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1

Calling the Church to Repent



Have you ever heard of a church that repented? Not individuals, but an entire church that collectively recognized its congregational transgressions and openly, genuinely repented, with biblical sorrow and brokenness?

Sadly, you probably have not.

For that matter, have you ever heard of a pastor who called his church to repent and threatened his congregation with divine judgment if they failed to do so?

It's not likely. Pastors today seem to have a hard enough time calling individuals to repent, let alone calling the whole church to account for their corporate sins. In fact, if a pastor were so bold as to lead his own church to repent, he might not be the pastor for much longer. At minimum, he would face resistance and scorn from within the congregation. That inevitable backlash is likely strong enough to generate a kind of preemptive fear, keeping most church leaders from ever considering a call for corporate repentance.

On the other hand, if a pastor or church leader has the temerity

to call for *another* church—rather than his own—to repent, he will almost certainly be accused of being critical, divisive, and overstepping his authority. He'll face a chorus of voices telling him to mind his own business. Vilifying him, therefore, clears a path for the confronted church to sidestep his admonition altogether.

The fact is churches rarely repent. Churches that start down a path of worldliness, disobedience, and apostasy typically move even further from orthodoxy over time. They almost never recover their original soundness. Rarely are they broken over their collective sins against the Lord. Rarely do they turn aside from corruption, immorality, and false doctrine. Rarely do they cry out from the depths of their hearts for forgiveness, cleansing, and restoration. Most never even consider it, because they have become comfortable with their condition.

In reality, calling the church to repent and reform can be very dangerous. Church history is replete with examples.

THE GREAT EJECTION

The name “Puritan” was devised as a term of derision and scorn. It was applied to a group of Anglican pastors in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who sought to purify the church of its remaining Roman Catholic influences and practices. These Puritan pastors repeatedly called for the churches of England to repent of their extensive carnality, heresy, and priestly corruption. But the Anglican Church would not repent. They could not deny the need for reformation, but they wanted a “middle way” rather than a thorough reformation.

Those who held the reins in the Anglican hierarchy remained impenitent—but not passive. They were determined to silence the voices calling them to repentance. For decades, the Puritans faced hostility and persecution from church leaders and political rulers alike. Many suffered and died for their faith, while many more

endured imprisonment and torture for the sake of Christ. The persecution reached a crescendo in 1662, when the English Parliament issued the Act of Uniformity. The decree essentially outlawed anything other than strict Anglican doctrine and practice. That led to a monumental and tragic day in England's spiritual history: August 24, 1662, commonly known as the Great Ejection. On that day, two thousand Puritan pastors were stripped of their ordination and permanently thrown out of their Anglican churches.

Those faithful Puritans understood that the Church of England had to repent and reform before the nation would ever turn to Christ. But rather than reject their wickedness and corruption, the impenitent leaders of the Church of England attempted to silence anyone calling for repentance and restoration.

Subsequent history reveals that the Great Ejection was no isolated event with temporary significance. The spiritual turmoil did not end once the Puritans were excommunicated and separated from their congregations. In fact, it's safe to say that the Great Ejection was a spiritual disaster that serves as a clear and dark dividing line in England's history that has implications to the present day.

One of those ejected ministers was Matthew Meade. Concerning the Great Ejection, he wrote, "This fatal day deserves to be written in black letters in England's calendar."¹ Iain Murray describes the spiritual fallout of that dark day: "After the silencing of the 2,000, we enter an age of rationalism, of coldness in the pulpit and indifference in the pew, an age in which scepticism and worldliness went far to reducing national religion to a mere parody of New Testament Christianity."²

J. B. Marsden saw the event as an invitation for the Lord's judgment. He wrote, "If it be presumptuous to fix upon particular occurrences as proofs of God's displeasure; yet none will deny that a long, unbroken, course of disasters indicates but too surely, whether to a nation or a church, that his favour is withdrawn. Within five years of the ejection of the two thousand nonconformists, London

was twice laid waste.”³ He wasn't wrong. The Great Ejection occurred in the summer of 1662. In 1665, an epidemic of the bubonic plague struck London, killing more than 100,000 people, roughly one quarter of its population. The following year, a massive fire swept through London, incinerating more than 13,000 homes, nearly a hundred churches—including St. Paul's Cathedral—and decimating most of the city. Many historians agreed with Marsden, viewing those disasters as divine retribution for England's impenitence.

