

The Three Greatest Threats To Today's Church: The Reality Revelation 2-3

Several years ago, our church building was inspected by the fire marshal to see if we were in compliance with safety codes. As it turned out, there were a several things we were required to do including installing automatic door closers and a fire suppression system for the oven. In more recent years, we've been required to hold periodic fire drills and maintain other fire safety procedures.

Now I have to admit that at the time some of this seemed a bit much, but the reality is that we're being told to do these things to protect ourselves from the threat of fire. And that's a good thing. However, there's a greater threat than fire that churches today must face. It's a threat not against their buildings but against their very existence. And these threats have been in place since the very beginning of the church.

We see them in the letters to the churches which is recorded in the book of Revelation. Though the circumstances in their day are far different than they are in ours, the core threats are the same. So beginning today and continuing for the next two weeks, I want to talk with you about these threats.

This morning we will look at the reality of the threats. Next Sunday we will examine the threats themselves. And on the last Sunday of the month, we will explore the solutions that the Bible offers to keep the threats under control. We begin then with the reality of the threats.

I. The threats are real.

You see, it's very easy for us to get a triumphal attitude about the church thinking that nothing could ever possibly bring it harm. But such thinking is foolish and unbiblical. While the universal church will always have a presence in the world, individual local churches and even entire denominations can find themselves risking extinction if they don't handle the threats against them well.

That message is echoed time and time again in the letters to the churches in Revelation. For example, in the letter to the church in Ephesus the church was warned that they were in danger of having their lamp stand removed. The church in Pergamum was told that they were in peril of facing the sword. And the most stern warning was leveled at the church of Laodicea that they risked being spewed out of the Lord's mouth.

So to say that churches today have some real threats against them is not hysterical chicken little talk. It's simply a statement of sober reality that every church should pay attention to. That was true 2000 years ago and it's true now.

Consider the current condition of the church in England. In 1961 there were approximately 55,000 churches in the UK. By 2005, a little over 40 years later, the number of churches had dropped by about 15% to 47,600. However, during this same period of time, the number of mosques has increased from 7 to 1,689. What is even more troubling is the fact that of the 42 million Brits who call themselves Christians, only 10% actually attend church or are functional Christians. And get this. It's estimated that if these trends continue, then within a few decades there will be more practicing Moslems in Britain than practicing Christians.

I point out the situation in Britain because it's a forecast of where the church in the US is heading. Some of those who research these things suggest that we're just a couple of generations behind them. Whether they're accurate in their predictions remains to be seen. But the downward trends are undeniable. Today only 25% of American Christians regularly attend church and the numbers continue to go down each year.

So the threat to today's church is real. And while there are wonderful examples of churches who are bucking the trend with increased attendance and influence, the overall state of the church in America is not good. And if we're to avoid being a part of the ongoing decline, we need to understand where the threat is coming from. That brings me then to my second point.

II. The threats are internal.

When you first begin to think about the reasons why the American church is in the state it's in, the finger pointing comes quickly. We point an accusing finger at liberal political groups such as the ACLU with their anti-Christian bias against the church. We point another finger at Hollywood and the entertainment industry in general for their onslaught of attacks against basic morality and their ridiculing of Christians whenever possible. We point still another finger at government officials who increasingly seem to put the church on the margins of society. On and on the finger pointing goes.

In fact, just this week I received an invitation to attend a rally here in Cumberland County for concerned Christian citizens who feel their rights are being violated by recent governmental rulings.

I understand their feelings and believe that Christians do need to express their concerns like any citizen should about the things that trouble them. Nevertheless, though we can point many fingers at the various aspects of our culture that seem out of sync with the Christian message, the real threat is not with them. It never is. For the real threat isn't external. It's internal.

That exactly the message Jesus was sending the early church through John's revelation. He told the church in Ephesus that they had lost their first love. The churches of Pergamum and Thyatira were reprimanded for allowing false teaching in their churches as well as immoral practices. The church at Sardis was told that it had only the appearance of spiritual life while the church at Laodicea was exposed for being lukewarm in their faith.

All of these things were threatening the churches and they were all internal. And here's the amazing part. These churches existed at a time when great persecution was against them. By the time John received his revelation, he was living in exile and Christians were routinely being murdered and harassed. And yet not once are these things listed as the reason for concern. Time after time, it was the internal problems of sloppy theology, heartless devotion, and religious hypocrisy that was identified as the culprit.

