

A LIGHTHOUSE IN A DARK WORLD

By Steve Zeisler

In his film *Sleeper*, Woody Allen plays the owner of a health food store who awakens 200 years in the future. The following morning he asks one of the doctors who has revived him for wheat germ, organic honey, and tiger's milk for breakfast. She is mystified and reports it to another doctor, who explains, "Oh yes, some years ago these foods were thought to contain life-preserving substances."

"What!" she exclaims. "No deep fat? No steak? No cream pies? No hot fudge?"

"No," he chuckles. "Those were thought to be unhealthy---precisely the opposite of what we now know to be true."

It's typical Woody Allen humor, poking fun at all of us. But there's a serious point underlying the joke, which is that there's a good chance that today's experts don't know what they're talking about. The "assured results of modern scholarship," to use C. S. Lewis' phrase, are likely to be jettisoned by the next generation, which will look at things differently. If there is any area where that pattern obtains, it is the advice of the world in the area of ethics or morals. In Romans 1:22 Paul says, "Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools" Again and again those who give us direction on how to behave and what to believe tell us things are right and proper that turn out to be destructive, and foolish.

That is a subject I'd like us to consider this morning. Over the course of several months we have studied the book of 2 Corinthians. Last week we concluded our study of the last verse of the last chapter. This week I'd like us to look at the whole, to think again about some of the themes running through the book. Essentially, the book of 2 Corinthians is a clarion call for the Christian church to be what it ought to be. It is an effort to help us come to grips with temptations to be impressed with that which should not impress us, sound a false note, lose our way, and be inauthentic in our expression of the Christian faith.

A world in darkness

If there is anything we need to recognize, it is how desperately our non-Christian environment needs the Christian church to fulfill its role. The last verse of the book of Judges says, "In those days there was no sovereign in Israel, and everyone did what was right in his own eyes." The period of the judges was one of the worst periods in the history of the people of God; they were dominated by their enemies and often in spiritual darkness. We live in an age that is just like the age of the judges. Our contemporaries are not just in rebellion against what is right, but they are losing the capacity to know right from wrong.

Remember the Uncle Remus story of Brer Fox, Brer Bear, Brer Rabbit, and the Tar Baby? Brer Fox and Brer Bear were trying to capture the wily Brer Rabbit, and they set in front of him a silent, sticky tar baby that would never say anything. Finally Brer Rabbit, in his frustration with the Tar Baby, struck it a blow, and of course his paw got stuck in the tar. That made him angry, so he struck it another blow and got the other paw stuck, which made him even angrier. Then he started kicking it and hitting it with his head, and soon he was effectively captured by this individual he was trying to challenge and change. Every effort he made to fix things made them worse.

We live in a world that is increasingly like that, where people are so confused about what is right and what is wrong that even the best efforts to fix things are likely to make them even worse! For instance, our culture is attempting to fix the pain of societal breakdown and the loss of family unity, but the very attempts to fix it---the reconstruction of the family into all sorts of bizarre configurations---are likely to bring even further destruction.

Sidney Shamborg is quoted in a newspaper article on the demise of New York City:

Sidney H. Shamborg, Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter, who now writes a New York Newsday column, calls the situation an emergency and compares it with his experience as a war correspondent. "I never looked over my shoulder when I was in a war zone because I always knew where the bad guys were," he says. "When order breaks down and there are no rules any more, you're inviting pockets of anarchy, which we have in this city. It is worse. Twenty years ago I didn't look over my shoulder in this city. Now I do."

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The condition we're talking about is denoted by the Greek word anomia, which means lawlessness; it is found in 2 Corinthians and other places in scripture. Interestingly enough, in the book of 2 Thessalonians "man of lawlessness" is one of the titles given to the antichrist who will set himself up in direct opposition to the reign of the Lord Jesus. The word anomia is often translated evil or wickedness. It is the end of the process, the worst condition, in which those who oppose God no longer just rebel against the truth; they deny that such a thing as truth even exists. We live in a world where truth has been sacrificed, so that people who want to do what is right have no notion of which direction to turn.

I'm told that those who fly airplanes can occasionally experience vertigo, the phenomenon in which they have no notion as to what direction they are moving; their orientation is thoroughly confused. So as the plane is careening along, it's impossible for the pilot to make a good choice of direction until he can tell where the ground is. Anything he does might just as easily cause disaster as correct the situation. What our society is experiencing today is moral vertigo.

