

2004

## Time Tested Preaching

Dear Friends,

At our last Wednesday night adult Christian Education Class of 2003, the elder leading the study played for us a recorded sermon on Romans 6:11 preached on a Friday night in December 1958 by Martyn Lloyd-Jones. We were surprised and amused to hear at one point Dr. Lloyd-Jones mention that their Friday night series would be suspended for three weeks due to the approach of Christmas, just as our own Wednesday night classes were about to be likewise suspended. However, that passing remark by a minister preaching to his people forty-five years ago, and its intriguingly coincidental parallel to our own current situation, made me think more deeply about the substantial matters in that sermon delivered then and its application to us now.

The sermon we heard had a more timely ring to it than the mere reference to an approaching holiday break similar to one we were about to take. In fact, the whole message was timely. It was as fresh and powerful as if it had been preached in December 2003. A little reflection and analysis of the sermon reveals to us why this is so. In that message, the preacher employed very few illustrations, and little, if any, humor. In fact, his message was lacking many of the elements that contemporary preaching gurus deem to be essential. He did not warm up his hearers with a joke; he told no personal stories to convince his hearers that he empathized with their trials and social distractions; nor did he demonstrate by allusions to novels, films, or political events of his day how attuned he was to current events and culture. There was in that man's sermon not an iota of what so many now strive to pour out upon their people, namely, a plethora of common rhetorical devices aimed at showing the people the relevancy, if not the cutting-edge stylishness of the gospel.

What did characterize the message preached was a sober, passionate, and powerfully gripping exposition of the Word of God. Apparently, Dr. Lloyd-Jones took seriously Paul's charge to Timothy that he should preach the Word in and out of season (2 Tim. 4:1ff).

Nor is Martyn Lloyd-Jones alone in this commitment. When one reads sermons preached by the Puritans, by the Reformers, and by early Church Fathers, one is struck by how full their messages are of Scriptural matter. That is why their sermons stand the test of time. They are as convicting, converting, and comforting to readers now, who hunger for spiritual food for the soul, as they were when they were preached to those who first heard them. Do any of the purveyors of homiletical fluff of our day really think that their sermons will stand the test of time? Their productions, over which they labored to make them relevant, are dated and stale a few months after they have preached them.

The best that can be said about those whose sermons are crammed with spicy illustrations and humor, rather than with Scriptural substance, is that they are seeking to make the gospel understandable and acceptable to their contemporaries. The fault in this misled venture, however, lies in a serious misunderstanding of men's true needs and the true aim and purpose of preaching.

Men do not need warm stories and easy entertainment, however much they may want such things. What natural men need is regeneration, and what the regenerate need is to be edified in the faith. The preaching of the Word of God alone accomplishes both ends.

Those who urge preachers to keep their sermons short and full of contemporary allusions and engaging illustrations do their urging from a psychological and not a theological basis. They think that since modern people's attention span has diminished due to their addiction to television, the preacher must adopt a style of delivery that makes as few demands upon the hearers as television makes upon them. What do those proponents for dumbed-down sermons make of the rather long and elaborately structured sermon Jesus preached on the mount? Do they think if our Lord were to preach that sermon today that He would shorten it and liven it up?

True preaching does not confirm the natural man by endeavoring to show him how little the gospel will intrude into his life, and how mildly and pleasantly it will refine him. True preaching kills the natural man and raises him up a new creature who hungers and thirsts not for enjoyable novelties and cultural relevance, but for eternal verities, for righteousness that endures for time and eternity, and above all for the God who towers above the passing and pitiful fashions of this perishing world. The sooner more ministers of God's Word cease their clever and desperate antics, calculated to achieve the approval of men, and give themselves to preaching the whole counsel of God that is ever relevant and empowering, the sooner we shall see true revival in the churches.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

## Fear Not

Dear Friends,

All Christians know that God, through His prophets, tells His people not to fear (e.g., Is. 35:4; Jer. 30:10). David prays that the Lord would keep him, not only from his enemies' destructive desires, but also from the dread of his enemies, or from the fear of the possibilities of injury they might inflict upon him (Ps. 64:1). Our Lord Jesus repeatedly told His disciples not to fear (Mt. 10:28; 14:27). The Apostle Paul directs believers to avoid anxiety, the milder form of fear (Phil. 4:6,7). In fact, one could search the Scriptures exhaustively in vain, trying to find a single verse that commends a believer for his fearing anything but God.

Despite this teaching, most Christians do have and heed their fears and nurture their anxieties. This is so because too many of us view fear as a logical alert to danger, anxiety as an unavoidable facet of anticipation, and we consider the Scriptural prohibitions against our phobias to be merely pious advice, if not a primitive sort of folk psychology designed to anesthetize people so that the edge is taken off of their pains. We can forget or fail ever to realize that the calls for us to stop fearing are not dispensable pious counsels, but absolute divine commands. In short, a believer who fears anything except God is in sin; a Christian who is anxious is transgressing against his God. That is why we may study the emotional life of Jesus, who was made like us in all things except sin (Heb. 4:15), and find manifestations of every human emotion except fear. It is also why we find that the prophets, psalmists, apostles, and our Lord Himself all show a complete lack of sympathy for and tenderness toward any who do fear.

We may wonder, if we admit that our fearing is sin, just what holy, moral law of God we are violating when we fear. The summary answer is that we violate not only God's direct charge against our fearing, but also we transgress each one of the Ten Commandments when we fear. In representative detail, we should know that the one who fears violates the first commandment by making his fear to take precedence over his God. The fearful one violates the second commandment in that while he magnifies and deifies his fear in violation of the first commandment, he reduces God's wisdom, love and power, making Him into a puny idol unable to secure His people. Fears also transgress the third commandment by prompting the fearful to hold God in contempt rather than in reverent awe. The fearful soul violates the second table of the commandments as well. Who will honor his parents if he fears the ridicule of his peers? Who will speak the truth, if he knows that he testifies to his own hurt, which he dreads?

