

1 TIMOTHY 4:1-5

DOCTRINAL DRIFT

“The Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.”¹

Sometimes it seems that preachers spend more time explaining away the Word than they do providing exposition of the Word! The trend can seem at times to be intensifying. Perhaps, in light of Paul’s warning, such an observation is not as farfetched as one might imagine. Perhaps it truly is correct to note that prominent “reverends” are jettisoning the Word in favour of creating a new set of scriptures to suit their own fallen tastes.

For instance, this week past, I listened to part of a sermon by the Very Rev. Gary Hall, chief ecclesiastical leader and executive officer of the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. In a “sermon” designed to honour homosexual youth, this supposed cleric said, “In its wisdom, the church came to its senses and labeled both racism and sexism as sinful. And now we find ourselves at the last barrier—call that barrier homophobia, call it heterosexism. We must now have the courage to take the final step and call homophobia and heterosexism what they are. They are sin. Homophobia is a sin. Heterosexism is a sin. Shaming people for whom they love is a sin. Shaming people because their gender identity doesn’t fit neatly into your sense of what it should be is a sin.”²

As I listened to this portion of his sermonette, my mind recalled the Word of the Lord delivered through the Court Prophet, Isaiah.

“Woe to those who call evil good
and good evil,
who put darkness for light
and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet
and sweet for bitter!
Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes,
and shrewd in their own sight!”

[ISAIAH 5:20, 21]

Imagine that! Moses got it wrong! And our Judeo-Christian heritage has had it all wrong for thousands of years! The Dean of the National Cathedral would have us believe that either God has changed His mind or He got it all wrong in the first place and needed this brilliant idiot to straighten matters out! What arrogance! What chutzpah! What hubris! What insolence! What an utter lack of sophrosyne!

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² The Very Rev. Gary Hall, Sermon, 6 October 2013, <http://www.nationalcathedral.org/worship/sermonTexts/grh20131006.shtml>, accessed 7 October 2013

Responding to his “comforters,” who were anything but “comforters,” Job spoke truly of such foolishness as exhibited by faux-ministers fawning over the denizens of this dying world when he castigated these fools with biting sarcasm:

“No doubt you are the people,
and wisdom will die with you.”

[JOB 12:2]

The audacity of unbelievers parading as Christians, much less as ministers of the Almighty, leaves one breathless. Understand that people such as this fall under the opprobrium of the Apostle, who described those who stand opposed to the Faith once delivered to the saints as “False apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” [2 CORINTHIANS 11:13-14].

Nevertheless, the message this day is not about the perfidy of professed Christians, though the times are undoubtedly evil. The message focuses on the apostolic instruction to the people of God concerning their conduct during evil days. Paul has spoken of the congregation of the faithful as “the focal point and repository of the truth.”³ Then, as we witnessed in an earlier message,⁴ citing what was likely an early hymn, the Apostle stated the core of the Gospel truth. The Apostle opens this portion of his letter with the conjunction “now.” By using the word “Now,” the Apostle speaks of the conditions in which the people of God must hold and protect that truth. That becomes the message we consider as we look into the Word today.

DOCTRINAL DRIFT — “The Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.”

Though there are notable exceptions, transitions from righteousness to wickedness are often imperceptible. An example of such imperceptible transition may be provided by thinking of an apprentice carpenter who is told to cut lengths of wood for building a wall. He is told to cut all the wood to the same length. The man cuts the first piece of wood, carefully measuring to ensure the length is correct. Then, he picks up the piece he cut and uses it to measure the next cut. After that cut, he picks up the piece that he just cut and measures for the next cut. He continues cutting wood, always using the piece that he has just cut to measure each piece.

When the foreman comes to retrieve the pieces, what do you suppose he finds? Each successive piece is marginally shorter than the preceding piece! After fifty pieces are cut, the difference is exaggerated; the problem is immediately obvious—the carpenter failed to use a proper standard, and as result the wood is ruined for the purpose required. Something like this happens when people fail to measure their conduct by the Perfect Standard of Christ the Lord.

