of four places: on our circumstances, on others, on ourselves, or on the Lord. If we focus on any one of the first three and not on the Lord, the giants will look bigger than God, the obstacles will outweigh the opportunities, and our fear will be greater than our faith.

So they turned and went into the wilderness where they wandered until their bones bleached in the Syrian Desert. There every man and woman above twenty years of age, obviously the age of accountability, died in the

wilderness.

It has been estimated that they wandered eight hundred miles in that forty years. That calculates down to 20 miles a year or 100 yards a day. That's faster than some churches are moving today.

Looking back years later, the Lord said through the psalmist, "They turned back and tempted God, and limited the Holy One of Israel" (Psalm 78:41). Turned their back on God? Tempted God? Limited God? How? By refusing to go through the open door. By failing to seize their opportunity.

I used to think the opposite of fear was courage. Now I know it's not. It's trust. Courage is man-centered. Trust is God-centered.

I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that I once pastored in a small university town. During that time I led the head basketball coach of the university to faith in Christ. He immediately became concerned about the salvation of his fellow coaches and wanted me to witness to them. He was especially concerned about the Athletic Director, Milton Jowers. Coach Jowers was the "Bear Bryant" of Division II athletics. He was an ex-Marine who operated by fear and intimidation. A marvelous coach, he had led both his football team and his basketball team to NAIA national championships. Bear Bryant had even tried to hire him as his basketball coach at Texas A&M when he was there. Everyone feared Milton Jowers.

One day I was in the barbershop when Coach McDonald came in. He asked if I had visited Jowers yet. When I said no, he said, "You're a coward. You're a double-dog coward." In Texas, there's not anything worse than being a double-dog coward.

So when my haircut was finished, I went straight to

the field house and asked to see Coach Jowers. The secretary notified him, and he invited me in. I don't usually take this approach, but I thought if he was such an intimidator, I should meet him on his own turf. So I stuck out my hand and said, "Coach, I'm Paul Powell, pastor of the First Baptist Church, and I've come to talk to you about your soul. Are you interested?"

He said, "Sit down, boy! Let's talk." Then he began to tell me about his life, and I shared the gospel with him. Before I left, he said, "If you care enough about me to come and invite me to church, I will come."

The next Sunday, he and his family were there. The next Sunday after that, they were back. The next week I visited in his home one night and led his two teenage children to Christ. He and Erma, his wife, weren't ready yet, but a few weeks later, they both came forward professing faith in Christ. As he took my hand, he said, "Preacher, don't put me on the bench."

Milton Jowers wanted in the game. That's what many of you need. Some of you have been sitting long enough. Listen, not one of us is going to get out of this world alive. You're either going to die in the bleachers, on the bench, or on the field. So you might as well get off the bench and onto the field, and go for it. Remember this—you're either on the way or in the way.

Jesus reminds us, "I am the door: By me if any man enter in, he shall be saved" (John 10:9). If we'll go out, they'll come in...and be saved. The doors of opportunity are open. We must not hide behind them. We must go through them and bring people to Him—the door of salvation.

8

The Lukewarm Church

Revelation 3:14-20

A country preacher went to a convention where almost every speaker talked about apathy and lethargy. He wasn't sure what those words meant, but they sounded serious, so he decided he would preach a sermon on them at his church. The next Sunday, he stood before his congregation and spoke passionately about both.

As he greeted his parishioners at the end of the sermon, one lady asked, "Pastor, you talked about apathy and lethargy. What are they?"

He responded, "My dear, don't you know what apathy and lethargy are? Why, they are two of our basic Baptist doctrines."

Apathy and lethargy are not, of course, Baptist doctrines, but there's an awful lot of both indifference and unconcern in our churches today.

This is not a new problem. It has plagued the church from the beginning. The scriptures speak to this in John's letter to the church at Laodicea (Revelation 3:14-20). The Lord instructs him, "Unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write..." (v. 14). When God begins a work in the world, He always begins with His own people. Doesn't He say, "If my people, which are called by name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face,

and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land" (II Chronicles 7:14). Mark it down somewhere; the Lord is more concerned about spirituality in the church house than He is with carnality in the White House. We aren't, but He is.

