THOUGHTS OF SEPTEMBER, 2020

1. My soul is bothered by all of the religiosity, so I was helped today when the Lord reminded me that the only one who can be non-religious is Jesus Himself. Yes, that helped relieve my steam.
2. I want to talk about the presence [or absence or absolute perfection] of holy spirituality in today’s church. As always, our standard of perfection is Jesus’ life and teachings, and perhaps the showing forth of His life and teachings in the lives of the apostles.

But first a point. Spirituality and works of the Holy Spirit are very important, but they are not the most important, so first I want to put true spirituality into the Lord’s proper perspective.

When the seventy joyfully returned to Jesus, saying, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name,” Jesus blessed and approved them and their ministry, then added, “Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven” – Luke 10:20. The wonderful gift of eternal life is central, although holy spiritual living and ministry are promised and commanded. There should be no question of that.

He had already told them, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter; many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles’ and then I will declare to them ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’” – Matt. 7:21-23. Again, eternal life is central, and the point here is that holy spiritual power and ministry can be mis-handled, and with significant consequences for the hereafter.

Without going into the complete understanding of those two important comments of Jesus, it is enough for our purposes today to say that Jesus said having our names written in heaven is more important than having spiritual power, and certainly that spiritual loose cannons do not impress Him. In other words, the Lord desires humble, obedient faithfulness. When that is working within us, and between us and one another, and between us and the Lord, it is safe to seek and exercise holy spiritual power. I don’t want to be too “boxy,” but recall what Jesus said.

Gideon showed that sort of safety in Judges chapter six when as a defeated man, in a defeated family, in a defeated nation, he replied to God’s greeting of, “The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior” with, “O my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, ..?” Powerful miracles were a sign of God’s presence and approval among God’s Old Testament believers, as they were a sign of God’s presence in and approval of Jesus, and are still a sign of God’s presence and approval with the church [that’s you and me and other believers]. It is a reasonable question to ask ourselves how the Lord of the church shows forth His approval of His church where you are.

In His Great Commission, Jesus said, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” – Matt. 28:18-20. He said He would be with them everywhere, but from there onward, He would be invisible … present, with all authority [power], but invisible. That was and is a challenge, right?

As it had been during those three years when He had been with them physically, they should still preach the gospel, heal the sick and cast out demons – plus go everywhere, making and baptizing disciples. They did that. And spiritual reality continued to follow them.

I hope in have put holy spiritualities in proper perspective, so now we will deal with their essential presence and absence in our own lives and ministries.

Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father´-- John 14:12. When Jesus returned to heaven, His Father gave the Holy Spirit to believers so they/we would have the same power source and the same power as did Jesus. [Selah – that is something to meditate on.]

Church history in and outside of scripture shows the waning and waxing of the Holy Spirit’s activity and power in the church to be closely aligned with recognizable outpourings of the Holy Spirit, during which biblical spirituality springs to life. It is good to point out that the same pattern was lived out by the people of God in the Old Testament – humanity has not changed, even with the abiding Holy Spirit.

Many people who are now alive in America and other nations are and have been a part of such outpourings and manifestations of the Holy Spirit’s presence and power, which show the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Central to our conversation are such as the five-fold gifts of Christ’s word in Ephesians chapter 4, and the nine gifts of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians chapters 12, 13, and 14.

I have seen many miraculous healings of bodies and minds, and I will list a few. As usual, I choose to select as testimony those examples in which I had first-hand involvement: Chronic bronchitis and smoking, mental-emotional spiritual deliverances, control over the weather, raising the dead, breaking of addictions and bad habits. machinery malfunctions, financial miracles, and others. Call me if you want to hear those testimonies. Many are in my book, “God’s Doctor.”

We are living in a very spiritually active world. However, in my experience these years, the most obvious spiritual activity is unholy spirituality – rioting, pillaging, homosexuality, murder, abortion, radical feminism [the Jezebel spirit], wars [official, and long-term skirmishes], immorality in high and low places [including in the church], failure of the family, and many more. The Lord wants us to live as informed and vocal victors amidst this carnage. We are now in a major spiritual war. Satan wants us to be ignorant of these things, of the spirituality in all things and situations, so that even though he has lost us to the kingdom of God we will just sit on the sidelines out of the real action – neutralized and quiet.

I think our conclusion has to be that the prince, the ruler, of this world, Satan, and his many co-fallen angels, are intent upon destroying God’s purposes, not only personally as in Jesus’ life and ministry but also in all believers’ and unbelievers’ lives, in all of God’s creation, at all times. That is shown on almost every page of scripture from Genesis to Revelation. Everything is spiritually motivated, directed or controlled, although ultimately in every case by the Holy Spirit to God’s glory and for our eternal betterment.

