

Revival or Removal?

By Paul S. Rees

Have you made a recent study of the second and third chapters of Revelation? If not, by all means do!

Take, for example, the first of the seven messages to the churches. The inspecting Lord lays against the Ephesian congregation the charge that they have left their "first love." The indicated cure for this condition is repentance. But it is the alternative to repentance that should seize and shake us with its gravity: "I will come to you, and remove your lampstand from its place" (2:5). Note whose authority and office it is to do the removing. Christ's! And no one's else.

Keeping Responsibility Where It Belongs

Now turn to the fifth message, where the Lord in judgment confronts the church in Sardis: "I know your works; you have the name of being alive, and you are dead" (3:1). Yet this is not a judgment without mercy: "Awake, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death" (v. 2). Note carefully whose responsibility it is to "strengthen what remains." It is ours — we who are members of the church!

In Christ alone resides the authority to remove the church's lampstand. On the other hand, only as concerned believers exercise their responsibility in repentance and in seeking God's face for spiritual renewal will that little fire which remains be kindled into flame.

Let's not confuse the two things. Frequently you and I are tempted to "write off" a congregation, or even a whole denomination, as "dead," or "worldly," or "liberal," or "formal," or "apostate." Thus we would take it into our hands to remove the candlestick. We are far exceeding our authority. We are, in effect, usurping Christ's place. This is dangerous business.

History's Light on "Removal"

Let's face it: the removing of candlesticks is not without precedent. It has occurred. It may again.

Get out your map of Africa and look at it. Look at the vast expanse of territory in the north — where the continent is the widest. You are looking now at Islamic Africa, peopled by millions who, fiercely loyal to Mohammed, gaze eastward to Mecca and upward to Allah. Their hostility to the Christian Gospel is strangely blind (after all, they are not idolaters) and often savagely bitter. Was it always so? Far from it. In the early centuries of our era some of the strongest, most flourishing, and most famous Christian churches grew up and bore marvellous fruit in North Africa.

What happened? Those churches, alas, became complacent, ingrown, unaggressive, worldly. Their chance to repent came — and went. And at length the Lord, in sovereign judgment, removed their lampstand.

It can happen here, "here" meaning Europe and North America. Already it may be later than we think. Nonetheless, the point is that candlestick-removing is not our business — either to perform it or pronounce it. This is in higher hands!

Our Role Is Repentance

Our great and urgent business is to "strengthen what remains and is on the point of death." We can face the facts. We can bow low in brokenness. We can let in the abundant, renewing tides of God's quickening Spirit.

A while ago I heard Billy Graham commenting on an evangelistic tour he had made in Africa. He spoke of a stimulating and enlightening conversation he had enjoyed with a Nigerian Christian leader. "My travels in Asia and Africa," said Dr. Graham, "have enabled me to meet so many Christians whose spiritual commitment, sensitivity, and discipline are greater than anything I find at home that I shall not be surprised if more and more of them come to Europe and North America as 'mission-The King's Highway

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aries."

The next day after I heard Dr. Graham make this observation I was reading an article prepared by a press relations editor of the United Presbyterian Church. He revealed that earlier this denomination had asked the Presbyterians of Korea to send them a worker. The man sent was Dr. Young Kyo Han, former dean of Yonsei University's Pusan branch. He began his work in the United States in 1958.

The Candid Appraisal

Are we curious to know what impression was made on this Christian from beyond the wide Pacific as he entered into the life and mood of "Christianity USA?" Here is part of his appraisal:

"There are great churches in the United States doing great work for world evangelism. But they have their shortcomings because of an encroachment of formalism, institutionalism, and superficiality, falling short of the spiritual dynamic based on the essential message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The people of the United States live on the spiritual endowment established by devout forefathers. When and if the spiritual resources are exhausted without being reinforced by fresh spiritual investment, the country may lack the divine blessing of peace and prosperity. It is my mission to proclaim to easy-going and nominal Christians the vital nature of the Christian faith."

There are phrases here to stab us awake — unless we resent hearing them from a visitor from other shores.

"An encroachment of formalism, institutionalism, and superficiality" . . . "spiritual resources . . . exhausted" . . . "easy-going and nominal Christians!"

Whatever else they do for us, they should remind us tartly that in the life of the churches the alternative is finally this: revival or removal. If we do not seek and find the one, He will authorize the other!

—The Herald