What was wrong with this church? The Lord tells us, "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot" (v. 15). The church had grown lukewarm, complacent, and indifferent. It had lost its fire, its enthusiasm for God and His work. They were still going through the motions of church, but they had lost their passion.

Then He expresses His desire for the church. "I would thou wert cold or hot" (v. 15). Some folks don't understand that the Lord actually prefers a cold church to a lukewarm church. Why is that? If a church is lukewarm, then it is satisfied with itself. It is comfortable with things as they are. Its very warmness makes it so comfortable that it wards off a sense of need, but if it's cold, the people might get chilled enough to hunt a fire.

The evidence of their lukewarmness was everywhere. They felt they were rich and increased with goods and had need of nothing, but the Lord saw them in an entirely different light. He said they were "wretched and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked" (v. 17). And worst of all, they had shut the Savior out. The Lord said, "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me" (Revelation 3:20).

Then the Lord makes a startling statement. "So then, because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth" (Rev. 3:16). The word "spew" literally means "vomit." Not a pleasant thought,

but lukewarm churches make God sick.

What was it about this church that distressed the Lord? They were satisfied with themselves, they had grown soft on sin, and they had shut the Savior out. For this the Lord rebukes them and calls them to be zealous and repent. Someone has said, "The sadness of the Savior is not in the sin of the sinners, but in the satisfiedness of the saints, that He has so little of us and we have so little of Him."

As I pointed out in the introduction, this is the Lord's last message to the church. His last message is not, "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19-20). The church had gone beyond commission to complacency, beyond acts to apathy. So his final message is to repent of it lukewarmness—to rekindle the fires of passion for their mission.

What we need today is to catch fire. The old hymn by John Newton puts it best:

Revive us again; Fill each heart with thy love;
May each soul be rekindled with fire from
above.

Hallelujah! Thine the glory. Hallelujah! Amen.
Hallelujah! Thine the glory. Revive us
again.

Rekindled from above! That's what we need. This passage tells us what we must do for that to happen. Three things are essential:

- A holy dissatisfaction with ourselves.
- An honest dealing with sin.
- A humble welcoming in of the Savior.

No Digging In

The first thing we need to do to be rekindled from

above is to have a holy dissatisfaction with ourselves. One of the problems with the Laodicean church was that it was satisfied with itself. They felt they were rich and increased with goods and had need of nothing (verse 17a).

Most churches today are like that—half empty and fully satisfied. They have nice buildings, comfortable pews, ample receipts, respectable programs, and contented hearts. They are at ease in Zion.

They are like the church clerk who sent in his annual associational letter. The report read:

- 1) Baptisms for the year—none;
- 2) Transfers by letter—none;
- 3) Gifts to missions—none;
- 4) Revival meetings held—none;
- 5) Improvements on property—none.

Brethren, pray for us, that we can hold our own.

J.B. Phillips nailed us when he wrote, “The church is so prosperous that it is fat and out of breath. So organized that it is muscle-bound.” It may be that the greatest curse of the church today is its prosperity and its popularity. Jesus warned, “Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! for so did their fathers to the false prophets” (Luke 6:26), and again he warned us of the “deceitfulness of riches” (Matthew 13:22).

Wealth gives people a false sense of importance—it makes them feel that they are worthy of special attention; it gives them a false sense of power—that others should do what they say; it gives them a false sense of security—that they don’t need God in their lives; and it gives them a false sense of success—that they have arrived, that they have it made. It can do the same to churches.

A church that's alive and dynamic can never be satisfied with what it is or where it is. It must always be advancing, moving forward. We must not be content to hold our own. We are here to build the kingdom of God. That takes an aggressive and dedicated effort.

We need more of the aggressive spirit of General George S. Patton, America's greatest field commander of World War II and the man most feared by the Nazis. He said, "I don't want to get any messages saying that we are holding our own. We're not interested in holding anything but the enemy. We're not digging in. We are constantly advancing."

C.S. Lewis said, "If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity." Neither do I! I pray for you a holy restlessness. I pray that the Lord will comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. Without that, we'll never be rekindled from above.

