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When Paul told Timothy:

Understand this, that in the last days [that is, during this gospel age]¹ there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people (2 Tim. 3:1-5)...

...he was not telling him – as a stimulus to carnal speculation – that dreadful apostasy would mark the final, closing years of this age; that is, its last three and a half, or seven, years (depending on which prophetic scheme you hold). For a start, how could Timothy avoid such people if they would only exist 2000 or more years after he had died? In any case, Romans 1:18-32, where Paul said much the same thing to the Romans, is in the present or past tense. No, whatever it was that Paul was warning Timothy about was already present – and prevalent – in first-century Ephesus. And not only there and at that time. The apostle was spelling out what all believers must expect throughout this age.²

How frequently the apostles sounded this warning about apostasy, *apostasy even in their days!* Consider, for instance, Acts 20:17-31; Galatians 1:6; 1 Timothy 1:19-20; 2 Timothy 4:1-4; Hebrews; 2 Peter 2:1-22; 1 John 2:19; Jude; Revelation 2 & 3. Take the *ekklēsia* at Ephesus (the warning in Acts 20, the letter and, finally, Revelation 2:1-7); how quickly it declined!

¹ See, for instance, Acts 2:17; 1 Cor. 10:11; Heb. 1:2; 1 Pet. 1:20; 1 John 2:18.

² See the previous note.

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Then again, when Paul told the Corinthians that ‘the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power’, he was laying down a general principle, a principle which is always true, which always applies. It applied in Paul’s day; it applies today. Indeed, Paul was doing the same as Christ in John 3:3-8. Nicodemus wanted a pleasant conversation about spiritual matters. Christ would have none of it! ‘You must be born again!’ he thundered. ‘Until you are born again, unless you are born again, you will never see – never even see, let alone enter – the kingdom!’. Flesh remains flesh until the man is regenerated and made spiritual. And as Paul told the Corinthians: ‘Until you are regenerate, spiritual matters will be foolishness to you’. His actual words read:

The natural person [the unregenerate man] does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly [foolishness] to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:14).

That’s not the least of it:

The carnal mind [the mind, the thinking, the understanding, of the natural man, the unregenerate] is enmity against God (Rom. 8:7).

And all that applies today. Since the fall of Adam, there has never been a single human being born of a father and mother to whom it has not applied. It always applies. Flesh is always flesh, and natural man, an unregenerate man, is always in Adam until he is regenerated by the sovereign Spirit of God and transformed (Col. 1:13), made spiritual, united to Christ by faith:

Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned – for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man’s trespass, much more have the grace of

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God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 5:12-21).

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.... Thus it is written: 'The first man Adam became a living being'; the last Adam [that is, Christ] became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable (1 Cor. 15:22,45-50).

Putting all this together, we know that throughout this age, churches have been, will be – *and are being at this very moment* – plagued by those who mistake veneer – image and chat, appearance, show – for reality – true spirituality, spiritual power. Indeed, the grim underlying principle is ever with us: such people 'repudiate true spiritual power'. Moreover, the apostle's command to true believers still stands: 'avoid such people'. This solemn teaching, with its associated command, therefore, is always relevant – never more so than today. I am convinced that we, as

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contemporary evangelicals, desperately need to face it, and, having faced it for ourselves, we must go on to make sure that we confront professing believers attending our churches – as well as rank unbelievers – with it. Nothing – nothing – is more necessary today.

Why? Why, especially, today?

As I have explained elsewhere,³ I am convinced that most contemporary believers are becoming increasingly enmeshed in a system which has utterly transformed the new-covenant status and function of the *ekklēsia*. Utterly transformed it. If Paul came on the scene today, he simply would not recognise today's goings-on. We can so easily fool ourselves. We need to grasp the damage Christendom has inflicted; it has turned many churches into little more than local outlets for a global corporation, a plush shopping mall, an amusement arcade or a would-be glitzy theatre of entertainment – tinged with 'spirituality', of course.

The upshot, in brief, is that instead of the *ekklēsia* being – as it ought to be – a living, active, vital society of believers, separate from the world, the modern Christendom-church is doing all it can to break down the God-ordained gulf between the *ekklēsia* and the world in order to attract as many unbelievers as it can into prolonged church-attendance in order to evangelise them. The ultimate motive may be good – if true conversion *is* the motive, then the motive *is* good – but the scheme is utterly unbiblical.⁴ I am convinced that evangelical Christendom, by such methods, is actually encouraging the wholesale confusion of veneer for reality, varnish for substance, and in so doing is – to put it no stronger – actually guilty of encouraging the repudiation of the Spirit, the proliferation of natural men and women who think, and who are treated as, spiritual.