Our fears are actually great and serious sins. Our anxieties are little foxes that spoil the vineyard of the Lord. Why should we cleave to them in defiance of our Lord's command? Why should we dishonor and grieve our God, who has demonstrated His love for us by giving His Son to die for our sins, and has displayed His almighty power in raising Him from the dead?

Besides being sinful, our fears make sorry counselors for us. They promise us at least some degree of safety if we heed them, and yet they propel us to hazard infinitely greater than that from which they claim to deliver us. Fears make us self-regarding while they would disparage and dismiss the Lord. Our fears tell us that the way of our trusting, obeying, and following the Lamb of God through many tribulations is too costly and painful. Our fears do not tell us that such a trusting walk through tribulations is the only way we enter the kingdom of heaven.

Fear reduces us to being cowardly and indolent. When we heed our fears we will increasingly refuse to venture anything for dread of loss. We will fear lions in the streets (when there are none there) and so will not go forth to work with diligence. The sons of the living God are redeemed not to be cowards, but to be more than conquerors.

Fear prompts us to distrust God and to rely upon our own phobias for direction, and upon our own power for deliverance from danger. Fear would have us to be our own saviors, and, if we but reflect upon that, what pitiful and ineffectual saviors we make!

It is the wicked who fears and flees from all sorts of challenges. The righteous is as bold as a lion, fearing neither man, nor beast, nor devil, but, instead, having supreme and reverent regard only for his God, who loved him and gave His Son for him, he enjoys peace and confidence flowing from that faithful regard.

All fear of anything except God is sinful, irrational, and injurious. In light of the costly, securing, and empowering redemption of the Lord, fear is inexcusable. We should not treat our fears as guiding friends, but rather as destructive foes. We should not indulge our anxieties as benefactors, but exorcise them as the defiling suggestions of demons that they are. The devil approached Eve in the garden asking her: *Indeed, has God said?* We should turn the satanic question to our advantage, asking ourselves whether God has ever said that we should fear. Then, finding that He has not, let us fear not.

Yours in Christ's confidence,

William Harrell

## Human Artistry and Divine Authority: A Critique of "The Passion of the Christ"

Dear Friends,

I have been asked by many people, who know that I am a minister, what I think of the Mel Gibson film *The Passion of the Christ*. It is likely that many of your friends, workmates, and neighbors, who know you are a believer, are asking you the same question. Therefore, I thought I would share with you this month some of my thoughts on that question.

The short answer to the question should be for every believer that the Book is infinitely better than the film. But what are some of the reasons that this is so? The primary reason is that God inspired the Book, while an uninspired man made the film. Does this mean that the film is of no value, or even that it is for a believer defiling to watch?

At this point I should confess that I have not seen the film, nor do I plan to see it. You may say that this makes me an unqualified critic, but I maintain otherwise. I have heard reports of the film from both critics and fans, and I have gathered, I believe, an accurate understanding of its contents. Therefore, I ask: What could a two hour visual representation of the sufferings of Jesus, cluttered by slow motion focused shots of His beatings, flashback shots of His boyhood, drawn totally from the imagination of man, and venerating scenes of His mother possibly add to my understanding of Jesus Christ—an understanding gained through thirty-three years of my apprehending Christ by faith as He is presented in His Word? Someone may answer that to first century readers of the Gospels, who had witnessed such beatings and crucifixions, the spare and suggestive accounts of the Savior's sufferings given in the Gospels may have been sufficient for them to grasp the horrors of such treatment, but they are not adequate for us. To such an assertion I reply that God's Word is sufficient for all believers in all ages, not standing in need of augmentation by twenty-first century cinematography.

But then there is, many cry, the evangelistic value of this film. Here I agree with the Apostle Paul, who, when he learned that some men were preaching Christ from impure motives, rejoiced that Christ was preached, whether in pretense or in truth (Phil. 1:18). For a time, at least, the name and the sufferings of Jesus will be in the minds of many people, and the Lord can and no doubt will use that for good. If Mel Gibson wanted to make a film, I applaud him for producing a sincere and serious depiction of Christ rather than some lewd and ribald film like so many others that crowd the screens of the world today. Yet, when Paul rejoices that Christ is preached even from men with impure motives, he surely is not commending those men uncritically.

I believe that Mel Gibson is a sincere and devout Roman Catholic. What he has produced is something that fits well into the Roman Catholic tradition. He has made a cinematic icon (his production company is named Icon Productions!). The icons of the Middle Ages were made to portray the Lord, His works, and especially His passion to

masses of people who could not read. Some actually worshipped the icons, but most used them as aids to their devotion. But they all had more to do with art than with theology. That is why the icons, through the ages, have been so widely admired—even treasured—because they are great art, with the subjects they depict fading into incidental significance.

This film is in essence a piece of visual art. So insignificant is the audible message in it that Gibson has the characters speak in Aramaic and Latin. It may be, and I am inclined to believe that it is, a beautiful and moving piece of art. But visual art is not the mode best suited to convey the truth of God to men.

Very few of the people of God have actually seen the mighty deeds of the Lord with their eyes. One generation saw the plagues in Egypt, the Red Sea parting, and the awesome majesty of Sinai. A handful of prophets saw visions of the Lord's glory, while another generation beheld the Savior, witnessed His miracles, heard Him speak as no man spoke, and saw Him crucified, buried, and resurrected. They were blessed by what they saw, although not all of them, and in some instances few of them were. A whole generation that saw God's mighty deeds in their exodus from Egypt balked in unbelief when they should have entered the Promised Land. Two of Jesus' disciples saw their resurrected Lord on the Emmaus road and failed rightly to perceive the identity of the One whom they were seeing. Some of those who saw were blessed, but many more who have not seen are no less blessed (Jn. 20:29).

