

THE CHRISTIAN & THE CHURCH (01)

January 06, 2008.

Introduction

If I were to put a general title to the series of sermons I desire to preach to you in **2008**, that general title would be : **A Pastor's Burdens**. There are several topics and issues that are burdens and concerns on my heart for this church. With God's gracious help I want to expound them to you from God's word. **John Sutcliff** lived from **1752 – 1814**. He was one of the three men who banded together to be rope-holders in the labors of the great Baptist missionary, **William Carey**. The two others were **Andrew Fuller** and **John Rylands Jr**. In the last couple days of his life **John Sutcliff** shared many personal things with his close friends. One of the exhortations he gave them was : *“Preach as you will wish you had when you come to die.”* I pray that God would give me such a passion in **2008** to preach every sermon in this manner.

A Pastor's Resolutions.

My goal today is to begin preaching to you on the subject : **The Christian & The Church**. But before I do there are a few matters I want to speak briefly about. Firstly, on Old Year's night I set before those who were present five primary resolutions I want to keep before me in **2008**. I want to outline these for you with a few comments in between gleaned from other men of God.

1). I desire to know God afresh and increasingly. To know God is to love God. True evangelical religion is marked by love for God. But God is to be loved as God, as He is in Himself, or He is not loved at all. In other words, when we love God only because of the benefits we discern we can get, we do not love God. Then our love for God is

corrupted. Two verses must be noted here. Firstly, *1Cor.16:22* says, “If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be accursed.” Secondly, *Eph.6:24* says, “Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ with incorruptible love.” We must love the Lord for who He is. We must love Him with a love that is incorruptible, a love free from ulterior motives.

2). I desire a renewal in the life of faith that was peculiarly begun for me in 1972.

It is so easy to walk by sight, depending on the things you see, the facts and figures and the projections based upon them. It is so hard to walk by faith, trusting in the Lord to lead, to take up the challenges He sets before you and trust Him to take you through them. We have enough evidences in this church to know that God is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we can ask or think. Our hard fought journey into the Reformed faith and the building you sit in are a summary of the exceeding abundant that God is able to do.

3). I desire that my life would be marked by earnest and increasing prayer. Sutcliff

said at the close of his life, *“I wish I had prayed more.... I wish I had prayed more for the influences of the Holy Spirit ... more for the power of vital godliness ... more for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to attend our labors.”*

While preaching at **Whitefield’s Tabernacle** (Nov. 27, 1898) **Spurgeon** declared, *“Look at our prayer meetings, with only here and there a bright exception. There are, possibly, six old women present; scarcely ever do enough male members come to pray. Prayer meetings they are called; spare meetings they ought to be called, for sparely enough are they attended. And very few there are who go to our fellowship meetings, or to any other meetings that we have to help one another in the fear of the Lord.”*

4). I desire to read more of God’s word, feed on it with delight and with the recognition that it is the most valuable possession that I have. **Sutcliff** said the word of God should be read with sacred awe, studied with deep gratitude, conscious that to be

deprived of the Bible is to be left in dark despair. He added that the reading of God's word must be accompanied by faith in its Divine origin and fervent prayer.

5). I desire that God would help me become bolder in my faith, grant me more opportunities for evangelism and let me see more conversions to Christ. We are told that in his final days **Sutcliff** had a greater sense of human depravity and the exceeding sinfulness of sin. As he lay dying he was even more sensitive to the great responsibility of preaching the gospel. He declared, *“Ministers will never do much good till they begin to pull sinners out of the fire.”*

Sutcliff was conscious that the sure pledge of success in evangelism and missions was an effusion of the Spirit of prayer in the church. He agreed that this must be accompanied by cultivating an unshaken persuasion of the promises of God respecting the triumph and enlargement of His kingdom.

Andrew Fuller noted that the true churches of Jesus Christ travail in birth for the salvation of men. He lamented that evangelical Calvinists failed to appreciate their desperate need of the Spirit. Thus they neglected regular prayer for His empowerment and the cultivation of an attitude of dependence upon Him. **Fuller** stated, *“If all our help be in God, then to Him it becomes us to look for success. And that looking to God takes place in the sphere of prayer. To pray for the Spirit's outpouring and help is to ask God to accomplish that on which He has set His heart from all eternity and in which He supremely delights, namely, the glorification of His beloved Son.”*

The Middle Passage.

