

JOHN 5:39-47

FAITH THAT FAILS

“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. I do not receive glory from people. But I know that you do not have the love of God within you. I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him. How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?”¹

Doctor Kenneth Hemphill recounts a story that provided an invaluable lesson about the sufficiency of Scripture. The instruction came, inadvertently, from a layman who was his visitation partner on one occasion. Doctor Hemphill writes, “We were following up with a home visit to a couple who had expressed interest in joining the church. The woman and the man had filled out visitor cards with the same address but with a different last name. The gentleman was not present, and the young lady was a bit nervous during our visit. It was obvious she was concerned about her present living conditions and wanted a little free counselling. My friend indicated that we would be willing to stay as long as necessary to help her deal with issues of concern but that she first needed to answer a few simple questions to help him determine whether we could be of help.

“I listened intently as he patiently asked the following three questions: 1) Are you certain that you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ? She responded ‘yes.’ 2) Do you believe that the Bible is God’s Word and is sufficient for all our needs? Again she responded in the affirmative. 3) If I show you truth from God’s Word that deals with the issues that concern you, will you obey them immediately and completely? My friend did not elaborate at this point, but the lady began to exclaim that we wouldn’t understand. She pointed to her financial need and loneliness. My friend listened patiently and then started again repeating the three questions.

“The implication was obvious. If we pointed her to Scripture which she confessed to be a ‘sufficient guide’ and she refused to obey God’s Word, we had no other advice to give her. It would be like going to the doctor and refusing to follow his prescription.”²

Undoubtedly, you agree with Doctor Hemphill’s assessment. However, you need to answer with complete honesty another question that has a direct application in the life of each believer. “Is the Bible a sufficient guide for the challenges that you face in daily life?” If it is a sufficient guide, then we are each responsible to act on what is taught in Scripture.

Scripture does not condone relying on human ingenuity to accomplish the will of God, but rather it points to Christ and obedience to His commands. Too many Christians are fixated on the latest craze to accomplish the work of God, rather than being focused on what is revealed through the Word in order to do the will of God. Jesus addressed this precise tendency two millennia past when He rebuked religious leaders who doubted His authority.

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

² Kenneth S. Hemphill, First Person: “Is the Bible ‘Enough’ for Church Growth?” Baptist Press, July 30, 2008 (<http://www.scbaptistpress.org/BPFirstPerson.asp?ID=28571>)

FOR CHRISTIANS, THE SCRIPTURES ARE THE SOLE RULE FOR FAITH AND PRACTISE — Those who follow Christ the Lord adhere to Scripture; ultimately, all Scripture points to Him. There may be disagreement over interpretation of Scriptures, but there is no question for those who seek to honour the Risen Son of God that the Scriptures are the sole rule for faith and practise.

Even our Catholic friends, who teach that Scripture is interpreted by tradition, are compelled to appeal to Scripture in an attempt to justify the various traditions that are at variance with the Word of God. As is true for Catholics, so also the various cults attempt to justify their teachings by appeal to Scripture. Ultimately, then, all Christian congregations, denominations, sects and cults acknowledge that Scripture is the basis for faith and practise. There may be hermeneutical arguments that are advanced, but there is no question that the final appeal for faith and practise is the Word of God

This statement is not an acknowledgement that all views concerning faith and practise are correct or even that truth is whatever one wishes truth to be; rather it is an admission that the ultimate foundation for every doctrine that individuals within Christendom may hold dear is God's Word. The Jewish leaders with whom Jesus interacted so frequently would have argued that they honoured the Scriptures by applying their particular interpretations and by holding to their various practises, just as many contemporary religious individuals contend that they honour the Word through their practises. However, the religious leaders that so often confronted Jesus were unaware that the truth they professed was obscured by centuries of cultural encrustation.

Preceding the text chosen for study today, we read that Jesus had healed a crippled man [see **JOHN 5:2-9**]. It so happened, that it was a Sabbath when Jesus healed the man. The man had been an invalid for thirty-eight years; and when he was healed, Jesus commanded him to take up his bed and walk. Well, to no one's surprise, the man picked up his bed and walked away, presumably for home.

