

1982

Dear Friends,

A few nights ago I ran across one of my favorite non-scriptural proverbs. It seems that the great exiled Russian writer, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, had been urged by some of his contemporaries to be more accommodating towards the Communist leaders in the Soviet Union, "You must let bygones be bygones," they said. "Do not be so bitter, dwelling on the personal sufferings you have endured in the past." Solzhenitsyn, you see, had languished for years in the type of Russian prison in which it has been estimated that sixty-six million prisoners died between 1917 and 1959. Then his friends quoted to him half of the proverb: "Dwell on the past and you'll lose an eye." However, Solzhenitsyn made his point when he completed the proverb for his friends, saying, "But the proverb goes on to say: 'Forget the past and you'll lose both eyes.'" There is a world of vital truth in that proverb, and I want to suggest to you that the Bible gives us the same warning with respect to the devil. We may adapt the proverb to read: Keep the devil in sight and you'll lose an eye. Let him out of sight and you'll lose both eyes." The fact is that if we are diligent and keep an eye on our enemy, we are bound to suffer, to be wounded for our trouble. Yet, if we ignore him, we shall be handicapped beyond repair, and, consequently, our usefulness in the Lord's service will be severely limited, if not ended entirely.

At this point we often hear the objection which says that we should simply ignore the devil and focus only on Jesus. Such a sentiment may at first glance seem very biblical and holy. But then upon examination we begin to discover how foreign such thinking is from the Word. Of course, I am aware that there is the danger of our becoming preoccupied with Satan, and that surely is a snare. But I want to share with you a few familiar examples of teaching from prophets, apostles, and our Lord Himself, wherein this idea of keeping the devil, at least in our peripheral vision, is present.

We all know something of the incredible sweetness of Psalm 23 (the Shepherd Psalm). Yet in verse 5 we find these words: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." Here we have an inspired writer, taken up in pure worship and adoration of his Lord, and part of his song of celebration has to do with the provision the Lord makes for him in the presence of his enemies. There is no flight from reality here; no ignoring of the enemy. David acknowledges his foes, and even in that he finds cause for praising the Lord for the way in which He causes David to be a victor in the midst of his enemies.

I remember several years ago a minister said that the Apostle Paul never mentions the devil, and that the only people who do talk about Satan are those who are simply trying to shirk personal responsibility for their sins. That brother needed to read his New Testament more closely! We find Paul writing to the Corinthians, urging them to forgive and to restore a penitent believer to their fellowship, "...in order that no advantage be taken of us by Satan for we are not ignorant of his schemes." (2 Cor.2:11). Paul develops his teaching on the devil in this second letter to the Corinthians. He warns them about false apostles who disguise themselves as apostles of Christ: "And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light," (2 Cor. 11:13-15). The Romans were taught about Satan (Rom. 16:20), as were the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 2:18; 2 Thess. 2:3-12), the Ephesians (Eph. 6:11ff), and others. Apostles other than Paul teach us about the devil. Peter (1 Pet. 5:8), James (Jas. 4:7), and John (1 Jn. 3:8-10) all tell us in effect to know our enemy.

When we consider the teaching of Jesus, we find ample reference to the devil. For example, see the explanation of the parable of the sower in Mt. 13:10-23; Mk. 4:10-20, and Lk. 8:9-15. In our studies in John's Gospel we have also found that Jesus has had much to say about Satan and his agents: "You (Pharisees) are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth...he is a liar, and the father of lies."(Jn. 8:44).

All of this (and there is much more biblical teaching on the devil!) is to show us how vital it is for believers to know and to keep an eye on the enemy. Such vigilance is an inherent part of following our Lord. Yet the

sad truth is that many do not properly take in this fact, and their lives show it. For example, when such people are defeated by trial or temptation, they blame either God or themselves. The devil, meanwhile, escapes to do more damage later. As this pattern repeats itself, their devotion to the Lord will naturally grow weak. They begin to believe that either they are totally unworthy, and hence they allow themselves to be consumed by guilt, or they suspect that the Lord is unloving or unable to protect them sufficiently. In either case, a blind wandering in the wilderness of sin increasingly replaces warm and loving devotion to the Lord. The poor souls become more and more debilitated as the joy of the Lord, which is our strength (Neh. 8:10), withers away. In short, despair replaces devotion. Make no mistake, an enemy hath done this.

I recall watching a movie on television a few years ago, in which there was a terrific sword battle between the good and noble hero and his wicked and deadly foe. The hero fought almost to the point of exhaustion, and he received many wounds in the conflict. But he knew that he had only two alternatives: (1) he could fight for his life and bear the cost involved in that fight—his exhaustion, his wounds, et.; (2) he could give up and allow his enemy to slay him. Escape was out of the question, and reasoning with the brute was impossible. So he fought to win, and win he did!

Friends, we are in that hero's place. We can either face up to our enemy, the devil, and learn to fight him in our Savior's strength, or we can let him out of our sight, hoping that he will go away, only to find ourselves stabbed in the back through his treachery. So this is a plea for those who need this word to learn how faithfully and wisely to follow our great Captain into the real battle, where, despite the thunders of war, we are the safest. Our focus will be on the Lord, but we must never let Satan out of our peripheral vision, lest we become casualties, losing both of our eyes, and wander aimlessly in the desert of sin and despair.

Yours earnestly,

William Harrell

Congregational Singing

Dear Friends,

Lately we have received some very positive comments about the quality of worship during our Sunday services. Naturally, the fact that visitors can detect and appreciate a true spirit of worship in Immanuel should be a great encouragement to us. Yet, lest we are tempted to grow complacent in this area, I would like to express some thoughts on the subject. This is done in the spirit of Paul to the Thessalonians, "...that you may excel still more," (I Thess. 4:1).

I would like to enter this field from the point of congregational singing, for there is a direct correlation between a congregation's attitude of worship and its singing. The cause and effect relationship between the attitude of worship and singing can be simply stated: When the heart is tuned for true spiritual worship, the lungs, the vocal cords, the face, and, indeed, the whole body reflect such an attitude. Perhaps it would be helpful for us to consider briefly some of our own individual experiences with regard to congregational singing. Then we can examine the underlying principle which conditions such experiences.

I am sure that we have all been in church services where the singing was weak, pathetic, and depressing. It is neither an enjoyable nor an edifying experience. One looks about to see grim faces painfully muttering feeble syllables. The countenances betray the anguish of the souls, and the dark, debilitating sickness soon infects the entire fellowship. Some may try to fight it off, but when such poor singing prevails, even the most spiritual saint feels himself being dragged into a chilling abyss.

Opposed to this are those church services where the singing is full, rich, strong, and exultant. One's heart is lifted to the very portals of heaven as the congregation strains, seemingly with power from on high, to offer a resounding peal of praise and adoration to our great and loving Triune God. The faces and the physical bearing of such worshippers reveal the fact that their hearts are "lost in wonder, love, and praise."

What are the causes which beget such radically different effects? I suggest that at least two major factors play a part in congregational singing, and both of these manifest either directly or indirectly our attitude of worship. The first has to do with what we sing; the second has to do more directly with how we sing.

