

Dear friends,

I write to share with you my most proud experience in my more than twenty years of being the pastor of Immanuel. It occurred several months ago, and I believe that clear indicators have issued from it that vindicate the supreme pride I take in the event. Not least among these indicators is the last several months' financial receipts, which show a noticeable increase over receipts of previous months. The date of this most proud event was 11 September 2001; the place was at our church; and the occasion was our monthly stated meeting of the Session. There on the day when our nation was reeling in response to the cowardly and devastating attacks upon New York and Washington, the Session of Immanuel met to consider, among other things, the direction in which we should head with respect to the enlargement and renovation of our church building. The decision we together reached on that matter surprised and delighted us all.

For some time now, we have been in prayerful consideration regarding our church property. The Lord has granted us numerical growth to the point that we are increasingly feeling pinched for space. Then there has been the matter of the design of the building we bought in 1985, and renovated as best we could for our purposes and according to our needs and means. In particular, the main meeting room is, with its soft, low ceiling and hard walls, an acoustic nightmare, having swallowed up a considerable degree of volume of my voice over the years. It is also a climate control nightmare, easily getting stuffy in the coldest weather. So we sought to make improvements. At one point a few years back, another property with a vastly superior building on it, came up for sale. We almost managed to buy it, but it was not to be ours. Then, we asked one of our members, a gifted architect, if he would submit plans and estimates for our improving the building we had. On his own time, he devoted considerable energies in presenting us with a rather brilliant solution to our problems. It was with respect to his plans and the funds we would need to actualize them that we, as a Session, came to a decision which marks my proudest pastoral moment.

As we came to the Session meeting, I sensed that we all wanted to press ahead with the building renovations. We were to a man most satisfied with the excellent plans our architect had submitted. The sticking point, however, came over the money. We were almost finished paying off the debt on our building. We had little surplus monies in hand, and with our members already giving, so far as we could determine, sacrificially, we could not see from where renovation funds would come, except through our incurring greater debt. Then, as we had experienced a number of times in the past, a consensus began beautifully to emerge. The expression of one thought led to the voicing of another thought until we unanimously and unreservedly agreed that we would put off the major renovation project indefinitely, devoting the extra funds which would, within a year, be at our disposal from retirement of our mortgage, to missionary support and mercy ministries. In sum, we determined to invest in the living stones of Christ's body, and submit with renewed contentment to the Lord's providence for us in our current building.

Here is why this decision represents my most proud pastoral moment. In the course of our discussions, it became apparent to me (and I do not believe to any others) that I perhaps wanted the building renovations more than anyone else. Convicting thoughts accumulated in my mind. I had devoted my life and energies to a small flock gathering in a modest building, showing little, if any, sign of being a functional church building. Had I come, at my own half-century mark in life, to feel that I needed tangible validation for my ministry? The suspicion of that possibility was convicting enough for me. I personally surrendered to the notion that I could likely have to serve out my remaining ministerial days in our small, flat-roofed building. But as I waged this battle silently with my carnality, my fellow elders were well on their way to viewing the delay in our renovation project as opening to us exciting opportunities to do work of eternal significance.

So I came to realize that I, who had fed these men the spiritual manna of God's Word for more than two decades, was now being led by their stalwart spirituality to adopt a course of action remarkable for its self-denying faith. Here were men who understood and were committed to true spiritual priorities. They were manifesting a faithfulness that rightly reckoned that "a little with righteousness is better than great income with injustice." (Pr.16:8). As Paul had learned the secret of contentment, and as the Canaanite woman reckoned a crumb from Christ to be a veritable feast for her soul, so my brothers were prompted to act by that faith which cares not whether it dwells in an earthly tent, so long as it has title to the city whose

architect and builder is God. Here was the validation for my ministry (if I needed it) that would outlive all buildings, nations, and the world itself. So now you know about my most proud pastoral experience...so far!

Yours with holy pride,

William Harrell

Dear friends,

The topic of contemporary worship continues to arise for discussion, if not debate, amongst pastors and people. One finds articles and books being written now in defense of what is called contemporary worship. In fact, some of these written treatments are beginning to shift from the apologetic and defensive to the triumphal proclamation that any who do not fall in line with this form of worship are in fact dead wood in the Church, needing to be cut out as soon as possible. The cry from proponents of contemporary worship is that any way other than their way is a stumbling block to modern men and women, especially young men and women. We are told that modern people find the reverent singing of psalms, the offering of prayers that have theological content, and the faithful preaching of the whole Word of God, unvarnished by culturally fashionable garb, to be irrelevant, if not unintelligible. Added to this cry is the almost unvarying phenomenon that numerical growth occurs where worship is heavily laced with contemporary facets, especially the facet of sentimental and swinging music, and a lot of it. At the same time, where worship is focused upon the eternal God, and not man and his fading fashions, the numbers drawn to participate tend to remain relatively small.

I believe that a true analysis of this phenomenon will reveal that the divide is not essentially between things temporal and eternal, or things past (traditional) and present (contemporary). Rather, the divide is between man-centered worship (surely an oxymoron) and God-centered worship. The driving demand of contemporary worship appears to be a desire to change God and His ordinances as much as possible, refashioning Him and them into the categories and expressions which confirm modern, secular man in his ways, while challenging and changing him as little as possible. Of course where change for man is the aim, it is a change in his circumstances, not his character, a removal of his misery, not his sin.

What are we to do about a Church whose local assemblies are increasingly opting for ear-tickling gimmicks? First, we should not feel pressured to substitute man's devices for the doctrine and ordinances of God. By God's grace, not by our worthiness or cleverness, we are not to be drawn into the practice of such things—childish at best, carnal at worst—which characterize what is called contemporary worship. Paul warns of men wanting their ears tickled, and instructs pastors not to meet that desire, but rather to be faithful in preaching the Word (2 Tim. 4:1-5). He also warns against our building the Church with perishable materials such as wood, hay, and straw (1 Cor. 3:12,13). Let us continue to take such warnings seriously, and not be swept away by the empty bulk that surely fattens the celebratory gatherings in many a mega-church.

Let us also resist the temptation to ignore or lovelessly to castigate our brethren who have developed a spiritual sweet tooth, and thus hunger for and demand candy rather than spiritual meat. Instead, let us pray for them, seek to maintain good relationships with them, so as to win them, if possible, to better ways.