Perhaps a congregation, desiring to honour God, establishes rules for holiness. They read that women are not to wear “that which pertaineth unto a man”; so they pass a rule proscribing pantsuits. Of course, such rules will never create holiness, and they have a way of metastasising. Soon, the church will pass other legislation, always adding rules to “clarify” God’s Word.

³ 1 TIMOTHY 3:15, Clarence Jordan, **The Cotton Patch Gospel** (Smyth & Helwys Pub., Macon, GA 2004)

⁴ Michael Stark, “The Mystery of Godliness,”

<http://newbeginningsbaptist.ca/clientimages/42652/sermonarchive/1%20timothy%203.16%20the%20mystery%20of%20godliness.pdf>

I grew up in an area near to a religious group that insisted married men must have beards and wear simple clothing; their women were required to wear long dresses made with rather plain cloth such as gingham. Observing these people, I discovered that a man can have a beard to his navel, and have a filthy mind. I learned that a woman can wear a dress that drags the ground with sleeves down to her fingertips and still be flirtatious, coquettish, prurient or even concupiscent. What is on the outside does not make one holy; what is on the inside determines whether one is righteous and holy. The group I described is no different from a thousand other sects that rely on mysticism, legalism or asceticism to validate their religious experience.

As I read what Paul has written, it appears that a group promoting asceticism had taken root among the Ephesians. The cautionary words Paul wrote indicated that this group was arguing that denying oneself was the means to spirituality. They were teaching that celibacy was a means to spiritual maturity; and they taught that diet could make one presentable to God. Rather than looking to the work of the Master as their sole hope for salvation and godliness, they were focused on denying the appetites of the flesh through rules—rules which Paul characterised elsewhere as “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” [COLOSSIANS 2:21].

Of course, it is easy for us Evangelicals to read what the Apostle has written and imagine that we know precisely what cult or sect he would point out as “exhibit A” in this day. However, I suggest that whenever we begin to create rules to promote holiness—however innocuous, however reasonable those rules appear in our estimate—rather than accepting and obeying what has been given in the Word, we fall under the very condemnation he presents!

Paul informs the reader that “the Spirit” explicitly speaks concerning this ecclesiastical drift. Using the present tense, Paul indicates that the Spirit had given this message at other times and that He was continuing to press this point even as Paul was writing this letter to Timothy. Let’s tease apart what the Apostle has written so we can get a handle on what is happening. The adverb that is translated “expressly” is unique—it is a hapax legomenon, occurring only here in the New Testament. It is possible that Paul used this word in order to stress the vital importance of this matter. It is as though he erected a flashing neon sign to grab the readers’ attention. Therefore, we should be able to find warnings throughout the Word of apostasy coming.

Though the Apostle is quite aware of the Great Apostasy coming at the end of the age, Paul is not at this point referring specifically to that great apostasy that will occur at the end of this age—he is speaking of a condition that was even then afflicting the congregation in Ephesus and which infects the people of God to this day. He was speaking of the tendency for churches, and for some who present themselves as church leaders, to drift into error through creating novel doctrines arising from attempts to clarify the Word of God.

There is, however, a coming great apostasy; and now is a good time to recall that time. In the Old Testament, Daniel, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, pointed to the coming apostasy when he described a disturbing vision that involved four beasts rising successively out of the earth; the fourth beast in his vision was especially frightful and disturbing. He noted some exceptional activity surrounding that creature. “I desired to know the truth about the fourth beast, which was different from all the rest, exceedingly terrifying, with its teeth of iron and claws of bronze, and which devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet, and about the ten horns that were on its head, and the other horn that came up and before which three of them fell, the horn that had eyes and a mouth that spoke great things, and that seemed greater than its companions. As I looked, this horn made war with the saints and prevailed over them, until the Ancient of Days came, and judgment was given for the saints of the Most High, and the time came when the saints possessed the kingdom.”

