

1999

Dear Friends,

I recently heard a sports commentator declare that we are seeing the rise of a new generation of athletes determined to demand respect from everyone while giving it to no one. Such an observation could well be made regarding our society in general. Not only is road courtesy, for example, almost extinct, but safe driving with obedience to highway laws is also fast disappearing, as road rage rises to replace them. Another area where the demand for respect and refusal to give it to others may be seen is that of civil lawsuits. The idea that a person—even a Christian—should suffer wrong rather than take a brother to court is viewed by almost everyone as naive and ludicrous, despite what the apostle Paul and the Lord Jesus have said on the subject (1 Cor. 6:1-11; Mt. 5:38-42).

We are living in a society where increasingly men, women, even children retaliate with harsh words or, in some cases injurious force, whenever they feel themselves wronged. This should alert us to the fact that such people are far gone into the delusion that they are gods living in a world of slaves who owe them perfect obedience. This attitude, alas, has infected many who profess the name of Christ. There needs to be amongst Christians a recovery of an appreciation for and practice of the virtue of sanctified insensitivity.

While it is true that God's grace makes us sensitive, soft, and considerate (Gal. 5:22,23), it is not true that the grace of the Lord makes us thin-skinned. In fact, sanctifying divine grace makes us hard. It does not make us hard-hearted with respect to others. We are commanded and enabled to love and care for others. But concerning ourselves, it is instructive to note how consistently the Scriptures extol self-denial. The rule is that we are to have an honest estimation of ourselves. We are not to think, as we tend to think, too highly of ourselves (Rom. 12:3,16). Yet our attitude and actions toward others are to be gracious and generous, as we labor to prefer them in honor to ourselves (Rom. 12:10; Phil. 2:3,4). Such biblical denial of self and affirmation of others is exactly the reverse of the asserting of self and denigration of others which increasingly characterizes our society.

We do well to consider and seek to apply to ourselves a sanctified insensitivity to our own whims, wants, and wounds. Our Lord sets before us the pattern of His own self-denial. He refused to take the well-meaning but satanically inspired counsel of Peter which told Him to avoid the cross (Mt. 16:22,23). Nor did our Master embrace His cross so that we, His servants could shun ours (Mt. 16:24). Jesus set His face to go to Jerusalem (Lk. 9:51); He proclaimed in Gethsemane, "Not My will, but Thy will be done." (Mt. 26:29); He came not to be served, but to serve (Mk. 10:45).

Jesus could do all of this because He was hardened by His anointing to learn obedience (Heb. 5:8). We are to be hardened by His graciously supplied spiritual armor (Eph. 6:10ff). Through our application of such armor we find ourselves protected from the insults and abuses of men and devils, and thus we avoid the tempting snare of our exercising personal retaliation against those who would injure us.

If we do not attain and maintain the sanctified insensitivity to personal injury which the armor of God supplies, we shall find ourselves perpetually vulnerable to feeling hurt. Furthermore, we shall also find ourselves mightily tempted to react to such hurt by trying to dump it on or dish it out to others. Such dishing out tends to be not only against those who have hurt us, but against relatively innocent souls, or, worst of all, against those who most love us.

Those who demand respect while affording none to others are at heart hurting people. All of their boisterous demands, threats, and destructive retaliations against perceived wrongs do nothing to soothe and heal their wounds. Their anger, issuing from their hurt, only deepens their wounds while inflicting wounds upon others. The only safe refuge from such escalating mutual torture, the only sanctuary where hurts can be healed and tender sore spots hardened is in the wounds of Jesus. Those wounds result from and lead us

directly to the tenderness of His loving heart. That love is our inward healing and our outward hardening against further injury. Here is a balm and shield infinitely better than that sensitivity which opens us to injury and that angry retaliation which inflicts hurt on others while flooding our own souls with bitterness.

Fortifyingly yours,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

I begin this month's letter by sharing with you a rather lengthy quote:

There is an Athenian love of novelty abroad, and a morbid distaste for anything old and regular, and in the beaten paths of our forefathers. Thousands will crowd to hear a new voice and a new doctrine without considering for a moment whether what they hear is true. There is an incessant craving after any teaching which is sensational, and exciting, and rousing to the feelings. There is an unhealthy appetite for a sort of spasmodic and hysterical Christianity...The whole tone of men's minds on what constitutes practical Christianity seems lowered. The old golden standard of the behavior which becomes a Christian man or woman appears debased and degenerated. The tendency of modern thought is to reject dogmas, creeds, and every kind of bound in religion. It is thought grand and wise to condemn no opinion whatsoever, and to pronounce all earnest and clever teachers to be trustworthy...all these mighty foundation-stones are coolly tossed overboard like lumber, in order to lighten the ship of Christianity, and enable it to keep pace with modern science. Stand up for these great verities and you are called narrow, illiberal, old-fashioned, and a theological fossil!

When do you think these words were written? Were they penned by a faithful modern pastor, lamenting the glitz and guile of the contemporary Church Growth Movement? In fact, the words were written by J. C. Ryle (in *The Church Today*) more than a century ago.

The pressure upon Christians in general, and pastors in particular, to be contemporary in the name of making the gospel relevant is no new one. The apostle Paul, knowing that pastors in every generation from his time to the end of the world would face that pressure wrote to counter it. The apostle had himself determined to preach nothing in cosmopolitan Corinth except Christ crucified (1 Cor. 2:1,2). He had reasoned with the sophisticated philosophers in Athens, not by offering to them a novel teaching for which they hungered, but by declaring to them the ancient truths of God as Creator and Sustainer of life, of man being a sinner in need of repentance, and of Christ being Redeemer and Judge (Acts 17:16ff). Accordingly, Paul set out a singular pastoral strategy for all ministers to follow. Pastors are to preach the Word (2 Tim. 4:1-5). They are not to analyze, anticipate, follow, or set fads. Pastors are to preach and faithfully seek to apply the whole counsel of God whether men will listen and respond favorably or not.

