

REVELATION 3:1-6 THE INHERITED CHURCH

“To the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

“‘I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”¹

Each year, Forbes Magazine publishes a list of the richest people in the world.² It is instructive to note the variety in the list. These billionaires represent quite a variety of business as well as a variety of nations. In my estimate, what stands out from this list is that the wealthiest among us are self-made. We recognise the names of many of these people: Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, Mark Zuckerberg, Carlos Slim Helu, Charles and David Koch, Larry Ellison. Most of the super-rich are entrepreneurs who grew their financial assets from comparatively little wealth.

I find it fascinating to note that the children of the super-rich, people who would have made this list in previous decades, are either no longer listed or their names appear much further down the list. *Inherited wealth tends to dissipate rather than grow.* Names such as Rockefeller, Carnegie and Morgan are no longer on the list.

Perhaps this observation can be related to the churches. “The churches?” Specifically, I want us to think about the “inherited church.” When I was training preacher boys in Dallas, I urged those young men to become pioneer preachers, pushing the Faith into communities where the Faith was not well-established, shining the light of the Gospel into darkened corners of the world. Typically, these men would seek an established pastorate, endeavouring to serve in a church with a large attendance. However, while they were looking for a larger church to serve, they were ignoring some significant opportunities to plant churches.

It has long been observed that the fastest growing and most effective evangelistic churches in America tend to be new churches. An older report indicates that in 2006, new Baptist churches (less than three years old) in Oklahoma averaged nearly 10 baptisms, while older churches averaged about 8.5. In that year, the largest church in Oklahoma (not a Baptist church) was only 10 years old.³ New churches exhibit a vibrancy that is difficult to capture in old-line churches.

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 Luisa Kroll and Kerry Dolan (eds.), “Meet the Members of the Three-Comma Club,” Forbes, Mar 6, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/billionaires/#1d4ce593251c>, accessed 9 June 2018

³ See Randall Adams, “The Inherited Church, May 01, 2007, <http://www.bpnews.net/BPFirstPerson.asp?ID-25558>, accessed 1 May, 2007 and 31 July 2018

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Church life in Canada reveals that most of the churches leading our nation in reaching the lost sheep are young congregations. If there is hope for reaching our nation with the message of Christ the Lord, we must see new churches rather than merely hoping that older churches will somehow rise to the challenge. However, the majority of churches in our nation are “inherited churches,” churches founded and built by previous generations. We “inherited” these churches in that the buildings were largely built by previous generations, as were many of the ministries, organizations, and guidelines governing church polity. Even the framework for the budget may have been developed decades ago. And in many cases the lay leadership of the congregation hasn’t changed significantly in forty years.

Like inherited wealth, the inherited church can live in the afterglow and off the resources accumulated from previous generations. Whether thinking of wealth or of churches, the tendency is for accumulated resources to dissipate, dwindle and decline. These resources include not only tangible things such as buildings, but also the congregation of believers itself, and the intellectual and spiritual energies that were expended in growing the church. Thus, the challenge facing the inherited church is to rekindle the urgency, renew spiritual energy that is always present in a growing church that effectively reaches lost people. The pioneering spirit present at the beginning of a congregation must be recaptured for that church to resume growth.

THE PAST BELONGS ... IN THE PAST — “I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead” [REVELATION 3:1]. Evangelicalism has a reputation of being alive! Large churches and vibrant worship communicate that the Faith is acceptable to current generations. Whether that reputation is deserved or not may be subject to some question. To be certain, many of the great churches of previous days are a pitiful shadow of the power that once characterised their presence in the nation.

I am inundated with Emails from various web sites intended to equip pastors and worship leaders to be more effective servants. Included in these assorted Emails are articles instructing preachers how to make their messages more relevant, somewhat like the books that once flooded the market urging greater relevancy in preaching. There will also be advice on effective pastoral ministry in this day so far removed from the days of the New Testament. Among the articles will be news items detailing how exciting church services are in the current *church du jour*. There will also be articles written to urge worship leaders to make worship (usually restricted to the music presented) more exciting. At other times church leaders are told how they must conduct their lives, even how they should dress, if they want to be relevant. All these articles aim to turn churches away from what has been done in the past so they can become truly contemporary.

