



The Reflector

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Exaggerated Reports Of Dead Churches

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Mark Twain once sent a telegram stating that “the reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.”

Occasionally I hear that a certain church is dead. Knowing that churches do die, this concerns me because I love God’s people.

Sardis was a dead church with a general reputation of being alive. (Rev. 3:1). This Biblical example and my own experience teaches me that people’s assessment of a situation may not be accurate. A church pronounced alive by certain people may in fact be dead. Conversely, a church pronounced dead by certain people may be alive and well – thank you.

When I hear these reports of dead churches, I try not to get too alarmed and immediately go into mourning over their passing. Nor do I hastily jump in with some kind of drastic recitative measures to restore their breath of life. It just might be that these reports have been greatly exaggerated. I have learned to consider my sources before notifying the next of kin throughout the brotherhood or even expressing my concern to the membership of these “dead churches.” A church that may be dead from a certain person’s perspective may not really be dead after all because his concept of deadness may be influenced by certain experiences in his background.

A person with “Pentecostal” leanings will sometimes observe the quite and orderly manner of a congregation’s worship and pronounce it dead. A decent and orderly service, according to the principle taught in 1 Cor. 14:40, needs some life pumped into it from his perspective. To him, a little foot stumping, hand clapping, bodily gyrations, gospel music to a rock or country and western beat, and spontaneous outbursts would infuse some life into this “dead church.” But, the churches in the New Testament seemed to get along and

thrive without such things.

A very liberal-minded brother analyzes a congregation’s collective work pronounces the church dead. He sees no social welfare activities. He notices no organized recreational, social, political or other “fellowship” activities for its various age groups. He looks over the church staff and facilities and sees nothing that indicates the church’s involvement in such things. The congregation just meets for worship and edification, conducts periods of Bible study for all who will attend, maybe has a special series of meetings from time to time, supports an evangelist who works locally with them and other evangelists who work in various places in the world, and gives financial aid to needy members as the need arises. What a dead church! Poor thing! To a person of this mind-set, this church needs a transfusion of a whirlwind of activities more relevant to today’s world along with the trained personnel to direct these great “ministries” to raise it from the dead. Again, never mind that the Scriptures nowhere authorized these social and recreational programs.

Still another, though not as liberal-minded as the other brother, but geared to the fast-paced, results-oriented, organizationally-minded, elaborately-programmed modern world, looks at a congregation that is not as highly organized as he has become accustomed to in his secular world, as being dead. Such a one has a hard time conceiving of a church being very productive without the same kind of techniques and pressure points that he is used to in his day to day world. His kind often convinces the church to pattern itself after the concepts that they consider to have worked so well for society, business and government. Then they look around at churches that do not have similar “programs” and pompously pronounce them dead on the vine. Unless a

church has the same kind of dynamic, hyper-active programs characteristic of their highly organized world, it is simply not doing anything – dead.

These people do not seem to understand that the bulk of the Lord's work commanded and done in the New Testament was done by Christians on a personal level. Yes, there was church organization in the New Testament. (Phil. 1:1; Acts 14:23; 1 Pet. 5:1-5). Saints were organized into local congregations with elders to lead and oversee and with special servants called deacons. They had work to do that required organization; and, of course, this is still true today. However, not every thing that a Christians does for the Lord and His church has to be planned, organized, orchestrated nor supervised by the church. The church does not have to have a "program" to cover all the needs, problems and responsibilities of the Christian. In fact, it is this writers judgement that many churches – even those we would label "conservative" – are "programming" themselves to death. Much like secular governments, they are becoming top-heavy with bureaucracy, thus stifling individual initiative and productivity.

To certain people, unless the work is done as a part of a church initiated and highly structured "program", "we are not doing anything." When, in fact, "we" may be doing much more than many of the highly programmed churches are doing. How can this be? By dedicated members, prepared "for works of service" (cf. Eph. 4:12 NIV) by the edification work of the church, going about their daily lives fulfilling their individual responsibilities according to their abilities and opportunities.

