

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA

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Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:5,7,10-11a

"2011 and Counting..." (part 5)

THE SIGNS OF SOCIETY

Last Sunday, we began to look at the signs that will be present in society before Christ's return. We specifically looked at the clearest passage in all of Scripture that deals with such things, **2 Timothy 3:1-4:** *"But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God."*

While always present in the human heart since the Fall of Adam and Eve, the three loves of self, money and pleasure are rampant in Western society and culture. And last Sunday, I contended that *the Declaration of Independence* paved the way for such loves to take center stage in our world. Of course, that doesn't mean the Declaration was a bad document. It is a wonderful statement but if you take the idea of God as Creator, Supreme Judge, and Lawgiver out of the equation, what you are left with is a man-centered and self-centered document. And even our Founders understood that a people could only benefit from this if they were a moral and a God-fearing people. John Adams, one of the original signers of the *Declaration* and our nation's second president said, *"Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."*

For most of our history, God and Christ were at the heart of national life and we were blessed as a nation like no other. However, since World War 2, we, as a nation, have sought to take Almighty God and His Law out of our national life. A most recent example happened this past Wednesday when a federal appeals court ruled unanimously that a local trial judge in Ohio has no constitutional right to hang in his courtroom a poster of the Ten Commandments along with his own pointed comments about "moral relativism" and the rule of law.

The 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals declared that the presence of the poster in the courtroom of Richland County Common Pleas Court Judge James Deweese violated the First Amendment rights of lawyers and litigants appearing before him. Asserting that the judge's "secular" justification for the written message was "a sham," the federal appellate judges affirmed a lower court ruling ordering Deweese to take down the poster.

Hung on Deweese's courtroom wall in 2006, the poster includes the following comments from the judge himself above the familiar list of commandments: *"There is a conflict of legal and moral philosophies raging in the United States. That conflict is between moral relativism and moral absolutism.*

We are moving towards moral relativism. All law is legislated morality. The only question is whose morality. Because morality is based on faith, there is no such thing as religious neutrality in law or morality. "Ultimately," Deweese's poster states, "there are only two views: Either God is the final authority, and we acknowledge His unchanging standards of behavior. Or man is the final authority, and standards of behavior change at the whim of individuals or societies." In addition, underneath the commandments, the judge added this comment:

"The cases passing through this courtroom demonstrate we are paying a high cost in increased crime and other social ills for moving from moral absolutism to moral relativism since the mid 20th century. Our Founders saw the necessity of moral absolutes. . . . The Declaration of Independence acknowledges God as Creator, Lawgiver, 'Supreme Judge of the World,' and the One who providentially superintends the affairs of men. Ohio's Constitution acknowledges Almighty God as the source of our freedom. I join the Founders in personally acknowledging the importance of Almighty God's fixed moral standards for restoring the moral fabric of this nation."

I believe this judge told it like it is. And more importantly, he is right! But our courts don't seem to think so. After a lawsuit was brought by the American Civil Liberties Union, the 6th Circuit ordered the poster to be taken down and declared that the poster *"sets forth overt religious messages and religious endorsements. It is a display of the Ten Commandments editorialized by Defendant, a judge in an Ohio state court, exhorting a return to 'moral absolutes' which Defendant himself defines as the principles of the 'God of the Bible.' The poster is an explicit endorsement of religion by Defendant in contravention of the Establishment Clause."*

The above is another example of how references to God and/or Christ are put down by our government, and all because of the elevation of individual conscience and freedom. We also looked at other examples of how the love of self has overtaken our society in things such as legalized abortion, homosexual rights, obsession with self-improvement and self-help, the New Age religion and movement. Add to that the love of money (i.e. materialism), and the love of pleasure (entertainment and recreation) and you have a three-fold concoction that will always lead to moral relativism, uncontrolled decadence, and total self-absorption, all of which are completely contrary of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

TWO MORE SIGNS

Well there is more. There are two more signs the Apostle Paul gives us. Please look again at **2 Timothy 3, this time verses 5 and 7.**

"...holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; Avoid such men as these. ...always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth."

What will be the two signs that will also be present in society? First, there will be many churches, church leaders, and churchgoers who will practice their Christian faith on the outside, but will deny the true power and spiritual life of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, and thereby lack any transformation on the inside. This leads us to the second sign – *“always learning but never coming to a knowledge of the truth.”*

In other words, people will be educated, and learned, and have access to all kinds of knowledge, but they never find the actual truth! Now I want to unpack these two signs for a moment, for while the first three deal with base human nature of self, money and pleasure, these two other signs deal with false spirituality and a blindness to spiritual truth.

THE DENIAL OF GOD’S POWER

False Christianity. That is what Paul is referring to in verse 5; a Christian faith devoid of the power of God. So where in the Church is there a denial of God’s power? Well, we left one that fits this description to a “T” – the Episcopal Church. The Episcopal Church has all the outside trappings but it lacks God’s power on the inside. But such can happen in any Church. There are three areas that Bible says demonstrate God’s spiritual power: His Word, the Cross, and the Holy Spirit. You deny any of the three and you are in trouble.

