

1989

The Weapon of All Prayer

Dear Friends,

Some of the world events of 1988 should be seen by us as intriguing, if not positively exciting. In particular I refer to recent speeches made by the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, in which he called for world peace, for an open world economy, and promised, for his part, to reduce conventional arms in Europe . Then there was the speech in which the PLO head, Yassir Arafat, renounced the use of terrorism in the pursuit of his organization's goals. Peace is being promised in Afghanistan , in the Middle East , in Asia , in Africa .

I do not intend to analyze these various proposals and possibilities in this letter. We all know that talk is cheap, and that, considering the economic pressures in the Soviet Union for instance, Gorbachev had little choice except to reduce his military, representing such a necessity as a free gift issuing from his beneficence. Time will tell whether deeds will match such promising words, and until that truth can be known, we do well to remain vigilantly skeptical.

Yet, is it not interesting to consider that whatever the hearts of the likes of a Gorbachev or an Arafat may have in terms of true intention, the circumstances in which they currently find themselves constrain them to behave with increasing decency? Here we may well be seeing the subduing hand of the Lord at work, and that is what is so exciting to contemplate. Indeed, we may be seeing on a vast scale the beginnings of answered prayer for our Lord's kingdom to come and will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Do you think that such a hope is naive? Many do. Even many Christians do. I would say it were naive and presumptuous except for one thing, namely, the fact that such hope in those who truly have it issues from a life of committed prayer. The cynics, I venture to say, know less about such prayer and its power than do those who have this hope.

For years, we in our personal prayers as well as in our weekly prayer meetings have been crying to the Lord concerning the world situation. I realize that by such praying we play a small part in a world chorus of intercession. Yet I do not want any of us to underestimate the significance of our prayers, especially of those we offer together in our prayer meeting. For the one thing most deadly to effective praying is that we grow discouraged as we are tempted to believe that our prayers are not making any real difference. The truth is that they are making a far greater difference in our world than any of us may realize.

We have noted repeatedly how faithfully the Lord has answered the prayers of our prayer meeting. We have prayed for things great and small, and eventually we have witnessed the Lord's answer. Such a record of divine faithfulness should give us great encouragement and incentive to pray on, not to mention cause for deepest gratitude.

There are, of course, limitations to legitimate prayer. As James tells us, we must not ask amiss or selfishly, nor may we expect answers when we ask in doubt rather than in faith (cf. Jas. 1:6; 4:3; 5:15). We are to pray in the name of Jesus, and that entails praying according to His will and for His glory (cf. Jn. 15:16). But then we are given the help of God's Holy Spirit in such an endeavor as praying in Jesus' name (cf. Rom. 8:26 ,27).

Besides such limitations, there are other conditions attending prayer which we must note. One of the most important of these is the fact that prayer, being part of the offensive spiritual armor given to us by God (cf. Eph. 6:10 -18) is most fiercely resisted by Satan. An incident in the Book of Daniel bears testimony to this. In Daniel 10 we find the prophet fasting and praying for three weeks as he seeks to understand a vision. When an angel appears to give him the interpretation, we learn that this angel had been opposed by demonic powers for the entire three week period, thus accounting for the delay in answered prayer.

If we are going to engage in serious prayer, then we must learn to persevere. We must also commit ourselves to constant vigilance against the snares of the enemy. Satan will seek to attack or entice us at some time during the week, in order that we may be discouraged in our prayers, especially at prayer meeting, or perhaps even feel disqualified from prayer, due to sin having defeated us in some area.

True intercessory prayer is costly business. That is why those with only a mild sense of commitment to the Lord and His work do not engage in it. That is also why we are all tempted more or less often to stop our praying. We feel weary, or the prayer meeting seems dull and dragging, or we perceive that our week has been difficult due to satanic opposition, which we perhaps rightly believe will lift if we simply stop praying. At times it just doesn't seem worth it to persevere in something which causes so much trouble and yet seems to pay so little in terms of answers.