“Thus he said: ‘As for the fourth beast,

there shall be a fourth kingdom on earth,
which shall be different from all the kingdoms,
and it shall devour the whole earth,
and trample it down, and break it to pieces.

As for the ten horns,
out of this kingdom ten kings shall arise,
and another shall arise after them;
he shall be different from the former ones,
and shall put down three kings.
He shall speak words against the Most High,
and shall wear out the saints of the Most High,
and shall think to change the times and the law;
and they shall be given into his hand
for a time, times, and half a time.’”

[DANIEL 7:19-25]

Daniel makes a similar observation of coming apostasy in DANIEL 8:23. Jesus, also, spoke of coming apostasy [see MATTHEW 24:4-12; MARK 13:22]. Similarly, several of the Apostles and Jude wrote of coming apostasy [see 2 PETER 3:3; 1 JOHN 2:18; JUDE 18]. In particular, Paul wrote rather extensively of the coming apostasy. He may have been referring to Daniel’s words or to the warnings of the Master; however, I must wonder if he was referring to his own revelation written early in the days of his apostolic ministry.

“Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness” [2 THESSALONIANS 2:3-12].

In the text before us, the Apostle states that the Spirit’s warning concerns “later times.” This term is unique for Paul, occurring only here in his writings; it differs somewhat from a term that is undoubtedly more familiar to many Christians—the term “last times.” We are living in the last times, which began with the coming of Christ the Lord and will continue until His return [e.g. ACTS 2:16, 17; HEBREWS 1:2]. In this cautionary statement, the Apostle is not specifically looking forward to the great apostasy that is mentioned elsewhere; Paul is speaking of a continuing action of drifting away from the Faith. Paul will address the great apostasy in another place in these Pastoral Letters [see 2 TIMOTHY 3:1-9; 4:1-4]. Here, however, he is warning of an ongoing apostasy that will plague the churches until Jesus comes.

I don't particularly enjoy pointing out the obvious, but all that is necessary to establish the drift that has occurred over the previous fifty years among the churches of our nation is to compare the doctrinal position of any of a number of religious groups from fifty years ago to what is promoted by the group bearing the same name today. Read the printed sermons of ministers with any of a number of denominations from fifty years past with those printed today. While there were liberals who rejected the Bible as authoritative within the Anglican Communion, godly ministers who served during the fifties and sixties would be appalled by many of the activities of Anglicans and Episcopalians today? Could godly ministers within the United Church have believed the standards that the denomination would promote in these opening days of the twenty-first century? Could any of a number of righteous individuals faithfully serving among numerous Baptist and Pentecostal groups have believed their labours would build a group that would drift so far from the Bible as they have today?

I have told in previous messages of the response of one man who was instrumental in forming a great movement of the Faith. Interviewed by a newspaper concerning the group that had formed, this man was asked, "What is the future of your group?" Without hesitation, that great man answered, "Apostasy!" It was a biblical answer. Anything touched by the hand of man tends toward apostasy. Unless God Himself should intervene, we don't grow toward God, we move away from God. Jesus has taught us, "No one comes to the Father except through Me" [JOHN 14:6b]. Jesus also taught, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day" [JOHN 6:44].

This is the basis for the stern warning that was issued in the Letter to Hebrew Christians. "We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will" [HEBREWS 2:1-4].

