

Knowing These Things...How Shall We Then Live?

By M. Wayne Benson

The way the church responds in crisis reveals something about who we are as God's people. And by "church" I mean The Church universal. Crises seem to bring about the best and worst of times for the church.

Take the pandemic, for instance. The best side of church was seen when pastors and parishioners alike rediscovered that the church is not a building. Pastors discovered creative ways of "gathering" even when we couldn't, as government-imposed lockdowns were enforced. Yet even as our religious freedoms were threatened in America, it provoked an awareness of the persecuted church around the world, where lockdowns are the norm. It awakened us to the fragile value of our own religious freedom and forced the church to take a stand against government overreach. Lawsuits made their way to the Supreme Court and mandates that limited religious freedom were throttled back. Best of times out of the worst of times.

Financial support during the pandemic actually increased in most of our churches, along with soaring online participation. Wise pastors and church leaders suddenly came to the realization that an effective online presence was worth the investment. For years many pastors had been ignoring the 21st century reality that the "drive-by" curiosity of a prospective attendee is no longer satisfied by seeing a church building but by website clicks and the latest download of a service or a sermon...all of this happening long before they decide to pull into our parking lot.

At the same time, when the church was writing its best history, there were chapters when the church was at its worst. I cannot remember a time when so many major Christian leaders had moral failures or sank into depression or even suicidal ideation. True, lockdowns, isolation, Covid illness and death all around us contributed to the despair many felt, but the crisis seemed only to squeeze to the surface the weakness that was already lurking beneath it.

The pandemic also revealed how divided the church was...and probably had been for a long time. Whether it was BLM, mask mandates, gender identity, social justice or trans-ports, the church was never able to speak with one voice. And though the people of the Kingdom are not automatons who parrot cliches in monotone unity, neither are they to be a cacophony of clashing voices in such disharmony that it offends even the ears of the unredeemed.

And now there is war; a war in Europe, as Putin seems hell-bent on reestablishing the old boundaries of the Soviet Union, starting with Georgia and Crimea, and now Ukraine. The media is ever on the scene showing us heartbreaking pictures of the Ukrainian people being slaughtered and driven out of their country, by the millions. The prophetic implications certainly seem near, as nuclear armed nations bristle with aimed and armed ICBMs. And, I fear, again the church will be at its best and worst. Already the division has begun with pro- and anti-war arguments, political and even spiritual

division. Does the church wink at the injustice and bloodshed of a bully invading a sovereign, democratic nation? Or should we draw back and watch, recognizing that war, itself, is sinful. After all, much of the church embraced the position of conscientious objection even in previous declared wars. There's plenty of scripture to go around on both sides of the issue. Think of the Civil War...and the church was as divided as was the country itself. Even the holocaust, though there was universal condemnation when the horrors of reality surfaced, the church never really got it together until long after the war.¹

The Apostle Peter was a man who understood conflict, both internally and within the ranks of the church. There was a time when he and Paul came almost to blows as they withstood each other "nose to nose."² The potential for division in the fledgling new church was palpable. Whether it was racism in Acts 6, or Holy Communion in 1 Cor 11, or the gospel to the Gentiles in Acts 13, the church and its leaders often found themselves debating more than one side of an issue. However, the words that describe the resolution that brought about unity were these: "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." (Acts 15:28).

Note that the debate itself was not preeminent – rather it was the Holy Spirit. First in order, "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit"...then "and to us." I suggest to you that we need a divine intervention – yes "we" the church, the saints of God – to come to that place where it is "good" to the Spirit of God so that brothers and sisters can dwell together in unity.³ It is clear from the scriptures that the Holy Spirit doesn't live in chaos, though He may seek to preside over the hearts that create it.

It was Peter who stood up at the Council of Jerusalem and reminded the apostles and elders gathered there that God gave the Holy Spirit to both the Jews and the Gentiles and that the Pentecostal evidence settled the matter. It is fascinating to me that Peter, previously so opinionated, so impetuous, at times even at odds with himself, would be the arbiter, the moderator, the peacemaker who initiates the call to unity. And he does it by invoking both the works and the influence of the Holy Spirit.

By the time Peter writes his epistles, he now has the heart of a pastor. Remember, in the humble scene before the resurrected Christ, after his embarrassing failure, the Chief Shepherd charges Peter to "feed My sheep."⁴ How remarkable that God uses an uncouth, loudmouth fisherman to become the spokesman on the Day of Pentecost and the diplomat at the Council of Jerusalem. Oh, the amazing grace of God. But it is not unlike God's choice of Paul who, as Saul of Tarsus, once persecuted and terrified believers, but then becomes the builder of the church. Yes, God's amazing grace!