It is true that prayer has limitations and that it is costly business, but it is also true that it is not some sort of feeble last resort or a lucky lottery. In prayer we enter into communion with God, and humbly request, by His leave and warrant, that He engage Himself to move, to act, to provide in a specific way. Our Almighty God is pleased so to move, act, and provide far more frequently and to a far greater extent than any one of us would be capable of believing.

We know this because the Word of God makes it clear, though at times we fail to feel it or reckon on it. For instance, there are the seven times Jesus tells us, in John's Gospel, chapters 14-16, to ask for anything in prayer in His name. That *anything* can range from the greatest to the smallest and most personal concerns.

Lest we underestimate the scope of such divine warrant, we are given examples of great things being asked by such as Elijah, who prayed for drought, then again for rain (cf. 1 Kings 17,18; Jas. 5:17,18). Several years ago we in this area were threatened with the direct approach of an awesome hurricane. It has become a joke in the media that one of our local prominent ministers, namely, Pat Robertson, prayed it away, which he claimed to have done. Those who find cause for jesting over this believe either that God does not exist, or that He would never interfere with the creation in such a way as to submit the course of a storm to the will of praying people. Yet it is God who causes and controls all weather (cf. Ps. 147:16-18), it is Christ who stilled a storm (cf. Mk. 4:35-41), and our heavenly Father will yet move in similar ways when requested to do so by His children for His glory and their good. If the world ridicules Pat Robertson, let them ridicule us, for we, too, prayed to be spared from that hurricane, and we who so prayed know that it veered away from us so inexplicably because of answered prayer.

Anything that God touches—and He touches all things on earth and in heaven—we can touch by prayer. It is not at all naive or presumptuous to believe that we get the Church and the world for which we pray. The Bible tells us that it is so. And if we fear that we will be praying for something not in the will of God, the Lord will make that known to us in due course, as He did when He told Jeremiah to stop praying for Israel's revival (cf. Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:11), or as He does when He tells us not to pray for one sinning a sin leading to death (cf. 1 Jn. 5:16). Yet even then, we are not condemned for our having prayed such prayers until we were told to stop.

In light of such biblical command, example, and incentive we should all be encouraged to pray more consistently, seriously, and perseveringly. It is easy to grow so tired and discouraged in our prayers that we don't even recognize the answers when they come, attributing them, mistakenly, to mere coincidence. Let us not believe such lies. Let us, instead, remember that our prayers pack far more punch than we are inclined to realize. For to our prayers is added much incense from the altar of heaven, consequently making the answers to such prayers greater by many magnitudes than what we even dare to imagine (cf. Rev. 8:3-5).

Our church is increasingly known by others near and far as being a praying church. May we ever be such indeed, lest we become like the church of Sardis in Revelation 3, which had a reputation for being alive, yet which was dead. So long as we bear in mind the great power which is ours in prayer, the amazing effects which have been in the past and can be in the future wrought through our prayers, and, most importantly, the God to whom and for whose glory we pray, we shall not suffer such a terrible thing. For we serve a God who commands, encourages, and prompts us by His own power to ask for things which He intends to give us in degree far above what we ask or think.

Prayerfully yours,

William Harrell

Backsliding

Dear Friends,

The subject of backsliding is not a pretty one to view, but since we all find ourselves at times slipping in our walk with Christ, I believe it is important for us to examine this area. It is hard for any believer to accept those things which slow his pace in the sanctification process. But some retarding aspects are more understandable and tolerable than others. For instance, while it is true that at times believers are characterized as mounting up with wings as eagles (cf. Is. 40:31), we are also shown to be at other times pinned down by the enemy of our souls to the point where our pace forward has halted completely, and where obedience is a matter of just standing our ground (cf. Eph. 6:10-14). Then there are times when the Lord Himself imposes a stop to our walk for our own good, as David testifies: *He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul.* (Ps. 23:2,3).

