

IS THERE ANY WORD
FROM THE LORD ?

David N. Samuel



Laodicea

IS THERE ANY WORD
FROM THE LORD ?

*Consequences of the neglect
of our spiritual heritage*

David N. Samuel

THE HARRISON TRUST

2013

A lecture given at
Autumn Conference of the
Protestant Reformation Society
on August 29th., 2013

© The Harrison Trust, 2013

Published by The Harrison Trust,
15 Grange Court, Cambridge, CB3 9BD

Printed by PLAN-IT Reprographics,
Atlas House, Cambridge Place, Hills Road, Cambridge, CB2 1NS

ISBN 0 907223 31 1

IS THERE ANY WORD FROM THE LORD ?

What does the Lord say to a nation that neglects and rejects his Word – the Bible? A nation where there is unbelief, and contempt, and cynicism regarding spiritual matters – a secular wilderness? What does he say to an unfaithful, harlot church that goes a-whoring after the latest intellectual fashion? What does the Lord say to a people who draw near to Him with their lips, but whose heart is far from Him? To a nation sunk in worldliness, bent upon the pleasures of the flesh and worldly comfort and ease? How does he regard the moral anarchy that engulfs the nation, largely because the church has neglected its true mission and message? “Is there any word from the Lord”, which speaks to this state and condition of society that we know and experience today, the evidence of which is all around us, on every hand? We perceive the condition of the nation. The question now is, “What is God saying to us, and how is he saying it?” “Is there any word from the Lord?”

IS THERE ANY WORD FROM THE CHURCH?

First, is there any word from the church? It would appear to be the case that there is not. Of course, that is a general statement. There are faithful ministers and faithful churches, but they are few and far between. It is like looking for a needle in a haystack. The verdict sadly is, speaking generally, that the church in this country has apostasised, it has forsaken the true faith and gone off onto sidetracks which lead to a spiritual wilderness. It is a long history going back to the higher criticism of the nineteenth century, when men set themselves up as judges of the Word of God, when they ought to sit under it not over it. This has done immense damage to the preaching in the churches. Whatever one may say of a good liturgy (and I am second none in my admiration of the 1662 Book of

Common Prayer) nothing can make up for the neglect of preaching, or for a downgrade in preaching. “Is there any word from the Lord?” That is the vital question. That is what people need first and foremost. “Man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live.”¹

We are proving the truth of that today in a negative sense. We are seeing the consequences of the neglect of preaching in spiritual starvation. People do not see it for themselves, because they are not discerning. They have no spiritual understanding. But it is there; it is evident, blatant: like those terrible pictures we see of starving people in Africa – just skin and bones. You remember the vision of Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones: how the Lord took him and showed him the dry bones scattered on the ground. It was a picture of the state of Israel spiritually. Their condition was hopeless. When we likewise look upon our nation today, that is what we must see, if we are spiritually discerning – a valley of dry bones.

And the message it was intended to convey to the prophet was, that the condition of the nation was likewise hopeless. Nothing humanly speaking could be done with it; it was past remedy. And that also is how we should see the condition of this our nation at the present time. Our hope is dried up. There is effectively nothing left of the spiritual life that was once there; that informed the lives of individuals, and the institutions of the land. We may think that that is an extreme verdict, but if we reflect upon it we see it is not. We see the materialism, the scepticism, the sensuality, the absence of spiritual life everywhere we look: in parliament, in our culture, in the media. Men and women are without spiritual awareness or understanding. Everything is worldly, secular. That is the culture which has been deliberately bred and fostered. Everything has been done which can be done, to expel religion, spirituality from the nation, from its homes, its families, its schools, its universities and institutions. The secularists shout with one voice, “We will not have this man to reign over us”, metaphorically speaking.