Paul is unsparing as he exposes the source of doctrinal drift that will occur among those professing the Faith—deceitful spirits and teachings of demons! Imagine that! Standing in the pulpits will be individuals prompted by deceitful spirits to declare the teachings of demons as biblical truth. Talk about twisting the Word! The diabolical origin of what is hypocritically presented as righteousness among far too many churches in this day is promoted through "the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared." One translation speaks of "the insincerity of liars" as "plausible falsehoods,"⁵ a phrase that captures the reality of the lies disseminated from too many pulpits. The lies that are taught are plausible to the unwary and incautious. Another recent translation charges that those who follow demonic doctrines "will speak lies disguised as truth."⁶ Clarence Jordan said these liars would "hypocritically preach what isn't so."⁷

I've usually appreciated Eugene Peterson's treatment of the Bible, and his rendering of the opening verses of this passage is no different. "The Spirit makes it clear that as time goes on, some are going to give up on the faith and chase after demonic illusions put forth by professional liars. These liars have lied so well and for so long that they've lost their capacity for truth."⁸

⁵ **The Revised English Bible** (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; New York; Melbourne; Madrid; Cape Town; Singapore; São Paulo; Delhi; Dubai; Tokyo 1996)

⁶ **GOD'S WORD Translation** (Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, MI 1995)

⁷ **Clarence Jordan, The Cotton Patch Gospel** (Smyth & Helwys Pub., Macon, GA 2004)

⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, **The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language** (NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO 2005)

The Apostle gives a couple of specific situations to illustrate the warning; but I would caution you that anyone who focuses on the external aspects of the Faith without seeking a corresponding internal transformation falls under the Apostle's severe condemnation. People transformed by the grace of God want to change—they want to please the Lord God. However, when we focus on the external features of religion, no lasting change can be witnessed. Individuals may play a role for a period; eventually, the true character will be revealed.

I came to faith in the early seventies, a time of great theological upheaval in the United States. Many of the established churches were being challenged by the Baby Boomers, many of whom were seeking foundations for their lives. Some churches responded artificially to the social currents by trying to focus on the music or conduct of the services in an effort to make themselves attractive to the youth of that era. After attempting to be relevant, they discovered that singing and dancing, while transiently exhilarating, will bring no lasting transformation nor can such efforts bring permanent spiritual satisfaction. There must be a transformation of life. Until a person is born from above and the Spirit of God takes up residence in the life of an individual, there can be no lasting satisfaction with religion.

Other churches faced with the same challenges were reactionary, becoming rigid in their positions to exclude those rowdy youth who were seeking spiritual satisfaction. The position of many of these churches was summed up by a few rules—no beards, beads or bell bottoms. These uptight saints were leery of taped music—if a song couldn't be played on an organ, it was suspect. They were contemptuous of anyone who dared challenge their rules. I recall a time when churches refused to baptise men with long hair, demanding that they cut their hair before they could be baptised. Many of those churches are no longer in existence, having died long ago, though some years were required before the aging congregation finally closed the doors.

Either reaction missed opportunities to serve God and either forfeited the blessings God might have had for them—the former because they thought they could capture the zeal of youth through acting youthful without being youthful, the latter because they were fearful of being challenged about their own commitment. In either instance, the churches created new regulations, ensuring that they would move steadily toward spiritual irrelevance. What happened in these cases can happen to us if we begin to focus on the externals rather than remaining focused on the reality of God's working in the lives of others. If our religious expression can be defined by what we do, rather than who we are in Christ, we are moving toward irrelevance. If we fail to maintain our focus on Christ the Lord, we will have permitted ourselves to be devoted to deceitful spirits and the teachings of demons.

THE GODLY RESPONSE TO DOCTRINAL DRIFT — “The Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.”

The key to a godly response to doctrinal drift is provided in the third verse. In that verse, Paul provided two examples from that day of those seduced by demonic powers. Some forbade marriage, perhaps as a means of achieving a spiritual superiority among the faithful. Adherents imagined that through celibacy they would be able to devote themselves to God. The other example was through imposing dietary laws. Perhaps people imagined that their diet was an expression of their commitment to God, only to deceive themselves.

Paul dealt with either of these situations in earlier letters to the churches. Concerning marriage, the Apostle invested time instructing the Corinthian believers. Listen to what he wrote. “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: ‘It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.’ But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

“Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.

“To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion” [1 CORINTHIANS 7:1-9].