Encountering the religious leaders, he was accosted with the demand that he put his bed down. It is fascinating that no one had complained that someone had carried him to the Pool of Bethesda, but when he carried his own bed, that was a violation of the Sabbath. The man didn't know who it was that had healed him, but when he found out, he informed the religious leaders that the man was Jesus. Immediately, these religious people sought Jesus out to confront Him. In fact, the Word of God tells us that they "were persecuting Jesus" [see **JOHN 5:10-16**].

Jesus' answer that He was doing what the Father did, infuriated them, and thus they "were seeking all the more to kill Him, because not only was He breaking the Sabbath, but He was even calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God" [**JOHN 5:18**]. There follows an apologia from the Master, of which the text is a part. Among other things that Jesus said that we should say only with caution (since we cannot know the heart), is that these religious leaders did not have God's Word abiding in them. Underscore that thought in your mind! They were scrupulous in adhering to the religious precepts they had adopted, but they did not have the Word of God in them! The principle stated is that just because a person is religious is no proof that they are godly. Just because someone is icily precise in her religious practise does not mean that she has the Word of God hidden in her heart.

Reading the verses preceding the text, I note that the religious leader charged the Master with breaking the Sabbath and implied that He was guilty of blasphemy. In answering them, Jesus calls five witnesses: God, who provided power for His work [**JOHN 5:32**]; John the Baptist [**JOHN 5:33-35**]; His own works [**JOHN 5:36**]; Scripture [**JOHN 5:39, 40**]; and Moses [**JOHN 5:46, 47**]. It is these latter two answers to the charges that serve as our text for this message.

Jesus never charged them with not reading the Scriptures; He did imply that they were ignorant of Scripture, however. The NET Bible translates the Master's statement as follows, "You study the Scriptures thoroughly."³ It is an acknowledgement that they were indeed scholars of the Word. However, their ignorance of the God who gave the Word that they studied so intently was apparent. Underscore in your mind that it is a tragic possibility for one to know what Scripture says and yet to be ignorant of the God who gave Scripture.

To my sorrow and amazement, I have met many such people. One individual in particular stands out in my memory. In the summer of my seventeenth year I left home to work with a crew constructing gas transmission plants across the southern United States. I joined the crew in Stanton, Kentucky and followed the pipe to Hartsville, Tennessee, working throughout the summer months to earn enough money to support myself in college that fall. Each evening, one carpenter in particular would ensconce himself in a wooden rocking chair on the porch of the rooming house where we were lodging. He would rock as he read from a big King James Bible. It was obvious as I talked with him that he was conversant with the words of the Good Book.

However, one evening in particular gave me pause in my estimate of him. As we sat on the porch that particular evening, we were discussing a man with whom we worked, a local fellow who was distilling liquor which was sold in Nashville for the benefit of local politicians. As we talked, the Bible-reading carpenter leaned back and spoke of his own still back home. Then, casually, he mentioned that it did not do for revenueurs to go prowling around his still. "I've planted a few," he said. There was no doubt in my mind what he meant.

It shocked me then, and it shocks me now, to think that anyone who is the least bit familiar with the Word of God could casually dismiss taking a life, as did that religious man. Since then, I have witnessed a number of religious people who are able to pray such beautiful prayers and who are ever so fastidious in observing the rules of religion as they conceive them, who nevertheless give considerable evidence of being ignorant of the God of the Word.

Christians should never be guilty of practising religious legerdemain or spiritual terpsichore in the way they handle the Word—Scripture must be the final appeal for faith and practise. Where Scripture speaks, we must act; and by the same token, where Scripture is silent, we must avoid creating rules and imposing manmade conditions. All evangelical denominations, indeed, all evangelical Christians who are students of the Word are in agreement on this point. However, it would appear that practise does not always keep pace with profession when it comes to applying the Word. Like these religious leaders, many of our fellow saints—and perhaps we ourselves—are straight as a gun barrel theologically, and just as empty. Icily precise in dictating the Word for others, many religious leaders fail to apply it in their own lives. Worse yet, though they know what is written, they are just as ignorant of the One who gave the Word.