Yet, to hear many in the Church today, one would think that Christ is not a rock upon whom we stand so much as a kite upon whom we fly, blustered by the ever changing fads and fashions of the passing times. Today, unless we are conversant in the jargon of demographics, small and large group dynamics, homogeneous units, fund-raising and membership-expanding drives, celebratory worship, and church architecture which aims to employ family life centers and food courts as tools to evangelize sinners and edify saints, we are made to feel that we are not only out of touch with the contemporary world, but are marginalized in the Church, and are sinning against the Lord.

It has been said that the A,B,C's of success in today's churches are: attendance, building, and cash—all in large quantities. As pervasive as such a value system is, one is struck with how devoid the Scriptures are of such considerations. Not a word in the New Testament is written about large church edifices or budgets. At times notice is given that great numbers joined the ancient Church. Yet, as much, if not more, attention in the Word is given to the conversion of single individuals, such as the Ethiopian eunuch, and to the nurture of small but faithful churches, such as the one at Phillipi.

We must resist the pressures to let personal values achieve ascendancy over objective virtues; to let the building of material edifices and transient programs eclipse the building of character in immortal souls; and to let a fascination with what is new replace faithfulness to what is true.

Men in droves may want what is novel. That does not give us warrant to disguise or deny the fact that the faith once delivered to the saints is ancient, though ever living and relevant. The mercies of our Lord are truly new every morning. But Christ Himself is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

I fear that many in the Church today fancy themselves wiser and more caring than Jesus. Men today, being rich in the trinkets of this world, refuse, as did the rich young ruler, to renounce such rubbish and follow Jesus. Yet, whereas our Lord was grieved and let the rich young ruler go his way, many in our day would run after his modern counterparts, endeavoring to refashion the claims of Christ in terms more amenable to the hankering of those heading away from the Lord of life and glory. The problem with such endeavor—and it is a fatal flaw—is that men are competent to fashion only false gods. Neither is our Lord nor is His gospel raw material to be worked into the shape we desire. We, not He, need changing.

I know a man who was interviewed by a committee to determine whether he would be called to pastor a church. He was asked what programs he would offer to make the church contemporary and appealing to the young and the unchurched. He replied that his calling was to preach the Word saturated in prayer, as that is the only strategy God has given to evangelize those in darkness and to build up the children of light. He was told that he would fail in the ministry if he did not modify his naive thinking. He replied that he would rather fail while faithfully preaching the whole counsel of God than to succeed by doing anything else. Far from that man's church being a failure, it has for nearly two decades produced some of the richest, strongest, most tenderly loving, faithful, and fruitful believers in the world today. While that ministry has gone on largely out of season, there are signs that it may soon be in season. Thanks be to God, whose Word and Spirit sustain His people through all seasonal changes, as fads can never do.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

The wonders of the informational revolution continue to pour upon us with increasing speed. Last year our church replaced the computers used by our secretary and myself with state of the art models. We have barely grown accustomed to these new marvels, and yet now a new generation of more powerful, faster computers is about to be unleashed. Pentium II processors are being overtaken by Pentium III processors. What are we to do?

There can be no denying that these advances in technology represent a great blessing to humanity in general, and to the Church in particular. Yet, we must be ever vigilant lest our abuse of blessings turn them into curses for us. If sinful man can, by his excess, turn the blessing of wine (which God gave man to make his heart glad) into the curse of drunkenness, then surely our informational technology can be likewise perverted.

It is important that we know where the line is between our legitimate use and illegitimate abuse of something. That line is usually found separating our using such things for personal and corporate edification, and our being addicted to such things as though they were ends in themselves.

With respect to computer and communication innovations, we are hearing increasingly of children being lured into harmful situations via their unsupervised internet explorations. We also hear of adults establishing and nurturing improper intimate relationships via cyberspace. Then there are the poor widows or widowers of those who are simply obsessed with computer games. These representative abuses of the computer should concern us all because they are real and are on the rise. Indeed, it could be that many of us who use this new and increasingly necessary technology may be treading closer to the line of our abusing it than we may suspect.

The overarching danger in this matter appears to be that for an increasing number of people, virtual reality is replacing reality as being of paramount concern. Some would say that the line between virtual reality and reality is growing less distinct each day. My electronic gadgets can and do reach out to touch other's gadgets, resulting in such things as clothing, airline tickets, music CD's, and books being delivered to my house. However, such uses of the computer simply enhance and facilitate the conducting of real business in the real world. It is precisely the failure of an increasing number of people to realize that a reality lies behind the virtual reality that leads to some of the disasters mentioned above.

Those taken up with the electronic gadgets and games for their own sake, are developing some quite debilitating and dangerous delusions. They can come to believe that their competence in maneuvering a computer game joystick represents an analogous competence in their living and performing in real life. It once was the case that responsible parents were concerned over the detrimental effects television watching had on their children, they being reduced from responsible producers to spectating consumers by the electronically conveyed images and advertisements of reality. But now, with interactive computer games, a person can be powerfully deluded into thinking that he is an active participant in life when he is in fact investing only virtual action in a virtual world, with no real connection to reality. There may be nothing wrong with one's occasional diversion into such a world for purposes of entertainment. However, the draw of such a world can be very powerful, and, if it is not successfully mastered, it will pull one from the real world and into an electronic fantasy which can be as destructive as drug-induced hallucinations.

No matter how far our technology advances, no matter how close virtual reality comes to resembling or appearing to improve upon reality, there will never be a substitute for vital righteousness. As a person seeks first the Lord and His kingdom, he then will find himself made competent to understand and rightly to use all things, including the electronic gadgets and games of our day and of future days.

Those possessing and nurturing, by the right application of the divine means of grace, a vital righteousness are neither flattered by the advancements nor flattened by the reversals of life in any age. To hear the cries of some Christians in our day, one would think that the worst thing we all have to fear is the pending Y2K crisis, in which some of our more aged electronic servants seem likely to malfunction and thereby reveal their true mastery over us.

