

# LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

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## THE DUST OF DEATH SLOWLY SETTLING UPON THE CHURCH

Isaiah states: "Shake yourself from the dust, rise up!" and "You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy!" (Isa. 52:2, 26:9). In 1973 Oz Guinness published a book entitled "The Dust of Death" in which he shows that the "dust of death" was slowly settling over all of Western culture. He charts the journey from a technological wasteland and into the promised land of radical living...out of the culture of Eastern religion, psychedelic drugs and the occult and into a third way. In the last sentences of the book he shows this third way to be found in the life, death and resurrection "that blasts apart the finality of death to provide an alternative to the sifting, settling dust of death and through the new birth open the way to a new life."

This dust of death which has slowly settled over Western culture has also slowly settled over today's religious system as represented in today's modern churches. We will note some theological wastelands that have settled over today's churches, beginning with the **dust of substitutes**. An interesting story of substitutes is found in the book of Kings: "And King Solomon made 200 large shields of beaten gold, using three minas of gold on each shield, and the king put them in the house of the forest of Lebanon (I Kings 10:16, 17). After the death of Solomon we have this word: "Now it came about in the fifth year of King Rehoboam, that Shishak the king of Egypt came against Jerusalem. And he took away the treasure of the house of the Lord and the treasures of the king's house, and took everything, even taking the shields of gold which Solomon had made. So King Rehoboam made shields of bronze in their place and committed them to the care of the commanders of the guard who guarded the doorway to the king's house" (I Kings 14: 25-27). The magnificence of gold was exchanged for cheapness of bronze. It gave the appearance of gold but was a counterfeit. They looked the same, but the substance had changed.

Today's Rehoboams are the churches that substitute bronze tradition for the gold of the gospel. Jude calls them "clouds without water" and "autumn trees with no fruit (Jude 12) and Peter says they are "springs without water" (II Pet. 2:17). Some common substitutes in the religious world are the same ones recorded in the Bible. Romans 1:25: "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator..." The peril of this substitute is seen in the results of their actions. Three times in this passage (verses 18-32) the Apostle says that "God gave them over to their own lusts, to degrading passions and to a depraved mind" resulting in raw idolatry, lustful homosexuality and what he calls all "unrighteousness, making them in God's sight "worthy of death." Other substitutes we will mention without comment are: The substitute of myths for sound doctrine (II Tim. 4:2-4): "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 with their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths." The substitute of tradition for the Word, Mark 7:8, 13: "Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men...thus invalidating the Word by your tradition."

The substitute of the immortality of the soul for the resurrection, I Cor. 15, 17, 18 "and if Christ has not been raised your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Jesus have perished."

The most serious substitute is that of a substitute Jesus. To the people who were converted under the ministry of Paul and had been taught by the Apostles, Paul states they were "enduring (original Greek word) those who comes and preaches another Jesus which they had not preached" (II Cor. 11:4). In his day many religious leaders believed "this man cannot be the Christ!" In our day many religious leaders (Trinitarians) believe "this Christ cannot be a man!" There are two ways we can be guilty of believing in a substitute Jesus. First is like the religious leaders of his day, we can make Jesus less than the son of God. John 5:18: "the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God." They said he blasphemed because he said, "I am the son of God" John 10:36). The second way to make him a substitute Jesus is to make him more than the son of God (the error of trinitarianism). I John 4:2, 3: "By this we know the spirit of God every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from, God every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God, this is the spirit of the anti-Christ..."

Another prevalent and dangerous form of the dust of death that has slowly but surely settled over today's churches is the **dust of biblical ignorance**. How many times have we heard that "ignorance is bliss" or "what you don't know can't hurt you"? This is a dangerous attitude when applied to the Scriptures. We can understand the world's ignorance of the things of God, because they are "darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart...and have become callous..." (Eph. 4:19). However ignorance of the Bible is without excuse. Ignorance is disobedience (Rom. 10:3) and sins committed in ignorance had to be dealt with and demanded sacrifice (Heb.9:7). Even worship can be "worship in ignorance" (Acts 17:23). It was a lack of knowledge that destroyed Israel and took them into captivity Hos. 4:6, Isa. 5:13). One of the most appalling phenomena evident in today's church is the rampant ignorance and lack of understanding of the Scriptures. It is heart breaking to behold so many young men coming out of Bible colleges and Seminaries with only a scant understanding of the word of God.

By just a casual reading of Paul's Epistles we are struck with the many times he emphasizes the importance of not only knowing but understanding the will of God. "Do not be foolish but understand what the will of the Lord is" (Eph. 5:17). Many times Paul prays that his converts may have wisdom, knowledge and understanding and be enlightened about the things he is writing. He says that "the mystery of Christ in other generations was not made known...but now has been revealed..." (Eph. 3:5). He states that the "things which the eye has not seen, and the ear had not heard, and which

has not entered the heart of men, all the things that God has prepared for those who love Him (a favorite funeral text used by those who insist that we cannot know these things until we die and 'go to heaven') ...to us God has revealed them through the Spirit" (I Cor. 2:9-10). Again he stated that the Spirit has been given to us "that we might know the things given us by God" (ver. 12). It is remarkable that those who claim to have an abundance of the Spirit know so little about the word of God. He then says, "we have the mind of Christ." How can anyone who has the mind of Christ remain ignorant of his word and will?