Backsliding though, seems to be in a different category from these things. For while such things as those listed above do seem to slow us down, ultimately we know that they serve to sanctify us further. Can we say anything like that about our backsliding? It is one thing to endure the pain of conflict against an enemy without. But at least, in such conflict, we are sustained by the knowledge that our engaging such foes is the right and noble thing for us to do, and we also have the hope of victory before us. However, when the enemy is within, that is a different matter.

Is there any reason to be encouraged, any cause for hope, when we find the enemy within ourselves? What is one to make of the terrible reality of an appetite which begins to diminish for the things of God, while it increases for the things of the world?

Nothing can be more demoralizing and fearful than for a believer to realize that he is slipping, that he is falling behind in the race, not because of noble and unavoidable impediments, but because he is at war within himself. One moment he finds himself a captive to sin—the worst kind of captive, too—a willing one who enjoys his sin; the next moment he cries out, longing for the restoration of his fading joy in the Lord. Like the demon-possessed boy in the gospels, he finds himself thrown into the fire then thrown into the water. He begins to think himself no true son of God, but rather an impostor, a son of perdition, like Judas, or at least he begins to think himself seriously mentally ill. Can any good thing come out of such a state?

Before we seek an answer to that question let us acknowledge that the state I have briefly described above is more common amongst us than we may care to admit. Indeed, I believe increasingly that every believer finds himself falling into such dark ravines at

least once in his pilgrimage. If that is so, then our denying it or refusing to understand the experience will do us no good.

The fact is that backsliders are in pretty good company. Not that this makes a virtue of backsliding, but it does help to put it into proper perspective. Despite the call for us to lay aside the sin which so easily entangles us, the truth is that neither do we nor do practically any of the men and women portrayed in the Word succeed at that all of the time. David, for example, lied, committed adultery, and murdered. We can hardly say that he was, when he did those things, laying aside besetting sin. Furthermore, David sinned against great light. He had been raised up and given so much by God. He had been inspired by God's Holy Spirit to write a number of the Psalms. Yet he sinned deeply. What a war must have gone on within that gifted, sensitive, passionate man!

The apostle Paul, while not showing such glaring sins in his actions, confesses to us that in his attitude he was often locked in warfare with inner sin. In Romans 7 he describes his bouts of backsliding, at least in heart. When he says that nothing good dwells in his flesh, and that he is the chief among sinners, I think we do well to take him at his word. For to do anything less would be to call the apostle a liar, a man of false humility, who spoke such words not as truth, but rather as a means to receive our flattering denials and indulgent applause.

In addition to such biblical examples, when we read the biographies and devotional literature of the great saints of Church history, we find them at times disclosing how they wrestled with such things as spiritual indifference and various lusts. It is too easy and it is certainly wrong for us patronizingly to view such costly confessions as though they represent the operations of supersensitive consciences in souls who grieved over their having missed a morning quiet time or their having craved another cookie after all had been served and consumed. When a great saint confesses that he has wrestled and at times lost in his fight against lust, I could believe that his lust is of such a depth and magnitude as to shock the most jaded worldling.

Yet although we have acknowledged that backsliders are in good company, we must never forget that backsliding is sin. It is our sin so to give in to lust, our sin so to love the things of the world. We are responsible for it, no one else is, though the devil and his agents share in that responsibility. This knowledge, of course, is what makes backsliding so painful for a believer. It is an awful truth to face. But it must not make us despair.

The higher and unchangeable truth is that where our sin increases, God's grace abounds all the more. The Lord uses even our backsliding for His glory and our good. He is not napping when the remnants of corruption gain ascendancy in our lives. Such seasons do not come upon us apart from His sovereign ordaining. It is not that our holy God makes us sin; but He does have positive purposes in and uses for even our failings. What I am saying is that the Lord is still at work in us, even when we stray far from Him. The prodigal son was allowed to go to the far country, not by an indulgent or apathetic father, but by a wise and loving father who knew that, for that son, there in the

far country, and only there, would he come to himself, thus ultimately returning to his true home with truly deepened love and gratitude.

