

The Church: *Agents of God's Reconciliation*

Christians are to “go” and preach the Gospel to the lost. Disciples of Jesus are to bear witness that Jesus is God’s Way of reconciliation to God the Father. As we reflect upon our Christian mission, we should find time to reevaluate our spiritual walk with God. We who use computers are alert to viruses that can infect our computers and destroy all data. Yet, today, many of us are infected with a very **contagious virus** in our own lives—“**don’t care-ism.**” There appears to be a great deal of depression and dryness within the company of the redeemed. The romantic burning glow of love has faded almost into oblivion. Many disciples of Jesus are no longer growing in the “grace” that Peter speaks of in his Second Epistle (2 Peter 3:18). In order for growth to exist in our lives, there must be allegiance, dedication, and loyalty to the things of God. Many of us have never made the commitment that Jesus demands: “Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15).

MEMBERSHIP: PAPER MEMBERSHIP

Once upon a time—no this is not a fairy tale—for one to be a member of the church meant something. Today, to say that one is a member of the church carries no great weight. Membership is largely “paper” membership. Several months ago, I asked a member of a local congregation here in Montgomery, AL as to their membership. He responded by saying 700. I then asked him, “How many actually attended on Sundays.” The answer was astounding, “approximately fifty attend.” I was then informed that the number 700 is their paper membership. Paper membership is, in once sense, pure fiction.

Thousands of Christians today have lost their “salt” and “light.” Many Christians today want to live their lives in isolation from other believers. Countless believers in Jesus today want to live their lives without adherence to the ethical instructions from the Holy Spirit. Numerous disciples of Jesus seldom attend the gatherings of the saints on Sundays or weekdays. They have no fellowship to sustain them in their times of troubles, but occasionally they do attend a Sunday morning service. Yet, this gathering appears to be just going through the motions. In other words, the Gospel is to them like a record that is worn smooth with much playing. They themselves are played out! They have lost their zeal, their passion, their enthusiasm, and their eagerness for the growth of God’s kingdom. They are neither “cold” nor “hot” for spiritual growth. They have no sense of the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They have lost their desire of mission work.

As we think back upon the previous year, we should ask ourselves this question: Was my faith a reality or was it just a delusion? Did I play the role of a spectator or did I play the role of participant in reaching out to the lost? Did I just occupy a seat in the synagogue or was there a serious attempt on my part to practice a radical Christianity? Is my Christianity my profession or is it my vocation? If Christianity is just a profession, then we assume no responsibility. If Christianity is our vocation, then we assume responsibility and are participants. One objective of this chapter is to help us examine ourselves as to whether or not we have withered away, or are in the process of withering away.

Spiritual Temperature Running Low

What is our spiritual temperature! Is it “hot” or is it “cold” or is it “lukewarm”? Just where do we stand in our relationship to God? Are we like “plankton” in the sea? Plankton is microscopic plant and animal organisms that float or drift in great numbers in fresh or salt water. Plankton is a Greek word meaning “wandering” or “drifting.” Plankton drifts far out into the sea to provide food for the creatures of the sea. Now, having said this, plankton has no power of its own; it just drifts with the currents of the sea without its own destiny.¹

Scores of Christians are just like this. They drift with the current of the world—“don’t care-ism.” Are we drifting far from the shores of God? Are we like the waves of the sea that are tossed about? Are we hollow inside? Has our inner life withered away? Are we like individuals who have lost their souls? Or are we like trees planted by the rivers of water? Are we rooted and grounded and settled in the faith? Do we have commitment to the cause of Christ? What does commitment mean to us? How do we define commitment? **The word commitment involves the following descriptive terms:** dedication, loyalty, devotion, steadfastness, allegiance, and faithfulness. What is the opposite of these definitions? There is one word that adequately describes a conflicting mindset: indifference.

