

3. Don't Tolerate False Teaching; Don't Die of Complacency

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[0 : 00] If we could have our Bibles open, please, at page 1029, and we'll have a moment of prayer before we begin. Father, how you have privileged us by giving to us your most holy word, this written word which so fully and faithfully points to Christ Jesus, the living word.

And so we pray now that as we draw near to you, that you will most graciously draw near to us, that you will open your word to our hearts, and that you will open our hearts to your word.

In Jesus' name. Amen. I've called this series, Lights Shining in the Darkness, the seven lamps that burned in Roman Asia so long ago, but it is obviously a word for us today, for the whole church.

If you drive through any large city like this, or indeed any reasonable sized town, over and over again you will come across buildings that were once churches, sometimes flourishing churches.

Now they've become warehouses, blocks of flats, or even less worthy purposes. Now I know, of course, that the church is not the building.

[1 : 28] The church is the people of God, and the people of God ultimately don't need buildings. Many flourishing Christian communities meet in homes and in public halls.

Nevertheless, if a church that once held a flourishing community of God's people, where once the gospel was faithfully preached, has ceased to exist, we're really forced to this question, why do churches die?

Why does a community of God's people, which was once alive, once living, once spreading the good news of the kingdom, why does it cease to exist? Now, of course, many of the buildings, particularly in Scottish towns and cities, really shouldn't have been there in the first place, because many of them are products of the splits in the church in the 19th century.

Different factions building enormous buildings, really across the streets from each other. Huge buildings which never could have been filled, even at the height of Victorian churchgoing.

Huge buildings to seat a thousand people. And many of these buildings you go to now, and you'd be lucky if there are ten people. Huddle together. Or not huddle together, because in these kind of places people usually scatter, rather than huddle.

[2 : 42] I was brought up in a small village on the east coast of Fife. When I was a boy, the village was still living in the afterglow of a great revival that had swept through the fishing ports a good many years before, when my grandfather was a young man.

My grandfather was a fisherman, and like the other fishermen of his day, he would go up and down the fishing ports, down to Yarmouth and Lowestoft, and then up to Shetland, and even further.

And at that time, God was powerfully working through the evangelist Jock Troop, who many of you will have heard of. He was, of course, associated with the tent hall here in Glasgow.

People were saved. People were blessed, and flourishing communities grew up. If you were to return now, you would find many of them no longer existed.

In a few others, several elderly people drag out a weary kind of existence, still singing the same kind of hymns, still almost dressed the same way as they would have been at that time.

[3 : 50] And over the whole thing, you could write the words of what will appear in 1 Samuel, Echabod, where is the glory? The glory has gone. And the reason churches die ultimately is nothing to do, but only secondarily to do with economics and shifts of population.

Churches die because the Lord of the church removes the lampstand. And that's what these letters to the seven churches are about.

The danger of the testimony being snuffed out. The candle ceasing to burn, and the life simply dying. Now, I said a few weeks ago that these were seven churches on the west coast of what we now call Turkey, and further inland.

Probably the route from Ephesus to Laodicea is the one a messenger would take. Next week, I really must get one of those maps up there to show you. I must get the technology guys to put it up there.

I'm never very sure about these things, because you look at the map rather than listen to the words, but it might at least help to fix it in our minds. But anyway, this messenger would go around these seven churches, carrying the letter, which is the whole book of Revelation.

[5 : 09] The whole book is the letter to the seven churches. But to each of the churches is given an individual message, which is also a message for all the churches. And here we come.

The messenger has now turned inland and come to two important trading centers, Thyatira and Sardis, both of them significant communities, and both of them in danger of ceasing to be any longer churches of God.

The candlestick, the lampstand, is in danger of being removed. Now, I hope you don't think this simply sounds negative. Willie talks about necessary negatives, those negatives which are needed, in order that we can get to the positive, the dangers to avoid, so that we can avoid them.

And there's two particular dangers here, and these are my two main points. Thyatira, first of all, verses, chapter 2, verses 18 to the end of the chapter, verse 29.

To the church in Thyatira, the Son of God says, Don't tolerate false teaching. That is the message to Thyatira. If you put up with false teaching, the church will die.

[6 : 24] But the message to Sardis, chapter 3, verses 1 to 6, is don't die of complacency. These are the two points I want to make, and I want to develop these now.

So let's look, first of all, at Thyatira. Don't tolerate false teaching. Now, I think I said before that to each of these churches, Christ comes, it's the same Christ, but words are used of him, which are particularly appropriate to the situation in the city or in the church.

And to this church, verse 18, the Son of God. Now, Thyatira had a particular patron god who was the god Apollo. And the name given to Apollo was Son of Zeus, the head god.

So, to this idol, pagan worshipping community comes the son of the true god. Not the son of Zeus, but the true god. His eyes are like a flame of fire.