The people of God see best and most truly and edifyingly when they see with the eyes of their hearts (Eph. 1:18). Such spiritual seeing is done with the ears, as faith comes by hearing the Word of Christ (Rom. 10:17). We shall be more blessed if we form our conceptions of Christ and His salvation from the testimony of God's Word, as we read it and hear it preached week by week, than if we watch for a few hours an artistic production of an uninspired man. I had an e-mail from a woman who saw *The Passion of the Christ*, and she said that it moved her more deeply than anything in all of her eighteen years of being a Christian. I fear that many may experience the same sort of thing. Yet, that is indicative not of the film's excellence or necessity, so much as of the poor preaching and poor hearing of the preached Word that such people experience.

One day, every believer will behold the face of the Savior (Rev. 22:4). Until that day, we shall perceive our Redeemer more clearly and sanctifyingly not through the visual artistry of men, but through the inerrant testimony of God's Word. We should avoid having our minds cluttered by men's finite and fallible conceptions of Christ. The Book really is better than this or any other film.

Faithfully,

William Harrell

## Law and Love

Dear Friends,

It is right that Christians, as individual citizens of their respective nations, should work according to their calling and ability to promote godly civil legislation. However, it is not right for the Church as a whole to become enmeshed in civil affairs. This is not because the Church lacks the expertise and competence to afford much that is of earthly good to the nations. It is rather that the Church has a higher calling and equipping. Whenever the Church has lost sight of her heavenly orientation and charter, she has become of less, not of more, earthly benefit.

Christians, of all people, should hold the civil laws in high regard. The believer is conscience bound to do so, for he knows that the civil authorities have been ordained, and are superintended, by God (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17). At the same time, however, Christians should have a realistic understanding of the limitations of the law, whether civil or ecclesiastical. The law, whether it is of God or man, can only prescribe regulations for behavior. It lacks the power to prompt obedience, except through its coercive sanctions. The law can convict, but it cannot convert a single soul.

Civil legislation is even weaker than the laws of God. Whereas divine law can and does convict one of his doing or even thinking evil, civil law aims only at the outward behavior of man. Civil legislators and judicial systems seek, sometimes quite feebly, to retard the decay in society. Nor do any modern legislators or jurists think that they can do anything more than impose the lesser of any number of evils, upon society; none aim for the attainment of man's highest good.

In stark contrast to the imperfectly preserving character of law is the love of God. The immeasurable love of the Lord, that prompted Him to plan, promise, and accomplish the salvation of sinners, goes infinitely beyond what mere law can do. The law prescribes righteousness, while the love of God provides it. The love of God in Christ converts wicked rebels into obedient servants of heaven's King. The love of God also prompts those possessed by it to love others. The description of this love of God in the heart of man, found in 1 Corinthians 13, shows how new creatures in Christ commit themselves from their hearts to doing good and thinking the best of others, even when it costs them dearly to do it.

The love of God rightly apprehended by faith makes a man rich with every spiritual blessing in Christ; while it gives him courage and power to live as more than a conqueror over all that would threaten him. The love of God secures a man, giving him peace, and it enriches a man, making him kind, considerate, and generous in his dealings with others.

It is too easy for us to give in to the temptation of thinking and acting as though the enactment or preservation of godly civil laws will bring revival to our nation. It is too easy for us to fear that the erosion of our civil liberties—especially those that guard our religious freedoms—spells the doom of the Church. The civil magistrate may wield the sword that coerces outward behavior and kills the body, but he has nowhere near the power and authority of those who wield the sword of the Spirit, that is the Word of God.

It is right, therefore, and we do well, to decry such civil and social evils as abortion, homosexual marriage, and laws banning prayer in public schools. However, the Church will ever fail effectively to address such evils when she invests her energy in the political process, rather than in prayer and the preaching of God's Word. It was Mary Queen of Scots who reputedly said: *I fear the prayers of John Knox more than all the assembled armies of Europe.* Certainly, the devil dreads the sword of the Spirit and the weapon of all prayer far more than all of the political activism in which the Church ever has or ever will indulge.

Therefore, let us respect the rule of law in our land, but let us ever rely upon the Lord for our security and our sanctification. Let us assail the throne of God's grace by our prayers far more than we assail our neighbors and legislators with our political maneuvering. Let us value the love of God in Christ far more greatly than we value the legal rights and freedoms we have in this imperfect and perishing world. Finally, let us love our neighbors and cultivate peace with them, rather than relying solely upon the laws of the land to maintain peace and order in our society. It is only those who sincerely and constantly are so heavenly minded that are of most deep, extensive, and lasting earthly good.

Yours in Christ,

William Harrell

## The Virture of Maturity

Dear Friends,

No one could rightly deny that we live in a culture increasingly oriented toward youth. This preoccupation with young people and the things associated with them has infected the Church. I do not mean to say that we, as Bible believing and practicing Christians should ignore our children and young people. Scripture has much to say about the responsibility parents and Church leaders have in nurturing the young in the Lord. However, such godly nurturing is quite different from the idolizing of youth that has infected many churches.

Perhaps I should explain why I regard the propagation of specialized youth ministries in the Church as an infection of worldly culture. In the first instance, one searches the Scriptures in vain to find any reference to, still less any approval of, that position considered essential by many churches in our day, namely, the youth minister. Are the youth ministers so prevalent in our day legitimate extensions of the Scriptural mandate for parents to raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord? I think not. In most cases such ministers are little more than paid surrogates for parents too busy or disinclined to conduct family devotions and train their own children in the catechisms of our faith.

Furthermore, even if such specialized youth ministers were countenanced by the Word of God, the character of most youth ministries would render them infections rather than promoters of true spiritual health. One finds at the heart of typical youth ministries a determination to entertain more than to edify. There may be Bible studies and times of prayer, but these are preceded by fun and food and followed by the same.

