

How to Be a Faithful Church

a sermon in the series
Hebrews: An Epistle of Encouragement

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Hebrews 13:7-14; 17

7 Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation. 8 Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever. 9 Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines. For it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace; not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein. 10 We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle. 11 For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned without the camp. 12 Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate. 13 Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. 14 For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.

17 Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.

In the thirteenth chapter of Hebrews the writer is bringing to a conclusion this epistle of encouragement. He does so by giving exhortations of love and faithfulness based upon what he has taught them in chapters one through twelve. Last week in verses one through six he taught us how to be a loving church. “Let brotherly love continue.” Today we shall find in verses seven through fourteen and in verse seventeen that the writer of Hebrews is going to teach us how to be a faithful church. In the midst of unfaithfulness and a generation of darkness, how can you and I remain faithful, strong and unwavering?

The answer centers on verse eight actually. “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.” It is amazing that in the list of exhortations this great proclamation should be made, but it will become very obvious to you in just a little while why the author inserts this statement. Verse eight is the pivotal point; Christ is unchanging. Theologians use a term called “immutability” to mean that God cannot change. Therefore, since He can’t change and is faithful, we are to be faithful to Him. This is the exhortation of the writer who was inspired by the Holy Spirit.

A FAITHFUL CHURCH WILL HAVE RESPECT FOR THE ELDERS

Let me share with you three exhortations out of this text that speak to you and me on how we can be a faithful church. First, a faithful church always respects the elders, the spiritual leadership, of the congregation. I can't enter into this text without first lamenting the sad state of the ministry today. The pulpit has suffered great loss over the last several generations. Preachers are a dime a dozen, but true men of God are a rare and precious commodity. If you should be so blessed to have a man of God who stands in your pulpit, cherish him, hold on to him tightly for he is a rare thing in this generation. There are many people who stand in pulpits and will speak beautifully with great flashes of oratory and eloquence. They may say some very profound things, powerful things, motivational things. There are many men with such ability. But there are very few men who will tell you the whole counsel of God and not leave out the parts that seem to engender controversy. Very few are the number of men who, knowing that if they preach certain truths many of their own flocks will take leave of them never to return, yet will still preach them.

Now if you have that kind of pastor, please cherish and respect him. That is what this text says, that every faithful church will respect Godly, true, genuine spiritual leadership. It is a sad thing to know that we have more politicians than pastors in our pulpits. Men, who will for the sake of building a crowd, leave out important and essential truths of the gospel, or say things in a deceptive manner leaving false impressions. If ever we needed men to stand faithfully and preach all of God's word without fear of reprisal, it is now. We are living in the very days of which the apostle Paul said that people having itching ears would gather unto themselves teachers and not able to endure sound doctrine. This is why I say to you preachers are a dime a dozen, because there are many people who will scratch people's ears and tell them what they want to hear. But very few are the number of men who will teach the full counsel of God regardless of who will listen or follow. I am thankful for those men who serve in churches who are willing to take that kind of stand.

But not only has the pulpit suffered loss, but there are not as many faithful churches as you and I might think. Churches are a dime a dozen also. Churches that desire to be faithful to all of God's word are a precious commodity; indeed, they are a rare thing these days. I am not talking about a loss of the number of churches in this country. Why, we have churches on every street corner. We have edifices that are large and beautiful that rise to the sky. They have all sorts of programs and ideas to titillate the flesh and satisfy the peoples' needs.

Brethren, I want a church that teaches me the whole of God's word, every jot and tittle of it. I am not so interested in what they can do for me; I want to know is the word of God being faithfully proclaimed. It is a sad thing what the ministry has undergone in these last few years. There was a time in our nation when a pastor was considered a very important part of society. He was respected. Today that is gone.