THE LOSS OF MISSION

No Longer Salt or Light to the World

One of the greatest challenges facing the church today is its loss of mission. The church no longer has a sense of mission. More and more, we witness the culture of the world creeping into the church. To a great extent, we can hear an echo of Paul’s words to Timothy: “Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica” (2 Timothy 4:9). Robert Raines, ordained minister and director of the Kirkridge Retreat and Study Center, correctly says, “The church has accommodated herself to the cultural climate. The church is no longer changing culture, but is being changed by culture.”² In other words, many Christians, as

¹I am indebted to Robert A. Raines, *New Life in the Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 13, for this illustration.

² See Raines, *New Life in the Church*, 14. Again, I am grateful to this excellent author for the genesis of this message. His book is as timely today as it was forty-eight years ago.

stated above, have ceased to be “salt” and “light” to the world. As we glance over the number of members in many congregations, we cannot help but notice that many members are still living without a purpose. Just a casual observation reveals that a lot of members have no sense of individual mission in reaching out to the lost. They have lost their burning zeal to meet with the people of God on Sundays. They have lost the concept that all Christians are ministers of the redeemed society—the community of the concerned ones.

No Longer Zealous for God’s Kingdom

Numerous Christians have not lost their enthusiasm and fervor to meet with the people of God on Sundays, but, at the same time, it appears that many still “think of Sunday morning religion as the heart of Christianity, which it emphatically is not,” writes Elton Trueblood (1900-1994), 20th century American Quaker author and theologian as well as former chaplain both to Harvard and Stanford universities.³ This statement is not cited to take away the importance of the Sunday gatherings, but rather, to call attention to the fact that Christianity involves more than just the Sunday morning services. **There is a sense in which churchgoing is a sign of weakness, not strength.**⁴ This statement is true if we think that Christianity is just *churchgoing*. Strictly speaking, we do not go to church; the church does the going.

Many view the church today as the Jews viewed the Temple in the time of Jeremiah. Pay attention to Jeremiah (627 BC) as he deals with external religion versus internal religion:

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. ⁴ Do not trust in deceptive words and say, “This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!” ⁵ If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, ⁶ if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, ⁷ then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever. ⁸ But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. (Jeremiah 7:3-8).

Twenty-six hundred years after Jeremiah wrote these words, we still find this same mindset among many Christians. The church, or its members, can never be loyal to Christ by just simply meeting on Sunday mornings. Christians are called in order that they might become the **fellowship of penetration**. Jesus’ says: “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation” (Mark 16:15). We cannot be genuine Christians by just simply observing a performance on Sunday morning and preachers preach. These acts of devotion are essential to our Christian growth and development, but in order to make our Christianity more real in the market place, we must devote the whole of lives to His service. These activities of singing and preaching should strengthen us for works of service in order to advance His kingdom. Regrettably, some Christians feel that they have done their “duty” for the week if they have not missed the Sunday assembly.

³ Elton Trueblood, *The Company of the Committed* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1961), 109.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Feeling Responsibility: Reaching Out to the Lost

What is our sense of responsibility in God's kingdom? Do we feel any accountability for the congregation that we are a part of in its struggles to reach out to the lost? Do we feel any responsibility toward God's community in its spiritual battle to encourage and strengthen its members? Do we feel any responsibility to conduct Bible studies during the week? Do we meet regularly with the saints for the purpose of edification and public worship as the corporate Body of Christ, or do we allow the least incident in life to keep us away from corporate worship? Do we spend our Sundays as a day to visit relatives? Do we throw away our Sundays as a day to go fishing? Do we run through our Sundays as a day to go golfing? Do we exhaust our Sundays as a day to lounge around? Do we consume our Sundays as a day to sleep? Do we finish our Sundays as a day to _____ (you fill in the blank)?

Do we have Sunday morning sickness, which is undoubtedly extremely devastating to some Christians, especially between 9 am and 12 noon? There is legitimate sickness. This chapter is not dealing with sickness that is genuine. What this study is concerned about is the sickness that just occurs between 10 am and 11 am. Following this time period, Christians can do almost any chore they desire. When we do occasionally attend, can we with a good conscious sing: "O, How I Love Jesus"? Or what about: "To Christ Be Loyal and Be True" or, "Work, for the Night Is Coming." If we are nonchalant in our attitude toward spiritual things, then we wonder how we can be involved in soul winning. When we, as Christians, do not stand in awe of salvation, then it is not a wonder as to why so many of us are lax in our concern about sharing the Good News of God's way of salvation by faith in Jesus. Loyalty to Christ involves far more than just orthodox theology. Christianity is a way of life twenty-four hours a day.