It is important that we avoid singing poor hymns and/or poor tunes. This is not, as some suppose, a matter of personal taste. We simply must recognize that there are words and tunes, in even the best hymnal, which do not accurately express the truth and sanctified sentiments of the Gospel. Some may enjoy singing such hymns, but they should not confuse their personal enjoyment with worship of the living God. I like to

sing Roger Miller's "Kansas City Star," but I do not pretend that I am offering the Lord pure spiritual worship in the process of my singing it.

Without being too technical, I think I can safely assert that the two aspects of any hymn—the words and the tune—stem from and affect two aspects of our psyches. The words primarily have reference to the logical, the thinking part of us; while the tune primarily has reference to the emotional, the feeling part of us. Both aspects of any given hymn must be fitting before that hymn will serve to evoke and express true worship. The tune must fit the words, and both must express a legitimate facet of our faith. If the words reflect weak, pious hopes, or semi-worldly wishes, instead of triumphantly celebrating the sure, saving power of Christ, we cannot hope to rise very high in our worship. Likewise, if the tune is pitiful or too racy for the words, the result is the same—inhibited worship. For example, would you be able to sing "O Sacred Head Now Wounded" to the tune Lancashire, which we usually sing to "Lead On O King Eternal"? The music fits, in terms of meter, but does the tune fit the words? Try it and see what results when we carelessly mix two good hymns, each with the other's good tune.

The point is that both music and words must be fitting. When we put ourselves into weak or weird vehicles, it does not matter how willing the spirit is to soar; it simply cannot exceed the limits of the chosen vehicle. You may want to drive a go-cart 160 m.p.h. but you cannot. You will need a Ferrari to realize such an ambition.

Of course I am not saying that all hymns should be martial and strong. The matter of fitting words and music equally applies to those tender, sensitive, even sorrowful aspects of the Gospel. The discipline of hymn and tune selection can be easily mastered with a bit of basic education in the area just discussed. But what if people refuse to see these principles or fail to abide by them? Or what if the hymns are fitting, but the actual singing remains, "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable," as Hamlet says? Such questions move us into a consideration of the second major factor of congregational singing, namely, how we sing. This deals more directly with one's heart, and is by far more important than the matter of hymn selection.

We must go straight to the root of the issue by examining our motives for coming to church, and our intentions with respect to our participation in worship. If we gather on a Sunday simply as a concession to tradition, or in response to external pressure (say a spouse or parent forcing us to attend), or in order to meet others and show our talents, we are clearly gathering on the basis of a selfish principle. Even if we meet primarily to be fed the Word, to share in fellowship with others, or to be blessed and lifted—all of which are important, legitimate concerns—we are still coming together upon a selfish basis. We have allowed something other than the Lord of glory to become our highest aim.

Our Westminster Confession of Faith helps us here. We are reminded that the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. So our highest aim in worship should be the selfless one of our seeking to glorify the only One who is worthy to be praised above all others. True worship has to do fundamentally with this intention,

this motivation. Then when we sing there will be an all-telling difference. We will not have to become preoccupied with technical perfection, for our heavenly Father neither expects nor wants that. However, we will find our hearts made increasingly free to go out to the Lord in loving devotion and lifted song.

As we give ourselves to Him in this way, far from losing anything, we discover growing capacities for praise, and, yes, for enjoyment—good, holy, enjoyment—all to the glory of God. Friends, let us continue to grow in our knowledge and experience of these things. Let us ever “worship the Lord with reverence, and rejoice with trembling.” (Ps. 2:11).

Yours in His joy,

William Harrell

Crises of Commitment

Dear Friends,

I hope that none of you will think that I am divulging confidential information as I speak in fairly general terms about some of the issues which have surfaced lately through a number of individual conversations. It is my sincere belief that most of these particular issues are part of a larger whole. Since that is the case it will surely benefit us all to examine this larger picture, and then assess our individual concerns within that context.

What I refer to here are the various crises of commitment which are coming into the lives of a number of members of Immanuel. Such things as the pressures and demands of careers, the development of intimate personal relationships, the challenges of family responsibilities, and the pursuit after at least a reasonable degree of economic security and personal happiness are flaring up at this time in the lives of many, to the point where these concerns threaten to overwhelm and weaken spiritual vitality in individuals and in the body as a whole. Admittedly, the areas I have mentioned are legitimate concerns. But when they swell to become all-consuming preoccupations for us, we are at least in the grip of powerful and dangerous temptation, if not in actual sin.

Let me draw something of a composite picture to illustrate what I mean. It has been a growing source of wonder and alarm to me to see how many career-enhancement courses are taught on Wednesday nights. That this is so puts some of you in the awkward position of having to decide whether to attend one of the stated meetings of your church, or commit yourself for a week, a month, six months or more to overtime work or training classes in your career. I know that such decisions are not easy to make, and some of you may even resent having to make such choices, but as unpleasant as it may be, we should manfully face these issues and be willing to accept the consequences of our choices.

You must believe that I do realize and accept that there are those times when the career does actually need some added attention, and that the Lord may well be leading some aside for a time into that avenue. But what I have said to several still holds: There are limits to what you can do, and if you have any sense of priority you will set limits to what you will do. It's one thing for me to tell my boss that I *cannot* work Wednesday nights or on Sunday because I am ill; it's another thing to tell him that I *will not* work then because the Lord, and His people mean more to me than my job. It requires great courage, grace, and wisdom to display such integrity.

The same holds true for those who are seeking to develop intimate personal relationships or fulfill duties on the home front. Whenever the pleasures or difficulties in these spheres become so great that they dull our appetite for the Lord and His service, we are in trouble. Some do not come regularly to the prayer meeting or even Sunday evening worship because social commitments or family concerns bar the way. But as with the limits we impose or fail to impose upon our careers, so in the area of social and family concerns, the priorities of one's heart show up in behavior. There are those who

will drag themselves to the Lord's appointed place of worship, even when the most incredible difficulties conspire to keep them away, while others have seemingly an endless number of excuses for their all-too-frequent absences. Of course I am not simply referring to an external thing such as perfect attendance at all stated meetings. What is really at stake here is the level of one's devotion to the Lord. This will show up not only in one's attendance record, but also in the spirit in which one participates in worship, prayer, and bible study.

My dear friends, I do want to exercise great patience and understanding tolerance with each of you as you wrestle with these crises of commitment. But as painful as it is for me to say this, I must tell you plainly that in the last analysis a crisis of commitment arises and has its greatest force in a divided heart. Fears, doubts, and temptations lose their power as we, without reservation, make the Lord alone our portion and refuge. Confusion is dissipated, and the frustrating complexities of life are less threatening when we realize, in thought and in experience, what David tells us about the Lord in Psalm 16:11:

You will make known to me the path of life;

in Your presence is fulness of joy;

in Your right hand there are pleasures forever.