We've all met those people, haven't we, whose eyes seem to look right through you, and whom it's very, very difficult to deceive. Not that we should be deceiving anyway, but, you know, we can all think of people like that.

[7 : 38] Well, this is the one who cannot be deceived, and we cannot hide from him. And his feet like burnished bronze. He is standing firmly. And he's saying to the church, you too must stand firmly.

Now, notice first of all, though, verse 19, if we stopped at verse 19, this would be great, wouldn't it? I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.

This is a wonderful church, isn't it? Obviously. But, as John Stott says in his commentary, in that healthy body, a malignant cancer had begun to form.

The church was healthy, but it was dying. There were obviously good things, and the Lord commends these good things. Notice, love, faith.

And they're growing as well. Not just growing in numbers, well, they almost certainly were, but growing in Christian grace and Christian character. Now, one thing we learned a few weeks ago in Ephesus is that we cannot pick and choose.

[8 : 46] In Ephesus, they had good doctrine. There's no problems with false teaching there, but they had lost their love, their first love. Their love was burning low.

It was fading ashes rather than a blazing fire. So, just as in Ephesus, good doctrine, resisting false teaching, couldn't compensate for lack of love, so in Thyatira, faithful work and warmth could not compensate for tolerating false teaching.

You can see how these things happen. They're so seductive. Ephesus, I suggested, had become so concerned with false doctrine, with heresy hunting, that the number of people who were acceptable kept on being reduced and reduced and reduced.

Everyone had to almost subject themselves to a soundness test. Probably anyone who even slightly disagreed were immediately excommunicated.

So, their desire to be true to the gospel had made them harsh. Almost certainly in Thyatira, it's the opposite problem. Their love had become indulgence and softness and they had become indifferent to true teaching and become accepting everyone.

[10 : 02] They're all this thing nowadays. Haven't we had to accept everyone, affirm everyone? And that's what was happening in Thyatira. So, what is the false teaching that the risen Lord, the Son of God, warns against?

Verse 20. Now, remember the language here is apocalyptic language, poetic language. You tolerate that woman, Jezebel. Now, we looked over many weeks at the stories of Elijah and Elisha and we found implacably opposed to the gospel then was the sinister figure of Jezebel.

Jezebel wanted to root out the worship of the true God and establish the worship of Baal. And there were two things about that worship which made it very popular. First of all, it appealed to people's sense of what was bigger than them, the sense of the eternal.

That's not wrong in itself, of course. That's a sign of the image of God who's put eternity in our hearts. But it also said you can have all that and you can indulge yourself as well.

No Ten Commandments. No awkward statements about behaviour and holiness and so on. That's always going to be popular, isn't it?

[11 : 19] If you doubt that, I've often said this before, go and look at mind, body and spirit in Waterstones or Borders and see the kind of odd books you'll get there. Because people are very happy with this sense of God as somebody other, as somebody distant.

They're not very happy, of course, about this God demanding holiness and demanding changed lives. Who Jezebel may have been, we don't know. She may have been a particular person.

She may have been a group of people. But the reference here almost certainly is to someone who is teaching that everything is acceptable.

Teaching that what God calls sinful is in fact holy. Sexual immorality. Now, the relevance of this to all our current debates in the Church of Scotland and elsewhere is staggering, isn't it?

This is exactly what's happening in our churches. The woman Jezebel is teaching that things which God calls sin are in fact holy and to be affirmed.

[12 : 26] This is why this is not an ancient letter. This is a warning to the Church in the 21st century. A warning to all of us. So, the first thing about this woman Jezebel, about this false teaching is that it leads to ungodly living.

Once we start believing the wrong things, we'll start behaving in the wrong way. It won't happen overnight, but it will gradually happen. There'll be a slippery slope and before long, the Church will simply become the religious flavouring on the world.

The second thing, this dramatic imagery of the sickbed and her children, strike her children dead, is, I believe, saying that false teaching leads to death.

Very far, you see, very far from making the Church healthy and continuing to grow, this Church is becoming spiritually ill and will soon die.

And that's what always happens with this kind of teaching. When you think about it, most people, well, I mean, think about your own heart. Most of us like to enjoy ourselves and that is not wrong in itself.

[13 : 33] Enjoyment and pleasure are good gifts of God. The trouble is, since we are sinful, the devil wants us to use that God-given instinct in order to behave in a wrong way.

If you say to people, come along to Church and we'll simply affirm you. You don't need to change, you don't need to repent, you don't need to live holy lives. What are people going to say?

Oh, why bother? I can do that without coming to Church. Why bother getting up on a Sunday morning and coming along to Church simply to be told I'm good enough anyway?

That's why those kind of churches die, because there is no message in it. There is nothing to cause growth, there is nothing to bring conversion. There is this vivid metaphor of an unhealthy body thrown on a sickbed.

verse 23, I will strike her children dead. Ultimately, this kind of teaching leads to spiritual death. It empties the churches because there is no call to repentance and faith.