Finally, let us focus on our own worship, seeking to conform it in structure, content, and our heart's attitude to the contours of God's will revealed in Scripture. Such a focus will surely result in services on the Lord's day that will seem to visitors to be drastically, even jarringly different from anything they have experienced in the world. But is that not the whole point and the crying need in our day? To men who do not know God, the observation of people who do know God devoting themselves to Him cannot but appear mystifying, challenging, even threatening. The failure of those who would conform worship to make it appeal to the so-called seeker is their overestimation of the effectiveness of the bridge they fancy they erect between God and the seeker. The truth is that no natural man seeks God (Rom. 3:10-12). But the good news is that God seeks and saves men, not by His becoming culturally hip with them, but by His calling them effectually through His Word and by His Spirit from their death into His life.

I conclude by sharing with you some words from Robert Louis Wilken written in an article titled "Angels and Archangels: The Worship of Heaven and Earth," and published in *Antiphon: A Journal for Liturgical Renewal*. Wilken concludes his article with these words:

The greatest gift the Church can give our society is a glimpse, however fleeting, of another city. But we can only do that if our worship is self-consciously, confidently, and unmistakably oriented to God. If someone wanders off the street as we pray, he should sense that there is a double Church, as Origen put it: the one that is seen and the other that is unseen. Indeed, if the visitor does not feel uncomfortable, out of place, and out of step, something is terribly wrong. The visitor should experience a little vertigo, because something is going on that is beyond his ken. Yet one would hope, as he listens to our faint voices and feeble songs, that he would also hear, if only as an echo in the distance, the thunderous sound of the heavenly host singing, "Holy, Holy, Holy."

May this be ever and increasingly so, in our reverently joyful singing, in our praying with holy passion, and in our preaching, hearing, and applying the saving Word of God.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

Dear friends,

Did you know that while Scripture condemns hypocrisy, it does not do so absolutely? The fact is, that the practice of holy hypocrisy is not only commended to us, but it is essential for us to practice if we are to live as Christians.

By holy hypocrisy I do not mean the kind of projection of a pious image that characterized the Pharisees and was so rightly condemned by Jesus (Mt. 23). The Bible consistently denounces the practice of men's honoring the Lord with their outward profession, while their hearts are far from loving Him. We will search the Scriptures in vain, seeking to find a single verse wherein the Lord commends a dead orthodoxy or that religious formalism which merely apes the externals of the faith. The problem with such hypocrisy lies in its superficiality. It is not radical enough.

Holy hypocrisy may admittedly be a striking and provocative phrase, but there can be no denying that it accurately describes what we are commanded to practice as we grow in our sanctification. It is a thorough hypocrisy—a covering that reaches our heart as well as our behavior—that the Word commands us to practice. A good example of it is found in the imperative words of the Apostle Paul: *But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.* (Rom. 13:14). Here we are clearly told to be holy hypocrites. We are exhorted to put on Christ—to cover ourselves thoroughly with another's person and works. However different from Christ, however far from being like Him we are at any given time, we are commanded to don the Savior without delay. However powerfully our sinful lusts hold us, we are told to starve them out, putting them to death by our complete disregard for them. This is holy hypocrisy.

We would all be better off if we obeyed this commandment in all of its radical simplicity. How many hours, days, or years do we waste wallowing not only in sin, but even moreso in guilty remorse over our sin? We do this because the devil threatens us with the charge of hypocrisy if we rise from our sins and run immediately to God clothed in the propitiatory work of Jesus (1 Jn. 2:1,2). We feel bound to observe a consistency in our thoughts and actions. For example, if I am sinning at this moment, something makes me feel inconsistent and hypocritical if I ask forgiveness of the Lord, and partake of the means of His grace. So I wallow for a season, not in sin, but in remorse over sin, until some time passes and I feel less a hypocrite coming to the Lord and practicing His holy commands. Or I may feel that since I have gotten myself into sin, the only consistent thing for me to do is to stay there until the Lord comes to take me out of it.

We all have experienced this sort of thing. But our maintaining that kind of consistency and refusing to put on Jesus actually serves to confirm us in our sin and alienates from the Lord. Instead, we should hasten to be holy hypocrites, crying out in prayer to our God from the depths of our sin, not on the basis of our consistent obedience, but through the merits of Jesus. Rather than feel that we would offend God by our reading His holy Word while we are in sin, we should rush to the light of that Word precisely when we are in the dark dungeon of transgression. Of course this results in our having inconsistent attitudes and actions. But it is the inconsistency of grace, the supplanting of sin by the imputed righteousness of our Redeemer. The alternative is that we remain with a damnable consistency in our sin. Should we really prefer our remaining dead in sin to our being raised up in newness of life? If we stumble and fall repeatedly, would we rather stay down in the mire because we feel embarrassingly inconsistent and hypocritical being lifted up again and again by the strong and loving grace of our God?

This holy hypocrisy is the power that breaks the charm of Satan's holding us not so much in the fires of sin as in the smoke of our guilty sorrow over sin. It has power to pluck us from hot sins as well. Ask yourself the next time you are sinning and recall the words of Romans 13:14: "Why would I not now put on Jesus, crying to God in His name, seeking the forgiveness He offers, reading His Word, and having fellowship with His people?" The true answer will never be that God would condemn us as hypocrites if we, fresh from our sin, seek His help via prayer and the Word. We should never let the sickness of our guilt keep us from coming to the Great Physician who alone can heal us. It was C. S. Lewis who said that the more we act like we are Christians, the more we actually become Christians.

This is due to the radical nature of holy hypocrisy. The putting on of Christ is not just our outwardly acting like Him, but our inwardly conforming to His holy mind and heart. Thus, we are told to "put on a heart of compassion..." (Col. 3:12). We act as though we love others, but we also sincerely do love them with the love of Christ. When we put on our gracious Savior, we find that He not only covers and governs our deeds, He also transforms our minds and fills our hearts with His love. Therefore, we do not look to give our love to the worthy, but rather we shower it upon the unworthy without fear that we shall exhaust its immeasurable supply by our generous, gracious giving. We find that our love becomes more like His love, not discovering loveliness in others, but rather depositing it in them. Such holy hypocrites are not condemned by God, but commended by Him, governed by and filled with His grace and love, until that day when we no longer need to put on Christ, for we shall see His face, and find that we have become thoroughly like Him (1 Jn. 3:3; Rev. 22:4,5).