In the same letter, addressing the issue of ministerial support, the Apostle used the example of respected church leaders taking their wives with them as they served the churches. “Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas” [1 CORINTHIANS 9:5]? Did you catch that? While Paul was single, though he was perhaps previously married, celibacy was not something that either Peter or James practised. Both were married!

Addressing the matter of dietary rules, Paul writes, “Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do” [1 CORINTHIANS 8:8].

Elsewhere, Paul cautions believers who wish to honour the Lord, “The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” [ROMANS 14:17]. In other words, external practise does not make one holy.

Closer to the experience of Christians in Ephesus who were being seduced by such demonic doctrines were the Colossian Christians. The Apostle warned the saints of Colossae, “Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God” [COLOSSIANS 2:16-19].

Haggai questioned the priests his day. Speaking for God, the prophet challenged them, “Thus says the LORD of hosts: Ask the priests about the law: ‘If someone carries holy meat in the fold of his garment and touches with his fold bread or stew or wine or oil or any kind of food, does it become holy?’ The priests answered and said, ‘No.’ Then Haggai said, ‘If someone who is unclean by contact with a dead body touches any of these, does it become unclean?’ The priests answered and said, ‘It does become unclean’” [HAGGAI 2:11-14].

I preached on this text several times in years past, emphasising that holiness is not communicable. Just as holiness is not communicable, it is equally true that external expressions of religion are no more effective in transforming life than sprinkling rose water on a cancer is curative. There must be a new heart to ensure a transformed life. For this reason, Jesus insisted, “You must be born again” [JOHN 3:7]! It is the logical application of the truth, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” [JOHN 3:6].

The latter portion of the third verse in today's text that reveals the Apostle's thinking concerning a godly response to doctrinal drift; Paul identifies those to whom he writes as "those who believe and know the truth." With this identifying characterisation, he provides a statement concerning the proper response to demonic teaching. The world is divided into saints and sinners. Either one is born from above, or one has never had the new birth. Either one is walking in light, or one is walking in darkness. Either one is saved, or one is lost. Either one hears the voice of the Risen Master, or one is guided by the god of this dying world. Those of this dying world are susceptible to heeding deceitful spirits and teachings of devils.

Jesus said, "The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one" [JOHN 10:25-30].

It is always a source of amazement to those in this dying world that Christians can be joyous. Denizens of this darkened world imagine that the most maladjusted people of all must be Christians who have faith in the unseen God. However, study after study reveals that Christians are the most satisfied, the most well-adjusted of all the peoples on the earth. I do not mean to imply that everyone who claims the Faith is of the Faith; what I do mean is that when one reveals the transformation that accompanies salvation, that individual is generally quite content with his or her lot in life. The Christian who is walking with Christ will have seized on the apostolic instruction that teaches, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" [PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7].

GOD'S GOODNESS REMAINS UNCHANGED — "Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer." Here is a principle that is neglected in this day—God is good. Usually, when we speak of God's goodness, we are focused on how His mercy directly benefits us. However, God is good, regardless of my perception of His response to my desires.

The people of God, their eyes focused on Him and on His will, realise that God is good. Nothing good lies within fallen mankind. The tender mercies of this darkened world inevitably lead to disappointment and disaster. Perhaps one of the most prominent examples that can be provided of the efforts of fallen mankind arises from the tension between what has come to be called the "social gospel" and the Good News of Jesus the Son of God. Churches of a progressive bent imagine that they are fulfilling the will of God through focusing on human hurt. So, they feed the hungry and build houses for the homeless. Admittedly, these are good things, but an old adage speaks a poignant truth when it states, "Good is enemy of the best."

The liberal mindset is that the faithful must focus on the physical condition of humanity, ensuring that no one suffers. The thought ignores the clear statement of the Master that, "You always have the poor with you" [MARK 14:7]. When the realisation that all the churches of the world can never eliminate poverty and human need sets in, the liberal mindset then insists that compassion must be coerced; and no human institution is sufficiently powerful to coerce compassion except for government. Thus, government becomes both the instigator and the administrator of compassion through coerced giving.