Might I ask a question? Can we say that there is a paucity of biblical spiritual activity today in the church? Why? What is the spiritual condition of the church, and what does the Lord think about it? Is He “understanding” because He is a good God and we are but flesh and we cannot do better? Are the way things now are, the best He can do or wants to do? What did Jesus say about that? Why did our Father send us the Holy Spirit? Why the intermittent outpourings [waxings and wanings] of His Holy Spirit instead of steady, high level spirituality?

1. There is a close attachment between pity and mercy. Pity assumes need on the part of him who receives it, and mercy assumes adequate resources to meet the need on the part of him who shows it. Pity is a tender feeling toward those in misery or distress, which alone is nearly worthless; it must be followed by helpful action, if possible. The Lord pities those who fear Him [who hold Him in highest respect], and acts mercifully according to His eternal plans for them.
2. We have been talking about the church. That’s me, you, many other people [“people” includes Jesus Christ, who is a member of the church], plus the active ex-officio presence among us of the Holy Spirit. Our Father is not a member of the church; we are becoming members of Him. Without Jesus, and without the Holy Spirit, there would be no church. The Holy Spirit leads and empowers the church, and Jesus is the head of the church. Our ongoing question is, “What is the Lord-Head doing with the church?” Peripheral questions are, “What is the church doing with the church,” and “What is the world doing with the church?”

First, question number three. The world plays a vital role in the life of the church, providing persecution for those who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus – 2 Tim. 3:12. The world also provides life situations, like police, transportation, food, etc. Jesus is Lord of all, now, but it is not His plan to show that He is Lord of all at this time, although He is. At this time, He is working to show that He is Lord of the church, and much of that showing forth is only see by eyes of faith. For that to show, there must be persecution of His disciples. There is little or no persecution of non-disciples, because it is discipleship that makes us distinctive from the world, and the world hates Christian distinctiveness. That is our answer to question three – “What is the world doing with the church?” – persecuting her, and providing a society for her.

Now for question number two. Much of the church also hates Christian distinctiveness – not so much in its variable religiosities, but in its biblical life-style and proclamations, wherever the church may have biblical life-style and proclamations [For a moment, recall the negative actions and attitudes of the already-established churches toward the Charismatic Renewal and other outpourings of the Holy Spirit]. That is a partial answer to our question number two of: “What is the church doing with the church?”

Now to our question number one: “What is the Lord doing with the church?” The church is Jesus’ hand-picked, blood-bought, eternal bride, His beloved [thank God!], and He knows all of her [and my, and your] imperfections. He knew them before He selected us, but selected us anyway – not because we were worth something and could make a notable contribution to His project, but because we were dead in our sins, helpless, lying in the dirt, going nowhere, dying. He looked at us, pitied us, loved us, had compassion, and gave us His life. He is now cleaning us up.

He made it His job to change us from Godlessness to Godliness. Although that change job has started here in this earth-life, it will need to continue into our after-earth life, because He is making us like Jesus. Not almost like Jesus, but like Jesus. And He has not purposed to change us by Himself. Preparing the church for its future is not only His job. He incorporates us into bringing the church into existence, and for perfecting her – warts and all. We are His co-laborers.

The main thing I have to work on within myself when talking about the warts on the church’s nose is to keep a righteous attitude. I have no difficulty getting my facts at least mostly right; I can recognize warts along with the best of church critics. They are easy to see within me, among us, and within the church at large. But, speaking up with the truth among those who do not see, so do not agree, or who see but do not want to deal with the truth, tempts my human flesh to harden, or become pushy, or become unrighteous, or to withdraw.

Instead, as I work to remain honest with the Lord about my own warts, the Holy Spirit gives me a clear mind, well-spoken words, and compassion for the fallen, ignorant, and rebellious who are following in the well-worn path that I have traveled. The problem is that some of those saints do not always desire to receive the Lord’s correction. [Surprise!] Even God’s own compassion may sound like wrong or harsh judgment to some ears, as it did to the Pharisees and Sadducees of Jesus’ day. When God’s judgment about His people is spoken with God’s compassion, it is still His judgment. The penitent ones receive it as the blessing it is. At the same time, the unrepentant receive it as the condemnation it becomes for them.

That serves as a reminder to us, that when the Lord sends a messenger, He not only gives His messenger His message but requires His own attitude of them. Messengers need to be serious about standing in for the Lord with both His messages and attitudes toward the receivers of the message. The other side of the coin is that those who receive the message are responsible for hearing and obeying, no matter the real or supposed unrighteousness of the messenger. The flesh looks for ways to dodge messages.

I think the message to the church is, “Wake up, family. See what is going on. The fig tree has budded. Remember what is yet to be done.” All things eternal are up to the Lord, but He always involves us in them in various ways. Mark 4:26-29 reads, “The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows – how, he himself does not know. The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”

The message is that there is a seed planter, a time of watering, a time of patience, a time of growth, and a time for the Lord of His harvest to harvest His crop. Those times seem to be partly in our hands, because we are watchmen, shepherds, laborers who know what is going on, and each of us have our part to play in the process -- to know what is going on, and to speak and act accordingly. We cannot make the Lord’s eternal things happen, but we are to partake actively in the process.