Strumming a Harp Won't Do

Second, we need an honest dealing with sin. The church at Laodicea saw itself as needing nothing, but the Lord saw it as wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked (vs. 17b-19).

Someone has said that the church today is like Noah's ark. If it weren't for the storm on the outside, we couldn't stand the stench on the inside. We are, today, in danger of turning the Lord's sheepfold into a zoo.

The reason is obvious. It is because we have grown soft on sin. We must face our sin and then forsake it if we want fire from above. With a moral cancer growing in the palace, King David, because of his sin with Bathsheba, needed to do more than grab a harp and start strumming a praise chorus. He needed to confess and

repent. That's the only way to deal with sin.

David, in agony, cried out, "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest" (Psalm 51:1-4).

I thought David had sinned against almost everyone except God—against himself, against Bathsheba, against his wife, against Uriah, against the nation. But he saw that his sin was against God. We, too, need to be aware of the awfulness of sin and that it is against God.

David Kendall, former President Clinton's personal lawyer, at a February 1998, news conference, defended his insistence that President Clinton keep silent about the Monica Lewinsky case by quoting a former partner as saying, "It's the spouting whale which is first harpooned."

That may be good legal advice, but it is poor spiritual advice. The Scriptures say, "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy" (Proverbs 28:13). But then, that's the difference between a politician and a prophet.

What Are Some Kinds of Sin We Need To Confess?

We need to confess the sins of omission. Paul, speaking of his own struggle with sin, said, "The good that I would I do not" (Romans 7:19). There are things that we should do, and we don't do—things like tithing, pray, witness, read the Bible, and minister. We could fill the

church with people guilty of this sin.

In October of 1998, in Abilene, Texas, Shawana Patterson was found guilty on the charge of “injury to a child by omission,” i.e., for failure to intercede when her boyfriend abducted her eleven-year-old daughter, Sarah, and her nine-year-old son, Cody, from their bedroom.

Sarah was raped and her throat cut, and Cody was severely beaten and left for dead. At first she told her son that she did not respond to their screams for fear of her own life. Later she claimed she was asleep and did not hear their pleas, though her bedroom was less than fifteen feet away.

Her crime? Doing nothing! Her children needed her, and she did not answer their cries for help. There are not only *crimes* of omission; there are also *sins* of omission. We are accountable not only for what we do, but for what we don't do. If we were hailed before the court of God and asked to give an explanation of the cries we have not answered, the needs we have not met, who would go free?

There are sins of commission. Paul turns it around, “The evil which I would not, that I do” (Romans 7:19). Just as there are some things we should do, there are some things we should not do.

People today don't like negative preaching, but there are an awful lot of “thou shall nots” in the Bible. You'd have to throw away a lot of the Bible if you did away with negative preaching.

Recently there appeared all over America a series of religious billboards with a clever spiritual message on each. They were all simply signed “God.” The one I liked best read, “What part of ‘Thou shall not’ . . . don't you understand? - God.”

Then there are sins of the disposition. Again Paul writes, "Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit" (II Corinthians 7:1). The children of Israel had barely gotten out of Egypt when they began murmuring, and the church had hardly gotten out of Pentecost when it began to murmur. We've been doing the same ever since.

Some of the fussiest, crankiest folks I know are in church. They go around growling all day and wonder why they feel dog-tired at night. Others are just plain mean. So mean that if they were in the arena with the lions I'd pull for the lions. Unfortunately, the meanest man I know never missed a Sunday in church.

Still others are critical and judgmental. A Baptist preacher and an Episcopalian rector were seated next to one another on a plane. When they learned that each was a minister, they immediately began a warm and friendly conversation. Presently the stewardess came to take their drink orders. The Baptist preacher ordered a diet Coke, and the rector ordered a glass of wine. Almost immediately their conversation cooled, and the Baptist turned away and became very quiet.

The rector, noticing the silent treatment, tapped the preacher on the shoulder and asked him what was wrong. The preacher said, "I don't think a man of God should be drinking wine."

The rector replied, "But, my brother, surely you Baptists know that Jesus himself turned water into wine."

The preacher responded, "Yes, we do. And we'd have thought a whole lot more of Him if He hadn't."