¹ Deuteronomy 8: 3

GOD IS SOVEREIGN

But the saying is that ‘man’s extremity is God’s opportunity’. We see the evidence of that throughout the history of the church. At the very times when the darkness is so thick that it might be felt, the light has broken through. At the very time when the church seems no more than a lifeless corpse, the Lord has passed by and spoken the word that has raised it to life again. ‘Man’s extremity is God’s opportunity.’ I do not really concur with that. It is not the best way of putting the matter, for the Lord can act at all times. He is not constrained by circumstances, by the condition of the church or of men. But nevertheless it contains an element of truth. God is sovereign; he is not limited by the condition of the church or of the individual. He acts in his own way and in his own time. We cannot tell when or how that will be. If we could, God would not be sovereign. So we must wait upon Him and seek his face. God can intervene in the most unexpected ways and in the most unexpected places. We have a paradigm of this in the Scriptures themselves. Did God not call Moses when he was minding his father-in-law’s sheep in the wilderness? Did not an unbelieving Jew say of Our Lord himself, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” Who could have thought that the Reformation, which was to change the face of Europe and reform the church, returning it to the Scriptures, would begin with a lowly monk in a monastery in Erfurt? God is sovereign: that is the truth we must keep constantly before us. He is not circumscribed and limited as we are. He acts freely when and where he deems it right to act. Let us keep that before our minds and we shall not be overwhelmed by the darkness, and by the bleakness of the state of the church, and of Christianity today in this country and elsewhere. Tomorrow everything could be changed, transformed, altered beyond our comprehension and beyond recognition.

Well, what has a sovereign God to say to the church today – a weak church, a church institutionally stripped of its privileges which it has enjoyed in the past, reduced in the number both of its ministers and its members; demoralised and weakened by successive attempts to renew itself through man-made schemes and tactics, and having

exhausted its own resources and strength? Well, if we want to know what God is saying to the churches, we cannot do better than turn to the Book of Revelation. In the seven churches of Asia Minor we have, as it were, a mirror of the church in all ages and circumstances. In those letters to the seven churches given to John by the risen Christ, every condition and need of the church is addressed.

THE CHURCH AT EPHEBUS

First, the Church at Ephesus. After the initial commendation the Lord brings a charge against the Ephesian Church, in that it has “left its first love”. Now here is something that is of first importance today. How can God be served and worshipped without love? “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind”.² That is the first commandment. The trouble with worldliness, where it invades the church, is that it stunts that ardour and the vital force of Christianity is sapped. How do people lose their first love? How does love grow cold? The answer is, with time: the passage of time can have a deadening effect upon the soul. John was writing to second-generation Christians at Ephesus. The children had not the spirituality and enthusiasm of their fathers. We read of a similar situation in Judges, chapter 2. The people that served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and who had seen all the great works of the Lord that he did for Israel – all that generation was gathered to their fathers, “and there arose another generation after them, which knew not the LORD, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel”.³

Now this is a fact of life. The passage of time can lead to a diminution of zeal and love. Let us beware of the “second generation” syndrome. People can be brought up in evangelical homes, in evangelical churches, but that does not mean that they share the faith and zeal of their forebears. We all need to experience afresh and at first hand the grace and power of God in the Gospel of Christ. Each generation must itself be born again. Faith and

² Luke 10: 27

³ Judges 2: 10

repentance must be first-hand experiences. Nobody can experience them for you, in your behalf. “*You* must be born again” is the message.

How can we experience afresh the grace and power of the gospel of God? Well, a lamp will not burn brightly without oil. If the oil is dried up, the lamp goes out: “Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning” goes the chorus. And so it is: the oil that keeps the lamp of faith burning brightly is the grace and mercy of God *experienced* at first hand. And it is that which causes Christians to be the lights of the world in their generation. “Is there any word from the Lord?” What is God saying to the churches today? He is addressing their need, and the message is this: that they cannot shine as lights in the world without knowing at first hand the grace and power of the love of God in Jesus Christ. All this may have a familiar ring to it, and people may switch off because they think they have heard it all before. They feel it is trite – mere words. But to experience the love of God at first hand is a very great and powerful thing. It is transforming, liberating, and empowering, and that is exactly what is needed today both in the Christian and in the church.