Whatever does or does not happen to us on 1 January 2000, it cannot be as bad as what is happening today in Sudan and Ethiopia. The Y2K doomsayers predict that we will be without food, water, utilities, and money come the first day of the new millenium. Hosts of Sudanese and Ethiopians are without those things today. Added to their plight, our African brethren are suffering terrible wars, and in Sudan especially, Christians are targeted for persecution, arrest, torture, death. Yet, contrary to all the fears and expectations which issue from the weak faith of so many who have become enslaved to conveniences, the churches in those lands are reportedly growing, even flourishing. There are real, vital lessons for us to learn from how these dear brethren of ours are triumphing not in a virtual reality game, but over the grim realities of life. Let us, like them, make it our main concern to know, trust, and obediently serve the Redeemer, who sovereignty rules over all reality. Let us feed upon and minister abroad the heavenly manna of God's Word, so that we may stand in any evil day which may come, and truly serve for God's glory in all the days of our earthly pilgrimage.

Vitally yours,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

Scripture informs us that those without vision perish (Prov. 29:18). This, of course, does not mean that physical vision is vital, for many who are blind can and do lead productive, satisfying lives, despite their visual limitation. The power of sight referred to as being so vital is spiritual vision. It is operative when a believer exercises faith and thereby perceives the Lord in each and every given situation.

Such vision is a gift of God (Eph. 2:8,9). It is a precious, necessary, and potent gift. The apostle Paul employs his prayers in asking God to grant such vision to believers at Ephesus (Eph. 1:15-21). Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians when he was in prison, and yet he rightly deemed it more important that he pray for his brethren's vision than for his own release.

Indeed, so imperishable does this spiritual vision make those who have and use it, that even when they are amidst affliction and trial, such as imprisonment, they know that they are far more free than those in the grip of spiritual blindness. Thus, we read of Paul and Silas singing praises to God during their imprisonment at Philippi (Acts 16:25). Similarly, we read of the apostle John, who was banished to the island of Patmos as punishment for his faith in Jesus, by the exercise of that same faith receiving a revelation of the majesty, sovereignty, and glorious victory of Christ over all His enemies. Physically, John was on Patmos; but he was also in the Spirit, and hence beheld the heavens opened and the glorious Son of God standing with him and for him (Rev. 1:9,10ff). Our spiritual vision should enable us to see not only the grim threats surrounding us—as Elisha's servant saw the Syrian army surrounding him and his master—but we should see that He who is with us is ever greater, more powerful, more wise, and lovingly for us than any people or things arrayed against us (2 Ki. 6:15-19; Mt. 28:20; Rom. 8:31-39; 1 Jn. 4:4; 5:4).

This teaching is clear and prominent in the Word of God. Yet, it is too frequently the case that our power of Spiritual perception grows dim and feeble. Then fears and doubts, anxious cares and worrisome distractions, fill our minds and hearts, clouding over the light of the love and power of our Lord for us. As my eighteenth year in the ministry draws to its completion, I am convinced with increasing conviction that in some way or other, loss of spiritual vision is a contributing cause in all pastoral problems. Whenever I counsel folk in one way or another I invariably find myself seeking to restore and stimulate the exercise of spiritual vision, the failure of which has caused those I counsel temporarily to lose sight of the Lord.

How does our spiritual vision become impaired? In short, our old enemies play their part. Satan, as he did in the Garden (Gen. 3) casts doubts in our minds and insinuates hard and deceitful things about God. Whenever we heed such sinister, demonic counsel, the light of our souls grows dim quickly. The world, with its enticements and imposing demands, also clouds our vision, seeking to interpose the clamor of Babylon between the believer and the true Lover of his soul. The flesh, too, if not mortified, rises up to harden our hearts, to darken our understanding of and chill our love for the things of Christ.

It requires our perpetual vigilance against these foes to keep their darkening influence from reaching us. But our guarding against them is not enough. We must also positively pursue, with the drive of hunger and thirst, that sanctification without which no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). That sanctification is the process of our growing into the likeness of Jesus. It is our becoming perfected in that purity of heart whereby we see God (Mt. 5:8). If our hearts are not set on this priority above all others, then we shall have poor vision, and be like Mary's sister, Martha, who saw only the many cares which distracted her from the one thing necessary (Lk. 10:38-42). Yet, if we do set our hearts on the priority of our seeing and being transformed into the likeness of our Redeemer, then we shall see Him, and in His light we shall see light (Ps. 36:9) and become light (Mt. 5:14-16; 6:22,23). That is to say, we shall never lose sight of the amazing truth, which fills our hearts with gratitude and our hands with power, that our God reigns lovingly over us and for our good. We shall never be blind to the fact that by His love, wisdom, and sovereign power over and for us, He transforms all things from dreadful foes into effectual servants for our good. May we with renewed earnestness seek such vision, and may our Lord accordingly open our eyes to see how truly loved and secure we are in Him.

Yours in His love and light,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

One of the membership vows, undertaken by every member of our church, specifies that the member work for the purity and peace of the church. Scripture tells us that we need not—indeed, cannot—manufacture or attain the peace we have in the church. It is, in fact, a gift of God which we are called upon diligently to preserve (Eph. 4:3). It is a most precious gift coming to us from the God of peace. Yet, the call for us to be diligent in preserving the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace should alert us to the fact that such spiritual unity with its fruit of peace is something always under attack. Our resisting such attacks is how we work for the peace of the church. This peace is not an optional facet of the life of the Church which we can sacrifice if it becomes too costly for us to defend. It is worth our bearing any cost to preserve.

Recently, I overheard a stranger in passing comment to his friend that his church was boring. He said nothing ever happened there; nothing ever changed; the services were predictable, the membership stable, the ministries unvarying. "I would rather have a good fight in the church than the boredom we now have," was the final comment I overheard. My hearing this passing conversation between strangers set me wondering about our church. We have a very predictable church life. Our services and stated meetings have changed very little over the years. Our membership, at its core, remains stable, and I am committed to a ministry of consecutive, expository preaching which makes it fairly easy for folks regularly attending services to anticipate what the coming sermons will be about. We had sore challenges and heated controversies in earlier years, but not in recent years. At our Session and congregational meetings, a sweet unanimity prevails. Does this mean that our church is boring?