In some respects, there is nothing like a bout of backsliding to break a man's spiritual pride, to make him more humbly dependent upon the Lord, to make him more sympathetically loving and gentle and patient in his dealings with others. These virtues do not develop because of the backsliding itself, but because of the wisdom, knowledge, grace, and love of our redeeming God, who sinlessly makes redemptive use, even of our sin. We don't know for certain, but Paul's thorn in the flesh may well not have been a physical affliction, but rather some besetting sin which served to humble him and keep him close to the Lord, and therefore, in God's hands, much good came of it (cf. 2 Cor. 12:7-10).

Thus we discover yet another facet of Romans 8:28. Such a discovery gives us no cause for carelessness or complacency in our walk, and surely it gives us no license to sin. But when we rightly understand and apply this truth, we find hope dawning upon us, realizing that our Savior comes to us, even and especially in our defeats, as a sympathetic high priest to offer not condemnation, but blessed help. We have His Word so that we might not sin, but if and when we do sin, we have Him as our advocate (cf. 1 Jn. 2:1). Though we fall, we shall rise again, and having been forgiven much, we shall love Him and others much more. His gracious rescue effects this. All glory to His name.

Yours in His grace,

William Harrell

Feeding on the Whole Counsel of God

Dear Friends,

It is wonderful to read and hear reports about how the Lord is working mightily in such places as Korea and certain African countries, where thousands daily are being converted to Christ. Those who watch and chart such church growth most closely tell us that by the turn of the century the main axis of Christian power and influence will be between Africa and Korea. Such a prospect should humble especially North American and European Christians, who have enjoyed gospel privileges for so many centuries, while we have produced ever decreasing spiritual fruit.

I think one of the most significant aspects of these Korean and African revivals is the cry which issues from these lands for competent teachers of the Word. It seems apparent that even the babes in Christ there realize the need to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Savior, as well as realizing the attendant danger of spiritual superficiality. This seems to be one of the crucial areas where their scene differs greatly from our own. We seem not only complacent with spiritual superficiality, but in many quarters go so far as actually to prefer it. One prominent British theologian has observed that North American Christianity, while it covers the continent, is only a fraction of an inch deep. Some would contend that this is not so, and I would agree that in certain places within our land true and deep spirituality is being fostered. However, in most places I believe the theologian's observation to be accurate.

Consider the churches in our land which, as a rule, are growing numerically. They tend not to be those which are committed to a faithful and full and deep ministry of the whole Word of God, so much as those which are full of special interest groups and activities. Of course defenders of the latter sort of churches would say that they are simply seeking, in accordance with Scriptural mandate, to cast the net widely so as to take in all sorts of fish, the Lord being the one to sort them out. Or they may say that we should all admit that Charismatic forms of worship draw in people, whereas Calvinistic forms repel many; and thus if we are going to be true to the great commission we must adopt the former and jettison the latter.

But all of this evades the point, which is whether or not the Word of God gives to us not only assorted propositions about Christ and salvation in Him, but also regulations pertaining to our growth in sanctification and worship. In short, we believe that Scripture speaks to us clearly and sufficiently in all areas of life. Not only so, but we believe that all areas of Scripture are necessary for sanctified living and worship. Whatever they claim in theory, Charismatics, Arminians, and Fundamentalists—all of whom together comprise the vast majority of American churches—do not hold to such belief. This is to say nothing of the giant televangelist empires, which for the most part purvey mere pop religion, a weird yet intoxicating mixture of superstition and sensuality, covered with a thin coating of biblical truth.

The issue is never whether a certain form of theology or worship is true at certain points. The issue is whether it is true at all points. A key is not of much use if only two or even three of its four teeth are cut at an appropriate height for the tumblers of a lock. All of the teeth must match all of the tumblers if the key is the right one for a given lock.

On a vast scale we in North America seem to be going through something like Charles Spurgeon's *Downgrade Controversy*. For increasingly the cry is in our day similar to what it was in his, namely, that doctrine divides whereas love builds up. Thus we are urged to set doctrine aside and concentrate only on love. Yet the love such downgrade advocates would have us to embrace, besides being void of real content, is quite discriminating. The one thing it will not tolerate is a person who exalts the truth of God's Word above even the most tender of natural affections or relationships.