We are the church. The power of God the Holy Spirit is offered to the church through faith, not through theology. Theology is man’s best efforts to understand God and His ways – what He requires of us. But, despite theologies, we are beset with unbelief. We are exercising so little of the faith that we are offered. Faith is the lightning rod for the Spirit, but faith in the church seems to have been redefined as a way to believe, no longer as Who we believe and how He leads us. Functional faith in the Lord’s written word is being replaced with theological correctness, with humanistic revision of the scriptures, and with those watered-down ways of life. Wrong is labeled as right, and right as wrong. We have much of which to repent before the harvest comes.

The more we see of the church’s warts, the more responsibility we have for speaking up. The Laodicean church is in a wilderness, wandering around in circles with its Egyptian riches and gods, depending on the living God only when necessary for blessings in these more difficult times, and those sorts of blessings are running out. We have gone through generations of being starved of scripture, being led by religious leaders who came out of colleges or seminaries where their personal faith had been watered down, and the thoughts of a powerful, biblical life as the Body of Christ had been reduced to Madison Avenue religiosity, whose counterfeit religion is powerless and deceptive. But the harvest is coming. Like at Jesus Christ’s first coming, the devil is frantically working to stop His second coming. He caused misery then, and is now, but these are the end of days, and the harvest is coming. The Lord is irresistible.

You will recall that the Spirit tells us in the New Testament that the things that happened to God’s Old Testament people happened to them for our sakes, and were recorded for our sakes – 1 Cor. 10:11. That was a powerful and loving act of God, and we owe a lot to the Lord and to those Old Testament saints for what they went through for us.

As God’s hand-picked people, Israel had been carefully watched over, nourished, and given a choice piece of real estate called the Promised Land. The Promised Land was where the promises of God were full-time effective, as long as they trusted and obeyed Him. In that place, they were to worship their God certain ways, and only at their capital city, Jerusalem. At times they did well. They honored and obeyed their invisible, living, and powerful God. They served and worshiped Him in the ways He directed, despite their many differences compared to the nations around them – nations who had visible, wonderful, manmade gods and very different worship.

They had been a united twelve-tribe nation, but became divided into two groups -- 10 tribes [retaining the name of Israel] and 2 tribes [called Judah]. The nation of Judah retained Jerusalem as its capital city. DANGEROUS COMMENT: I have often thought of the possibility that our division of Christianity into the already-present Catholic church and the newly named Lutherans, or Protestants, is comparable to the major division of Greater Israel. When you begin to think of that possibility, you can imagine the many-faceted confliction that arises in formerly-brotherly conversation.

The division of God’s Old Testament people weakened them, as is to be expected. The northern kingdom, Israel, deteriorated first, into living and worshipping like the nations around them. They never did completely stop worshipping their invisible, living God, Jehovah – they just added the worship of those other gods. The worship of those other gods meant that Israel no longer worshipped Jehovah in spirit and truth, which is the only way to worship Jehovah. As a result of their apostasy, the northern kingdom was overcome by the neighboring empire of Assyria, the people were carried off into other nations, and the area was repopulated with idol-worshipping, pagan foreigners.

NOTE: a) Worshipping in spirit is alive and personal. It originates from our hearts, from within, is sincere, is motivated by our love for the Lord, and is stirred by our gratitude for all He is and has done. Spiritual worship is not mechanical or formalistic, so requires that all physical postures or symbolic actions be infused with heartfelt faith and love. Spiritual worship stirs us to rejoice and give thanks. In that spiritual condition, the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see and trust Jesus and to live our biblical Body of Christ lives.

 b) Worshipping in truth is living and worshipping according to the God of scripture. As God’s children, we must be informed by who that Lord is and what He is like. The Spirit reveals Jesus to us. Jesus is the church’s one foundation, our Lord. He is a solid rock. He means what He says in His printed word and in His continually fresh prophetic words. When His church gets off course, He sends His word and heals those who will listen.

 a+b) Spirit and truth worship is God-centered, not us-centered. It is not based on what feels good, but does make us feel right. Us-centered worship is idolatry. See John 4:23-24; 1 Cor. 2:12-16.