Some Christians are like that. They act more spiritual than God is. I don't drink wine, but I'm not too good to associate with those who do. If I was, I'd be better than Jesus, because He did.

Some folks pride themselves on the fact that, “We don’t dip and we don’t chew; and we don’t run with those who do.” When I hear of people like that, I’m tempted to say, “Well, neither does a fence post.” The Pharisees kept all the rules. They were so separated they wouldn’t even eat an egg that was laid on the Sabbath day, but their hearts were not right with God. Jesus said that our righteousness must “exceed” theirs if we are to enter into the kingdom of heaven.

W. S. Childs once wrote:

There is so much Devil in the best of us
And so much Angel in the worst of us
That it doesn’t become any of us
To say much about the rest of us.

I know this for sure—you’ll enjoy church more if you don’t sit in the seat of the scornful. Frankly, I worry about the Christianity of a person who does not grow sweeter, kinder, gentler with the passing years, who is not growing to be more like Jesus, which is the ultimate goal of the Christian life (Romans 8:28).

What about you and somebody else? How are you getting along with others? Maybe it’s a member of your family. Maybe it’s someone you work with. Maybe it’s a friend or neighbor. Maybe it’s a fellow church member. The Lord said that if we bring our gift (our offering envelope) to the altar and remember that our brother has ought against us, we are not to leave the gift before the altar, but go and first be reconciled to our brother and then return to make our offering (Matthew 5:23-24).

While that may decrease the offerings to the church, it would increase the possibilities of revival in the church. If there’s anything wrong between you and a brother, straighten it out. That’s the right thing to do. You can’t

be right with God and be wrong with your brother. If you're wrong with your brother, you're wrong with God. The cross reaches up, but it also reaches out. The horizontal and the vertical must both be right if we are going to be right. We could have revival if we would get right with our brother.

And there are the sins of suspicion, i.e., of doubtful things. Paul writes, "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Romans 14:23). The word "faith" here means "to be confident," "to be persuaded." If we can't do a thing with a clear conscience, we shouldn't do it. If a thing has a question mark over it, we should give it up. If it's okay, God will give it back to us. If it's not, we don't need it.

The bottom line is—we know what our sins are. We may act like we don't, but we do. Mel Trotter was talking to a man once about confessing his sins. The man said, "I don't know what they are."

Mel said, "Get down on you knees and guess at them."

Mel continued, "Would you believe? He guessed them the first time." If we get still and quiet long enough, we could guess our sins the first time, too.

Our problem is not that we don't know our sin. It's that we don't want to quit it. In a revival meeting, a man came forward and said to me, "I have been fornicating with a woman, but I don't want to marry her, and I don't want to quit." I commend him for his honesty. He didn't say, "I'm making love with a woman." He didn't say, "I'm sleeping with a woman." He said, "I'm fornicating with her." That sounds a whole lot worse, doesn't it? And he was honest enough to say, "I don't want to marry her, and I don't want to quit."

He had conviction without contrition. I told him he

had to do one or the other.

We must admit our sin, and then quit our sin. We can't expect God to take away sin by forgiving it, if we aren't willing to put away sin by forsaking it. White-wash won't stick on dirt. Any country boy knows that.

So if we want to be rekindled from above, we must have an honest dealing with sin.

Shut Out of His Own House?

The third requirement for being rekindled from above is to humbly welcome the Savior in. I read about a brother in a church in the deep south who went to a revival meeting one night and got on a mountaintop. He marched around Zion. The next morning he went back to the meeting, and they called on him to lead in prayer. He had never come down from the mountaintop, so he prayed something like this, "We thank you for the meeting we had last night, Lord. I never was in such a meeting. We thank you, Lord, for giving us such a meeting. Lord, well, you just ought to have been there."

The fact is, sometimes He's not there. According to George Barna's research, more than 75 million adults attend worship services each weekend. Yet, he found that less than a third of them ever leave with a sense that they have interacted with God. What that means is they are absent at the time when they take up the most space. We come to church and open the door and enter, we open our hymnals and sing, we open our wallets and give. Then we open our Bibles and read. But we don't open our hearts and worship. We just go through the motions.