³ *Attracting; Relationship; Evangelicals Warned.*

⁴ For my arguments, please see my works listed in the previous note.

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As a consequence, an increasing number of unbelievers are being absorbed into Christendom-church attendance – and, in many cases, church-participation – yet remain unconverted, still dead in sin. Worse still, they can remain in that condition without ever being really, powerfully, directly, bluntly, passionately confronted with the principle that ‘the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power’; or, to apply the dictum to today’s circumstances, they are rarely, if ever, confronted with the fact that ‘the kingdom of God does not consist in church attendance, and participation in church activity, in being able to parrot a catechism or credal statement learnt by rote, but in power, in reality, in a felt-experience of Christ’. Confrontation is out! Confrontation would work directly against the overriding principle of attracting attenders. Why drive them away? Why raise any barrier?⁵ The grievous truth is, many contemporary evangelicals are directly encouraging – promoting – *within their churches*, this classic sign of apostasy in this age, ‘the last days’, about which Paul warned Timothy: ‘having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power’.

Notice they ‘having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power’ is the climax of Paul’s catalogue of the marks of declension (2 Tim. 3:1-5)! That’s the climax: a form or show of spirituality, without the actual experience of it, actually while repudiating it. And I say, that is the very thing that is being actively and energetically encouraged by many contemporary evangelical churches. Think of it! And that is why I say that we evangelicals need to face the blunt apostolic truth that ‘the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power’. And, having faced it, we need to retrace our steps, put our house in order, and act in accordance with new-covenant principles. Moreover, as I have said, we need to confront professors and unbelievers with the principle.

Nothing, in my opinion, is more urgent.

⁵ See my *To Confront?*

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This is so important, I want to expose it even further. As I have said, we live in a time when many believers are preoccupied with packing consumers into church attendance, holding them, taking them through a training course, coaching them into giving the right answers so that they can pass muster in any investigation as prospective church members. This last is nothing new – the descendants of the New England settlers (who intended to set up a puritan colony) became masters of the art, virtually cramming or coaching candidates, making them as near word-perfect as possible, for an examination pass.⁶ The cry today is: ‘Come to church’ rather than ‘Come to Christ’.⁷ Moreover, a great deal of the current gospel-preaching is straight Sandemanianism.⁸ But conformity to rules, and mere head-knowledge of facts, will never produce spirituality:

...regulations... ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’ (referring to things that all perish as they are used) – according to human precepts and teachings... have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh (Col. 2:20-23).

We must call a spade a spade. Charles Ellicott on 2 Timothy 3:5:

These, by claiming the title of Christians, wearing before men the uniform of Christ, but by their lives dishonouring his name, did the gravest injury to the holy Christian cause.

⁶ When my son was taking his ‘O’ level examination in Geography, I knew that because of the inadequacy of the preparation provided by his teacher, he was certain to fail. I asked another teacher for advice; although, of course, he had not seen the paper, as an experienced teacher he was able to give me six topics he advised I should cover. The evening before the examination, I crammed those six topics into my son’s head. The next day he passed his examination; I could have passed it. The day after, I would have failed. For the spiritual equivalent – coaching people to give the right answers – see my *Four; Assurance; The Secret; Christ; Infant*.

⁷ See my *In Church?*

⁸ See my *The Secret*.

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Another dreary catalogue of vices... Paul gives in the [letter] to the Romans (Rom. 1:29ff.); but in that passage he paints the sins of paganism. Here he describes the characteristics of a new paganism, which went under the name of Christianity.

That's it in a nutshell: 'a new paganism, which went under the name of Christianity'. Think of that!

All this provokes some very serious questions, questions I must put to myself – and, of course, questions you, reader, must put to yourself.

Is my spirituality just a matter of talk, of chat? That is, do I know – in my head – the leading points of the gospel? Do I like to talk about them; even, do I *love* to talk about them, but am I an utter stranger to the felt experience – the inward power – of them?

J.C.Ryle wrote:

What do I mean when I speak of formal spirituality?⁹ This is a point that must be made clear. Thousands, I suspect, know nothing about it. Without a distinct understanding of this point, my whole paper will be useless. My first step shall be to paint, describe and define. When a man is a Christian in name only – and not in reality; in outward things only – and not in his inward feelings; in profession only – and not in practice; when his Christianity, in short, is a mere matter of form, or fashion, or custom without any influence on his heart or life – in such a case as this, the man has what I call a 'formal spiritual profession'. He possesses indeed the form, or husk, or skin of spiritual profession – but he does not possess its substance or its power.