Whatever justifications people try to make for these youth ministries, the truth remains that in the Church, as in the world, there has arisen a nervous preoccupation with young people that is conspicuously absent in Scripture. I say it is a nervous preoccupation, because, increasingly, parents tend to raise their children in fear more than in faith. They fear that the world will sweep their children away unless they are committed to a professional youth worker, who is hip and appealing to the young, but not completely worldly. After all, what chance do parents have lastingly to influence their children when all forms of advertisements in our culture show kids in the know and parents having no clue? It is a fearful preoccupation that our youth have as well, for while they are charmed by the indulgence they receive from their nervous elders, and enjoy the power and prestige their youth gives to them in this culture of distorted values, they know that, apart from their cool image, they are essentially frightened and insecure. They also know and fear that the passing years will soon enough disqualify them from their privileged status, and they, too, will be dumped into the disenfranchised heap of adults.

How should we view and minister rightly to our young people? We should view them through the focusing lens to Scripture and not through the blur of secular passions and fashions. Our secular society exalts the young. Why? Because of the physical feats they can perform, their physical beauty, and the seemingly spontaneous and creative way they view and live their lives. The working assumption of secular sociology is that people are born pure and good, but grow bad over time. Thus, youth is touted as a time of blessing, old age as a corrupted and cursed stage of being.

Scripture, however, presents the opposite view. The child is loved, but also realistically seen as being foolish, and needing correction, ignorant, and needing instruction, naïve, and needing wisdom. The emphasis in the Word of God is upon growth in knowledge, maturity, and understanding. It is not upon the mere physical vigor of youth. Elders, not the young, are exalted in Scripture. Thus, Paul writes to Timothy, identifying the latter's youth as a handicap for which he must compensate by an exemplary manifestation of the venerable virtues of spiritual maturity (1 Tim. 4:12).

The fixation many have with youth is unscriptural, unhealthy, and ultimately, self-defeating. Why should we idolize a period of human development that is so fraught with inexperience, ignorance, discontentedness, and incompetence? Despite the fixation many have with youth, the years do carry everyone inexorably into chronological, if not mental, emotional, and spiritual maturity. Let us resist this lie that youthful vigor is the zenith of human development. We serve a God who is the ancient of days, who leads us through all of the perils and pains, as well as pleasures, of this life to the higher joys of His glory. The Christian life is a pilgrimage from the chaos and scars of our sinfulness to the celestial city of God. Those who do mature in Christ know that He does not serve the best wine first, but saves it for the last.

Yours growing in hope and gratitude,

William Harrell

## The Cushion of Grace

Dear Friends,

Our Lord has wonderfully designed His kingdom for sinners. Not only does He call us, just as we are, into the kingdom of God, but He has made provision for us to grow out of the dregs of our sin and into His likeness. The efficient cause behind such sanctifying growth is the Holy Spirit, who indwells each believer and fosters the development of the fruit of the Spirit in every member of the body of Christ (Gal. 5:22ff). We also are directed and empowered to help one another grow in the grace, knowledge, holiness, and love of the Lord. One of the ways we do this is by our recognizing and respecting the cushion of grace that our Savior has applied to all relationships in the Church militant.

What I mean by the cushion of grace is that we finite and fallible sinners, who find ourselves in process of being conformed to the image of Christ, cannot relate rightly with each other only upon the basis of truth and justice. Redeemed though we may be from the dominion of sin, we still must contend with its remnants in our lives, as well as in the lives of our brethren. This sin factor clouds our judgment and taints our motives so that we are incapable of perceiving the whole truth in our interpersonal relationships. We shall be ever laboring under such incapacitation throughout our earthly pilgrimage. Thus, our Lord has incorporated into the constitution of His Church a modifying factor designed to offset the faulty judgment and impure motives of His people as they related to one another. We are not, therefore, told to communicate with each other only in truth, but in the truth saturated in love (Eph. 4:15).

Scripture articulates and expounds this cushion of grace in many ways. Jesus speaks, for example, of the need we all have to remove the log from our own eyes before we endeavor to take the speck from the eyes of our brethren (Mt. 7:3ff). Strictly speaking according to the truth, it may be our brother who has more sin—the log—and we who have the speck of the lesser sin. But whether that is true or not, our residual sinfulness would have us to assume in every case that we are more sinned against than sinning, and so our motives easily become inquisitorial and prosecutory, rather than humbly and lovingly appealing. Accordingly, our Lord imposes the cushion of grace between brethren, in which each believer, when dealing with others in the body of Christ, assumes that he himself is the greater sinner. Mutual humility and loving commitment to provoke each other to love and good works then results.

Despite what our Lord says about the log and the speck, many believers still try to relate to others without the cushion of grace. Some point to what Paul writes in his Roman epistle about our calling to have an honest estimation of ourselves (Rom. 12:3), and also to the Ninth Commandment that obliges us to speak the truth (Ex. 20:16) as the basis for their conceit that they are with minimal sin while the saints around them maximize their transgression. However, the more honest and true the estimation in

which we hold ourselves is, the more lowly will be our profile. For the truth is that we tend to think not too lowly, but too highly of ourselves, as Rom. 12:3 also makes clear.

Because of this sinful propensity we have to minimize our own sin while magnifying that of others in the body of Christ, our Lord commands us to exercise the judgment of charity, wherein we lovingly are committed to placing the best construction upon the words and deeds of our brethren, not the worst. We are also commanded to prefer our brethren in honor before ourselves (Phil. 2:3).

If we are to err in our judgment—and we all do err—our gracious, loving Lord would have us to err in the direction not of our exacting justice, but in the direction of our gracious, patient, and loving treatment of others. In this, Jesus Himself gives us the example in His treatment of Judas. Our Lord knew from the beginning what a rotter Judas was (Jn. 6:64). Yet, Jesus treated the betrayer as a disciple in good standing, and, even at the consummation of Judas' betrayal, our Savior appealed to him, calling him *friend* (Mt. 26:50).