2 Kings 17:24-4**1**, being in the Old Testament, is given to us as an example, and was written for our instruction, Right? Let us go through those Old Testament verses and apply them to us -- the condition and habits of God’s people, the church, today:

 v. 24 – The Promised Land had been emptied of ten of the twelve tribes of God’s chosen people. Assyria had replaced them with unbelievers, those not chosen by Jehovah, those with whom He had not covenanted, those who did not even know Him. Those Gentiles took over the 10-tribe separatist nation of Israel in the Promised Land. The remaining two-tribe nation of Judah was not doing well either, and they would fall into the hands of Babylon in later years.

 v. 25 – The Gentiles did not fear [honor] the Lord, and indeed could not. But He was still the Landlord of the Land. He would not tolerate the misuse and abuse of His property. He sent lions into the land to bring death to its unbelieving inhabitants. What are today’s lions in God’s Promised Land? Answer: The usual – financial distress, untreatable diseases, constant wars, social unrest, incompetent leadership, apostacy, anarchy, etc. What is today’s Promised Land? Answer: Entering into God’s rest by faith in Jesus, where God’s promises are fulfilled – Heb. 4:all.

 v. 26 – Those unbelievers in God’s Land appealed to their national Assyrian leader for help, knowing that they had a religious problem and therefore needed a strong religious answer. Religion is blind, deaf, powerless and never the answer; but it is the opiate of the masses [Karl Marx].

 v. 27 – The king of Assyria, quite a multi-religious man himself, sent them an apostate priest of Jehovah from among his captives in Babylon. There is nothing like sending an unsuccessful defeated apostate to revive a dying or dead group, yet the church continues doing that in our day. Apostate priests and other ministers, from apostate universities and seminaries, cannot bring the people into worship in spirit and truth, so we fail again. The best they can do is go through religious ceremonies, teaching the customs and traditions of the church.

 v. 28 – So that priest taught them how they “should” fear [honor] Jehovah, who to them was just another god among gods – the god who would protect them from their lions.

 v. 29 - 31 – But they continued also worshipping their other gods.

 v. 32 – Their hired priests did what the people wanted.

 v. 33 – They got their religious act together, to get from their god what they wanted, which was protection from the lions. That’s us, calling on God/gods to get what we want from them!

 v. 34 – But their religious diligence did them no good; it had some form but no reality to it. No spirit, no truth.

 v. 35 – Why? Because they were not His covenanted people [not born-again], so they could not keep covenant. Our comparable problem is that all on the rolls of the church are not born-again. Being born-again is the result of the Lord putting His Spirit in us, which no man can do.

 v. 36 - 40 – This was the covenant that the Lord made with His chosen people,

 v. 41 – And those half-breeds, later called Samaritans, did no better, until Jesus met the woman at the well – John 4.

1. Finney would preach and sometimes the whole congregation would get up and leave. How many of today’s preachers, Sunday School teachers, politicians or activists would persist in the face of that sort of response? Getting prompt, positive results is very good, but the importance of our message is what really motivates us.

1. When we are born-again by the Spirit of God, and begin loving His printed Word, and becoming involved at least a bit in church life, we begin to get a picture of Jesus’ bride, the church, how she is, how He loves her as we are, how He wants His bride to become, and what He does to beautify us. I know that each of our one-person exposures to the Bible and to church are limited, but the Holy Spirit takes us beyond our limitations and show us Life beyond our experiences. No one except the Holy Spirit has a total Life experience, so we can depend on Him to inform and enrich us beyond common expectations if we are spiritually alive and biblically oriented.

In Thought No. Four we talked about three questions: 1) What is the Lord Jesus doing with His church? 2) What is the church doing with Jesus’ church? 3) What is the world doing with Jesus’s church? Today we will enlarge upon what we said last time. Let’s take those questions in order. Remember that when we talk about the church we are first talking about “me,” then our close others, then millions of God-chosen others. Let’s keep it personal, family and honest.

Question No. One: What is the Lord doing with His church?

 1) The Lord is bringing the church forth from God’s reality in eternity past, into our reality in eternity present, for purposes in God’s and our realities in eternity future, during which He will duplicate in us the nature and works of Christ, and much more. He is making us like Jesus was and is – nothing less, and then has a fantastic family social life and outreach plan. What a project! The present time of the church on earth is our kindergarten experience. We are learning our history [meaning pre-creation, Old Testament, New Testament, end times, Tribulation, Millennium, and God’s tabernacle on earth among men], our mathematics [meaning Jesus + me = victory; and one puts 1,000 to flight and 2 put 10,000 to flight; and greater is He who is in (us) than he who is in the world], and our geography [such as, our feet are on this earth but we are seated with Christ in heaven at the right hand of our Father]. All of that is but a taste of eternal reality.

 2) The Lord is bringing the church into being, from being simply humans in a religious organization, to being born-again saints in a powerful spiritual Body doing the works of Christ, and greater; from being self-centered children, to being a united and well-coordinated organization run from the top down – Jesus being our Head. The Lord is fulfilling His Spirit-breathed written Word; He is sending His Word by missionaries, prophets, and other overcomers and healing the world according to His schedule, and by what He means by “healing the world” at the present time. The world’s perfect healing is scheduled for over 1,000 years from now, which is just a bit over “one day” from now. We are on His schedule and He is always on time.