Yours clothed in Christ,

William Harrell

Dear friends,

At least forty times in Scripture we read some variation of the doxological declaration, *Blessed be the Lord*. We let the meaning and significance of such doxologies escape us when we allow our conception of them to sink to the level of vague religious expression. Our grasp of what Scripture is saying when it declares, *Blessed be the Lord*, is revealed to us by how we answer such questions as: What does it mean to pronounce the Lord blessed? Are we contributing something to God when we so bless Him? What, if any, significance does our pronouncing the Lord blessed have for us? If our answers to such questions are vague and mistaken, then we are failing to glorify our God and find our blessing in Him as we should.

The most basic meaning of the term, *bless*, is to speak well of. When we bless the Lord, we speak well of Him. We do not convey something to Him, as He does to us when He blesses us, for His Word works what it pronounces in a way that ours does not. Rather, we acknowledge that we have cause to speak well of Him; we ascribe to Him blessedness. When we are told by Scripture that our God is blessed, we are being informed that He is the only source of all true blessing. But He is a giving source as well. He does not simply contain all blessing in Himself, but He showers it upon His people, so that part of our speaking well of the Lord—part of our pronouncing Him blessed—is our recognition that He has graciously blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Eph. 1:3).

Any failure on our part, therefore, to pronounce the Lord blessed reveals our failure either to recognize how greatly He has blessed us, or to resist the sin of presumptuous ingratitude for what we know He has given to us. That we all do fail in this area is as undeniable as it is humbling to us. However, Scripture teaches us the way to correct this. As we at first trace the words, *Blessed be the Lord*, with our lips, then train our minds to ponder the words' meaning, our hearts will rise up in grateful and devoted praise to the God of all blessing.

Let us consider two examples in the Word of God. After Job had been stripped of his possessions and of his children, we read of him worshipping God and declaring: *The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord*. (Job 1:20,21). It would seem that Job had all blessing from God removed from him. Yet, we learn from what Job does, in his worshipping God and declaring Him blessed, that even when God seems to be cursing us through His dark providence, He is still blessed. Further, God is conveying to us blessing, even through His apparent curses. The rest of the Book of Job shows Job sorely tested in his faith and commitment to pronounce God blessed and blessing, but in the end, Job is vindicated for his doxological determination.

Another example we find in the words of Paul when he declares: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort*. (2 Cor. 1:3). Here the blessedness of God is even more clearly brought to light. The blessedness of God has its highest and fullest expression in what He did in choosing a people for Himself, redeeming them through the atoning work of His Son, and adopting them in Christ as His own beloved children. When Paul designates God as Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, he alerts us to the wonderful truth that God never ceased being the loving Father to His Son, even when Jesus hung on the cursed cross. In fact, we know that the supreme blessedness and love of God are manifested precisely at the cross (Rom. 5:8).

Paul also designates God as the Father of mercies and all comfort. By these words, we should understand that God never ceases being to us in Christ a wise, loving, caring, protecting, providing Father. God is blessed in that capacity, and we are blessed in the relationship of His being our Father.

What our proper understanding of these examples should show us is that our God is ever blessed and blessing toward us. We have cause to thank and praise Him in all situations and circumstances precisely because He never ceases to be blessed and blessing in all things. Therefore, when our way grows dark, perplexing, and painful, we may understandably become embittered and blame, rather than bless, our Lord. Yet such actions on our part are understandable because they are natural, not because they are spiritual and

in accordance with our exercise of faith and our apprehending the reality of God's blessing even through apparent curses.

Paul and Job were not mere theorists in this matter of the blessedness of God. They each went through manifold afflictions, and yet both of them emerged knowing the secret of contentment in the exceeding great blessing of the Lord. Do we bless God when we lose the things precious to us? Do we praise Him when we are beaten and locked in circumstantial prisons of darkness? If not, is it because we know a dark secret that neither Paul nor Job discovered, namely, that there are times in which God is neither blessed nor blessing? Surely those who, amidst their afflictions, see and say that God is blessed, have learned to draw honey from the lion and are showing us how to do likewise. Let us, then, perceive the light which those men and others like them have seen even in the darkest days of their lives, namely, that God is ever blessed and blessing, and thus is constantly deserving of our trust, devotion, praise, and thanksgiving.

Yours in our blessed Lord,

William Harrell

Dear friends,

Next to a prisoner's execution, the punishment of his being put into solitary confinement is the most dreaded thing he can face. That fact should be instructive to us all. It testifies to the reality that a man is his own most miserable companion. It tells not only of the vacuity of man's heart and barrenness of his mind, but also of the painfully lacerated condition of his soul. Solitary confinement forces a man to face the fact that he is his own worst enemy. Some may be tempted to argue that this is so only for those criminal characters who are likely subjects of it. But who would presume himself so free from criminal tendencies that he would undertake a course of solitary confinement in order to enjoy the paradise of his own company?

The great French philosopher, Blaise Pascal, wrote often in his *Pensées* of man's desperate pursuit after diversions. Man seeks diversions to keep him from self-reflection that would expose his misery. Pascal writes: "If our condition were truly happy we should not need to divert ourselves from thinking about it." (*Pensées* # 70). Again, he writes in *Pensées* # 136: "A king is surrounded by people whose only thought is to divert him and stop him thinking about himself, because, king though he is, he becomes unhappy as soon as he thinks about himself."

The desire all men have for diversion provides the inward conspirator against man's solitude; the plethora of activities in the world provide the outward conspirators. In our day—with telephones, pagers, televisions, VCR's and DVD's, cassette and CD players, e-mails, voice mails, etc.—there are countless ways for us to be diverted if we so choose. Most do so choose. With a rise in labor saving devices and lessening of the hours per week the average person works, most people have not attained peaceful reflection but frenzied activity.

This is true not only of the world, but also of the Church. It is true, to a certain extent, of our local assembly. At times I see seats previously occupied at our stated meetings empty due to the increase of pressing engagements or enticing distractions for some of our members. There are also incidents of some people attending the meetings nodding off into a doze during them. Their surrender to the somnolent urge is due not so much to their unwillingness in spirit to hear and heed the preaching and teaching of the Word, as it is to the weakness of their flesh. How can a man expect to give close attention to a sermon when he has been run ragged during the week by countless demanding engagements? If one arrives at worship physically exhausted, it is highly unlikely that he will be in any condition to receive much benefit for his soul. He has arrived at the place of spiritual exercise already spent.

