

When God Removes His Hand

Caveat

If you are a logician, you immediately will realize that the premise of this paper commits the logical fallacy of *the illicit process of the major* – i.e., distributing the undistributed subject of the major premise. i.e.,

- All dogs have four legs
- My cat has four legs
- Therefore, my cat is a dog

This would be a valid concluding premise if the major premise read "Only dogs have four legs," or "All creatures with four legs are dogs."

Thus, although realizing that the premise of the paper is guilty of the illicit process of the major, I believe that the rapid and dramatic change in our culture gives credence to the paper's premise.

-JWG

Romans 1:18-32

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,¹⁹ because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.

²⁰ *For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.*

²¹ *For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.²² Professing to be wise, they became fools,²³ and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.*

²⁴ **Therefore God gave them over** in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.²⁵ *For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.*

²⁶ **For this reason God gave them over** to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural,²⁷ and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

²⁸ *And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, **God gave them over** to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper,²⁹ being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips,³⁰*

slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,
³¹ *without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful;*

and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.
 (Romans 1:18-32 NAS)

For most of my life I have been a shade-tree mechanic. I no longer am that, because the automobiles that have been produced in recent years have so many electronic components in their systems that I am dead in the water when it comes to diagnosing and fixing them. However, in the old days, when a vehicle didn't run properly I usually could diagnose and fix what was wrong.

For example, if smoke were coming out of the exhaust, the source of the smoke could be diagnosed by noting the color of the smoke.

- If it were white, after the muffler had been heated – the problem was water getting into the cylinders;
- If it were blue, then oil was getting into the cylinders;
- If the smoke were black, that meant that the fuel air mixture was too rich.

The point being, the smoke was the symptom of a condition and the color of the smoke indicated the general nature of the problem.

Romans 1:18-32 describes societal symptoms that reveal a serious truth about that society.

- When a culture dramatically and totally departs from what that culture has been,
- when it devolves, and devolves, and devolves into the state described in these verses,
- when these depraved characteristics become defining traits of that culture,
- the dramatic changes in that culture point back to a cause.

Romans 1:18-32 informs us that these symptoms, these societal conditions, occur when God removes his restraining hand.¹

In recent days,

- I hear about court rulings, that cause me to shake my head in despair;
- I hear a statistic that states that 54% of the babies being born in America are born to unwed mothers (71% in the black community);
- I hear of lesbians and homosexuals praised for their openness about their behavior;
- I hear a lesbian activist state that the goal of her organization is not just to achieve equal recognition for same-sex marriage but to do away with the very institution of marriage;
- I read about our cultures redefinition of marriage, including the growing number of polyamorous marriages and open marriages;²

¹Paul in this section probably was referring to the Gentile world, because in the next section He turns to the Jews and then, in 3:23 declares that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

- I read a news article about the United Church of Christ’s filing a lawsuit in Federal Court challenging North Carolina’s same-sex marriage ban;
- I see advertisements on television dealing with subjects that belong in the bedroom and not the living room (I can almost hear a six-year old little girl, after witnessing a particular commercial, asking her father, “Daddy, what is reptile dysfunction...,” and I wonder what his answer might be);
- I see in movies the coarsening of our culture, using the very same graphic displays of gore that the military uses to desensitize the troops to killing;
- I learn of politicians who are just that – self-interested politicians and no longer statesmen;
- I read of evangelical Christianity being on a government list of dangerous radical institutions;
- I see some members of the government attacking Roman Catholicism and its position on abortion and contraception, some even seeming to wage a war on Roman Catholicism because they can’t control it;
- I hear reports of the IRS’s not only targeting conservative organizations, but also Christians organizations, even requiring them to disclose the contents of people’s prayers;
- when the language is changed from *freedom of religion* to *freedom of worship* – meaning that you can worship in your building, but please keep it to yourself;
- when our President gives a speech at a Planned Parenthood Convention and tells the delegates that he will fight for them, which means that he will fight for the right of mothers to kill their babies;
- when our President sends to the Vatican two pro-abortionists to represent America at the ceremony canonizing two new saints (thus mocking the Roman Catholic Church’s stance on the sanctity of human life);
- when we have daily shootings in Tulsa (when I was a boy, everyone in my hometown – young and old - had guns, but the shootings that now take place daily were unheard of);
- When the Chief Executive of the software giant, Mozilla , Brendan Eich, resigned from the post because the company was threatened by a boycott unless he resigned – Eich’s crime was his having given money to support opposition to gay marriage in California;

