

It Is Written

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Cold, Empty Churches

By Andy Sochor

Corydon E. Fuller, in *Reminiscences of James A. Garfield*, described a period in which he (the author) was working with a school in Hambden, Ohio, in 1851. In this “little village” that “enjoyed no past, and had no hope in the future,” there were two churches which he described in this way:

“The two churches stood like gladiators over against each other, shabby in their weather-beaten habiliments, faded and tattered by winter’s storms and summer’s heat. Without, they were forbidding and repulsive; within, the fires had grown cold upon their altars, and the worshipers had departed, save a few fossils who had come down from a former generation.” (*Reminiscences of James A. Garfield*, p. 39)

No additional information is given about these churches and how they got into this condition. However, any church could find itself in this condition in the future, no matter its current state.

The churches Fuller described were once active in their work and worship. Yet over time, their services had “grown cold,” and most of the “worshipers had departed.” Whether one condition led to the other or both happened concurrently, they were related (and can also be in our churches today).

How could worship grow cold? Jesus said that the worship we offer to God must be done “in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). Yet when we become stagnant in spirit and our “reverence for [God] consists of tradition learned by rote” (Isaiah 29:13), our worship becomes hollow. We may be “going through the motions” rather than worshiping from the heart.

Why might worshipers depart? There could be a few reasons for this – unfaithfulness (they fall away from the Lord), relocation (they move away from the church), or death. In reality, even in the best of circumstances, every member will one day be a former member.

How can we work to prevent our places of worship from becoming lifeless and empty? Obviously, the church is not the building; however, the building is usually the place where the church gathers. What can we do to ensure that these gatherings continue, are beneficial for those who assemble, and are pleasing to God?

Evangelism – The Lord’s church began on the day of Pentecost when three thousand heard the gospel and were baptized into Christ (Acts 2:38, 41). They then continued to assemble together for worship (Acts 2:42, 46). If churches want to bring more people in from the outside, it must be done by “[sounding] forth the word” (1 Thessalonians 1:8) since “the gospel...is the power of God for salvation” (Romans 1:16). Any growth that comes when churches employ other gimmicks or tactics found in the world is only superficial. Real growth requires a proclamation of the gospel. As Paul told the brethren in Corinth, we are to plant and water and allow God to give the increase (1 Corinthians 3:6).

Edification – God designed the church to be a self-edifying body in which “the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love” (Ephesians 4:16). The most obvious benefit of this is to help prevent unfaithfulness as we “stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:24-25). We need to “encourage one another day after day...so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Hebrews 3:13). However, when a local church functions as a healthy, united body in which every part contributes and is dependent upon the others, this may also prevent some members moving away. Of course, some relocation is inevitable, but our congregations should not be such that moving away from our community is more appealing because of the opportunity to leave the stagnant, dysfunctional, or lukewarm church where they currently are.

Brethren who find themselves in churches like the ones described at the beginning of this article are to be commended for doing their best to faithfully serve the Lord in a difficult situation. The “few people in Sardis” who remained faithful were promised that they would “walk with [the Lord] in white, for they are worthy” (Revelation 3:4). Those congregations may still grow – in strength and number – through their diligence and faithfulness.

However, for those who are in churches that currently seem to be healthy, vibrant, and growing, it is important to be reminded that such conditions may not always exist. If we become complacent and fail to carry out the Lord’s work as we should, a once-healthy church will eventually become cold, empty, and close to death.

Let us continue to be diligent in our service to the Lord, faithful in the work He has given us, and strive to equip the next generation to carry on after we are gone.

A Richly Blessed Family

By Bill Hall

“Pity the Jones family. Poor things, they have to keep the preacher every time the church plans a meeting. And Christians are always stopping in at their place. And they are about the only people in the church that ever invite people in after services. I just wouldn’t put up with it myself.”

Spare your pity! The Jones’ are a richly blessed family. Oh, occasionally they entertain some ungrateful scoundrel, but the blessings of hospitality far outweigh the problems.

The Bible speaks of some wonderfully blessed people along these lines. For instance, we do not pity Mary and Martha for “having” to have Jesus in their home; we pity those who, not wanting Jesus, were deprived of this blessing. We do not pity Mary the mother of John Mark, in whose home “many were gathered together praying”, we pity those homes where Christians never assemble for Bible study and prayer. We do not pity Philemon who was to prepare Paul a lodging; we would love to have Paul as a guest in our home. Christians need to learn the joy and blessings which come to those who are hospitable.

“We are hospitable,” someone says, “we often have friends from church in our home for get-togethers and parties.” That’s fine! We encourage this! But Bible hospitality goes beyond having friends in for an evening which is at least partially for our own selfish enjoyment. “I was a stranger and you took Me in,” Jesus will say in the judgment (Matthew 25:35). Gaius was commended for helping “brethren” and “strangers” who were traveling for the Lord’s name sake, and was told by John, “If you send them forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God, you will do well” (3 John 5-7). Further, the Bible teaches that we become partakers in evil deeds of false teachers when we receive them into our houses (2 John 9-11). But does this not imply that we become partakers in the good deeds of faithful teachers when we show them hospitality?

A Christian will want to make friends with other Christians, and consequently will plan enjoyable evenings with close friends in his home. But the hospitable Christian will also use his home for conducting Bible classes, entertaining visiting preachers and other workers for the Lord, getting acquainted with newcomers in the church, comforting the bereaved and troubled, and for every good work.

Our homes are blessings from the Lord. We must not use them selfishly, but rather to His glory. The result will be an occasional scratch on a chair, or a stain on the carpet, or a chipped glass -- really a small price to pay, though, for the warmth that comes to the home from new friends, good influences, rich Bible discussions, participation in the Lord’s work, and the satisfaction of knowing that one is pleasing God and preparing himself for eternity. No, it is not the Jones’ whom we pity; it’s those who do not know the joy of hospitality.