What is to be done? I believe that our awakening to the necessity and reward of times of spiritual solitude and meditation will go far toward restoring a resiliency of heart and clarity of mind in any of us who may be frazzled from distraction. While it is as true for the Christian as it is for any other person that it is not good for him to be forever alone, it does not follow that times of planned solitude, reflection, and mediation are unnecessary or harmful for him. Jesus spoke of His being alone, yet not alone, because the Father was with Him (Jn. 16:32). The blessed consolation of His communing with His Father infinitely improved a solitude imposed upon our Lord when men abandoned Him. It also is the key to our understanding why He periodically chose to withdraw from people.

As believers, we need not dread and avoid solitude. Our Redeemer has promised never to leave or forsake us. Therefore, we should seek to make time in our busy schedules to quiet our souls, guard our ambitions (Ps.131), and sit alone with our God, partaking of the good portion, the one thing necessary (Lk. 10:42).

When we regularly withdraw from others to enjoy holy communion with our God, we find ourselves not diminishing but increasing in all virtues. When we withdraw from our fellow fallen creatures and the imposing demands of a tyrannical world, we turn from a cursed realm to the contemplation of heavenly glory, and to communion with the One who is light, life, and love. No one can heal, comfort, wisely direct,

and fruitfully empower us as He can do. Thus, when we emerge from our times of sanctifying solitude, we do not resent others for their needs and cries for our help. Rather, we have been sweetened by our Savior to have loving compassion for them, and have been strengthened and enlightened rightly and effectively—as opposed to blindly and frenetically—to serve them.

William Jay wrote that men may live in a crowd, but they must die alone (*Morning Exercises*, p. 60). Even in that grim solitude, the believer is not really alone, for the Good Shepherd is with him (Ps. 23:4). But what a shame it would be for any of us to find that in that solemn hour we experience the blessing of our being alone with Jesus for the first time. Let us then, seek to spend more time alone with our incomparable God, and less time in the exhausting crowd of men. Then we shall, like Isaac amidst his mediation, find the best things brought to us (Gen 24: 63,64); then we shall be victorious over the demands of men and time, so that we can make better use of time and be better servants of others.

Yours in the peace of Christ

William Harrell

Dear friends,

This letter is a follow-up to last month's thoughts on sanctifying solitude. Several of you indicated that you were challenged by the contention that we all could use more time in private reflection than we currently experience. Some questioned whether we need differing amounts of such time, others asked for more practical instruction regarding how they can have such times amidst their demanding busy schedules. There may even be some who wonder if I am not unfairly exalting the reflective spirit of Mary over that of her busy sister, Martha. Thus, I hope to share some further thoughts regarding the necessity and nature of sanctifying solitude.

It is a truth realized by few that there are many people who can do our work for us, but none who can take our rest for us. Our very constitution, as creatures of God, testifies to the necessity of our regularly drawing away from all distractions, finding in the solitary repose of physical sleep a restoration of resilience, not only for our bodies, but also for our minds and emotions. This necessity is driven home by God's Word. Whether Ps. 127 was composed by Solomon or for him, it is very instructive to note in a psalm associated with that most industrious and productive king of Israel these words: *It is vain for you to rise up early, to retire late, to eat the bread of painful labors* (Ps. 127:2). While Scripture condemns indolence repeatedly in the Proverbs and in other places, such as 2 Thess. 3:11,12, the Lord's Word also condemns carnal activism. Thus, it is not I who exalt Mary over Martha, but Jesus, who commends the humility and spiritual hunger of Mary as she sat at His feet, hanging on His every word. Respecting the diligence of Martha, Jesus called it distraction; regarding Martha's self-assured superiority over her supposedly lazy and impractical sister, Jesus admonished Martha for her failure to devote herself to the one thing necessary.

So greatly do we need repose and refreshment on every level of our being that Jesus calls us to receive from Him our essential necessity when He invites us to come to Him and partake of the rest He gives to us (Mt. 11:28-30). In contrast, our Lord condemns those who feverishly prophesy, cast out demons, and do miracles for Him without their really knowing Him and luxuriating in His peace and love (Mt. 7:21-23). With the Word of God so clearly commending to us the need we have to take rest, and the loving desire our Lord has to give it, we should wonder that true rest is so greatly discounted by professing Christians.

If we acknowledge, as we must, that rest is the crying need of our souls and bodies, then we must explore the nature of the rest to which Jesus calls us. First, we must note that there is no rest apart from Him. True rest is what only He gives, and what we must receive only from Him (Mt. 11:28-30). While it is true that He directs and enables us to worship and serve Him together as His redeemed people, there is a vital prerequisite to such corporate service. The gifts of our brethren are divinely given blessings for our souls, but even they have their limits. Our Lord's grace has no such limits, and that is why we must make our personal walk with and worship of Him our priority. We must keep the first great commandment first. Then, and only then, can we know rightly and do lovingly that which is required by the second great commandment. However, such personal, vital communion with God is by us too often assumed, and thus dismissed quickly in favor of action amongst men. Hence, most Christians launch into their days driven by the dictates of men rather than walking from a time of devotion to God, being filled with His peace, wisdom, power, and love—the very things that we most need to help us do our work among men fruitfully.

How then do we institute and maintain such patterns of sanctifying and refreshing solitude with our God? For those who have no regular times alone with the Lord, I say simply you must begin to have and keep appointments with the Lover of your souls. Such times, initially, should be short and simple, otherwise they will soon appear to be impracticable and will be discarded. These blessed appointments must also be made a priority, and kept with regularity. Our times of sanctifying solitude may begin with a short reading from Scripture, but should largely be devoted to prayerful meditation. Countless mercies of the Lord, that are newly showered upon us each day, we fail to consider and to be gratefully consoled by simply because we throw ourselves into in a blaze of frantic activity without our thinking of the precious divine blessings. Let us take time to consider the great promises of the Lord, His immeasurable love for us, His high and holy will for us, and His almighty power offering us unceasing protection and provision. Let us grow in a sweet and loving familiarity with our heavenly Father, our interceding Redeemer, and our guiding and empowering Comforter. Such times will grow in their depth, duration, and frequency.

I conclude with a few, brief practical hints concerning preparation for and maintenance of such times of sanctifying solitude and soul refreshment. For a start, learn to master, rather than be mastered by, modern conveniences. Invest in an answering service for the phone, then let it do its work should the phone ring when you are enjoying your precious audience with the King of Glory. Review your habits and commitments and cut out those things that are unnecessary and unprofitable. Learn physically and emotionally to relax and release the tension that builds through the day. Train yourself to catch tension mounting at an early stage, and at such times—and they may come several times in any given day—discipline yourself, with conscious determination, to cast your burdens on the Lord and return to His blessed rest. Learn to maintain good posture. Learn rightly to breathe, periodically practicing deep breathing, slowly filling the lungs to capacity and slowly exhaling. Find and enjoy things that are to you legitimate pleasures, and take greatest pleasure in the grateful knowledge that such things are to you gifts from the Lord.

