



Serving God In a Changing World

"Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen" (Romans 1:20-24).

First, I want us to look at the society in history of which we find ourselves living. *Secondly*, we want to examine our feelings toward that society. *Then*, we will look at its feeling toward the church, and *finally*, we will ask, "What can be done?"

First, let's look at the society in history of which we are a part. Let me say, I believe our world is properly described by the late Dr. Francis Schaeffer as a post Christian world. Yet, I do not mean by that, that we are to believe that there was any time, in any country when the majority of folk walked the narrow road. Neither the gospel, nor an honest look at history will allow that. I mean by that, simply, that Christian influence is having less of a salting influence in society; perhaps, because Christians themselves are less salty.

For example, Christians have become leaders in the propagation of materialism; even using it as a gimmick to lure people into the church. Christians no longer fight their battles with care and love and persuasion; instead they use coercion, force, and downright meanness -sometimes, inciting people to attitudes that lead to murder, hostility and war, rather than Godliness. As many Christians have placed winning above everything, they have adopted a "win at all cost," "two wrongs do make a right," and "the end justifies the means" spirit of conduct that has not gone unnoticed by the world we are trying to win. They seem to support the idea that if you need to act badly and do wrong to accomplish a good --if that is what it takes; then, by all means do so. The result has been a church that

doesn't look much different than the world it wants to win.

Even as we crusade for lofty causes, we lose our salt as we sacrifice our "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance," for methods befitting a "rough and tumble" political campaign. It is as though the Christian has traded the methods of Christ for the methods of a political science ruffian. In the mean time, the world sees no difference between "us" and "them."

Yet, I do not believe our text will allow a private interpretation of its message to our day alone. After all, it is addressed to a people who lived 2,000 years ago. Though the passage relates to the fall of man, it speaks of any period where people knew the truth, then deliberately turned away from it. Many periods of history could be spoken of in this way. Take, for example, the church of the Apostle Thomas in India. It began to whittle away at the truth and largely died. Do we realize that in China at about 800 A.D. there were Christians worshipping in every great city? The same may be said of the church in North Africa, where Saint Augustine was a bishop. On the other hand, South Korea has one of the strongest churches in the world; while Lebanon has a strong Christian & Missionary Alliance Presence.

This is true of people in many places who do not now know the truth. If we look into their histories, we can find a time when they knew truth but failed to practice it. Now, there are two realms of truth. First, there is the truth of Christ, and secondly, there is the true culture that *following Christ* creates. The second is a natural outcome of the first. Yet, Christians seem to be in a frenzy to save the Christian banner, forgetting that it is the result of accepting, loving, and following Christ himself. They want to have the results and the institution, while they speak little of the means.

The means to a more Christian world is *people who follow Christ* --and then, others who follow them.

So, what I am saying is that we are once again living in a day in which fewer people know the answer to the question. "What is a Christian?" Not so much because there is a great shortage of paper, or radio, or TV waves, or digital signals to tell them what a Christian is; but, rather, we are at a loss to give very many good examples of what these Christians look like. There is less and less substantial difference between a Christian and a non-Christian.

As people turn away from truth, they come under the judgment of God. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth" (Roman 1:18). Lies replace truth. The judgment does not come as a bolt from the sky; but, rather, as a result of God leaving man to himself, and letting him destroy himself with his post-Christian culture --it is one of cause and effect. It is a judgment of "God giving them up in the lusts of their *own* hearts" (Romans 1:24). The damage is actually done by man to man, as man finds no place for Christ. When man follows his selfishness, gratifies his every desire, gives himself to revenge, clutches his bitterness, refuses to forgive and to love, there is damage. There is great damage when men will not follow Christ. Why will we not follow the Christ who saves us? Why do Christians want to be Christians who do not follow Christ?

I think we must all agree that the result of not following Christ is seen as death in our world, while the result of following him is seen as life --not only life in the hereafter, but life in the here and now. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, *and the life (the life to live)*, no one comes to the Father but by me.

How should we feel about a world such as our own? There was a man who found himself a preacher in a period of history like our's. The man was Jeremiah. His people had been a God-loving people, then they turned from the truth and were paying the price for it. It was in a period much like our own that Jeremiah ministered. That is why he was known as the weeping prophet. His attitude must be our own; we must weep over the church as it turns away from following Christ, and we must weep over the culture that has followed it. "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy." "He that goes forth weeping, bearing precious seed, (that is, thoughts, feelings and ideas that come from God) shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his harvest with him" (Psalm 126:5,6). Going, weeping, sowing, reaping; it is no funny thing, it is no light thing to see what happens when God is left out of the calculations of people, and Christ is left out of the conduct of Christians. That Children's Series Gloria did on line --"What Would Jesus Do?" It is still there, on line. Every child needs that.

The irony was, as Jeremiah pointed out, there was plenty of external religion. Yet God replies, "Of what use to me is frankincense that comes from Sheba, or sweet cane from a distant land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor are your sacrifices pleasing to me" (Jeremiah 6:20). There was plenty of sacrifice. However, our *hearts* must be in whatever we do. When our hearts are not in it, we do not lead the way at all.

