

## **The Three Greatest Threats To Today's Church: The Solution**

### Revelation 2-3

Have you ever noticed some of the ineffective responses that people make when trying to handle their problems? For example, some people respond to them by worrying about them perhaps believing that doing so will somehow make things better. Other folks just stick their heads in the sand hoping that their problems will go away by just ignoring them. Then there are those who deal with their problems by trying to figure out who to blame for them as if that's going to solve anything. On and on it goes.

The same thing is true when it comes to our response to the threats against the church. If we're not careful, we can waste a great amount of emotional energy getting all worked up over them. Or we can hide away in our sanctuaries and pretend they don't exist. Or we can attack the culture and blame it for all the struggles we're having to manage. Or we can make a different choice. We can start looking for a solution.

Now as we've already seen, implementing a solution to the threats against the church isn't going to be easy. But that doesn't mean that there isn't one, because there is. And it's found in the very same place where we learned about the threats themselves.

So we turn again to the seven letters to the churches in Revelation 2-3. There we find the timeless and workable solution to the real threats that will come against any church that is seeking to follow the Lord. Basically, it's a single solution that has several parts to it. For the solution to work, each part must be acted upon. And if we do, we can know that our future will be bright indeed. So here's the first part of the solution.

#### **I. Continue doing what is good.**

If you've been keeping up with what we've been looking at over the last few weeks, you know that we've seen some unpleasant things that were threatening the ancient churches. Having an unpracticed, unclear, and unembraced faith were serious problems then as they are now. But even in the midst of those real threats, the letters reveal that not everything was out of control.

In church after church, there are things that were affirmed and needed to be continued. For instance, the Ephesian church was recognized for not tolerating evil and for confronting false prophets. The believers in Pergamum and Philadelphia were affirmed for staying faithful to the name of Christ even when under great pressure. And the church at Thyatira was noted for a

variety of good things including their good deeds, love, faith and service.

What an important reminder this is to not become so overly focused on what isn't right that we fail to see what is. And what is right needs to be recognized and affirmed as a source of encouragement to stay with it.

Now let's think about our church for a few minutes. If I were to ask you to make a list of the things that you thought needed to change around here, it probably wouldn't take long for us to come up with quite an extensive list. And if we wanted to, we could become so totally consumed with how much isn't right that we'd get all depressed and miss out on a host of things that are right. For example, here's just a sampling of what's right at LBC.

- \* The ongoing support of the staff and trust in their leadership
- \* The willingness to try new things
- \* The level of involvement in a variety of ministries
- \* The incredible commitment of our lay leadership
- \* The value you place on the unity of the body
- \* The openness you express toward new people
- \* The strong spiritual dreams you have for the church's future
- \* The commitment that you have to keep on striving to be the kind of church we believe God is calling us to be

I could go on, but I think you get the point. There are many things that are good about us. And if we're to properly handle the threats that will always be coming against us, we need to stay with the good things we're doing. And as we've seen, there are good things. By staying faithful to them, we will be implementing the first part of the overall solution. Here's the second part.

## **II. Tell the truth about what is not good.**

As important as affirming good things may be, we must not allow that to blind us to any problems that are present. Instead we must use the energy from what is good to face what is not good and tell the honest truth about it. We see this demonstrated throughout the seven letters to the churches. Over and over again Jesus invited these congregations to have an ear to hear.

It's a call to pay attention and tell the truth. Rather than trying to excuse themselves or ignore the warnings, they needed to admit where they had fallen short. The strongest of these challenges was leveled at the church in Laodicea which was told they needed to face the fact that they were wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked. Now that would have been pretty hard to hear. But that church needed to know the truth about where it had

gone wrong in order to do something about it.

That's no less true in our day. We do ourselves no service by pretending all is well when it isn't. For facing difficult truths is unavoidable if we're to truly experience real change.

Yet churches today can easily find themselves doing what Morgan Freeman's character did in the movie *The Bucket List*. In the movie, he had just been told that he had terminal cancer. And yet instead of facing it, all he wanted to do was keep watching Jeopardy. It was an avoidance technique which wasn't going to help him come to terms with his medical situation.

So we need to face our issues - our real issues. Here's what I mean. If I chose, I could stand here this morning and share a variety of things that I think need to be addressed in our church. Some of those things you would agree with and some you might not. In fact, you would probably want to add some things that I left out. But instead of that, I want to make it a bit more personal. You see, it's easy for any of us to point out what's wrong about a particular approach to ministry or something that we feel is being neglected.

But if you remember, we saw early on that such things are not the real threats. The real threats are more spiritual in nature. And that's what makes them personal. So instead of looking outward, we need to look inward and ask ourselves some tough questions.