Now next week we will examine these internal threats in more detail, but for now we simply must face the truth that as much as we may not like the way society treats the church at times, that's not the problem. And the longer we keep pointing our fingers at the world as if it's the problem, the longer it will be before we face the real threats that seek to endanger us.

With that said, let me ask you. Do you see evidence of a sloppy theology in our church? Are we allowing the spiritual thinking of the world to slowly infect our understanding of biblical truth?

In addition have we lost our heart? Are we just going through the motions of doing church without a true love for the Lord that motivates everything we do?

Finally, do we see any evidence of hypocrisy in us? Do we act one way in church and another way when we're someplace else?

These are difficult questions, but they must be faced and answered honestly. For they speak to the true source of threat against us - the threats from the inside. Therefore, may each us examine ourselves to make sure that we're seeking to be biblically grounded, that we are growing in our love for the Lord, and that we are striving to be consistent in our lifestyle.

That brings me to the last thing I want to share with you this morning.

III. The threats are answerable.

As depressing as all this may seem, it's not hopeless. Time after time the ancient churches were told that there was a way out of their dilemma. If they responded properly to the instructions of the Lord, their future could be bright.

Words like repent, overcome, return, obey, and wake up are used to describe the kinds of actions that the seven churches were called upon to do. Notice that these are not programmatic answers. Never were they told that their future depended on the methods they used or the approaches they took. It was always about the quality of their relationship with the Lord and the genuineness of their walk with him.

Think about it, do we really believe that a church can overcome being lukewarm by implementing the hottest and latest church program? Is the loss of a church's first love regained by tweaking the congregation's ministry methods? Can a congregation that has only the appearance of life experience resurrection through adopting new and creative strategies? Hardly. No these problems are spiritual in nature and thus require a spiritual solution.

That's exactly the point that pastor Erwin McManus made in a recent statement about the decline of the church in America. McManus who pastors a thriving church in the Los Angeles area stated the following,

"My primary assessment would be...American Christians tend to be incredibly self-indulgent.... I think the bottom line is our own spiritual narcissism. There are methods and you can talk about style, structure and music, but in the end it really comes down to your heart and what you care about."

McManus is right. The solution to the threats against the church comes down to the heart. In a few weeks we will be looking at some of these heart solutions in greater detail, but for now I want you to think about the condition of your heart. Do you see a loving spirit flowing from it? It is causing you to live worthy of your Lord? Does it motivate you to treat others with dignity and compassion? Is it inspiring you to reach out with the love of God to others? If not, you now see where the problem lies.

Listen, if my heart and your heart is not right, then we are the ones who threaten our church's future. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Such is the case for Mission Baptist Church in Locust, NC. This rural congregation was dying at one time. Like many churches it had slipped into a pattern of just doing church without heart. Mission groups were basically meet and eat times. Bible studies were just rehearsals of old information.

And worship was lifeless.

In response to all this, the church took the typical steps that most churches do when they are in a similar situation. They moved programs to different times. They changed leaders. They tried to make it more interesting. But nothing worked.

That's when the pastor realized that the problem was in reality a heart issue which required a spiritual solution. And over a period of time, he helped that congregation come back to life where it's now a thriving congregation with a bright future.

Now I'm not saying that we're in the same position that this church was in. But I can say that the bottom line issue is the same. The future of our church or any church for that matter lies not so much in our programming or methods. Rather it lies in the spiritual condition of our members. If our heart is right, then people in the world will be able to tell and they will be attracted to our spiritual vitality. But if it's not right, then we can try every ministry strategy imaginable and it won't matter.

With that in mind, let me ask you. Do we need a heart change at Lafayette Baptist? And more personally, do you need a heart change as an individual member? We all have dreams for the kind of church we hope we will become in the future. But for those dreams to become a reality, the heart must be right.

So this morning during our time of commitment, perhaps you need to come and pray for our church or you may even need to come and pray about your own spiritual condition. And if the Lord has been calling you to join our church or to become one of His followers, then you are invited to come today and do that. We would love to have you.

Whatever decision you need to make today, it begins with a change of heart. That's our prayer and we stand together and sing.