Think how much more peace we would experience if we treated each other less judicially and more graciously. Think how sweet our relationships will be, and how greatly friction amongst ourselves will diminish when we recognize and respect the fact that our Lord would have us to be zealous not only for the truth, which we can and do twist, but especially for holy, sacrificial love, that is impossible to counterfeit. Let us then, reckon ourselves to be blinded by logs in all of our dealings with our brethren, and then, to our ultimate surprise and delight, we shall come to see the saints more truly and relate to them more lovingly, sweetly, and satisfyingly through the cushion of grace.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

## Communicating Christ

Dear Friends,

The Christian has been redeemed and regenerated not only to commune with Christ, but also to communicate Christ to others. Such communion with and communication of the Lord are two things that God has joined together and that no man should tear asunder. The one issues from the other. If we do not have vital union with Christ we cannot have anything about Christ to communicate to others. If we are not devoted to Christ in loving gratitude for the great and loving things He has done for us, then we cannot declare Him to others, nor would we ever desire to do so. True, vital, and right communion with Christ leads to a desire to communicate the Savior with greatest fidelity. Whether such communication is fruitful, in terms of others bowing to the claims of Christ, is rightly deemed as being a matter more of God's doing than our own. This is not to say that we should be indifferent to the response our sharing Christ begets. We should pray fervently to God and speak faithfully to men with a zealous and sincere desire to see others embrace the Lord we love and serve. Yet, we should ever recognize that all of our best spiritual efforts are not sufficient to convert a single soul. Here, as with every other thing, without Christ we can do nothing.

Many Christians in our day note and lament the lack of response to the gospel, especially in our materialistic western culture. This has led many to reexamine methods of evangelism, and to adopt ways considered to be more effective in reaching the lost. Therefore, it has become a widespread assumption that if we want to see more gratifying results, then we must change with the times or die. This assumption has spawned a host of innovations in how churches seek to communicate Christ, not only to the lost, but also to those within the family of faith. Thus, mature saints must endure, in most typical Sunday services, such things as almost incessant music, amplified and varied by its instrumentation, tunes, and wording, all because it is this boisterous type of celebration that we are told people are conditioned to expect and even demand. Therefore, if we want to see many people in our churches, we must meet this expectation. I recently saw a large banner covering the side of a local church. The banner read: *Live Music Each Sunday*. Smaller letters told of a band and worship team that would lift the worshippers to great heights. What would such advertisers call our Sunday music? Is ours not live because we make melody with our hearts and voices rather than rely on a few experts pumping out amplified soft rock tunes that drown out the words of the worshippers?

Those experimenting with innovations in communicating Christ have largely torn asunder their communications from their communion with Christ. A shift has taken place in many quarters, wherein numbers of apparently happy people gathered in an impressive building that is ever expanding to accommodate its multiplying masses has replaced a concern to see people truly converted to Christ. Increasingly, pastors are coming to believe and pastoral candidates are being taught that the method of gospel presentation will prevail in our spiritually dying society. Hence, we find a growing

emphasis on technique and a diminished emphasis on theology. The message of salvation is subdued under a plethora of things that are considered to be culturally relevant, and thus calculated to win hordes to the cause.

This growing obsession with evangelistic and ministerial technique, embedded in a matrix of sentimental and carnally entertaining fluff, is very different from the charge that Paul gave to Timothy. The apostle told his son in the faith to preach the Word, whether in or out of season. He specifically charged him not to adapt the message to the fickle tastes of men (2 Tim. 4:1-4).

How can the loud music, the entertaining sermonettes, and the carnal circuses offered by some give life to the dead? We are witnessing in our day a growing embarrassment over the gospel and a growing esteem for gimmicks. But it is the gospel alone that is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16). Our knowing and respecting this truth should lead us to communicate neither in arcane nor in culturally hip fashion. Rather, we should be so absorbed in wonder, love, and praise for our saving God that we, with increasing naturalness and aptness, live, speak, and do the things that make others know with certainty that there is a gracious, saving God. Others will know, too, that by His doing we are not of this world, even though we are in it, and that they can share the same blessed and glorious deliverance in which we rejoice.

If we commune with the true and living God, we enjoy loving union with a glorious, heavenly King whose mercies are great and whose salvation is only and ever worthy of praise and thanksgiving. From such communion will flow not a nervous obsession with the ever-changing fads of men, but a vital grasp and loving, generous giving of the ever relevant and vital truth that alone sets men free.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

## Productive Pains

Dear Friends,

In our day, when individual pleasure, convenience, and comfort are extolled as virtues and, indeed, rights to which we are all entitled, we who are called by the Lamb of God to take up our crosses and bear them daily need to appreciate the vital distinction between pain and injury. We tend to equate the two, or to assume that the latter is the invariable consequence of the former. However, as in athletic conditioning, even more so in the Christian pilgrimage, pain is an inescapable component of certain gains. Our wise, loving, and almighty God uses painful situations in our lives, not to cause us injury, but to free us from our fears, as we endure the pain we think may well kill us, only to find that by the grace and enabling power of the Lord we emerge from our furnaces of affliction not damaged but strengthened. Such freedom from our fear of injury is a great gain that our heavenly Father is determined to confer upon us.

We are tempted ever to think and live by human logic, and not by faith. The Word of God tells us clearly not to lean on our own understanding, but to trust the Lord in all things—even the most painful and perplexing things—and we shall thereby emerge from our crucibles of suffering as more than conquerors (Prov. 3:5,6). When we rely not on our own finite, fallible, and fearful logic, but, instead, trust in and submit to our Lord's infallible wisdom, unchangeable love, and unlimited power, then we shall become as faithful and fearless as were Daniel's friends as they were about to be cast into the fiery furnace. We shall be like them in our furnaces of affliction, being driven to more vital and intimate fellowship with the Son of God who stands with us in our trials, and we shall, like them, emerge from our crucibles unscathed and victorious.