The Lord shut out of His own house? Yes! The bridegroom locked out of His own wedding chamber by his bride? Yes! It does happen. He can be shut out by sin, by strife, by indifference, or by just plain preoccupation.

The fact that you are in God's house is no assurance that He is. He can be shut out, and when He is, there is dullness and drabness.

What does the Lord do? He stands at the door and knocks. We most often apply that verse to salvation. We say the Lord is knocking on our heart's door. The truth is that this applies to the church. He is knocking on the church door wanting to come in, and we must be attuned to His voice and open the door if He is to come in. He never makes a forcible entry. He never crashes the party. He comes only as He's invited.

We sometimes sing a chorus written by Dottie Rambo and David Huntsinger that expresses what I am talking about:

Holy Spirit, Thou art welcome in this place.
Holy Spirit, Thou art welcome in this place.
Omnipotent Father of mercy and grace,
Thou art welcome in this place.
Omnipotent Father of mercy and grace,
Thou are welcome in this place.

That's what we need to do—welcome the Lord into our hearts and His house.

This then is the Lord's last message to the church. It is—repent of your lukewarmness. "Stop being satisfied with yourself. Stop being soft on sin. Stop shutting me out."

Any of us can lose our fire and enthusiasm for God and His work. Paul wrote to Timothy, "Stir up the gift of God, which is in thee..." (II Timothy 1:6).

Paul likens Timothy's spiritual life to a fire, a fire that once blazed brightly but has gone out. Now nothing but a pile of gray ashes remains. Underneath there are still hot coals, but they must be stirred. If someone

would just shake them up a bit so that oxygen could get to them, they would burst into flames again.

I'm not sure what happened in Timothy's life to put the fire out. Maybe it was the hardships of persecution. Maybe people had thrown cold water on his ideas. Maybe he had simply been at it so long that it had become routine, monotonous, old hat. Maybe he had become disappointed in people like Demas. I don't know what happened, but I do know this—the fire had gone out.

It can go out in your life and mine also. If you're not as close to God as you once were, make no mistake as to which one of you has moved.

What we need today is an old-fashioned church revival. We need to be rekindled from above, and it needs to start in the pulpit and spread to every pew in the church.

9

The Local Church

Revelation 2:1-4:11

What the Reformers never tired of repeating, according to Hugh T. Kerr, Jr., was their wish to introduce nothing new into the church of their time; their sole interest was the revival of New Testament Christianity.

By contrast, church leaders today keep trying to introduce something new into the church to make New Testament Christianity more appealing. We keep trying to make “adjustments” to reach this generation, and they laugh because they know they’re in control. The sad truth, though, is that deep down they’re disappointed. They are, like every generation, hungry for *someone*, not something, different. They long for someone to speak to them with authority. They long for strength in their weakness and hope for their fears, and they long to belong. They want to be loved, not used and abused. What they want is not some new chorus or the latest technotrend. What they desperately long for is something completely unique, something only the church can truly offer. “The world,” says Os Guinness, “desperately needs the church to be the church,” not to do church differently.

Any recovery of New Testament Christianity will necessitate returning to a New Testament church—the church as it was meant to be. The best place to see what

the church was like and should be like, warts and all, is to look at the seven churches of Revelation. Whether they were just seven historical churches that existed in time and then vanished away or whether they are representative of the different kinds of churches in each age makes no difference. The seven together help us understand what the local New Testament church was like and what we realistically should expect it to be like today.

A composite drawn from the messages of the risen Lord to these seven churches helps us to understand the local church as nothing else can. There are three truths that emerge here:

- Every church has a purpose.
- Every church has its problems.
- Every church has His presence.

Shine Some Light My Way

First, every church has a purpose. These churches were called candlesticks. Today a candlestick may be an ornament of beauty used only for decoration, but in the first century world, candlesticks had a singular purpose—to hold up light. They existed to help people see.

With that one sweeping analogy, Jesus declared that the purpose of the church is to bring light into our world so that people may see God, see their lost condition, and see the way to salvation.

Ernie Pyle was a famous war correspondent in World War II. He was a gifted writer who thrilled America with his eyewitness accounts of the bloody war. Pyle, himself, lost his life to a Japanese machine-gunner in Okinawa in 1945.