² Same-sex marriage advocates (Judith Stacey, Masha Gessen, Elizabeth Brake, Victoria Brownworth, the 300+ self-identified LGBT scholars, activists, and allies who signed the “Beyond Same-Sex Marriage” manifesto—including Gloria Steinem, Barbara Ehrenreich, and Kenji Yoshino) recognize that polyamorism and open marriage are the logical outcome of the redefinition of marriage. They have publicly acknowledged that in the revisionist view of marriage (in which individuals of the same sex can form a marital bond), there is no reason not to further re-shape the institution of marriage to include multiple partner unions. They argue that such a move represents further progress toward the ideal of equality and the norm of justice. Stopping short of doing that, in their view, is arbitrary and ultimately unjust. (Robert P. George, *So You Believe In “Marriage Equality,” Why Not For Throuples?* First Things Blog, 4/25/14).

- when Aaron & Melissa Klein, of Sweet Cakes by Melissa, in Oregon, and Jack Phillips, Masterpiece Cake Shop, in Lakewood, Co. have been ordered to bake cakes for same-sex weddings or go to jail;
- when promising and talented political candidates are vetted by the establishment of the two major political parties, and those that are “too religious” (for example, Erika Harold, Illinois, Keith Butler, Michigan) are opposed, undercut, and weeded out;
- when Ashley Madison, the online business whose motto is, “Life is short. Have an affair,” successfully caters to married men and women desiring an adulterous affair – being so successful that it grosses \$60 million in yearly revenue and \$20 million in annual profits – and the founder, Noel Biderman, declares, “Monogamy, in my opinion, is a failed experiment” – and *Businessweek* declares him to be a “lone genius....”;
- when we live in a culture that fits Isaiah’s description of societal depravity: *Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; Who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!* (Isaiah 5:20)

On and on I could go, but because in less than a decade these conditions have become the defining characteristics of American culture, I have to step back and realize that America displays all of the symptoms of a culture from which God has removed His restraining hand. It seems that God has said, – *OK have your way - I take My Hands off – go your way and pay the consequences.*

Why would God remove His restraining hand?

In answering that question, Paul wrote,

*For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks
For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than
the Creator*

Romans 3:10-17 is another description of the symptoms displayed by a thoroughly corrupted society

- *None is righteous, no, not one;*
- *no one understands; no one seeks for God.*
- *All have turned aside;*
- *together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.*
- *Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.*
- *The venom of asps is under their lips.*
- *Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.*
- *Their feet are swift to shed blood;*
- *in their paths are ruin and misery,*
- *and the way of peace they have not known.*

After this listing of the symptoms of the disease, verse 18 gives the diagnosis of the disease that produced these symptoms:

There is no fear of God before their eyes.

- When a culture persistently does not want any restraints put on it,
- when a rebellious society obstinately refuses to honor God as God – even mocking Him;
- when rebellious people become impressed with themselves
- when man decides that man is the measure of all things,
- after many appeals, God removes His Hand.

Throughout history, beginning with the Tower of Babel, mankind has sought to build a society

- apart from God,
- and in many ways, in defiance of God.

In modern times, these efforts have been built upon the assumption that man essentially is good, and left to himself, apart from the destructive presence of religion, utopia can be birthed.

For those who hold this view, both the cross and the crescent are the enemy.