In this way the sensitivities (many of which are sinful) of man become the guiding feature of ministry, in place of the proclamation of the Word of God. Man's perceived needs dictate. God's revelation and even man's truest and deepest needs are relegated to secondary positions. Hence we find men refusing to preach on such areas as predestination or hell for fear that such doctrine—whether true or not makes no difference—will offend someone and perhaps drive them out of the church. Meanwhile, those who do long for a full and faithful ministry of the Word are left to languish. Also, the plight of true shepherds becomes increasingly dire. Those who would rightly minister the Word are often driven to desert and wilderness places, being forced to live in caves and holes in the ground. Such thanks they receive from the church for their faithfulness.

I am not speaking here in hyperbole. For we know of a number of faithful men—two are now worshipping with us—who are seeking a call to a church and finding it very difficult. That difficulty for the most part lies in the fact that most churches are not interested in having a faithful teaching ministry, but rather want a man able and disposed to continue what they have come so to enjoy, having their ears tickled by pleasant, entertaining myths, rather than having their heads challenged and their hearts transformed by the truth of God's Word.

The Bible commands us to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ (2 Pet. 3:18). It declares to us that the will of God for us, whatever our personal agenda may be, is our sanctification (1 Thess. 4:3). Furthermore, we are told that the medium by which we are sanctified is God's Word, which is truth (Jn. 17:17). Finally, fitting in perfectly with this, in terms of supply, is the command of God's Word to ministers to do one thing above all else: preach the Word of God (2 Tim. 4:2).

Not only is it clearly God's will that we outgrow spiritual superficiality, not only has He provided the means by which we do this via a teaching ministry of His Word, but He also makes clear to us how dangerous it is for us to remain superficial in our spirituality. For one thing, so long as we remain babes we remain vulnerable to Satan's treacherous trickery (Eph. 4:11 -16, especially v. 14). For another, we remain incapable of feeding on the richest and most empowering portions of God's Word (Heb. 5:11 -14).

The deepest and truest aspirations of a man truly called by God to the gospel ministry lie in the area of preaching and teaching the Word of God. Such a man longs more than anything to delve into the rich depths of the God-breathed revelation which we call the Bible, and to share those riches with his flock. He finds the Word of paramount interest for its own sake first, and then, blessedly but only coincidentally, of practical benefit to man. He is engrossed increasingly in Christ, not as a mere means of salvation and eternal life, but as being Himself salvation and eternal life. Thus his preaching holds up this magnificent Christ, focusing on Him more than on man's passing interests or perceived needs. He does this knowing that in Christ, not in an analysis of man's needs, do we find true healing and much more.

Such men are instruments, raised up by the Lord to enable His people to grow to maturity. To the extent that such faithful men are resisted or ignored or distracted to give themselves to lesser things, those so resisting, ignoring, or distracting ought to know that they not only cause such a man the pain of denying him his deepest aspirations, but they resist their own Lord and leave themselves open to spiritual impoverishment and even danger.

The many revival babes in Christ in Asia and Africa today seem rightly to sense all of this, and they want to grow by sitting under a faithful, teaching ministry of God's Word. If they continue to demand such teaching, the Lord will surely supply it by calling to them teachers from afar and raising up ones from their midst. If they want the Word, the whole Word, and nothing but the Word, they will grow to be Calvinists in their theology and worship, and will, no doubt, eventually send missionaries even to our benighted shores. If that is how true revival is to come to us, may the Lord hasten the coming of that day!

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

Godly Intentions

Dear Friends,

The familiar adage tells us that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. What advantage is it merely to intend to do a good deed, or merely to plan to be helpful and loving with respect to others? James warns us about such fruitlessness when he tells us that faith without works is dead.