A foundation for truth

Contrasted to that is the responsibility of the church in society. The message of 2 Corinthians, that the church should know what it is about and rightly represent our Lord, is all the more important because of the loss of direction or standards in our age. In 1 Timothy 3:15 Paul makes a statement that is significant in this context: ". . . God's household . . . is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth." The best illustration I know to explain this role of the church is that of a lighthouse. A lighthouse is a tower built to stand high enough so that the light displayed at the top can be seen from a distance. Lighthouses are put in places of danger to broadcast to those at sea the presence of rocks, promontories, shallows, and so forth that must be avoided. The church is not the light itself. Jesus Christ is the light of the world. It is his beauty, his reality, his love that must be displayed. That is what will warn people and bring them life. But the church, like a lighthouse, has the responsibility of being the pillar on which the truth or the light stands. When the foundation is shaky or the tower is fallen, when the church is not what it ought to be, instead of holding up the light high where it can be seen, it may let it sink down so it is not in view for anyone. In a world as dark as ours, it is critical that we testify to the Lord, hold him high in the view of people, and allow his love to be broadcast everywhere. It is critical that we not become consumed with our own importance, foolish, selfish, and uninvolved. When we give the light a proper foundation, it may win unbelievers and declare the truth so people can tell the difference between right and wrong.

Let's look at 2 Corinthians chapter 5. We studied this chapter several months ago, but today I'd like to re-examine it as a challenge to be true to our calling as the foundation on which the truth stands, offering hope to a world experiencing moral vertigo. Chapter 5 verses 11-13:

Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart. If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.

What is in the heart

Verse 12 makes a point that is one of the themes of the book: The church can fail in its responsibility if we allow ourselves to take pride in what is seen rather than what is in the heart. We can become consumed with a fleshly managing of the impression we make, concerned only with its greatness and beauty, wanting to look and sound like the world only better, fighting with the world's weapons, caring more about what is on the outside than what is on the inside. It is a grave temptation that affects us as individuals, as denominations, as para-church movements, etc.

Think of some of the language that is familiar to us. You often hear about "community-building" efforts as something the church should do. If properly understood, this can be very good. But the Biblical phrase that's more potent is our Lord's calling to love one another. The radical thing is not to build community; community can be built on externals: looking alike, having the same experience, knowing the same jargon, etc. The radical call, is to love one another from the heart, with enough humility to understand what another person is going through and go through it with them. We can easily be sidetracked into community-building on the basis of externals, and lose the deeper calling.

Think of a phrase like church growth. The church growth movement is widespread, and brilliant thinking has gone into developing church growth strategies. But the truer and more profound call is to make disciples. We should be about the business of testifying to Christ in ways that are honest, winsome, thoughtful, and courageous, making his name known and drawing people to him by our actions and our words. Church growth can instead, if we're not careful, lead us into exclusive concern for numbers, seeing people only as members of a group, not as individuals.

Paul raises an important warning in 2 Corinthians 5:12: Beware of those who care more about what's on the outside than what's on the inside. If this dark world of ours is to be served well by a church that is the pillar for the truth, it must be a church that has given up caring what others think about it and that cares more about what the Lord thinks about it, that is more deeply committed to character than to image.

A second warning is found in verse 15. Chapter 5, verses 14-16:

Not for ourselves

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.

The challenge to us in verse 15 is that we should no longer live for ourselves, but for him who died and was raised again. Another temptation for the church of Christ is to circle the wagons of protection around ourselves and to imagine that Christianity exists to bring security, friendship, and other advantages for those who are already on the inside, and to forget that as Christ died, all died, and that we need to have his concern for a lost world. We start thinking of being a Christian as getting what we always wanted and never had, and now that we've got it, we try to protect it.

There are wonderful books, cassette tapes, and many other forms of Christian communication on the subject of family life. One of the great boons we have to offer the world is our ability to say what families can be; to strengthen, encourage, and build up walls that are broken down; and to hold high the calling of godly family life. But sown throughout much of what is said about families is the desire to have everything for the benefit of those who are members, with a lack of concern for those who aren't yet. The effort to protect our children or our group can at times leave others out. Rather than seeing the family or home as a beachhead into a

neighborhood, a hospitality center where strangers and those in need are welcome, the church thinks of itself as existing for itself. The book of 2 Corinthians challenges that idea. That's not real Christianity. Making the world safe for us is not why the Lord left us here.