Look, for example, at those thousands of people whose whole spiritual profession seems to consist in keeping religious ceremonies and ordinances. They attend regularly on public worship.¹⁰ They go regularly to the Lord's table. But they never get any further. They know nothing of

⁹ Original 'religion'. This note applies throughout this booklet.

¹⁰ That is, church attendance. See my *Public*.

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experimental Christianity. They are not familiar with the Scriptures – and take no delight in reading them. They do not separate themselves from the ways of the world. They draw no distinction between godliness and ungodliness in their friendships, or matrimonial alliances. They care little or nothing about the distinctive doctrines of the gospel. They appear utterly indifferent as to what they hear preached. You may be in their company for weeks, and for anything you may hear or see – you might suppose they were infidels! What can be said about these people? They are Christians undoubted, by profession; and yet there is neither heart nor life in their Christianity. There is but one thing to be said about them: They are formal Christians – their spiritual profession is a mere form!

Look in another direction, at those hundreds of people whose whole spiritual profession seems to consist in talk and high profession. They know the theory of the gospel with their heads, and profess to delight in evangelical doctrine. They can say much about the ‘soundness’ of their own views, and the ‘darkness’ of all who disagree with them; but they never get any further! When you examine their inner lives – you find that they know nothing of practical godliness... They are formal Christians – their spiritual profession is an empty form!

The question deserves especial notice in this age of the church and world. Never since the Lord Jesus Christ left the earth, was there so much formality and false profession, as there is at the present day. Now, if ever, we ought to examine ourselves, and search our spiritual profession, that we may know of what sort it is. Reader, let us find out whether our Christianity is a thing of form – or a thing of heart.¹¹

As Joseph Hart said, and said more briefly than Ryle, true belief is more than notion:

*Let us ask th'important question,
(Brethren, be not too secure),
What it is to be a Christian?
How we may our hearts assure!
Vain is all our best devotion,
If on false foundations built:*

¹¹ J.C.Ryle: ‘Formal Religion’, 1878.

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*True professed Christianity's¹² more than notion;
Something must be known and felt.*

Just so! Something must be *known and felt*. Better: *Someone* must be known, and our relationship to him must be felt!

In one of its many editions, in a footnote at the end of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*,¹³ the editor added some words from William Mason:

Does Christ dwell in my heart by faith? Am I a new creature in him? Do I look alone to Christ for righteousness, and depend only on him for holiness? Is he the only hope of my soul, and the only confidence of my heart? And do I desire to be found in him; knowing by the word, and feeling by the teaching of his Spirit, that I am totally lost in myself? Thus, is Christ formed in me, the only hope of glory? Do I study to please him, as well as hope to enjoy him? Is fellowship with God the Father, and his Son, Jesus Christ, so prized by me, as to seek it, and to esteem it above all things? If so, though I may find all things in nature, in the world, and from Satan, continually opposing this, yet I am in Christ the way, and he is in me the truth and the life.

The editor himself added:

How far may such an one go? [He called this:] This important question... They may become preachers and ministers of the gospel, with rare gifts, and a fluent tongue, like an angel, to speak of the hidden mysteries; but may die under the curse. They may have the gifts of the Spirit and prophecy, and be but a Balaam. They may stand thus until Christ comes and reveals them. They may, with confidence, say, Lord, Lord, have we not eaten and drank in your presence, and taught in your name, and in your name have cast out devils? and yet, poor creatures, be shut out!

Let me close this chapter – indeed, the main part of my book – with this solemn, but vital, call from William Gadsby:

¹² Original 'religion'.

¹³ For more from *The Pilgrim's Progress*, see Appendix 1.

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Pause my soul! and ask the question,

Are you ready to meet God?

Am I made a real Christian,

Washed in the Redeemer's blood?

Have I union

With the church's living Head?

Am I quickened by his Spirit;

Live a life of faith and prayer?

Trusting wholly to his merit;

Casting on him all my care?

Daily longing

In his likeness to appear?

If my hope on Christ is stayèd,

Let him come when he thinks best;

O my soul be not dismayèd,

Lean upon his loving breast;

He will cheer you

With the smilings of his face.

But, if, still a total stranger

To his precious name and blood,

You are on the brink of danger;

Can you face a holy God?

Think and tremble,

Death is now upon the road.