I came to faith within a group that had constructed a variety of rules ostensibly to protect adherents from deviating from Scripture. Like a Christian Taliban, the leaders created dozens of rules and regulations to maintain group purity. They could use only one version of the Bible. Women could not wear "that which pertaineth unto a man." They could not allow followers to engage in "mixed bathing." What is interesting is that I learned these were not exceptions, but among fundamental Christians such rules were normative.

Later, I worked within a denomination that took an opposite tack. They minimised biblical proscriptions and instructions in a bid to create denominational unity. So long as one did not criticise their theological laxity and without question sent money to the hindquarters, they were comfortable. However, woe betide the pastor who dared question the actions of leadership.

³ NET Bible (Biblical Studies Press, 2006)

These are not extremes, but broad examples of conduct that is tolerated within contemporary Christendom. Whereas God calls us to a balanced life, human tendency tends to extremes; and extreme behaviour is seldom worthy of Him who calls us to life. Such extremes of conduct are tolerated because the pew is ignorant of the Word and the pulpit will not jeopardise standing with denominational leaders through holding to a biblical standard. However, every conduct as a Christian and every effort directed at worship by a congregation must be tested against the Word of God. Does the action meet the standard of the Word? Christians must always ask whether their actions lead into the joy of the Saviour.

How do I know if an action or an attitude is pleasing in the sight of God? I must ask myself whether warrant for the action or the attitude is found in the Word of God. Does the action or attitude bear the approval of Christ the Lord—has He given His approval through the Word? Does the Spirit of God give me freedom to pursue this particular action? Obviously, I am responsible to know the Word of God. It should be just as obvious that I am not at liberty to create my own standard by which to gauge my actions. I must neither attempt to draft my own rules for conduct, nor ignore those which are clearly stated in the Word of God.

All this drives us back to the Bible as the standard by which we are to judge our actions and our attitudes. It does not mean that we are at liberty to wrest a verse out of context; rather, we must read the Scriptures in the light of the actions and the attitudes revealed through the life of the Master, applying what is discovered to our own lives. Because we are fallen creatures, we must hold beloved doctrines with humility, always submitting to the guidance of the Spirit of God and showing gentleness in our conduct.

THE SCRIPTURES ARE GIVEN TO LEAD US TO CHRIST — The very Scriptures that had been given to guide these religious leaders to faith in the Messiah of God were used to blind themselves to His presence! Among the professed people of God this same Scripture twisting is regularly done to this day. As was true of the religious leaders confronting Jesus that day, it is too frequently true of professed Christians in this day—their faith was in the Word and not in the One who gave the Word.

Though we do not say the words openly, our attitudes and actions frequently demonstrate that we have poor theology. Jesus identified Himself with God, which was immediately rejected by these biblical scholars. Their rejection was not due to poor ethics; it was the result of poor theology. They were willing to accept Jesus as a good man, if only He would acknowledge their right to dictate religious practise and define faith for others.

Christians today do something similar when despite verbal affirmations to the contrary they treat Jesus as optional rather than as very God. What I mean is that either Jesus is Master over life, or He is nothing at all. I quote **ROMANS 10:9, 10** at the conclusion of almost every service: “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”

The verse is concise and pointed, which is the reason I use it at the conclusion of a message. I want people to hold that concept in their mind, and so I include it at the end of the sermon. To be certain, faith secures the salvation of God, but this verse brings us back to the reality that the faith we have is to be faith in Jesus as Master over life. Either He is Lord of all, or He is not Lord at all. If He is Lord, then He has the right to reign over my life. If He has the right to reign over my life, I no longer have the right to refuse to do what He commands. Underscore in your mind that Jesus is Master over life, and Scripture leads us to Him as such.

To the religious leaders, Jesus did not merely claim to be doing what God did—He claimed a vital relationship to God as His Father. As He was giving His final instructions to His disciples, Jesus made the same remarkable claim in response to Philip's request to show him the Father. Jesus said, "Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father" [JOHN 14:9]. Jesus' words are amplified by something that C. S. Lewis wrote.