 3) The Lord is being very patient with His beloved church. The Laodicean part of the church is rebellious, splintered, blind, deaf, untaught, self-centered, and does not know, or care to know, about the Lord and how to walk the way of the cross. That part of the church is in this world and is of this world. It is content with getting from our God enough of whatever we want, and to keep going according to our own well-established plans and desires. But the Philadelphia part of the church, which is in this world but not of this world, sees the world as a missionary field with its door wide open, and hears the Lord saying, “Go.” It has little power but well-uses what it has, and needs little more than grace for another day with Jesus and the lost. It is changing its part of their world by paying the price of dying to itself daily, bearing their crosses, and receiving Christ’s life.

 4) Much of what the Lord of the church is doing is invisible to the world and to the worldly [Laodicean] part of the church. Among reasons for this invisibility are, 1) to protect His holy ones until their work is adequately accomplished and 2) the blindness of the flesh. The Holy Spirit plus a holy remnant are getting big-time results through expensive, personal evangelism, principally but not only in Third World nations. Church and para-church organizations are providing Bibles, teachers and financial aid. The work goes forward. Millions are being brought into the church, then are turning around and bringing in others.

Question No. Two: What is the church doing with Jesus’ church? Instead of answering that question directly, I’ll start with what the Lord of the church commanded and equipped His church to do and is still commanding and equipping His church to do. Then the answer to this question will be obvious.

Jesus said His church would break down Hell’s gates. That requires a power source -- the power source that Jesus had, the person of the Holy Spirit. This is a spiritual anointing upon believers, resulting in power; not the Spirit’s indwelling of believers, resulting in eternal life. So, when Jesus returned to heaven, He asked His and our Father to send the Holy Spirit for that purpose, and He did. The results were immediate and obvious, and are recorded in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. Question: In our day, what happened to Father’s gift of the Holy Spirit’s anointing? Answer: Unbelief on our part. We have resorted to understandings, like our theologies, instead of the reality of the Holy Spirit Himself. We have been left with human power to compete with Satan’s vastly superior spiritual power, and it shows in every area of church life – corporately and personally. We are not breaking down Hell’s gate; instead, Satan is walking freely among us, walking in and out of the church at will. It is obvious [to believers] that we do not have the power of the Holy Spirit. Scripture and the evening news affirm that unfortunate and variably appliable answer.

So, where does that leave us in this respect? Answer: In this world, not of this world, but without faith, obedience and power. We are weak, compromised, adrift, God-ignorant, worse than neutralized, and blindly developing answers that are no answers. You know what to do. The answer is to accept the truth, repent, and be set free. But the closest that most of us come to repenting is talking about repentance, praying about repentance, listing things that we and others need to repent of, talking and preaching about repentance. But few, very few, actually repent. True repentance is obvious to God and man. Scripture, and our few blessed and successful contemporaries, know and show that weeping, fasting, changed ways and restitution are God’s evidences of adequate and true repentance. If such is adequate evidence to God, I suppose that they would be helpful to us if we did them.

Without God’s promised and available power, we are playing shameful games by calling the ministry of Christ’s word in the church “apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers.” Labels mean nothing without the Life-evidences and power-results, and those results are shown to us in scripture. In fact, empty labels bring condemnation upon us. We are like kids playing games with play guns, saying “bang, bang,” faking reality. Don’t we see what we are doing? We are perpetuating our modern-day version of our church. The church is for God’s sake, and He is its Head, but He is not forcing Himself into functional headship. He did not do that in Jerusalem and is not doing it now. Like a husband is not to force his wife to honor and obey him, the Lord of the church is not forcing Himself on His church. Everything is for the Lord and will be shown that way in due time, if we don’t see it now.

We have God’s Handbook, the Bible, in our hands. I’m getting a bit simplistic here, but I borrowed and adapted a definition from what is a company’s handbook, “God’s handbook is a valuable communication resource between God and His church. It provides guidance and information related to our history, mission, values, policies, procedures, and benefits in a written format.” Companies produce handbooks for their employees for the same reason the Lord produced the Bible – for us to use, so we can be saved from an eternity apart from the Lord, and from our watered-down Christian living.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit as listed in 1 Corinthians and Romans are given freely to us to be used for everyday purposes, in business, church meetings, family life, on vacations, etc. Where are they? Full-time Christians are different than when we were full-time pre-Christians. All things have passed away, including our old self and our old ways. We really are a new creation, and we have equipment that sets us apart, but many of us have our own reasons for not living as a new heavenly creation. Fortunately, the Lord’s Spirit within born-again Christians will get us through this earth-life and into the next stage of our development, although some will have less life-success to show the Lord than we might think.