Are we really seeking to live out our faith in the world or are we just Sunday morning believers? Are we growing in our understanding of the faith or have we settled for shallowness? And finally, is our heart really into our relationship with God or are we just going through the motions?

These are the things we need to be telling the truth about. And that's not easy. But it must be done. For it's part of the solution. So I need to look within my heart and you need to look within yours. And if either of us see something that isn't right, then we need to admit it and then be willing to do something about it which brings us to the last part of the solution.

### **III. Take the appropriate actions to deal with the threats.**

In the seven letters the Lord gave specific steps that needed to be taken in order for each church to get back on the right track. And with each set of instructions came the promise of renewal and better days.

For example, the church in Ephesus was told that they needed to resume doing what they used to do. The Smyrna church was told to be faithful in the face of things they were about to suffer. Pergamum was told to repent of the false teaching and immoral practices they had allowed in their congregation.

The believers in Thyatira and Philadelphia were exhorted to hold fast to the correct teachings. Sardis is warned that they needed to wake up and strengthen the good things that remained in them - to repent of their lack of real life. And the church in Laodicea was given a variety of steps it needed to take to show genuine repentance from their lukewarm faith.

If the churches took the appropriate actions, then they would be renewed, strengthened and their future would be assured. But if they failed to act rightly, then they would continue to die and their lamp stand would be removed from them.

So it's that basic. When we know what's wrong, we need to take the appropriate actions to make it right.

Such was the case for Rivertown Christian Church in Massillon, Ohio on the outskirts of Akron. Started in 1965, Rivertown experienced good growth in its early years, but by the late 70's and early 80's it had started to decline to running around 100 in attendance. In the late 80's they called a new pastor, Greg Nettles, who had been serving as a missionary in Ireland.

Nettles immediately knew something needed to change in order for the church to survive. So he began working on ways to make the church more relevant to the surrounding community and he used a significant portion of his time in sermon preparation.

His efforts met with some early success with attendance climbing back to around 300. But there was a problem. The church had a significant internal struggle with disunity focused on one prominent couple in the congregation. For two years in the mid 90's the church agonized over how to deal with it until finally the decision was made to face the problem directly. The couple left and took 70 others with them.

But in the process the congregation was able to start regaining its spiritual health. Soon they were able to use their energy in outreach and ministry. Today Rivertown Christian Church is averaging over 2,000 in attendance with many guests who have never been involved in church before.

So here was a church that faced an internal threat and took the appropriate actions to make it right. Doing so brought back renewed vitality and effectiveness again. I'm convinced that what was true for that church, can be true for any church that is willing to face its internal threats and take the right kind of actions.

So what does this mean for us? It means that we too must be willing to face whatever internal threats we have and take the right actions. And once again, let me remind you that the internal threats are not so much programmatic as they are spiritual. In other words, if the heart is right, then the right methods will follow. But if the heart isn't right, then no program

change or adjustment in method will matter.

So how's our congregational heart? Here's my assessment. As I think about our church, no single threat stands out to me as being the dominate problem that needs to be faced. And that's a good thing. But here and there, I see the presence of each threat. And to the extent that they are present in our body, they hinder our effectiveness.

Here's what I mean. A breakdown in the consistency of lifestyle in even a few of our members has a quenching influence on the Spirit. Likewise if there's even a small minority of our people who tolerate a shallowness in their understanding of the faith, it limits our ability to have a powerful influence on others. And when there are pockets of our folks who are lukewarm in their service, their devotion, or their involvement, it casts a spirit of discouragement over the entire body. And the collective impact of all three of them contributes to a lack of growth and unnecessary struggle to maintain quality ministry.

So what do we need to do? First, each of us need to look within ourselves to determine whether we see the presence of these internal threats. If we don't, then we need to pray that the Lord will protect us from being infected by them. But if we see one or more of them in us, then we must tell ourselves the truth and take action. For if we're unwilling to get our hearts right with the Lord, then we not only risk our own spiritual vitality, but we are also putting our entire church at risk.

So as we sing our hymn of commitment this morning, I'm asking for some bold moves to be taken. That means if you're harboring sinful behavior or attitudes, then I'm asking you to turn from them and do whatever you have to do to root them out of your life. It also means that if you aren't trying to grow in your faith, then I'm asking you to get in a serious Bible study or discipleship group and start deepening your understanding. And finally it means that if you've become apathetic in your commitment to Christ, then I'm asking you to remember again the price He paid your salvation and then open your heart to the warming influence of the Spirit.

If we will do take these actions, then we will see great things in the future. But it begins right here - with a change in our hearts. May that change begin even as we stand and sing.