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish things that people often say about Him: 'I am ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher."⁴

Though no evangelical would deny that Jesus is God, many appear content to treat Him as something less than God. While castigating Catholics for presenting Mary as Mediatrix, we do something so similar as to be indistinguishable when we present Jesus as a way to God rather than insisting that He is "The Way." When we say that Jesus is a truth, rather than boldly stating that He is "The Truth," we make Him something less than very God. We attempt to soften the approach to Him out of fear of offending outsiders. Our fear of offending leads us to deny Him through timid assertions that we hope will attract outsiders, but we sin and desert the truth.

Whenever we make a strong claim about the deity of Christ or speak of Him as The Way, we will of necessity offend. When Jesus presented Himself to the religious leaders as Son of God, they were offended. The higher our claims concerning Christ, the greater the persecution we can anticipate. In the same way, when we speak with conviction, some will be offended. Am I prepared to be ostracised for allegiance to Christ? Am I willing for my church to be ridiculed and ostracised because of our stand for the Master?

As He prepared His disciples for His passion, the Master said on one occasion, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin" [JOHN 15:18-22].

In that context, I saw an excellent rebuke to Christians from a well-known atheist this past week. Penn Jillette, the verbal half of the magician duo Penn and Teller, is an outspoken atheist. Recently, he posted a YouTube video exhorting Christians to share their faith.⁵ Penn and Teller are headliners in Las Vegas, and their shows generally are marked by foul language and shock appeal. Penn Jillette, though, used no coarse language in telling about an audience member who gave him a New Testament.

Jillette was signing autographs after a show last fall when he noticed the man "hovering" over to the side of the crowd.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, **Mere Christianity** (MacMillan, New York, NY 1943, 1945, 1952, 1960) 55-6

⁵ Penn Jillette, "Penn Says: A Gift of a Bible," YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JHS8adO3hM>) accessed 14 February 2009

Jillette says, “He had been the guy who picks the joke during our psychic comedian section of the show. He had the props from that in his hand because we give those away. He had the joke book and the envelope and paper and stuff,” in the December 8 YouTube video.

The man walked over to Jillette, complimented him on the show and handed him a Gideon New Testament that included the Psalms. It was one of those pocket editions that most of us have seen, and perhaps a number of us even have in our homes.

Looking Jillette in the eyes, the man handed him the Bible and said, according to Jillette, “I wrote in the front of it, and I wanted you to have this. I’m kind of proselytising.” And then he said, “I’m a businessman. I’m sane. I’m not crazy.”

Commenting on the act, Jillette said, “It was really wonderful. I believe he knew that I was an atheist. But he was not defensive, and he looked me right in the eyes. And he was truly complimentary. It didn’t seem like empty flattery. He was really kind and nice and sane and looked me in the eyes and talked to me and then gave me this Bible.”

Jillette then stated he doesn’t respect people who don’t proselytise—who don’t witness. “I don’t respect that at all,” he said. The really important point that Jillette made was this, “If you believe that there’s a heaven and hell and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life or whatever, and you think that it’s not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward, his voice trailing off before saying, “and atheists who think that people shouldn’t proselytise—‘Just leave me alone, keep your religion to yourself.’”

“How much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytise?” Jillette asked. “How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that? If I believed beyond a shadow of a doubt that a truck was coming at you and you didn’t believe it, and that truck was bearing down on you, there’s a certain point where I tackle you. And this is more important than that.”⁶

Our pluralistic world demands tolerance for others, whilst well-meaning Christians are obviously willing to make concessions to avoid an awkward social situation. Even within the services of the church we become so refined in our presentation of Jesus that we become ineffective—puerile and insipid. Despite the clear command of Jesus to preach the Gospel to all nations, few Christians openly live out their Faith, and fewer still speak of their Faith. Consequently, few people in our fallen world realise that the Word of God is given to lead us to Jesus as very God.

In **MATTHEW 28:19, 20**, the Risen Lord gave His followers a singular imperative—“make disciples!” Of course, this imperative is fleshed out through three participles that can be translated “going,” “baptising” and “teaching.” The context for this command is “all nations” and “the end of the age.” In other words, the command the Master has given knows no geographical or temporal boundaries. Our church has been given the task of making disciples of the nations. But what else does the Bible tell us about the task?