Chosen of God: A People Belonging to God

Every Christian is a priest of God. If someone were to ask us if we are priests of God, how would we respond? How do we feel about the words of Peter in his First Epistle about Christians being priests? Listen to Peter as he captures the very essence of the redemptive society:

But you are a **chosen people**, a **royal priesthood**, a **holy nation**, a **people belonging to God**, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now **you are the people of God**; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. ¹¹ Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. ¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. (1 Peter 2:9-12)

Do we comprehend the wonderful truth that we are a part of the chosen people of God? Do we really understand that we are priests of God? Do we fathom the truth that we are a part of God's holy people? Do we grasp the significance of the reality that we belong to God? If we do not understand that God has chosen us to be a holy people, then we are not going to be

mission minded. Many Christians do not believe they are chosen to be salt, to be light, or to be leaven in the world. They do not believe that they are chosen to be Christ's witnesses. How do we react to these words by Jesus: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last" (John 15:16). Is Jesus concerned about whether or not we "bear fruit" to the glory of God? Listen to Jesus as He rebukes the religious leaders for their rejection of God's kingdom: "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit (Matthew 21:43).

AGENT'S OF GOD'S RECONCILIATION

Many Christians have no idea that they are called as agents of God's reconciliation. Paul understood his mission in life, and so should we:

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and **gave us the ministry of reconciliation**: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ **We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us**. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:16-21)

Hopefully, this year will be a year in which we, as members of Christ's Body, will take our calling with a great deal of trepidation as we step, as it were, into the presence of God and actively pursue our vocation in Christ as of paramount importance. Optimistically, every member associated with God's new **community of redeemed ones** will take to heart the words of Paul to the Philippians:

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—**continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling**, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. ¹⁴ Do everything without complaining or arguing, ¹⁵ so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, **in which you shine like stars in the universe** ¹⁶ **as you hold out the word of life**. (Philippians 2:12-16)

Do we "shine like stars in the universe"? Do we "hold out the word of life"? Do we "work out our salvation with fear and trembling"? Are we conscious that our Christian calling is a vocation? Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, reminds the believers of their responsibilities in Christ: "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received" (Ephesians 4:1). Do we seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness or do we seek first our own pleasures in life? In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, He cautioned His disciples to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:32). What does this mean to us?

I know of individuals who have not been to a gathering of God's people in several months because of their jobs or various reasons. If our work prevents us from serving God, then

it would seem that we should seek another means of employment. Someone might say, well I have got to take care of my physical needs. Well, that is true. Did Jesus mean that we should seek to take care of our own physical needs and then seek God's kingdom and His righteousness if time permits? Even if we cannot attend the Sunday morning gatherings, we wonder why so many still avoid the evening gatherings. Listen to Jesus as He addresses this issue of material needs:

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ **But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.** ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matthew 6:28-34)

Do we want to be used by God in His reconciling work? Are we caught up in the purposelessness of this day and age? Are we being strangled by the love of the world with all of its vested interests? Are we struggling in vain to deliver ourselves from this body of death? Is our local fellowship of believers composed of dry bones? Are we dry bones? Are we using sickness as an excuse for not meeting with the people of God on Sundays? If so, we wonder about our habits during the week. Are we able to go shopping during the week, are we able to work in our garden during the week, are we able to run errands during the week, and are we able to go to work on Monday, and so on? If so, we marvel why on Sunday mornings, we allow our sickness to prevent church attendance, but, at the same time, this sickness never interferes with our own desires after services on Sundays and our wishes during the week. Is it that we are not as interested in the things of Christ as we are our own pleasures? Paul, in writing to the Philippians, reveals the character of Timothy as he sends him to the Philippians:

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. ²⁰ **I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare.** ²¹ **For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.** (Philippians 2:19-21)