Once Pyle was walking along a beach on a South Pacific island following an invasion by the United States

forces. Havoc was everywhere, and many soldiers lost their lives as they hit the beach. During a lull in the battle, Pyle walked along the beach, looking at the bodies of dead American soldiers. One boy's body was so turned that a New Testament was showing from his shirt pocket. Pyle picked up the New Testament and began to read as he walked on the beach, but he turned around, went back to the boy's body, and placed the New Testament in the pocket where he had found it.

Reflecting on the incident, Ernie Pyle wrote to Harry Emerson Fosdick, the pastor of Riverside Church, New York City, and said, "If you have any light, shine it my way."

We live in a dark world—darkened by sin, suffering, and sorrow; darkened by death, disease, and disaster; darkened by poverty and perversion; darkened by anger, abuse, and anxiety. Along with Ernie Pyle, the whole world says, "Me, too. If you've got any light, shine it my way."

That's what the church is here to do. It is to shine God's light in this dark world. It is to hold up the light of hope, of forgiveness, of love, and of eternal life. It is to point people to Jesus, who is the light of the world (John 8:12).

Our mission is summed up in Charles H. Gabriel's words in the old hymn "Send the Light:"

There's a call comes ringing o'er the restless
 wave,
 "Send the light! Send the light!"
 There are souls to rescue, there are souls to
 save,
 Send the light! Send the light!
 Send the light, the blessed gospel light;
 Let it shine from shore to shore!

Send the light, the blessed gospel light;
Let it shine forevermore!

Several years ago, a group of tourists were being taken through Carlsbad Caverns, New Mexico. In that company was a father, mother, an eleven-year-old son, and a seven-year-old daughter. If you've ever been to Carlsbad, you know what they do when you come to the deepest point in the cavern. The guide suddenly turns off the lights to dramatize how utterly dark and silent it is so far below the surface of the earth. On this particular day, when the guide did that, two sounds were heard almost simultaneously. The first was the startled cry of the little girl who had not expected this and was frightened by the sudden darkness. The other, seconds later, was the voice of her brother, saying reassuringly, "Don't cry, little sister; there is somebody here who knows how to turn on the lights."

That's the mission of the church. We are to keep saying to this broken and battered world, "Stop your crying, brother; stop your crying, sister. Someone has come who knows how to turn on the lights!"

Most churches need a rededication to this great purpose. It may be that our greatest failing as God's people is that we have become too far removed from life—too heavenly-minded to be of any earthly use. We give ourselves needlessly to theological hair-splitting instead of carrying the light into the darkness.

William Croswell Doane put it this way in *The Preacher's Mistake*:

A minister of great austerity,
Climbed up in his high church steeple
To be nearer God

That he might hand God's Word
Down to His people.

In His day, God said,
"Come down and die,"
And he cried out from his steeple,
"Where art thou, Lord?"
And the Lord replied,
"I'm down here among My people."

What is needed in the church today is a sense of urgency, of immediacy, and of identification with souls who are burdened, lost, and dying. We need the church to be the church—a candlestick to this dark world.

The Half Has Not Been Told

Second, every church has its problems. Listen to the risen Lord as He walks among the churches and, one by one, points out their faults and their failures. One had lost its first love, and another was buckling under persecution. One was following false doctrine, another was tolerating heresy being taught in the church, and another was dead spiritually. Another was not seizing its opportunity to witness, and still another had grown cold and indifferent. And every church the apostle Paul addressed had to deal with either external persecution, internal conflict, the invasion of false doctrine, or immoral practices on the part of its members.

The same has been true of every church I served in my thirty-four years as a pastor. At my first church, two brothers-in-law, one of whom was an active deacon, had not spoken to each other for ten years. At my second church, a deacon's daughter became pregnant out of wedlock and had to get married, and in that little com-

munity in the late 1950s, that was a scandal. At my next church, a new member of our congregation who was an employee of a prominent business establishment was discovered to be a practicing homosexual, and our church treasurer's wife tried to run down our church secretary with an automobile over a financial disagreement.