Getting back to our text, how did the departure begin? It started with people who knew God, but did not glorify him as God, nor were they thankful. It started inside of people's hearts. While we focus on the obvious change of outward behavior, Paul pulls us to the secret regions of the heart. While we point at *other people*, Paul points to *us*. The decline started in the hearts of God's people -- people who did not, when they worshiped, worship him as the great and mighty God of Heaven. It always begins when God's own people cease to "glorify him as God," and begin to lack gratitude toward him who is our benefactor. If our worship and our attitudes are like that, then we are partly to blame for what we see and complain about around us. Complaining Christians are the ruination of the Church.

Surely, the greatest judgment must not be upon those who have destroyed from the outside. It must be upon those who have lost sight of a Christ-driven Christianity that offers the world something different than the human political solutions it has always sought. Do your politics, do your psychology, do your sociology, do your philosophy, do your economics; but remember, the real difference will come about by Christ in your heart, and the *Sermon on the Mount* as your code of conduct. The Old Commandment does not outshine the New. Human know-how and instrumentality cannot be counted upon to save the world or the church --Christ can be counted on. God sent Christ with the plan; we must follow it. Just as the Center for Disease Control can give us a "Biology Plan" to work our way through a pandemic --Christ gives us the plan for "heart health" for "spiritual health."

Not many years ago, although the churches may have shrunk in size, one could enter a church and hear about Christ. One could hear, as it were, Christ himself preaching; one could see Christ even on the pages of the Old Testament. Christ and his substitutionary death, life giving resurrection, and revolutionary sermons on how to live, offered a remarkable alternative to standard human methods of achieving a moral world and a fulfilling life. With Christ, the church did not need a political majority, one person could make a difference --just as Christ and the early Christians demonstrated for us. Individuals were changed, individually. They went out saying, "I'm going to try this; the other certainly isn't working."

If we love our world, we must love the Christ who loved it more than we do, and follow him closely in his teaching, in his living, and in his cross. Only then, will we make a difference. We must feel the sorrow that Christ felt toward hurt in our world and respond accordingly. When the church begins to weep more and fight less, its tears may soften the shell that keeps the world from Christ and from

good.

How, then, does the post-Christian world feel toward the Christian message? According to Jeremiah 11:21, the people of his own town said, "Jeremiah, if you don't keep quiet, we're going to kill you, we don't want to hear your prophecy." "The priests and the prophets and all the people took him saying, you shall surely die" (Jeremiah 26:8). Priests and Prophets? Yes! The most religious people can often be the most unchristian.

First, we must understand that our culture as a whole is not going to like what we say, especially about Christ, and will try to stop us --most likely by making us look foolish and stupid at first. In fact, there are many places in the world today, where one would be treated like Jeremiah if one were to speak the words of Christ. If we preach Christ we can expect to experience the true price of the cross of Christ --at least in the sense of not being accepted by prevailing society.

In Jeremiah's day, the "Word of the Lord" was destroyed by cutting it up and burning it (Jeremiah 36:22-24). Jeremiah was surprised that they were not afraid to do it. Yet, there are many other ways to destroy it. Perhaps the most insidious is to "hold it down by the unrighteousness of our own behaviors," as in our text. Jeremiah was put in stocks, while religious people said, "This man doesn't seek the welfare of the people, but the hurt" (Jeremiah 38:4). It is no small thing to stick with the message of the gospel of Christ. In addition to being lowered by rope into a pool of mire in an inner dungeon (wondering all the while whether his feet would touch), he had the psychological pain of being rejected by even other preachers.

If you are surprised when you become discouraged, perhaps you do not understand the real struggle for Christ. If we are never overwhelmed, I wonder if we are in the battle with compassion and reality or whether we are engaged in academic debates about silly little things, or just jousting with paper swords, or if we do not care.

Jeremiah was discouraged because he was standing against a flood (Jeremiah 20:14-18). You cannot expect to have it easy. If you love God, and love people, and have compassion for them, you will pay something for that. You will be forced to grapple with ideas, pick up the cross, use, actually use, the Sermon on the Mount, and you will discover many church-people who don't like what Christ said.

What does God expect? He simply expects us to go right on. He does not expect us to stop the Christian message because people are against it, or change it because it's not the prize of the world.

What shall we do as Christians? I believe it is possible to see when things are not working. I think Christians must, themselves, take another look at Christ. After all, according to our passage, what holds truth down is when we, ourselves, attempt to hold it, how-be-it, in unrighteousness. What, then, am I saying? People (Christian people) are trying to hold onto their Christianity and be unchristian at the same time. That is the meaning of "holding the truth in unrighteousness."

Too often our children have heard doctrines expounded upon, and have not seen them working. Talking about loving our neighbor will not take the place of loving our neighbor. Talking about honesty will not take the place of honesty. Teaching forgiveness can never take the place of forgiving. Ranting about purity, will not take the place of being pure, nor is consideration for the doctrine of holiness a substitute for being holy. Talking about freedom will not take the place of freeing the slaves. We cannot expect to major in the material world, while minoring in the spiritual, without ruining truth. Worship will only be valued by our children as they see us prioritizing worship --convenient worship will be seen by others as convenient worship.

The truth we seek is Christ. He said, "I am the way, the truth and the life; you cannot get to God (or godliness) any other way."

The cost of this kind of gospel is high. People will let you talk all you want; it's when they see you actually carrying the cross that they will take notice. All of this is the "I in you and you in Me" that Christ taught. It is the Gospel *in the people*, not just *from the pulpit*. While the world may change, we cannot afford to change to be like it.