Soon after the above-mentioned overheard conversation, I was on the phone with a fellow pastor who is in deep throes in his church. As he put the matter, it was warfare on numerous fronts. Factions in his church were against each other and many of them were united against him. It then struck me that if this dear brother were in a situation as peaceful as ours, he would likely not be wondering whether his church were boring, but, instead, he would be rejoicing in an inconceivably great blessing.

I do not know anything about the church criticized by the strangers. Perhaps it is boring. It is quite possible for a pastor and his fellow elders to fall into complacent stagnation. But that is not the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. The peace commended to us in Scripture is that tranquility which issues from trust in the Lord; it is the satisfied contentment of soul and gratitude of heart which are produced when we rightly are fed and properly digest the Word of God. It issues from that love, which the precious reconciliation we have in Christ has begotten in our hearts.

This is the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace of which Scripture speaks. It comes to us at no less cost than the precious blood of the Son of God. It is preserved by nothing less than our diligently seeking to know and serve the Lamb of God as He is presented to us in Scripture. As we preserve and cultivate such peace, we find ourselves freed increasingly from the distracting cares of petty controversies and from the ungrateful demands for novelty which afflict so many churches in our day. We are freed from these things so that we may whole-heartedly give ourselves to being further mastered by the sanctifying Word of God.

Amidst the sweet tranquility of our church life, we are finding all of the challenge, all of the excitement, all of the blessed comfort that we can handle in our exploration of the Word of God. What a privilege and thrill it is for us to come each Lord's day to our gatherings, knowing that we are all hungering for, and are all humbly expectant to receive, the heavenly manna. Controversies may excite, novelties may entertain, but it is this manna of which we partake beside still waters which restores our souls and fits us for costly and fruitful service in the world.

Whether it shall please our Lord to prolong this period of peace which we as a congregation now enjoy, I cannot say. I, for one, remain committed to guarding and cultivating it, come what may. But for as long as this rare jewel of congregational contentment lasts, I will never again let myself, even momentarily, treat with contempt this most precious divine blessing by confusing it with boredom.

With grateful contentment,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

I recently had the privilege of attending a gathering to honor one of the most humble and fruitful of Christ's servants, on the occasion of his retirement from pastoral ministry. Bill Fulton, though a bachelor all of his life, was used of the Lord to beget many children in the faith, and to lead countless souls closer to the Lord. A very high percentage of those who sat under his ministry, especially during his Air Force chaplaincy, are now serving as pastors or missionaries.

Since my father in Christ is still going to be active, serving the Lord in his retirement until he completes the race set before him, I do not intend to write this letter about this faithful man. He has exploits yet to perform for the Savior whom he loves, and we shall record them in due course. What I do want to share now are some observations of the precious experience of my gathering with so many brethren from whom, in the Lord's providence, I had been separated for more than twenty-five years.

It is not uncommon for us to experience the pleasures of reunion with individual believers or families with whom we have had little contact for some time. What was unusual about our gathering to honor Bill Fulton was that we all were drawn together for a brief period during his Air Force chaplaincy, then were scattered all over the world. At our reunion, after more than a quarter of a century of our diaspora, three remarkable facets were obvious to me. Since these facets, I believe, have application to the wider Church, I share them now with you.

The first thing I observed at our gathering was that all of the brethren had grown in the grace and knowledge of Christ. The youthful exuberance of a newly found faith had developed into a deeper, more strong and stable commitment. The Christ who had shown Himself faithful through all sorts of trials and triumphs was clearly embraced as the tried and true Good Shepherd. All of the graces were manifestly stronger, and the fruit of the Spirit evidently sweeter. The knowledge of the Lord had deepened into sound wisdom and unshakable assurance. You can imagine that such souls so ripened in grace would enjoy a great and precious felicity in loving fellowship. Indeed, the sheer gratitude we felt at seeing and once again sharing with one another was quite poignant. Hence, expressions of mutually loving and tenderly respectful regard characterized our time together.

The second thing I observed in our gathering was how diminished the evidence of residual sin was amongst these saints. I hasten to say how we were taught by Bill Fulton, throughout his ministry, to love Christ and each other, and to mortify sin and pursue righteousness. Yet, I could not help sensing that the sins which were undeniably a part of these lives twenty-five years ago, had faded into a largely defeated residue. These brethren had learned and, by God's grace experienced a great degree of success in carrying out, the imperative of the apostle: "Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies...for sin shall not be master over you..." (Rom. 6:12,14). Moreover, whatever sins we had committed against each other in those earlier days had been not only washed from us by forgiveness, but had faded into the sea of forgetfulness into which our Lord says He casts our sins (Jer. 31:34).

A final observation I make upon this special reunion. Wounds and scars were evident amongst us. The fresh flush and smoothness of spiritual baby faces had given way to wrinkles of wear and scars of sorrow and affliction. Yet, far from the scars deforming, they but added an enhancing patina to silver countenances and golden hearts. I thought this to be a clear token of the fact that as our Savior's wounds are—as the hymn says, *in beauty, glorified*—so our wounds were in process of being beautified to His glory. In fact, there is something exquisitely beautiful about broken hearts, shattered hopes, and ruined lives which have been healed and restored by the grace and power of the Lord. Such restoration has the dazzling brightness and sweet fragrance of resurrection about it.

The occasion of our reunion made the progress of sanctification more easily perceivable than it is amongst those with whom we daily live and serve in our home congregations. Yet, the only difference, I am sure, is that the process of sanctification, being usually very gradual, is not as easily noted when we have regular contact with one another, as it is when a fair number of years lapse between times when we are together.

Surely, what I saw at this reunion was a prelude to glory. There we shall all be perfected in Christ-likeness. There all sorrows shall cease, all traces of sin shall be gone, only the beauty of holy love shall endure. From my recent experience, I hunger for that day, and, meantime, have greater assurance that my Lord is doing all things well to prepare us all for that day. I sincerely hope that this brief sketch of my observations will help you likewise to wait for that day with confident expectation. I am convinced that when we see and experience what our Lord will finally make of us, not one of us shall be disappointed, but we shall all marvel and burst forth in loving gratitude and praise to our Savior.