Imagine by John Lennon

Imagine there's no heaven
 It's easy if you try
 No hell below us
 Above us only sky
 Imagine all the people living for today
 Imagine there's no countries
 It isn't hard to do
 Nothing to kill or die for
 And no religion too
 Imagine all the people living life in peace
 You, you may say
 I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one
 I hope someday you'll join us
 And the world will be as one

Imagine no possessions
 I wonder if you can
 No need for greed or hunger
 A brotherhood of man
 Imagine all the people sharing all the world
 You, you may say
 I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one
 I hope someday you'll join us
 And the world will live as one

What is my response to John Lennon's song?

I was born in 1930, the second year of the Great Depression. Fortunately, my father had a steady job during the ten-plus years of that dreadful era. Our backyard was next to the railroad tracks. From time to time, hoboes would come to our back door, always asking if there were some chores that they could do in exchange for a plate of food. They never asked for a handout, but they did ask for the opportunity to work for a meal. My mother always found something for

them to do – stack firewood, hoe the garden, or some other task. After finishing the assigned chores, the hobo would sit on the back step and my mother would give him a generous plate of food. No hobo ever came into the house. All of them behaved as gentlemen. After completing his assigned chores, the hobo would eat his meal and go on his way.

One day, when I was in elementary school, as I sat at my desk I began to think about the hard times and the men who came to our back door, men who wanted to work, but couldn't find work. In my seven-year-old mind, it seemed to me that the problem was money. As I thought about it, an idea came to me. What if there were no money. What if the man who made shirts would make the best shirts that he could make and the man who made shoes would make the best shoes that he could make and when the man who made shirts needed shoes he just went to the shoe maker and obtained a pair of shoes and when the man who made shoes needed a shirt he just went to the shirt maker and obtained a shirt. To my childish mind, this seemed like a great idea.

I was not aware of the fact that this idea had been tried many times and that every time it had been tried, it failed, because of the depravity of humans.

I was in the 4th grade when Hitler invaded Poland

I was in the 6th grade when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor

Near the end of my sixth grade, when America was fully engaged in World War II, both in Europe and the Pacific, I approached my teacher and said, "Why don't all of the nations of the world form an organization in which they declare peace. Then, if a nation attacks another nation, all of the rest of the world would jump on the aggressor and put an end to it?" She said to me, "Keep that dream, Jimmy, and someday, when you are a man perhaps you can bring that into reality."

Of course, in my childish innocence and inexperience, I was not cognizant of the inherent depravity of man, nor of the incessant activity of Satan.

- World War I was touted as the "war to end all wars."
- After World War I, progressives formed the League of Nations and based upon the progressive thinking of the day, the League of Nations, announced that war was, "obsolete."
- Of course, that proved to be folly and the world endured the horrors of World War II.
- After World War II, progressives formed the United Nations and we still have wars.

John Lennon may have written an appealing song with an appealing idea, but it is absurd – the nature of man is such that without the restraining hand of God, without the existence of heaven and hell, Lennon's dream is just that – an unrealistic dream.

After many appeals (and America has been the recipient of many appeals from God), all of the signs indicate that God has said to America, *have your way*, and the conditions described in Romans 1:18-32 and Romans 3:10-17 now describe our nation.

Interestingly, Romans 1:26-27 declares that when the practice of homosexuality and lesbianism become prevalent – and when a culture approves and applauds such behavior, - when this becomes a defining trait of a culture (something that is happening in America) - this is a signal that God has removed his hand from that culture. This particular sexual deviancy is not the *cardinal sin*, but it is a *signal sin*.

When the Church stands in opposition to these trends, or at least refuses to conform to them, the Church becomes culture's enemy – and opposition and repression of the Church naturally results.

If we think that things are bad now, there will be a time when things will be worse.

Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him,² that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

³ *Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction,⁴ who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God.*

⁵ *Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things?⁶ And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed.*

⁷ *For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way.⁸ Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming;*

⁹ *that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders,¹⁰ and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.*

¹¹ *For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false,¹² in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness. (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12)*

Scripture presents three conditions must be met before Jesus comes:

- The Gospel preached to all nations Matthew 24:14

"This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world (οἰκουμένη- the inhabited world) as a testimony to all the nations (ἔθνος- sometimes meaning the Gentiles), and then the end will come.

No one knows when this will be or has been completed. Does it mean that the Gospel must be preached in every dialect and to every subculture, or merely to every inhabited geographical area of the globe?

- All who have been appointed to martyrdom have been martyred. Revelation 6:9-11

When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained;¹⁰ and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"¹¹ And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also.

No one knows when this list has been completed, because only God knows how many and who is on this list. Perhaps even some of us in this room are on that list.

- The revelation of the man of lawlessness II Thessalonians 2:3

All of these matters point to the conclusion that difficult days are ahead for faithful followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Any Church that adheres to the Scriptural standard and proclaims the truths concerning sin, Christ, heaven, and hell, is an obstacle to a culture that desires to make man the measure of all things. Quite naturally, such a culture will consider the church to be the enemy that must be squelched.

Contemporary American culture and individuals in places of power already are becoming enemies of the Church. In the past, such opposition usually was covert, but today the opposition is becoming overt.

I do not want to be an alarmist, but, frankly, the way the world is going, I would not be surprised if in a few years we Christians will find ourselves in the same situation that Christians occupied in the Roman Empire, prior to Constantine.

Unless God intervenes in a dramatic way,

- perhaps pouring out a move of the Spirit similar to what took place in the late 1960's and early 1970's,
- perhaps bringing about something similar to the Great Awakening of the 18th Century or the Second Great Awakening of the 19th Century,
- perhaps bringing forth a national evangelist, as Our Lord did with Billy Graham following World War II.

Unless God's moves sovereignly in some manner, I do not see how we can keep at bay the persecution of the Church and the persecution of individual Christians. It's already happening and it will get worse, short of God's intervention.

As a matter of fact, Jesus predicted such:

"You will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end.

"For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes."⁸ "But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs.

⁹ "Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name.

¹⁰ "At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another."¹¹ "Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many.

¹² "Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold."¹³ "But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved."¹⁴ "This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come. (Matthew 24:6-14)

As the missionary enterprise pushes the Gospel deeper and deeper into the various nations of the world, Satan will respond with persecution and God will permit it to be so. It will happen.

- When it happens, there will be false prophets vs 11
- When it happens, there will be false Christs vs 5
- When it happens, there will be a coldness toward God and Jesus v12
- When it happens, there will be many Christians who will fall away, even becoming haters of the brotherhood v10

It is coming - someday - and the way things are going, it is not in the too distant future.

- When God removes His hand from a culture, and evil abounds,
- when men call good evil and evil good – when even government authorities do so,
- when the Church finds itself beset on every side by a culture that views the church as the enemy – what is the Church to do?

Paul wrote to Timothy,

*Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*¹³ *But evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.*¹⁴ *You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them, (2 Timothy 3:12-14 NAS)*

A key element in Paul's exhortation is, *things you have learned and become convinced of,*

In keeping with Paul's exhortation, the first thing that we must do to prepare for the future is to echo the spirit of Paul's words, "believe your beliefs."

- Do you really believe your beliefs?
- Do you believe them enough to die for them?
- If you are not ready to die for your beliefs, then you really don't believe them.

In this present era, it is important for each person to determine what he or she really believes, shore up that conviction and be ready to pay the price for that belief, if a price is demanded.

If I were to ask an average congregation for a show of hands indicating how many in the audience,

- Know of whom I am speaking when I say, Saul of Tarsus – most would raise their hands.
- If I were to ask how many have heard of David, most would raise their hands.
- If I were to ask how many have heard of Moses, most would raise their hands.

If asked how many can identify Antipas, there probably would be few hands raised.