Question No. 3: What is the world doing with Jesus’ church? Our answer so far has been 1) persecution, an unintended blessing that purifies, strengthens and grows the church. That is a very vital role. To develop disciples there must be tested discipleship and hard choices, which produce a church that is distinct from the world. When Jesus is not allowed to be Head of the church, the church’s distinctiveness fades until there is no noticeable difference between the church and the world, except for the church’s unusual theology and pleasant religiosity. 2) The world provides an ambient natural society with all sorts of life situations in which the church can thrive, much like a bacterial culture in a petri dish. Add to that, 3) providing a continual supply of candidates for salvation, until the fullness of the church has come in and Jesus comes for us, and 4) that the world is flirting with the church, enticing it to rejoin the world, allowing the world to feel good about its own impurities. Our successful resistance to flirtations strengthens us. You know the potential situation -- the sinner under conviction has no greater feel-good than being joined in his sin by the righteous.

So, what is the Lord doing with His church? He is loving her into Him. What is the church doing with the church? We are doing what we think should be done, with varying amounts of what the Lord says should be done. What is the world doing with the church? Whatever it thinks it can and wants, under the unknown and invisible hand of the Lord, the Protector and Lover of the church.

1. Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, had a miracle birth, was probably a slightly nonconformed person, left home and responsibilities at age 30 despite family resistance, become an itinerant preacher, was proclaimed by a famous person as “the Lamb of God,” and had never performed a miracle. But He was known as a helper, a problem solver, a compassionate person, and as someone who was always focused on the Lord God.

When a friend’s wedding celebration ran out of wine, His mother came to Him with the simple statement [note: not a request or instruction] of, “They have no wine.” She did not give Him directions or a deadline, but simply presented the problem to Him. That showed a high level of confidence in Him, that He would do something that was the right thing. She simply laid the problem at His feet, giving no instructions. Yes, their relationship was loaded, but the request was “open ended.” She had a high level of confidence that He would do something that would alleviate the problem.

My educated guess is that she expected Him to order some wine, and pay for it from the family funds. That is why she then turned to the servants and told them to do whatever He said [she “opened the family purse”]. So, what does that say to us? Turn to Jesus, even if we have never seen Him do a miracle, deliver our need to Him with confidence, be ready to play our part in the answer, and leave the problem with Him. In our obvious weakness we will see His hidden power, and it will be adequate.

1. In Malachi 3:1-4 the Lord shows how He works His righteousness into us. In verse three He says, “He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the Lord offerings in righteousness.” We probably have a general understanding of how the silversmith purifies his silver, but the blessings are in the details [or so I have heard].

The story goes that the silversmith heats his silver over the fire, keeping it in the hottest part of the fire in order to burn away all of the impurities. That’s us in the hot spot. The silversmith must sit there watching the whole process, because left too long in the fire the silver would be ruined. So how does the silversmith know when the silver is fully refined? When the silversmith sees his image in it. I suppose that in our modern days we have other ways of knowing when the silver is ready to be removed from the heat, but for millennia it was by the watchful eye of the silversmith.

So, the Lord’s eye is not only on the sparrow but also on the molten silver. He removes us from the heat when the job of the heat is accomplished. Praise Him for selecting us, for putting us in the fire, for watching over us, and for removing us at the perfect time.

1. In the end [at least the end of that which we are told], we don’t go off on fluffy clouds playing on our harps. We are on the earth at the end of the tribulation, and God the Father in His “third heaven” residence comes down onto the earth. He, the Father, says, “Now take a good look. My home is on earth among mankind, and I am actually living among you, and you will see first-hand what it is to be My people, and what it has always meant for Me to be with you.” [a bit of editing.]

Then our Father starts wiping the tears from our eyes, and everything is o.k. – really o.k.; o.k. as in things having been always o.k. What a beginning! So, we don’t spend much time in heaven, unless you want to call the Holy City on earth “in heaven.” It is the final answer to the Lord’s Prayer that we have all been praying for these short years. Humanity and creation have been finally rescued from our decay. Home is with us.

1. As you know, I have been [and still am] burdened with the condition of the church, the Body of Christ, defined as “me, you, other local believers, and millions more who have believed into Jesus Christ.” [“Into” is more accurately descriptive than “in” because we can believe in Jesus Christ without being saved/born-again. The devil and his demons know factually that Jesus is the Christ, but are headed for hell.] My burden is that it seems like the church is ill-informed biblically, barely alive spiritually, living in the natural, doesn’t know its condition [and does not care] and that the small segment that may be better off is on a low plateau of Christ-like living. My standard for evaluating the church is, of course, according to scripture and church history, and I labor to attain to those standards. Questions: What is your burden for the church? What are you doing about it?

It seems to me that the whole testimony of scripture is working to get us to see, even before we are born-again, that there is a spiritual realm beyond the material world that we live in, and that when we are born-again we are to participate in [even greatly participate in] that spiritual realm while we are yet here living actively in the physical. Testimony: As a physician I loved and prayed for my patients, and practiced good medicine. The results of that combination were remarkable. For example, during my years as a geriatrician I had the oldest and weakest patients, and they were the ones who had multiple, advanced illnesses. The hospital kept record of how long each doctor’s patients stayed in the hospital with each kind of admitting illness, like pneumonia, gall bladder disease, heart trouble, etc. My patients got out of the hospital, on average, two days earlier than the other doctors’, whose patients were younger and more healthy than mine. That’s remarkable, medically and spiritually.

