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EVANGELISM

Overcoming the Darkness: Three Challenges to Offering Christ

James T. Reuteler



The opening verses of John's Gospel declare that Jesus "was the light of all people" and that this "light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:4-5). Later, Jesus made this claim for himself when he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

The mission of the church is to reflect and offer Christ as the light of the world so that the darkness might be overcome. When we fail to reflect and offer that light, we lose our status as a church (the body of Christ). In the opening chapter of the Book of Revelation (1:12-13), John was given a vision of Christ standing in the midst of seven golden lampstands. These lampstands symbolize the mission of the church to reflect and offer Christ. The church exists as the body of Christ to overcome the darkness in the world. When the church fails to do that, it is faced with the threat of losing its lampstand (Revelation 2:5). The three challenges that the seven congregations in the Book of Revelation encounter are similar to the challenges we face today.¹ The issues may be different, but the challenges are the same.

The Challenge of Right Beliefs

We sometimes have the idea that what one believes does not matter. "Think and let think," we say, even if what we think turns out to be wrong. What one believes does matter. Our faith and moral behavior grow out of what we believe. The heart of the Christian faith has to do with the resurrected Jesus, who is the light of the world. Because Jesus is the light of the world, we are called to reflect and offer that light, glorifying not ourselves, but God. Formulating right beliefs is the foundational task of every congregation; yet, we can believe all the right things and still fail to keep our lampstand burning. That is what happened to the congregation in Ephesus: They were commended for right beliefs and right practices, but condemned because they had "abandoned the love [they] had at first" (Revelation 2:4).

The Challenge of Right Feelings

In spite of Paul's warning² that faith and works without love is dead, we continue to ignore the place of right feelings. Now, love is more than a feeling; but if we remove the emotional dimension of love, we lose our passion. Faith is both a decision and an emotion. We decide to believe, but we are moved to love. We need to experience what those two disciples experienced as they made their way to Emmaus with Jesus. "Were not our hearts burning within us," they cried, "while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32). We need such experiences if we are going to overcome the darkness of our world. Without these feelings, our love for God and our neighbor will grow cold and lifeless. Not only did that happen at Ephesus, it also happened in Laodicea, where the congregation was criticized for being neither hot nor cold. Because they were lukewarm, they were in danger of losing their lampstand. We face the same challenge, and that is why right feelings are so important. Faith without love is dead and incapable of overcoming the darkness.

The Challenge of Right Practices

Right practices include both personal behavior and social action. A congregation that becomes too tolerant of immoral behavior contributes to the darkness, and a congregation that fails to stand up for social justice does the same. Too much tolerance of personal and social immorality was the problem of the congregations in Pergamum and Sardis (see Revelation 2:14-15 and 3:1b-2). Moral compromise encourages immoral behavior and injustice. Personal and social

immorality are indivisible. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). Right practices cannot be separated from right beliefs and right feelings. They are as indivisible as heat and light are from fire.

Christ's commendations and condemnations to the seven congregations in the Book of Revelation shed light on what it means to be a church and what a church needs to do to reflect and offer Christ as the light of the world. As John Wesley put it, our task is "to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land."³ Until we get it right, the world will continue in darkness; but even if we do get it right, it will be a difficult task in our pluralistic society. But if Christ is the light that can move us through the darkness, then we must reflect and offer that light to the world. Our world is no more pluralistic today than it was in the first century.

[Click here to see Dr. Reuteler's chart of the "Three Characteristics of a True Church."](#)

¹For a theological understanding of these challenges, see Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), pages 146-49. Runyon gives them the theological names of Orthodoxy, Orthopathy, and Orthopraxy.

²1 Corinthians 13:1-3: ... "If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing."

³Thomas Jackson, "Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others: From the Year 1744 to the Year 1789," *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume 8 (Franklin, Tennessee: Providence House Publishers, 1995), page 299.

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