[14 : 37] There is no challenge to people to be godly. And the result is I will strike her children dead. And the third thing about this false teaching is that it leads to pride.

And I think this is the point of verse 24. To the rest of you in Thyatira, notice the risen Lord who sees everything, knows that everyone in Thyatira is not tired with this brush.

To the rest of you who do not hold to this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan. Now, it's not defined what the deep things of Satan are, but almost certainly it was part of the world view that was very popular around the end of the first century and on into the second, which is sometimes called Gnosticism.

Gnosticism taught that the physical world is evil, that the body is evil, and that the spiritual world is good. These kinds of people that Paul is arguing against, particularly in 1 Corinthians 15, people who were basically wanting resurrection, that basically took them out of the body and they became a spirit.

And Paul says that's not the Christian hope. The Christian hope is for transformed bodies in a new heaven and a new earth. But you see what happens if we think the body and the material world are simply going to disappear, that can lead either to self-indulgence on the one hand.

[16 : 04] After all, if it's just going to disappear, we can do what we like anyway. It's my body, isn't it? It's my life. Or else, it can lead to a kind of unhealthy and unbiblical super-spirituality.

I wonder if you ever heard of St. Simeon Stylites, who spent, apparently, 30 years perched on top of a pillar to demonstrate his holiness.

Now, one shudders to imagine, in fact, we mustn't go down that road, to imagine what the conditions must have been like on the top of that pillar. That kind of ridiculous world denying, crucifying the body in utterly the wrong sense, this is what happens often when people deny the biblical gospel.

You see, the biblical gospel says the body and the material world are fallen. They're not evil. They are fallen and are going to be redeemed. But in order to be redeemed, in order for a person to be redeemed, they need to repent.

They need to be forgiven. They need to be changed so that one day we'll have bodies like Christ's glorious body. So, on the one hand, we've got the self-indulgence.

[17 : 25] On the other hand, the super-spirituality. And what marks both groups of people, in fact, pretty often they're the same people at different moods and different times, is pride. is a kind of prideful self-indulgence or self-mutilation which doesn't want to hear about grace.

It's a denial, ultimately, of grace. As the gospel is about grace. So, what can be done if this false teaching invades us? Notice what the Lord says, verse 25, hold fast.

Because Christ is coming. Now, this word translated come here is an interesting word. It means arrive. In other words, Christ is on his way.

There is no doubt about his coming. And this will lead to a true godliness and a true authority. I will give authority over the nations.

A fascinating phrase, verse 27, he will rule them with a rod of iron. It's quotation from Psalm 2. But the interesting thing is the word translated rule is the word usually translated shepherd.

[18 : 35] And that's very interesting because the shepherd, so often the shepherd, the pastor, is a guard to a nice little man who drinks cups of tea.

Well, I suppose, I suppose there's a place for that, particularly if the tea is coffee. But, the idea of the pastor in the New Testament and indeed in the Old Testament is someone who rules by the word of God, by the authority of the word, who turns many to righteousness.

I've often heard it said about people, oh, he's a wonderful pastor, but he's a rotten preacher. Now, that's a contradiction in terms, since preaching is such an important part of the pastoral task.

He's a rotten preacher. That's probably because he's not spending any time in his study. He's spending all his time going around getting himself a reputation for being nice rather than digging into the word of God and shepherding the people of God and also that word which not only builds up the church but converts the world.

And I will give him the morning star. This is probably a reference to Daniel 12. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever.

[20 : 01] You see, if Thyatira is going to succumb to false teaching, no one is going to be turned to righteousness. If Thyatira succumbs to false teaching, no one is going to grow in the faith.

Only if Thyatira holds fast, presents the living word, will many be turned to righteousness. So that's the first message then. Don't tolerate false teaching.

Don't give it house room. Don't allow it to grow. Don't allow it to take root. Now the second church, the church in Sardis, is a very, very different kind of place.

Spotlight moves once again. This time to Sardis, the ancient capital of the province of Lydia, which was an extremely wealthy province on a main highway.

Now by the time John is writing, this church, sorry, this city, had passed its main glories. Most of its history was in the past.

[21 : 02] And the tragedy is, most of the church's history also appears in the past. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

That's pretty devastating, isn't it? You see, it would be easy if this were a church which was obviously, obviously tolerating false teaching, obviously behaving immorally.

There's no word of that here. The risen Lord looks into that church and says, oh, I know people think you're wonderful, but you're not. You're dead.

And to that church comes the one who has the seven spirits of God. I believe that means the Holy Spirit of God in his, if you like, in his sevenfold, his universal power.

In other words, the risen Lord comes to them in the power of his Spirit and says, change. And the seven stars, we know that the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. And, well, we're not certain what the angels mean.