No doubt we have each heard George Santayana’s prescient warning, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” I’m not advocating ignorance of what has gone before; I am advocating that we must ensure that we hold to that which is valid and valuable while jettisoning that which is not of eternal worth. Paul urged the Thessalonian Christians, “Brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter” [2 THESSALONIANS 2:15]. In the same manner, he commended the saints in Corinth because they did hold to what they had received. “I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you” [1 CORINTHIANS 11:2].

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We need to know which traditions are demonstrably biblical, and thus valuable, and which traditions are unworthy of the Saviour, and consequently of no eternal significance. Some elements of the past are necessary, if we will honour the Living God, and some elements need to be jettisoned. This means that we must make decisions concerning what we hold dear and what needs to be forgotten.

The churches of North America don't have a great track record of choosing what should be kept and what should be jettisoned. Perhaps this is true for much of the world, but it is obviously accurate for North America. We allow ourselves to become attached to material expressions of our Faith while ignoring the essential requirements of the Faith. The buildings in which we meet gain an exaggerated importance in our estimate, though we become casual about what is taught from the pulpits in those same buildings. I have witnessed this phenomenon repeatedly as I've worked with congregations on the cusp of insignificance and death within the communities wherein they were located.

I recall a church situated in one of the metropolitan areas of our province. The church had once burned brightly with the Gospel of Christ. The man who occupied the pulpit was known throughout the area for holding forth the truth of Christ the Lord. However, he had aged and at last found it necessary to retire. The congregation called a succession of preachers who appear to have hoped they could capture some of the lustre of what once was without doing anything to disturb the saints gathered week-by-week.

When I went to that church, the congregation had dwindled until just a handful of people met in the building each week, and most of those who did attend were driving in from suburbs to which they had fled years ago. The congregation still had a large church roll, but those listed on the membership roll had long since died or moved far away or ceased attending the services. Those few individuals who still gathered for worship remembered what once had been, but they were oblivious to what they had become. They were insensible to the signs of death; they were incapable of recognising the stench of death that permeated their meetings. The congregation had a reputation of being alive, but they were dead; they were living in the past and ignoring the present.

When God confronted Ephraim through Hosea, He could well have been describing the congregation to which I went so many years past. Hosea wrote,

“Strangers devour his strength,
and he knows it not;
gray hairs are sprinkled upon him,
and he knows it not.”

[HOSEA 7:9]

I poured my heart into the messages, and shortly the building began to fill with people from the immediate neighbourhood. The new faces represented what the community had become—immigrants, first generation Canadians starting a fresh life in this new country. But the old saints didn't like these new people—they weren't like the old people! They were of different races, spoke with accents, had different traditions. The old guard was offended that these people were taking over *their* heritage. They couldn't tolerate the loss of *their* church building or the name they once had. For them, *the building and the name were more important than teaching that was transforming lives* and calling people to life in Christ the Lord.

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That congregation boasted of supporting multiple missionaries around the world—and they did send moneys to over a hundred twenty-five missionaries ... most months. Most of these missionaries were supported with five or ten dollars each month; nevertheless, the congregation could legitimately boast of sending some of their moneys to each of these missionaries.

Though their system of “support” imposed a heavy burden on the congregation, their actions allowed boasting of their world-wide missionary outreach. However, they ignored the community in which the church was situated. The leaders of that congregation were less enthusiastic about people taking part in their worship services, especially when those people had different skin pigmentation or when they spoke with accents that marked them as having origins outside of North America. The older members were offended that “those people” were taking over their church.