Another question I would ask comes out of verses 17-20:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!
All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

An appeal to reconciliation

Verse 11, the first verse we read, says knowing the fear of God, we persuade men. Here, in verse 20, the need for reconciliation is spoken of with urgency. But a temptation we can fall into as a church is to want to bring about conformity without persuasion, by dominating, electing, and pushing, to expect the world to change and act as if it believed these things, without our ever taking the time to persuade people. We want to shape up the non-Christian world in external ways instead of imploring people to be reconciled to God, changed from the inside so that righteous actions occur because the heart itself is righteous. But it is not the business of the church to make the world conform to the church's standards as if that were the end of the process.

Now let me make an important clarification here. We are citizens of a nation, and we live in a community; we can vote, speak, and have influence as citizens who are Christian. It is our responsibility to take Christian citizenship seriously. We ought to act in ways that raise national and community standards, because the loss of standards is a terrible evil. We ought to use our citizenship to the full and do everything we can to influence nonbelievers around us to hear what is true. Part of the persuasion that brings about reconciliation is to hold the standards high so nonbelievers can be attracted to them, chafe under them, have to deal with them, and hear from God. It is a good thing to use political and public forums to make the world a better place. But these things are not the main business of the church. Imploring men and women to be reconciled to God is the greater thing. We must not let ourselves think that our primary responsibility is to try to fix the non-Christian world so it will be more compatible with us.

So there are three things from this passage that I would call to our attention if we are to be a pillar on which the light can effectively be displayed: First, we must not be fleshy and care more for appearance than for heart, imitating the world. Second, we must not be withdrawn, serving ourselves rather than serving the Lord and reaching out to the lost. And third, we must not be dominating, pushing the world into shape instead of appealing to men and women to believe Christ.

Spiritual vertigo

Now, this is serious business. The world is in spiritual vertigo and doesn't know how to help itself any longer. People around us are going to wake up as the prodigal son did and realize they're eating pig slop. They have spent their inheritance, and all they have left is starvation or food fit for pigs. But they, unlike the prodigal son, don't know where the father's house is! They don't have a memory of once knowing the living God, of being welcome before and perhaps being welcome again. They don't know how to go back home. That's why the lighthouse is so important. And the pillar that allows the light, the truth, to broadcast itself is the church.

In any age, the world's darkness is directly correlated to the loss of vitality in the church. If the church is hypocritical, self-consumed, listening to false teachers, and preoccupied with things that don't deserve its attention, then to that degree truth's foundation is faulty and the world is plunged into further darkness. If the church is true to what it ought to be, if it has learned the lessons of 2 Corinthians (indeed, all the Bible), and the foundation of the lighthouse is secure so the light may rotate and broadcast itself, to that degree the world at

least has hope, the possibility of reformation and knowledge of God, a place to go. Bearing in mind this correlation, as dark as our age is, the church bears responsibility.

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"His name the only name"

I remember 15 years ago Ray Stedman was preaching here on a Sunday morning. He was just getting started, and Howard Hendricks walked in the back door. To Ray's amazement, Howard walked up the aisle and said, "Sit down, I'm taking over the service now!" He'd been invited by the elders to speak on Ray's 25th anniversary as pastor here. So Ray had to sit down and listen while Howard proceeded to speak in glowing terms about Ray's life and ministry---the good work that had been done at PBC. It was a wonderful message. Ray got up at the end, and he was obviously overwhelmed, so he didn't say very much. He just pointed to one of the Christmas banners hanging in the auditorium, which quoted Zechariah 14:9, and read it aloud: "The Lord will be king over all the earth; in that day the Lord will be the only one, and His name the only one." Then he sat down.

For him, what was important was to deflect attention from himself, other human instruments and the glory of the church, and say it is the Lord who is glorious. I'll never forget as long as I live the sense I had of how utterly critical our responsibility is, and that we will be best at it when we forget ourselves and are caught up with Christ, always thinking of him, praying to him, speaking of him, loving him, when it's the Lord Jesus who is most highly thought of. The foundation isn't noticed because the light is bright. We live in a world that is in desperate need of such a church. "His name the only one."

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