The truth of the matter is that the love of Christians has grown cold. We live in a secular age, an age preoccupied with material things. Everything is geared to that – the media, education, our whole culture has a materialistic bias. The ‘holy’, the ‘other’, the ‘spiritual dimension of life’ has been blocked off. The Lord is saying to the church today that it has lost its first love, and has been assimilated to the world with its material values and material philosophy. Nothing can happen until that mind-set is challenged, confronted, and thrown off. We must live for eternity not for time for “the things which are not seen are eternal”, and “the fashion of this world passes away”. The church today must strike that note, and it can only do so if it listens to the word that God is speaking to the church today. “Is there any word from the Lord?” Yes, there is: “Cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armour of the light.”

THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA

What else is the Lord saying to the churches today? In the second letter in Revelation chapter 2 we find John writing to the Church in Smyrna – a suffering church. The word Smyrna is associated with myrrh, which signifies suffering. Smyrna was a poor church, poor in material things. That was not uncommon. The church at Corinth was also poor: “For ye see your calling, brethren,” wrote Paul to them, “how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called”.⁴ They (the Church at Smyrna) were also a suffering church because they were persecuted. “I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty”, says the Lord. Part of their persecution was the spoiling of their goods. What little goods they had they were prepared to lose, and to suffer for the sake of Christ. But it also entailed bodily suffering. “The devil shall cast some of you into prison ... Be ye faithful unto death.” In the following century the aged Polycarp was to suffer martyrdom at Smyrna. He was asked to sacrifice to ‘Caesar as Lord’. The magistrate demanded of him, “Swear and I will set you at liberty. Reproach Christ.” But the aged Polycarp replied: “Eighty years have I served Him, my King and Saviour, and he never did me any injury. How can I blaspheme my King and Saviour?”

Tribulation is the experience of the true church in all generations: “All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution”;⁵ “We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God”.⁶ There is perpetual enmity between the world and the church. If we are not experiencing that hostility, if there is no holy warfare, we should ask ourselves why. Has the church become worldly? Have the principles and prejudices of the world warped and fashioned our outlook and the orientation of the church? There must be something wrong.

What is the Lord saying to us today? Is the truce and the peace between the world and the church indicative of us having

⁴ 1 Corinthians 1: 26

⁵ 2 Timothy 3: 12

⁶ Acts 14: 22

backslidden and adopted the manners and mindset of the world? It is so easy for this sort of thing to happen, and there is much to indicate that it has happened in recent times. We have walked over enchanted ground and fallen asleep. It is a state of vulnerability and danger. “Awake thou that sleepest”, and call upon thy God. The church needs a wake-up call. It is not, of course, the business of the Christian to seek out suffering and opposition, but that will happen when the church is faithful to its vocation. The absence of suffering and opposition is an indicator that something is not right. The Lord is saying to us, “Woe to them that are at ease in Zion.” He is calling upon us to examine ourselves whether we be in the faith; to repent and do the first works. “All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.” Here is a plain message for the church and the Christian today (as in the second century) that everything is not right in the churches and that we need to examine ourselves and see whether we be in the faith.

Why is there opposition between the church and the world?

Because the principles of each are diametrically opposed. “All that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.”⁷ “If ye were of the world,” said Jesus to his disciples, “the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.”⁸ There is a fundamental clash and opposition between the world and the church. They cannot be reconciled. Yet that is what contemporary Christian thought has been attempting to do. But it is impossible, and such attempts can only result in the church being assimilated to the world. The Lord is saying to the church today, as he has said in the past, “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him”.⁹ That is the note that needs now to be sounded. Is there any word from the Lord? Yes, and it is clear and unmistakable. “Love not the world, neither the thing that are in the world.”

⁷ 1 John 2: 16

⁸ John 15: 19

⁹ 1 John 2: 15-16

THE CHURCH AT PERGAMOS

Pergamos is described by the apostle as “Satan’s seat”. It is an extraordinary expression, but describes the desperate wickedness of the place. The Scripture says that “the whole world lieth under the wicked one”¹⁰. But some places are still more notorious than others; and some particular ages are noted for their extreme rebellion against God. I think it is true to say that our particular age is specially marked out in that respect. We have witnessed a growing alienation in faith and morals in our life time. People thought that churches were poorly attended, and that morality in public life was at a low ebb a generation or so ago, but now the situation is dire. Pergamos was infamous also for its error and wickedness. In that situation the word of the Lord to the Church at Pergamos was, “Repent”. He called on them to shake themselves free from the culture and thought of a wicked and wayward generation. If they could do this, he, the Lord, would give them to eat of the hidden manna. He would feed and sustain them in a godless age with the true teaching of his word.