We have been seeing in our studies of John's Gospel that Christ is the source of life, joy, and true, deep, abiding pleasure. Ultimately, devotion to Him is an all or nothing affair. As this realization begins to dawn upon us, it may seem frightening at first, but as we grow to love and trust Him, life becomes more simple and sweet. It is that simplicity and sweetness which the devil seeks to keep us from experiencing, for a heart which finds its joy and delight in the Lord is much more powerful and effective in Christian service than is the heart which is moved by grim duty or legalistic fear. So the invitation and challenge comes, not only to the faithful few, but to all who read these words: Taste and see that the Lord is good. This is not simply a once-for-all-time decision, but Rather is a matter of daily commitment which we must constantly and jealously guard against the encroachment of all potential idols.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

Finances: The Lord's Blessing

Dear Friends,

Since we are to publish our first quarterly financial statement with this month's letter, I think that it would be appropriate for me to remark on the material side of the ministry of Immanuel. In the first place, we all have cause to express much thanksgiving and deep gratitude to the Lord for His provision. Who would have thought that a church which presently has only 19 communing members (although we are to gain several more this month) would be able to sustain the budget we do? Just some simple arithmetic shows that our per capita giving is about \$300.00 per month. I think that is wonderful, especially considering the fact that several of our members are non-income receiving family members.

With respect to trends and goals, it will be observed that we are as yet relying upon our Presbytery and other outside support for roughly one third of our monthly budget. This is fine since we are still a mission church. But the encouraging thing to note, which does not really show up in these quarterly figures, is that we are month by month becoming less dependent upon gifts from outside sources. This has caused us over the last three months to fall short of our budget by about \$100 per month, but we are making definite progress towards self-sufficiency.

The newest addition to our budget is the building fund. You will see that we are now hardly in a position to begin putting in contracts for property. Yet, from this small beginning we trust that the Lord will eventually enable us to move out of our rented facilities in the YMCA—a move which many of us believe will do much to enhance Immanuel's ministry. Of course, this is a long range concern, and we may yet find our patience being sorely tried here, but we have made a determined start.

It has always encouraged me that we have had the will and the means to help support the work of Christ's Church abroad. We have committed ourselves from the outset to giving 10% of our budget to various mission concerns. These include a local relief fund, support for two seminary students, and support for foreign mission works in several countries. Our ministry is simple by design, and, except for the matter of acquiring our own property, we do not expect ever drastically to increase our local budget. What this means is that as we grow we hope to be able to give a larger percentage of our budget to foreign missions.

Now the basic question arises: What does this all mean? Are we simply frugal in our budget and generous in our giving? Do we just happen to be fortunate enough to pay our bills, run the ministry, and contribute abroad with an ever decreasing amount of outside support? Naturally, we know that there is a reason why we are where we are materially. That reason has to do not so much with our common desires and priorities, which just happen to coincide with an interest in our church. Our giving, which is as sacrificial as any in the largest and most prosperous of congregations, results from design rather than accident or mere club mentality.

For example, we find this design in Exodus 25:1,2, where the Lord commands Moses to, “Tell the sons of Israel to raise a contribution for Me; from every man whose heart moves him you shall raise my contribution.” Two things in this commandment are vital for us to recognize. In the first place, the contribution is for the Lord. To be sure, Moses and Aaron and the various workers in the tabernacle would actually receive the contribution. But their calling, and the detailed directions which the Lord gives in the verses which follow for the prosecution of their calling, come directly from the Lord. These men and their labors would serve above all to ascribe glory to God. In the second place, we notice that the contribution for the Lord’s work would never be extorted from the people. Instead, contributions were to come from, “every man whose heart moves him.” Although we are commanded to give to the Lord’s work, the primary motive for giving is not one of duty, but of delight. Does not Paul underline this when he tells us that God loves a cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:7)? If we read on in Exodus 35 and 36 we discover the delightful and amazing results of this sort of giving. Moses was informed by the workers that, “The people are bringing much more than enough for the construction work which the Lord commanded us to perform.” (Ex. 36:5).

It will ever be so when the Lord stirs up the hearts of His people to commit themselves sacrificially to His work. This is the real reason why we have cause thankfully to rejoice. It is marvelous and we are deeply appreciative for the free and sacrificial giving of our members. But on the deepest level, this generosity is sustained because the living God is active in our midst, prospering us in our ways, and moving our hearts to contribute to His work. So let us thankfully reflect on the fact that we have come thus far by His help, and may we go on trusting and obeying Him from the heart, as He leads us onward in His work.

Gratefully yours,

William Harrell

Simplicity of Church Life

Dear Friends,

We frequently tell visitors that our congregational life is simple for a very good reason. Our church brochure proclaims that, “Our schedule is simple by design, and not because we lack resources. We believe a simple ministry promotes concentration on worshiping the Lord and building up His people.” I would like to deal with this subject of simplicity of congregational life, giving some of the rationale behind our determination to maintain a simple congregational life.

The fact is that simplicity in our ministry is one of the first things many visitors observe about us. I am often asked about the programs or activities we hope to develop in the future—as if our current state of simplicity is one which we must presently endure because our work is so small. Such observations betray an attitude which confuses simplicity with weakness, or barrenness and poverty, or, at best, immaturity. It is implied that we shall outgrow our simple ways when our membership doubles or triples, and a mixture of surprise and patronizing pity is expressed by such observers when they are told that we are determined to remain simple, especially as we grow.

We cannot go into all of the details, but I would like to give some reasons why this is so. Take, for example, our present congregational life, which consists of two Sunday services, a mid-week Bible study, and a Saturday night prayer meeting. We have adopted these as our only stated meetings because we take the description of church life in Acts 2:42 to be normative: “And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, and to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” Of course we have no mention in that verse about the frequency of the meetings of the early Church. What we do find is that an attitude of continual devotion characterized the lives of those believers, so that whenever they did meet there surely was rich spiritual blessing.

Whatever the frequency of meetings in the early church, I hope we do see in Acts 2:42 that intelligent corporate worship and corporate prayer constituted the basis of the ministry. One cannot find a more simple structure. You will not discover in the New Testament the complicatedly structured, highly specialized, pragmatically efficient sort of church which is far too common today. The exotic spiritual diet, with its seemingly endless variations of secondary, pre-digested thoughts of others, was quite foreign to the early believers. Their fare was the simple but substantial diet of intelligent corporate worship, conditioned and sustained by the teaching of the Word of God and the sacraments, all being saturated by private and corporate prayer.

It seems to me that two basic things need to be said about this normative pattern of church life. In the first place there is structure, albeit very simple. Some misguided souls would seek to make the Church of Christ into a formless, gaseous non-entity, characterized by total freedom of life and service, conditioned only by the “spirit.” This is not what we refer to when we say we want to keep our congregational life simple. Paul warns against this sort of thing when he tells us not to abuse our

freedom: “For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” (Gal. 5: 13). So there must be structure, and it must be in accordance with, not just any spirit (isn’t Satan a spirit?), but with the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, as we have seen, the biblical pattern is very simple. This is so because nothing should be allowed to obscure the glory of Christ. Specialized activities such as church softball, or church bowling leagues, which now are assumed to be normal—would have been anathema in the early Church; not because softball or bowling are in themselves sinful, but because anything which tends to atomize the body, anything which restricts participation to a few specialists, should not be deemed a church activity.