Now about the mind of Christ. It is easy to think that a good and sensible mind is the mind of Christ, but that is not necessarily so. Actually, the good and sensible mind is just that – good and sensible. We need more good and sensible minds, but there is something much better. Those two traits can be taught, but the spiritual mind and spiritual life cannot be taught. The spiritual mind is a gift that can be accepted once received, then submitted to, or rejected. Non-use is equivalent to rejection. That leaves the alternative – the good and sensible natural mind.

The one seeking the spiritual life may not realize that he is seeking the life of Christ Himself and the cross-life. Once the Spirit is received, it is a choice of whether to live in the mind of Christ, or the mind of Adam. There are many varieties of Adam’s mind – some religious, some natural, and some specifically Christian-religious [like icing on a cake]. In any case, the spiritual life is dependent on the Lord, and we diminish so Jesus can increase in us. We must become dependent of the Lord. As Paul expressed the process, “For me to live is Christ.” That’s the Lord’s target for us, and we openly accept it. We die to ourselves, so He can increase in us. Everyone won’t; but some will.

Therefore, if the church’s proclamation is that Jesus is Lord, that He has defeated evil and death, and that the kingdom of God is now, we should be showing the works of Jesus, bringing His peace, health, and justice wherever we have the opportunity, showing hope and cheerfulness, and living publicly in Lifegiving communities that the world will recognize as local Bodies of Christ. Question: What is your hope for the church’s appearance to the world?

So, I have been teaching on “The Church,” endeavoring to get my facts straight and attain to a righteous attitude. I realize that the church is Jesus’ church, not mine, and that the Holy Spirit’s assignment is to work within the church and in the world. But, does that mean that I and we should back off and leave the condition of the church to the Lord? I think not. In fact, I think it means that we are to labor over the quality of Jesus’ life in His Body as we present the Lord to the world. Note the hard-working Apostle Paul’s two-pronged ministry – to the world and to the church.

Scripture is an eternal history book that is complete, but not detailed, about the past, present and future. It is remarkable. It describes that, as born-again Christians, we have the Lord within us, alive and ready to be lived again, not individually fully, but corporately fully as His church. Question: Does the majestic corporate nature of living local Bodies of Christ require a revelation, or is it received simply, commonly by the reading of scripture?

The position we occupy in Jesus and in God’s mind, which is fantastic, is that we are now in Christ seated in the heavenlies at the right hand of God the Father. What a situation! What potential! That requires faith and focus if we are to be impacted by it. Truths like that tend to be held forth in our theologies but escape being incorporated into our entire lives. Question: How has your life been affected by your heavenly position?

While we yet remain in our earth-life, Jesus is not only in us but will never forsake us, despite many natural indications that He has deserted us, as with Jesus on the cross. Question: Are you often bothered by the feeling that the Lord is not with you? So, much of current reality is invisible to the natural eye. Our problem is that we, the Body of Christ, are hampered by our focus on natural reality. We are not a completed work, that’s for sure, but we are living far below our current pay-grade, which is the abundant and productive life of Jesus Himself. That life is meant to be experienced corporately, and perhaps only corporately. That’s why we have been hand-picked and put into the Body of Christ. We should think more of our lives as being corporate, in an organized, functioning body -- as Jesus prayed for us on the night He was arrested.

Man’s solution to our personal and the church’s problems, if we see our problem and desire a solution, is to work harder and perhaps a bit differently, to pray and ask the Lord to do something to help us with our hopes, plans and efforts, and to avoid getting into a worse situation, like friction with our ambient society or, worse yet, **persecution!** But persecution is commonly the Lord’s method for bringing us closer to Him and to one another. In fact, the church does its best living when under persecution, and the Lord knows it. Many of the listening church can hear God’s help now, coming down the road, thundering to our rescue, in the form of persecution. Question: Are you ready? Do you pray for the church, even for tough times of persecution? I do, but lightly and carefully.

I don’t expect my burden in, of and for the church to be lifted soon. Keep tuned. My next lesson on the condition of the church will incorporate a consultation with two church experts, John the apostle and Jesus the Messiah.

1. Look around you. The world, including our part of the world, is messed up and getting worse. One does not need to be a pessimist to see that, and we don’t have to be filled with helpless despair. Election day is supposed to set off even more conflict in our nation. This generation is filled with anxiety, worry, anger and resentment. The flames are lit and fuses are short. [Meaning that people are ready, or about ready, to hear the gospel.]