That is the message that we need very much today. Ours is a feckless and godless age and it has become increasingly so in the last generation. It is now far from God. The danger for the church is of drifting – drifting with the culture and ethos of the age, taking the path of least resistance. We sometimes hardly realise that our mind and thoughts are being formed and fashioned by the spirit of the age, and the spirit of the age is godless; as Paul puts it, “The prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience”¹¹. We have to learn to discern and discriminate between good and evil, right and wrong. We can only do that if we have the mind of Christ, if the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth; if we are anointed and instructed by the Spirit of God, and not by the spirit of the age – the “prince of this world”.

So what is the Lord saying to the church today? He is saying this: “Come out from among them, and be ye separate ... and touch not the

¹⁰ 1 John 5: 19

¹¹ Ephesians 2: 2

unclean thing; and I will receive you.”¹² God is speaking, but we do not always feel comfortable with the message, with what we hear.

The Church at Pergamos had amongst them the Nicolaitanes. Who were they? and what did they stand for? Well, in a word, the teaching of Balaam. Balaam, you remember, was the prophet hired by Balak, the king of the Midianites, to curse the Israelites, when they came out of Egypt and encroached upon his land. He could not destroy them by force of arms, so he sought to do so subtly, by enticing them away from the fear of the Lord, and the observance of his commandments. He sought to draw them into sin, particularly the open sins of the flesh, and idolatry. The Israelites fell a prey to these temptations, and it is that of which the apostle warns the Church at Pergamos.

The dangers of that situation are still with us today. The spirit of the Nicolaitanes is not dead. The spirit of our time is one of immorality, or, as it is euphemistically called, of ‘permissiveness’. It is the great spiritual danger of the age. There has been for some time a deliberate breaking down of the difference between the church and the world; a blurring of the difference between right and wrong, between good and evil, between true and false religion. We live in an antinomian age, in an amoral society, in a time of agnosticism; not very different from the kind of society that the Church at Pergamos experienced, and to which, in their folly, they succumbed. That is why the word of the Lord to the Church at Pergamos is a message to the church and the Christian today. That message is summed in one word, “Repent”. The word ‘repent’ (*μετάνοια*) means literally ‘a change of mind’, of outlook, for it entails a change of heart, too.

The Bible makes clear that there must be a separation of the church and of the Christian from the world. Nothing could be more apposite and relevant to our age than that. It is a clear word from the Lord to the church and the Christian today.

¹² 2 Corinthians 6: 17

THE CHURCH AT THYATIRA

The word of the Lord to the Church at Thyatira. One thing stands out clearly in all the letters to the churches in the Book of Revelation, and that is Christ's warning against false teachers. It is the duty of every minister of the Gospel, as clearly stated in the ordinal, "to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrines contrary to God's Word". It is an echo of Paul's words to the Ephesian elders, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood."¹³ It is a strange paradox that today people show great care for their bodies, and are very particular about hygiene and good food, but have little regard for their minds and souls, and what they put into them. You have only to glance at the magazines and videos on display in the shops to see that people are feeding their minds and souls on what is damaging and evil. The word of the Lord to the church today, as to Thyatira, is not all critical. He declares that he knows of their "works, and charity, and service, and faith, and ... patience." Though we live ourselves in a decadent age, the Lord is not unmindful of his faithful people. "I know," he says, "thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience". Nevertheless, despite this there was something wrong, and it may be summed up in the word 'toleration'. They were tolerant of wrong teaching. This is significant. People may feel that wrong teaching, which is contrary to the Scriptures, is not a matter of very great importance; that we do not have to "dot all the 'i's and cross all the 't's". But, in fact, in the sight of the Lord, it is of very great importance. "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump." False teaching can quickly undo and undermine the faith and well-being of the local church. That is the charge that the Lord brings against the Church at Thyatira, and it is also a word for today: "You suffer that woman Jezebel to teach and mislead you."¹⁴ Jezebel was probably the name given to false teachers, possibly women, because in the Old Testament Jezebel, the wife of Ahab, hearkened to the false prophets of Baal.