The starting point of making disciples is the evangelisation of those who do not presently know Christ. This has become a sticking point for many churches—and consequently for many Christians! Baptisms within most denominations in Canada and the United States have been declining since the 60s. It does not do to complain that people are just unresponsive to the Gospel. It is precisely at this point that we must allow Scripture to shine its light on our analysis. Jesus told His disciples that “the harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few” [**MATTHEW 9:37**]. In other words, the seed is good and the ground is prepared, but few are working the field.

⁶ See also Erin Roach, “ATHEISM: Penn Jillette Urges Evangelism,” Baptist Press, February 12, 2009 (<http://www.scbaptistpress.org/bpnews.asp?id=29863>) accessed 14 February 2009

Do we believe and obey God's Word? According to some studies, less than four percent of evangelical believers have *ever* told anyone about their relationship with Christ. The Word is true—the labourers are few. So what should we do? Let's follow the Lord's prescription: “Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into His harvest” [MATTHEW 9:38]. Do we have a designated time of prayer when we pray for God to “send out” labourers? We dare not resort to tactics of guilt and coercion rather than following God's prescription. Are we praying for the lost by name? Perhaps we aren't bringing in the harvest simply because we haven't recognised and obeyed what the Bible commands.

The Apostle to the Gentiles declared, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” [ROMANS 1:16]. Is our failure to witness justified? Evangelism is not a gift for which we wait patiently; it is God's appointed means to bring people to life in the Son of God. Boldness in witnessing is not a personality trait, but rather a work of the Holy Spirit. “Witness” is who we are before it is what we do [ACTS 1:8]. We are responsible to point others to Christ the Lord; the Spirit will bring conviction and conversion. If we believe the Word, we must tell others of the Saviour. Establish this truth in your mind: Scripture presents Jesus as God and all Scripture points to Him as Saviour of all who believe. Scripture is very clear that not to believe is to place your very being in eternal jeopardy. Therefore, because of the peril of our children, because of the eternal danger to our friends and colleagues, we are compelled to present the message of life that is found in Christ the Lord.

FAITH THAT DOES NOT LEAD TO OBEDIENCE IS FLAWED — Faith that fails to lead to obedience is woefully inadequate. In fact, it is fair to say that such faith is fatally flawed. The religious leaders Jesus confronted in the text were disobedient to Scripture. In repeated confrontations with the Pharisees, Jesus held them accountable for their disobedience [e.g. MATTHEW 23:1-36]. One can only wonder what the Master would say to contemporary evangelicals were He to confront us in our chosen lifestyles.

That these religious leaders were disobedient to the Word is evident from even a casual perusal of the pericope. Frankly, they were spiritually sick—they were infected with the most dreadful form of spiritual sickness—they were utterly sinful and unaware of their sin. Contemporary pastors are too often negligent in pointing out the sin of their parishioners. Tragically, many modern congregations have grown so perverse that they can no longer hear the voice of the Son of God; and the pulpit enables their wicked condition by conspiring to withhold the plain statement of sin sickness from the people.

Karl Barth illustrates this spiritual sickness in his 1919 commentary on Romans. Barth describes people who live in a wilderness alongside a canal. The canal was there to bring them water and life, and it was with great effort and cost that the project was built for their place in time. Great sacrifices were made, and many died as the canal was cut through mountain and desert. But the great irony is that the canal has become dry, and while its walls still convey evidence of the coursing of water, there is nothing there that can give life to anyone.

Nevertheless, the people continue to service it, to defend it, to name their children after its architects and engineers; but it is only an historic thing. A canal meant to convey something—water and life—now has become static, an end instead of a means—something for the museum. People tell stories about it instead of drinking from it. The older ones treasure the stories most; the younger ones have to be initiated deliberately; but each generation seems to lose a fraction of the true vision of the canal as time goes on. And no one has a memory of what water in the canal really looks like.