Still, those disasters don't compare to the spiritual consequences of England's apostasy. After citing the plague and the fire, Marsden continued, “Other calamities ensued, more lasting and far more terrible. Religion in the church of England was almost extinguished, and in many of her parishes the lamp of God went out.”⁴

J. C. Ryle, who served as the bishop of Durham in the late 1800s, summed up the spiritual cost of the Anglican Church's impenitence this way: “I believe [the Great Ejection] did an injury to the cause of true religion in England, which will probably never be repaired.”⁵ Indeed, over the centuries that followed, England has succumbed to a culture of liberalism, overrun with cold, dead churches and awash in apostasy and spiritual darkness.

And despite the centuries of foul fruit that sprang from the Act of Uniformity and the Great Ejection, the Church of England failed to achieve its primary goal. The Puritans were scattered, but not silenced. Many of the men who were ejected from their churches went on to have influence that continues to this day. Spiritual stalwarts such as Richard Baxter, John Flavel, Thomas Brooks, and Thomas Watson were among those who lost their pulpits in 1662 but faithfully carried on as outlaw preachers. Along with many others, they continued to expose the corruption of the Anglican Church, calling for its repentance. In that sense, they carried on the legacy that began with the Reformers more than a century earlier.

THE LEGACY OF THE REFORMATION

In medieval Europe, the Roman Catholic Church had a stranglehold on all matters pertaining to spiritual life. In an era when Bibles were rare and inaccessible to all but the clergy, the hierarchy of Rome established itself as the gatekeeper, controlling access to Scripture, and thus to God. The priests granted forgiveness, bestowed blessing, and served as the arbiters of eternal reward.

By the 1400s, the church was overrun with layers of institutional corruption. Behind a transparent veil of piety, immorality and wickedness permeated the church. Throughout Christendom, church parishioners struggled to survive and eke out a humble existence, while the religious ruling class preyed on the people's ignorance to line their pockets and expand their authority. Popes and archbishops lived reprobate lives of lavish excess and wanton lasciviousness. The church ruled with an iron fist, overseeing even governments and influencing all aspects of medieval life.

To its core, the medieval Roman Catholic Church was a breeding ground for heresy and spiritual deception. But even in the midst of its dominating corruption, the Lord was still redeeming His own and building His true church. Some churches existed and even thrived outside of Rome's authority. The Lord also used bold and faithful men like John Wycliffe and John Huss to reject and repudiate extrabiblical Catholic dogma, to peel back its pious mask and expose the corruption within. Like the Puritans centuries later in England, these men did not seek to overthrow the church, but hoped to call it to repentance and help restore it to biblical orthodoxy. And for their efforts, both men were excommunicated and burned as heretics. (Wycliffe was retroactively excommunicated decades after his death. His body was actually exhumed and incinerated, his bones crushed, and the bones and ashes scattered in the River Swift.)

Although the Catholic Church went to extreme measures to

silence Wycliffe, Huss, and others like them, the truth they preached survived and paved the way for an earnest German monk to carry on their legacy and strike a decisive blow against the papal fortress. Like those before him, Martin Luther did not set out on an overtly rebellious course to overthrow or upend the Church. But out of his fervent study of Scripture and through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, Luther came to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ and to a clear understanding of Rome's deviation from the truth of the gospel.

Historians identify the flashpoint of the Reformation as October 31, 1517, the day Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. In that pivotal treatise, Luther, not yet converted, argued against the abusive traditions of the Catholic Church—particularly the sale of indulgences.

Indulgences were a means for Catholics to buy their way out of penance and purgatory. They could also be purchased on behalf of deceased loved ones. With an extremely high mortality rate and an equally short life expectancy—and with the church's threat of eons in purgatory constantly hanging overhead—most people would leap at any hope to avoid languishing in the afterlife, in some holding place short of heaven.

Under Pope Leo X, the medieval church used the sale of indulgences to support the construction of elaborate structures like St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.⁶ A savvy monk named Johann Tetzel was one of their most successful salesmen.

Tetzel was ingenious in his mischief, perfecting a masterful sales pitch to prey on the credulous simplicity of Catholic parishioners. He would famously exhort the crowds with the promise, "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs." To a customer base of illiterate, superstitious peasants, what greater hope could there be?