Expectantly yours,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

On a recent day off, I was riding with my family on an outing. As I was not driving, I could afford to look out the car window and consider what I saw as we went along the road. In short compass I noticed three church buildings. The first was an older church, where the sanctuary was almost the entire building. There were some other rooms to the facility, a church office and a few Sunday School rooms, I surmised. Outside of the church, at the far end of the parking lot, was a single basketball backboard and hoop. Soon thereafter I saw another church, more grand and obviously newer than the first. It had an admittedly large auditorium, but even that was almost swallowed by the complex array of offices, classrooms, nurseries, fellowship hall, dining facility, gymnasium, and I know not what else. Finally, we passed a church I knew to be perhaps ten years old, and which tended to be like the second church, but which had become derelict.

After seeing these three church buildings, we stopped for lunch in a fast food place. There, as usually is the case whenever I enter such eateries, I was overwhelmed by a plethora of menu choices. This place had a children's playroom with a vast and expensive array of costly equipment for the little ones.

What, if anything, do these different facilities have in common? It is clear, at least to me, that the fast food place resembled the second church facility I saw. The very architecture of that church conveyed the message that it offered almost infinite choice for anyone with any interest at any time. Such a concept may seem good and right, and it cannot be denied that it draws a crowd. But what kind of crowd is drawn, and for how long do such crowds stay together?

Let us consider the fast food place. The children's playroom was full, and was abuzz with activity and movement. But on closer inspection I saw that few of the children and none of the adults were happy to be mixing their eating with the children's playful entertainment. For the most part, the children were surly, ungrateful, destructive, and disrespectful to the adults. The parents seemed dazed and depressed. Why was this so? Was this scene unique, or was it representative of such places? What does it have to do with the Church?

I believe the scene to have been fairly representative, not only of such dining establishments as seek to combine eating with physical entertainment, but also of those churches endeavoring to do the same. What does one's eating a hamburger and swinging from a monkey bar have in common? Nothing. In fact, your doing one prevents you from doing the other. But the marketing magicians of our world have concocted a formula whereby one is led to believe that he may maximize the indulgence of multiple desires at the same time and in the same place. The problem is, that the good life consists of choices—wisely, rightly, and timely made choices. Perpetual indulgence of one's whims is sinfully idolatrous. That is why the fast food playground was such a scene of massive misery. The people, having for the most part made an idol of convenient and manifold immediate gratification, were feeding on the husks which is all that idols can provide.

Yet, churches like the second noted above are consciously adopting the same market strategy and appealing to the same carnal impulse. What does a sanctuary and a gymnasium have in common? Nothing. The activity in one precludes activity in the other at the same time. Yet believers are increasingly believing that philosophy of the world which says that you can have it all at any time.

The ethos in the Church and in western society used to be that life was about choices. You ate, then you went out to play. There was a priority to everything. The maintenance of such priorities necessarily involved the exercise of self-denial, patience, and consideration for others—virtues which benefited others, pleased God, and blessed those so exercising them. That ethos is largely changed now into a belief that you can have all you want now, and a correlative belief that one has the right to demand it all now. Priorities, choices, self-denial, the exercise of patience and respectful consideration for others are increasingly viewed as unnecessary remnants of an impoverished and psyche-damaging past.

I wonder about the third, derelict church building I saw. Did the congregation move on to bigger and more elaborate facilities? Or did the fad of a church seeking to pander to every desire and every conceivable appetite run its course there, with the scattering of that congregation prophesying what will be in store for other churches driven by secular marketing impulses?

At any rate, we who take the Word of God seriously should seek to follow the prayer, precept, and example of Jesus and His apostles. So focused were they all on choice that they agreed in this: that there is only one thing necessary; one good part for us to choose, which will never be taken from us. That is our sitting with respectful silence, and feeding with soul hunger upon the Word of God (Lk. 10:38-42; 2 Tim. 4:1-5; 1 Pet. 2:1-3). With this as our priority, we need not mix goat food with our sheep food, but rather, by our commitment to feed on unadulterated sheep food, we shall grow to be ourselves more effective salt and light in the world, serving to transform goats into sheep, while resisting any form of reverse transformation.

Committedly yours,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

Who can doubt that we are living in a day when self-indulgence is extolled as a virtue? Advertisers tell us that we deserve the best of all products and breaks from all of our toil. Psychologists stress that if we allow ourselves to be subjected to any sort of inhibiting force, we shall ruin our psyches. The increasing cries for unlimited tolerance of others goes along with this mantra of self-indulgence. For if anything and everything is tolerated, then no one need practice self-denial. This philosophy tells us that as soon as the vestiges of authoritarianism and intolerance are eradicated, we shall be in paradise restored.

Christians are not immune to the temptations of the cult of self-adoration so prevalent in our time. One of the most pervasive practices in the Church today which reveals the shift away from self-denial is the general observance of the Lord's day. Those who remember the whole Sabbath day, to keep it consecrated to the Lord, are a shrinking, tiny minority. Sabbath keeping is now generally considered embarrassingly archaic, needlessly inconvenient, a legalistic vestige which, if practiced, will afflict its practitioners with psychological damage, while fostering in their children a determination to a rebellious throwing off of the yoke of the faith in their later years. Thus, it is rare to find Christian households where the television and computer are left turned off, where games are left unplayed, gardens left unattended—all because undistracted devotion is being given to something infinitely better, namely, communion with and worship of the living God. If we do not deny ourselves on the Lord's day, we will not deny ourselves on any other day.

But let us judge these matters by their fruits. The philosophy which tells us that it is damaging for one to deny himself has had a prevailing run long enough for us to judge its results. What do we see issuing from this cult of self-adoration? Deep and open perversity and corruption in civil government; public schools in crisis; pervasive crime, depression, apathy, and cynicism are rampant in our day. If self-adoration is the cure for the damage done by self-denial, then surely the cure is worse than the disease.

What of those who bear the cross, who deny themselves, who fast, who give money to the Church, who serve and honor others above themselves, who worship the Lord on His day, foregoing personal pleasures or business? Are they psychological wrecks? Are their children? They are not. They have their trials, their struggles, their failures, but in all they who truly deny themselves, who strive to enter the Lord's rest, find as the fruit of their striving refreshment of soul and body in the Lord.