Nowadays most churches want someone to simply fill the pulpit for about twenty minutes. Before long it will be about ten or fifteen minutes. And for the very few minutes that he does occupy the sacred desk, churches want the pastor to say cheerful and comfortable things. "Just share with us that which make us feel good," is the plea coming from congregations, as if feeling

good has become the Golden Rule or the greatest commandment. Christianity is in a sad state of affairs in America.

But if you should have a godly man who loves you enough to tell you the truth in love, then you have been greatly blessed of the Lord. Verse seven tells you how you should relate to this blessing,

Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation.

The author of Hebrews shares with us three ways to show respect to the spiritual leadership that God has given to you. First, he says consider the fruit of their lives. “Consider the end of their conversation” is how it is stated in the Authorized Version. The word “conversation” is used thirteen times in the New Testament. It is an Old English word, which literally means life, behavior, or conduct. Every time you find it in the New Testament it is referring to someone’s conduct, not his or her speech. It is referring to their lifestyle. The author at this point is actually citing leaders that they have had in the past who have died. He tells them that he wants them to consider past elders and how they endured to the very end. Remember them and think about them; respect them and consider the fruitfulness of their lives that even in the moment of death they remained faithful to God.

This church has a wonderful legacy of men of God who have been here in this pulpit. I have heard and researched much of the history of this church. I think of men like Harry White. Brother White was a godly man who led this church several years—a pastor, a shepherd, a kind and gentle man. I think of the name Frank Chandler who in fact served as Pastor of Oak Grove longer than any other pastor. I am coming close to catching up to him, but he has the longest tenure of any pastor of this church. He was a flaming sword in the hand of God, a sickle that God used to reap many souls for the kingdom. We ought to remember these kinds of men and how they lived. We are to think how they died and that they were faithful unto God to the very end. Often these men have not only preached the truth in prosperity and in good times but also preached under great adversity and affliction. They remained faithful and true to God not only in the good times but also in the bad. That is what the writer of Hebrews is saying, “Remember these men and see that the gospel works, not just when you are prospering but when you are having difficulty.

Many of you know Bob and Pam Orgeron. A few years ago they did a marriage retreat for us. Pam was diagnosed as having Lupus only to find out a few years later that the problem really was she had a hole in her heart. By the time they discovered this, her lungs had worn completely out. She needed a lung transplant. She received the lung transplant and seemingly did well, but her body began to reject those lungs. On this past Thursday morning she died and went to be with the Lord. I called Brother Bob and I tendered him my sympathy and my prayers. I asked him to tell me how God was revealing Himself to him in these crucial and terrible hours. He said, “Brother Michael, He is faithful.” He shared how God had encouraged his heart and strengthened him in these hard days. Oh, dear friend, this is what the writer of Hebrews is telling us to do. When you find that kind of a man, don’t be afraid to follow him, respect him, honor him, and cherish him.

Now please don't take what I am saying and go too far with it, as some churches do in idolizing their pastors. You ought never to idolize a man. Only God is to be revered. Pastors are brothers in the Lord whom God has called to watch over you, but the truth is he is a brother. But at the same time don't do what other churches do and despise the one called by God and treat him as a hireling. He is not a hireling; he is a God-called man, worthy of respect. Therefore the first thing to do to show respect to the spiritual leaders God has placed in your life is to meditate on the way they live their lives for God.

Second, the author of Hebrews says we are to respect leaders by imitating the faith of godly pastors.

...whose faith follow...

We are to imitate the faith of these men. The word "follow" means to imitate. The Apostle Paul said it this way, "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). In other words, "As I imitate Christ, imitate me." I have heard ministers say they could not dare say that to their congregations. My reply is always the same, "You need to resign or repent." There is not a man who fills the pulpit who should not be able to say, "Follow me as I follow Christ." That is what a shepherd is to do. He is to lead by his teaching and by his lifestyle. Paul did not say, "Follow me." He said, "Follow me as I follow Christ." As long as an elder, a pastor, a minister is leading the congregation as he is being led of the Lord, he is to be followed. It doesn't deliver itself to a vote at a business meeting.