A worker talks informally with a fellow-employee about Christ. A housewife who talks to her neighbor about the gospel over a friendly cup of coffee. A student gives tracts to his class-mates at school. A couple invites some folks over for dinner and in the course of it tells them about Christ and the church – maybe even getting together with them again and again. A sister carries a meal to a sick or bereaved neighbor and her family. A member notices a fellow-member is missing a lot lately and phones him to find out what the problem is. A mother raises a house full of children, all of whom turn out to be faithful Christians. A family has some kids over to sing, study the Bible or just to be together. The

list could go on and on with things Christians of conviction and dedication do without any public recognition or fanfare. This kind of thing is seldom taken into account by those who are quick to pronounce a church as dead or a "do-nothing" church. Unless these things are done within the framework of some church initiated and supervised "program" they just do not count with some brethren.

A Methodist preacher once told me that they were so organized that if two Methodist preachers accidently fell out of an airplane that they would not be able to hit the ground without first forming a landing committee to supervise the operation. I fear that some of my brethren are about as bad.

To brethren with this mentality, *we* are not visiting unless *we* have a church-planned and supervised "visitation program". *We* are not evangelizing the community unless *we* have a specific "personal evangelism program" planned and supervised by the church. Unless we are super-organized with highly visible programs for such things then we are bound to be accused by certain elements in the church of being dead or at least "we are not doing anything" – no matter how much individual members may be quietly doing without a sound of a trumpet (cf. Matt. 6:2).

Am I opposed to all organized programs for doing the Lord's work? No. I am simply saying that it has gotten to the point that too much emphasis is being placed on "church programs" and not enough on individual initiative and activity, prompted by personal conviction and commitment to the Lord. Also, that simply because a church may not have a portfolio of organized programs or a church orchestrated effort for every thing that Christians need to be doing for the Lord and His church, does not mean that it is dead nor that it is doing nothing.

Maybe, we can learn from the failures of communist systems around the world. Many countries are beginning to see how unproductive such tightly organized societies really are. They have placed too much emphasis upon state initiated and supervised programs. Such discourages individual initiative and productivity, hindering society as a whole. I believe a similar thing happens in those churches that overly emphasize collective programs for almost every phase of a

Christian's life.

One wonders how the church ever grew and prospered before all these ingenious programs, that some brethren think we *must* have today, became so fashionable. From the very beginning, churches that met for worship and mutual encouragement, edifying themselves through teaching or preaching, supporting gospel preachers and helping needy saints from their treasuries under the oversight of elders and served by deacons grew and prospered around the world. Why? Because the members were converted to the Lord. They were diligent students of the Bible "always abounding in the work of the Lord" from day unto day and from week unto week. They did not have to have an assignment from some organized program to act.

Maybe if we gave less attention to what "we" are doing or not doing beyond those things that must necessarily be done collectively and gave more attention to diligently studying the Bible and quietly practicing it, on an individual level from day by day, the church would really grow and prosper. I know this much. When members do this they do not make up a dead church by any stretch of the imagination. ■

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"Many Are Your Transgressions and How Great Are Your Sins"

R. J. Evans

"For I know many are your transgressions and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate" (Amos 5:12, ESV).

The word "sin" (*hamartia*) means "to miss the mark" (Thayer). We can illustrate it by the idea of aiming at a target and missing the bull's eye. There are several ways that are set forth in the Scripture that illustrate how we sin or "miss the mark." The Apostle John tells us, "Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness" (1 Jn. 3:4). Some have the idea that only some heinous crime, such as murder, is sin. This is far from the truth. While murder is certainly a sin, we must recognize that even some religious acts can also be sinful. Jesus spoke of those who on the day of judgment will be saying, "Lord, Lord, have we not

prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And I will declare to them 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" (Matt. 7:21-23). In this article, let us notice some different ways we sin:

Sin is doing what is forbidden. In the garden of Eden, God not only said what to do, "tend and keep it," but He forbade a certain action—"but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat" (Gen. 2:15-17). Adam and Eve both sinned when they ate of the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3). The tragic consequences of their sin are cited in Genesis 3, with God ultimately sending or driving them out of the Garden of Eden (Vv. 22-24). Lot and his family were told to escape the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. God told them—"Do not look behind you" (Gen. 19:17). But as they were leaving the cities, Lot's wife "looked back behind him and she became a pillar of salt" (Gen. 19:26).

How do we sin by doing what God forbids? Here's an example: God forbids indulging in the works of the flesh and loving the things of the world (Gal. 5:19-19; 1 Pet. 4:15; 1 Jn. 2:15-17). We sin when we violate God's law in the scriptures just cited by doing what He has forbidden us to do.