Perhaps you imagine that the congregation I just described was an anomaly; however, my experience with multiple congregations that could be described as “inherited churches” indicates that what I witnessed in that congregation is perhaps the norm rather than the exception for contemporary churches. Congregations that have not been required to struggle to establish themselves, churches that accept that the natural place for them is occupying some superior position within the community that prior generations attained, appear to take their position for granted. Such churches feel superior because they exist. The attitude exhibited sounds like some political entities exulting, “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.” Congregations that have received what they have without the investment of prayer and energy and time seldom appreciate what they have or the responsibility the Saviour has entrusted to them.

We see such an attitude displayed by Babylon the Great just before she is overthrown. A voice from heaven exposes the pride of that great city when her words are echoed back to her,

“As she glorified herself and lived in luxury,
so, give her a like measure of torment and mourning,
since in her heart she says,
‘I sit as a queen,
I am no widow,
and mourning I shall never see.’”

[REVELATION 18:7]

It is a serious sin to boast against the Lord, to exalt oneself. The warning delivered in the ninth Psalm to the nations of this fallen world is positively terrifying!

“The wicked shall return to Sheol,
all the nations that forget God.”

[PSALM 9:17]

In the same way, the congregation that forgets its purpose in the world is exalting itself against the very God it claims to worship and serve. We must be very careful that we do not permit ourselves to slip into such self-exalting dissipation.

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THE REMEDY FOR LIVING IN THE PAST — “Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard, keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you” [REVELATION 3:2-3].

Christ presents a three-step program for the congregation that has slipped into senescence. This three-step program must be applied individually for senescent saints, and assuredly, it is mandatory for comatose churches. “Wake up!” **Rouse yourself!** “Strengthen what remains and is about to die!” **Recover!** “Remember what you received and heard!” **Remember!** For the congregation that seeks to again be vibrant for the cause of Christ, God’s divine prescription will transform. When we rouse ourselves, recover and remember, we will **Repent**. The Lord Christ commands, “Keep [what you received and heard], and repent!”

Rouse yourself! It is instructive to note how frequently we see the need to rouse ourselves in the Word of God. For instance, Paul, writing in the Ephesian Encyclical, demands, “Do not become partners with [those who engage in ungodly attitudes]; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore, it says,

‘Awake, O sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.’

“Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is” [EPHESIANS 5:7-17].

Paul cites Isaiah, who wrote often of the need for God’s people to awaken.

“Wake yourself, wake yourself,
stand up, O Jerusalem.”

[ISAIAH 51:17a]

Again, Isaiah wrote:

“Awake, awake,
put on your strength, O Zion;
put on your beautiful garments,
O Jerusalem, the holy city;
for there shall no more come into you
the uncircumcised and the unclean.
Shake yourself from the dust and arise.”

[ISAIAH 52:1-2a]

One final citation from Isaiah is found in **ISAIAH 60:1**.

“Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.”

On another occasion in his first letter to the Corinthian saints, Paul truly gets in their faces when he wrote, “Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company ruins good morals.’ Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame” [**1 CORINTHIANS 15:33-34**]. These saints were not actually drunk on alcoholic beverages, but they would have probably contended that they were spiritually high. They imagined that they were “full of the Holy Ghost!” They could experience ecstatic speech and great feelings, but the Apostle accused them of being in a spiritual stupor.

Let me point you to another instance when the Apostle endeavoured to shock a congregation out of their daze. To the Church in Rome, Paul write, “You know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” [**ROMANS 13:11-14**]. Again, this appears to have been an instance of believers who were so other-worldly minded that they were no earthly good. Paul endeavoured to stir them up, shaking them awake so they would attend to first things as expected of those who follow the Lord of Light.

In what was arguably Paul’s earliest letter to be included in the canon of Scripture, the Apostle warned the Congregation in Thessalonica, “Concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing” [**1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11**].

The world about the faithful will seek to lull us into senescence, into an ineffectual daze. If we are not careful, we will become like lotus-eaters that threatened the men under the command of Odysseus. Many among the professed saints of the Most High have eaten the lotus fruit of this dying world and no longer care about home or fulfilling the responsibilities the Master assigned. They have ceased to be concerned for His glory, seeking only their own ease and comfort. Wake up!

