

1998

Dear Friends,

Life in this fallen world is full of shadows and secrets. The more of life one lives, the more one realizes that things are rarely, if ever, as they appear. After man's sin and fall, not only has his naked body been covered, but his own psyche and his entire world lie under a shroud which makes accurate understanding difficult and exhaustive knowledge impossible for any of us. The secrets of sinful thoughts and undetected sinful deeds lie within us all. The shadows due to our donning the guise of our respectable outward shows touch everything. Innumerable pains and frustrations result. We wonder if we ever shall see clearly and act with integrity and transparency.

The Word of God promises for those in Christ a sure hope of glory where the shadows flee away and where we shall know as we are known. It is almost inconceivable for us to think of the quality of joyful security we shall experience in that time when our every thought, word, and action shall be--and we shall know them to be--right and worthy of expression. None of us then shall resort to silence or misleading communication in order to hide our unworthy and unattractive sentiments. All ignorance, offensiveness, and vulgarity will be vanquished then in the light of perfect understanding and the attractive warmth of pure love.

In our modern world, with so many philosophical and social structures breaking down, the shadows darken and lengthen, the secrets deepen. Where previously family structure and clear social, economic, and political lines of authority provided a semblance of guidance for our plans and actions, most of that has dissolved now, and we are practically conventionless, and therefore clueless, with respect to how we should spend our time and behave ourselves.

The gospel brings light and order to such darkness and chaos. Yet, since we must work out our salvation in this world of gathering shadows, we as believers are not exempt from the frustrations and blunders resulting from a walk through the gloom. There are for us, however, times of great spiritual lucidity where we not only find ourselves doing just the right thing, but also we know that we are doing the right thing.

These times of great spiritual enlightenment may come upon us most unexpectedly, as when Moses, having spent forty years in the obscurity of Midian, suddenly came upon the burning bush from which he was addressed by the Lord. Our God is kind and gracious to surprise us in these ways. But there are more ordinary and regular times and events from which we should expect the clouds of doubt and uncertainty to be swept from our vision.

Times of personal and family Bible study and prayer should be times in which the pall, having gradually fallen upon us due to our living in the world, is lifted. However, the times when the light of the Lord regularly shines most brightly for the saints is when they gather for public worship on the Lord's day. Even with our personal and family devotions we may find ourselves vexed by uncertainty, as we wonder whether we are pursuing such devotions at the right time of day, for the right length of time, and in the right spirit. These doubts should diminish with practice, yet if we consider the matter properly we should discover that it is our regular attendance upon the corporate means of grace enjoyed by the people of God each Sabbath which serves to guide and fuel our personal devotions, and not vice versa.

One of the most edifying aspects about our giving ourselves to worship on the Lord's day is that there is so little discretion afforded us which we are likely to misuse as we are inclined to do during the other days of the week. What I mean by this is simply that for any informed believer, there should be absolutely no question as to where he should be and what he should be doing on the Lord's day. As we go to the assembly of God's people on Sundays, whatever nagging questions we may have regarding how we have spent our time and energies prior to that day, we should know that we are on that day doing absolutely the

right thing. As we devote the day to the exercises of private, family, and corporate religion, we should find ourselves seeing in clearest light and feeling with most holy passions. Such experience is enhanced by our due preparation for and expectation of it.

The clear light of our Sabbaths does not, when we regularly walk and unreservedly revel in it, fade during the rest of the days of the week. That light which, through God's Word and Spirit, brought conviction, conversion, comfort, and encouragement to us as we took our right place in the Lords' house on His day, will continue to shine, vanquishing increasingly the shadows which obscure our daily living.

A fellow minister and I, while we were on our respective family vacations and were worshipping in a local church, were remarking over how the people stayed and fellowshiped for what seemed endless hours after the evening service. "The Lord's people do not like to see the Sabbath end," said my minister friend to me. To which I replied, "Why should we? The Sabbaths not only prepare us for the endless day of glory, but they are the brightest times of our pilgrimage through this dark vale of tears, being a true foretaste of when all shadows shall flee away."

Yours in growing light,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

Most people in our nation are driven by a spirit dedicated to winning. Whether it is an Olympic contest or a war in the Persian Gulf, we do not like to lose. Winners amongst us are admired, followed, and imitated. Amidst such triumphalism I would like to say something about the virtue of one's having a willingness to lose, and a gracious spirit in defeat.

It is too easy and quite wrong for Christians to assume and act like they are never to taste defeat and disappointment in their service for Christ. Not only do the health, wealth, and prosperity advocates crassly show this to be their assumption, but we all are tempted to want, to believe, to hope for triumph at every turn in the Lord's service. What we tend to forget or overlook is that our calling is not to prevail in might, but rather to stand for right. And in this fallen world, right can often appear to be a losing, if not lost, proposition.

If we want to win, as opposed to our being right, Satan provides many ready devices to enable us to achieve quick victories. He who is not bound by such scruples as telling the truth, and acting with equity and charity, can easily gain advantage over those whose fighting hands are tied by such scruples. Is not history—world and ecclesiastical—filled with accounts of cheaters who prosper?

We do well to realize several significant things about the triumphs of the wicked and the defeats of the righteous. Of first importance, we should understand that the victories of the wicked are only apparent and short-lived. In John's Apocalypse, they who rejoice over the death of the two witnesses do so ever so briefly, before their exultant cries are turned into shrieks of anguish (Rev. 11:1-13). They who stand against Stephen, the first Christian martyr, learn soon enough that Christ was standing for His man and against them and the nation they had perverted (Acts 7:54-56). Saul learned this lesson sooner and as a subject of redeeming grace (Acts 9:3-6); most of the other Jews learned it irredeemably in 70 A.D. when their nation and temple were destroyed by the Romans.