The maintenance of regular times of sanctifying solitude is infinitely removed from petty and legalistic quiet times. Our practicing the disciplines of true rest, and our making a priority of our having times of personal communion with our Lord, will prove sustaining and most satisfying necessities for our pilgrimage through this world of cursed cares.

Yours in His peace,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

The cry going up increasingly in the Presbyterian Church in America is: *Let us fulfill the Great Commission and stop wrangling amongst ourselves over theological issues.* Such a cry betrays the impatience of immaturity, similar to that of an adolescent who feels that he is ready to drive a car, though he has not yet attained driving age. For many in our denomination, the Great Commission is used as a trump card, which they seek to play prevailingly over all other matters. My concern is that those beating the drums most loudly for our neglect of theological issues in favor of our fulfilling the Great Commission seem to understand neither the character of the Great Commission, nor the place it should hold in the life of a healthy Church.

To hear some of the passionate cries in our denomination, one would suppose that the Great Commission was the first and last word in the Bible. In truth, it is the last word Jesus spoke in Matthew's Gospel. It is less clearly and fully stated at the end of the Gospels of Mark and Luke, while it is nowhere expressed in John's Gospel. In the Book of Acts, we find the apostles and deacons, like Stephen, and evangelists, like Philip, fulfilling the Great Commission. But the churches these servants of the Lord plant are not urged to go into the world and fulfill the Great Commission. Nor do we find evangelism to be other than an occasional and incidental theme in the epistles of the New Testament. Those letters focus far more on edifying believers than on converting unbelievers. Thus, we discover, regarding the place of evangelism in the Word of God, that it occupies an important but secondary position, not a primary one.

Regarding the character of the Great Commission, we find that it is not reduced to the minimal proportions that are so popularly espoused by many in our denomination. True evangelism does not urge men to surrender to the love of God in order that they might have more happy and prosperous lives. Jesus defines the Great Commission as our making disciples, not merely converts. He further tells us that our charge is to teach the disciples we make all that He had commanded (Mt. 28:19,20). Hence, for example, when the Apostle Paul evangelized Ephesus, he proclaimed no reduced gospel message, but rather the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). Indeed, the epistles of the New Testament are largely concerned with the sort of theological wrestling that the Great Commission trump men in our denomination say is impeding our efforts to evangelize.

It is one thing for us to seek prayerfully to be faithful to the character and proper place of the Great Commission. It is quite another for us to exaggerate its place while diminishing its content, thus creating a counterfeit Great Commission. But why would anyone want to pander a cheap, pseudo-gospel, rather than proclaim the genuine, glorious good news of a free and full salvation? A key to the answer is perhaps found in what Paul writes to Timothy. In his last letter to his own young disciple, the dying apostle charges Timothy to preach the Word; he further warns him that there will be seasons when the gospel will be in and seasons when it will be out (2 Tim. 4:1,2). Paul warns that men will cease enduring sound doctrine, and will accumulate entertaining teachers for themselves (2 Tim. 4:3,4). But the apostle does not instruct Timothy, consequently, to become culturally relevant in his own ministry, so as not to lose his church members to the entertainers. He tells him, instead, to keep sober and to evangelize by His ministering God's Word (2 Tim. 4:5).

Yet, few in our day can stand to bear the costly hardship that such faithfulness to the true Great Commission will entail. One of our prominent denominational leaders has expressed the concern of many in these terms:

...a looming crisis for all American evangelical churches is that they cannot thrive outside of the shrinking enclaves of conservative and traditional people and culture. We have not created the new ministry and communication and church models that will flourish and grow in the coming post-Christian and very secular Western world.

From this alarming observation, many men are now being driven, not necessarily to proclaim God's eternal and ever relevant truth, but rather to devise models that will flourish in a secular world. Hence, if our

maintaining the fourth commandment, for example, sours secular men on the Church, we are urged to tank the Sabbath and design our Sunday services along the lines of a television talk show and musical extravaganza. We are urged to have Super Bowl parties on Sunday as an evangelistic outreach.

One hears increasingly urgings that our churches and their worship should be made culturally relevant. These calls for a culturally relevant gospel are disturbingly similar to the old, liberal calls for a social gospel. The social gospel failed miserably to convert men or to reform churches. I believe the new cultural gospel to be self-defeating as well. How are we to speak in cultural terms to a generation wherein culture is rapidly vanishing? We do not only live in a post-Christian day; we live in a post-culture day, amongst a generation which may best be described as being an anti-culture generation. The emerging anti-culture goes beyond the old hedonistic and self-centered mentality. It plunges men into the blackness of nihilism. Are we, then, to construct nihilistic models of ministry?

The early Church did not only survive, it flourished. It did so not by studying anthropology and sociology—the surface froth of reality—but rather by the devoted contemplation and living of theology—the root of reality. Believers then were so far out of the cultural mainstream, so greatly marginalized and consigned to their enclaves, that they were persecuted as being societal pests. Yet conversions took place, and the Church grew in quality and quantity.

Let us not heed these siren calls to devise culturally relevant models of ministry. Let us refuse to fulfill the pseudo-Great Commission. Rather, let us stand firm in this evil day, clad in the whole armor of God, seeking to grow in our understanding and proclamation of the whole counsel of God. Then, we shall truly be, and make of others, disciples, not of cultural fads, but of the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

The immeasurable, unchangeable, and unconditional love of God is something that is wonderful and precious beyond our abilities to assess. We who are the objects of that divine love are infinitely more treasured by our heavenly Father than we can know. Yet, because the unconditional love of the Lord is not the same thing as an absolute indulgence, we at times feel as though our God's love for us is weak, wavering, or that it has expired to be replaced by divine wrath. Here we must have a clear understanding of the difference between the nature of the love of God and the administration of that love.

It is clear from Scripture that God loves His elect people unconditionally. The Lord does not discover loveliness in us and find Himself attracted to us because of that, but rather by His sanctifying grace He deposits loveliness in us. Therefore, we read of our being predestined in love (Eph. 1:4,5), and of God's demonstration of His love for us in that while we were at our sinful worst, He gave His Son to die for us (Rom. 5:8). We have done nothing, nor can we do anything, to deserve or compel the Lord's love for us. It is for us a wonderful, liberating, and soul-securing truth that the ground for God's love for us is in Himself, not in us. Thus, the foundation for that love is unchangeable, as God Himself is unchangeable.

