

LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

HARRY BOWERS, EDITOR

7844 GRIMSBY CIRCLE, HARRISBURG, N.C.

JUNE 2020

THE PANDEMIC OF THE CHURCH

Webster defines pandemic as “Gk. *Pandemos* of all the people, occurring over a wide geographic area and affecting an exceptionally high proportion of the population.” The word usually applies to an outbreak of disease such as Covid-19. Jeremiah stated: “Behold if I enter the city, behold, *diseases of famine!*” (Jer. 14:18), and Amos 8:11 states: “Behold, I will send famine on the land, not a famine for bread or a thirst for water. But rather *for hearing the words of the Lord.*” The *disease of famine for hearing the word* of the Lord is of pandemic proportions in the modern church. This is not anything new. One grievous sin of Israel in the Old Testament was their failure to hear the word of the Lord. In Isaiah chapter 6, when God called Isaiah to the prophetic office, He took Isaiah into His very presence and when Isaiah realized his sinful condition he cried out “‘Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips and I live among people of unclean lips.’ Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand which he had taken from the altar with tongs from the altar. He touched my lips with it and said, ‘Behold this has touched your lips and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.’ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send and who will go for Us?’ Then I said, ‘send me!’ He said, ‘Go and tell this people: keep, on *hearing* but do not understand, keep on seeing but do not perceive’” (Isa. 6:1-9). This passage was quoted six times in the New Testament, showing that in the time of Jesus and the Apostles the so-called people of God had not changed from the time of Isaiah and the Prophets.

Still today the religious world continues in the Pandemic disease of the famine of *hearing the word of God*. How can we say there is a famine of hearing the word today when the national landscape is replete with sprawling religious facilities defined as churches? Many are mega-churches boasting thousands in attendance each Sunday, and many who do not flock to these facilities can view them via television every Sunday plus viewing religious productions scattered throughout the cable networks during the week. The question is how many of these attendees and habitual viewers are actually *hearing the word of God*? Jesus warns his follows to “take heed what you hear” (Mark 4:23). The Apostle Paul shows the importance of hearing the word in relation to faith: “Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved. How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? ...So faith comes by *hearing and hearing* by the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:13-17). The only source of faith is in hearing the word preached. In these words the Apostle shows the indispensable necessity of the church preaching the Word of Christ. Much preaching today, in the words of Joel R. Beeke in *Whatever Happened to the Reformation* is “Modern preachers in quest of a simple gospel, favors a mere formula, a packaged presentation, instead of the whole counsel of God. Moreover, some preachers seem to have a better understanding of professional football and television programs, or of the teaching of Sigmund Freud and Paul Tillich, than they do of Moses or Paul.” This is the reason the modern church has the pandemic disease of the famine of

hearing the word of God. Or to quote Oz Guinness in *No God but God*: “The preacher, instead of looking out upon the world, looks out upon public opinion, trying to find out what the public would like to hear. He then tries his best to duplicate that and bring his finished product into a marketplace into which others are trying to do the same. The public, turning to our culture to find out about the world, discovers there is nothing but its own reflection. The unexamined world, meanwhile, drifts blindly into the future.” If any preaching makes anything other than God’s revealed truth and resources the principle of purpose, Christians risk living false lives of faith because they have accepted what Paul calls “another gospel” (Gal 1:6) and their faith is vain because they have listened to vain preaching (I Cor. 15:14). They are experiencing the disease of famine of *hearing the word*.

It is unusual to read books or hear sermons today concerning false teaching because the assumption is that whatever a person believes is all right as long as they are sincere. The New Testament writings, as well as the Old Testament, are replete with warnings against false prophets and false teachers. Jesus in the sermon on the mount declares that false teachers come in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. He further warns in Matthew 24 that many false teachers would arise and mislead many. The writings of the Apostles, notably Peter, John and Jude, give a lot of attention to the fact that false teachers would abound and warns the churches to be aware of them. It is amazing to see how quickly and easily so many believers can be drawn away after those who are actually speaking perverse things. The Apostle Paul in his parting speech to the Ephesian Elders warned “from among your own, men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:30). Peter, John and Jude warn the church of danger, not from without, but from within. It was in the context of the religious system of his day, a system that claimed to represent God as His people, that Jesus warns against false prophets and teachers. False doctrine is a perversion of Scripture. The Scriptures are perverted, and false doctrine is born when words are used to express ideas not found in Scripture. The Apostle Paul said: “...things which we speak, not in words taught by human wisdom but in those things taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual *thoughts* with spiritual *words*” (I Cor 2:13).