[22 : 08] We obviously, angels, are in one sense or another, the kind of governing influence over that church. So, what does this say to us? First of all, the danger of nominalism.

The danger of ticking all the right boxes, saying all the right things, and the church, which was once a vibrant gospel church, is now dying embers.

How does that happen? It happens because they are living in the past. It's never a good thing when all our conversation about church is about the past, how wonderful so-and-so was.

We thank God for all those people in the past. And, I mean, after all, in a church like this, there is plenty cause to thank God for those who have ministered the Word of God faithfully for decade upon decade.

But we can't go back to the past. No one lives there now. We are in a different world. We are in a world where we have to minister, we have to witness to the people of our day.

[23 : 10] Not the people of the 1950s or the 1970s, but the people of the 21st century. And so often, churches become full of complacent people who are living in the past, glorifying the past, and have no word for the present.

So there is the danger of nominalism, the danger of repeating the old words, going through the motions. That was no life. There is the need to wake up.

Wake up, verse 2, and strengthen what remains. Now notice, strengthen what remains is important. The church is not quite dead. There is still hope for the church.

We are not told exactly what remains, but presumably what remains is the flickering embers of what had made it a living church in the first place. Presumably, the reason for its reputation, the reason for its being seen as a flourishing gospel church, there are still remnants of that.

And they need to be strengthened. They need to be, the fire needs to be rekindled. And remember, sorry, he said, yes, remember, verse 3, what you have received.

[24 : 22] Now, that doesn't contradict what I said about not living in the past. Because in the Bible, remember doesn't just mean saying, oh, you remember those days. Remember means remembering that living word which changed you and transformed you in the first place.

Remember those words which caused the reputation and keep it. What's the question to us who have been a long time in church?

Is this, what have we done with the hundreds and hundreds of sermons, the hours and hours of Bible teaching, the abundant opportunities? And looking at the back there, at these books, there are so many wonderful Christian resources.

What have we done with them? What are we doing with them? That's so important. Why do churches die? The churches die because the risen Lord pronounces the sentence of judgment.

But look at verse 4. Because I don't want to end on a negative note here. Yet, you have still a few names in Sardis. That's very important to remember.

[25 : 39] If a church is dying, there is still the challenge, still the call for individuals to be alive. You have a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments.

Now, a matter of clothing is actually quite an important minor theme throughout Scripture. First example, of course, is right back at the very beginning of the Bible when the Lord himself clothed Adam and Eve.

And it is all ultimately a picture of the clothing in the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul says in Romans, put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

And that was the text which led to the conversion of St. Augustine. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ. White is a sign of holiness, a call to holiness.

And later on in the book, the redeemed in heaven are described as those who have made their robes white in the blood of the Lamb. Now, I will never blot his name out of the book of life.

[26 : 42] This does not mean losing personal salvation. But what it seems to me, it's a very vivid and pointed challenge, saying not, not if you're, if you're not all you should be, I will blot your name out of the book of life because that would be salvation by works.

I think what the risen Lord is saying is look at your life. Is there evidence in your life that you actually are, your names actually are written in the book of life?

The theologian Jim Packer once said, the only proof of past conversion is present convertedness. And as I boy, I used to hear lots and lots of testimonies which always seem to stop at the moment of conversion.

Thirty years had passed and nothing had happened apparently. Now that is a danger, that's the danger of Sardis, looking back to a past experience without living in the present.

And that seems to me what the Lord is saying, I will never blot his name out of the book of life. Basically saying, are our lives bringing the cut fruit for repentance?

[27 : 49] Not are we perfect? Not have we got it all right? But, is the fact that grace has come into our lives, is that being shown by grace-filled lives?

And I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. Remember, Jesus had said that in his earthly life whoever confesses me before men, I will confess before my Father who is in heaven.

So, there are two things to guard against. We need to guard against false teaching. Tear up the weeds before they have a chance to take root.

And we need to guard against complacency. Remember, it's our present walk with the Lord that's so important. And perhaps revisiting that time when we first came to know him, of course.

That's not living in the past, but that's going back to the time when we first met him, when we first fell in love with him. I often say to couples who are preparing for marriage, when you run into difficulties, as you inevitably will, say to yourselves, what was it that attracted us to each other in the first place?

[29 : 07] And that's the way back, it seems to be. And that's the way back if we're in danger of complacency. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Amen. Let's pray. Our Father, these words are words which come from the Son of God who has eyes like a flame of fire, whose mouth has a sharp two-edged sword.

Father, we throw ourselves wholly upon his grace. Forgive us for when we tolerate false teaching. Forgive us when we drift into complacency and help us to rest and luxuriate in that grace that sought us and found us.

That grace which will keep us from falling and present us before the presence of his glory with shouts of joy. Amen. Amen.