In my next church, the WMU president, who had often led our church to pray for and send missionaries to win Africans to Christ, quit the church when the first African-American family joined our congregation. And in the last church I pastored, I had to ask several deacons and Sunday school teachers to resign because of having adulterous relationships or teaching false doctrine.

In some ways, I was personally caught in conflict in all of these churches. In my first church, we had a dilapidated tabernacle next door to the church house, a real eyesore. When I challenged the church to either repair it or tear it down, I thought I was being reasonable, but before I got out of the building, I was accused of trying to tear down everything the older generations had built up. I realized, for perhaps the first time, that people do not always hear what you say or understand what you mean.

In my second church, our deacons had thoroughly discussed an issue and had come to no conclusion, so with the approval of the chairman of the committee, I presented the issue to our church in business conference later that night for a decision. The church immediately and overwhelmingly voted to do it. As I greeted the people at the back door at the close of the service, one of the deacons stopped and said, "It looks like we don't need deacons around here. You're going to do what you

want to do anyway.”

At my next church, the mayor threatened to run me out of town for being critical of the police department for not enforcing the law, and when I preached a plain sermon on race relations, a choir member stomped out of the choir loft in the middle of my sermon in protest. The next day, a prominent deacon warned me, “Preacher, you had better be careful. You can get into a storm not following the Lord.” I reminded him that some people had gotten into a storm by following the Lord.

At my next church I heard that one of our most prominent deacons had a grievance against me. I went to him and asked, “Is there any contention between you and me?” And he said, “No! You’re the kind of preacher we need, but you’re not the kind I like.” I asked, “What kind do you like?” He said, “I want to come to church, sit and listen, get up and go home, and not be bothered.” I said to him, “As long as I’m here, you’re going to be bothered.” But the truth of the matter is, from then on his presence bothered me more than I bothered him. I could never make a new proposal without wondering what his reaction would be.

At my last church, I was publicly accosted and accused of being a liberal by a fundamentalist lady, because our church did not elect her as a messenger to the Southern Baptist Convention for the second year in a row. Then when I made a survey of our congregation, asking what projects they would like to undertake in the next few years, one replied anonymously, “Whatever King Paul wants to do.”

So, it’s been a fun run to say the least, and in the words of the Queen of Sheba when she saw the wealth of King Solomon, “The half was not told” (I Kings 10:7).

Churches do have problems. Why is this? It is be-

cause they are full of sinners. They are saved sinners, to be sure, but sinners nonetheless. They, or should I say we, all have faults and weaknesses that keep popping out in scores of ways. Dishonesty, lust, anger, gossip, criticism, bitterness, evil-speaking, unkindness, unforgiveness, selfishness, vengeance—these were all problems that the New Testament church had to contend with, and we have to contend with them today, also. We are forever struggling to become the people God saved us to be and wants us to be.

To put it another way, we are part of the family of God. In a large family, there are likely to be various ages and stages of maturity among the members. There will be a mother and father who are mature adults. There will often be babies who need constant care and attention. And there will probably be adolescents, those in between, who are trying to become their own persons—sometimes rebellious, sometimes disrespectful, sometimes moody, and sometimes ill-tempered.

It would not be reasonable to expect all the people in such a family to act alike, for they are all in the process of becoming and growing. That's the way the church is. It has some members who are mature saints, and some who are newborn babes in Christ.

Knowing all this, you may ask, "Can a church so flawed be of any use to God? Can a church like that do any good? Does it deserve a place in our lives?" The answer is yes! We always preach a better gospel than we can live. The value of a church can never be in itself, for that would entail idolatry. Its value is never in and of itself, but in its fulfilling its intended purpose and mission of holding up the light.

As a church, we do not bear witness to ourselves, but to Him. The mark of a carnal church is that it loves

to talk about itself. The early church never witnessed about itself at all; it witnessed about the Lord—what He could do, how He would work, what a fantastic person He was. The test then is, does the church do what it was put here to do? Is Jesus Christ being presented to the world? Even a flawed candlestick can do that.

So, in spite of its faults and failures, the Lord does not view the church as some cheap cast-off purchase at a garage sale or the flea market. He sees it as a “golden” candlestick, so valuable that He was willing to die for it.

He Is Here, Hallelujah!