It matters what we *hear*. Perhaps the most common source of the *hearing* false teaching in the church today is in its hymnody. Much faith is based not upon our hearing the word, but in the singing of hymns. To most Christians this is a trivial thing, yet concerning hymns and singing we are told to “Let the word of Christ richly dwell in you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs...” (Col. 3:16). We teach by what we sing. Singing a lie is the same as preaching a lie. If the words of hymns contradict the Scripture, how can we praise God by singing them? Examine any hymnbook used in churches today and you will find more songs glorifying death than glorifying life. Our hymns teach us how great it is going to be “when we die and get over there in glory” but says little about how great it is here and now in Christ. Much is sung about what we *will* have and little about what we

now have. The average hymnal has more songs on death than resurrection and virtually none on the ascension. There is surely a famine of the disease of *hearing the word* sweeping over the religious world today and the church is concerned more with the feelings and needs of consumers to the neglect of the Word..

The famine that is in the land today is not only a famine of the *hearing* of the word of God but a famine of *ignorance* of the word of God. How many times have we heard that “ignorance is bliss” or “what you don’t know won’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 among the people of God is without excuse. Ignorance is disobedience (Rom. 10:3) and sins committed in ignorance in Israel 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 heartbreaking 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. Many times he prays that converts may have wisdom, knowledge, and understanding about the things he is writing. He says that “the mystery of Christ in other generations was not made known...but has now been revealed” (Eph. 3:5). He states that even the things which eyes has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those that love Him (a favorite funeral text and a passage 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). He then says that the Spirit was given to us (not to make us feel good, give us a tingling feeling, slay us In the Spirit. or enable us to speak in tongues or to have a secret prayer language) but “that we might know the things freely given us of God” (ver. 12). It is remarkable that many of those who claim to have an abundance of the Spirit (baptized, overwhelmed by, engulfed by the Spirit) know so little about God’s revelation in His word. 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 of Scripture are the very ones the Apostle Paul 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 have died (I Thess. 4:13) yet due to tradition, emotionalism, sensational preaching and prophesy experts, this is one of the most misunderstood subjects in 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 6 he asks: “do you not know?” Twice concerning the fact that we will judge the world and we will also judge angels (a subject most 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 those worldly folks to settle their problems? (A good question for today’s modern Christian). He then asks if they do not know about their bodies being the temple of the Spirit and they should not be using them for immoral purposes. Since the divorce rate today is as high among Christians as the world, evidently Christian. do not know this. In Romans 6 when some Christians thought they could “continue in sin” Paul answers “May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ have been baptized into his death? ...Therefore we walk in newness of life” (ver. 2-4). Not knowing the Scriptures is a *disease of famine* of pandemic proportions in the average church today. However, it is not enough to just hear the word and even have a fractional knowledge of it, we must obey the Word.

The pandemic famine disease of *nonobedience* of the Word is perhaps the most deadly of all diseases in the religious world today. James G. van Buren wrote in a 1960 *Christian Standard* “The Bible is praised more than it is read, it is read more than it is understood, it is understood more than it is obeyed.” Jesus was very emphatic about the necessity, not only of hearing and knowing his word, but in *obeying* it. We emphasize his solemn admonitory word: “Blessed are they that hear the word of God and *keep it*” (Luke 11:28). The Sermon on the Mount concludes with the insistence that our house of life can be rock-based and storm proof only if the hearing is coupled with obedience to it. James echoes the same caution when he urges “Be ye *doers* of the word, and not hearers only” (1:22). We need to understand that the commands Jesus gave and the directions he left are to be taken seriously. And the words of the Apostles must be taken to be the same as the words of Christ. There can be no dismissal of any command in the word as being unnecessary or not mandatory. Jesus said: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments...If anyone loves me, he will keep my word...” (John 14:15, 23). One cannot stand on Sunday morning and sing “O, how I love Jesus,” and refuse to obey his commands.

The Scripture speaks both of the positive results of obedience to the Word and the negative results of disobedience to the Word. After hearing the first gospel sermon preached after the ascension of Christ the record is: “Now when they heard this they were pierced to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the Apostles, ‘What shall we do?’ Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’” The result of their obedience was the forgiveness of their sins and the receiving of the Holy Spirit. Acts 5:32 States that God has given the Holy Spirit “to those who obey Him.” John 14:23 shows us what it means to have the Holy Spirit: “Jesus said ‘If any man loves me he will *keep my word*, and My Father will love him, and *We will come to him and make Our abode with him*’.” Further, “He (Christ) became to *all those who obey him* the source of eternal salvation” (Heb. 5:9). The positive results, of obeying the word are forgiveness of sin, eternal salvation, and the presence of God and Christ (by the Spirit) in our lives. The tragic results of *the famine of disobedience* is explicitly stated in the following Scriptures: II Thess. 1:8, 9: At his coming Jesus will deal out “retribution to those who *know not God* and *those who obey not the gospel*, they will pay the penalty of eternal destruction.” John 3:35: “He who *does not obey* the Son will not see life.” Rom. 1:8: “To those who *do not obey the truth*, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation.”