Read the book of Acts and read Luke's greeting to Theophilus. He says, "The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach" (Acts 1:1). It is not by accident he lists "to do" before "teach". Teaching is not all there is to the pastorate. Surely, it is part of it. Jesus first led by His example; in fact, if Jesus had never taught one parable, or preached one sermon or one discourse, we would still know how to live, by following His example. But I don't think the writer of Hebrews is speaking of just the lifestyle. I think he also means to follow their doctrine. Doctrine is very important in order to live the Christian life faithfully, and so I say we need more doctrinally oriented preaching. We need to leave off some of these fanciful topical sermons that tell us how good we look and how great we ought to feel. We need the depth and meat of God's words. It is no wonder so many Christians are immature. They have been fed the bottle and have never been weaned yet.

Doctrine is that which establishes us. It is doctrine that perfectly and thoroughly furnishes the man of God unto all good works (2 Timothy 3:17). We ought not come to doctrinal passages that are heavy and deep and be afraid to wade in. Learn how to swim, take it, and accept it. Let it minister to you and thereby establish you.

Third, the writer says if you are going to respect your leaders, then you need to obey and submit to them. This is the exhortation of verse seventeen.

Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.

Perhaps you could handle everything I have said thus far, but this third statement is a little bit more difficult to chew on. This is deeper truth here. In verse seven he has told us to remember our godly leaders in the past. Take note of how they live their lives and were faithful to God and follow that example. But in verse seventeen he talks about present leaders. This verse interprets church leadership as this—God calls a man or a plurality of men to lead. A church is to follow the leaders whom God has given the oversight to. It matters not what church government style you have, if you're Congregational, Presbyterian, or Episcopal it doesn't matter, the truth is that God has established leadership.

But how is that leadership to work, as neither God nor the writer of Hebrews, is advocating a board of men who rules and dominates the church? This is not a verse that sets men as absolute rulers over congregations. It is very clear in the New Testament that the church is not to be lorded over by men, especially a man called pastor. This is the clear teaching of Peter in his first epistle. “Neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:3). The church is to be led by none other the Head of the body, Jesus Christ. Are we willing to trust the Head and allow Him to lead and guide us? Most churches will not trust the Head, they don’t even have a connection to the Head. They form their own institutions and governments in which to govern themselves, and Christ Jesus is never listened to, submitted to, or heeded.

It must be certain that God is our leader, no pastor, no man. That is the New Testament mandate, but yet, God does give the church spiritual oversight. He does direct the body. But how does the Head communicate to the body? He does so through spiritual leaders. This is the reason for verse seventeen, “obey them that have the rule over you.” The word “rule” means leaders. It is a word that was used for political as well as religious leaders. He follows this up with a very strong statement. “Submit yourselves to them.”

This must not be interpreted as an authority invested in men. Again this is not dictatorial. The authority to rule is not an authority that men have in and of themselves. The pastor has no authority invested in him personally. Rather, it is in the call of God and in the gifting of an elder or pastor. But even here we must exercise the greatest of cautions. Just because a man occupies the office of pastor does not mean he has the authority to act as a pastor. When we view a pastor as someone who fills an office in the church we are on a dangerous road. A man may occupy an office in the church but occupying an office does not make a man a pastor as so many have taught. This is not the New Testament view. I believe God calls a pastor and equips him to do a ministry. It is this equipping that makes him a pastor. Ministry and office can be two different things.

Here is the danger of that type of thinking that equates the authority of a pastor with the office of pastor, and it is this, if I believe my authority is derived from my serving in the office of a pastor, then the basis of my authority is an office and not God. If a preacher is not called by God,

he has no authority whatsoever. It matters not that he may have the title “pastor.” Only God can make a pastor. The vote of a congregation or the appointment by a hierarchal body does not make one a preacher.