Antipas is mentioned only once in Scripture and we know nothing about him except one statement in Revelation,

*"And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this:*¹³ *I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. (Revelation 2:12-13)*

Could there be anything grander on one's tombstone than that epithet? *My witness*, (The Greek term, μάρτυς, means, *witness*) *My faithful one, who was killed among you.*

Witness... some witness by word and some witness by their deeds and some witness by their death. Antipas witnessed by his death.

What a compliment to the Church at Pergamum – they dwell where Satan's throne is, and yet, they held fast the name of Jesus and did not deny the Faith.

Pergamum was not a commercial center, but it was a religious center. It contained temples devoted to many different Gods. Some of the chief ones were

- Zeus
- Aphrodite
- Aesculapius

This center of false religion is described by Jesus as, *where Satan's throne is*.

In this religious center filled with false religions and the demons that received the worship in such idolatry, the Church of Jesus Christ had been persecuted and at least one of the believers, Antipas, had been killed because of his faith.

In order to prepare for possible persecution, each one of us had better know what he or she really believes and believe it with a whole heart and be willing to die for that belief.

As second thing is this – we must develop Paul's crucified the mind-set.

"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. (Galatians 2:20)

Paul, realizing that Christ on the cross paid for his sins, and thinking that if crucifixion were the penalty for sin, then he should have been crucified because he was a sinner. However, Christ went to the cross for him – thus, he viewed himself as being super-imposed upon the body of Christ - hanging on the cross with Jesus.

I died, but now I live ...

The most difficult challenge faced by most of us is - dying to self.

LUTHER: "I am more afraid of my own heart more than I am afraid of the Pope and all of his Cardinals. I have within me the great Pope – SELF!"

In many ways, it would be easier to die for Jesus, than to remain in this life and live for Him.

- Dying happens and it is over.
- Living is facing the daily challenges, the temptations and the persecutions that one might face.

'He will speak out against the Most High and wear down the saints of the Highest One, and he will intend to make alterations in times and in law; and they will be given into his hand for a time, times, and half a time. (Daniel 7:25)

Even though the battle does get wearisome we hear the voice of Scripture:

Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. (Galatians 6:9)

But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good. (2 Thessalonians 3:13)

For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12:3)

In His letter to the seven churches, Jesus commended the Church at Ephesus with these words, *and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. (Revelation 2:3)*

A Third Thing is this – remember that the gate and the way that leads to life is narrow and we must resist the impulse, out of human compassion, to widen the gate.

"Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. "For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it. (Matthew 7:13-14)

We cannot expect the people of the world to have the same standards that we have, nor to live by the same standards by which we live. That being true, we must be willing to be different from the world – set apart – that after all is what the terms, *holy* (ἅγιος) and *holiness* (ἁγιότης) , mean, i.e., *to be separated or set apart.*

A major aspect of that narrow gate is that there is only one way to heaven.

"Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. ² "In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. ³ "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴ "And you know the way where I am going." ⁵ Thomas said to Him, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me. (John 14:1-6)

Many voices are challenging the exclusivity of Jesus' statement. For example, Brian McLaren, high priest of the Emergent Church Movement, has written,

"I believe Jesus primarily came not to proclaim a way out of hell for some after death, but rather a way into a better life for all before death. His message was not about going to heaven after history, but about the kingdom of heaven coming to earth in history."³

In another, somewhat sarcastic statement, McLaren wrote,

...he could not mean, "I won't let anyone get to the Father unless they get by me."⁴

Syncretism is flourishing in much of Europe - to the point that a new term, *Chrislam*, has been coined. Even in church buildings constructed in Germany in honor of Martin Luther, syncretistic services are being held.⁵ How long will it be before this happens in America?

³ Brian McLaren, *A Reading of John 14:6* (self published) 2006, page 3

⁴ Brian McLaren *More Ready than you Realize* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan) 2002, p 50

In line with this topic, even though the Church at Pergamum had held fast to the Name of Christ in the midst of persecution, Our Lord did have a rebuke for the Church at Pergamum.