Luther was furious over Tetzel's church-sponsored extortion. His Ninety-Five Theses constituted a public repudiation of the practice

and a direct assault on the greed of the Church. Thesis eighty-six put the blame squarely on Pope Leo himself: “Why does not the pope, whose wealth is today greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build this one basilica of St. Peter with his own money rather than with the money of poor believers?”

Those Ninety-Five Theses ignited the Reformation, but they did not constitute its primary battleground. In fact, Luther had not yet come to true faith and repentance at the time of their writing—he was saved shortly thereafter. The doctrine of justification by faith is of course an insurmountable argument against the sale of indulgences, so it is significant that the Ninety-Five Theses omit any mention of that doctrine. It indicates that Luther’s “Tower Experience,” when he finally understood what it means to be justified by faith alone, occurred sometime after the posting of the theses. Scholars and historians cannot determine the precise year when Luther first had his awakening, but Luther spoke of it often, and he seemed to view it as the moment of his true conversion. Here’s how he described what happened:

The words “righteous” and “righteousness of God” struck my conscience like lightning. When I heard them I was exceedingly terrified. If God is righteous [I thought], he must punish. But when by God’s grace I pondered, in the tower and heated room of this building, over the words, “He who through faith is righteous shall live” [Romans 1:17] and “the righteousness of God” [Romans 3:21], I soon came to the conclusion that if we, as righteous men, ought to live from faith and if the righteousness of God contribute to the salvation of all who believe, then salvation won’t be our merit but God’s mercy. My spirit was thereby cheered. For it’s by the righteousness of God that we’re justified and saved through Christ. These words [which had before terrified me] now became more

pleasing to me. The Holy Spirit unveiled the Scriptures for me in this tower.⁷

The truth that believers are justified by faith alone became the focus of the entire reformation debate. That principle (*sola fide*) is therefore known as the *material principle* of the Reformation. But it was the *formal principle* of the Reformation, *sola Scriptura*—the authority and sufficiency of Scripture—that motivated Luther to write and post the Ninety-Five Theses. His commitment to that principle was evident even in his earliest writings before his conversion.

John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, Philip Melancthon, Theodore Beza, John Knox, and many more shared that same conviction and fought the same fight on different fronts to rescue and preserve the authority of God's Word in His church against the tyranny of the pope and the heresies of the Catholic Church. The supremacy and authority of Scripture was the beating heart of the Reformation from which all its other core tenets flowed.

In defense of his work at the Diet of Worms, Luther famously proclaimed his submission to Scripture alone:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen.⁸

Five hundred years later, faithful men serve in the shadow of these great warriors of God and work to carry on their legacy of biblical fidelity and gospel truth. Moreover, we carry on their pro-

test, not merely against Rome, but against any system, church, or self-styled shepherd who deviates from the Word of God in the life of the church. And tragically, the twenty-first century church may be facing greater threats than it ever endured under Rome.

THE PATHOLOGY OF AN APOSTATE CHURCH

Consider the spiritual ground that is lost when the church surrenders biblical authority. If Scripture does not speak with absolute, inerrant authority, the offer of justification by grace through faith cannot be extended to desperate sinners. One can't argue for the sufficiency of Christ as the sacrifice for sins, or His rule as the Head of the church. One can't cling to the glorious truth of imputation—that at the cross, “[God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). Without those truths, we have no guarantee that God's wrath has been satisfied. There can be no assurance of faith, no hope of heaven, and no confidence in the promises of God.

On the other hand, doing away with the authority of Scripture—or merely subjugating it to the authority of men—purposely paves the way for false doctrine and false teachers to infiltrate the flock of God. It invites theological confusion, elevating the words of fallible men over the inerrant Word of God. It is designed to exchange the gospel of grace for a man-centered system of works-righteousness. And it pollutes the purity of God's truth, clouding biblical doctrine with superstition, tradition, extra-biblical revelation, and demonic deception.