Refusing to do what God requires is sin. God told King Saul to destroy all the Amalekites, but Saul spared the king, and the best of the sheep, oxen, fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good to sacrifice unto God (1 Sam. 15:1-9). Saul's refusal to do exactly what God commanded, caused him to lose his position as king and was told: "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice....For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft And stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry" (1 Sam. 15:22-23).

When we refuse to do what God requires, we sin. Jesus gave a parable about ten virgins. Five were foolish and refused to be prepared for the delayed arrival of the bridegroom. They were not allowed to go with him to the wedding—which represents heaven (Matt. 25:1-13). Jesus gave another parable about the talents. Two men used their talents, but the one talent man refused to use his and buried it instead. He was cast into "the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 25:24-30). Also, those who fail to

serve “will go away into everlasting punishment” (Matt. 25:31-46). James warned, “Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin” (Jas. 4:17).

Adding to, taking away from, or substituting for what God has authorized in Scripture is sin. No person is permitted to do what has just been mentioned (Deut. 4:2; Prov. 30:6; Jer. 26:2; Matt. 15:9; 2 Jn. 9; Rev. 22:18-19). God commanded Noah to “Make yourself an ark of gopherwood” (Gen. 6:14). We know that Noah did not add some other kind of wood, for “Thus Noah did; according to all that God commanded him, so he did” (Gen. 6:22). If Noah would have added or substituted some other kind of wood, such as oak or pine, he would have sinned. God “devoured” Nadab and Abihu because they substituted “profane fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them” on the altar (Lev. 10:1-2).

We sin when we add to, take away from, or substitute for what God has authorized in His word. One of the ways in which we glorify Him is by wearing the name “Christian” (Acts 11:26; 1 Pet. 4:16). To add a human name would be adding to God’s word. Thus, we sin when we wear some human, unauthorized religious name or title (Matt. 23:9). We sin today when we attempt to take away something that is taught in God’s word. There are many who try to take baptism out of God’s plan of salvation, by teaching that baptism is not necessary for the “remission of sins” (Acts 2:28; 22:16). We are to worship God “in spirit and truth” (Jn. 4:24). The scripture teaches that we are to partake of the Lord’s supper “on the first day of the week” (Acts 20:7). If we take the Supper out of our worship on the first day of each week, we sin by taking away what is revealed in God’s word.

We sin today when we begin to substitute what we like, rather than by abiding in and obeying what is authorized by God in His word. In New Testament worship, God only authorizes vocal congregational music—singing (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). But many have added and substituted instrumental music to their worship simply because it pleases them. We should do all by His authority, always seeking to do His will (Col. 3:17; Heb. 10:9). It is not a matter of doing what we like or prefer; we

should always seek to do what pleases God, as is set forth in His word (Gal. 1:6-10). The Apostle John said, “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son” (2 Jn. 9).

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Sin separates us from God (Isa. 59:1-2); it leads to spiritual and eternal death (Rom. 6:23; Jas. 1:14-15); it will keep us out of Heaven and will result in everlasting punishment in Hell (2 Thes. 1:8-9; Rev. 21:27). Therefore, regardless of how many ways we sin, we should do what God has commanded us in order to have our sins removed or forgiven by the blood of Christ. If we are not a Christian, it begins by obeying Christ’s gospel plan of salvation (Rom. 1:16) for the remission of our sins (Rom. 10:17; Jn. 8:24; Lk. 13:3, 5; Rom. 10:9-10; Acts 2:38; 8:36-38; 22:16). If we are already a Christian, when we sin, we should immediately repent, confess, and pray to God for the forgiveness of our sins (Acts 8:22; 1 Jn. 1:9). The Apostle John stated: “My little children, these things I write to you, that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 Jn. 2:1). Each day of our lives, may we all have the same objective—that we “may not sin.”

■

Healing Divisions ...

It is amazing how many people think that all religious divisions can be cured by more love and “better attitudes.” These assume that hatred and bad attitudes must have caused the divisions in the first place. This may have been in some cases, but not all. In more cases than not, the difference is doctrinal leading to differences of faith and practice.

Recognizing the cause of the differences governs how one approaches to solving the problem. Those who see it mostly as a love and attitude problem often urge us to ignore doctrine and meet and work together, united by our love for each other. They see doctrinal differences as being no obstacle if we all have a loving attitude. They look for ways to minimize doctrinal differences to the point of insignificance. Love is everything to these people. Over 40 years ago I heard a brother pray, “Lord, we thank you for love. We know that love is more important than being right.”

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