

STATE OF THE CHURCH 2010

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INTRODUCTION:

This is a season for personal inventories, and for resolutions. This is appropriate and fitting . . . unless one of your resolutions needs to be to rely less on resolutions and more on actually doing something. Assuming your resolutions help you get things done, you don't want to lose ground here in order to gain ground there. Sanctification is accumulative—one virtue should not displace another.

THE TEXT:

"Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God" ([Rev. 3:2](#))

"Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing" ([Phil. 3:16](#)).

SUMMARY OF THE TEXT:

Our first text is taken from the admonition given to the church at Sardis, and it is a pretty stern rebuke. The church there had a reputation for being alive, but was dead (v. 1). It became apparent in the next verse that they were not *completely* dead (v. 2), but the remaining life there was about to die. There were just a few embers in what had been a roaring fire, and those needed to be blown back into a blaze. "Strengthen the things that remain" means that they needed to get back to first principles, they needed to go back to the word they had first received (v. 3). In the words of the admonition to the church at Ephesus, they needed to return to their first love.

The second text assumes that those reading the exhortation have been faithful, and the call is not to repentance. At the same time, there is no sense of "having arrived." Paul does not consider himself as having "apprehended" but he continues to press on toward the goal (v. 13). The mark that he strives for is the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus (v. 14). Anyone who is mature should think the same way, which shows us that maturity is not complacency (v. 15). Let us continue to do what got us here (v. 16). Let us live up to what we have already attained.

If we have wandered off the path, let us return to it. If we have stayed on the path, by the grace of God, let us keep on.

TIME AND OBEDIENCE:

In this world, time is not an automatic friend. We have just passed one of our culture's milestones for time, going from the year 2009 to the year 2010. This is good . . . or it is not. Time deepens wisdom, but it also hardens folly. Time is given so that we might have time to repent, but it also given so that we might be without excuse. Time allows the grain to ripen, and it allows the weeds to grow. Time allows the meat to roast in the oven, and is also what causes it to burn.

KEEPING THE GOSPEL:

God is triune, and reveals Himself to us as triune. The principle way He chose to do this is through the Incarnation of Jesus. In other words, the doctrine of the Trinity was made necessary by God's complete identification with us—which seems counterintuitive. How can the fact that the eternal Logos became a human being forever and ever lead us to the a complex doctrinal formulation that makes our heads hurt? Well, if it makes our heads hurt, then perhaps we are not as Trinitarian as we might like to believe. It is a given that the infinite God cannot be comprehended by finite minds. That much even unbelievers can know. But our glory is that this infinite God who cannot be comprehended took on human flesh forever, and has assumed a dwelling place among us. The relationship we have with *Emmanuel*, God with us, is not a relationship with a figure of speech. This is gospel; this is what God has done—a perfect man, living a perfect life on our behalf, and then offering up that life in blood sacrifice, so that we might be put right on the basis of His resurrection from the dead. Put right? Put right with what? With everything . . . put right with ourselves, put right with the creation, put right with our neighbor, and put right with our God.

KEEPING THE GOSPEL FRESH:

This gospel, in its experienced reality, is transformative. It changes things, and, as it happens, it often changes things that didn't want to be changed. Over time, one of two things will happen. The first is that we persevere in staying on the path, just as we ought to have done. If this is the case, then we need to be encouraged to "keep on keeping on," as we used to say. The other option is that we slide back into the ways of death, as the saints at Sardis did, all while keeping relics of the gospel around. We revert to the sin while keeping this very fine catechism. As time progresses, that catechism becomes a large pebble in our shoe, one that makes us walk funny.

The way we deal with this is that we objectify the truth, putting it "out there," giving credence to it "in its place." Thinking that we have created a safe house for the truth to live in, we are actually killing it. The truth is meant to be lived, and if it isn't lived it isn't our truth. The truth is meant to be loved, and if it isn't loved it isn't our truth. Now truth is objective, but we must not objectify it. That is what Paul is talking about when he says that the letter kills but the Spirit gives life. Paul is not hostile to letters—he wrote "the letter kills" with letters. His words are objectively true, and by this we mean that they are not made true by our applause, and they are not falsified when we withhold our applause. But we objectify truth when we say, "Yeah, uh huh, I heard that before." Or "I knew that once." For those in this position, they must either come to their first love, or they must return to it.

KEEPING IT SIMPLE:

This year our congregation will be 35 years old. During that time, children born in the first years have grown up, married, and are bringing up children of their own in this same congregation. Things we knew and learned have been successfully passed on—let us continue to live up to what we have already attained. Some have joined the conversation part way, and feel like they are always catching up. Some other things we have drifted away from, and so let us return to the basic things, the simple things—love God and hate sin. Love His Word, despise the world, and learn to love the world.

A fitting conclusion is provided by a couple songs—the old gospel song *Sweet Jesus* says, "Everybody talking about heaven ain't goin' there." And as the song *Denomination Blues* puts it, "Ya gotta have Jesus, and that's all."



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