I would go so far as to say that this principle should also be applied to the specialized groups which are so much a part of many churches today. One finds in almost any church in our country men’s Bible studies, women’s Bible studies, young couples’ studies, singles’ studies, and so on. But where does this sort of thing stop? Can you imagine having a tall, left-handed, middle-aged, Caucasian men’s Bible study? Or how about the classical music lovers’ Bible study. Or, since many such activities spring up around a common problem or need, why should we not have something like an agoraphobics’ study?

You see the absurdity in my exaggerations, but the truth is that most churches are headed at full speed towards such a ridiculous end, rather than towards the simplicity which is in Christ. They set such courses, no doubt, in accordance with the fine goal of seeking to meet people’s needs. Yet somehow, in the process of men’s pursuing this noble end, a structure is erected which gradually but surely saps spiritual vitality from, instead of edifying, church members. Such complicated congregational structures fragment the body of Christ instead of uniting it in the one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of which we read in Ephesians 4.

Therefore, in accordance with the biblical pattern, we are committed to keeping our congregational life simple. This will not only build us up in the Lord, but will give us wide range as individuals to shine as lights in our dark and needy world, instead of gathering as salt piles which increasingly lose their savor. We are committed to this way not only for our own present spiritual welfare, but also for the future well-being of our children, who too often grow up to inherit a monster of an organization in their church, rather than a church which simply shines with the beauty of loving, personal and corporate holiness. In an age of increasing complexity and organization this simple pattern will surely appear odd. Yet we trust that because it is the Lord’s pattern it will bear lasting fruit. So we simply press on.

Yours in hope,

William Harrell

Simplicity of Individual Life

Dear Friends,

Last month I dealt with the subject of simplicity in ministry and congregational life. I would like to carry on from there and share with you some thoughts on simplicity in one's individual life. In one of our recent Sunday evening studies in Ephesians we had our attention drawn particularly to Ephesians 3:10 where we read that one of the goals of our redemption in Christ is, *in order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the Church to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places*. We learned from that verse that angels could understand the wisdom of God in His creating man and loving him. However, the fact that God could continue to love man after the fall, and could be impelled by His great love to work for the salvation of fallen man, disclosed to the wondering and uncomprehending minds of angels the manifold wisdom and love of God. Sin had broken man. Sin fragmented, disintegrated, and complicated man's personality. Yet, instead of the Lord casting His ruined creatures away, the complicating factor of the fall and sin in man occasioned the demonstration of the multi-dimensional wisdom and love of God, as He worked to save man.

If we keep in mind the fact that sin is a complicating factor in man, we can better appreciate something of the work which God the Holy Spirit is doing in our lives. It is true that God, in Christ, embraces us, sin and all (*Just as I am ...* as the old hymn says); but that does not mean that our pure and holy God intends to allow us to remain deformed or complicated by sin. I am convinced that part of our being sanctified, part of our being made more like Christ, has to do with our becoming more simple in heart, mind, and action.

Consider the way that the Bible depicts Satan, for example. He is restless, as we see in Job 1:7: *And the Lord said to Satan, 'From where do you come?' Then Satan answered the Lord and said, 'From roaming about on the earth and walking around on it.'* Peter tells us in I Pet. 5:8: *... your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour*. Satan is the original discontented being, as we see in Isaiah 14:13,14 where he says: *...I will ascend ...I will raise my throne ...I will make myself like the Most High*.

What a great contrast there is between the vaunting ambition and frantic activity of Satan, and the sort of quiet, peaceful, and deeply satisfying life to which our Lord calls us when He says: *Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest*. (Mt. 11:28). Those who have walked longest and closest with our Lord can testify about this proffered rest and its life simplifying effects. Just as sin, with its complications of personality and lifestyle, restlessness and dissatisfied heavings of one's heart—all go together; so do restful contentment in the Lord, and a simple, efficient lifestyle.

I believe that this teaching on individual simplicity needs to be applied for most of us in two related areas. First, we must learn not to despise the routine or the common

affairs of our lives. This will not be easy for in so doing we must rise above our culture and the fast-paced, instant everything, success oriented age in which we live. You will agree that most of us naturally prefer the exotic or extraordinary happenings in our lives over the seemingly dull routine. This preference is as natural as is the tendency children have for running, jumping, screaming, and playing fantastic games of imagination or sport. However, when adults prefer the excitement of the playground to the sedate, though more deeply satisfying, life of their faithfully discharging responsibilities, we must identify this preference as a mark of immaturity.

Such an attitude shows up in the spiritual realm when one lives for the occasional Bible conferences, special activities, films, and so forth, while finding that the ordinary weekly preaching of the Word, the intelligent, corporate prayer of the Church, and the daily domestic routine of living a quiet and godly life, are too flat and stale to be of any profit. The result of such an attitude is that one wrongly learns to associate the nearness and blessing of God with only the exciting and extraordinary, while discounting the routine and despising the day of small things (cf. Zech. 4:10).

A second area of application has to do with our peculiarly American pragmatic tendency. We are used to getting things done, whether it is designing, building, and flying a space shuttle, or baking an instant cake. However, problems develop when we substitute mere activity for the mature, rational, and prayerful reflection which alone will lead to the production of something of value.

Poor Samson provides a telling example of this pragmatic spirit. After he had disclosed the secret of his strength and the Philistines were upon him, he presumptuously said: *I will go out as at other times and shake myself free.* Then these terrible words follow: *But he did not know that the Lord had departed from him.* (Judges 16:20). He had grown accustomed to doing great feats of strength instead of maintaining a right and consistent relationship with God.

Is it not true that we can be like that? We get used to thinking that our spiritual health and service are like instant soup—just follow the right steps, do the right activities, be at the right formations, and the result will always be the same. If problems arise, we tend too frequently not to rest and reflect and seek the Lord in utter devotion; we simply increase our activities! That is why so many Christians are so busy rushing to meetings, multiplying Bible studies and other commitments, or even filling up their social calendars in the name of fellowship. The last thing that such busy and complicated creatures want to do is the first thing they need to do, namely, to heed the call of the Lord to *be still and know that I am God.* (Ps. 46:10).

My dear friends, let the Lord mature you into simplicity. It will not be easy to give up our complications, to resist the urge to esteem the extraordinary above the routine, or to find our worth primarily in who we are rather than in what we do. But it is my prayer that we may together strive to enter the rest of the Lord (cf. Heb. 4:11), and so learn the contentment of King David, who had learned to hope in the Lord:

O Lord, my heart is not proud, or my eyes haughty;

Nor do I involve myself in great matters,

Or in things too difficult for me.

Surely I have composed and quieted my soul;

Like a weaned child against his mother,

My soul is like a weaned child within me.