That's a broad way to summarize the various deviations that have dominated the Roman Catholic Church since before the time of Luther. But it's also a fitting description of the Protestant church *today*. If that sounds like an overstatement, consider these questions: What demonstrable difference is there between Tetzels indulgences and the holy water and anointed scraps of cloth peddled by charismatic

charlatans to their vast audiences? What's the difference between a pope who speaks *ex cathedra* and a pastor who expounds his own dreams and mental impressions as fresh revelation from the Lord? And what separates the worship of Mary and the veneration of the saints from the way today's self-proclaimed apostles visit the graves of their forebears to "soak" in the deceased's anointing?

Worse still, the same kinds of rampant corruption and immorality the Roman Church once worked to conceal are now celebrated and encouraged by many Protestant congregations. Far from being known for their *purity*, many churches today go out of their way to embrace or imitate the debauchery of secular culture. Pastors exegete Hollywood movies rather than Scripture. Seeker-sensitive megachurch gatherings often look and feel more like a rock concert or a burlesque show than a worship service. Celebrity-minded church leaders seem more interested in what's stylish and marketable than they are in what's sound and solidly biblical. Shockingly, there are even some ostensibly evangelical churches whose leaders are proud that their membership is open, welcoming, über-tolerant, or even affirming toward serial adulterers, hard-hearted fornicators, impenitent homosexuals, immoral idol worshipers, and even to forms of paganism. They're *proud* of it.

Many more congregations are on a slower path to the same destination. While they might not openly celebrate immorality, they do nothing to drive it from their midst. Sin is not confronted and church discipline is not faithfully practiced. Over time, the conscience—both individually and collectively—grows cold, unconfessed sin becomes the norm, and the church bears no discernable difference from the world.

All that is evidence of a lack of submission to God's Word and a decreasing concern for doctrinal truth and the purity and protection it produces. Born from the conviction that true believers must separate from an apostate church, Protestantism has needed only a scant five hundred years to cultivate its own strains of apostasy. Much

like the Israelites in the book of Judges, the Protestant church seems determined to repeat the mistakes of its past rather than learn from them. Paul's indictment of the churches of Galatia applies to much of the evangelical church: "You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?" (Gal 3:1). A recent national survey revealed that 52 percent of evangelical Protestants believe salvation comes by faith and works combined. Only 30 percent affirm *sola fide* and *sola Scriptura*.⁹ The Reformation is being undone by "bewitched" evangelical Protestants. The protest is largely over.

Descent into apostasy doesn't happen overnight; the changes are slow and steady. Rejecting Scripture's authority and priority is the first step, usually followed by a succession of compromises: *maybe we can be more relevant and inviting to the world if we don't take this verse or that sin too seriously*. Once the church determines its purpose is to engage and attract the culture rather than edify and equip the saints, it sets out on a path that will always lead to worldliness and apostasy. Not long ago, the pastor of one of the largest churches in America told church leaders they should not let doctrine get in the way of winning people over. One sympathetic author summed up his exhortation succinctly: "Don't put theology above ministry."¹⁰ Churches today are so invested in attracting sinners that they attempt to bury their theology under the welcome mat.

That unbiblical model of outreach is the very thing dulling many churches' ability to reach the world with the gospel. Filling the pews with comfortable, unaffected unbelievers is the fastest way to confuse and corrupt the work of the church. God has not called His people out of the world to chase its trends in vain attempts to seem relevant. The church cannot be salt and light in this wretched world if we are indistinguishable from worldly people (see Matt. 5:13–16).

THE ALLEGED ADVANTAGES OF THE EARLY CHURCH

To curb those worldly trends and simplify the work of ministry, some Christians today are calling for a return to the early church model. They believe what's ailing and inhibiting the work of the church today is the church structure itself. Megachurches with sprawling campuses, legions of leaders, and overgrown congregations that must be endlessly subdivided—those are supposedly the villains that have corrupted and confused the church in recent years.

The argument suggests that Christians can't function and serve to their full potential in a large-church environment, and that the New Testament model of small house churches frees God's people to focus on what matters most. When there is no building to maintain, no denomination to support (or submit to), and no institutional oversight, the church is unshackled to serve the Lord and reach the surrounding community. This is offered as an attempt to return to the simplicity described in Acts 2:42: "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." But that was a church of three thousand!

However, we need only look at the New Testament to see that life in the first-century church was anything but idyllic. Small congregations, simplified organization, and proximity to the apostles did not give the early church the spiritual advantages and insulation we might assume. In fact, we see many of the maladies that plague the church today on display in its earliest incarnations. Put simply, the purity of the early church is overrated.