Human logic would expect ones afflicted in every way to be crushed, but faith perceives the hand of God in such affliction, sustaining us for His glory and our good (2 Cor. 4:7-10). Human logic reckons that when afflictions come upon us, we or God or both have done something wrong. Faith rightly reckons that our Lord has sovereignly maneuvered us into our sufferings for our blessing. As William Jay has well written: *those sorrows will never injure us that bring us to God (Morning Exercises, p.84).*

This is not to say that we should make an idol of our pain any more than we should make an idol of our pleasure. Paul's thorn in the flesh drove him to cry out to God repeatedly for its removal; Jesus cried out, asking that if it were possible His Father might let the cup of His crucifixion pass from Him. Yet, in each case, God made clear that He had gracious and glorious designs *in* and *through* the sufferings of the apostle and of His Son. Accordingly, there resulted an unreserved submission of both Jesus and Paul to their set courses of suffering. We should realize, as did Paul, that if the Lord does not remove our thorns in the flesh, it is because He has blessed purposes to accomplish through our bearing our pains, being sustained by His abundantly sufficient grace.

How much time we waste, and how greatly do we increase the magnitude and bitterness of our sufferings when we refuse to see and submit to the blessed reality that our Lord is with us in our sufferings, He having ordained them for us to bear, and ever orchestrating them to serve for our good. How differently we would view and respond to our pains if we exercised our faith to believe that they were serving, in the hands of our heavenly Father, to produce great and lasting gain for us. Then our bitter complaints and paralyzing fears would be vanquished, and we would be well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, and with difficulties, borne by the grace of God and for the sake of Christ (2 Cor. 12:9,10).

Let us, therefore, work out this painful dimension of our salvation, swimming against the tide of the world's worship of pleasure. Let us exercise our faith, and so endure our sufferings with the submissive resignation, trusting anticipation, and calm assurance that come from our knowing that our God truly does cause all things—even the most painful and perplexing things—to work together, not for our harm, but for our good and for our highest ultimate happiness.

Perseveringly yours,

William Harrell

## Feast in the Face of Foes

Dear Friends,

Our Savior has not accomplished a work of redemption that barely delivers us from our sins and only marginally keeps Satan away from us. Nowhere in Scripture do we find the conception that the saints of the Lord are, at best, survivors of the onslaughts of their spiritual enemies. Instead, we are told repeatedly that in Christ we are more than conquerors over all that would threaten us (Rom. 8:35-39). Yet, many believers do not feel, think, and live like super conquerors. This is so due to a number of reasons, such as ignorance of the truth that sets us free, impurity of heart that clouds our perception of God, failure to exercise the gift of faith, and so forth.

I do not intend to write about such failures so much as about the faithfulness of our God. In the matter of the nature and extent of our victory in Christ, the Lord has faithfully declared to us in His Word that while it is a decisive victory, it is not yet, for those on earthly pilgrimage, a victory perfected in its application. By this I mean that any hopes we have of our attaining sinless perfection in this life issue from our own wishful thinking rather than from the Word of God. Likewise, any expectation we have of experiencing a life of total freedom from Satan's wiles is mistaken, and bound to lead us into bondage and misery.

Scripture makes clear to us that by the justifying and regenerating work of God, the believer is delivered from the dominion of sin. Romans 6 is the clearest and fullest treatment of this gracious and glorious liberation. Yet, we are therein told that we must not let the remnants of our sin assert themselves so as to have mastery over us. Here, then, is not so much a balance to be kept as it is a dynamic tension that should energize our living. The fact that we are freed from the dominion of sin should encourage us, assure us, and fill us with peace, joy, and thanksgiving. It should also prohibit us from complacency and presumption, especially when Scripture makes it equally plain that we must mortify the dregs of our sinful natures, not letting them have mastery over us.

Another way of putting this is in terms used by the writer of the Hebrews epistle. He exhorts us to run the race set before us, laying aside the sin that so easily entangles us (Heb. 12:1). Here we see the tension between our deliverance from sin and our lapsing into its dominion again. We are to lay aside our sin. The image is one of an athlete stripping down for a race. The removal of his warm-up suit is an easy and necessary task. Our deliverance from the dominion of sin has rendered our dealing with its dregs as easy as would be our taking off some of our clothing. Yet, this same sin, if not so removed, can easily entangle us. Thus, we must live as those truly freed from the oppressive dominion of sin by our constant and vigilant determination to detect sin within ourselves as early as possible, so that we might nip it in the bud. Otherwise, what may today be easily manageable remnants will tomorrow swell to engulfing proportions. This is a battle that must be waged throughout a saint's life. This is how we stand in and by Christ's victory over sin for us.

Similarly with Satan, we must not think that his being disarmed and made a public spectacle through Christ's death and resurrection renders him inoperable. Scripture teaches us that the devil is a defeated foe (Col. 2:15); the Word of God also teaches us that he is a roaming, roaring lion intent on devouring the unwary believer (1 Pet. 5:8). The resolution of this tension is found in our careful application of the full armor of God (Eph. 6:10ff). Such images as armor and wrestling that are employed by Scripture to describe the Christian's warfare with the devil indicate to us that Satan is not in a distant prison, but, instead, is very near to us. When we wrestle, we are at grips with our opponent. With armor, our demonic enemy's blows come upon us, but the thin but hard layer of armor preserves us from injury.

This proximity of our old enemies, sin and Satan, is highlighted in the Shepherd psalm, when we are told that our God prepares a feast for us in the face of our enemies (Ps. 23:5). Such nearness of these enemies could be understood as indicating a deficient victory, and that, alas, is how many believers understand it and consequently experience it. Thus, they are confused and filled with dismay when they find that they must still contend with sin and Satan.