We read in **John 1:1,14,17**: *“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth...the law was given through Moses, grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.”*

The “Word” is God’s means of revelation. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for Word was *DABAR*. It meant anything that God used to show Himself to mankind. So a word from the Lord included visions, dreams, visitations by angels, the audible voice of God, and miracles. These are “Words” from the Lord which were eventually written down in the Word of God, the Bible. But then came God’s ultimate WORD – Jesus Christ – God, the Son - literally, “*LOGOS*,” in the Greek. As the WORD, Jesus is the full self-disclosure of who God is. It is the Word of God personified. God comes to us in history as a living human being. As the Apostle Paul writes concerning Jesus in **Colossians 1:15**; *“He is the image of the invisible God.”* It is why the Apostle John warns in **I John 2:23**: *“Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father, but the one who confesses the Son has the Father also.”*

And so any denial of the Word of God and you remove the power of God for salvation. It is why Paul wrote in **Romans 10:17**, *“Faith comes from hearing and hearing by the Word of God.”* But if you have a church that questions the Word, contradicts the Word, ridicules the Word, you have a church that is only of the Lord on the outside. *White washed tombs* Jesus called the religious leaders of his day that were guilty of the same thing - no power, no life.

Another area of God's power is that of the cross. The Apostle Paul wrote in **1 Cor. 1:18**, "***For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.***"

The cross is the heart of the Gospel of Christ. His suffering and death paved the way for our forgiveness and eternal life. But again you have many in the church leaving this essential core message out of the Gospel. There is little if any talk of sin and its consequences, or that Jesus not only suffered and died because of our sin but to also pay the penalty for our sin. We even have leaders in the church that ridicule the cross. The Very Rev. Dr. Jeffrey John, Dean of the St. Albans Cathedral outside of London, declared on BBC Radio during Lent in 2007 that the message of Christ dying for our sins is nonsense. In his radio lecture, Dr John revealed that he had taken issue with the traditional teaching of the Christ's Crucifixion from a young age. He said: "*Even at the age of 10, I thought this explanation (Jesus dying for our sins to satisfy God's righteousness) was pretty repulsive as well as nonsensical. What sort of God was this, getting so angry with the world and the people he created and then, to calm himself down, demanding the blood of his own son? "And anyway, why should God forgive us through punishing somebody else? It was worse than illogical, it was insane. It made God sound like a psychopath. If any human being behaved like this, we'd say he were a monster. Well, I haven't changed my mind since. That explanation of the cross just doesn't work but sadly, it's one that's still all too often preached."*

What then is Dean John's take on the reason for the cross? He thinks Christ was crucified so he could "*share in the worst of grief and suffering that life can throw at us*". Wow! Where is the power in that? Yes, God demonstrated in Jesus Christ that He suffers with us, but the power is that God suffers *for us* because He loves us!

Infamous Episcopal Bishop John Spong, called the idea of the Son dying for the sins of man at the bequest of the Father, "*child abuse.*"

While these disgraceful comments demonstrate the height of the church's hypocrisy and arrogance, anytime we add to the cross or take away from it, we lose sight of the true gospel message and thereby miss out on its transforming power.

What other of power is often neglected by these false Christians? The power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said in **Acts 1:8** that "***you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem in Judea, in Samaria and even to the remotest parts of the earth.***" The key to being able to go out and be witnesses for Christ is the Holy Spirit. We must be open to the direction and guidance of the Holy Spirit and not closed to Him. There are in the Church that teach that the gifts and manifestations of the Holy Spirit died out with the Apostles. My friends that's a lie! The gifts haven't died out. In fact, the Bible teaches that before Christ comes there will be a major outpouring of the Holy Spirit and we have begun to see this in the last 100 years.

NEVER COMING TO A KNOWLEDGE OF THE TRUTH

Now how about the second sign? Verse 7 says that people will be “*Always learning, but never coming to a knowledge of the truth.*” If that doesn’t sum up the problem in our world today, I don’t know what does! We have more institutions of higher learning, more universities, colleges, schools, education, knowledge, books, resources and on and on than in anytime in human history, more technological know-how but has that meant more people finding the truth? I don’t think so. All the PHDs in the world won’t bring you to faith in Jesus Christ. It is the Word. It is the Cross. It is the Holy Spirit and it is responding to these three in faith that saves!

And if you don’t have the Word, if you haven’t accepted Christ and the message of the Cross, if you don’t have the Holy Spirit, you have nothing! The Lord Jesus Christ, the Living WORD, said in **Jn. 14:6**, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life.*” And then in **Jn. 8:31-32**, “*If you abide in My Word, you are truly my disciples, And you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free!*” What truth? The truth about the person of God, about man, about sin, about death, about life, about eternal life. This, my friends, is the power of God and the truth of God and it doesn’t come from learning. It comes through faith in the word of God, the Son of God and then when we have that faith we get the Spirit of God!

THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

And that, my friends, is the only way to truly respond to the sins of the flesh, the temptations of society, and to a false gospel. We are surrounded by the way of the world – *the love of self* – it’s all about you; *the love of money* – get as much money as you can, he who dies with the most stuff wins; *the love of pleasure* – if it feels good do it – *an empty faith* – we don’t believe in God’s Word – that’s old fashioned. And *lots of education* but no truth. But there is only one answer. And it hasn’t and will never change and that message is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Faith in the Word, a commitment to obey the Word and a trust in the Holy Spirit to lead you to follow the way of Christ.

The Gospel is not what we do for God, it is what God has already done for us! It is a gift that we receive by faith. And we live it the same way. By faith, each and every day. How are you filled with the Holy Spirit every day? The same way you received the Holy Spirit – by repentance and faith. Each day is a new day to begin and each day is a day to grow closer to the Living God and fulfill the destiny He has for you! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!