However, in the administration of God's love, we sometimes find it difficult to perceive that love. This is so because God does not always show us His love in every detail and circumstance of our lives. This is not to say that anything other than His love is the source of all details and circumstances of our lives. It is rather to acknowledge that the changing details of our lives form part of a pattern designed by our heavenly Father according to His wise, holy, and loving determination. We perceive now in part, and that incomplete perception accounts for our occasionally losing sight of the love of the Lord.

We especially fail to see the love God has for us in the trials, afflictions, and deprivations of our lives. But our reckoning that circumstances contrary to our desires betray something less than our God perfectly loving us manifests our confusing divine love with divine indulgence. Our faith should cling to the clear teaching of God's Word, and not seek to read the level of our Father's love for us from the mystery of His providential dealings with us. The Word of God clearly tells us that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases (Lam. 3:22), that God has supremely and undeniably demonstrated His love for us in Christ's death for us (Rom. 5:8), that our God lovingly causes all things to work together for our good (Rom. 8:28), and that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ (Rom. 8:38,39).

Although the love of God is constant, its administration toward us varies according to our need and according to the wise and loving purposes of our Father. Because our God loves us with an immeasurable, unchangeable, wise, and holy love, His love will be like none we have ever experienced. Precisely because He loves us, He treats us at times as though He does not. There is wise and loving design in His treatments which seem to contradict His professions of love for us. By our Lord's judicious withdrawals of the manifestations of His love, for example, we are trained to hunger and thirst for His love, viewing it as more vital to us than we perhaps presumptuously had been doing. In short, the pure, unceasing manifestation of God's love for us in our current less than perfectly sanctified state would prove not a delightful refreshment to our souls, but a debilitating intoxication overwhelming us. As God's glory fully manifested to us as we are now would consume us, so His love poured upon us without judicious administration would not edify, but would ruin us.

Thus, we should realize that we are in a school wherein we are being trained to contain greater measures of the pure and potent love of the Lord. Our God does not deal with us according to what we deserve, but that does not mean that He indulges and spoils us. Rather, He deals with us according to His design, which is wise, holy, and ever loving.

One day we shall see the face of our Lord, and behold with perfect clarity His most tenderly intimate disposition toward us. Then we shall see that His love has prompted all of His actions toward and provisions for us. Until that day, we perceive His love as through a veil. But the veil covers only sense and sight. Faith penetrates it and enables us through the safety and certainty of its conduit to see and sense what

a great love the Father has for us. Faith enables us to trace the most painful and perplexing aspects of God's providence to the source not of a heedless, hapless, or hating divinity, but to our infinitely wise, perfectly holy, and unchangeably loving heavenly Father. So, let us by faith not only work out our love for God and for others, but, even more fundamentally, work out a right apprehension of the love our God has for us.

Yours in the deep, deep love of Jesus,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

I am writing this letter on 3 September. Last year at this time, who could have known that in eight days our nation would be struck by terrorists who would inflict terrible destruction upon us and compel lasting changes in our nation and throughout the world? Certainly, the terrorists themselves knew what they had planned for 11 September. But even they must have been uncertain as to whether or to what extent they would succeed in their deadly mission. And who can know today what further evil is being plotted against us? Our national intelligence agencies apparently had suspicions that something was afoot last year, and they may have bits of information regarding future attacks. But, in the final analysis, it appears that evil men have taken the initiative and forced our nation and much of the world into a reactionary mode.

In fact, most of world history appears to indicate that wicked adventurers, oppressive tyrants, rapacious and imperialistic aggressors largely have had and have retained the initiative over legitimate nations and their citizens. The apparent advantage the wicked have over the righteous is the theme of Asaph's Psalm 73. However, are things really as they usually appear to be?

While wicked men have destroyed many lives and some significant buildings, and no doubt are planning further death and destruction, we have been building ourselves up by, among other things, our studying the Psalms at Saturday prayer meetings. We have almost completed yet another consideration of the entire Psalter. What we have been seeing, as we have studied line upon line and precept upon precept, is that our God is never robbed of His sovereign initiative by the wicked.

The first Psalm shows a world of men divided. There are the wicked, who sin and scoff against the Lord and His people. There are also the righteous, who are blessed by their eschewing the wicked and their ways. The final triumph of the righteous is mentioned in the last verse of Psalm 1. Yet, almost as many verses in that Psalm are devoted to the wicked as to the godly. This difference between the righteous and the wicked intensifies into conflict in the second Psalm. The remainder of the Book of Psalms details the struggles, triumphs, and defeats of the Lord's people. Sometimes believers find themselves oppressed by the wicked; at other times the saints stand in triumph. There are ups and downs, mountains and valleys, battles, victories, and defeats for God's people recounted throughout most of the 150 Psalms.

Towards the end of the Psalter, however, we find that the faith of the writers is not deeply and seriously struggling, but rather has attained a high and constant grasp of the incessant cause the Lord's people have to praise and rejoice in their God. The last seven Psalms, for example, each begin and end with a call for the Lord's people to praise Him. Between those calls for praise, there are many reasons given to warrant our praises to God. Where evil does appear in those Psalms, it is shown to be defeated and insignificant.

If the Psalms, as they are arranged for us in Scripture, lead us through valleys of the shadow of death to the glorious height of God's victorious, sovereign, and majestic throne, should we not reckon that such is the arrangement of the pilgrimage of the Church through this world? If each of the seven last Psalms, forming the perfect ending of the Psalter, is composed with praise for God as its Alpha and Omega, should we not reckon that all of the eternal plans, temporal provisions, and final accomplishments of our God are to be praised?

When we see and interpret the events of our lives in and through the clear testimony of Scripture, we shall understand and declare that, *All Thy works shall give thanks to Thee, O Lord* (Ps. 145:1). This is not to say that the praise and gratitude we owe the Lord is immediately apparent to us in every aspect of His providence. But such initial confusion, if not dismay, is due to the weakness of our faith, the darkness of our understanding, the shallow and vague views we have of the wisdom, power, and love of our God, rather than to any defect in our Lord's providence.

The greatness of our God is unsearchable (Ps. 145:3). We should reckon that to be so at all times, especially during the darkest, most painful and perplexing of times. If we wait to discover the praiseworthy greatness of the Lord, making our expressions of gratitude to Him depend upon our feelings of happiness or

our understanding (upon which we are expressly told in the Word not to lean, Ps. 3:5), we shall rob our Lord of the praise due His name during our earthly pilgrimage. We shall also deprive ourselves of the blessing of a secure assurance that our Lord is ever at work for His glory and our good.