¹³ Acts 20: 28

¹⁴ Revelation 2: 20

Thyatira was a trading city. There were many trades and guilds. Each had its patron god, and at festivals the members of the guilds would be expected to attend, and possibly take part in, the feasts devoted to the gods. This the Lord condemns. Toleration of false teaching and other religions and deities is wrong. There can be no compromise on the part of the Christian; the Scripture makes it clear that ‘there is salvation in none other, but the name of Jesus’.

Now, toleration of other religions, and false teaching, are common place today; and Christians are expected to engage in ecumenical gatherings, and even in inter-faith worship. But the word of the Lord to the church is clear and it is the same today as then. Article XVIII of the XXXIX Articles of Religion states the matter very clearly, and reads as follows:

Of obtaining eternal Salvation only by the Name of Christ
They also are to be had accursed that presume to say, That every man shall be saved by the Law or Sect which he professeth, so that he be diligent to frame his life according to that Law, and the light of Nature. For holy Scripture doth set out unto us only the Name of Jesus Christ, whereby men must be saved.

There can be no misunderstanding here. There can be no compromise. The word of the living Lord to the Church today makes that abundantly clear; and that church can only flourish which abides faithfully by the Word of God in this matter. The word of Christ to the church today is the same as his word to the Church at Thyatira. “That which ye have already hold fast till I come.” Let there be no compromise, no falling away from the truth. How is it that people fall away? Well, often they do not intend to do so, but it happens, little by little, which makes the exhortation of the apostle incisive and searching: “Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip.”¹⁵ As John Bradford, the Reformation martyr, said, “Stick to [God’s] word, though all the world would swerve

¹⁵ Hebrews 2: 1



Sardis

from it.”¹⁶ It is not being in the majority that makes one right, for the Word of God clearly states: “Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil”.¹⁷ And again, “Wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat”.¹⁸

THE CHURCH AT SARDIS

The trouble with the Church at Sardis was formalism, a preoccupation with the outward things of religion. The Lord says to the Church at Sardis: “Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.” There was a preoccupation with ceremonies, forms and appearances, but no corresponding inner power or vitality: “having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof”. You can walk along the sea shore and pick up a beautiful shell. It is empty. It once housed a living creature, but the creature is dead and only the outward form remains. That is what the apostle is saying to the Church at Sardis. “Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.” The life, the spiritual life and power, had departed, and only the outward form of religion remained. And is that not a word from the Lord for the churches today?

What is the answer to formalism? What is its cure? There are those who would say: ‘Do away with all forms of worship; get rid of liturgy and prepared sermons. Let the services be spontaneous, free-wheeling.’ But that is not the answer. No liturgy, only extemporaneity, does not necessarily mean more power. It is too radical, like saying the cure for a headache is to cut off your head. No, liturgy has its place, but it must be sound liturgy, Scriptural liturgy. The fault lies not in the forms of service, but in the lack of spiritual life and experience which should inform them.

A jug is a very useful thing and is meant to hold water. If it is empty, you do not smash it, you fill it with water. The answer to formalism in worship is not to get rid of liturgy but to match it with

¹⁶ John Bradford, *Writings*, II (Parker Society; 1853), 43

¹⁷ Exodus 23: 2

¹⁸ Matthew 7: 13

experience; to let the form of liturgy be the medium of the power of which it speaks. You may recall that revival took place at Llangeitho in the eighteenth century, in the parish of Daniel Rowlands, when he was reading the Litany in church. If the church lacks the power, let it ask of God; let it ask that the word of God expressed in the reading of Scripture, in preaching, and praying may be filled with the unction of the Spirit of God.