This brings us to the second matter I want to deal with. On May 18, 1879, **Charles Spurgeon** preach a sermon in his own church entitled, **“The Middle Passage.”** The occasion was their **25th** anniversary of his ministry among them as their pastor. It was a

message on the call for revival based on **Hab.3:2**, “Lord, I have heard the report about You and I fear. O Lord, revive Your work in the midst of the years, In the midst of the years make it known; In wrath remember mercy.” In this sermon, Spurgeon’s concern is our concern. He feared that from an admirable fervor many were cooling down to a dangerous chill. Listen to Spurgeon.

He said, *“The middle passage becomes difficult because things grow ordinary and common place which afore-time were striking and remarkable.... We tremble lest the people who prayed mightily at first should restrain prayer before the Lord; lest those who made self-sacrifices should think that they have done enough; and lest those who have consecrated themselves unto the Lord should imagine that they began upon too high a key and cannot keep up the music to such a pitch. A people who have loved the souls of men and have been like mighty hunters before the Lord after sinners, may suddenly dream that they are excused from further effort, and may leave others to do mission work for their Lord. It is an ill day when a feeling of satisfaction begins to creep over us, but this is one of the perils of the midst of the years. I have always been afraid lest that spirit of simple reliance in which we began should ever depart from us.”*

Spurgeon added, *“Satisfaction with results will be the [death] knell of progress. No man is good who thinks that he cannot be better. He has no holiness who thinks that he is holy enough.”* In other words, **Spurgeon** was driven with a passion never to be satisfied with the measure of his holiness or the extent of his service.

As I have examined my life I have come to the conclusion that I have quietly drifted away from that simple reliance upon the Lord I began with in **1972**, that simple reliance that took me through the toughest battles I faced for truth and the progress of this church over the years. But I believe also that as a church a feeling of satisfaction in achievement has crept over us and we are drifting from that spirit of simple reliance upon the Lord. We are drifting from the spiritual realities that matter into a pragmatic mindset. Both conclusions are a great grief to me.

In his sermon, **Spurgeon** warned against the dangers of the pride of achievement and the pride of experience. These draw us away from our childlike confidence in God and lead us to rely on ourselves and our own ideas. He warned against being assailed by weariness in doing good and running the race set before us. Weariness causes us to remove our eyes from rejoicing in the many things that have been accomplished and being overwhelmed by the so much that remains unaccomplished.

Spurgeon said, *“If we stood like watchmen on the walls for years the tendency is to relax our vigilance. If we have borne a protest for many years the thought will suggest itself that it will be folly to be singular any longer, and wise to yield to the current of the times.... In the midst of the years, what with weariness and want of faith, the heart is apt to yield to the devil’s infernal suggestions. Therefore, brethren, let a mighty prayer go up from the whole church to our Redeemer God – “O Lord, revive Thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make it known.” O Lord put new life into us.... Give us a new Pentecost, we beseech Thee.... Give us back the dew of our youth that we may do our first works, and something more. Let us have with the maturity of age the freshness of youth, and let us run without weariness in Your ways, because Your Spirit has quickened us. Our dependence is on You even for life itself; breathe Thou on us once more.*

“Oh, my brethren, it is vain and idle for us to think that any good can come of human speech or human song or human worship of any kind apart from God Himself being there. There must be supernatural power put forth or men will never turn from darkness to light, nor rise from death to life. What is the church worth if the Lord be not known in the midst of her?.... Once more display Thy glory. Exalt Thyself in the conversion and the salvation of men that the multitude may see how glorious is the Lord our God.... Thou hast wrought great wonders, O Lord, do it again in the midst of the years.”

Spurgeon's words reflect the heart cry of the psalmist in *Psa.44*. He said, "O God, we have heard with our ears, Our fathers have told us, The work that You did in their days, In days of old.... You are my King, O God; Command victories for Jacob." (*vss.1, 4*). In other words, do it again Lord, do it again. What you did for them do it for us. What you did for us in the early years, do it again.

I share these words with you because they were a great encouragement to my own soul. I know I have passed the middle years of my labors in this church. But I assure you that I am not exempt from the things Spurgeon was conscious of. As a watchman on the walls who have borne protest for over three decades against error while preaching the truth, I can grow tired and impatient. A few years ago I heard a preacher say to a small group that I was a part of, "*I have fought my fights. My time for fighting is over. I leave the fighting to you younger men. I am moving on.*" And that's what he did. He set out a course for his departure from pastoral labors.