And nowhere is that more apparent than in the book of Revelation.

AN APOSTLE IN EXILE

We often think of Revelation as a prophetic look at the second coming of Christ. We think of the judgment that awaits the world

because “He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him” (Rev. 1:7). We tend to look at the promise of God’s wrath in horror, but also with a sense of relief that it will not fall on us.

But before the visions of the book of Revelation reveal the subject of God’s judgment against unrepentant sinners and the return of Christ, it opens with three chapters addressed to churches. Specifically, Christ dictates a message through the apostle John to the seven churches in Asia Minor: “Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and Laodicea” (1:11).

Those were actual congregations located in towns throughout what we know today as Turkey, listed in an order that follows the ancient postal route. Each of these churches was founded as fruit of the apostles’ ministry (primarily Paul), with Ephesus serving as the mother church for all the others in that region. Toward the end of his life, John ministered in the church at Ephesus, giving him an intimate connection to all those congregations.

When the Lord revealed to him the Revelation, however, John was living in exile in a penal colony on the rocky island of Patmos.

On the night Christ was arrested, the Lord Himself had warned His disciples that persecution was coming: “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. . . . If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:18, 20).

It did not take long before persecution was in full force. The church faced opposition from the very beginning, initially from Israel’s religious leaders. Likewise, it endured the hostile suspicions of Rome. Roman culture was dominated by pagan and debauched religion. Christians did not fit in, nor could they partake of much that constituted everyday life in that wicked society. Moreover, Christianity simply made no sense to people steeped in Roman

culture. The doctrine and practice of the early church were so utterly misunderstood that the Romans falsely accused Christians of cannibalism, incest, and other sexual perversions. Rumors spread that Christians were atheists and political dissidents because they would not worship Caesar as god. In the year AD 64, the Roman emperor Nero played on these long-held suspicions to distract from his own misdeeds. That year, when a fire devastated much of the city of Rome, the public suspected Nero was to blame. Nero shifted his deserved blame to the Christians, instituting an official campaign of persecution against them across the city and beyond. It continued throughout the rest of his reign. During that first wave of Roman persecution, both Peter and Paul were executed, along with countless others who were hunted down and slaughtered for sport.

Also during Nero's reign, Rome waged a bloody war to suppress Israel's hopes for independence. Nearly a thousand towns, villages, and settlements across Israel were burned to the ground, with their inhabitants massacred or scattered. In AD 70, Jerusalem was overthrown and the temple destroyed. What was once the capital city of God's kingdom on earth was now under the control of pagans.

Just over a decade later, Rome initiated another wave of persecution under the emperor Domitian. This second campaign against the church lasted longer—from AD 81 to 96—and extended throughout the empire. Rome's assault on the church was organized and militarized. Thousands of Christians lost their lives while others were banished or fled. Historians tell us it was during this period that Timothy was clubbed to death. Tertullian—who was born about 60 years after the apostle John died—claimed that “the Apostle John was first plunged, unhurt, into boiling oil, and thence remitted to his island-exile!”¹¹ Lacking firsthand witness testimony, we needn't insist on the veracity of that tradition, but it does accurately reflect the ferocity of Rome's campaign against Christians. Nero was said to smear Christians with pitch or pine resin and bind them in papyrus or bundles of wood. Or he might crucify them on

crosses soaked in creosote. He would then pierce their throats so they could not scream, and set them ablaze while still alive, using them as torches to illuminate his garden parties.¹²

In Revelation 1:9, John tells us he was sentenced to the island prison of Patmos “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” Preaching the gospel was a crime punishable by death. Patmos is not at all the island paradise some might initially imagine. It’s actually a crescent-shaped rock jutting up out of the Aegean Sea, roughly ten miles long and five miles wide. In John’s day, it was a desolate, isolated place, nearly forty miles off the coast of Miletus, between Asia Minor and Athens. John’s sentence likely included the forfeiture of all his property and possessions, along with any civil rights he enjoyed under Roman law. Although he was living in exile, he was essentially given a death sentence, since he would spend the rest of his life doing hard labor in the quarries, with meager food and desperate living conditions. Already in his nineties, John could not have expected to survive for long on Patmos.