Finally, every church has His presence. Look at Him; He is walking in the midst of the golden candlesticks—not aloft from, but among. He was there then, and He is there now. That’s the glory of the church.

In the made-for-television movie, *Days and Nights*, Konstantyne Simonov wrote of the siege of Stalingrad. The fate of men and nations hung upon the outcome of the conflict. Two exhausted defenders of the city, common soldiers, rested between battles. Looking at the enemy encamped around, one asked, “They don’t give any date when they will take the city. What is the reason?” His weary companion replied, “We are the reason.”

In reply to the question of why does God’s spiritual purpose for this world not fail, why does His church continue to live in spite of its faults, we are bound to say, “He is the reason.” It is His living presence. It is the fact that He walks among the golden candlesticks even today and that makes the church different from all other organizations. It is His presence that makes the church the church.

LaTonya Taylor recently wrote an article about the spiritual leadership of Oprah Winfrey. Though brought up and baptized a Baptist, she has broken with the traditional faith and believes that there are many diverse paths leading to God.

When Oprah does go to church in Chicago, she attends Trinity United Church of Christ, but according to Trinity senior pastor, Jeremiah Wright, she has not attended a service there in the last eight years.

Pastor Wright partially defends her, saying, "Sundays got to be a hassle for her. Everybody came at her with notes, with portfolios, with ideas and requests. It made her coming to church a problem."

Shortly after her show was syndicated in 1986, Oprah spoke about the challenges of being a celebrity in a public worship service: "Last Sunday I was in church, and a deacon tapped me on the knee and asked me for my autograph," she said. "I told him, 'I don't do autographs in church. Jesus is the star here'" (LaTonya Taylor, "The Church of O," *Christianity Today*, 1 April 2002, p.44).

Right she is. Jesus should be the featured attraction of the church. Not the preacher. Not the choir. Not the liturgy, but Jesus. He must be the focus of our attention.

So we can sing, in the words of Kirk Telley:

He is here, hallelujah!

He is here, amen!

He is here, holy, holy;

I will bless His name again.

He is here, listen closely;

Hear Him calling out your name.

He is here; you can touch Him;

You will never be the same.

But there is a gloomy as well as a glorious side to His walking among the churches. As He walks and watches, He condemns as well as commends. He blames as well as blesses. He reproves as well as rewards.

It is a sobering thought to realize that He sees all. I read somewhere about a college cafeteria where some student had placed a hand-painted sign by the cookies, saying, "Take only one cookie; God is watching." Then with a kind of cleverness you often find on a college campus, another student had put a sign over the apples that said, "Take all the apples you want. God is watching the cookies."

The reality is that God is watching both the cookies and the apples, and He is watching you and me, holding us accountable for our actions. As the Scriptures say, "His eyes are upon the ways of man, and he seeth all his goings" (Job 34:21), and "The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him" (II Chron. 16:9).

Daniel Webster said, "Our accountability to God is the most solemn thought that can occupy a man's mind." Accountability means we must always be attuned to the voice of Jesus to obey what He says. He is the church's light, the church's lover, and the church's Lord.

Sir Leonard Wood once visited the king of France, who was so pleased with him that he invited him for dinner the next day. Wood went to the palace the following day, and the king, meeting him in the hall, said, "Why, Sir Leonard, I did not expect to see you. How is it you are here?"

"Did not your majesty invite me to dine with you?" asked the astonished guest.

"Yes," replied the king, "but you did not answer my

invitation.”

It was then that Sir Leonard uttered one of the choicest sentences of his life. He replied, “A king’s invitation is never to be answered, but to be obeyed.”

So, on Sunday morning, when you find it difficult to leave a warm bed, or when your doubts are much stronger than your faith, remind yourself why you need to go to church. It is because He is there. It’s the one place where you receive a blessing just for showing up. Even more important, it is a place set aside from the noise and restless commerce of the world for giving thanks for all that is larger than we are. It’s a place where we can join a rag-tag band of other people and praise the God who made and sustains us, who every week renews our hope that we can make it through life. It is a place that calls us to our highest and our best in every area. Like nothing else I know, it brings us back to our senses...and to the Savior...the Lord who is never absent.