While some of you are really just beginning, others are already in their middle years of service to the Lord. This is not the time to grow weary in well-doing. (cf. *Gal.6:9*). This is not the time to step aside in the name of letting others get involved. In the Christian life and in the work of the church old men of God and old women of God are desperately needed to remain faithful and active in order to prepare and guide the coming generations into taking up their responsibilities in their service to God.

As **Sutcliff** lay dying in his final days, **William Ward** wrote to him, "*I tremble for the ark, while I am anxiously looking at the health of two or three among you.*" Why? **Ward** was greatly concerned that the visions of ministerial training, evangelism and missions that motivated **Sutcliff**, **Fuller** and **Ryland** and the circle around them be not lost, but transmitted to the new generation that would fill their places after their deaths. I have to say, Brethren, that I tremble for the ark. I do not see the vision and burdens that have burned with blazing fire in our hearts being absorbed by and beginning to possess the younger generations.

The battle for the restoration of Biblical truth was fought in an atmosphere that prevailed with error. We paid a high price for truth. If it was possible, I know that some who hated the truths we loved and fought for would have spilled our blood as was done to our faithful Baptist forefathers. Today, errors greater than we fought against prevail in our land. The fight has not ended. It has intensified many times over. We fought for the restoration of evangelism in the midst of a hyper-Calvinism that had taken hold. We fought to establish a forward thinking and moving church, a church in which the basics of apostolic worship could be restored, a church with a heart for missions around this world and particularly in the Caribbean.

We are not perfect and we will never be perfect. We will be ever striving for perfection that will only be achieved when the Lord Jesus returns. But in our imperfections, this is not a time for weariness and pulling back nor being overwhelmed by the seemingly insurmountable tasks before us. The Great Wall of China was built one block and one stone at a time in the midst of many lives being lost and much blood being shed. We are involved in building something greater than the Great Wall of China. We are involved in building the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. And if we can pass on the visions and burdens the Lord has put in our hearts to the next generation, one person at a time, we would accomplish what God has set before us.

Oh, how we need to labor in prayer that the Lord of the harvest would grip the hearts of the next generation and bring to birth in them a Biblical vision for their generation. We need social fellowship in this church but I believe we have lost sight of spiritual fellowship. Social fellowship has almost completely supplanted spiritual fellowship. The result is that our children know a whole lot about eating and drinking, liming in the malls, going together to movies, fun and laughter, banquets and parties, cricket and football, but how little they know at a practical level about pursuing holy lives, making choices that glorify God, wrestling in prayer, evangelism, and missions. They know all the latest technologies and computer games but how well do they know God? They are pressed by us to succeed in the world but they are not pressed to seek first God's

kingdom and His righteousness. We are preparing them to live in this world but we are not preparing them to live for God in this world.

Before I move to the next point I want to say a brief word about missions. I have indicated already that, Lord willing, it is my desire to preach on what the Bible teaches about giving our monetary gifts to the Lord. I also indicated that I do not believe we have been faithful as we ought to be at the very basic level of our tithes and offerings. I know firsthand also that the giving to missions is being done in a limited way in our church. I want to encourage you to begin giving to missions. It does not matter how small the amount is – begin giving to missions. Even if all you can give is one dollar per month, commit yourself to do so.

The Lord used a little boy's five biscuits and two fishes to feed a crowd that had five thousand men, besides women and children. You have no idea what the Lord can use that one dollar to accomplish. You children who are not working and in school, you can save from allowances and also give. The members of the missions' committee will be approaching every member in this church over the next couple weeks to ask you about giving to missions. I want to say two things : (1) I trust you will make a faith commitment before the Lord to give; (2) I trust you will keep that commitment with prompt faithfulness.

The Challenge To Consolidate.

This brings us to our third major point. At our last members' business meeting I told you that it is important for us to spend time in **2008** consolidating the work God has established in this church over the last seven years. I want to challenge you to begin this work of consolidation. **Firstly, this consolidation must be individual.** Seek to consolidate your own walk before God. Prayerfully examine your life very critically. Pray earnestly that the Holy Spirit will guide you in this critical examination with judgment day honesty. This kind of examination is Biblical and necessary.

Firstly, the apostle Peter said you must be all the more diligent to make certain about the Lord's calling and choosing you. (*2Pet.1:10*). Peter's command, "be all the more diligent" presses upon you the urgency of the matter before you. Peter wants you to actively and urgently apply yourself to the responsibility he has set before you. The verb "make" calls upon you to do something for yourself. This is not something someone else must do for you. This is not something you must do for someone else. You have to do this for yourself. This is your responsibility to yourself.