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Recover! “Strengthen what remains and is about to die!” This admonition serves as a reminder that even within what we might imagine to be a congregation that is suffering from severe dissipation there may well reside some saints who long for God to be honoured and for His Name to be glorified. Though these saints may be discouraged, fearful and weak, they are known by God and they still pray for Him to work in their midst. The Living God hears the prayers of such saints and in His time will work in their lives to stir them up to the praise of His glory.

While living in the Bay Area of California, a gentleman who enjoyed a good reputation among the churches approached me one day, asking if I would be open to preaching in an area church that was then without pastoral leadership. Being an eager young preacher, I hastily agreed though I knew neither where the church was nor what their denominational affiliation was. I knew nothing of their particular situation. This gentleman had arranged for me to speak at several other congregations at various times in the past, so I trusted him in this instance.

Early the following Sunday, Ralph picked me up and he began to drive toward the Bay Bridge. He was evasive about telling me where we were going, but I was young and eager to preach, so I wasn't terribly worried. We drove across the Bay Bridge and into the city of Oakland, wending our way through the city until we pulled up in front of a stately old United Methodist Church. Ralph had promised the congregation that he would bring a preacher, and I was the one he brought to preach on that day.

The building was perhaps one-third full of mostly elderly people. I preached as I had been taught—hell hot, eternity long, sin black, Jesus merciful and salvation free. I poured my heart out, warning of judgement to come and calling people to respond to the grace of God. I gave an invitation, and when I asked who would give their heart to the Saviour, a lad of perhaps fourteen or fifteen years of age jumped from his seat and came to the front of the auditorium. He told me that he wanted to be saved. We prayed, and he asked the Master to receive him. God graciously saved that young man. I shouted and said that perhaps there were others who would come to faith.

To my joy, many within that audience left their seats and shortly the altar was full of those sweet old Methodist saints, praying and confessing their sin, asking the Saviour to bless the congregation and to save sinners. Some had begun to shout, as only those good old Methodists could shout. Many were weeping as they did business with the Saviour. It was powerful to witness the moving of the Spirit in the congregation.

When the service had concluded, a woman approached me to ask if I would take a moment to speak with her. She told me she had been converted in a Billy Sunday crusade in 1919 and that she hadn't heard preaching like Mr. Sunday's from that day of her conversion until this day. She continued by saying that the Christians in this church longed to hear the Word of God. They attended services, famished for the Bread of Life. Yet, these dear people were faithful, coming week-after-week to the church in hope of hearing a message from the Word of God.

Let me tell you what I learned that day. This was a church that had a heritage of life, and now it was seemingly dead. Despite appearances, it was a congregation that still had a few names “who [had] not soiled their garments.” God may only have a few embers glowing dimly among His churches, but those embers, when proper kindling is supplied, can again blaze into brilliant flame to the glory of God as the fresh breath of the Holy Spirit blows across the congregation.

Remember! “Remember what you received and heard!” We live in a day marked by woeful biblical illiteracy. Church leaders are effectively ignorant of what is written. Bible memorisation has become the exception, both among clergy and laity. Few people discipline themselves to read the Bible in its entirety. Among professing Christians, disciplines that once marked people as followers of the Christ are absent. Fasting, prayer and Bible reading are disciplines that have been neglected by Christians. We have forgotten, and the consequences of our neglect are dreadfully terrible.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in The Templeton Address for 1983, made this significant statement. “More than half a century ago, while I was still a child, I recall hearing a number of older people offer the following explanation for the great disasters that had befallen Russia: Men have forgotten God; that’s why all this has happened.”⁴ **Men have forgotten God.** Among the churches, it seems as if we Christians have forgotten some essential truths—**we have forgotten who God is and who we are.** In our ignorance, we imagine that we **deserve** God’s mercy.