How is the church to receive the Spirit of God and the power of God? “If any man thirst,” said Jesus, “let him come unto me and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. ... this spake he of the Spirit which they that believe on him should receive.”¹⁹ If we do not receive it, it is because we do not ask. If the church lacks power today, it is its own fault. That is what the Lord is saying to the church today: “Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.”²⁰ We must ask, and we must ask aright, according to the Word of God and with the right motive. What is the right motive? Is it to put the church right and receive power? No. It is that God should be glorified; that Christ might be lifted up that he might draw all men unto himself. That is the word of Christ to the church today: “Ask, and ye shall receive”.

THE CHURCH AT PHILADELPHIA

This is the only church of the seven that the Lord finds no fault with. They had “little strength”, but they used what they had. Here is a word from the living Lord to the church today. Are we using the grace we have been given? ‘To him that hath shall be given’; yes, but only if we exercise a proper stewardship of what we have. The Lord does not reward idleness. Have we understanding of the Word of God? Are we using it? Have we love for God and for mankind? Are we showing it? Nothing improves by not being used. “Stir up, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people”. The word of the Lord to

¹⁹ John 7: 37-39

²⁰ James 4: 3

this church is a word of commendation. “Thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name.”

We have but little strength today, but that is no excuse. The true, confessing church is small and weak, but if we are faithful the Lord will speak to us a word of commendation and encouragement. He says that he has put before us an “open door”. What does that mean? Well, it can mean two things. First, privilege of access, by which the Lord means freedom of access into God’s presence. Believers are privileged in this way, that they are “kings and priests unto God”; “his ears are open unto their prayers.” Secondly, opportunity; while the door is open, there is opportunity of service. The salesman keeps a foot in the door because as long as it is open he can do some business. Are we seizing the opportunity that is ours to serve the Lord? God has put before us an open door. Are we redeeming the time, that is buying up the opportunity because the days are evil? We do not know when they will change and become adverse.

And here also is a word from Christ to the church that he will keep them in the time of evil. “Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world”.²¹ Well, that is the situation today. It is a testing time for the Christian and the church, but we have the assurance that we shall be “kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed at the last time”.²² We need such supernatural aid and strength for there is a great falling away. We have seen that happen in our own time. Paul declared that there would be a great falling away in the last times. Whether we are living through those times is not easy to ascertain, but there is great coldness and indifference to Christianity. Paul describes such a situation:

in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy,

²¹ Revelation 3: 10

²² 1 Peter 1: 5

without natural affection, truce-breakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof:²³

All that is very real to us, because we see it about us all the time. Therefore we need supernatural aid to be kept from the evil. And we have it, because we have the promise that we shall be kept by the power of God unto salvation: “When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.”²⁴

THE CHURCH AT LAODICEA

Seventh, and lastly, the word of Christ to the Church at Laodicea,²⁵ a church that was outwardly prosperous but lukewarm spiritually. It was neither hot nor cold. It was not cold, that is, not in unbelief, yet it was not hot, on fire with love and zeal. It was complacent, indifferent, mediocre. What was the cause of this condition? They had, presumably, not always been like that. When they were converted, they would have been willing, receptive, obedient. Why, then, were they in this condition? We are told that the cause was spiritual blindness. They could not see themselves and their true condition. They thought that they were still good Christians. They believed they were “rich and had need of nothing” (v. 17), when in fact they were “wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked”.

How can we explain this? Some things are relative. For example, we are all going round, travelling through space at thousands of miles per hour, but we are not conscious of it at all. Why? Because we are all going around *together*. The spiritual and

²³ 2 Timothy 3: 1-5

²⁴ Isaiah 43: 2

²⁵ Revelation 3: 14-22

moral decline at Laodicea in the church had been general and as a result nobody had noticed. They measured themselves by themselves, and they thought they were alright. They were ignorant of their true condition, and complacent because of it.

This is an ever-present danger in the church, and in society too, for that matter. “All we like sheep have gone astray”. That is why the yardstick of what is right and true cannot be what is being done and practised in the church. The yardstick must be the Scriptures, the Word of God. “What saith the Scripture?” How did the church get itself into such a mess in the Middle Ages? Because there was universal ignorance of the Scriptures. Luther’s rediscovery of the doctrine of justification by faith in the Epistle to the Romans brought about a thorough Reformation.

