

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series: New Year Messages
Number: 6
Text: II Peter 1:12-15
Date: January 10, 2010 (a.m.)

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An Apostolic Sense of Urgency: A Ready Reminder

George Barna, the highly acclaimed pollster guru that Evangelicals harken to like the ancients did the Oracle of Delphi,¹ produced another survey that showed that born-again Christian adults in the United States think and act virtually the same as nonbelievers. Questioning respondents about everything from parenting priorities to education and from moral absolutes to the importance of their religious beliefs, Barna said there was almost no difference between those professing to be born-again Christians and non-Christians. “For years we have reported research findings showing that born-again adults think and behave very much like everyone else,” he said. “It often seems that their faith makes very little difference in their life. This new study helps explain why that is: Believers do not train their children to think or act any differently. When our kids are exposed to the same influences, without much supervision, and are generally not guided to interpret their circumstances and opportunities in light of biblical principles, it’s no wonder that they grow up to be just as involved in gambling, adultery, divorce, cohabitation, excessive drinking and other unbiblical behaviors as everyone else.”²

In his, Statistics for the Changing Church (2008), Barna finds four Mega-Themes in recent research: “...More than two out of three... noted that they are open to new ideas and easily adapt to change.... Most Americans, it seems, are willing to change as long as the pathway promises benefit and enjoyment, and generally avoids pain, conflict and sacrifice. “...adults – especially those under 30 – regularly strive to be connected to a substantial number of other people and yet possess a nagging sense of loneliness, isolation and restlessness. The constant involvement with social networking via the Internet, text messaging and phone calls via mobile devices... are manifestations of the investment in relationships and connections that are important but somehow not as fulfilling as desired.... “...people are reframing not just faith in general, but Christianity in particular. While slightly fewer adults – and many fewer teens – are identifying themselves as Christians these days, the image of the Christian faith has taken a beating.... The result is that those who choose to remain Christian – however they define it – are also reformulating the popular notion of what ‘Christian’ and the Christian life mean.... “Rigidity of belief – which includes the notion that there are absolute moral and spiritual truths – perceived by a large (and growing) share of young people to be evidence of closed-mindedness. The result is a nouveau form and structure for the Christian faith....”

Barna’s *modus operandi* is to track what is currently popular, or in vogue in the culture, and then recommend that churches adapt to the trend. One example of Barna’s approach is seen in his controversial book, *Revolution*, where Barna calls upon Christians to become revolutionaries by abandoning the institutional Church and going *solo*, as a new way of “doing church.” This approach seeks to customize one’s spiritual needs, primarily around the internet, as a new model for a personalized faith experience. Everything is built around the individual. Here is how Barna

put it. “The United States is home to an increasing number of revolutionaries. These people are devout followers of Jesus Christ, who are serious about their faith, who are constantly worshipping and interacting with God, and whose lives are centered on their belief in Christ. Some of them are aligned with a congregational church, but many of them are not. The key to understanding revolutionaries is not what church they attend, or even if they attend. Instead, it’s their complete dedication to being thoroughly Christian by viewing every moment of life through a spiritual lens and making every decision in light of biblical principles. *These are individuals who are determined* to glorify God every day, through every thought, word and deed in their lives” (p. 8). Elsewhere he noted, “Whether you become a Revolutionary immersed in, minimally involved in, or completely disassociated from a local church is irrelevant to me (and, within boundaries, to God). What matters is not whom you associate with (i.e., a local church), but who you are” (p. 39). According to Barna, the local church is non-essential.³ The truth is, a great many Christians today “really don’t believe ideas have consequences any longer. They have some vague notion that there are bad ideas out there and that they won’t sleep peacefully until they are squelched with extreme prejudice, but unless the ideas come from other academics they are not really dangerous, and to treat them as lethal is a little unbalanced. The truth is, every error is fatal—*eventually*. All errors aren’t immediately fatal, and we lose track of the small errors in our battles over the big errors, and I’m sure that can’t always be helped. But one result of this misperception is that we organize our objections according to the size of the errors and the threat we perceive in them.”⁴

As Machen pointed out, a “salutary lack of logic” often prevented “the whole of a man’s faith being destroyed when he has given up a part.”⁵ Machen insisted, however, that eventually the yeast would leaven the whole lump. The tragic truth is that bad theology only leads to more bad theology and eventually to how ministry is done. Our theological presuppositions or premises will, sooner or later, begin to impact us practically. (In the modernism Machen was facing it was the premises of theological liberalism - today it is the cultural influence that plagues much of Evangelicalism.) Much of today’s Evangelicalism suffers from theological amnesia.