O Israel, hope in the Lord

From this time forth and forever. (Ps. 131)

Sincerely yours,

William Harrell

Disobedience, Duty, and Delight

Dear Friends,

Some of the best selling Christian books on the market today have to do with divine guidance and the discovery of the Lord's will for one's life. This is obviously an area of major importance, and I do not intend to go into it in this brief letter. But I do hope to contribute at present something in the form of a preliminary consideration. The Lord Jesus teaches us that one's attitude, to a great extent, conditions one's ability not only to do God's will, but also to discover the divine will. Our Lord said: *If any man is willing to do His will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or whether I speak from Myself.* (Jn. 7:17).

I would like briefly to deal with this attitude which enables us to have ears to hear what the Spirit of God is saying to us. In order to keep things clear, simple, and short, I want to look at this under three headings: disobedience, duty, and delight. I need not say much about disobedience. It is sin. A disobedient heart tends to block out true knowledge of God and of one's own nature. The familiar words of Samuel to King Saul after Saul's disobedience are illuminating in relation to the analysis of a disobedient heart: *Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry.* (I Sam. 15:22,23).

Although it is a sad phenomenon that Christians do disobey the Lord, when we are reasonably healthy spiritually we know that we should avoid disobedience at all costs. But how do we render obedience? For many, the only weapon they believe that they have in their arsenal to ward off disobedience is duty. Nor should we despise this weapon. Duty, a truly wonderful and virtuous motive, may be defined as the attitude of founding one's conduct upon moral or legal obligation. So, for example, duty requires us to refrain from murdering, stealing, or committing adultery. At times we may find ourselves mightily tempted to give in to satanic suggestions in these areas, but when we allow the dictates of our godly duty to triumph over our temporarily inflamed passions, victory is won. We have held out and have been obedient, having been sustained by a sense of duty.

However, it is distressing to find that many believers seem only upon rare occasion to rise above the employment of sheer duty in their quest to discover and do God's will. As we have said, duty is wonderful but it is a bit like heavy artillery—absolutely necessary for saving your life in an intense engagement with the enemy, but not the sort of thing you can or even should carry around with you every time you make the slightest move.

What I am trying to say is this: too many believers concentrate all of their efforts on cultivating a sense of duty which is far from the biblical conception of duty, and which actually results in a very inferior form of obedience. Such poor souls rightly understand that to obey is better than to disobey; so they will learn to obey by grimly pressing on, despite their feelings. They increasingly become like galley slaves, and although it would be much too unorthodox and unacceptable to admit it, their walk with Christ gradually but surely becomes a matter of absolute drudgery.

Why does this happen? It happens because there is an ignorance or a forgetting of the fact that there is another dimension which is a part of the biblical idea of duty. Here we enter the realm of delight. Of course I am not talking about the hedonistic philosophy which tells us to do

only those things we want to do, or those things which make us feel good. Yet it is amazing to see how often the Bible marries the concept of delight to that of duty. The longest psalm is full of this and it would pay you rich spiritual dividends to list and meditate upon the many verses in Psalm 119 which deal with this. For example, we read in Psalm 119:47, *I shall delight in Thy commandments, which I love.*

To most of us the thought of commandment implies sheer duty. You obey whether you feel like it or not. Furthermore, are we not inclined to feel that if we have to do something we never really want to do it? Such a notion is absent from the biblical conception. We find not sheer, grim duty in the long psalm, but a true, spontaneous, and willing delight being expressed from the transformed heart of the psalmist, even as he does the very things which he has a solemn duty to do. Moses brings the ideas of duty and delight together in Deuteronomy 30. He says to Israel, *...I command you to love the Lord your God...* (Dt. 30:15-20). Paul does the same thing when he commands the Thessalonians to rejoice always (I Thess. 5:16), and when he twice commands the Philippians to, *rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice.* (Phil. 4:4).

So my friends, even though it is clear that God has so joined duty and delight, do you find that in practice you put them asunder? To obey the Lord from a grim sense of duty is surely better than to disobey; but such obedience is far from the best. Let us seek grace, therefore, to enter with greater consistency and depth this dimension of godly delight, and then we shall be in a better position to hear and obey the Lord's voice.

Yours in His joy,

William Harrell

Social Problems: Symptoms of Spiritual Decay

Dear Friends,

Frequently unbelievers and carnal believers accuse Biblical and Reformed believers of ignoring or obscuring through simplistic analyses the pressing social issues of our day. In some instances this criticism is justified, such as when believers become interested only in cultivating a cloistered virtue, in running away from this ugly, sinful world, and escaping to the bliss of heaven. We cannot deny that the impulse to find refuge in our Lord and to be free from the curse of sin in this life is legitimate. Read such Psalms as 3, 7, 11, 16, and 18, to name a few, and you will see this attitude displayed. Of course worldly people who have no God for their refuge will mock this attitude, but that shows their lack, not ours. Yet, if all we ever want to do is run to heaven and ignore the challenges of the world, we are being escapist and irresponsible, and we need to read such passages as Romans 13:1-7; I Peter 2:13-17; and John 17 (especially verse 15 where Jesus prays concerning His disciples: *I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one.*).

I say all of this because we need to remember that part of our responsibility of being in the world while not being of it is to proclaim to the world, as clearly and intelligently as we can, that the social ills which are growing all around us are symptoms, not of mere social incompetence or apathy or bad luck, but of spiritual decay. This can be illustrated by considering some social issues.

Think of such areas as abortion and divorce. While we must be as gentle and sympathetic as possible with individuals who have their troubles in these areas, it still remains true that, as a rule, one's desire to have an abortion or to get a divorce stems from a selfish motive. With abortion it is pretty clearly a case of one claiming: *my rights over the rights of the unborn*. In the same way, divorce most often results when it is decided by one or both partners in a marriage that the fun is over, that it will be easier to try again with someone else. Not much thought is given to the social fallout which results from the decision, where children of broken homes grow up to be ignorant, graceless, irresponsible, and deprived wretches, who will themselves, but for the grace of God, ultimately spawn children yet more degenerate.

We in Virginia have recently had exposure to still another controversial social issue which clearly shows that spiritual values affect social behavior. I refer to the state's execution of the convicted murderer, Frank Coppola, and the many outcries denouncing it. What is disturbing in the case of Frank Coppola's execution is not that it took place. It was right that our Supreme Court revived the death penalty in 1976, for capital punishment is plainly sanctioned in the Bible—in the New Testament (Rom. 13:4), as well as in the Old Testament. But the sort of outcries against our state officials for their putting this man to death are disturbing and revealing.

Consider, for example, the words of Chan Kendrick, director of the state American Civil Liberties Union, as he denounced Coppola's execution by saying that: *it proves that politics comes before human life... It should never be easy for the state to carry out these state-assisted murders*. State Delegate J. Samuel Glasscock of Suffolk feels the same way. He tells us that he is now more than ever opposed to the death penalty, and that: *It's a hard, hard message to get across, but society has to learn how awful the death penalty is*. But for whom is it awful? Would it never occur to such supposedly enlightened souls that murder is awful for the innocent victim, awful for the victim's family and friends, and that the murderer deserves to pay an awful penalty?