¹⁴ *'But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality.* ¹⁵ *'So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.* ¹⁶ *'Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth.* ¹⁷ *'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.'* (Revelation 2:14-17)

To what was Our Lord referring, in this rebuke of the Church at Pergamum? How did Balaam teach Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel and who were the Nicolaitans, whom the church permitted to exist in its midst?

When the nation of Israel was about to cross the Jordan River, Balak, king of Moab, realized that he and his armies could not withstand the people of Israel. He had just witnessed Israel's defeat of the Amorites. He knew that there was a man who was a prophet of God – a man named Balaam, the son of Beor - and that those whom Balaam blessed were blessed and those whom Balaam cursed were cursed. So, he sent for Balaam and offered him a sizeable fee to curse the Israelites. Balaam sought God and God told him to refuse the offer and not curse the people of Israel (Numbers 22:5-14). Balak sent more messengers with a greater offer, and once again, Balaam refused to disobey God, but he said that he would seek God about it. God told him to go with Balak's messengers, but that he should not speak anything other than that which God gave him to say. To make a long story short, God put into Balaam's mouth a blessing for Israel, not a curse (Numbers 22:15-23:12). Again, Balak offered Balaam a larger fee and again, God put into Balaam's mouth a blessing for Israel rather than a curse. This happened three times.

Realizing that this was not going to work, Balaam came up with a scheme to achieve Balak's ends. According to Numbers 31:16, and the record of the event in Numbers 25, Balaam counseled Balak to have the Moabite women seduce the Israelite men and invite them to participate in their idolatrous and immoral feasts. If he could not curse them, he could corrupt them. In this he succeeded.

This is what God accused the church at Pergamum of permitting. They were permitting in their presence the Nicolaitans who were a sect of Gnostics who had entered the church and were allowed to remain as Christians. They were perverting the saints with their false doctrine.⁶

⁵ See, Erwin W. Lutzer, *The Cross in the Shadow of the Crescent* (Eugene, OR, Harvest House Publishers) 2013

⁶ **Nicolaitanism** became quite strong and plagued the church for almost 100 years. Its adherents claimed to be followers of Nicholas, the proselyte, one of the seven deacons chosen in Act 6. They told this story about their founder. He had a very beautiful wife.

It is important that as we move forward into the days ahead that we be sensitive to any adjustment of doctrine. Many popular contemporary movements are casting aside the foundational doctrines of the faith and conforming to the spirit of the age.

A fourth thing to which we must commit ourselves is intercessory prayer.

After the stoning of Stephen and the ensuing persecution, Christians evacuated Jerusalem (all except the apostles) and everywhere they went they spread the Gospel. Their situation was not the same as ours – to where would we flee?

More fitting for our situation is that described in Acts 4:23-31.

After the healing of the lame man at the Gate Beautiful, Peter used the occasion to preach Jesus Christ to the excited crowd. He gave special emphasis to the resurrection. This upset the Jewish authorities and so they arrested Peter and John and put them into jail. After spending the night in jail, they were brought before the Jewish authorities. Even though the court wanted to take strong measures against the preachers, they found themselves restrained by the presence of the man who had been healed. So, they released Peter and John with a threat of further punishment if they persisted in their proclamation of Jesus. After their release the two apostles went to a house where some disciples were praying. When they entered the house, the following took place,

When they had been released, they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them.²⁴ And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, "O Lord, it is You who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them,²⁵ who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David Your servant, said, 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples devise futile things?'²⁶ The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against His

After the ascension of Jesus, the apostles were jealous, and so, Nicolas brought his wife forth and said that anyone who wanted to marry her could have her. He said that "we must abuse the flesh." He himself never had any woman other than his wife, his sons and daughters were honorable. However, his followers, taking the expression, "We must abuse the flesh," began to do just that. They became very immoral, committed fornication without restraint and were described by Clement, one of the early Church leaders, as being "as dissolute as he-goats." What this group did was take Paul's teaching that we are not under law, and pushed it to the extreme, disowning all moral obligation as something that pertained to the flesh, which was inappropriate for the spiritual man. Through debauchery they sought to destroy their bodies. To them, this was not sin, because it was a means of attaining a higher place, when the body was spent of its lustful forces.