What went on in Jesus’ mind when He looked at the sad situation of His day – Matt. 9:36-38? People were coming to Him in their neediness, so He preached the good news -- the gospel of the kingdom of God now, for them, without measure; and He delivered. He had compassion for them, meaning they were messed up and washed out, but did not need to stay that way. They were distressed, harassed by one another and by evil spiritual forces, dispirited, thrown down and being trampled on. Sounds like our day, and not only the riots, doesn’t it!

They were like helpless sheep without a shepherd. Years ago, I saw a pack of country “pet” dogs attacking a flock of sheep. The sheep tried to huddle together for imagined protection but the dogs tore patches of skin from their bodies. The sheep ran about, which seemed to greatly incite the dogs. It was a tragedy in the making. I was alone, but managed to run off the temporally insane dogs, then notified the owner of the sheep.

If we can make the mental connection, we are like those sheep, and like the sheep with whom Jesus engaged. We are being attacked by powers greater than we are, and we need our Shepherd. And we need shepherds who have Jesus’ compassion, who will produce the good news of the kingdom of God in our midst. The scene now is like the one with Jesus, and like the one with those sheep being torn apart by those dogs -- the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.

When things within and around us become terrible, and someone(s) get serious with the Lord, we and He will act. The solution is within us: Pray the Lord of the harvest sends out workers into His harvest. Lord, help the church to help You help the world. The harvest is ready. Call up your Body.

1. Remember that it is an exchanged life, not an improved life – Gal. 2:20. Until we see the difference, and how to let Jesus grow in us, we are working on attaining something that we already have, and end up with “me” trying to improve “me.” That well-meant effort causes spiritual fatigue. The Lord’s way for success in the born-again person [who has the holy seed of God’s Spirit] is for us to give our lives up so He can grow in us. That, as you know, is by faith, by knowing and depending on the truth of His word that promises His results as we die to ourselves. Knowing and depending on His faithfulness will result in resurrection life here and now.
2. A bit of news, unless you already know it. We are not prepared for tomorrow, but tomorrow we will be.
3. This will be a valuable Thought, but to many American Christians it is not valuable, not even a passing thought. We are an individualistic people, sometimes to our credit, and sometimes to our detriment. I’ll put the Thought in the form of a question: “Who is your elder?” In 1 Peter 5:5 he wrote: “You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; ..” Peter then finishes the verse and others with more on humility.

Humility is valuable in this life and before the Lord; it is powerful. Shallow, limpid weakness is not humility. Humility is “power under control.” Younger believers who know who they are and what they are doing, intentionally humble themselves to their elder(s). That is a remarkable spiritual quality. I’m not talking about a cult, but of an identifiable group of believers among whom are, known and functional, more mature believers and less mature believers.

If we are paying attention to our spiritual growth, we have noticed that there are others who are more mature than ourselves. They are probably older chronologically in earth-years and in the spirit-walk than ourselves, but not necessarily so. But, they do have less of themselves and more of Jesus, that “one thing that is needed” that Mary had but Martha did not. Their “many things” have been discarded, and it shows. If we consider them to be our elders, we have probably noticed the central point, that they are more like Jesus than we are.

Whether or not we know it, they have walked the way of the cross more deeply than ourselves. That is why we have noticed their eldership. If we know their testimony, we know that it did not happen all at once. It took time, many temptations, some failures and recoveries but many tests and trials, and more sufferings than currently shows. Thus, religiosity, education [even religious education], socio-economic level, church office, social success, etc. do not equate with spiritual maturity, and thus do not assure us of a person’s eldership. We need to listen to our elders and hear what they have to say. One of these days you may not have an elder, but will be one.

1. Living with guilt, real or mis-applied guilt, can give one a complex, and it may not be an outright, simple guilt complex. It is a heavy load to think that the Lord is disappointed with you, and may be a mindset that leads to seeing sin and error in everyone, relating to them primarily according to their sin and error, and produce in us a general condemnation of others, and/or an arrogant haughtiness. Watch out for it, because it attaches itself to those of us who have a mixture of real and self-righteousness, called phariseeism, and who want to become more righteous.

To rid yourself of phariseeism, back up and let the Lord deal with your guilt. Doing that will also help you get rid of unreal expectations, such as of becoming sinlessly perfect in this life or in any special part of our lives. Sin is not good, and should be avoided, but loving the Lord is of higher focus and importance than not sinning. Why didn’t I learn that from my childhood?! I had great parents and was raised in the church, but missed lots of good stuff that would have given me direction and stability earlier in life. I’ll bet that you can say the same.

That is where religion will not help. Religion will tell you that the solution to your guilt is to do better, or more. It may tell you to be more religious, but perhaps to just volunteer more at some good nonprofit organization. It will tell you that if you give more of yourself for good and religious works, you will be more pleasing to yourself and the Lord. Don’t fall for that, but do do those good works out of a caring heart. Again, the solution is to get rid of real or mis-applied guilt so you can live by love, as the Lord loves us. We already have peace with the Lord; that life is worth living.

To God.