The Lord's day is primarily a day devoted to the glory of God, not to the gratification of man. Yet when we give ourselves to this holy practice, we find that we are blessed. Our hearts are purified by the Word and Spirit of the Lord, and we more truly see our God Whom to know is eternal life. Our bodies, also, receive a recuperating rest which cannot be had in the continuance of the fevered pace of modern life. It is not our businesses, or even our pleasures which give us rest; it is the living Christ who calls us to Himself that He might give us rest. Long ago the prophet Isaiah put it in these terms: *If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot from doing your own pleasure on My holy day, and call the sabbath a delight, the holy day of the Lord honorable, and shall honor it, desisting from your own ways, from seeking your own pleasure, and speaking your own word, then you will take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth...* (Is. 58:13,14). Here is self-denial for the sake of highest self-fulfillment. That is why Jesus said that God made the sabbath for man, not man for the sabbath. If we indulge ourselves, we destroy ourselves. If we deny ourselves for Christ's sake and according to His ordinances, we shall live abundantly and reign as more than conquerors, on Sundays and all days. Choose this day which course you shall pursue. As for me and my household, I testify that nothing in all the world helps and truly heals our souls like Christian self-denial and the finding of one's delight in the Lord and His ordinances.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

The Word of God informs us that men naturally suppress the truth (Rom. 1:18). We are all born with a propensity to follow the example of our first father, Adam, who, after his fall, sought to hide from God. This means that until the regenerating work of God makes us new creatures in Christ, we hunger and thirst for delusions rather than for the truth and righteousness of the Lord. Nor are our delusions merely personal and private affairs. While it is ultimately the truth which alone sets us free and gives us the basis from which to build genuine and intimate relationships with others, men have always endeavored to produce a counterfeit cohesion in society by means of the propagation and widespread adoption of common delusions. The first attempt man made to manufacture and market his delusions arose with the building of the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9). With that venture, individual mistrust of God's covenant promise—wherein He pledged never again to destroy mankind by a flood (Gen 9:11)—and individual pride prompted men to confer and conceive of a way to live without reliance upon God. Thus, men determined to build a tower reaching into heaven. They were deluded in the conception and in the execution of their plan. We know this because Scripture records not that God interrupted their building project before its completion, but that He visited them with judgment after they had built the tower (Gen. 11:5). Men thought that they actually had constructed a tower whose top reached heaven. Yet, in fact, God came down—infinity down—to see the tower and to confuse men's ability to communicate clearly to each other their individual delusions.

This is not to say that men have not, since then, attempted to raise up new towers of Babel. By means of empire-building, the production of material wealth, the advancement of science, medicine, and technology, men have through the ages endeavored to raise the ruins of Babel in increasingly sophisticated and enduring forms. Some of these forms have been overtly sinister, such as the philosophy and political structures of atheistic socialism—a tower which thankfully remains in our day as a rusted hulk showing itself only in such retrogressive places as China and Cuba. Some of the towers have been more subtle and enticing, their vaunting structures being more hidden than exposed, their pleasing promises and initial provision blinding men to the reality that they are being puffed up rather than built up with good, enduring substance.

We who have witnessed in this century many lives being destroyed, many societies being crushed, by the cruel advance of totalitarian political regimes, now survey the world's landscape and, seeing only remnants of such cruel oppression, are tempted to think that all threats are past. The more vigilant amongst us rightly warn that cycles of war and peace continue through world history, and they call us to be on the alert for the next rising foe. But we make a fatal mistake if we think that only cruel delusions prevailing over the nations destroy them. Apparent kindness can kill as effectively, and often more effectively, than can cruelty. Accordingly, I venture to make an observation about the contemporary delusions which appear to be coalescing world wide. I am not alone in this observation. The delusion I refer to is that of entertainment.

Who would seriously contend that pleasant diversions from the drudgeries of the world pose threats to the lives and welfare of men? In answer I refer to a recently published book by Neal Gabler, titled, *Life, the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*. In his book, Gabler observes that men have in always sought the diversion of pleasure. But our day has lost the perspective of entertainment being a temporary diversion from work. We increasingly view entertainment as essence of our lives, with work being a cursed interruption. Legitimate diversions are one thing; obsessions are quite another thing.

Today we do not simply have illusions distracting us from our daily living and responsibilities; we seek to make the illusion a permanent reality. The wealth and technology, as well as the relatively stable geo-political situation of our world enable us to be the first generation that could live within our own illusions, and live out those illusions in the world. Hence, we have film stars, musicians, and sports stars making astronomical sums of money. We live on a steady diet of movies, which reduce the world and the lives of people to a two hour show. Even the more serious fields, such as news reporting, have taken up the mantra. Hence we get news stories in sound bytes, and we find choreographed banter played out amongst news reporters. Consequently, we are a generation maintaining a fragmented and seriously inadequate view of

reality. Most people now find it inconceivable that real events should take more than the time of a sound byte to develop, and that there can be anything higher than our being fed or finding for ourselves and expressing to others the humor in a situation.

We are no longer interested in facts, but in fun. This is becoming a world-wide delusion. It certainly has invaded the Church extensively, increasingly banishing serious worship and mentally demanding preaching, replacing them with jocular, sound byte sermons and giddy playing that tries to pass itself off as being the joy of the Lord. But such fun is not food for the soul. It does not penetrate the heart and expose sin; it does not enlighten and transform the mind into the image of Christ. No wonder, then, that with this rising tower of Babel, as with all others throughout history, the Word of God has anticipated its rising and issued us appropriate warning. For God tells us in Scripture that even when all appears peaceful and secure, it is our pleasures that wage war against our souls (Jas. 4:1-4). Are we going to fight this enemy, or capitulate?

Soberly yours,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

If anyone knows that people get hurt it is a pastor. In my more than eighteen years of ministry, I have spent a great deal of time seeking to soothe aching souls and bind up wounded hearts. What I endeavor to do in this letter is to apply some general counsel with respect to the subject of personal hurt. It is my hope that such counsel will both prevent many from being hurt, as well as deliver those who may be hurting from that painful state.