In this opening section of Peter’s second epistle, we find the apostle’s resolutions, two of them to be exact. To begin with he resolves to always be *reminding* them of the truths stated in the immediate context. Next, he resolves to “make every effort” to see that after his death they will “always be able to remember these things.” Peter was well aware of the tendency we all have as sinful human beings to forget. “But men are men,” as Shakespeare has put it, “the best sometimes forget.” We all have sung the words of Robert Burns Auld Lang Syne... “Should auld acquaintance be forgot, and never brought to mind?” And yet we do forget. How quickly we forget great people, great events and great truths. I am not simply referring to awkward and uncomfortable moments when we run into an old acquaintance and can’t remember his name or, worse yet, when we forget that today was our wedding anniversary. The forgetfulness I have in mind is captured by Ecclesiastes 9:14-15. “There was once a small city with only a few people in it. And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siege works against it. Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man.” Many a great and noble person has suffered such a deplorable fate. This was personally brought home with a frown by something that happened to my brother when he visited England recently. While touring Oxford University he was astonished to find the tour guide completely oblivious to the name of England’s greatest theologian, John Owen. When he informed the guide that Owen had been Dean of Christ Church and Vice-Chancellor of Oxford under Oliver Cromwell, the chap simply shrugged his shoulders and continued his lecture on the important people associated with that famed institution. It is really unthinkable, at least in my mind, that John Owen should be unknown to anyone officially connected with Oxford. But, then again, is it not the case, that we tend to forget things that we consider unimportant? We remember the things that we esteem and we forget

those things that we do not value (forgetting your wedding anniversary more than once could lead your spouse to that conclusion!).

The Bible even refers to the sin of forgetfulness. How can forgetfulness actually be referred to as sin? Psalm 106:6, 7 explains: “We have sinned, even as our fathers did; we have done wrong and acted wickedly. When our fathers were in Egypt, they gave no thought to your miracles; they did not remember your many kindnesses, and they rebelled by the sea, the Red Sea.” Forgetfulness led to unfaithfulness. The Psalmist links this forgetfulness to a lack of understanding and a failure to appreciate what God had done. In Deuteronomy 9:7, God reminds His people of this very same incident and charges them to remember their forgetfulness! Now this will, no doubt, strike us as a strange thing to do because we prefer the kind of counsel that is echoed in the line from a song by Barbra Streisand, “What’s too painful to remember we simply choose to forget.” Sounds good and, besides, this advice is frequently heard from the pulpit, and there is not shortage of books in the average Christian bookstore that play this tune. We are confidently told that remembering our own troubled past with all our failings and weaknesses produces only guilt and this is bad for our self-esteem. It only serves to halt the healing process our fragile psyche so desperately needs and will likewise frighten our wounded inner-child. God, the great therapist in the sky, we are assured, surely doesn’t want us to remember such unpleasant things, does He? On the contrary. He does. For example, in Ezekiel 16:22 and 43 God rebukes His covenant people for not remembering their past and then in verses 61 and 63 He declares that the day is coming when they will remember and will be ashamed. This note is played in the New Testament as well. In Revelation 2:5, the church at Ephesus is instructed by the glorified Christ to “Remember the height from which you have fallen,” and in 3:3 the church at Sardis is given similar exhortation. Paul’s admonition to the Gentile Christians in Ephesians 2:11, 12 is likewise a call to graphically remember their past condition. Peter’s call to remembrance is repeated three times in this passage and this is made all the more emphatic and solemn by the apostle’s reference to his approaching death.

I. PETER’S PRINCIPLES

There are a number of principles that can be gleaned from this passage of Scripture. They are general points which are of great value not only to the Christian, but can and should be used when dealing with non-Christians.

- A. The Difference Between Being Aware of Something and Really Knowing It. Note Peter’s language in verse 12 (compare with James 4:17).
- B. The Memory Needs to Be Stimulated. (verse 13). The word translated “*to refresh*” in the NIV is the infinitive form of DIEGEIRO, to wake out of sleep, to stir up (as in the ESV). The preposition in compound is perfective so that the actual meaning is “to stir up or wake up thoroughly.”⁶ (The same word appears in 3:1 where it is translated “*to stimulate you to wholesome thinking.*”)

II. PETER’S CONVICTIONS

What are the great things that Peter wishes to rehearse with his readers?