Like Paul in 2 Corinthians 11:23–29, however, the physical pain John endured could not compare to his anguish over his beloved churches in Asia Minor and their defection from the authority of God’s Word. From the letters Christ dictated to the individual churches—which we will examine in greater detail in the chapters that follow—we know they were engaged in a variety of sinful behaviors, including sexual immorality, idolatry, and hypocrisy. They were tolerating sin and compromising with the pagan culture surrounding them. They willingly accommodated false teachers and even helped spread their heresy. In many ways, they were examples that would be repeated by churches in subsequent ages, including evangelical churches across the Western world today.

Twenty-five years before John’s vision on Patmos, the apostle Paul warned of the dangers facing the early church. He urged Timothy, “Do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel” (2 Tim.

1:8). In verses 13–14, Paul charged him to “retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me. . . . Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you.”

Paul knew persecution and suffering would reach Timothy's doorstep. He also knew how easy it would be to crumble and compromise when threatened with prison, torture, and death. Throughout his final epistle, he sought to prepare his young apprentice for future trials. He continued in chapter 2:

Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. . . . Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

(vv. 1, 3)

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth. But avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. (vv. 15–17)

Flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness. . . .
But refuse foolish and ignorant speculations. (vv. 22–23)

Paul's concern wasn't just for Timothy, but for the whole church. He understood the spiritual threats that loomed on the horizon for God's people:

In the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power;

Avoid such men as these. . . . But evil men and imposters will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. (3:1-5, 14)

Throughout his ministry, the apostle Paul carefully warned about the danger of succumbing to false teachers and the need to be vigilant and discerning in the face of their threat. “Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting” (Rom. 16:17–18).

But he also understood that the fight to maintain the doctrinal and moral purity of the church is not exclusively external—that plenty of threats come from within as well: “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths” (2 Tim. 4:3–4). As he prepared to leave the Ephesian church, Paul gave the elders there a vivid warning to guard the flock God had entrusted to them: “I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert” (Acts 20:29–31). Not thirty years later, that church had drifted from their love for Christ into empty piety, while several of the surrounding congregations had succumbed to some of the very corruptions Paul warned of.

JUDGMENT FOR THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD

By the time he reached that point in his life, John knew very well that “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted”

(2 Tim. 3:12). He told people in his pastoral care, “Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you” (1 John 3:13). But as John was living out his final days in torturous labor on the Isle of Patmos, he may have looked back in amazement at how different his circumstances were from what he expected when he set out to follow Jesus.

Israel had very high expectations for the Messiah and the kingdom He would institute. They eagerly anticipated the arrival of an heir to the Davidic throne who would overthrow Rome’s occupying forces, wipe out Israel’s enemies, and usher in the fulfillment of all God’s promises to Abraham, David, and the prophets. The salvation they awaited was temporal, not eternal.

The disciples held that hope. Throughout Christ’s ministry, they frequently jockeyed for supremacy in the promised kingdom of heaven (see Matt. 18:1–5; Luke 9:46–48). John and his brother James even enlisted their mother to petition the Lord on their behalf (Matt. 20:20–21). Acts 1:6 tells us that right up to the moment Christ ascended into heaven, His disciples expected Him to unleash His sovereign power and inaugurate His kingdom on earth.

In the years that followed, as the church exploded into existence and the Holy Spirit authenticated the apostles’ ministry through miraculous gifts, it must have seemed that the Lord’s return was imminent. But almost immediately the church was inundated with false teachers. Before long, many of John’s apostolic brothers were dead at the hands of Rome—by the time he reached Patmos, he was the only apostle still alive.

With believers on the run from merciless persecution and with churches in serious spiritual decline, John might have had every reason to be disappointed and depressed. Had the Lord’s plan for the church failed? It would be easy to imagine him crying out for a vision of what the Lord was doing in His church—some divine insight to encourage and comfort him in the twilight of his apostolic ministry. No matter how seasoned and spiritually mature he

was, he surely could have used some hope and solace.

Instead, what he saw was utterly terrifying. John tells us it caused him to fall to the ground “like a dead man” (Rev. 1:17). What he saw was the glorified Christ, appearing as ruler, judge, and executioner. John saw the Lord in all His glory as the Head of the church, ready to mete out righteous judgment—not on the world, but on His church!