When Jesus preached, he preached and taught so differently that they began to say, “We have not heard these things like this before; this man preaches with such authority.” This is the same authority that men of God are to have; it is not because they occupy an office. The authority of God is in the anointing of God so that when an anointed man speaks, his words will carry authority; there will be power in his words. If a man’s authority to fill the pulpit and lead a congregation is in the fact the congregation has elected him, he has no pastoral authority. It means nothing. The only authority that is recognizable in the New Testament is the power of the Holy Spirit in a man’s life.

We have way too many preachers who have no authority, no power, and yet because they are in the position of pastor, they are calling upon their congregations to follow them. No sir, this is not the way of God. If men are to follow as you follow God, you must have the hand of God on you. Let God get a hold of you; there will be some who follow and there will be some who will never follow. But don’t let that bother you. Let them not follow, God knows His sheep and His sheep will follow God’s shepherds.

Let me see if I can illustrate this for you. Let’s say tomorrow as you are busy about your work, your employer grabs one of your fellow employees, who has no seniority over you, no authority over you, but your boss tells him to tell you that he wants you to drop what you are doing right now to do this job for him. Your fellow employee, who has no seniority, no power over you, comes to you and he says you are to stop what you are now doing and tells you what you to do. You look at him and say, “Who are you to tell me what to do? I have worked here longer than you have; I am more experienced than you; you have no right to tell me what to do. You are not the boss.” At that point he says, “Oh, but the boss said this is what you are to do.” At that moment everything changes, doesn’t it?

God chooses one from among the sheep, who perhaps may be younger than some of the other sheep, puts His hand on him, gifts him, and calls him to lead. He personally has no authority in himself, but when he speaks the word of the Lord, he is to be obeyed.

This verse is not calling for dictators. The writer is stressing God has called men. Notice what he says, “they watch for your souls.” The literal translation of this is that “they stay awake at night for your souls.” They keep themselves awake to vigilantly watch and guard the flock. It is the pastor who faithfully guards the flock of God. If they can’t do that joyfully, it will be unprofitable for you, the writer says. The day will come when you and I will stand before the Lord God, and you will be judged as I will be for faithfulness. But when God calls me I will have to give a second account, in fact, I will have to give a third and a fourth and a fifth and a sixth and as many as God puts under my oversight. I will have to give an account—did I tell you the truth, was I faithful in my discharge of preaching the entirety of God’s word, was I there when you needed a kind word,

was I there when you needed a reproof when you were beginning to go astray? And if I have been faithful in that duty and you still stray, it will not be profitable for you.

You are to respect the leadership that God has given you and you will be a faithful church. Now, dear friends, I want to commend you and thank God for you. I consider myself the most blessed man in the entire Commonwealth for the privilege of pastoring this church. You are of exemplary character in following this command. You have never shown anything other than that. God will bless you for that. In fact, sometimes I worry a little bit about you. I sometimes wonder if you don't respect me too much and some of you, I fear, may even be idolizing me. I would tell you before the living God that is a sin. It is a sin before Him. I am a frail man; I am like the man who said, "If you could look into my very heart of hearts you would never come back and listen to me again." May God bless you for your faithfulness to this text over the years. It has been such a privilege, and I look forward to many, many more.

Well, that is not the whole text as you can see. Let's now move on to verses eight through twelve and we will bring this message to a conclusion.

A FAITHFUL CHURCH WILL BE DOCTRINALLY SOUND

Not only must a faithful church respect its elders, but secondly, a faithful church will be doctrinally sound. Let me highlight this requirement for faithfulness as we go through the major points. First, to be doctrinally sound you have to have a doctrine that is unchanging. It is amazing to me how many of the cults, Jehovah Witnesses, Mormons, and the like, have through the years changed their major doctrines. Do they think God changes His mind like that? I don't think so, and that is why the Apostle Paul, in the middle of this list of commandments, puts in this wonderful statement about Jesus. Look at verse eight, "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever." Why in the middle of all these simple commands to be a loving and a faithful church does he say this about our Lord? It is because Christ is our doctrine. Our gospel is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Christ is our doctrine. The Bible says of Christ Jesus that God has made Him "unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:30). The good news is not just hearing somebody preach. The good news is Jesus. He was crucified, buried, and resurrected. Our doctrine is Christ. We have no other message than that. Paul said he went to the Corinthians "not with excellency of speech or of wisdom." Rather he said that he declared unto them "the testimony of God" (1 Corinthians 2:1). Why was that the essential message of the Apostle Paul and all the other apostles? Because there is no other gospel. Our doctrine must not be changing or evolving. It is as certain as Christ is, who is unchangeable.