However, such proximity does not indicate deficiency, but rather decisive advantage that is ours. So triumphant is Christ, so potent is the feast He provides, so secure are His people, that our Lord can afford to let sin and Satan stay close to His sheep. Those old enemies may yet afflict the saints, but they cannot harm them. In fact, God sinlessly uses our foes as servants for our good. So, let us learn not to focus on the foes, but rather on the feast provided by our Lord.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

## **The Way of Escape from Temptation**

Dear Friends,

We are all familiar with the verse that tells us that no temptation will overtake us without our faithful God providing for us in the temptation the way of escape (1 Cor. 10:13). While that verse may be familiar to us, our understanding of it may be less than accurate. Too often we erroneously assume that the way of escape our Lord provides for us is an easy loophole through which we may slip and adroitly be freed from the temptation. In truth, the divinely provided way of escape from temptation always involves some cost to us, and sometimes that cost is supreme. Many believers can and do testify, to their pastor if not to one another, that when they have found themselves in the throes of temptation they often have failed to perceive any way of escape from it. Upon closer examination of such cases, we discover that what such people did not perceive was an easy, desirable way of escape, for which they were looking, though the true yet costly way of escape, for which they were not looking, was there to be taken.

Our understanding of the verse in question, with its valuable and vital promise of divine provision amidst our temptations, is greatly helped when we bear in mind its context. Paul has been warning his readers about spiritual complacency and carnal cravings. The apostle has cited the example of the Israelites who experienced the exodus from Egypt, but then fell under the judging hand of God in the wilderness because they hardened their hearts in unbelief against the Lord. Then Paul reminds us that their fall happened and was recorded as an example to us, that we should not crave evil things, as did that Israelite generation (1 Cor. 10:6).

What were the evil things craved by the people? Paul gives examples. There was the immorality with the daughters of Moab, through which Israel joined the Moabites in the worship of their false god (Num. 25:1ff). There was Israel's grumbling against Moses, occasioned by lack of water and the people's loss of appreciative taste for the manna that had been miraculously provided from heaven for them (Num. 21:5,6). Finally, Paul notes a general and persistent attitude of grumbling on the part of the people.

In sum, the people craved basic essentials of life (food and water) as well as companionship with their neighbors (the Moabites). These things in themselves appear to be far from evil cravings. In fact, the food and water seem to be essentials for life. Can Paul, then, be suggesting that the way of escape from temptation is that we deny ourselves, if not devote ourselves, to death for the sake of the Lord? That is precisely what he is teaching us. It is also what Jesus teaches us when He speaks of our bearing our crosses daily (Lk. 9:23), and losing our lives for His sake (Mt. 16:25), and rejoicing in our persecutions and sufferings for His name's sake (Mt. 5:10,11). This is the lesson we are taught in Scripture when the righteous, such as Daniel's friends—Shadrach,

Meshach, and Abed-nego—choose to lay down their lives rather than to sin against their God (Dan. 3:16-18).

Think what a burdensome care and draining distraction it is for us to reckon that our responsibility is to save our lives, if not to preserve our greatest ease and fondest comforts at all costs. Our hearts grow hard, our minds grow dark, and our eyes grow dim when we place not only our luxuries, but even our very lives above our fidelity to our Lord. It is no wonder, then, that when we are in such a spiritually dull state we fail to perceive the Lord's way of escape from temptation, if that way leads through death. When we crave life above the Lord of life, we will not hear, let alone heed, the truth that it is for the believer great gain to die (Phil. 1:21).

We make ourselves vulnerable to satanic temptation, and weaken our resolve against worldly enticements and intimidations when we set a point beyond which we refuse to go in our resisting sin. Sometimes the way of escape from temptation entails the shedding of our own blood (Heb. 12:4). Far from our being spiritually vulnerable and fearfully resentful, we are strong, bold, and filled with peaceful confidence when we count our lives as being expendable in the service of the Lord who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ. When we, like Jesus, entrust ourselves to our God who judges righteously and delivers us graciously, we shall see and rejoice in the way of escape the Lord provides for us. Even though that way may lie through many deaths of our hopes, aspirations, position, and possessions, or, ultimately through our own death, it is the way that leads to resurrection and glory. The alternatives are that we determine to be our own deliverer, escaping from temptation not by a faithful resistance to it, but rather endeavoring to escape temptation through our own cunning or to placate it with compromise. Those alternatives lead us inexorably into sin, and the wages of sin is not life, but death—the very thing we sought above all things to escape.

Let us, therefore, learn to think more radically with regard to the matter of the way of escape from temptation. Let us determine now and always that we shall resist temptation, though it cost us our lives. Those so determined will always see the way of escape in the most pressing of temptations, and find blessing through their taking that way.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

## Love for the Law of God

Dear Friends,

The first Psalm declares to us that the way of blessing is found by a person's delighting in the law of the Lord (Ps. 1:2). In the long Psalm, the writer declares: *O, how I love Thy law! It is my meditation all the day.* (Ps. 119:97).

Yet, an increasing number of pastors in our day would declare that if members of their churches expressed such sentiments, they would be rebuked for their legalism. Such pastors, in their endeavor to exalt the Lord's grace, are guilty of denigrating the holy law of the Lord. They would maintain that the psalmists quoted above were simply being true to the limited light they had, and that they were making the best of the merely provisional revelation of God they possessed at the time they lived and wrote.

But, then, what are we to make of the Apostle Paul's declaration in Rom. 7:22, where he says that he joyfully concurs with the law of God in the inner man? Surely the apostle that exalted the saving grace of Christ more than any other apostle cannot be a legalist!

The fact is that in our day believers are finding themselves increasingly misled by those who are prompted to rely on their own logic rather than upon the supra-rational divine gift of faith. What I mean is that all of the theological fads that have arisen in recent years are characterized by a tendency to subsume all heads of theology under one controlling rubric.

Thus, we have seen the Holy Spirit's Person and work practically exaggerated to the point where the Father and Son are eclipsed. We have witnessed the Father's adopting work magnified to the detriment of the Son's justifying work and Holy Spirit's sanctifying work. We have been told that God's supreme attribute is love, to the detriment of His holiness and justice. We have been urged, in the name of grace, to banish all thoughts of the law of God and of our seeking to keep it as we gratefully work out our salvation by the enabling power of the God who works in us to will and do His pleasure.