"To make certain" is to give yourself a guarantee about the Lord's calling and choosing you. How do you give yourself this guarantee? You look into your life for the evidence of true conversion to Christ and the fruit of such conversion. The primary evidence is the change from spiritual and moral death to spiritual and moral life. The primary fruit is the pursuit of a holy life to the glory of God. The qualities of this holy life is summed up for us in *vss.5-8*. (**read**).

To be able to give yourself this guarantee of the Lord's calling and choosing you is to bring into your life peace of heart and stability. This is the opposite to stumbling. Peter said that in making certain "you will never stumble." Peter used a double negative with the verb "**stumble**". The verb "**stumble**" is not speaking about sinning. The verb points to that final, once-for-all, irretrievable fall from which there is no rising. **Tom Schreiner** wrote, "*Believers who confirm their call and election by living in a godly manner will not "stumble", that is, they will not forsake God, abandon Him, and commit apostasy.*"

Dick Lucas wrote that Peter is seriously concerned that "*we take the responsibility to continue to the end of our Christian lives more deeply grounded within the same hope with which we started.*" He added that the believers Peter wrote to "*had failed to take seriously their responsibility to live Christianly. The attitude that takes hold of Christ by faith and then lives a life of obedience to Him is the one that proves that our salvation will last.*"

In *2Cor.13:5* the apostle Paul calls upon you to “test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves.” Note the emphatic repetition of the word “yourselves”. You are being called upon to test yourself and examine yourself from time to time. Both verbs are commands in the present tense. The idea is that you never reach the point where you are too old in the faith to be testing yourself. This is your responsibility to yourself. And you need to be uncompromisingly honest in testing and examining yourself because eternal issues are involved here.

The verb “test” calls upon you to discover what kind of person you are, to discover your true nature. Are you a new creation in Christ? (*2Cor.5:17*). Has God changed you? Are you a child of God? (*Gal.4:5*). Are you in the faith? Are you a Christian? Are you a growing and maturing Christian? (*2Pet.3:18*). Or after all your years in the faith are you still an infant in Christ, feeding on milk and living carnally? (*1Cor.3:1-3a*).

The second verb “examine” calls upon you to examine the genuineness of your faith, to discover the proofs or genuine marks of your faith and approve yourself. According to *Heb.6:8* those whose lives are disapproved have a counterfeit faith and produce thorns and thistles and end up being burned. According to Paul genuine faith seeks to be pleasing to God (*2Cor.5:9*). Genuine faith is marked by love for Christ and being controlled by the love of Christ. (*2Cor.5:14*). Those who are controlled by the love of Christ, loves what Christ loves and as Christ loves. I will deal with this quality of love more in depth when we come to consider the church as the bride of Christ.

Take time, Brethren, to examine your character as a Christian. Examine your pursuits. Are your pursuits characterized by the pursuit of holiness? (*Heb.12:14*). Are your pursuits characterized by saying a firm “no” to ungodliness and worldly desires? (*Tit.2:12*). Are your choices characterized by your love for Christ? (*2Cor.5:14*). Or are your choices characterized by a love for this world? (*1Jn.2:15-17*).

How is your prayer life? Is there growth in your prayer life? Is your prayer life marked by a growing devotion, earnestness, fervency and frequency? (*Col.4:2; Jas.5:16;*

1Thess.5:17; Psa.34:4, 6). How are your Bible reading and the reading of good Christian books? (*Jer.15:16*). How is your church involvement? Do you know what role the Lord has given to you in His church, what function He has given to you in His body? (*Eph.4:11-16; 1Cor.12*).

Secondly, this consolidation must extend to the rest of the church. Please turn to *Phil.2:4*. (**read**). The basis of this exhortation is the attitude and example of the Lord Jesus. (*vss.5-8*. [**read**]). The highest point of sacrifice here is the Lord's substitutionary atoning death on our behalf. But these verses make clear that Lord's example has far more in it than His death. For our sakes, He who is God became man. He who is the glorious Sovereign became a bondservant. He who is lofty and exalted (*Isa.6:1*) humbled Himself. He who is the Creator of life submitted Himself to death. The questions I want to ask are as follows :

What kind of relationship do you have with your brothers and sisters in Christ? What kind of involvement do you have with your brothers and sisters in Christ? I said to you on Old Year's night that an isolationist Christianity has spiritual death marked all over it. If you are an isolationist Christian, what does that say about you? It says you are proud. It says you are lofty in your own eyes. It says that in your pride and loftiness you cannot humbly condescend to become a bondservant of Christ to His people. It says you are headed for a fall that will be totally unexpected and stunning.