Assess what you have received and remember that it is all of grace. God has forgiven your sin. Now, you are called by the Name of the Son of God. You have access to the Father, coming into His presence at any time with full confidence that He hears you when you call. You have a great Defender Who will not permit you to be utterly cast down. You have received the Holy Spirit of God—He lives in you and He has gifted you and equipped you to serve among the saints. He has gathered you into assemblies where you can encourage one another, comfort one another and build one another. God has provided you with food to eat and a place to live. He has enabled you to live in a peaceful land without fear of being attacked by foreign powers. Remember!

When we have roused ourselves, recovered our heritage and remembered the Holy One, we will **repent**. I am convinced that repentance is the normal response of the congregation that has met the Risen Son of God. I know that when the individual meets the Glorious Saviour, that woman or that man, will repent. Like Job, we will cry out,

“I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;
therefore, I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.”

[JOB 42:5-6]

Like Saul of Tarsus, though we inveighed against the Lord Christ and even assailed the saints, we will fall to the ground and cry out, “Who are you, Lord” [see ACTS 9:5]?

We are permitted to witness the saints in eternity as they stand complete in Christ. John writes, “I saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished.

“And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire—and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying,

⁴ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “Godlessness: the First Step to the Gulag,” Templeton Prize Lecture, 10 May 1982, <http://orthodoxnet.com/blog/2011/07/men-have-forgotten-god-alexander-solzhenitsyn/>, accessed 6 October 2018

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‘Great and amazing are your deeds,
O Lord God the Almighty!
Just and true are your ways,
O King of the nations!
Who will not fear, O Lord,
and glorify your name?
For you alone are holy.
All nations will come
and worship you,
for your righteous acts have been revealed.’”

[REVELATION 15:1-4]

“Who will not fear, O Lord.” Surely, I will fear the Lord for He can only be described as “Other.” He is not like me; and when I see Him, when I am conscious of His presence, I am in awe and I am overwhelmed with wonder. Before Him, I marvel at His majesty, at His might, at His mercy. In short, I repent of my broken, ruined condition and I worship. I ascribe to Him the worth of His glorious Name. Amen.

Repentance is not the normal condition of an individual; but repentance is the normal response of one who meets the Living Christ. Our flesh rebels at the thought of admitting that we are wrong, that we have transgressed the will of the Living God. We mask our wickedness with excuses for why we act as we do.

GOD’S WORTHY ONES — “You have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” [REVELATION 3:4-6].

I am always humbled to remember that God works even among congregations that appear dead to my eyes. I recall an incident during the early days of my service before the Lord. An unbelieving preacher ministered in a two-point parish, the churches being located about an hour away from where I was living. I had developed a strange friendship with this preacher, despite his unbelief. Learning that he was about to be moved to a new parish several states away, I decided to go down for one of his last services and tell him I was praying for him. I was reasonably certain that I would not see him again, and I wanted him to remember a young Baptist preacher was praying for him.

As it turned out, Roland wasn’t present when I arrived at the church in Mabank, he was ministering at the second parish over which he presided. However, a few elderly people were gathered around a table holding what they called a Sunday School. Each of the individuals was reading from a quarterly produced by their denomination, and they were reading what was written—that was their Sunday School lesson.

One of the men seated at the table noticed that I was carrying a big Scofield Bible; in fact, it was the only Bible that appeared at the table! That gentleman asked if I read that Bible. When I assured those at the table that I not only read the Bible, but I believed it, they united in asking if I would open the Bible and teach them something from the Word. It is fair to say that they clamoured for me to teach something from the Bible.

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I asked if the quarterly they were reading had recommended a focus passage. Learning that they were “studying” **2 CORINTHIANS 2:12-17** I began to teach this small group from that passage of the Word. You will perhaps recall that the passage reads thusly, “When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me the Lord, my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So, I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.

“But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ” [**2 CORINTHIANS 2:12-17**].