So first, make sure your doctrine doesn't change, and second, to be doctrinally sound, a church must avoid strange new teaching. If Christ is the same and does not change, then anything that is different from Christ is to be avoided. Look at the very first part of verse nine.

Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines.

What, may I ask, is strange doctrine? Some of the groups that I mentioned, the Jehovah Witnesses and the Mormons, preach about Jesus Christ. They will even go so far to say they believe that salvation is through Jesus and Him alone. So what is so strange if they preach about Christ? The author answers in the later part of verse nine that strange doctrine will always be based upon man and his works rather than upon Christ.

For it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace.

There is no way to be established and in right relationship with God apart from grace. There is no salvation in works that is based upon the efforts of men. “So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy” (Romans 9:16). This is the context in which to understand our text. The author says, “it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace; not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein.” He is speaking about the Jewish people as well as some pagan religions. The dietary laws of the Jewish people are recorded in the Mosaic law, but by this time the Jews had exceeded the dietary laws of the Old Covenant. They rated some clean meats to be better than other meats. This was nothing more than the doctrines and commandments of men, men trying to be more rigid than the commandments of God, trying to show that they are more worthy of God’s good favor.

This is not the doctrine of Christ. The doctrine of Christ is not based upon man’s work of observing stringent laws; rather it is based upon the finished work of Christ and His perfect obedience to the law. Again, it is based upon the Lord Jesus Christ. You cannot earn your salvation, you cannot do anything to guarantee it, nor keep it. Salvation is wholly of the Lord.

But not only is strange doctrine based upon man rather than Christ, but strange doctrine will also give you false views of Christ. Again we see how verse eight is such a pivotal verse here. “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.” Paul, speaking to the Galatians, says that there are others who are preaching Jesus but it is a different Jesus than what he preached. The Jesus that is to be followed is the Jesus that is presented in the Word of God, and only in the Word. If anybody preaches to you a different Jesus than this one that we find revealed in God’s Holy Word, do not submit to it. Do not be led astray. It is not the truth of Scripture.

Today is no different than the time of the writing of this epistle. False prophets and false Jesuses abound, as they did then. That is why we move to the author’s third and final point—doctrinal soundness will always find as its central cornerstone Jesus Christ crucified. You do not need to know the inner and outer teachings of a false church or a cult in order to know the truth. But you must know this truth . . . Christ and Him crucified. The writer moves his argument to the centrality of Christ in verse ten.

We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle.

What is the altar of Christianity and its New Covenant? It is Christ. Some have suggested that the cross is the altar because it was upon the cross Jesus died. But the cross is not the altar that

I believe the writer is referring to. Christ is the altar Himself. Not only is He the sacrifice, as we will see in a few moments, He is also the altar. The altar was the place in the Jewish temple and tabernacle where the sacrifices were offered up to God. It was an instrument made out of shittim wood overlaid with brass. This is a picture of the humanity of Jesus Christ. Christ's humanity was the altar upon which he sacrificed Himself for the sins of those who believed. Christ is our altar. It is at this altar that we have the right to participate.

Let me offer more biblical evidence of why I believe Christ is our altar. In the Old Covenant it was the altar that gave refuge to a man. Adonijah went into the temple under the threat of death by Solomon, and he grabbed the horns of the altar so that they could not touch him. It was a place of safety and refuge. I tell you Christ is our safety. Christ is our refuge; as long as you are in Christ the devil can't touch you. You are inseparably linked to the Lord God through Jesus Christ who is our altar. But not only is Jesus our Lord and Savior, and not only is He our altar, but He also is our meat and portion.

Whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle (Hebrews 13:10b).

What could the author be meaning when he said this, "we have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle"? I am sure you know this; I say this only to refresh your memory that in the Old Testament the Levitical priests survived by the tithe and the provision of eating certain portions of certain sacrifices. The priest was allowed to keep part of the meat and eat from those sacrifices. But the writer says they, meaning the Levitical priests, have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle. No one can eat from our altar unless they are believers in the sacrifice of Christ. He is reinforcing the centrality and exclusiveness of Christ Jesus. There is no way to eternal life except through Christ. How much clearer can this be? Unless one eats and drinks of Christ there is no life. Salvation is more than just an acknowledging of God. It is the internalizing of God. God coming in and we being partakers of a divine nature says Peter.

In addition to Christ being the altar He is also our sacrifice for sin. Christ is the sacrifice for sin. Again we see a comparison with Old Covenant types.

For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned without the camp (Hebrews 13:11).

This is a reference to the Day of Atonement, when after the animals had been slain and their blood had been taken into the Holy of Holies, their carcasses were taken outside of the camp and burned. When the temple was built in Jerusalem, the dead animals were taken outside the gates of Jerusalem and there they were burned. The priests were not to eat anything from those sacrifices. This is type of which Christ is the antitype. The comparison continues in verse twelve.

Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate.

After beating and flogging His body they took our Lord and led Him outside the gates of Jerusalem, and on Golgotha's gruesome hill, men nailed Him to a tree. The greatest single event of all human history was when my sins were nailed to a cross along with God incarnate. "Without the gate" is where our redemption was purchased. Without the gate," dear friend, the bulls and goats of the Old Covenant were merely illustrations and types of the real sacrifice that was to suffer "without the gate." We have already studied in Hebrews chapter ten that the blood of bulls and goats can never take away sin. But Jesus is the fulfillment of the type and He has sanctified His "people with his own blood."

If we are to be a faithful church, this is the cornerstone of our message. We should never wander from this message. When in a few weeks I teach on parenting and child rearing, I will do so in the shadow of the cross. For in talking about husbands and wives and parents and children, we should do so with our eye on Christ. He is our doctrine. Anything we find in this book points to Jesus Christ for He is our doctrine.

A FAITHFUL CHURCH WILL BE REPROACHED

Now lastly if you and I are to be a faithful church we must understand that we too will be reproached. This is the message of verses thirteen and fourteen.

Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.

What does that mean? Well, it must mean that we are to be despised. Even as Christ was despised, so will we be. The fact that Christ was taken out of the city is an indication that the establishment despised Him. Even the location of the execution is a sign of reproach. Archeologists and church historians tell us that Golgotha was more than likely overlooking the very garbage dump of Jerusalem. A great pit had been dug and it was here that the city and all of its occupants would go and throw out their garbage and their refuse. The Romans, after crucifying on Golgotha's hill would, if nobody would claim the body, pry the body from the cross and allow it to fall down into the garbage dump of Jerusalem. That is how despised those who were crucified were. They were given no respect, reproach upon reproach.

If you are to follow Christ, you too will be reproached. Paul wrote to Timothy saying that no true Christian can escape reproach. "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution (2 Timothy 3:12). They despised your Savior; they hated Him, and they will hate you and me. Here was this man born in abject poverty, a carpenter from Nazareth who claimed to be the Messiah yet died as a criminal and outcast of His own society; He was cast outside of the camp. Paul says that such a message was a stumbling block to the Jews and it was foolishness to the Greeks. If you accept Christ as Messiah you will be reproached.

