

## **“Challenges to the Church”**

*“For when we were come into Macedonia, our flesh had no rest, but we were troubled on every side; without were fightings, within were fears.” 2 Corinthians 7:5*

There is no question that the Church in North America is facing severe challenges. The decline in church attendance which has been steadily going on for years has now reached epidemic proportions in some circles. Why is this? To put it simply, there are more going out (and up!) than there are coming in. I remember well the healthy attendance that marked our fellowship in years past – the overflow VBS and Sunday school programs, the well-attended annual picnic, the regular stream of neighborhood visitors on Sunday mornings and all without any advertising! That is certainly not the case these days, especially for many traditional meetings like ours. Instead, there are huge gaps in the pews that in the past were simply not there – and the statistics bear it out. According to a 2014 poll from Pew Research Center, 37% of all Americans attended church on a weekly basis. Gallup estimated that once-a-week church attendance for Americans was at 39%. That fact is bad enough but the Hartford Institute of Religion Research has an even more revealing statistic. According to their findings, 40 percent of Americans *say* they go to church weekly when in fact less than 20 percent are *actually* in a weekly church meeting. In the Institutes’ words, *“more than 80 percent of Americans are finding more fulfilling things to do on weekends”*. There you have it... *“more fulfilling things to do on weekends”*. It proves just how powerful the sway of the great god “Entertainment” is over the masses. The majority of the population is occupied with worldly pursuits while a number of those who profess to know the Lord are halting between two opinions, having erected competing altars to the Lord and to other gods (1 Kings 18:21). We wonder why the Church does not have more influence in the world!

In writing to the Corinthians, Paul indicated that he was simultaneously waging a war on two fronts. He elaborated on this in 2 Cor. 11 – shipwrecks, stonings, stripes and imprisonments – just a few of the “fightings” without, all in his quest to share the life-liberating message of the Cross. After listing these adversities (vv. 23-28), he concludes his list with a terse but telling comment - “the care of all the churches” (v. 28). These were the “fears within”, the ongoing conflicts that he experienced from the false teachers who had infiltrated many of the churches he established but whose simplicity in Christ was being threatened (2 Cor. 11:3).

These same pressures are with us today and likewise affect the life of the Church. Externally, there is the threat of government intrusion and interference. Ironically, after decades of decrying separation of church and state, government now demands that we bow to legislative decrees that are objectionable to Bible-believing Christians just as it was in the days of Daniel (Dan. 3). The intimidation that it evokes has been quite effective in muzzling the message decreed from a Higher Authority. Along with the influence of the entertainment world, the challenge to penetrate society with the Gospel message is even more difficult as it keeps the population pitched toward Vanity Fair, all the while portraying Christians as narrow, old-fashioned and behind the times. Adding to the dilemma is the preponderance of false prophets, whose main target is “the people”

(2 Peter 2:1). They are tireless emissaries of the devil who appear as ministers of righteousness whose conflicting half-truths steer souls away from finding and following the One whom they so desperately need.

What are the fears within? It is that same line of false teachers who ignorantly are “brought in” (Gal. 2:4) or who have deceptively crept in the assemblies of God’s people, (Jude 4). Together, these influences upset the rank and file, make merchandize of the Gospel, pressure leadership to adopt unscriptural practices (Ex. 32:4-5) and foster criticism of the leadership for unscriptural reasons (Num. 12; 16; Jude 11) What challenges we face!

So, what then is the Church to do amid such formidable opposition? It is to do precisely what Paul and others did in his day. Equipped with the Scriptures and empowered by the Spirit, believers should fearlessly take the whole Gospel to the whole world. It is not for the world to come and hear but for us to “go and tell”. It is the responsibility of *each* one to do the work of an evangelist, 2 Tim. 4:5. “*Each one, reach one*” should be the cry. Buoyed by the promise that “*the gates of Hell shall not prevail*” (Matt. 16:18) and “*the foundation of God standeth sure*” (2 Tim. 2:19), we are to steadfastly hold forth the message of Life. We are to regard the words of Paul to the Philippians: “*in nothing terrified by your adversaries*” (Phil. 1:28) and to the Corinthians “*a great effectual door is open to us and there are many adversaries*”, 1 Cor. 16:9. At the same time, we are to take heed to ourselves and to the doctrine (1 Tim. 4:16) and to be on guard against the devastating effects of false teaching and the subtle influences of the world.

Yes, there are far more fulfilling things to do on a weekend (and the rest of the week) but it is not in the passing pleasures of this world, but in Christ and in His Word! It is our duty to know Him, make Him known and as we do in the power and strength of the Spirit, perhaps we will see this trend turn around, with less gaps in the pews.

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