The great tragedy of this situation is that government can brook no competition. Therefore, increasingly in our world, government becomes the arbiter of morality and ethics, drafting legislation to restrict the churches from fulfilling the mission they received of God. Progressive churches, thoroughly infected with the attitude of this dying world, applaud the efforts of government because it relieves them of responsibility for giving more than lip service to the commands of the Master.

However, congregations who know God, or rather who are known by God, will always endeavour to do the things that God commands. Foremost in the commands of God is making Christ known and bringing the lost to life in the Son of God. We who follow Christ are not seeking to preserve this life as it is; we are seeking to prepare people for the life to come. It is not as though we are unaware of human suffering, but we are fully aware of eternal suffering. Therefore, we are calling the lost to life through faith in the Living Saviour. We are warning those who are perishing to flee the wrath to come.

In His ministry, Jesus did what was best, not merely what was good—there was no tension between compassion for human need and concern for the lost. On one occasion when the Baptist was imprisoned, he sent disciples to ask if Jesus was actually the promised Messiah who was to come. Jesus' answer was, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me" [LUKE 7:22, 23].

Jesus did relieve human suffering, but in addressing human physical need He ensured that the spiritual condition was addressed. His purpose was always to bring the message of life to those who were dead in trespasses and sins. He was quite clear on the reason He came into the world. "[Jesus] said to [the disciples], 'Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.' And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues" [MARK 1:38, 39]. Jesus' purpose was to proclaim the message of life.

Since His purpose was declaring the need to be born from above, it should be no surprise that He expects His disciples to declare that same message. The Great Commission is still, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" [MATTHEW 28:19].

Even more pointed is Peter's statement of the charge to disciples, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation" [MARK 16:15].

The message is iterated when Jesus appeared to all the disciples as recorded by Luke. "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things" [LUKE 24:46-48].

It is apparent that when Jesus says to disciples, "As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you" [JOHN 20:21], He sends those who are obedient to preach the message of life. They will exhibit compassion, but their mission is to make disciples. Those who obey will be witnesses [see ACTS 1:8] wherever they go, testifying of the grace and the goodness of God.

We are physical beings, and as twice-born people we are motivated with the compassion of Christ for the suffering of humanity. However, we are not so fully focused on this life that we can ignore the life to come. The physical aspects of our being, however pleasant they may be for the moment, are all things that perish as they are used. Focusing on the externals of mankind, we are addressing the temporary; we are sacrificing the permanent on the altar of the temporary. For if we fail to address the permanent, we leave those to whom we "ministered" in their lost condition. Thus, the focus on externals is transient and destined ultimately to disaster.

This is the message, then. We live in perilous times. We are nearing the end of this present age. What lies ahead is judgement. We are not terrified of that judgement, but we are fearful for those who are lost. Therefore, moved with compassion for the eternal condition of lost people, we declare the message of life. This is the message God has commanded us to declare to all who will receive it. Jesus, the Son of God, gave His life as a sacrifice because of helpless mankind. In His death, He took upon Himself all the sin of mankind, providing expiation for sin—all sin.

Had Jesus died, it would be a wonderful story and a great example. However, Jesus broke the bonds of death, rising to life and coming out of the tomb. Paul's assessment of His resurrection is that Jesus Christ "was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead" [ROMANS 1:4]. The promise of God is the message we now bring to all people, "If you openly confess, 'Jesus is Master,' believing with your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be free. It is with the heart that one believes and is made right with God and with the mouth that one agrees with God and is set free." In the words of the Prophet, "Everyone who calls on the Name of the Master shall be free"—free of guilt, free of condemnation, free to be all that God created us to be.

Our sincere prayer is that you now enjoy that freedom. As a congregation, we commit ourselves to declare this message of life to all who will receive it. Amen.