But here we seem to have a curious mixture of attitudes. Those who are for abortion (killing a fetus), and for divorce (killing a marriage), are also usually against capital punishment (killing a killer). This mixture is, however, consistent. It may seem that the negative attitude towards capital punishment is something other than the selfish motive. After all, would it not be easier to execute a person than to keep him in prison for years? Yet when we examine these attitudes closely we see that their common root is anti-authority, anti-biblical, anti-God. They all represent a throwing off of the yoke, a determined refusal to bear responsibility and to face the consequences for one's actions.

So the fig leaf of changing the law is brought in to cover the guilt for aborting a child, or a marriage, or for murdering another person. Change the law, indeed, but the consequences remain! You may not like driving around a sharp curve in the road at 25 m.p.h., so you change the law. Now you are allowed to take the curve at 55 m.p.h. But you face the consequences when you smash your car, for 25 m.p.h. was absolutely the right speed.

So it is in society. People turn their backs upon the Lord and His law, believing that they have improved their lot. It seems to them that things are easier and work better when there are no rules to bind them. Two bitter fruits are born of this. In the first place, things do not work better, life is not easier, freedom is not achieved simply by ignoring or trying to change God's law. We need but look at all of the divorces and ruined lives to see that. No matter how much we want to believe otherwise, the car will crash if we take the curve too fast.

But the second fruit born of such negligence or outright disobedience of divine law is even more serious. Some may wonder if we should really expect secular society to conform to Biblical standards. The answer is that we must expect this, because truth is singular. There are not two or more realities—only one. God has not one law for the believer and another for the unbeliever. So when our neighbors keep reaping the bitter consequences of disobedience, we have an obligation to disclose to them the cause. We must warn them that if the first bitter fruit of disobedience ripens on pragmatic soil (i.e., things don't work as they had hoped), the second fruit arises on moral grounds. They have yet to fall, finally and irreversibly, into the hands of the living and inherently just God, whose perfect law they have flouted, whose Person they have affronted, and whom they will find to be a terrible, consuming fire.

Therefore, let us have courage and faithfulness to face the social challenges of today from this perspective. Let us pray that the Lord would yet, in His mercy, grant repentance to those who dwell in the darkness and futility of unbelief and rebellion from God, with the consequent miserable fruit of social ruin.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

Idolatry

Dear Friends,

I want to address the subject of idolatry. You will not be surprised to learn that I am against it, and I trust that you are against it as well. So what more is there to say on the subject? Surely on the formal, theological level the issue is very clear and simple: Idolatry is a violation of the second commandment. It is an affront to God, an offense against His majesty, His holiness, His justice, His sovereignty, His wisdom, grace, love, and mercy. When we regard anything above the Lord, or when we seek to worship Him by means other than those which He has appointed, we sin against all that He is, and against all that He has done, is now doing, and against all that He purposes to do in the future. In short, when one erects an idol he demonstrates his preference for his own faulty notion of God above the true and living God.

Those who make an orthodox confession of faith in Jesus Christ will naturally agree with what has been said, and will agree that with respect to life's priorities, the true and living God must come first. But the fact that one makes such an orthodox and pious confession is in itself not enough. It has been said repeatedly in sermons and Bible studies at our church that a person may be formally or intellectually orthodox, well informed and articulate, while being practically idolatrous and far from the Lord. Such an observation simply echoes what Jesus says when He quotes from Isaiah: *These people honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me.* (Mt.15:8). The words of James apply equally well: *...faith without works is dead.* (Jas. 2:26). Furthermore, when we bear in mind the fact that the Ten Commandments (including the 2nd against idolatry) were first given, not to unbelievers, but to a people already redeemed by the Passover blood, we begin to appreciate that at least practical idolatry is something against which the believer needs to establish a pretty strong and vigilant guard.

Besides being a very serious transgression in itself, there is something fundamentally irrational and suicidal about idolatry. For many Christians the idea of sin against God is a vague, abstract, theological notion. But the experience of tasting the bitter fruits which are the consequences of sin is a painful and concrete reality. Therefore I want briefly to focus on this practical, self-destructive aspect of idolatry.

Whether we realize it or not, the best of saints can be in the habit of constructing at least little idols. We read in I Samuel 19:13 that even David, a man after God's own heart, had a household idol. We may not have little figures to worship around our homes, but we do frequently formulate mental conceptions of the Lord and His will for us which are far from accurate. When we cling to our false notions in the face of the clear teaching of Scripture we are being idolatrous. The irrational and suicidal part of this is seen when we understand that the Lord, because He is jealous for His own glory and for our best welfare, always dashes idols to pieces. If we persist in holding on to our idols, we will be dashed with them.

See how this works out in a common reaction to the destruction of our idols. When our idols are demolished, the resentful belief that somehow God has let us down can enter our hearts. For example, we formulate false ideas about God's will for our lives, and how God will be glorified in it all. This mental idol may range from something manifestly worldly to the strange notion of the legalistic ascetic, who wants to be a martyr and is angry and disappointed when personal and material blessings from the Lord come into his life. Whatever the case, when the Lord thwarts our mistaken plans or overturns our false notions, we can react like sulking children, feeling sore about the destruction of our playthings.

Yet, far from enriching our lives, our idols bring only poverty and ruin. We may feel that we lost something very precious by our not getting that job promotion or that new house, but if such prizes were idols of our own making, then despite our feelings, we are far richer without them. For the false notions we entertain about the Lord and His plans for our lives obscure, rather than magnify, God's glory, while they impoverish, rather than enhance, our lives.

An idol, whether it be statue or thought, always represents less than God, and less than God's best for us. This may not be immediately apparent, since we do tend to construct high hopes, materially and

spiritually. We may desire such things as a new car, a better job, or even a fine church building. We may also feel that we are gifted in certain areas (e.g. administration, hospitality, teaching, music, etc.), and that the Lord will surely refine and use such gifts. Then comes the dashing of the idol. We are called to serve, not in a capacity in which we feel strong and confident, but in an area which we may well deem inglorious. Provision is made for us which seems downright common and meager. In short, the reality which the Lord often delivers can seem very disappointing in comparison with the idols of our fond hopes.

Yet here is the central issue: The Lord wants to give us real things; He wants to make us real. He is not interested in merely inflating our conceits or intoxicating us with ever more fantastic dreams. He wants our action and service to reflect accurately and genuinely flow from our true character. Simply put, we have a tendency to prefer to dream, and when our dreams are shattered we blame God. He is determined to deliver reality, which may at first seem incredibly dull and beneath us, or even unsafe and unwise. Consider of the provision for the birth of the Son of God—a stable! Yet, when we come to terms with the divine reality and the Lord’s will and provision for us, we find that life is more blessed and exciting than we could have imagined. This is so because God’s glory and our highest good always go together.

We have learned this from our studies in Nehemiah, where we find the Jews building the wall around Jerusalem for the glory of God (cf. Neh. 2:17 *...that we may no longer be a reproach.*), and for their own individual security (cf. Neh. 3:28-30, where each person *...carried out repairs in front of his own house.*). However, there remains this paradox: The Lord’s way to blessed life is the way which at first appears to be the suicidal way, for it leads us into death.