I begin by sharing with you a pearl of wise testimony given by one who is a spiritual mother in Israel. The force of this testimony is increased by its coming to us through one whom the Scriptures designates a weaker vessel (1 Pet. 3:7). If weaker vessels can find effective protection from hurt, then all others can as well. The essence of this woman's testimony runs something like this: "If someone tries to hurt me, it is his sin. If I let myself be hurt, it is my sin." Such testimony may, at first, not be welcomed by those who are hurting, for it seems to be saying that one's hurt is one's own fault. In fact, it is a perfectly scriptural testimony, one full of power to comfort, heal, and strengthen. It rightly asserts that those in Christ need never be helpless victims caught in the injurious power of others.

It is a fact that Christians do experience emotional, physical, and spiritual hurt. But there are right ways and wrong ways for us to view and respond to such hurt. Consider the man by the pool of Bethesda (Jn. 5:2ff). Jesus approached him and asked: "Do you wish to get well?" The man, who had lain sick for thirty-eight years, did not say that he wanted to get well, but gave an excuse for his being sick. Or consider Jesus, on another occasion, telling a man with a withered hand to stretch out that hand (Mk. 3:1-6). Such questions and commands to those manifestly in pain and infirmity would be supremely insensitive and cruel, were it not for the fact that the One issuing them has loving compassion and almighty power to do something about the malady.

This same Lord has much to provide for us in the great, precious, practical, and powerful promises of His Word. He makes it clear to us that believers will be attacked. We must never be surprised when people hurl injurious words and deeds at us (1 Pet. 4:12-14). Indeed, it more often than not is the case that such attacks issue from those closest to us. It is not for nothing that the great spiritual warfare and armor passage in Ephesians immediately follows the passage dealing with marriage and family life (Eph. 5:21-6:20). If anyone is in a position to hurt us, it would be those most intimate with us. However, we need not be hurt, even when hurt is intended. For our God has provided us with spiritual armor more than adequate to deflect any assault from earth or hell itself. If we are hurt, it is a result of our neglect rightly to apply that armor.

How is this armor, then, rightly applied? It is applied by our constant and vital reckoning by faith that everything which comes to or even against us, must pass through the wisdom, love, and power of our God before reaching us. Such reckoning transforms painful and perplexing attacks into instruments serving to foster in us growth in the grace and knowledge of the Lord. There is nothing like such attacks to drive us more vitally into God as our shield and refuge. When we run into Him, then let our attackers hurl their worst abuse at us; it does not reach us, for we are encompassed and protected by perfect love and power.

Too often when we are attacked, we let ourselves be hurt. We act as though the armor of God is just so much theological hyperbole, not something vital to our welfare which we must perpetually be wearing. It is our attacker's sin that he or she intend our hurt. But if we are hurt, it is our sin that we practically took God's Word so lightly, and so negligently applied the provision He made for our good.

If hurt comes to us in this way, we often make another mistake by looking to the offender to relieve our hurt. What is this except to magnify the power our attacker has over us? The remedy for our hurt lies not with our attacker, but with our Lord. Our wounds, resulting from imperfect human love and, at times, intentional human hatred, only He can bind up with the balm of His perfect divine love. Indeed, when we expect our offender to heal our hurt, it is really a subtle form of our punishing the attacker, demanding of him what he has no power to do. Sinful man is good at harming, destroying, even killing others; he is not

competent to restore what he ruins. Thus, part of our Lord's healing us is His direction that we rise above our attacker's intended hurt, responding to him with grace and love.

Such treatment of those who have offended us may seem to let them off free from accountability for their sin against us. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our Lord teaches us that anyone who touches for good or ill even the least of His people touches Him. And as Christ is the only refuge to protect us from hurt, and the only great physician who can heal our broken hearts, so only He can break the hardest of hearts set against His people (remember Saul of Tarsus?), or judicially destroy the worst of their enemies (think of Haman or Herod).

This brings me to another word of testimony from another fine, spiritual woman. She says she has learned that submission to her husband when he is not being very loving to her is a matter of her ducking out of the way so that Christ can flatten him. That, too, is biblical wisdom (Rom. 12:17-21; 1 Pet. 3:1-6) which, when believed and wrought out in faithful and loving action, serves to protect the one relying upon it from hurt and bitter anger, while also rescuing the attacker from his own sinful and ultimately self-destructive ways. In this way, we rise above our being hurt, helpless victims. We become, by the rich provision of the love of God in Christ, more than conquerors. May we all, more and more, rise by the grace of the Lord from being victims to being such victors.

Yours in Christ's protection,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

I begin with a quote from one of our recent mid-week classes currently studying a series titled, *Devotional Classics*:

JESUS has always many who love His heavenly kingdom, but few who bear His cross. He has many who desire consolation, but few who care for trial. He finds many to share His table, but few to take part in His fasting. All desire to be happy with Him; few wish to suffer anything for Him. Many follow Him to the breaking of bread, but few to the drinking of the chalice of His passion. Many revere His miracles; few approach the shame of the Cross. Many love Him as long as they encounter no hardship; many praise and bless Him as long as they receive some comfort from Him. But if Jesus hides Himself and leaves them for a while, they fall either into complaints or into deep dejection. Those, on the contrary, who love Him for His own sake and not for any comfort of their own, bless Him in all trial and anguish of heart as well as in the bliss of consolation. Even if He should never give them consolation, yet they would continue to praise Him and wish always to give Him thanks. What power there is in pure love for Jesus—love that is free for all self-interest and self-love!

—Thomas À Kempis. *Of the Imitation of Christ*, II:11

The above quote generated some helpful discussion at our mid-week meeting. However, I believe that even more penetrating discussion followed the meeting as several raised the question whether it is possible to love Jesus for Himself without also loving Him for the blessed comforts He gives. Since some raised that question, I am certain that others are pondering it, and I believe that we all can profit from further consideration of it.

There are three ways for us to respond to Jesus Christ and the blessings He gives. Two of those ways would sever Christ from His blessings, while the third does not try to put asunder what God has joined together.

The À Kempis quote above may appear to condemn that category of response which would sever Christ's blessings from His person, and cleave to the blessings above the Lord who gives them. Such an endeavor is clearly wrong, but that is not precisely what À Kempis challenges.