It would seem, then, that those who are most conspicuously active in the Lord's service have the greatest faith. Yet, on closer examination we find that such is not necessarily the case; in fact, the reverse may well be true.

When it is said that faith without works is dead, and that good intentions are in themselves insufficient, we must realize that this is not to set works in opposition to faith or good intention. Instead, it leads us to a deeper consideration of faith and of our motives. For true faith will work, and truly good intentions will be acted upon.

In our day of fast-paced action, and of the spirit of activism which has invaded the Church, we do well to recall that the emphasis in the Word of God consistently is placed upon motives for action, rather than upon the action itself. Respecting our assessment of motives, we are not competent judges of the hearts of others, and thus we should labor to place the very best construction we can on their actions. Where there is any question concerning the motives of others, we should lovingly seek to cover a multitude of sins by our attributing to others as high, holy, and loving motives as could be credibly possible. But whereas we are not competent to judge a man's heart, and consequently should seek to err on the side of generosity in our assessments of others, there is a most competent Judge who knows thoughts and intentions perfectly, and weighs them with perfect equity.

The Lord not only sees what we are doing, He knows perfectly what our motive is for what we do. With Him, motive is the critical thing. A truly good intention, even if its fruition is legitimately frustrated, is infinitely more acceptable to our Lord than would be the most heroic and sacrificial deed performed from base motives.

This truth can easily escape our attention in Christian service. When it does, we begin to believe that the end justifies not only means but motive.

Perhaps several examples will help our understanding at this point. Take the extreme instance of a malicious kidnapper, who speaks in kindly tones to his victim, showering the child with affectionate words, gestures, and gifts. But the motive is evil. Thus, the good showing is just that—a show, a lure to help effect seduction. In contrast, a loving father may at times be forced to discipline his child. Judging simply by appearance we may wrongly conclude that the father is a merciless monster. Yet he does what he does from a loving motivation. Therefore, we see the motive in each case to be the determining factor.

There are Scriptural examples which serve to illustrate the importance of motive as well. It would seem that nothing in the world could be more Christian and loving than for one to give all he has to the poor and needy. Yet such giving can be done from motives other than love, and when that is the case it profits nothing (cf. I Cor. 13:3). Yet, if love does not motivate a person so to give to the poor, what does? There are a number of possible answers. Many would give from a sense of guilt, the motive being not love for the poor, but love of self and a desire to rid self of guilt. Some may give in order to draw to themselves the admiration of others. That sort of giving then becomes a trade or an investment, wherein money, goods, or services are given so that the dividend of people's admiration may be acquired.

Such impure motives may also prompt and so taint deeds of worship. Paul says that if anything other than love for Christ prompts even such religious activities as speaking in tongues, prophesying, and the exercise of miracle-working faith, it is all useless (cf. I Cor. 13: 1,2). Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount tells us repeatedly not to fast or to pray or to do anything pertaining to our faith merely to be seen by men, but rather to do so only from the motive of loving and grateful devotion to our heavenly Father, who sees in secret yet rewards openly. Jesus also warned that not everyone who says, *Lord, Lord* will enter the kingdom of heaven (cf. Mt. 7:21 -23). It will not be the lack of profession or religious performance which will bar such from eternal glory. Rather it will be that their words and deeds of service had issued from other than pure, godly motives.

Primarily, this knowledge is given to us not so that we become critical and suspicious of the thoughts and intentions of others, but rather so that we, under the searching and sanctifying guidance of the Holy Spirit, may examine and endeavor to purify our own motives. Therefore, I should constantly examine, for instance, whether I preach the gospel because I love the Lord and His people, and so labor for His glory and their good, or whether I simply am conscious of a duty I must render in return for a stipend. Or perhaps I just like to show off, having people hold me in high regard. The Lord will reveal to me the truth, and will give grace so that I might purify my motives if need be. But such self-examination before Him is a facilitating pre-requisite, whereby I humble myself under the Lord's mighty hand, rather than waiting for that divine hand to press conviction upon me.