This was a very popular movement. Huge numbers of Christians flocked to this sect. It is condemned in two of the letters to the seven churches mentioned in Revelation (Rev. 2:6; 2:16). Although not addressed as a sect, profligacy among clergy was known as "Nicolaitanism" even in the time of Urban II (reigned 1088-1099 AD).

Christ.²⁷ "For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel,²⁸ to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.²⁹ "And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence,³⁰ while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus."³¹ And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness. (Acts 4:23-31)

As we face growing pressure to keep our mouths shut, let us respond by praying for God to do two things:

- give us greater boldness,
- and that God would strengthen our witness by granting signs and wonders through the name of Jesus.

At the same time, let us beg God to intervene in America and bring about a Spirit-empowered revival in our churches.

The Acts 4 prayer is a reminder of fifth thing that we must not cease doing – being diligent and bold in evangelism. The Great Commission still is our mandate.

Spokesmen of Islam are declaring that Islam is superior to Christianity because in nation after nation, Islam has replaced Christianity. Where there formerly were church buildings, there now are mosques. Where Christianity once was the prevailing faith of a given region, followers of Christ are hard to find – if they are found, they are persecuted – and Islam rules.

In America, forces equally intimidating are capturing and controlling our culture, seeking to displace and/or remove the biblical Gospel message from having any influence in our society.

In spite of this, we must not abandon our primary commission:

- To proclaim the Gospel of Christ, in the anointing of the Holy Spirit, at every opportunity and even when there is no obvious opportunity.
- We must not be shy, because God is God and He has commissioned us.
- We must be bold, regardless of the consequences.

If there is a prevailing weakness in most churches today, it is the lack of aggressive evangelism. It is comfortable to meet Sunday after Sunday, sing a few songs, listen to a talk, and shepherd the believers. We can ease our consciences by financing missionaries who go forth to battle the enemy in the nations of the world.

These things are easier to do than leaving the comfortable presence of like-minded saints and going forth into an alien culture, confronting the wolves, and seeking to save lost sheep.

Not only should we pray for God to enable each of us to be bold, it also is fitting that we pray for God to provide in our individual churches those whom He has called to be evangelists. Elders do not make good evangelists (they are shepherds) and good evangelists rarely make good elders (it takes too much patience). How blessed is the church that has an evangelist (or evangelists) who bring in the lost sheep to dedicated shepherds who will disciple the new converts and bring them to maturity.

As we face the future, we do well to remember the words that Jesus spoke to a crowd that enthusiastically following him:

Now large crowds were going along with Him; and He turned and said to them,²⁶ "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple."²⁷ "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple."²⁸ "For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it?"²⁹ "Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him,³⁰ saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.'³¹ "Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and consider whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand?"³² "Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace."³³ "So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions."³⁴ "Therefore, salt is good; but if even salt has become tasteless, with what will it be seasoned?"³⁵ "It is useless either for the soil or for the manure pile; it is thrown out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear." (Luke 14:25-35 NAU)

Sadly, we live in an age in which the Gospel has been merchandized in a manner that focuses exclusively on the blessings of salvation, proclaiming a cheap grace that has ignored the Gospel's demands – the cost of discipleship. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the inspiring German martyr who wrote strongly concerning the error of cheap grace,⁷ wrote,

“When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”⁸

If and when the day comes that we are arrested, tortured, and killed, let us boldly and without wavering faith, remain faithful.

In order to do that each believer must first decide what he believes and if necessary, be willing to die for that belief.

In the meantime,

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 15:58)

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York, Macmillan Publishing) 1949/1963 paperback, page 45ff

⁸ Bonhoeffer, page 99