A second response which would separate Christ from His blessings is one which would endeavor to embrace Christ and eschew His comforts. This may seem to be what À Kempis is endorsing. The Church in his day certainly was riddled with crass comfort grabbers and indulgence sellers on the one hand, and legalistic ascetics on the other. The first class esteemed comforts above Christ; the second class sought to attain more than perfect spirituality by devoting themselves to Christ while despising His comforts.

What a careful reading of the À Kempis quote reveals is that it is impossible for us to separate Christ from His blessings and comforts. John Calvin rightly said that Christ comes to us clothed in His blessings. We may distinguish the two, but can never separate them.

What À Kempis is in fact contrasting is not Christ and His comforts, but rather Christ with His comforts and our personal comforts, or, as he says: "Those...who love Him for His own sake [i.e., clothed in His blessings] and not for any comfort of their own...." Thus, the contrast is between Christ's comforts and what we may think to be our own comforts.

Scripture teaches us that the Lord's comforts are not always what we would consider, at least initially, to be comforts. In fact, divine comforts may appear to be curses. Consider such things as Paul's thorn in the flesh, Jesus in Gethsemane, the teaching that all who desire to live godly lives will be persecuted, the truth that it is through many tribulations that we enter the kingdom of heaven, the call to self-denial and diligence, the bearing of godly discipline, and the bearing of our own cross. Thus, we see how initially cursed divine comforts appear. But in them and through them we do learn the wonder of God's love and the

power of His gracious and faithful promises. The comfort of Christ is, in fact, that he transforms curses into blessings, crosses into comforts, deaths into resurrections.

It is an invariable truth that in Christ, the greatest comforts issue from the most painful curses. That is surely what the cross reveals to us. That is why the godly seek participation in, not avoidance of, the fellowship of Christ's sufferings (Rom. 8:16-18; 2 Cor. 4:17,18; 12:7-10; Phil. 3:10,11).

Those endeavoring to determine and derive from Christ their own comforts abuse both Christ and themselves. Such selective saints fail to perceive the connection between Christ's wounding and healing. They fearfully refuse to see that the afflicting hand of the Lord serves for their good (Ps.119: 67,71). They forget that it is through the death blows our Lord delivers to our sin in the agony of our fellowship in His sufferings that resurrection life results.

We are, in fact, incompetent as children to determine our own highest comforts. Our Lord, like the loving Father He is, with perfect wisdom, love, and power determines the best and highest blessings for us. Those blessings are all designed and serve effectively to perfect our love for the Giver, and our loving appreciation for all of His gifts, even, if not especially, the most painful gifts.

Yours in Christ's comforts,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

As this will be my last Minister's Letter to you in this millenium, I would like it to be especially profitable to you. But what am I to share with you on such a momentous occasion? As I range mentally through the state of the flock, the spiritual welfare and service of her members, the state of the Church and world in general, various topics suggest themselves to me. Yet one topic which perhaps touches upon a number of other matters is that of the preparedness of most of our members to live and serve in this and the next millenium. We tend neither idealistically to cling to past days nor to fear coming days. That fruit issues from a particular root.

Will Y2K be a non-event, a minor inconvenience, or a catastrophe? We are not overly concerned, for we are prepared for whatever may transpire. It is not that we are ignorant and presumptuous. Instead, it is that over the years of so many of us sitting under the regular ministry of God's Word, we are vitally convinced that our God is sovereign, and that, come what may, He shall cause all to work for our good. We have grown strong as we have fed upon the heavenly manna. Therefore, we do not avoid challenges, but welcome them as opportunities for us to experience the wisdom, love, and power of our God, as well as for us to serve for His glory and the good of others.

We have grown rightly resistant to the mounting cultural and emotional pressures to seek immediate gratification by novel and even wayward means. Such resistance has not made us odd or archaic. In fact, we are, as a congregation, as contemporary and relevant as any, and more so than most. For we keep abreast of news and developments so that we might understand, then saturate and change people and situations in our world via our prayers.

There is little, if any, evidence that we have grown weary in well-doing. Loving consideration and practical concern amongst our members have deepened and expanded far beyond the boundaries of our membership.

Nor is there the stench of spiritual pride and complacency arising from what we have become and what we have accomplished. Humility before and gratitude to the Lord have grown sweetly and potently in our hearts and in our midst. We have rightly recognized that we have come thus far by the gracious help of our Lord.

I can hardly think of an area of Christian virtue or service where we, as a congregation, do not excel. Perhaps my only area of concern is that, so far, few from our body have been raised up to sense callings to career missionary or pastoral service. Yet, the Lord has raised up a good number of church officers who are the majestic ones in the Church and the world. They present sterling examples of diligent and capable service in the congregation and in the higher courts of the Church. Most of our members, as well, are exceedingly caring and competent, so that needs are not only seen, but anticipated and met. Sometimes I feel as though I am pastoring an entire congregation of pastors and missionaries, who just happen not to have the official designation of minister.

Time and space in this letter do not afford me ample opportunity to express the sense of humble pride I have when I think of you, the members of Immanuel. You are a treasure growing ever more precious; servants who are increasingly zealous for the Lord's honor and the brethren's blessing; an army of spiritual soldiers who strike mounting dread in the heart of Satan and his wicked horde. I cannot think of a pastor on earth more privileged than I am in my pastoring such a people. Your prayers uphold me; your hunger for the Word of God draws from me sermons of penetrating power which convict and comfort; your kindness to me and to my family fills our hearts with wonder and gratitude.

It is the Holy Spirit of God, using the inspired, whole counsel of God as contained in Scripture, who has made us what we are. We do well to note that, and to give Him all thanks and glory. We also do well to remain perpetually vigilant, knowing that we who have been so wonderfully raised up by the Lord will make tempting targets for the devil. But above all, we should know that the God who has begun this good work in us and amidst us, will bring it to a wonderful completion, as He saves His best wine until the end,

and leads us from strength to strength. Who would fear to face a new millenium with such a God as we have, and such a body as Immanuel? Let not one of us do so.

Gratefully and confidently yours,

William Harrell