We should not wait to see or feel the sovereign, glorious, and perfect victory of our Lord over all of His enemies and ours. Rather, we should determine, by the testimony of Scripture, and through the exercise of our faith, ever to praise the Lord for all of His works. We should praise Him with our words and faithful works in and out of season. We should honor Him by our giving Him our confiding trust at all times, even and especially during the most trying times. We should learn to believe more what our ears hear from, and what the eyes of our hearts see in, God's Word, than to believe in the proud boasts of the wicked and the alarmed cries of those who are without faith or who are weak in faith.

The walls of Jericho were high, strong, and seemingly an enduring and impossible impediment to Israel. Yet, at the perfect time, when Israel shouted in triumph before they actually possessed their triumph, those walls were reduced to rubble, if not to dust. So shall it ever be for the devices of the wicked. Let us, then, praise our God that it really is so, and let His terror seize the wicked.

Yours with triumphant trust in our Victor,

William Harrell

The Minister's Letter

Dear Friends,

Recently, one of our members, Joseph Randall, during a Bible Study he was leading, read a list of truths about those who are in Christ. The effect was powerful upon those who heard it. With his permission, I offer that list to you.

IF YOU ARE IN CHRIST JESUS BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH...

You are justified and have peace with God (Rom. 5:1)

You died with Christ and to the power of sin's rule over your life (Rom. 6:1-6)

You are free from condemnation forever (Rom. 8:1)

You have Christ as your wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption and have been made righteous (1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21)

You have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16)

You are the temple of the Holy Spirit, were bought with a price, and are not your own (1 Cor. 6:19-20)

You have been established in Christ, sealed, and given the Spirit in your heart as a guarantee of your inheritance (2 Cor. 1:21; Eph. 1:13-14)

You have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer you who live, but Christ lives in you (Gal. 2:20)

You have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ (Eph. 1:3)

You have been chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, that you should be holy and without blame before Him in love (Eph. 1:4)

You have been predestined to adoption as sons of God (Eph. 1:5 – 1 Jn. 3:1)

You have been made alive together with Christ (Eph. 2:5)

You have been made to sit in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:6)

You have access by one Spirit to the Father (Eph. 2:18)

You have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him (Eph. 3:12)

You have been delivered from the power of darkness and conveyed into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins (Col. 1:13-14)

Christ is in you (Col. 1:27)

You are complete in Christ (Col. 2:10)

You have not been given a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind (2 Tim. 1:7)

You are sanctified and one with the Sanctifier, therefore Jesus calls you his brother (Heb. 2:11)

You can come boldly to the throne of grace, that you may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:16)

You have been given exceedingly great and precious promises, that through them you may be partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4)

You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13-14)

Jesus calls you His friend (Jn. 15:15)

You were chosen by Jesus and appointed by Him to bear lasting fruit (Jn 15:16)

You are a slave of righteousness and a slave of God (Rom. 6:18, 22)

You are an heir of God and a joint heir with Christ (Rom. 8:17)

You are a member of the body of Christ (Eph. 5:30)

You are a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17)

You are a saint (Eph. 1:1)

You are holy and righteous (Eph. 4:24)

Your life is hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:4)

You are the elect of God, holy and beloved (Col. 3:12)

You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, the people of God (1 Pet. 2:9-10)

You can do all things through Christ Who strengthens you – Philippians 4:13

You have all your needs supplied according to God's riches in glory by Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:19)

You have the Lord your strength and confidence (Ps. 27:1; Pr. 3:26)

You shall always be led by God to triumph in Christ (2 Cor. 2:14)

You can cast all your worries, fears, and anxieties on God (1 Pet. 5:7)

You are never alone for Christ is always with you (Matt. 28:20)

You have your sufficiency from God (2 Cor. 3:5)

You have God working in you to will and to do His good pleasure (Phil. 2:13)

You will do valiantly, for God will tread down your enemies (Ps. 60:12)

You will have fullness of joy and pleasures forever more one day in God's very presence (Ps. 16:11)

Your momentary and light affliction, is working for you a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory (2 Cor. 4:17)

Your present sufferings are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in you (Rom. 8:18)

One day you shall have no more tears, no more sorrow, no more pain; there shall be no more death and no more sin (Rev. 21:4)

You cannot be separated from the love of God in Christ for any reason in the universe (Rom. 8:35-39)

You have certain and unshakable promises causing you to be strong, and fearless because God is with you and He is your God and will strengthen you and help you and uphold you with His righteous right hand (Is. 41:10)

You will one day enter into the joy of your Lord (Matt. 25:23)

You can not be defeated. God is for you, who can be against you? (Rom. 8:31)

You are more than a conqueror through Him who loved you (Rom. 8:37)

All things, even those meant for evil against you, are working for your good (Rom. 8:28)

You have the "Hound of Heaven," your heavenly Father, pursuing you relentlessly with goodness and mercy all the days of your life (Ps. 23:6)

The above list is full, but by no means exhaustive. In these days of people wrestling with crippling feelings of inferiority, it is essential that we keep in our minds and hearts the rich truth about who we are in Christ.

Yours in our gracious Savior and His great salvation,

William Harrell

Saints and Their Sins

Dear Friends,

How is a saint to view his sin? By what measure should he judge its nature, its magnitude, its effects and consequences, as well as its power? There are two prominent but equally wrong ways in which believers understand the sin in their lives.

The libertine reckons that he is justified by the atoning death of Christ, and that all his sins—past, present, and future—have been forgiven by God. There is truth in this reckoning. All the sins of any believer have been imputed to Christ, and their penalty paid for by Christ. But justification is not the whole truth of salvation. It is through sanctification that the perfect, sinless, and righteous character of Christ is imparted to us. The libertine leaves the process of sanctification out of his reckoning. He lives with a cavalier attitude toward his sin, thinking that since it is all forgiven, it therefore is of no consequence.

At the opposite extreme stands the legalist. He acknowledges with his lips but denies with his heart that Christ has accomplished a full and free justification. The legalist is too proud fully to accept such amazing divine grace. He also underestimates the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, viewing it as making little progress in transforming the sinner into an actually holy saint.

The libertine views his sin as nonexistent. In his claim to make much of the atoning work of Jesus, he actually reduces the infinite cost our God bore in His accomplishment of redemption to a facile charm that does away with sin. The libertine speaks glibly of his sin being under the blood, but fails to consider that his sin was so great that its forgiveness required the death of the Son of God.