Christ’s message to the church, through John, is unequivocal: “Repent.” Over and over, Christ calls these wayward churches to repent and reform. To the church at Ephesus, He said, “Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first” (Rev. 2:5). He had a similar message for the church at Pergamum: “Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth” (2:16). He warned the church at Thyatira of the severe judgment that awaited “unless they repent” (2:22). He charged the church at Sardis to “remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent” (3:3). And He gave a final warning to the church at Laodicea, reminding them that “those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent” (3:19).

These were not casual, dispassionate warnings. Each call to repentance was accompanied by the devastating consequences that awaited if a church failed to reform. In that sense, what John saw and heard was the fulfillment of Peter’s words decades earlier in his first epistle: “For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God” (1 Peter 4:17). Like Paul, Peter knew the many looming spiritual dangers that threatened the church, even from within. He also knew that churches would in some cases succumb to temptations, false doctrines, the lure of the world, or the assaults of the Evil One. Peter called his readers to persevere under persecution, which he saw in part as God’s judgment against the unfaithful church. Moreover, Peter understood that this is how God always operates with His people.

As a good student of the Old Testament, Peter would have been familiar with the prophecy of Ezekiel 9, which was another terrifying vision of God's judgment: "Then He cried out in my hearing with a loud voice saying, 'Draw near, O executioners of the city, each with his destroying weapon in his hand'" (Ezek. 9:1). Writing during the Babylonian captivity, Ezekiel saw a vision of God calling foreign powers to execute His judgment on His people. The vision continues,

Behold, six men came from the direction of the upper gate which faces north, each with his shattering weapon in his hand; and among them was a certain man clothed in linen with a writing case at his loins. And they went in and stood beside the bronze altar.

Then the glory of the God of Israel went up from the cherub on which it had been, to the threshold of the temple. And He called to the man clothed in linen at whose loins was the writing case. The LORD said to him, "Go through the midst of the city, even through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations which are being committed in its midst." But to the others He said in my hearing, "Go through the city after him and strike; do not let your eye have pity and do not spare. Utterly slay old men, young men, maidens, little children, and women, but do not touch any man on whom is the mark; and you shall start from My sanctuary." So they started with the elders who were before the temple. (vv. 2-6)

God's wrath had reached a boiling point with apostate Israel. He made a provision to mark out the few who had remained faithful, but everyone else would face the fullness of His judgment. Moreover, the slaughter would start at the very seat of His authority and

the center of worship, with those most culpable for Israel's apostasy.

In essence, that is the same vision John saw—the Lord as the righteous Judge, coming to call His churches to repent of unfaithfulness to Him.

Most people who go to a church believe it is a safe place—perhaps the *safest place*—when it comes to threats of judgment from the Lord. It's almost like climbing aboard the ark; once you're safely inside, you're untouchable.

But that's not true. Frankly, it's a foolish and dangerous notion. Just because you are in a church—or something you call a church, where Jesus' name is invoked and songs are sung about Him—does not mean you're safe against threats from God. Here in the opening chapters of Revelation, the Lord makes some very strong, direct threats against churches. A church is no safer than the world in that regard, and its transgressions often demand a swifter judgment.

That's why this passage is so often overlooked and rarely discussed. While the Lord repeatedly called for Israel to repent and return to a right relationship with Him, the early chapters of Revelation are the only place He employs similar language when dealing with the sins and failures of churches. It makes us uncomfortable to think about God calling His church to repent and reform, and threatening them with judgment if they don't. But it is critically important that we heed the warnings Christ delivers to us through the pen of John in Revelation.

Yes, these were letters written to specific local congregations about their particular issues. But they also stand as warnings to the entire church throughout its history. And as we'll see, the rebukes delivered to the churches of Asia Minor are just as applicable to the modern church, if not more so.

The issues that corrupted churches in the first century are the same threats facing the church today: idolatry, sexual immorality, compromise with the world and its pagan culture, spiritual deadness, and hypocrisy. Over the intervening centuries, the church

has not outgrown these familiar pitfalls. Nor has God lowered or softened His righteous standard. Regardless of when and where it exists, He demands a pure church.

That was His message to the churches in Revelation. Roughly two thousand years later, Christ is still calling churches to repent and warning us about dire consequences if they don't.