¹ See "Vatican Apologizes to Jews", William Drozdiak, The Washington Post, 3-17-1998; Or "The Silence", James Carrol, The New Yorker, 3-30-97

² Gal 2:11-14

³ Ps 133

⁴ John 21:15-17

In this hour, Peter reminds us about the “Day of the Lord”...of that “Day,” that span of time on God’s prophetic timeclock...he reminds us of that day in which we, ourselves, may well be living. Peter tells us that his words were written to “stir up [their] sincere mind by way of a reminder...” (2 Pet 3:1). Peter was no stranger to conflict, and he saw it coming. He reminded the church that, “in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying ‘Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation.’” (2 Pet 3:3-4)

Just recently, I was talking to a pastor and mentioned Last Days events and the importance of our preaching from time to time about the coming of the Lord – preparing the church to “always be ready.” His immediate response was about how “he had heard that stuff since he was just a kid.” Then he launched into a diatribe about how we can’t be motivated by fear. Our conversation was brief, and I didn’t know him well, but I wondered if he had had a negative reaction to one of the movies like “Thief in the Night” years ago. I suppose there have been a few movies more intent on “scaring people out of hell” than showing them the way to heaven. However, he was either stuck in his own internal conflict or simply resisting the uncomfortable responsibility of preaching the whole council of God. For, instead of associating the coming of the Lord with our comfort and our redemption, he saw it as a lame attempt to manipulate. Instead of recognizing the blessing of just “reading” the book of Revelation⁵ or the significance of the Blessed Hope, he had reduced that message to manipulation through fear.

Peter, in his day, has to remind the apathetic church, already asleep or, worse yet, cynical, that the Lord is not a slacker about His promises just because we don’t see everything unfold in our brief lifespan. He reminds God’s people of judgment and some pretty horrible events – heavens passing away with a roar – elements being destroyed with intense heat – earth being burned up. Yet the essence of the warning is not about fear but about waking up to “look for and hasten the coming of the day of the Lord.” We are to respond to His promises “looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.” In fact, the clincher is in the very next verse (2 Pet 3:14-15): “Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him wrote to you.”⁶

Amazing that Peter preaches peace and patience in the midst of a description of judgment and a world on fire. And also amazing that he encourages his listeners to remember the message of his “beloved and wise brother Paul,” whom he had previously withstood face-to-face in sharp disagreement. The formerly boisterous, open-mouth-insert-foot Peter now the peacemaker and impartor of Holy Spirit grace.

At the end of the chapter, he tells them to “be on your guard so that you are not carried away by the error of unprincipled men and fall from your own steadfastness but grow in

⁵ Rev 1:3

⁶ 2 Pet 3:15

grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.”

Peter raises a question in v.11 that I want to posit here and for our time. “Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness...” In other words, “Ok, so bad stuff is happening – and God didn’t leave us hanging about all this, He told us about it. But the big question is: Knowing these things...how should we then live?”

Is there anything happening today that God hasn’t warned us about, whether plagues or pandemics...wars or rumors of wars? Yet, in the midst of our enemies, even in the Valley called Death, He invites us to sit at a banquet table, He leads us beside still waters, He feeds us in green pastures and restores our souls!

I can’t think of anything in our day posing greater cataclysmic destruction than a war between nuclear powers. As a kid growing up during the cold war with the USSR, we thought about those things. And, yes, somehow crawling under that desk in the classroom brought us a little pseudo-comfort that we might be protected from the fire and brimstone of an atomic explosion. It was an illusion, of course.

We live in a world of illusions – funhouse mirrors that distort reality. The idea that the right political party or our favored political candidate could bring about peace apart from the Prince of Peace is an illusion. Oh, we will certainly live a better life with “good government”. But God defines good government for us in 1 Tim 2:1-4, and it’s the very reason we are to pray for “all who are in authority.” It is “so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

The big deal about “good government” is not just for our comfort – but that it creates an atmosphere whereby people can come to the knowledge of the Lord. It’s the reason why, if we can’t have heaven itself, democracy with its man-centered imperfections will always be better than communism, why freedom is better than totalitarianism. One might argue that the best government is a benevolent dictator who makes all good decisions for us. True, if the benevolent ruler was God. And there were some good kings in the Bible. The problem is that “power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”⁷ Furthermore, taking freedom away doesn’t promote salvation, because as free moral agents, we must “will” (want) to be saved...we must respond to the Holy Spirit...we must repent and turn to God. Christ made that possible. And once we’ve been set free, free to love God and live right, free from slavery to sin, God wants us to remain “free indeed.” In Gal 5:1,13, Paul says, “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery... For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.”

⁷ John Dalberg-Acton, in his letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, 4-5-1887

As pastors and leaders, our job is not simply to identify problems and impose our catharsis of grievances on our congregations. What God's people need to know is "How should we then live?" Peter doesn't tiptoe around the issues – it's pretty graphic. But he drives us toward the work of the Holy Spirit to bring about peace, contentment, holy conduct and godliness.

The world is in chaos. In some ways it seems as though the world is devolving...all the way back to Gen 1, when the world was "without form and void and darkness was upon the face of the deep." But recall, it was the Spirit that brooded over the chaotic, unformed world. And it was God's Word that penetrated that Spirit-charged atmosphere and brought about light and life!

We need the Holy Spirit to brood over us, to incubate over our turbulent, chaotic world. We need preachers with fire in their bones, who are unafraid to preach the truth in a world that resists it! We need prophets who, under the weighty anointing of the Holy Spirit, transform the atmosphere over those who hear the eternal Word. We need shepherds who know where the still waters and green pastures are and make a clear discernable path for the sheep to follow them there. In the midst of our enemies, set a banquet table and, yes, "Feed My sheep."