Every area of our lives should be submitted to such examination. Why do I go to the stated meetings of the church? Why do I give of my time, talent, and treasure? Does duty compel me, or a desire for notice and social acceptance? Why do I read the Word and other spiritual books? Is it only for self-gratifying education? Have I made my intellect an idol? Why do I like certain hymns? Is it because of their aesthetic, or entertainment value to me? Have I thus made my emotions an idol? Why do I seek to be friendly and loving towards others? Am I just doing a job that is expected of me? What prompts me to behave as I do in the world? Do I feel threatened by some people, and am I envious of others, and so do I make personal distinctions, becoming a judge, as James says, with evil motives (Jas. 2:14)? If so, I can hardly expect the fruit of love to flourish in and issue from such impure soil. Only we ourselves and the Lord know the answers to

such questions of our hearts, and in those areas where we would deceive ourselves, only the Lord knows.

Therefore, we must be careful to ask these searching questions before the Holy Spirit. Otherwise we shall either fudge the answers so as to put ourselves in a better light than we deserve, or we shall lose confidence, finding ourselves sinking in a sea of self-doubt and paralyzing, destructive, self-criticism. Even avoiding these pitfalls, the process of searching our motives in the light of God's Word and before the Holy Spirit involves many painful self-discoveries. Yet they serve to humble us, and drive us more deeply into the Lord, in whom we are purified, freed from selfish preoccupation, and abundantly enriched and empowered to render loving and blessed service.

I commend to us all this essential and sanctifying discipline of heart examination. For then we not only discover the truth which sets us free, but it shall be proven in our lives that the road to heaven is paved with good intentions, and pure, godly motives, wrought out in word and deed.

Sincerely yours,

William Harrell

Evangelism

Dear Friends,

Since we have recently resumed our work of neighborhood visitation and evangelism it might be helpful for us to consider certain aspects of this vital ministry. I use this letter to do so because although only a small number from our membership actually do go out seeking to impart the gospel in the homes surrounding our church, such a venture really should concern us all.

The warrant we have all received to propagate the gospel comes to us from the Lord Jesus Christ Himself through the so-called great commission. In it Jesus tells us that, *All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.* (Mt. 28:18-20).

You would think that with such a warrant, containing a promise of the presence and engagement of the all-encompassing authority of the Lord Jesus, the going would be easy. But it just does not work out to be so. In fact, evangelism can be hard, discouraging work, so much so that many lose heart for it and quit, while many more never get started. But the option for us to have merely a personal faith without our sharing it simply does not exist.

Admittedly, going through neighborhoods from house to house knocking on the doors of strangers is perhaps the least pleasant and, in many respects, most difficult of all forms of evangelism. Not all are called and equipped by the Lord directly to participate in this particular form of gospel proclamation, though all can certainly support such a mission with prayer. But in some way or another, if we truly know the Redeemer, we shall endeavor to make Him known to others. Such an endeavor can be difficult and frustrating whatever form it takes.

If we are not to grow weary and lose heart, it is vital that we understand certain factors which play a part in evangelism. I believe that most if not all of these factors can be viewed in terms of cost and compensation.

The cost is what we first become acutely aware of when we seek to share the gospel. For those going out with us regularly visiting homes, there is the factor of time which must be spent doing this. Although the actual time spent visiting is not great (about 1½ hours per week), even a little time spent is costly to busy people. Then, of course, when we experience how that time is spent, the sense of our bearing cost rises greatly. There are various troubles to be encountered. The weather can be adverse, even in spring and autumn, the seasons to which we confine our visiting. We may find ourselves unwelcome in many homes. Others are apathetic. There is also the prejudice factor, produced by the high-pressure hits many homes already have received from cults such as Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses. To the undiscerning we all look the same. Then

there are the physical dangers, usually coming in such forms as dogs, drunks, and drug addicts; not to mention the emotional drain of making ourselves exposed and vulnerable.

These are just some of the most obvious costs. When we experience them and they accumulate, we may begin to wonder whether our Lord has not given us a most dirty and difficult, if not impossible, chore.