The cross of Christ stands before each of us as an ugly reality. We are called to bear it. Then it slays us completely. All of our hopes, all of our plans, all of our abilities and gifts are consumed on the altar of God’s sovereign love for us. But then we are raised to new life, with true hopes, and fruitful plans, and gifts sanctified by the gracious touch of the Master. Is this suicide? Only those who doggedly and suicidally cling to false dreams think so. But those who lose their lives in the deep and eternal purposes of the true and living God do find their lives again, transformed by our blessed Savior, as He and His Word dwell richly in them. Now I ask you, what idol can possibly compare with that?

Truly yours,

William Harrell

Hearts Prepared for Worship

Dear Friends,

Since we have started recording our sermons and Bible studies I want to share a concern which I have in relation to these tapes. Some have said that they find the tapes more fulfilling and powerful than the live services. This is not good. We rejoice that folk are being blessed by these tapes, yet when greater blessing is found through tapes than through worshipping the Lord in the living fellowship of His people, something is amiss. I have listened to many fine tapes, but when I have had occasion to participate in worship in the places from which such tapes originated, I have found the worship to be incomparably better.

Could it be that we are in danger of distracting each other, rather than promoting an atmosphere of true worship? The fact is that no matter how powerful a sermon may be in a given service, if a spirit of worship does not prevail, the Word will fall on more or less dull ears. I recall worshipping in a church during our vacation where the sermon was very short and ordinary. But the spirit of worship was powerful, lifting, and edifying. Not just the minister, but the people brought the Holy Spirit to that service!

If it is true that people are finding that our tapes are superior to our services, there may be too many distractions in our worship. Since our public worship of God is so vitally important, I want briefly to touch on some areas where I believe we can minimize distraction through prayerful attention, correction, and practice. First, there always seems to be a few individuals who forget that we are a worshipping family. They will come in late, cough, yawn, loudly blow their noses, and generally fidget about at will. It does not seem to occur to them that their inconsiderate behavior distracts preacher and people. This sort of action betrays not only bad manners, but also a lack of personal engagement in the discipline of worship. Naturally, some coughers, blowers, and fidgeting ones will claim that their actions are involuntary, and that no one can be expected to control such bodily functions. I say, go to a symphony concert and witness the way in which coughs and nose blowings are held in abeyance until the time between movements or until the intermission. These supposedly involuntary eruptions can be greatly controlled simply by one's being completely intent upon the business at hand. When a cough does explode, a considerate person can and will use his handkerchief to muffle it.

There is also the greater danger of our slipping into the feeling that our services are mere spectator events. One comes to church to watch the minister perform, and either to be lifted by the performance, or to be disappointed in it and critical of it. The person suffering from this spectator syndrome will be reluctant to sing freely and joyfully to God's praise. Such a person is more critically aware of those about him than he is humbly and thankfully aware of the Lord. Also, the spectator's ability to concentrate on the Word or in prayer grows ever more feeble, since he refuses to exercise his powers of concentration, or to contribute an effort, or to invest himself in what is going on in worship. Such passivity increasingly diminishes one's ability to discover and appropriate glorious wonders of the Lord's Person and work.

Here we must remember the words of God to Jeremiah: *You will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all of your heart.* (Jer. 29:13). Yes, we must be active in worship, and learn to give ourselves to the Lord. In worship we not only make an effort to discover who God is and to praise Him accordingly, but we also present ourselves to Him as living sacrifices. This involves preparation of mind and heart, and a giving of our lives to the Lord—our whole lives, as they have been lived during the entire week. Spiritual preparation is not accomplished by ten minutes of quiet reflection before a service. We must strive to bring to the Lord hearts which have been made full of humble gratitude and praise, and this is not possible unless we begin our preparation by walking with and serving our Lord consistently throughout the week.

Finally, we allow ourselves to be distracted and we cause distraction for others when we fail to come together in a spirit of expectancy. Will the living and majestic God not speak to us from His Word? Is not the Lord Jesus Christ interceding for us? Will the Holy Spirit fail to guide us into all truth and blessing as we gather in Christ's name? Again, the words of God to Jeremiah are apt: *'For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.'* (Jer. 29:11) (or it may read...*a future and an expectancy.*). Lord help us to believe it, and to worship You accordingly!

Yours expectantly,

William Harrell

Hearts Prepared for Worship

Dear Friends,

Last Sunday, upon my returning from a brief vacation, I had the opportunity of being led, rather than leading, in worship in our church. Two of our own men led us in morning and evening worship, and their prayerful preparation and studious labors were apparent to anyone with a true spiritual appetite. The Lord also honored His servants by showering His blessings upon us and lifting our hearts in praise. I was struck afresh with the thought that despite our faults (and we must not deny these, but must seek the Lord's grace to overcome them) there is a definite quality of genuine godly devotion and personal warmth in our fellowship and worship.

Visitors frequently speak of this quality of personal warmth in the ministry of Immanuel. But many of them make a mistake when they attribute the cause of this warmth to our being a small church, or to our being temperamentally warm and open people. In fact, many of us are naturally cool and reserved. What then does cause us to be so warm and friendly? To what can we attribute the inclusive love which is being fostered in our midst?

The ultimate answer is that the love of God is being shed abroad in our hearts as the Holy Spirit works in and among us to will and to do His good pleasure. The proximate cause is that we seek to be biblical believers, i.e., we have committed and submitted ourselves to a ministry of God's Word. But then there are many ministries claiming to be committed to God's Word which are by common consent cool and impersonal. A church does not have to be very large to suffer from such an icy, metallic spirit. It simply needs to be selective in its biblical scope, rather than taking in and seriously applying the whole counsel of God.

I was recently talking with some friends about churches which are run much like assembly lines. They had been discussing this topic with another person from just such a church, and found that the rationale behind such operations is that a large church, which bustles with activity, must be run like an assembly line in order to be run efficiently. My friends remarked that such thinking seemed to resemble the mentality one finds in a General Motors car factory, to which the person seeking to justify the assembly line ministry replied that GM did make good cars. There are at least two things wrong with such popular and pragmatic thinking. In the first place, there is a great difference between cars and people. Cars do not have emotional or spiritual needs. Cars, with all of their complex technology, are very simple in comparison with the manifold complexities of human personality. Of course the tragedy is that when people are treated like cars over long periods of time, and when they are told they are like cars, they do begin to believe that they are cars! In the end this mechanical approach to ministry is utterly dehumanizing.

Secondly, many of the high-powered, assembly line advocates argue that if we want to be warm and personal, that's fine. But they want to be efficient, they want to see results, and as they respect (so they say) our desire to move seemingly at a pedestrian's pace in order to achieve intimacy, so we should respect their determination to build a ministerial Concorde jet, with all of its sleek swiftness and cold efficiency. They will sacrifice intimacy for efficiency.