The legalist views his sin as Lady MacBeth viewed her *darned spot* of murderous guilt, the indelible nature of which she declared with the words: *All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand*. The legalist hears that the death of Christ has made a monumental difference for the believer, but he does not believe it. He covers himself not in the cleansing blood of Jesus, but rather in the rags of self-effort, while he fills his mind and heart not with the Word and Spirit of God, but with ceaseless self-loathing.

If these ways of a believer understanding his sins are wrong, what, then, is the right view we should have of our sin? The biblical view of man prior to his regeneration is that he is altogether sinful. The common sentiment that God loves the sinner while He hates the sin is fallacious because it fails to understand that sin comes only from sinners. We sin because we are sinners. If God hates all sin, then He must hate sinners, the source of all sin. The pre-regenerate sinner can do and desires to do nothing but sin.

Radically different is the matter after regeneration. Through the justifying work of God in Christ, applied to the sinner, the sanctifying reformation of a new creation begins to take place. Nor is it that this sanctifying work begins with miniscule magnitude. The regenerate man has at the moment of his new birth not only a fully justified status before God, but also a new heart (Ezek. 36:26), with new appetites, new loves, and new hatreds. The believer, who previously loved his sin and despised God, now has undergone a complete revolution, wherein he loves righteousness and hates evil (Rom. 12:9). For him, all things are new (2 Cor. 5:17). He has God dwelling in Him by the Holy Spirit, prompting him lovingly to cry to God as his loving Father (Rom. 8:15), and working within him, causing him to will and to do God's good pleasure (Phil. 2:12,13).

Is the believer, therefore, sinless? No, and if he thinks he is and says so, he is a liar (1 Jn. 1:8). But for him, the sinner he was has been killed, and he must contend only with the corpse, from whose dominion he has been released (Rom. 6:6,7,11). Paul works this out fully in Rom. 7:12-25. For the apostle—as for any believer—sin is a dead remnant, no longer an animated and animating power. David confesses his sin to God in Ps. 6 in terms of a disease: *Heal me, O Lord, for my bones are dismayed*. One can love a man and hate his disease precisely because the disease is not essential to the man, and the man himself hates the disease that afflicts him.

A believer's sin can grieve his God, but never anger Him. It can make the believer miserable, but never separate him from the love of God in Christ. It can defile him, but only temporarily, as believers are bound to stand before the throne of God's glory blameless and with great joy (Jude 24). Therefore, we must never make light of our sin, for it is a terrible thing to grieve our heavenly Father, and it is unpleasant to bring misery upon ourselves. But neither should we make too much of our sin, esteeming it as a living and dynamic power sure to dominate us until the day we die. Our sin is but a rotting corpse, and, as such, a nuisance with which we must contend, but not a master against whose domination we cannot prevail. Let us, then, neither deny nor deify our sin. Let us take sin seriously; but let us take the saving blood of Jesus more seriously.

Yours in His forgiveness,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

In the New American Standard version of the Bible, the word, *joy*, occurs 182 times. Most of those references are in the Old Testament, where physical exuberance is prominently associated with joy. The fewer New Testament references to joy are remarkable for their lack of association with such demonstrative exultation. Why is there clapping and shouting accompanying expressions of joy in the economy of types, shadows, and promises, while in the economy of provision and substance the joy appears to be more subdued?

The Apostle Peter describes the Christian's joy as *inexpressible and full of glory* (1 Pet. 1:8). By the word, *inexpressible* or, as the King James version translates it, *unspeakable*, we usually understand that the cause we have to rejoice in our salvation is so great that no amount of laughing, clapping, leaping in the air, or shouting could fully express it. This understanding, of course, is true. Yet, I suggest that it is a fuller understanding of the words *inexpressible* and *unspeakable* when we acknowledge that for the Christian, there are silent depths to the glorious and substantial joy he has in Christ.

It is often remarked that there is no account in Scripture of Jesus having laughed. Does it follow, then, that our Savior was joyless? Surely not! Jesus speaks of His joy being in His disciples, thus making their joy full (Jn. 15:11). He prays in His high priestly prayer that His disciples may have His joy made full in themselves (Jn. 17:13). The writer of Hebrews speaks of Jesus having endured the cross for the joy set before Him (Heb. 12:2), meaning not a distant carrot dangled from a stick but rather that Jesus was filled with joyful anticipation at every moment and juncture of His earthly life.

The fact is that Jesus contained within Himself the fathomless source and immeasurable substance of true joy. Those in Christ who possess the genuine joy of the Savior will not be given to glib laughter and giddy excitement. They will maintain within themselves a quiet and strengthening joy, which is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22), whereby they may find delightful dimensions in their pleasures as well as in their trials (Jas. 1:2). True Christian joy is a deep taproot that anchors the soul through the storms and calms of life in the glorious victory of Christ.

The old dispensation of ceremonies and types seemed more substantial and certainly was more sensual—with the bleating of animals and shedding of blood. There is a more simple but also more spiritual quality to the experience and expressions of believers after Christ's accomplishment of redemption. Likewise, we should understand that the more demonstrative expressions of joy in the Old Testament are not more but rather less deep and true reflections of the full joy of the Lord. Under the Law, we are told, the people of God were treated as children guided by a tutor (Gal. 3:24). Children laugh, jump, and play, but they are excited to these acrobatic expressions by transient and trivial things. We who are in Christ are to put away such childish things. Our joy is tempered by an awesome reverence inspired by the knowledge that God has given His Son to die for our sins. The knowledge that such a terrible transaction not only was necessary for our salvation, but also actually has taken place, does not dampen and lessen our joy, so much as it deepens, expands, and strengthens it to inexpressible magnitude.

In our day of rampant sentimentality and enthusiastic excitement parading under the banner of joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, let us take ourselves to the Word and its testimony to learn the character and contours of true joy. Let us not mistake shallow and transient happiness, which depends upon pleasing circumstances, for the enduring joy of the Lord that gives us enduring strength in the most severe trials. Still less should we confuse the emotionally incited exuberance of man with the gift of Christ given to us to be cultivated by the Holy Spirit. The true joy of the Lord imparts to us a nobly serene and humbly grateful deportment, indicating our confident assurance that we are possessed by divine grace and are bound for indescribable glory, because our God has provided the salvation He had for ages past promised.

Yours in the joy of the Lord,

William Harrell