What are the consolations? Most are inclined to look for consolation in terms of success in the mission, which success is thought of in terms of converts to Christ and church members. However, if we limit our understanding of successful evangelism merely to converts, we can easily be led astray in our motive and method.

We may evangelize out of love for lost souls and in order to build up the Church, but the highest and truest motivation should be for the glory of God. Such a motivation will save us from feeling like miserable failures when our gospel message is rejected. It will also save us from worse plights, such as feeling proud of ourselves when people respond favorably. Additionally, we shall be safeguarded from the temptation to tamper with the message of life in order to make it more popular and appealing.

But what does it mean to evangelize for the glory of God? For one thing, it should make us reassess the cost factors. For the difficulties and inconveniences detailed above are not random, unrelated things. They are orchestrated by a higher, sinister hand. When we seek to share the gospel, we are issuing a challenge to the prince of darkness and his gloomy, evil empire. He has his fiery darts to throw at us, but we have shafts of powerful light to hurl at him and his captives.

Yet even an understanding of this spiritual conflict between light and darkness, good and evil does not penetrate to the heart of the matter. It is not simply that we are instruments of God's salvation, opposed by the devil because he hates to lose control of his captives. For whereas Satan is not pleased when a benighted soul escapes his thrall, his real anger issues from the fact that God, whom Satan hates fiendishly, is glorified when His Word goes forth to transform lives. And lives are always transformed when we share Christ. Either they are enlightened unto salvation, or hardened unto judgment. In either case, God is glorified; in the manifestation of His mercy with the former instance, and of His justice in the latter.

Realizing this is itself a form of consolation. It means that we, by God's grace, have been called to participate in the greatest and most meaningful of all conflicts. It is the highest honor so to be enlisted on the right and victorious side.

Another consolation has to do with the message itself which we share. In presenting the gospel, we are sharing not something of our own making, but rather the precious and powerful Word of God, that has been delivered to us by the Lord, and which has made us the new creatures that we are. Unregenerate men and devils seek to heap scorn on the message, or to suggest to us more pleasing and plausibly effective ways of sharing it—all of which suggestions are merely various forms of leaving out the cross. But when we,

like the apostle Paul, refuse to be ashamed of the gospel, knowing it to be the power of God for salvation, we shall declare it fully and purely with confidence and all warranted expectation.

We have the message of the ages to share, from which not all the malicious power of hell can detract, and to which neither we nor anyone else can add improvement. Thus, we should eschew that mentality which asserts that the technique we employ in evangelism makes a critical difference. People may be interested in and entertained by certain forms of gospel presentation, but unless we, again like Paul, determine to know and declare nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified, we are not engaging that power of God which never returns to Him void.

Finally, we should realize that in true evangelism we are not merely sharing a commodity apart from ourselves, conveying mere facts and information. We must live and share a life, our life, our new life in Christ. The cultivation of that life is the real, costly yet consoling work of evangelism, preceding any form of sharing we may do. If it does not, we are most likely to degenerate into mere pious hypocrites, hawking religious bombast. This priority is made clear in such biblical declarations as Isaiah 43:10, where we are called God's witnesses and servants, not first and foremost because we are engaging in the proclamation of a message, but, *In order that you may know and believe Me (the Lord), and understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God...there will be none after Me.* The cultivation of our new life in Christ, then, must precede our conveying the gospel, or we have no gospel to convey.

Our calling, therefore, is simply to devote ourselves to our Lord, and to testify to the world concerning Him as He leads and enables. The use made of that testimony depends upon the Holy Spirit, who may employ the power of God's Word declared to save or to harden unto judgment. In either case, the Lord is glorified. Yet, He is pre-eminently glorified in the salvation of sinners. The heavens rejoice over the conversion of one such. But while such conversion is the Lord's doing and not ours, it is an exciting privilege to pray for it and work for it by His direction and power. So let us renew our commitment to this glorious work.

Earnestly yours,

William Harrell