The quick victories of the wicked prove hollow and short-lived. We should not envy them such counterfeit triumphs. Nor should we despise or be ashamed of our defeats and setbacks in Christ. For one thing, the God who causes all things to serve for our good (Rom. 8:28), demonstrates repeatedly that what initially may appear to be painful defeats for His children, ultimately prove to be glorious victories, yielding more and greater fruit than what we had anticipated through the victory which we planned and pursued. Think of Paul and Silas in Philippi (Acts 16:11-40). If the victorious joys of the wicked are hollow and short-lived, the pains and ignominy of the defeats of the righteous are also short-lived; but instead of their being hollow, they are productive of good and of glory (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

The reality is that the truth in which we stand in Christ is infinitely more substantial than, and absolutely victorious over, the lies and deceit which are the stock and trade tactics employed by the wicked. The truth can be betrayed, ambushed, arrested, tried in rigged proceedings, sentenced, mocked, abused, crucified—and it will rise again all the more glorious for its encounter with such evil treatment. Those who stand for the truth may confidently expect similarly to be mistreated and thrust into initial defeat and death, but soon thereafter to be raised in glorious resurrections. This is the way our Master, who is the living Truth, went, and there is no other way to true, virtuous, glorious, and lasting victory.

The hymnwriter, Frederick William Faber, expresses this truth in these words:

Then learn to scorn the praise of men,

And learn to lose with God;

For Jesus won the world through shame,

And beckons thee His road.

It is a vital truth necessary for us to grasp. Otherwise, we shall be timid, rather than bold, in our testimony for Christ, and we shall shun engagements with the wicked, being fearful that we should lose, and counting our own nervous peace better than a manly and faithful death, we shall sacrifice the truth to court the favor of perishing men. Or worse—we may adopt the tactics of the world to win at all costs. Better to lose with God, who brings glorious resurrection out of ignominious death, than to win without Him.

Many times in the courts of the Church I hear men lament their losing godly motions and overtures. What many fail to see is that although such right proposals may often initially lose, their substance begins eventually to show in the life of the Church at large. Oh, that we may have more men willing so to lose their proposals, so that the truth stated in them may be planted and spring to life, even in those who think they have triumphed over it!

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

Part of our calling in Christ is that we stimulate one another to love and good works. We read about this responsibility in some rather familiar verses in the letter to the Hebrews: "...and let us consider how to 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." (Heb. 10:24,25). Too frequently these verses are quoted as a maxim requiring believers to attend church meetings. While it is true that we are obligated by the scriptural exhortation to commit ourselves to the corporate gatherings of the body of Christ, we are not simply ordered to muster dutiously in formation. Rather, we are called together in order to partake of and contribute to affectionate blessing.

The context in the Hebrews verses calling for corporate gatherings is the mutual stimulation of love and good deeds. While it is true that in our worship we are not primarily gathered for that purpose, it is equally true that this secondary aspect of mutual love is most greatly advanced in our corporate worship. Does this mean that we are loveless grouches, who by our obeying the biblical injunction to gather for worship are thereby transformed into loving, caring members of the family of faith? The answer is more complex than what such a question presupposes. It is undeniable that nothing teaches and empowers us to love like our worship of our redeeming God. As our hearts and minds are fixed on the Lord--who mercifully regarded us in our sin, bondage, and misery, and lovingly gave Himself to deliver us from our woes--we are instructed in the nature of true love and empowered in its performance.

However, once love ignites in our hearts, it should burn not only on, but beyond our Sabbaths together in worship. Here the dynamic aspect of our worship comes into view. We love because Christ first loved us. We gratefully gather to worship the Lord who so loved us. But as we become ever more knowing and practiced in the blessed art of love, we serve to enhance the blessing of our gatherings and our fellowship because we come together as respectively sweet and serving members of the body of Christ, who delight in one another's affectionate regard. Neither does the fact that we increasingly delight in the love we have for each other distract us from our love for Christ or His love for us, nor does it diminish our love for the Savior or our apprehension of His love for us. Such mutual consolation of love in a fellowship is fully in accord with our encouragement in Christ (Phil. 2:1,2). Our love for one another is a fruit of Christ's love for us—a fruit which grows only so long as it rightly issues from its source.

But now a practical question is posed: How do we best stimulate one another to love and good works? Too often we try by way of our expectation for others to love, and by our giving one another exhortations to love. We can fall into the temptation of treating love as though it were transferred by expectation and

instruction, when, in fact, it is primarily transferred by action. There is an instructional dimension of love; but it also remains true that love is not so much taught as caught.

Therefore, we are exhorted in Hebrews 10:24 to stimulate one another to love and *good deeds*. The attitude and action of love must go together. Here, again, let us consider our source of love, namely, Christ in the gospel. We should understand that the gospel is not an instructional manual, telling us and teaching us about God and His love. It is rather a clarion declaration of the demonstration of God's love. At the heart of the gospel we find not the words of our Lord professing His love, but the works of our Lord providing His love.

With our understanding this, we hold the key to how we stimulate one another in love. It is not by our talking about love—though we should articulate the affectionate attitude of our hearts—it is by our acting on the attitude of love. We best stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not by our instructing and exhorting others to be more loving, but by our being ourselves more loving and serving in the body of Christ.

By our loving others in word and deed, we shall serve to bless them. Whether or not those so blessed by our love respond immediately by giving their own in return, our Lord, the source of love, will not fail to bless those exercising His love. In truth, our fellow believers do not tend to resist the exercise of love or refuse to reciprocate it. It is more the rule than the exception that our overtures of love to others awaken love in them, which they, in turn demonstrate in affectionate and grateful deeds for us and others.

Love does not grow by our withholding it and hoping for it to come to us; it grows by our giving it to others. Such a rule is already evident in our fellowship. May it grow ever more evident as we continue lovingly to serve one another, and thus stimulate the increased blossoming of the precious, satisfying, and attractive love of Christ in our midst.

With deepest affection,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

My dear brother, Alistair Malcolm, pastor of the West Parish Church in Inverness, Scotland, has written to his congregation in his March *Congregational Record* an excellent and timely letter. With his kind permission, I share it with you now in our own *Record*:

BELONGING AND BELIEVING

Dear Friends,

In recent years there has been much said and written about the need for churches to be friendly and welcoming. I agree completely. It is sad if not disgraceful that visitors to any Christian service of worship should be ignored, far less that they should have to move their seat three times before they were not told, "You're sitting in my seat". (Yes, I do know of a person who had to move three times! What a welcome for someone who was not even a Christian at that stage of their life).

This much-repeated call for friendly and welcoming churches has been extended to include the need for what we do and how we express ourselves in worship to be clear, relevant and easily understood by "outsiders". The argument is that if we strive for this, people will hear the claims of Jesus in language and idioms with which they are comfortable, and so are much more likely to respond in faith and repentance. Again, I agree, although with some reservation because linguistic clarity and idiomatic familiarity are useless without the biblical preaching and the work of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless I am sure we are all fully in sympathy with the intention of this call for welcoming and friendly churches where the message and the worship are easily understood.

However, the search for welcoming churches and relevant worship has become obsessive and silly in some instances. The call for "user friendly, low-charge" services has, sadly, led to banalities replacing Bible, meretricious jingles replacing music and an iconoclastic attitude to anything, however true and good, if it is not bang-up-to-the-minute nineties material! That does not worry me. This too will pass. Already there are signs of a sensible reaction, as over-simplification is being more accurately called "dumbing down".

What does concern me is a possible shift in priorities that is coming in with this legitimate call for clarity and friendliness. This shift is made possible by the present widespread use of small group meetings for outreach or to train in discipleship or the like. Before I go any further let me make it clear that I am not opposed to working in groups or to programmes and courses set up for specific purposes. I have used them in the past and it is likely that I will use them again in the future. But, as we said recently (*Record*, Sept. 1997), these things make good servants but bad masters. They should never take over the life of a congregation nor ever replace or devalue all-member worship, teaching and prayer.

Put together the emphasis on welcoming congregations whose services are comfortable for people coming in, with the benefits of a small group which is more readily able to befriend and support its individual members, and you may see the shift in priorities that I am concerned about.

What I mean is that the focus moves from believing to belonging. People come into a congregation where they feel welcome and comfortable. They are slotted in to a group where they feel supported and valued. This is a worthy, even an excellent thing to achieve for newcomers to the church, but it is dangerously wrong if it becomes the end in itself so that fellowship replaces faith and belonging replaces believing!

The crucial need is not to be accepted by others but to be forgiven by God. Whatever the cost, we must be faithful in presenting the absolute necessity of coming to a personal and saving faith in Jesus Christ. The Philippian jailer was not told to "belong, and you will be saved" but to "believe

in the Lord Jesus"! It would be a tragic failure to fill pews with people who feel comfortable and welcome in the church and who are being genuinely helped and encouraged by the loving support offered to them, but who never come to faith and repentance, and are not saved.

Of course, the choice is not between the one and the other. The choice is not between being a welcoming and caring congregation whose members are never challenged by the message of the gospel, or being a cold and obscurantist bunch of people locked in a time warp, who uphold Biblical truth but never show genuine love to a single lost soul. Where the Word of God is honoured and the gospel of Christ proclaimed, the love of Jesus must be shared. The two belong together. Who would not agree with this? However, that is not the point. The point is that today's danger is of anaesthetising people into thinking that they believe because they feel that they belong. It is a matter of wrong priority.

In any case, we only truly belong when we do believe. We only truly belong to each other when we belong to Christ. Only in Him are we one. He is the Vine, we are the branches. Apart from Him we can do nothing. The Saviour's command is to abide in Him.

Yours sincerely,

ALISTAIR MALCOLM.

And likewise yours with gratitude for the challenge,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

Pity is a word connoting a sort of ambiguous emotion for most people. When one pities another, the pitying one feels sympathetic sorrow for the other's suffering. Yet, at the same time, there is often a sense of contempt which accompanies such sorrow, as the sufferer is deemed weak, inferior, or somehow deserving of the suffering. For this reason, pity is not usually thought of as a virtue, but more as a mixed emotion. Yet, pity is a rather pure virtue. In fact, it comes from the same Latin word from which we derive the term piety.

It is a virtue for one to feel sorrow for his suffering fellow man. With pity there are related virtues such as sympathy, compassion, condolence, and helping consideration. Pity is our appropriate first response when we perceive that others are hurting. It is a function of love that we take pity upon those who are suffering, even if they have brought the suffering upon themselves. We are to go so far as pitying our enemies. Even when our enemies fall, Scripture cautions us not to rejoice, lest our Lord see it as the callous, vindictive response that such rejoicing would be, and relent from His judicial providence with respect to our enemies (Prov. 24:17,18).

As with all virtues, pity has its source in our God. He who could justly have beheld us in our sinful rebellion and left us to endure our consequent misery, instead pitied us and determined to deliver us from our sin and its woes. That is why our Lord is so grieved when His children, who have enjoyed the precious blessing of divine mercy, fail to exercise it themselves. Think of the parable of the unmerciful servant (Mt. 18:21-35). Those who behold the suffering of others, and yet remain themselves unmoved by the spectacle, demonstrate more affinity with the one who has been a liar and murderer from the beginning (Jn. 8:44), than with the God of merciful pity, holy compassion, and redeeming love.

We should notice, however, that pity, as with other virtues, is not immune from abuse. The worst abuse of pity is when it is misdirected from others to ourselves. Self-pity is no virtue; it is a vice. Especially is it a vice for those who name the name of Christ, who have tasted the mercy and benefited from the lovingkindness of the Lord. Why should ones so blessed of the Lord ever pity themselves?

Self-pity is a vice for several major reasons. First, it requires a misdirecting of one's powers of perception. One of the first things we learn in Christ is that our eyes and ears and mouths have been given to us by our God and re-created by our regeneration in Christ not so that we may use them only or even primarily for ourselves. We have eyes to see the needs of others; ears to hear their cries; mouths to speak kindly to them; feet to run to them; hands to serve them with practical help. Those who indulge in self-pity focus their perceptive powers upon themselves, thereby disabling themselves from perceiving the needs of others.

Related to this misdirecting of one's powers of perception is the misuse of the God-given capacity designed to foster community and charitable intimacy between men. The one who pities himself is not concerned with others, except in so far as they represent possible sources to succor him. What is this, if not a form of stealing? God gives us the power to pity so that by it we may succor others, yet by our indulgence in self-pity we rob others of that help and comfort we should be giving to them.

Self-pity is not only a wasteful misappropriation of a blessing intended for others, it never blesses the one indulging in it. Our pity, like our love, is designed to be given to others, not consumed by ourselves. Thus, whereas others are blessed when we rightly pity them, no one is less helped and more miserable than he who heaps his pity upon himself. Nothing dries up the milk of human kindness others may have for us faster than our self-pity. Nothing more quickly and thoroughly exorcises the spirit of pity from the breasts of others than when one is possessed with pity for himself. Self-pity is possibly the only form of human misery that fails to evoke pity from others.

Perhaps the most serious factor which renders self-pity a vice is that which pertains to what self-pity manifests regarding one's view of the pity, compassion, and saving love of the Lord. In essence, self-pity can be exercised only when one is at best ignorant or forgetful of, and at worst contemptuous of the pity which God has for His people. The seeds of self-pity germinate when we succumb to Satan's tempting suggestion that we should not endure the testing times ordained for us by our wise, holy, loving heavenly Father, but rather become our own providers. The enemy of our souls would have us live off of bread, not miraculously made from stones, but miserably extorted from others by our whining. Self-pity is nourished when we do not take our life from the Word of God, when we are not vitally nourished by and profoundly grateful for the broken body and shed blood of the Son of God, but rather, when we hunger for the things of this world.

The more one considers the vice of self-pity, the more wretched and loathsome one sees it to be. Let us therefore, knowing this, refuse to indulge so ugly, so fruitless, so wasteful, so sinful a vice. Instead, let us draw our comfort and joy and strength from the abundant lovingkindnesses of the Lord, as He ministers them to us by His Word and Spirit. Then let us employ our pity rightly, as a virtue to be exercised for the glory of God and good of others.

Yours in Christ's immeasurable compassion,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

I feel compelled to share some grim thoughts about a grim subject. We have recently been shocked and appalled at the news of young teenage boys shooting their classmates and teachers. One such incident is horrific enough, even if no one were seriously injured in it. However, there have been several such incidences recently, with multiple deaths and many serious woundings attending each. What is to be done to stop such tragedies?

Is the proliferation and easy availability of guns in our land the culprit which operates so pervasively and powerfully that even well-adjusted children fall prey to the temptation to release their stress and vent their frustrations by their blazing away at living targets? The easy availability of firearms undeniably has played a part. We doubt that the children who have done these deeds would have similarly vented their frustrations with knives or clubs had they been the only weapons available. There is something intoxicatingly powerful about a gun; there is, at the same time, something deceptively innocuous about the mere act of aiming and pulling a trigger--as if the murderous havoc wreaked is something consequentially removed from the person firing. While all of this is true, it is also true that we have had guns aplenty in this nation from its inception. Yet children shooting innocent masses of people is a contemporary phenomenon.

What is it, then, about modern society and in modern children, which leads ones so young in growing numbers to resort to such destructive behavior? I cannot resist linking these pubescent homicides with another form of destruction which has grown in frequency recently: teen suicide. Although destruction of others takes things a step further from self-destruction, it is only the objects which differ. The impulses which lead to such desperate acts can be quite similar.

I have repeatedly wondered not only why such young ones would do away with themselves or others, but, even moreso, why they would do it at this time in history. When world wars were being fought there were no such things as these manifestations of teenage destruction. Even when the world lay enshrouded in the dark cloud of the threat of communism and nuclear war, such crimes of adolescent destruction were rare. As soon as all threats foreign and domestic ceased, and as economic prosperity was on the rise, it seemed that our youth plunged into destructive behavior. Have the young ones largely lost their minds? Are they going berserk for no reason?

I believe that there are factors, far deeper and more powerful than the availability of guns, which are at work destroying our young ones. I am no sociologist, but even I can see how our culture has been transformed from the "Me generation" through "generation X" into the emerging generation of apparent nihilists. The common feature of all of these generations is that self is central.

Generations prior to the 1950's, though largely nominal in their Christianity, still retained a Christian consensus whereby one's serving a higher good of benefiting others was considered virtuous. The "Me generation" became largely self-absorbed. Its narcissistic and hedonistic impulses can be seen in everything from the national debt to the rise of abortion. Should such a generation, committed to killing many of its children before their birth, relegating the survivors largely to (un)caring professionals through their formative years, and robbing them of their material means in their latter years (cf., the raising of retirement age to 70 for those born after 1969) expect for their children to rise up and call them blessed?

"Generation X'ers" inherited their parents' selfishness, but I believe they sensed more than reasoned, that they were largely left with the gleanings of material idolatry, while they were deprived of any spiritual inheritance due to their parents' abandonment of true spiritual moorings. "X'ers" are stunned, bored, depressed. Their music is derivative, their clothing retro. Theirs is the generation of despondency at best, despair at worst. Hence, the increased suicides.

The rising generation appears to be going beyond despair into destructive determination. Their music is harsh and defiantly vulgar; their dress is black. Could it be that whereas the "generation X'ers" were

deluded into thinking their spiritual poverty was their own fault (hence, self-destruction), that the rising generation senses more accurately that someone has robbed them, and they are going to retaliate?

These are some of my grim thoughts regarding the current disturbing phenomena. They may be misguided, exaggerated, and erroneous. I hope so. But I do not believe so.

If I am even remotely right in my analysis, the current dark days will give way to blacker nights. With sin erupting in mortal manifestations within our land, what are the churches doing to counter it? Largely, the churches are reducing their services on the Lord's day, so that evening worship is an increasing rarity; they are reducing the length and diminishing the depth of their sermons, and filling their assemblies with elaborate instrumental music and superficial choruses; they are relegating pastoral oversight to small, practically autonomous home groups; they are increasingly devoid of corporate prayer. To me, all of this has about it the ring of spiritual hedonism--a sort of pandering to the dying "Me generation."

The true need is for more frequent gatherings of God's people for worship, with more frequent and more substantial sermons. Believers should gather together for prayer, crying to God for His mercy and power which alone can both subdue the wicked, and even convert them, transforming them from empty, despondent, destructive souls, to satisfied, joyful, servants and ministers of the love of Christ. Whatever others may think or do, I believe that prayer and the ministry of the Word remain our true hope, whether the world behaves mildly or madly. I trust that you share my belief, and that together we shall act on it so that, by the mercy of our Lord, we may live to see brighter, more blessed and blessing young ones yet being raised up to the glory of God.

Soberly yours,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

Boredom is an unpleasant experience for us all. While it is true that certain factors in our circumstances may give rise to boredom, it is not true that boredom is some sort of objective plague which comes upon us and before which we are helpless victims. Too often, when one declares that something is boring, he means that something is wrong with his environment, not with himself. Yet, boredom, like stress, is actually one's subjective reaction to his environment. Therefore, when a person says he is bored, he is actually declaring more about himself and his feelings than about his environment. Consider the example of two people attending a critically acclaimed French poet's reading of his own works. One person expresses genuine appreciation; the other says the experience was boring. The latter person is actually saying nothing about the quality of the poetry he has heard. But he is revealing about himself that at best he is ignorant of French, at worst, that he is a poetic Philistine.

Christians are not immune to boredom. Yet we, of all people, should recognize that the way for us to avoid it is usually not through a stimulating change of circumstances. By our seeking the Lord's grace, and by our exercising the gracious fruit of the Holy Spirit in all circumstances, we shall find ourselves wonderfully engaged in loving service or patient preparation for such service. These servant responses on our part glorify our Lord, and, since our enjoying Him naturally follows, we find ourselves becoming exhilarated and satisfyingly fulfilled through such service, rather than being bored.

Of course, I am not suggesting that we must never seek to change circumstances or situations we find tedious. What I am suggesting is that as a general rule, we should look to change our attitude. After all, in essence, boredom results from a concentration upon ourselves, rather than a humble, loving, and grateful concentration upon Christ and His people.

Many times, boredom is the bitter fruit issuing from our misconstruing and abusing those tranquil seasons our Lord provides for us to quiet our souls and concentrate ourselves upon Him in hope. The brief but blessed contentment psalm (Ps. 131) speaks of this. David, although a man exceedingly gifted and one who was called and equipped by God to rule as a king, testifies in that psalm that he had found contentment and hope in the Lord when he guarded his ambitions and quieted his soul before the Lord. He does not commend to us the way of distraction from such quiet times through stimulating activities. Indeed, the tranquil seasons--times which many, due to thoughtlessness, dread and avoid at all costs for fear that they breed nothing but boredom--are regularly employed by our Lord to bless and sanctify His servants. Moses was removed from the bustle of Pharaoh's court to the deserts of Midian. Paul spent fourteen years in Arabia, and the life of Jesus prior to the time of His baptism, appears to have been so tranquil and uneventful that nothing is recorded of it in God's Word, except for Christ's birth and His having been in the temple when He was twelve.

The choicest graces develop and the most precious blessings are often found through our exercise of humble contentment amidst those dry seasons which, apart from God's grace, would easily breed boredom. We learn such contentment as we find Christ to be our sufficient portion not only in abounding circumstances, but also in those abasing circumstances which we are tempted to think waste our time and our talents.

Our Lord Jesus was not only born in most humble circumstances, He lived His life and gave His life in such humility which He voluntarily assumed (Phil. 2:5-8). Accordingly, He was never bored or boring to others. For the nourishment of His life was to know and do His Father's will (Jn. 4:34). Jesus was not reluctant to spend a quiet night by Himself on a mountain, for in such a place He could give Himself without distraction to His Father in prayer. He was not loathe to do the quiet tasks, the dirty and humiliating labors which no one else would or could do. The result was not His confirmation in tedium or torture, but rather His exaltation to the highest place heaven affords.

We do ourselves great spiritual damage when we avoid quiet and solitary stretches of time, filling them with stimulating distractions so that we may avoid boredom. We must discipline ourselves, and help our brethren and our children to discipline themselves, to resist the temptation to fill slack and apparently empty time in our lives with the husks of worldly diversions. We must learn to view the less demanding and less busy periods of our lives not as voids in which we die of boredom, but as vats in which rich ingredients our God has wrought in us by His sanctifying grace ferment toward perfection. We may try to combat boredom with stimulating activities, but we shall do so at the high price of character development. The true antidotes to boredom are those rare related jewels of Christian contentment and humility, which enrich and empower us and fill us with gratitude and joy.

Yours contentedly in Christ,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

The Scriptures exhort us to work out our salvation (Phil. 2:12). We are, by this exhortation, not commanded to work in order to be saved, but rather to work because we are saved. This is a vital distinction. The call to work does not in any way militate against that blessed divine grace by which we are saved. In fact, our working is a fruit of God's working in us to will and to do His good pleasure.

As the biblical teaching on work can be perverted into legalistic drudgery, so the teaching on grace can be perverted into an indolent complacency. Both perversions are deadly to our souls.

With respect to the summons for us to work, it is most instructive when we observe how consistent the Word of God is in its condemnation of indolence and its commendation of diligence. The Book of Proverbs most amply presents this consistency. We should therefore take it as an absolute rule that there is no such thing as a lazy, obedient Christian. Yet, we do well to bear in mind that there are both counterfeits and substitutes for the sort of holy work to which our Lord calls us. These counterproductive distractions from our duty and drains upon our energies must be carefully identified and avoided.

One counterfeit for true spiritual work is a ceaseless activism which confuses mere movement with progress. This counterfeit fails to incorporate the exercise of a principled patience, which, to the undiscerning, may appear as apathetic inactivity. True spiritual work contains rhythms of exertion and rest, of action and waiting. We reduce the efficiency of our work if we fail to perceive and respect those seasons which demand our own refreshment or call for the patient observation of ripening factors.

Another counterfeit for spiritual work is that work which sets trivial goals instead of aiming at the highest and best. Here the object is not one's apprehension of the truly lasting, precious, and transcendent, but rather a shallow and transient gratification which one experiences in meeting the easily attainable. Such working undermines the development of endurance and perseverance--qualities essential if we are to scale the greatest heights of Zion.

Related to the counterfeits for our spiritual work are substitutes, which do not really resemble that working to which we are called, but which, nevertheless, we are tempted to employ in place of true spiritual industry. For example, it is easy for us to substitute desire for deeds, or wishing for working. Self-centered wishing is the intoxicant of the spiritual sluggard. It awakens in him a craving which he mistakes to be prophetic of the fulfillment of his desire. It blinds spiritual vision, shunts effectual prayers--as the wisher fancies that God's omniscient awareness of his wishes constitutes a form of praying--and paralyzes resolute and diligent action. Wishing does not make anything so. It neither does good, nor, since it undermines productive thought and action, can it be deemed harmless fun.

Worry is another substitute for work. With worry, there is a fearful and somewhat resentful anticipation of failure or rejection. The one who worries does not have ears to hear the clear commands of God, nor does he have faith to appropriate the empowering grace of the Lord. Instead of his hearing and heeding the great, precious, and potent promises of God's Word, the man who cultivates anxiety asks a single, rhetorical question: *Why try?* Yet, the worrier thinks he is working hard. Indeed, there is no denying that he wearies himself in his expenditure of vast amounts of energy, trying to avoid and justify to himself and others his avoidance of endeavor which he deems useless and doomed.

Related to the worrier is the whiner. Whereas the worrier broods over his complaints, the whiner ceaselessly publishes his. Here, though, we must be careful to distinguish the legitimate by-product of spiritual work from the illegitimate substitute for such work. The Scriptures are replete with saints crying out in pain and anguish. The Psalms are especially full of what may appear as whining. Yet, the Word of God commends to us those productive cries which are rightly directed to the Lord. Part of our spiritual work is precisely that we learn to cast our burdens upon the Lord and strive to enter His rest. But whiners

do not really direct their cries to the Lord; rather, they fill the ears of men with moans designed to arouse human sympathy and to marshal others to do the whiner's work.

For the present consideration, a final substitute for work may be stated as weariness. We are all at times tempted to think that because we are hard-pressed and tired, we are excused from those exertions incumbent upon the working out of our salvation. With this temptation, the best thing we can do is remind ourselves that weariness does not equal death, nor does work pursued in a weary state bring on death. In fact, we are told plainly not to grow weary in doing good, but to press on with faithful service, knowing that in due course we shall reap the fruit of our labors.

The kind of work we are called to do is not primarily for a paycheck, for the approving affirmations of men, or for immediate self-gratification. What our hands find to do, we are to do with all of our might, because our work is to be for the Lord, in accordance with the direction of His Word, by the power of His Spirit, and we are to look for our reward from Him. By such working, we actualize our salvation, being ourselves increasingly conformed to the image of Christ. The product of such character development results not always from the success of our plans and projects. We are likely to find that, more than through such successes, we are sanctified through our whole-hearted attempts which yield failure in this life, only to provide seed from which glory shall result in the next. For us to work in this way calls for nothing less than our faithful, vital, and consistent application of the enlightening truth and empowering grace of God, supplies which our loving Lord provides inexhaustibly.

Yours resisting indolence and pursuing diligence,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

It is remarkable that humor plays so prominent a place in the pulpit and ministries of so many churches in our day, when there is no record in the Word of God of Jesus or His apostles ever laughing. Indeed, when we consult the various sermons recorded in Scripture (most being in Acts), we find not a single joke; nor do we find illustrations drawn out, except those taken from Scripture itself. Why are the biblical saints so serious, so reverent, while we modern believers suspect and shy away from anything that is not humorous or plainly helpful in giving us a sense of immediate gratification? Perhaps we would like to think that we have progressed beyond the Church fathers in our theological understanding, so that today we experience spontaneous and refreshing joy in the Lord, where the fathers may have been too stuck on the matter of sin.

Is all of the glibness and gaiety of our modern Church issuing from the joy of the Lord? We may answer that it is if and only if it is all rooted in the death and resurrection of Christ. If it were truly rooted in and issuing from our Redeemer's saving work, this so-called joy would not shy from or conflict with the other elements of the Person and work of Christ. Such things as conviction of sin, the righteousness of God, the divine majesty and final judgement, or cross-bearing and rendering of costly ministry to each other and diligent, lovingly sacrificial service for the Lord will all comport with true joy in the Lord. Yet such things kill that which many today would call joy.

Because of this, I believe that our modern obsession with fun issues from something other than the Christ of Scripture and the whole counsel of His gospel. For one thing, modern, secular man has become much more concerned with his own feelings than with objective facts. This shift of concern from the realm of the objective to that of the subjective has had an impact upon the Church. Therefore, the gospel is frequently by many believers conceived of in terms of an uplifting message surrounded by pleasant music and engaging sights. It is insisted that its impact must be immediate and positive as far as one's feelings are concerned. But the mind and one's entire character are left largely untouched.

For those who replace faith with feelings, the object of such feelings, though it may be termed the Lord Jesus Christ, is far from the Christ of fact and of Scripture. There is today the sentimental Jesus, who is soft, frail, effete. With this Jesus, meekness issues from weakness rather than the voluntary condescension of strength; humility issues from a simple mind which is incapable of high conception, endeavor, and accomplishment. However, this sentimental Jesus is, in fact, an idol, not the incarnate Son of God. The true Savior is most merciful, tender, and sympathetic; but He also cleansed a corrupt temple, caused soldiers to fall at His word, spoke castigatingly to hypocrites and plainly of hell, and died on a rough, cruel cross so that we might live. It is only through our having saving faith in this true and living Christ that we have life and joy and peace.

Those who insist upon the primacy of feelings over faith and who proclaim the sentimental over the saving Christ have more affinity with the enemies of the gospel than with its friends. They serve—perhaps unwittingly, but nonetheless surely—to entice people away from the facts of sin and salvation, and to confirm them by means of euphoric feelings in a lost state which is undeniably real and which shall inexorably produce inescapable misery.

The sentimental Christ saves no one. This is so because such a Christ is a figment of men's sentimental imagination, a soother of feelings, a charm incapable of touching objective reality because it lacks reality itself. Amidst this widespread fascination with feelings and fabrication of a sentimental savior, we are called to embrace by faith and faithfully to proclaim the true Christ. He is not a mere inspirer of feelings, but an infinitely powerful Savior and Lord. He made the world, upholds it by the word of His power, entered it as the God/man to save His people, and shall judge the world on the final day. This sovereign Savior may seem like exceedingly strong medicine for modern man to swallow. His gospel may seem not good news, but a gloomy contradiction of man's sweetly spun fantasies. But feel it or not, the plight of sinners in fact is so dire that salvation from it requires nothing less, nothing other than the whole Christ

Jesus as He is presented in Scripture. Though this Christ may be in our day largely out of season, let us understand that it is the season, not the Savior, which needs to change.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

I have been committed to a major home project this summer. On my days off and during odd spare hours I have been building a wooden fence around our back yard. Such physical work—notwithstanding all the painful effort, sweat, and grime involved in it—has been quite rewarding and instructive. It is also gratifying, since work with physical materials tends to be relatively straightforward, and one can see progress made at the end of the day. It is usually quite different with the spiritual work of the pastorate. People are much more complicated and unpredictable than are building materials. Additionally, progress in spiritual work is usually difficult to judge, especially since what often looks initially like failures can only be seen in the long haul to have been essential stepping stones to ultimate success.

One of the lessons I learned during the fence building project was rather surprising, and I thought that it would be beneficial if I shared it with you. As I was drawing up plans, choosing materials, finding places to buy good quality wood at fair prices, and, finally beginning the construction work, I became aware of fences all around me. I learned which designs were good, which were poor; where to buy wood, where to avoid buying; and what professional companies built good fences and which companies built poor ones. The last mentioned lesson was learned rather quickly. One company's name was repeatedly on the fences to which I was drawn as I haunted those fences having a design or material which struck my fancy. I am not very creative, so I studied and tried to copy the best models I could find.

This brings me to the point I want to share. When the time came for me to purchase hinge materials for the gates, I knew what I wanted, for I had seen hinges of superior quality on all of the fences made by the outstanding company I have mentioned. The problem was, I could not find that type of hinge in any of the hardware and do-it-yourself stores where I was buying materials. I finally called that elite fence company to see if they would sell me hinge assemblies. They agreed to do so, and I made the rather long trip to where the company is located to make the purchase.

As I was driving to that company with directions supplied by them and a fair knowledge of the general area where they are located, I found myself assuming that I would see a large, modern, well advertised, and easily accessible building when I arrived. However, when I reached the terminus of my directions I saw no evidence of the fence company. I stopped in another business in the vicinity to ask if they could direct me to the place. To my amazement, I was pointed down a gravel road—hardly more than a large path—and finally came upon a building of most modest dimensions, construction materials, and design. I entered no glamorous showroom, but a tiny office where two men worked at old desks with archaic office equipment.

When I said who I was and that I had come for the hinges, I was led by one man into the back work area, which was small, as well, and contained just two other men making

ornamental wooden designs as accents for their fences. I began to wonder if I had come to the right place, until the man helping me pulled out the hinge assemblies I so prized and handed them to me.

The whole experience was so contrary to my expectation that I had to seek an explanation from the man helping me as he wrote up my ticket for the purchase. So I told him of my surprise at finding perhaps the top quality area fence building company housed in such a humble facility. He remarked that it was their commitment to put their effort and expense into the product they built, rather than in their building. "After all," he said, "We would rather have you impressed with our product, which is for you to enjoy for years at your home, than have you enjoy one or two visits to our place of business."

As I drove home it occurred to me that what I had just seen was a model of what the church should be. We should put our efforts into forming Christ in the hearts of men, women, and children (Gal. 4:19, Col. 1:28,29). We should focus all efforts on the formation of Christian character—who people are and shall be at all times and for all time—instead of trying to create pleasing occasional experiences for believers and inquirers. Our impact on the world should be through who we are, and where we, as believers, live and work. When we build great edifices and conduct elaborate programs, all in an effort to draw people's attention, we succeed only in drawing men's attention to ourselves, to our building, to our productions, but not to the Lord Jesus. Yet, when we gather according to the simple, yet life-transforming, means of grace instituted by our Lord, we are not just pleasantly diverted for a few hours while we are gathered. We are edified and we go to our homes and our work places shining in attitude and action for the glory of Christ.

By the Lord's grace, we have become such a church. We have a relatively small membership, and our facilities are functional, but by no means plush. Yet it has pleased God to bring the lost to faith and to build up believers through our worship and service. Our commitment to a serious, in-depth ministry of the Word and prayer has paid rich dividends in making us a people of noted high spiritual quality. Many of our members who have transferred to other locations and joined other churches serve there in significant and fruitful leadership positions, while a good and growing number of such testify that their time with us was deeply formative and a high watermark in their spiritual pilgrimage.

We all at times get discouraged because our numbers remain small, our ministry simple, and our facility modest. But we do well to remember that it is not the design of the Savior to gather us into holy huddles, so much as to fill our hearts with zeal, our heads with wisdom and knowledge of His truth, and to send us into the world to be salt and light for Him. I am exceedingly privileged to be a part of such a choice work and people of the Lord as we have at Immanuel. I trust that you are conscious of the privilege, too.

In His Service,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

Our Lord tells us in His Word that we should ever be ready to make a defense to everyone who asks us to give an account for the hope that is in us (1 Pet. 3:15). Such an instruction is not limited to pastors, theologians, or apologists. It is expected that anyone in whom there is the hope of salvation will have opportunities and should be prepared adequately to share the gospel.

Since this is the case, we do well ever to be prepared to give such an account. May it never be with any of us as it was with the young marine who, during a battle in World War II, was asked by his mortally wounded friend how to have peace with God, only to find that he did not know what to say. What would each one of us reply in a similar situation? We may, in fact, be in such situations more often than we realize. Not all of our friends, associates, fellow workers, neighbors, and casual acquaintances with whom we have daily contact, will live to the point where we feel comfortable and ready to share our faith with them. If we have ears to hear, we may perceive that some of them are asking in various ways the question posed by the dying marine. Even if they will live for many years hence, we dare not presume so.

In addition to our responsibility to share Christ with those who inquire regarding our hope, we should understand that this instruction for us to be ready to give reasons for our faith is as much for our own benefit as for others. There are times when the things people say and do, and what we experience and feel—whether painful suffering or pleasure and delight unconnected with our faith (sin's seasonal pleasures)—challenge us with respect to our faith. The couple tempted to violate the seventh commandment may reason that if what they feel for each other is so pleasurable, then it cannot be wrong. The faithful and pious soul afflicted with painful trials may wonder, in view of the divine love, wisdom, and might, why he is allowed so to suffer. Such tempted saints need right reasons to sustain their challenged faith and hope.

An adequate account for our faith and hope in Christ consists not of our expressing personal feelings, nor of our stating intellectual propositions, even be such propositions true. Our telling must contain both warmth and light; holy passion as well as heavenly principles. That is why our Lord tells us that our fulfillment of the commandment rightly to love our neighbor depends upon our loving the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength (Mk. 12:30). We are physical and spiritual, intellectual and emotional. The gospel appeals and applies to all of our being. The Bible, accordingly, contains divine communication which touches every component of our being. In the Word of God, there is historical narrative, which excites our hearts and instructs our minds, song and poetry, which strongly touch the heart while also filling the head, doctrinal instruction, which strongly fills the head, but also warms the heart, and prophecies and apocalyptic visions which are ablaze with both light and heat. If we are feeding rightly upon the whole counsel of God, a balanced and effective account for our hope will always be at the ready.

Should we, in our accounting for our faith, emphasize too much the intellectual or the emotional, each one threatening to snuff out the other, we shall find that we succeed neither in bringing others to Christ, nor in keeping ourselves faithful to Him. We shall instead be endeavoring only to tear asunder in ourselves and in others what God has joined together—heart and head.

The gospel is reasonable. Not all of it can be proved by reason, but much of it can be so proved, and none of it can be disproved by reason. Our hope in Christ is essentially suprarational, meaning, beyond but not contrary to the rational. Therefore, the good news of salvation in Christ has engaged, exercised, and satisfied the world's greatest intellects, without, by doing so, baffling the intellect of children.

Yet the gospel is not only true and rationally coherent. It is food for the soul, satisfying to the heart, morally excellent, and aesthetically beautiful. If the hope within us is merely a set of true principles intellectually apprehended, we are poor indeed, and are most to be pitied. The hope within us is more than propositions about Christ. It is personal communion in holy love with Christ Himself. Let us, then, neither allow our

minds to grow dim nor allow our hearts to grow dull with respect to our Savior and His ordinances. Then we shall keep strong our own gratitude and faithfulness to the Lord. Then, also, we shall shine with the persuasive power of truth and the attractive power of love.

Yours in the truth and love of Christ,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

Two months ago I wrote about an insight I gathered through a summer fence building project. A number of you expressed appreciation for that letter, and some asked whether I had similar insights to share from other projects or activities. In response, I now write to tell you of something which has always intrigued me, and which has been useful to me in my pilgrimage. I refer to how we travel in the dark. We all can relate to the experience when we contrast the difference between our driving a car in daylight and in darkness. But in particular, I intend to draw from a hobby of mine to point up the contrast more fully.

The hobby of which I speak is fishing—one not altogether foreign to students of the Bible. Most of my fishing I do in the Chesapeake Bay from my small boat. Things such as free time available, weather conditions, tides, temperature, time of year, and fish species targeted dictate when I fish. These varying factors have resulted in my having been on the water in bright daylight and in blackest night. What most people do not realize, however, is that driving a boat is dissimilar from driving a car in many ways, especially at night. The most notable difference is that boats do not have headlights, as do cars, and so one must learn to exercise true night vision if he is to navigate after sundown.

Night vision is the ability to see in the dark. We all have it, though it takes some training for one to discover and effectively use it. For most people, the thought of being in a boat on a large body of water in the dark is frightening. They fear that neither they nor anyone else on the water will be able to see so as to maneuver safely. Most people thusly mistake darkness for blindness. The fact is that it is never so dark at night that we cannot see. The darkness may reduce visibility so that we cannot perceive all the things we can in daylight. Yet our eyes adjust to pick up the traces of natural and man-made light available, thus enabling us to see sufficiently to move safely.

There may be some physiological basis for those who have poor night vision, but I am inclined to believe that a psychological factor contributes to poor night vision. There are people who feel endangered when their visibility is reduced, even though it may still be operative at a sufficient level. In the darkness I have experienced on the water, I have had to learn to search for and trustingly follow hints, traces, and outlines of things, which are all sufficient to tell me what and where things are. I grant that movement guided by traces is not as easy as movement in the full light. But what is one to do, not move at all unless there is perfect daylight?

The insight I have gathered from my exercise of night vision is that we should understand our pilgrimage through this life to the celestial city to require the exercise of faith, which is a way of our apprehending things far different from our so apprehending them by sight. We live in a dark world. This does not mean only that sinful men in the world are blind, but also that due to the divine curse upon the world, the light of God has been somewhat withdrawn from it. Now we do not and cannot know except in part. We do not perceive fully anything or anyone—not our world or the things and people in it, not our minds and hearts, and least of all do we fully perceive God. Even when we are converted, and find that we have by God's grace been given new, spiritual eyes, it takes us a lifetime to learn to use those eyes rightly. For even with spiritual eyes fully open and operative in this life all we shall see are outlines and traces of our God and His handiwork. Though we may be redeemed and regenerated, we live out our new life in this old world darkened by man's fall and God's curse.

As night vision rightly reads and reacts to the hints and traces of diminished light, so faith rightly looks for, perceives, and acts upon not the fullness and perfection of divine glory, but the glimmers of young glory marking the believer's way through this dark world. Such glimmering young glory we call grace. We rightly long for the fullness of glory—the bright, clear light of that endless and perfect day yet to come. But while we are in this dark world, we are given by our God great and precious promises, tokens of divine favor, administrations of our heavenly Father's wisdom, love, and power which are—though less than the fullness of that glory to which we are destined—more than sufficient to guide each and every step of our

pilgrimage through this world. So let us grow in our understanding of how to exercise that faith which is the night vision of our souls in this darkened life. And let us progress by grace accordingly.

Yours in the growing light of the Lord,

William Harrell