- A. Life Itself. The Bible never likens human life to that of animals. We are created in the image of God. We are not the product of random chance. Life has purpose and significance. But life is short and all of us must, like Peter, depart this life.
- B. The Nature of Life. Life is more than physical existence. We live in this world in a body and we experience life through our bodies—but the body is a kind of tent. Why

does the apostle speak like this? I think it is to underscore the reality that this body and this world will pass away.

- C. The Whole Purpose of Life. What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. We need to be constantly reminded that we are here to do more than simply gratify our physical needs and find self-fulfillment and personal happiness. We have to give an account to our Creator (Hebrews 4:13).

CONCLUSION: J. C. Ryle, writing towards the end of the 19th century, made this observation which applies equally to our own times. "There is much in the attitude of professing Christians in this day which fills me with concern and makes me full of fear for the future. There is an amazing ignorance of Scripture among many, and a consequent want of established, solid religion. In no other way can I account for the case of which people are, like children, tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine. There is an Athenian love of novelty abroad and a morbid distaste for anything old and regular, in the beaten path of our forefathers. Thousands will crowd to hear a new voice and a new doctrine without considering for a moment whether what they hear is truth. There is an incessant craving after any teaching which is sensational and exciting and rousing to the feelings. Inability to distinguish differences in doctrine is spreading far and wide, and as long as the preacher is clever and earnest, hundreds seem to think it must be all right, and call you dreadfully narrow and uncharitable if you hint that he is unsound."⁷ Peter is not exhorting his readers to live in the past. He is not urging them to live simply by memories. As Martin Lloyd-Jones has observed, "that is an attempt to walk forwards looking backwards at the same time, and it is something that is wrong in and of itself."⁸ Remembrance, in the biblical sense, is more than simply a recollection. Peter is calling his readers to actively engage their minds so that they understand and, therefore, do not forget. "The business of the church and of preaching is not to present us with new and interesting ideas, it is rather to go on reminding us of certain fundamental and eternal truths."⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ Delphi was inhabited since Mycenaean times (14th – 11th c. B.C.) by small settlements who were dedicated to the Mother Earth deity. The worship of Apollo as the god of light, harmony, and order was established between the 11th and 9th centuries. Slowly over the next five centuries the sanctuary grew in size and importance. During the 8th c. B.C. Delphi became internationally known for the Oracular powers of Pythia—the priestess who sat on a tripod, inhaled ethylene gasses, and muttered incomprehensible words that foretold the future. The ancient people of the Mediterranean had such faith in Pythia's view of the future that no major decision was made without consulting the Oracle of Delphi first. Greek and foreign dignitaries, heads of state, and common folk made the pilgrimage to the Delphi sanctuary, and paid great sums for Pythia's oracles. Since the sanctuary only served the public a few days over nine months out of the year, great sums were paid by the more affluent ones in order to bypass the long line of pilgrims. <http://ancient-greece.org/history/delphi.html>

² The Barna Group, as cited in "Christians Parent No Different than 'World,'" WorldNetDaily.com, March 3, 2005, online at http://www.wnd.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=43128.

³ For more on Barna, see my sermon series *The Local Church* (July 19 – Oct. 11, 2009).

⁴ I owe this snippet to the always insightful <http://remonstrans.net/>

⁵ As cited by G. L. W. Johnson in *Whatever Happened to The Reformation?* Eds. G. L. W. Johnson and R. F. White (P & R, 2000) p. 21.

⁶ J. B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St. Jude and the Second Epistle of St. Peter* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1978), p. 101.

⁷ J. C. Ryle, *Holiness*, (rpt. Evangelical Press, 1956) p. 17.

⁸ M. Lloyd-Jones, *Expository Sermons on II Peter* (Banner of Truth trust, 1983), p. 56.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 57. Listen to the advice of the old Scot, John Brown: "There is something very far wrong in a Christian teacher's estimation of his duties and responsibilities if he can be heard, even for a very few Sabbaths in succession, without putting his hearers in mind of the great elementary principles of Christian faith and duty, by which both saints and sinners are most likely to be stirred up—the things whereby men live, and in which is the life of the soul." *II Peter: Parting Counsels* (rpt. Banner of Truth Trust, 1980), p. 163.