The fallacy in this argument is that although many do play off intimacy against efficiency—as if they were equal options—the Bible does not sanction the sacrifice of the one for the sake of the other. In fact, if we weigh efficiency against intimacy biblically, we find that intimacy is far more important. When Paul descends from the doctrinal Alps of his letter to the Ephesians we find him closing with these words: *But that you also may know about my circumstances, how I am doing, Tychicus, the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord, will make everything known to you. And I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know about us, and that he may comfort your hearts.* (Eph. 6: 21,22)

Paul's warm, personal love shows through, and he assumes that the Ephesians love and are concerned about him. I have recently wondered whether the efficient cause of this magnificent epistle is not found in this: Paul loved and was loved by the believers in Ephesus, and to assure them about his circumstances he was sending Tychicus with news, and so as not to send him empty-handed, Paul composed this letter. What do you think?

I realize that assembly line advocates may say that my thinking on this point is only a gush of weak sentimentality. But I believe that if they truly reflected upon their approach to ministry, they would find themselves at odds not only with me, but also with Paul, and Peter, and John, and the Lord Jesus Himself. How can anyone read John's Gospel or his epistles and come away thinking that true biblical faith can sacrifice personal intimacy to mere efficiency, which more often than not is simply blind activism? This is what I mean by saying that such people limit their biblical scope. They may read such verses as: *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God . . . the one who does not love does not know God . . . If some one says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar. . . .* (1 Jn. 4: 7,8,20). However, a cold and selfish walk, no matter how efficient it may seem, can only result when one ignores such verses.

Personal warmth and loving intimacy should never be considered as one among several options in ministry. Nor should anyone labor under the illusion that we just happen to be a loving fellowship, as if this were our special focus. The Lord Jesus Himself informs us that loving intimacy is no such optional luxury when He says: *This is my commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.* (Jn. 15:12). If we truly believe this, we will not hesitate to give ourselves to one another in Christ, by His power, and according to His will. (cf., I Thess. 2:8). Furthermore, as we give ourselves to others in Christ, we also give to others the Christ who dwells in us, and this, besides being warm and intimate ministry, is ultimately efficient ministry as we find ourselves being blessedly knit together in the sweet and powerful love of Christ, and such love makes obedience and service sweet and fruitful.

Affectionately yours,

William Harrell

Punk Rock and Redemption

Dear Friends,

Recently I was watching a television program about punk rock. For those who are unfamiliar with this terribly ugly phenomenon I should add a few words of explanation. Many of us have been exposed (alas!) to the loud, harsh, pounding punk rock music, which celebrates violence, gruesomeness, and evil. But punk rock is more than music, it is a life-style which is founded upon a philosophy of despair. Writers like Francis Schaeffer have helped us see how music and art express and reflect distinctive philosophies. Such philosophies do not stop with music, but go on to express themselves in general culture. The more you know about the historical development of philosophy, art, literature, music, and general culture (i.e. social, political, and economic developments), the more clearly this pattern appears.

Think of the rock music of the 1960's. The message was free love, easy, casual living, and self-indulgence. Parents lamented over the strange music, the long hair, beards, and old clothing. But look around at general culture today. Average, middle-aged men and women have imbibed the pleasure-loving philosophy of the 1960's, and this now shows in their casual attitude toward life, work, education, and even dress. They may not be listening to Beatles' music (although some do!), but the life-style of the Beatles and the rock culture of the 1960's has permeated general culture in the 1980's.

There once was a time when people dressed up, not only to go to church on Sunday, but also to go out to a restaurant or even to a movie. Now all is common and casual, with blue jeans and tennis shoes being the accepted attire for all occasions. Yet punk rock alerts us to the fact that a new philosophy is on the rise. The free love and hedonistic philosophy of the 1960's has already given way to a philosophy of absolute negation and despair. Punk rockers maintain that all is meaningless—life doesn't matter, society doesn't matter, even the individual self doesn't matter. They not only loudly proclaim this in their music (themes of death, torture, and destruction being primary), but even in their dress punk rockers proclaim their total negation of life. We have gone beyond weird hair styles and clothing now.

Punk rockers will not only stab you in the back and stomp in your face, but they also indulge in self mutilation which resembles that practiced by primitive, heathen tribesmen. For example, we see punk rockers wearing safety pins and the like through their own flesh. But they are different from primitive tribesmen in this way: the heathen bushman lacerates himself for the religious purpose of satisfying some idol, thereby demonstrating how deceived he is regarding true deity, while punk rockers abuse themselves as a result of a conscious and decided rejection of all that has meaning, morality, and personality, including especially God. So, is this negative, despairing philosophy to permeate general culture in the year 2000, as the hedonism of the 1960's has triumphed in the 1980's? You may be wondering if this is an appropriate theme to be considering as we near Christmas. But there is the point! We must not ignore the harshness and blackness that is operating in our world, even during Christmas. We can too easily forget the pitiful plight of the cause of God at the time of Christ's birth. The people of God had been reduced to servitude, and the sort of seekers of truth and of God we find recorded in the Bible are dear old Simeon and Anna, the peasants, Mary and Joseph, and, of course, a few shepherds. All the while the Caesars, and the likes of murderous Herod seemed to have had firm control. The Bible does not ignore the blackness, even at Christ's birth, and we must not ignore it either. So again I ask: will the philosophy of despair prevail in the 21st century? Will 1983 mark an advance in godlessness? Jesus Himself asks at the end of a parable on importunity, *...when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?* (Lk.18:8).

Our age is seeing more clearly than has any other age that there are ultimately only these two choices: faith in God through Christ, or despair. One way is life, the other is death. The punk rockers have shown us at least that despair and eventual annihilation of others and of self are the fruits of all godlessness. Punk rockers are simply being logical and totally consistent in their godlessness. Turn your back on God,

and at first you may seek pleasure and satisfaction. But the quest is in vain and doomed to end in disillusioned despair and death.

Far different is a living faith in Christ. Where the unbeliever's demand ends in despair and death, the believer does not demand, but humbly and gratefully receives the saving grace, mercy, and life of God in Christ. As we receive this gift we also give ourselves to our Lord in trusting obedience. We learn to worship Him alone, to love Him, and to serve Him, as He commands and enables us to love Him and the other members of His family (*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another... Jn. 13:34*), and to serve others in His name (*...to the extent that you did it to one of the least of these, My brothers, you did it to Me. Mt. 25:40*).

This worship of God through Christ, this giving of ourselves to Him and to others in His name is that for which we were created. The punk rockers demonstrate that when we violate this reason for our being by making selfish and godless demands, the end is not fulfillment, but despair and death. However, when we die to selfish and sinful and satanically inspired urges and live for Christ, we receive by faith the very life of the Son of God, and we blessedly grow and develop for His glory and for our good.

So let us renew our determination to abide in the light and life of Christ, and may we, through our service, be instruments of that light and life in our needy world. For this is the deepest meaning of our Lord's nativity, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. To that end, my prayer for each of us is that we will continue to mature in our faith, giving ourselves ever more consciously and consistently to the One who is the way, and the truth, and the life. Giving ourselves unreservedly to Him is the only way to overcome the devilish demands of sin which lead to death. For as we give ourselves to Him in glad adoration, and to others in His name, we discover that quiet but sweetly growing and enriching blessing of peace, and liberty, and life in Him, which is a world away from, and which triumphs over, sin, despair, and death.

Yours in His service,

William Harrell