When people go back to the Bible things begin to happen. The church is reformed and revived. Lukewarmness is driven out and replaced by “power and love and a sound mind”. And the same is true of the individual believer. Is there coldness, indifference, backsliding? Then it is a sure sign of neglect of the Word of God, a sign that other things have come into the church and into the life of the Christian – a love of the world, of ease, and comfort, and self-esteem. Remember the words of the apostle Paul, which sound like a knell: “Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world”.²⁶ And what is the end of this compromise of the Christian and the church with the world? In a word, rejection by the Lord: “Because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth”.²⁷ But that need not be the end of the matter, for at the close of that passage on the lukewarm Church of Laodicea the word from the Lord is this: “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.”²⁸ That is what Christ is saying to the churches today. Is there any word from the Lord? Yes, there is. But we must act *now!*

²⁶ 2 Timothy 4: 10

²⁷ Revelation 3: 16

²⁸ Revelation 3: 20

CONCLUSION

The subject of this paper has been: Is there any word from the Lord? We began by saying that the Word of God is rare today. Preaching is not what it once was, and faithful preachers, and faithful churches are few. Our hope seems dried up. There is a famine “not ... of bread, ... but of hearing the words of the LORD”.²⁹ The great need of the time is to hear God speaking to us as a church and as a nation. We read in the Old Testament of the time when “There was no open vision” in Israel, and that “the word of the Lord was precious [*or* rare] in those days”.³⁰ We are experiencing something similar today. The anxious enquiry on the lips of Christians should be: “Is there any word from the Lord?” It is only the Word of the Lord that can save us. Gimmicks will not do; initiatives of one kind and another will not serve, because they are of human invention, and are part of the problem not the answer. It is like a man who when bound, however much he struggles, cannot free himself. He needs someone to come and set him free.

And so it is with the church. Human thought and ingenuity will not serve: they cannot deliver us. Only an intervention from outside can do that. “Is there any word from the Lord?” If ministers and people are serious about the problem we face, that is the question we should be asking. Martin Luther’s famous expression was, “The Word will do it!” The difficulties and opposition he faced were enormous. But he looked beyond them. He had confidence in the supernatural power of the Word of God to accomplish the work of reformation in the church.

A safe stronghold our God is still,
A trusty shield and weapon;
He’ll keep us clear from all the ill
That hath us now o’ertaken.
The ancient prince of hell
Hath risen with purpose fell;
Strong mail of craft and power

²⁹ Amos 8: 11

³⁰ 1 Samuel 3: 1

He weareth in this hour;
On earth is not his fellow.

And the last verse goes on triumphantly:

God's Word, for all their craft and force,
One moment will not linger,
But, spite of hell, shall have its course;
'Tis written by his finger.

That is the confidence in the power of God's Word that we need today. "By the word of the LORD were the heavens made".³¹ He called all things into existence by the word of his power, and by the word of the Gospel men and women are made a new creation in Jesus Christ. "Is there any word from the Lord?" Yes, there is: it is a written word in the Holy Bible; it is a living word through the power of the Holy Spirit; it is a *kerygma*, a preached word, a proclamation in the mouth of those who are called to declare it. We can set aside all the gimmicks, all the elaborate services, all the attempts to entertain people and amuse them.

The word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.³²

Only the Word of God can explain man to himself, and give him the answers that he needs to the questions of time and eternity. "Is there any word from the Lord?" Yes, there is. I am reminded of John Wesley's celebrated words at the beginning of his book of sermons, which I think sum up the matter:

³¹ Psalm 33: 6

³² Hebrews 4: 12-13

I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit come from God, and returning to God: just hovering over the great gulf; till, a few moments hence, I am no more seen; I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing – the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God Himself has condescended to teach the way; for this very end He came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me that book of God! I have it; here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri*.³³

“Is there any word from the Lord?” Indeed, there is, and it is a living word of grace, and power, and regeneration.

³³ John Wesley, Preface to the *Forty-Four Sermons*;
homo unius libri – a man of one book.