I turned to the passage and began to teach what the Apostle Paul had written. Having taken to heart Peter’s words I was prepared to teach. Peter taught followers of the Saviour, “In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect” [**1 PETER 3:15**]. Thus, to the best of my ability, I explained the passage, answering multiple questions raised for the space of about fifty-five minutes. I was startled to note that almost all of those seated there that day were afflicted with moist eyes. Clearly, I was with fellow believers, saints who longed to hear the Word of God declared. Their love for the Saviour was evident from their desire to learn more about Him. That was better than some Baptist churches in which I have preached.

Later, the minister, the man whom I knew as a fellow minister and as a friend, arrived to conduct the morning service for the little assembly. He and his wife graciously invited me to share a meal with them, which I was glad to do. During the meal, Roland shocked me when he casually mentioned that leaders from within the congregation had approached him to see if I would consent to be their pastor. He was quick to veto the request, noting that the bishop of that denomination would never approve of someone such as me. I was equally adamant to respond that I really didn’t think that I would get along with their bishop, especially since he was openly opposed to the vigorous proclamation of the Faith of Christ the Lord. Still, I was touched by their request.

I learned a significant truth that day—though one might be tempted to dismiss a congregation such as that I described as desiccated and dead, there were still souls present who recalled what it was to walk with the Saviour in the first blush of new-born love. These were people who had been starved to hear the Word, and yet, they were hanging on because in their hearts they did love the Lord. Superficially, it might appear that they were dead. Yet, these dear old saints had not “soiled their garments.” Christ loved them, and He still held them to be precious. We must be careful not to imagine that we are not susceptible to falling into the same condition. This is a humbling truth!

I love the people of God. How could it be otherwise since I love the Saviour? Those who love the Bridegroom, love the Bride. I delight to discover God’s people in the most unexpected locations. What is evident is that the Spirit of God has preceded me. There is no place where I can venture that the Spirit of Christ has not already visited. The Spirit of Christ is doing precisely what Jesus said He would do, when Jesus said, “My Father is working until now, and I am working” [**JOHN 5:17**].

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Nevertheless, I am gravely concerned that seated in the pews of many churches, perhaps even seated in the pews of most congregations in the western world today, are people who have never known what it is to struggle to advance the cause of Christ. These dear souls likely profess the Saviour's Name, singing praise songs and reciting prayers, but they have never known what it is to actually struggle to survive as followers of the Master in an unchristian world. They have never known what it is to be "persecuted for righteousness' sake," nor yet what it is to witness God's mighty power. Like the generation that followed after the days of Joshua, they are best described as "another generation ... who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done" [JUDGES 2:10b]. It is distressing to observe that for the most part, the churches of our western world appear to take for granted the life we enjoy, never realising the cost of securing the congregation. It is as though our churches know the words, but they have never learned the melody. And that is truly frightening.

Here is a grave tragedy: among the professed Christians attending the churches will be found people who have never been born from above and into the Kingdom of God. When my wife and I were young in the Faith, we didn't realise that there could be people who had known of the Lord without knowing the Lord. One of Lynda's closest friends after we had come to faith was a pastor's wife. One Sunday, as her husband gave an invitation to trust the Lord, Jackie stood and walked down the aisle. She realised that though she was a pastor's wife and though she had been in church all her life, she had never been born from above. She was what I have come to call "second milers."⁵ In almost every congregation I have pastored, I have met second milers.

Perhaps there is one here today who qualifies as a second miler. You may be a church member, perhaps you were even baptised on your profession of faith, but you now realise that you never made the decision to personally place your faith in Christ Jesus as Master over your life. You have been a good church member, but you are unsaved, and you know that if you were to die tonight, you would be excluded from God's Heaven. This is our invitation for you to trust Christ as Saviour, to receive Him as Master. Trust Christ and be saved. Amen.

⁵ I first heard this term used by Dr. W. A. Criswell to describe those who had been previously accepted into church membership but now realised that they had never trusted Christ.