Though Barth's warning was originally intended for Swiss and German churches in the aftermath of World War I, it is a warning modern evangelicals should heed. The danger is ever present that my life, my church, my tradition, my denomination, even my Bible will become relics of religious curiosity instead of living instruments of God. Men will be ordained, earn religious degrees, plant churches and launch magazines, publishing houses, colleges, and seminaries with solid evangelical commitments, and it will *all* be for nothing. Their religious efforts will count only as empty canals. There are specialists who can cite Scripture and verse, who can measure orthodoxy with exacting precision, who can identify the religious speck in someone's eye from a great distance, but in whom love for God does not exist.⁷

Do you recall the repeated insistence of the Master that love for Him was seen in obedience to His commands? Undoubtedly, we will do well to recall a few instances. Jesus said, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" [JOHN 14:15]. Again, He said, "Whoever has My commandments and keeps them, He it is who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love Him and manifest Myself to Him" [JOHN 14:21]. Shortly after this, He made the point clearer still when He said, "If anyone loves Me, He will keep My Word" [JOHN 15:23].

Think of one final instance where the Master united love and obedience as He prepared His disciples for His passion. Jesus said, "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love." He appended to this statement encouragement for disciples ever since, "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" [JOHN 15:10]. Even a casual reading of the Word of God will convince the unbiased reader that love for Christ and obedience to His Word cannot be segregated. We cannot approach God's Word as we would a cafeteria line.

Modern congregations are frequently disobedient to the Risen Son of God. Ask yourself, "Is the Bible sufficient for church growth and health?" I do not mean to imply that we do not need to organize for systematic study of the Word or for outreach to a lost world. We know that "God is not a God of confusion" [1 CORINTHIANS 14:33]; He works through orderly strategy. But we often disagree that it is "God who gives the growth" [1 CORINTHIANS 3:7]. We tend to rely on the latest scheme or marketing strategy that worked somewhere else rather than looking to the Word of God for growth strategy. Our congregation will do well to get back to search the Scriptures to hear the voice of the Risen Son of God, if we truly want to experience church growth and church health—the salvation of the lost and building up believers.

Perhaps the primary obstacle to church health is spiritual myopia which generates apathy. Many Christians behave as if the church were established to meet their needs and to keep them comfortable and entertained until Christ returns. Some have suggested that we might call this the "Love Boat Syndrome." We behave as if the Ship of Zion is the Love Boat. The role of the captain and staff is to be entertaining and to cater to the needs of the passengers while they enjoy a pleasurable cruise to Glory. Everything is fine as long as the food is sufficient, the music restful, the waters calm and no one moves my deck chair. But in reality, the Ship of Zion is a hospital ship and there are no deck chairs on a hospital ship!

If we will cultivate a healthy church, we must challenge this myopic apathy. There is no program and no method which can overcome such apathy. Nothing changes minds and attitudes except the Word of God applied by the Spirit of God. Thus, the beginning of change for any church must begin with knowledge of—and obedience to—the Word of God.

⁷ See Gary M. Burge, NIV Application Commentary: John (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 2000) 186-7

Having brought people into the fellowship of the congregation, what programme of discipleship shall we employ? Again, we must believe that Scripture is sufficient. We are taught that “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work” [2 TIMOTHY 3:16, 17]. The Word must be recognised not only as inerrant and infallible, but as profitable and powerful. The Word of God will accomplish what we can never do in building strong saints.

If we believe that God’s Word is true and sufficient, we will respond by demanding that those who teach us hold us accountable to the Word and that they instruct us in righteousness, insisting on obedience to the Word. Instead of fighting over arcane and insignificant issues, such as the length of the service, the type of music provided, the failure to salute some trivial doctrine that we have created to halt the insidious spread of liberalism, we will seek to discover the love of God in Christ through ardently pursuing the Christ of the Word and doing the things that He has commanded. Jesus exposes empty religion—religion that seeks its own glory. Ultimately, it was religion that would condemn and crucify Jesus as a religious duty.

But what of church members that profess Christ but do not have the love of God in them? They are condemned. But is there no hope for such people? There is indeed hope, if they will but embrace the Christ of the Word, believing that He died because of their sin and that He has been raised for their justification. The Scriptures offer life to all who will receive Christ, saying, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in Him will not be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing His riches on all who call on Him. For ‘everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved’” [ROMANS 10:9-13].

And that is our prayer for each one who hears the message this day. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. Do it today; do it now. Amen.