Everyone in this church needs spiritual help. Everyone in this church needs spiritual guidance. Everyone in this church needs ongoing building up in the faith. Everyone in this church needs the prayers of others. Everyone in this church needs encouragement. Everyone in this church needs the exhortations and encouragements that build, that rebuke, that bring to repentance. Everyone in this church needs fellowship. Everyone in this church needs a phone call from time to time. Everyone in this church needs someone to talk to.

If you happen to say that you need none of the above things, the worst case scenario is that you are not saved. If you are truly saved then the choice is very simple : either you are a liar or the Lord Jesus Christ is the liar. Since **Rom.3:4** says, “let God be found true, though every man be found a liar”, then it means you are the liar. And your lies are rooted in your isolationist spirit, your pride and your unwillingness to become a bondservant of Christ in the service of others. If these sins are present in you, then it is time to repent of them. If you fail to repent, our Heavenly Father will discipline and scourge you.

What you need does not give you the excuse to sit and wait for others to act. Just as you need others, others need you. Faith grows by action rooted in obedience to Christ. I know that for a fact and by God’s grace I have proven that. A large part of my growth in Christ is directly related to my dealings with you and the relationships I sustain with you. There is always someone weaker than you and who needs you more than you need him or her.

No member in this church should be allowed to fall into the cracks and disappear. You should not be calling me and asking me about Brother or Sister So & So. You should be calling me and telling me that you called and / or visited this Brother and that Sister whom you haven’t seen and you want to update me on their status. You should be looking for those with whom you can come alongside and encourage and build up over a period of time and train them to do the same. In **Jn.14:26** Jesus described the Holy Spirit as “the Helper”. The Greek word is **parakletos** and describes one who comes alongside and offers encouragement and comfort. Under the Spirit’s direction, this is what every Christian must become – one who comes alongside to encourage and comfort.

Using the related verb, **parakaleo**, Paul said in **1Thess.5:11**, “Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you are also doing.” Our verb is “**encourage**”. It also means “**exhort**”. Note that, they were already doing this. They were already seeking out one another to encourage and build up one another. Paul commanded them to continue this good work. **Eph.4:12-13** says we are equipped in the

faith by teaching and preaching of pastors to build up the body of Christ. The goal of this building is not evangelistic. The goal of this building is unity of the faith and maturity in Christ.

This work of encouraging, exhorting and building is a very crucial and vitally important work in the church. And we are all required to be involved in it. To be involved in it requires that we have Christ's attitude and follow Christ's example. To be involved requires that we stop being so self-centered and selfish and start looking beyond ourselves to others who need us, regardless of how weak and undeveloped our gifts and abilities may be. Christ's attitude and example are peculiarly required of leaders. *Phil.2:20* tells us that Timothy had in himself Christ's attitude and example and was genuinely concerned for the welfare of the believers. But to be genuinely concerned for your Brother or Sister in Christ is not a responsibility that is limited to leaders in the church.

Are you involved in this good work of encouraging, exhorting and building? Or are you standing back, watching the failures and absences and criticizing and condemning? Are you one of those who stand back and say, *"I could have told you so"*? Are you standing back unconcerned, saying nothing and doing nothing, minding your own business like the priest and the Levite while your Brother or Sister in Christ is lying wounded?

I want to challenge you to start the process of coming alongside and encouraging and exhorting and building up others. In the week ahead you have six days. Make a list of six members, whether absent or present and call one each day. You are calling to find out how they are doing. You are calling to say you were absent and I missed you. You are calling to ask : how can I pray for you? You are calling to say : I am happy to be a part of God's family in this church and I am happy that you are part of God's family in this church. You are calling to say : I love you in the Lord. You can call to say : the Lord blessed me in my devotions this morning and I wanted to know if I can share this blessing with you.

There are so many little things you can do to let your Brothers & Sisters in Christ know that you care. There are so many little things you can do to begin the process of consolidating the lives of others in Christ.

I am challenging you, my Brothers & Sisters in Christ, to make a list on the space given to you in your notes page and call one person each day over the next six days.