These changeable passions for subsuming all facets of the Person and work of our triune God under one main head are driven by an incapacity, if not a perversity, that cannot comprehend the balance, richness, and contours of the whole counsel of God. It is also a lazy man's way to reduce all components of the revelation of God to one controlling feature that becomes the default mode for all theological reflection or endeavor.

The truth is that there is tension in the genuine gospel. For example, we must regard with utter reverence the holy law of God. Yet, we must not for a moment think

that we save ourselves by our keeping of the law. Thus, we apprehend the grace of God, whereby in Christ the penalty of our violating God's law has been both graciously and justly paid by Christ's suffering and death, while His perfectly righteous life is imputed to us. Yet, this gracious transaction does not, when rightly understood, lead us to despise the law of God, but rather to concur in its holy nature and to seek to live with its just and beneficent precepts serving as our guide and goal.

Jesus Himself makes clear to us that we are all obliged to obey the moral law. He summed it up beyond the generally negative features of the Ten Commandments, telling us that we are to love the Lord our God with all of our being, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. The very character of this law—its manifest righteousness, necessity, goodness—should make it clear to us all that we have been saved by God's grace not to ignore, defy, or mock the law of God, but rather to revere it, and to strive to keep it, however faulty our striving will inevitably be, until we are perfected in sanctification, at which time we will have the law of God perfectly written in our hearts and issuing forth our own perfect and perpetual obedience to its holy precepts.

The legalist diminishes the law of God by reducing it to the dimensions of petty, outward regulations that he deludes himself into thinking that he can keep. He also despises the grace of God, viewing it as something he neither needs nor wants. The libertine diminishes the law of God by his conceiving of it as being only a provisional tool designed to convict sinners, and not as being also an abiding standard for believers. He, too, cheapens grace by his conceiving of it as divine indulgence that is indifferent to whether we live righteous or unrighteous lives. The truth is that the law of God is a holy, dreadful power that thunders condemnation against those sinners who are not in Christ. But after it works conviction in the elect, it then serves as the sweet standard for the blessed life of those who pass through its convicting power by the converting power of God's grace in Christ. It is the essence of genuine divine grace that it not only saves us from our own violation of God's law, but also fills us with growing desire to know, love, and gratefully obey the law of God for the pleasure and glory of the Lord who gave the law, as well as for our own highest blessing.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

## Drugs and Doctrine

Dear Friends,

I was watching the television recently and made special note of a commercial advertisement that is representative of a growing number of such commercials. The camera pans several people doing different, ordinary things, such as walking, talking on the phone, or simply standing. Then the product being advertised is named and appears in writing on the television screen: *Valtrex*. The announcer tells the audience to ask their doctors if it is right for them. Thus ends the commercial. There is not the slightest indication of what the product does. One presumes it is some sort of medicine. In other such commercials the scant information about the purpose of the pills is augmented by a plethora of alarming side effects that should make any reasonable person conclude that the disease is surely better than the cure.

Why do I share this observation with you? It is because these interestingly allusive commercials, by their very existence, reveal that people in our culture have a strong penchant for seeking, finding, and procuring what they want. Evidently, the drug companies are willing to spend millions of dollars on such commercials because no amount of dire warning of side effects and lack of information contained in the commercials will stop people from investigating and buying the product.

In contrast to the tenacious determination of millions of consumers, putting themselves to whatever trouble it takes to have their drugs, we are told that the doctrine of the gospel must be fashioned into forms ever more palatable to our generation. Our failure so to fashion the gospel accounts, it is insisted, for the lack of response to the good news in our day. Apparently, drug dealers (legal and illegal) can bank on their consumers being savvy enough to get the most fleeting and obscure message about their products, while doctrine teachers are told that they must treat their hearers as though they were imbecilically thick.

The tragedy about this phenomenon is that far too many church leaders refuse to believe that the failure, on the part of the masses, to accept the gospel, results from their aversion to it, not their lack of understanding of its message. Psalm 2 informs us that people naturally despise the Lord and His anointed. Paul tells us that the gospel is a stumbling block and foolishness to those who are perishing (1 Cor. 1:18). Yet, in the face of such adamant hatred of and opposition to the Lord of glory, many Christian leaders treat the matter as though the rejecting hordes were basically beautiful people who would embrace the Savior if He were just pitched softly and enticingly enough.

It cannot be denied that many people do respond to the softly pitched Jesus. But the vital question is whether such a Jesus is genuine or counterfeit. I recall not long ago discussing with another pastor the so-called incorporation programs used in his rather large church. He shamelessly declared to me that he knew all such programs were

but lures to entice people into the church. Once they were there, he asserted, they would hear the gospel and be converted.

I will not deny that the brother in question witnessed conversions in his church. However, I asked him if any of those purportedly converted ever grew in discipleship to the point where they no longer required the lures. Honestly, he answered that he could not think of any. That by which we catch people must be that by which we keep them. Thus, the Church in our day in being built up with vast amounts of wood, hay, and stubble; goats are being herded in amongst the sheep; and tares are being planted amidst the wheat. Meanwhile the sheep are being starved spiritually, as brief and superficial sermonettes are served up amidst a mountain of musical and theatrical chaff, because the goats demand such fare.

In stark contrast to all of the tweaking, embellishing, sentimentalizing, commercializing, and cultural jargonizing of Christ and His gospel taking place in many churches today, the Apostle Paul declared that he was not ashamed of the gospel, and that as he labored to preach it faithfully he rightly had confidence that it would have power to convict sinners, to break their stubborn pride, and to convert them to the Savior (Rom. 1:16). Thankfully, there still are, in our day, pastors who are committed to a similar ministry of the Word. Their churches tend to be few in number and small in terms of their membership. Yet they stand against the tide of those rushing to tickle the itching ears of the masses demanding a gospel shorn of sound doctrine (2 Tim. 4:1-4). Such pastors are few, but fit to be seeds of truth and love, planted by the Lord, as they endure countless deaths, that they might serve to produce a crop of true saints, who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and not for the sham that litters the ecclesiastical scene in our day.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell