

Congregational killers

David B. Jones

The Lord's church is expected by heaven to be alive and growing. The apostle Peter exhorted babes in Christ: ***"As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby:" -- 1 Pet 2:2.*** If a newborn is not growing, it is dying. Anyone who is not growing is dying. Any congregation which is not growing is dying. There are various ways to test to see if a congregation is growing. Many only look to the attendance and contribution. It is possible to have both of these advancing and a congregation be dying, because the truth is not taught there. Criticism is often leveled by larger congregations against smaller ones because the smaller ones are not large. It is possible for a small congregation to grow in spirituality and maturity, but the attendance not grow as rapidly. Of course, let us quickly add, there comes a time that, that small congregation will begin to grow numerically as a natural result of growing spiritually. As Christians mature, their concern for the lost will increase, and they will naturally (as a result of growing in Christ) reach out with conviction and compassion. However, the larger congregation could leave the truth, which would cause it to begin to die at that very point. The numbers at the larger congregation (general factor in popular opinion of growth) may stay good because they only "pat people on the back," and "make them feel good about being lost!"

While the Lord anticipates His body growing, His adversary, the Devil, agonizes over the growth. Satan will do all he can to thwart the growth by implementing killers which will cause a congregation to cease growing, thereby, beginning the process, resulting in death. We will examine some of these "congregational killers" and notice the answer to them.

incompetent and inattentive leadership

God has always demanded good and godly leadership for His people. Before the Law of Moses, He expected the heads of the families to provide the spiritual feeding for the family. They were to hand down the law to their families. They sacrificed for their families. God then chose Moses to lead His people out of Egypt. At Mount Sinai God made a covenant with Israel: ***"The LORD our God made a covenant with us in Horeb." -- Deu 5:2.*** In that Law God made provisions for there to be leaders who watched for and warned His flock. They are called shepherds in various places. Notice what God said relative to their leaders: ***"My people hath been lost sheep: their shepherds have caused them to go astray, they have turned them away on the mountains: they have gone from mountain to hill, they have forgotten their restingplace." -- Jer 50:6..... "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD unto the shepherds; Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! should not the shepherds feed the flocks?" -- Ezek 34:2.*** The shepherds did not watch the flock and they were scattered in captivity because of sin. The leaders are also called pastors: ***"And I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding." -- Jer 3:15..... "For the pastors are become brutish, and have not sought the LORD: therefore they shall not prosper, and all their flocks shall be scattered." -- Jer 10:21..... "Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! saith the***

LORD. Therefore thus saith the LORD God of Israel against the pastors that feed my people; Ye have scattered my flock, and driven them away, and have not visited them: behold, I will visit upon you the evil of your doings, saith the LORD." -- Jer 23:1-2. The term "pastors" simply implied those who fed or were to feed the flock of God. Physically, there were flocks watched by shepherds who provided food for and protected the flocks from the wolves and bears. Spiritually, there were to be shepherds and pastors who watched and warned the people of God.

Today God has also set leaders over His people. They are called elders, pastors, bishops, overseers and shepherds. Notice two major texts which reveal much about these men and their work: **"And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church.... Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." -- Acts 20:17,28....."The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away." -- 1 Pet 5:1-4.** Notice in these texts the various terms for leaders are used. Paul and Peter taught exactly the same thing as they wrote to those mature in the faith (elders), who had the oversight (overseers) and they were to feed (pastors) the flock.

The problem in many congregations today is the lack of godly leaders. In the place of that, many congregations have incompetent and inattentive leadership. Far too many are concerned more with power and prestige than with the people of God. Many are too afraid to stand for anything, hence they fall for everything. The leaders of God today are to watch for the souls of the people: **"Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you." -- Heb 13:17.** They are to stop the mouths of the false teachers: **"Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers. For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake." -- Titus 1:9-11.** In order to do so they must revere the word of God, receive the word of God and respect the word of God enough to expedite its commands. The killing problem in many places is the lack of this type of leadership. These type leaders must have a compassion for people, concern for the lost and conviction about truth. They cannot allow compromise to enter the equation. They must not fear or favor man over God. Where you have leadership which loves God, loves mankind and longs to carry out the word of God, you will have a congregation which grows and lives. Where you have no leadership, you have congregations which will perish: **"Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he." -- Prov 29:18.**

Let us say quickly that there are congregations which, for one reason or another, have no men at certain times qualified to serve. What should these congregations do? They should work toward the goal of having elders and press on toward that mark, serving God to the best of their abilities. Does this mean these are not growing? No, but obviously they will not grow as much as they could if they had the leadership God designed.

Weak and “watered-down” pulpits

Hand in hand with the lack of leadership, goes the killer known as weak preaching. God has chosen the preaching of the gospel as the means to convey His saving gospel to the world: ***"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek." -- Rom 1:16.... "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.....For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." -- 1 Cor 1:18,21.*** Thus, it is the word of God which produces the faith it takes to save man: ***"So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." -- Rom 10:17.*** If there is an absence of sound, solid preaching, then the congregation will cease to grow because it ceases to be fed the diet which causes spiritual growth.

The absence of true gospel preaching may take a little while to bear fruit. However, over a period of time, it will cause the ugly heads of compromise and division to rear themselves. Gospel preachers and godly elders will be persecuted by those whose diets have been fed a steady stream of human wisdom. Faithful congregations will be picked apart because they preach and practice what the Bible says. The apostle Paul wrote that we should defend the gospel: ***"But the other of love, knowing that I am set for the defence of the gospel." -- Phil 1:17.*** Notice the emphasis placed on “sound” (healthy) doctrine: ***"For whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine;" -- 1 Tim 1:10..... "Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus." -- 2 Tim 1:13..... "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears;" -- 2 Tim 4:3.*** God expects sound words and sound doctrine to come forth from pulpits of His people. This gospel should be defended with the very lives of those claiming to be God’s people.

When we have weak pulpits the churches will be weak and dying. Congregations will be killed because the lifeblood will be choked out by human thoughts and innovations. The preaching must be distinctive and different from the world. This type of preaching will produce faith and when faith is acted upon it will produce Christians. Christians will go forth making a difference where they are. The church of Christ will be different from any other group claiming to be religious. They will have a “thus saith the Lord” for what they do. An objective standard of authority will be sought for all that is done: ***"And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him." -- Col 3:17.*** Where this type of preaching is absent the Lord’s church will fall into apostasy. They will begin to fellowship the world with its denominations. They will invite men such as Jeff Walling and Rubel Shelly to fill their pulpits. They will fill the minds of their people with poison which will pollute the soul. As a result, congregations will be killed.

Indifferent and inconsistent brethren

Another congregational killer will be the indifference and inconsistency of brethren.

Indifferent brethren are brethren who could care less about the work of the church. They might be indifferent because of sin in their lives. They might be indifferent because the cares of this world have choked the love they have for God and the souls of men. They might be indifferent because they have been hurt and have not handled it according to the word of God. They might be indifferent because they are just plain lazy and not willing to work. This type of attitude can permeate through a congregation, choking the life and zeal out of the members.

Inconsistent brethren are those who do one thing under one situation and something else in another. They can not be trusted because if you depend or lean on them, they may not be there! They react one way today and another way tomorrow. This type of “wishy-washy” attitude also permeates and pollutes a congregation. They can discourage other members due to their reactions. They support godly elders and gospel preachers under some conditions, but turn on them at other times. They practice the truth sometimes and sometimes they do not. Paul wrote: ***"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord."*** -- 1 Cor 15:58. We are to be steadfast, always abounding in the work of the Lord. Indifferent and inconsistent brethren are neither steadfast nor do they abound in work. They abound in criticism, but not in commitment.

Undercurrents and undermining caused by divisive brethren

The Proverbs writer revealed God’s attitude toward those who cause division: ***"Frowardness is in his heart, he deviseth mischief continually; he soweth discord. Therefore shall his calamity come suddenly; suddenly shall he be broken without remedy."*** -- Prov 6:14-15..... ***"These six things doth the LORD hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him:...A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren."*** -- Prov 6:16-19. Notice that the one who sows discord will be broken suddenly and is an abomination to God. One who goes about to undermine other brethren is one who is an abomination to God. We need to think very seriously before we attack other brethren, whether to the face or to the back!

There are times we need to mark other people: ***"Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple."*** -- Rom 16:17-28..... ***"Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us."*** -- 2 Th 3:6..... ***"And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."*** -- 2 Th 3:14-15.... ***"A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject; Knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself."*** -- Titus 3:10-11. However, to attack people who are doing the will of God without cause is another matter. To undermine the decisions made in a local congregation is to help kill that congregation. Of course, we are talking decisions which are not sinful. Sinful decisions need to be opposed, but decisions which are not sinful need to be heeded by the members. To go about talking against the decisions and those who made them is to undermine the local work and help kill that congregation. God views this type of action as an abomination.

Conclusion

May we ever be aware of those things will kill a congregation. May we never be guilty of these, but may we ever be busy developing our talents and using our energies to build up the work and not tear it down. May we ever be aware of our responsibility which we have before God. We must remember we will stand before the Judge of the earth and give an account of our talents. Are we ready for that reckoning? If not, why not take the work of the church seriously and decide to fulfill the role God has designed? If we can be elders, let us be. If we can serve as deacons, let us serve. If we have the talent to preach, let us use that talent. Women who would please God need to have the proper respect for the role God has designated for them to fulfill. They need to realize if they fulfill this role, God will save them and they will make a major contribution to the life of any congregation. But, let us all realize, we all have some talent(s) and we had better be grave and sober-minded about using them to God's glory, thereby helping congregations to grow and not die! May we ever love the Lord's church, the church of Christ, realizing how we treat each other is exactly the way we treat the Lord. Let us resolve in our hearts to promote the local church and work toward the end of bringing glory to God by preaching and practicing the gospel of Jesus Christ.