Where is our concern? Do we have more interest in our own activities than we do the Church of the Living God? Do we have an intense yearning to meet with the people of God on Sundays? Or is Sunday simply just another day. Robert Raines correctly analyzes the mindset of many Christians in their behavior of "don't-care-ism":

The first obligation of the Christian as a member of the believing community, the Body of Christ, is to worship God. It must amaze the newcomer to the average church to discover that the church cares less about his weekly attendance than he does his Service Club, which regularly checks up on him. Anyone who regards his attendance at Sunday worship as an optional matter depending upon whim, fancy, or personal convenience, is not seriously interested in the new life with Christ. To be a

Christian is to be a living member of the Body of Christ, whose characteristic action is the communal worship of the God and Father our Lord Jesus Christ.⁵

RELEASED FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT TO SERVE HIM

We have been released from bondage to life: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Yet, many Christians labor under the impression that this release from darkness to light is a release without a mission. Are we ministers of reconciliation? Paul, as cited above, writes:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And **he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.** ²⁰ **We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.** We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (5:18-21)

HAVE WE LOST OUR SENSE OF MISSION?

Have we lost our sense of mission? If we expect the Body of Christ to grow, then there must be real change in our outlook concerning corporate and individual responsibility toward the lost and toward the saved. **The church today is loaded with nominal members. For many, church membership is simply an external symbol without an internal commitment.** The church of Jesus needs to recapture the idea that it is supposed to be leaven, not a lump. Every believer is called by God to be a faithful priest. Have we taken up our cross daily to follow Jesus? Raines makes the succinct observation:

Membership in the church is meant to be the outer symbol of inner commitment to Jesus Christ. Evangelism outside the church, evangelism in breadth, is essential. But what is even more crucial in our time is evangelism inside the church, evangelism in depth. The church is loaded with nominal members—genial, friendly folk who are ignorant of the Bible and innocent of disciplined Christian commitment. They are sincerely but superficially Christian. This order of Christianity is drawn in pastel. Its faith is shallow; its people are without any spiritual history; they are not growing; they are spiritually asleep. The time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God. The imperative for our time is conversion within the church.⁶

DO WE HAVE A JOHN THE BAPTIST MINISTRY?

Do we want God to use us as He did John the Baptist—to prepare a people for eternity? Do we have a John the Baptist ministry? Many Christians are like “musty museums”—dull and lifeless. Again, Raines says with his ability to go right to the heart of it all:

⁵ Raines, *New Life in the Church*, 59.

⁶ Raines, *New Life in the Church*, 77.

In the church there are no passengers; there is only the crew. All members are involved in worshiping, working, and witnessing. Every member belongs to a *koinonia* [fellowship] group with its own special mission.⁷

Are we just passengers? Or are we a part of the crew? In conclusion, we cannot help but wonder how the words of Paul fit in with our lifestyles? Is the Word of God at work within our lives? Listen to Paul as he described the influence the Gospel of Christ had in the lives of the Thessalonians and pay attention to John as he, too, described the influence that the woman of Samaria had on her hometown:

Thessalonians

And we also thank God continually because, when **you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.**¹⁴ For you, brothers, **became imitators of God's churches in Judea,** which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews,¹⁵ who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men¹⁶ in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last. (1 Thessalonians 2:13-16)

Samaritans

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did."⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days.⁴¹ And because of his words many more became believers.⁴² They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world." (John 4:39-42)

CONCLUSION

I am praying that each believer associated with God's family will take an inventory of his or her own spiritual life and see if one is looking after one's own self-interest rather than the interest of Jesus Christ. To look after the interests of Jesus Christ is to put Him first in our lives. Are we doing this? Is Jesus really first in our lives? Is our own well being strangling us? Are we changing our colors like a chameleon to blend in with the ways of the world? The church means nothing to the world. Does the church, which cost Jesus His life, mean anything to us? What we frequently witness within many local congregations is the "segregation of concern." What does this mean? It simply means that about 90% of the congregation generally loses its responsibility in the corporate concept of the church. In other words, the congregation is saturated with corporate irresponsibility.

⁷ Ibid., 140.