Some of the most controversial and argumentative passages in Scripture are the very ones the Apostle says he would "not have you ignorant about" or about which he asks, "do you not know?" He says we are not to be ignorant about those who died (I Thes.4:3), yet due to emotionalism, sensational preaching and prophesy experts this is one of the most misunderstood subjects of the Bible. He said he would not have us ignorant about spiritual gifts (I Cor. 12:1), yet this too is on the front burner of ignorance. Six times in I Corinthians he asks, "do you not know?" Twice concerning the fact that we will judge the world and will also judge angels (a subject Christians do not want to hear; it will interfere with their singing in the angel band). He also asks if they do not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom so why are they appealing for to the unrighteous to settle the problems? (A good question for today's modern Christian). He then asks if they do not know their bodies are a temple of the Spirit and they should not be using them for immoral purposes. Since the divorce rate today is as high as the world, evidently we do not know this. Ignorance is no excuse.

Lesser known and hardly recognized dust of death that has settled on the religious world today is the **dust of professionalism**. This is a hard subject to deal with when applied to the church. We have no trouble spotting professionalism in ministers who are pompous and arrogant, but seldom picture churches as being too professional, however, churches are as guilty as preachers. Many times the failure of the preacher is clearly seen but the failure of the people go unrecognized. Note these Scriptures: Jeremiah 5:30, 31: "An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land. The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priest rule on their own authority and My people love it so...!" II Timothy 4:3, 4: "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 lusts, and will turn away their ears from the truth, aside to fables."

The dust of professionalism is like an artificial rose. It looks like the real thing, especially from a distance. It can fool the casual observer and may add a certain charm to the room, but it has never fooled a bee. It has no aroma. A church guilty of professionalism has become cold and indifferent to the needs of others, has no real interest in anyone or anything outside of its own immediate circle, and offers no real service to those suffering in body and soul. On the other hand a professional church is always busy and faithful in certain areas of life, especially church life, which does not touch the real purpose of the church's existence.

A classic example is the church at Sardis (Rev. 3:1-5). There was nothing false being taught...no Balaam, and no Nicolaitans, as in Pergamum, no Jezebel as in Thyatira and there was no suffering and persecution as in Smyrna and Philadelphia. Rather Sardis was humming with activity. It evidently had excellent projects going with no lack of money, talent or manpower. The indictment from

the one who had the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars was "you have a name that you are alive, and you are dead." Sardis had come to terms with its pagan environment. A church guilty of professionalism has a name for being alive, but does not have the life. In their dead professionalism they experienced neither theological controversy nor persecution. As G.B. Caird wrote: "Content with mediocrity, lacking both the enthusiasm to entertain a heresy and the depth of conviction which provokes intolerance, it was too innocuous to be worth persecuting."

A.W. Tozer described the professional church as one "caught up in the monstrous heresy and noise, size, activity and bluster, they think make men dear to God." Isn't it strange that with the churches showing the greatest membership and financial growth in history, we now have the worst crime record in the world? Isn't strange also, that in a day when architecture and sculpture were at their best, the Apostles and the early Christians had no use for them as a means of "attraction" to the church. Instead they used the truth. The power of salvation is in the gospel, not being professional in the eyes of the world.

Another classic example of the dust of religious professionalism is found in Isaiah chapter one in his description of the nation of Israel in his day. They offered multiplied sacrifices and burnt offerings, appeared before God with their offerings, were careful to keep the new moons, Sabbaths, festivals and appointed feasts. They burnt incense and spread out their hands in prayer, but God said "I am weary of bearing all this...they are an abomination to Me." In our worship there is a certain "professionalism" properly viewed, but there is a grave danger that we become worshipers of worship and perform religious acts in the same unfeeling manner as the nation of Israel in Isaiah's day. This is the modern picture of the dust of professionalism.

Before we close this subject there is one more important element of the dust of death settling up on the church today we should mention, that of **the dust of covetousness**. "Covetousness" is many times translated "lust" but in and of itself it means "a strong desire". For example we read in Luke 22:15 the words of Jesus, "with desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you" and I Cor. 12:31: "But earnestly desire the greater gifts." Scriptural covetousness that is condemned is a desire for anything forbidden, an internal desire, a drive, a lust, includes every illicit desire and is a form of idolatry (Col. 3:5). If Covetousness is a sin of the individual heart how can we speak of a covetous church? It is in epistles written to churches that we have warnings against covetousness. I Cor. 10:1-11 the Apostle lists the sins of Israel in the wilderness and states that "these things happened as examples to us, that we should not crave evil things as they craved" (ver. 6). James 4:1-4 is a good example of the danger of covetousness. He shows that covetousness breeds quarrels, conflicts, wars and even murder. The covetous person makes himself an enemy of God. Heb10:5 urges us to be content with what we have because we have the promise that God will never desert nor forsake us. The character of the members of a church determines the character of the church. The church is what its members are. That is why God judged Ananias and Sapphira so harshly (Acts 6) and why Paul states in I Cor. 5:6,7 "...do you not know a little leaven leavens the whole lump, clean out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump."

The church in Laodicea (Rev. 3) shows its covetousness when it said "I am rich and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing." Christ's answer was "you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked." This is the dust of covetousness.