Yet another truth we can receive from this phrase "Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach" is that all those who believe in Christ will be a minority. Those

who are perishing are by far a majority. They travel a very broad road that leads to destruction. The way to eternal life is narrow and very few there be that find it. But not I am not speaking about the non-church world; much of the church world as well is a part of those on the broad road to destruction. The Lord Himself warned us of this over and over in many of His parables about the kingdom of God. Tares would be planted by the enemy. The parable of the dragnet suggests that the kingdom of God has within it many who appear to be loyal subjects but in the end they will be cast out.

Always and again it is the religious crowd that persecutes the church. As in the Old Testament, the killing of the prophets was by the so-called people of God. It was the Sanhedrin that had Christ arrested. It would be the same religious council that would later persecute Christ's apostles. Religion has always envied true Christianity. It sees the true faith as a threat to its ways and traditions. True believers are branded as either heretical or fanatical. Either way the religious establishment tries to silence the believer.

Now I would not have you think that the secular world has clean hands in regards to persecuting the church. Far from it. Pagan Rome was involved in our Lord's death and the persecution of Christians. But here Rome's incitement against Christians was a matter of defending their own religious beliefs. The church of Jesus Christ has been and always will be outside the camp. It will always be outside mainstream and popular religious thought.

I am not arguing against orthodoxy. I am one who believes that we ought to be orthodox, which means believing the unchangeable doctrine of Christ. But the majority has never gotten the orthodox doctrine of Christ right. It never has; church history bears this out. Since Constantine took over Christendom and made his view of Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, orthodoxy has greatly suffered. Official Christianity picked up where pagan Rome left off and began to persecute the church of Jesus Christ. They martyred those who would not accept Rome's baptism. These early Christians believed that the church should not be wedded with the state and believed only those who are saved should be baptized, and not babies.

The church went underground, and it has been underground for many, many centuries. Even the great Reformation did little to stop Christendom from abusing the saints of God. It only created more enemies for true believers. True believers were in these official churches. I would not dispute that. Some of them were exceptional men and women whom we admire greatly today. But organized religion will always be the enemy of vibrant and real Christianity. Those who will advocate Christ and Him alone, crucified, buried, and resurrected; true faith and repentance; justification by grace alone with a life of holiness following, will be a persecuted people. They will be a minority and a people of reproach even among Christendom.

Today, unfortunately, the sad truth is the gospel has been relegated and reduced to something of folklore, a fairy tale, a means by which to soothe your problems and to give you comfort. Dear friend, the gospel is more than that. And wherever and whenever the purity of the gospel is preached there will be persecution. Wherever the gospel is preached there will be a reproach.

Paul says it this way, for “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ.” Why did he say that? Because wherever he went there was a stigma associated with the preaching of the gospel of Jesus.

Many have sadly misunderstood this in our nation. They think Christianity is safe because we are living in a “Christian nation.” But a Christian nation we are not. The truth of God has always been despised within the borders of America, and it will always be despised within our nation and any other country. Paul said “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ” because wherever he went there were bonds and afflictions awaiting him. Why was he not ashamed of it? Because he says, “It is the power of God unto salvation” (Romans 1:16). What does it matter if they should take me outside of the gate and there leave me? So what if I am reproached and killed in shame? I have the power of God unto salvation. I have experienced it. In my heart and life there was a change not by my works, but by the grace of God. He changed me. Why should I be ashamed of this glorious gospel when it brought me out of darkness and into the light? Why should I be ashamed of a man who would suffer the abuse and reproach of a world while overlooking a garbage dump? If Jesus would do that for me, I shall gladly go outside of the camp with Him.

This is what it means to be a faithful church. Ladies and gentlemen, do not expect things to get better. Pray that there may be an awakening among sinners, but don't expect things to be better. For if there was an awakening in this country, it would still affect only a minority, and as with all awakenings, the effects would be limited in time. In the hours that face us, we may go through severe times and we may experience exactly what the others who have gone on before us have experienced—great persecution. But if that be God's will, let us remain faithful for we have an unchanging Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever. Amen.