

How Do We Rekindle The Fire?

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Perry Cotham was born to Christian parents January 5, 1912 in Murray, Kentucky. He was baptized at an early age and began preaching soon after in 1929 at the age of 17, and is now in his 75th year of preaching. He graduated from Freed-Hardeman College (then a junior college) in 1931. He then entered college at his hometown of Murray, Kentucky and graduated from Murray State University in 1934. While attending college he preached for several of the area churches and conducted meetings. After several years of local work in Kentucky, Oklahoma and Texas he began full time meeting work in 1972. Since that time he has preached in all 50 of the United States and in all inhabited continents of the world, including over 70 nations. He has written 16 tracts and published 3 debate books with those of the Pentecostal persuasion. Perry lives in Grand Prairie, Texas.

We come now to the close of a very fine lectureship on “Issues Facing the Church.” We realize the need of being more active in the Lord’s work in spreading the Gospel, at home and abroad, and of faithfully living the Christian life, and so our question now is: “How do we rekindle the fire?”

The apostle Paul wrote to the young evangelist, Timothy, whom he loved dearly, “Stir up the gift of God, which is in thee through the laying on of my hands” (2 Timothy 1:6 - ASV). [This means, “kindle afresh the gift of God,” – NASB; “rekindle the divine gift,” – Goodspeed].

Of course, “the gift” here refers to some miraculous gift which was bestowed by the laying on of Paul’s hands as an apostle to help timothy as an evangelist in the Lord’s work. Some of the Christians had these gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12: 4-11; cf. Acts 8:14 – 24) in the early days of the church before the complete revelation of the Lord had been given and confirmed and recorded. These gifts were needed then, and were useful in the work of the church. But no one today has any of these gifts; they have ceased; they are not needed. We have the perfect, complete, will of God (2 Timothy 3: 16-17; Jude 3; 1 Corinthians 13: 8-13), which is able to furnish us unto all good works.

However, Timothy needed to rekindle the use of his gift. The image here is that of a flame and causing it to blaze or burn more brightly. Devotion to God is the flame. Timothy is exhorted to use the gift (the abilities that God had given him and to be more active in the Lord’s work. In other words Paul said: “Keep that devotion to God glowing like a hot blaze of fire; don’t let it burn low. Stir it up. Take advantage of the opportunities that are yours in Ephesus.”

However rich and useful the blessings and gifts God has through His providence bestowed upon us, we should also use them and not let our zeal in the Lord’s service get lukewarm or cold. We must keep the flame burning.

There are many congregations today that need these words of encouragement. They need to be “revived again” or “rekindled.” Years ago, as a youngster, I used to fan the fire on the hearth and make the blaze burn more brightly. Certainly, we can all understand the figure of speech. We should use all proper means to keep the flame of pure religion in our hearts burning and glowing.

However rich our gifts may be which God has bestowed upon us, they do not grow of their own accord but need to be “stirred up” all along, as fire under the embers. Otherwise they will decay and the flame will go out.

This same principle applies to churches. So, we ask the question: What needs to be rekindled in the church today? And how do we cause the flame to burn more brightly? Let us note some things that may help us to rekindle the blaze:

Let Us Attend the Public Worship Services of the Church

Christians are exhorted to not forsake the assembling of themselves together (Heb. 10:25). The early Christians came together, as at Troas, on the first day of the week “to break bread” (Acts 20:7). This was the Lord’s Day (Rev. 1:10) and the Lord’s worship service. Public worship is important. A failure to attend weakens the church. Many members of the church need to rekindle their zeal and begin attending regularly and faithfully the public services and encourage all others to do the same. Too, they need to invite their friends to attend with them. A kind, loving personal invitation may be what some people need to begin attending the worship services. This could mean a soul, or souls, saved eternally in heaven. A Gospel meeting is also a great time to invite neighbors and friends to attend the public worship services. We need to have more Gospel meetings as we did many years ago, at which time the church was then growing.

Let Us, as Gospel Preachers, Rekindle Our Preaching of the Lord’s Word Faithfully

Some preachers are not studying like those of former days in the church did. These pioneers of the faith studied their Bibles, and they lovingly, kindly and firmly preached the plain, simple truths of the Bible, giving book, chapter and verse on great fundamental subjects. Many preachers need to return to this kind of preaching today. The people are hungry to hear good, simple, Bible preaching. So “preach the word” (2 Timothy 4:2)!

Many churches today are like the church at Sardis, one of the seven churches of Asia. Note, the language:

And unto the angel of the church in Sardis, write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God (Revelation 3: 1-2).

What Jesus prescribed for the church at Sardis was a revival, a rekindling of the flame. Exactly how they were to go about doing that, He did not explain, but from our study in this lesson we are sure it would include these things we have mentioned.

Again, the Lord continued by saying:

Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent ... Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk

with me in white: for they are worthy. He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels (Revelation 3:3-5).

Many churches need to sing often and mean it' "Revive us again:"

Revive us again; Fill each heart with thy love;
May each soul be rekindled with fire from above.
Hallelujah! Thine the glory. Hallelujah! Amen!
Hallelujah! Thine the glory; Revive us again.

Wm. P. Mackay

Many churches need to be revived; they are dying spiritually. The members of the church at Laodicea were "lukewarm," "neither cold nor hot." (Revelation 3:16). Thus, the lord threatened to "spue" them out. They had material wealth but were spiritually "wretched, and miserable, and poor" (v. 17). Their members needed to "repent" (v. 19). Many congregations are like that today.

Let Us Rekindle Our Zeal to Give Liberally to the Lord's Work

"The liberal soul shall be made fat: and he that watereth shall be watered also himself" (Proverbs 11:25, KJV).

There was a man, and some did count him mad, the more he gave the more he had.

We have been richly prospered in the last few years, and we need to get back to real liberal giving to advance the Lord's kingdom (cf. Malachi 3:8-10).

So, brethren, let us rekindle the flame and maintain a working, growing, happy attitude in the Lord's kingdom. Christ once asked His disciples, "What do ye more others?" (Matthew 5:47). He is asking us the same today. In almost every congregation I have labored as a preacher I have met brethren who were eager to serve; willing both to say and believe, "We can do it," and having put it into practice, thereby they got it done.

I pray that this church here at 39th Street will continue to be an example to other congregations in this area in spiritual and numerical growth, in carrying the Gospel to regions beyond, and in maintaining that good spirit of unity and love for each other.

Too often many think of Christianity only in terms of harmlessness. But a Christian is not one who merely does no harm; he is a positive factor. His zeal and work for Christ really make a difference. This is one of the impressions made by the early saints. After Pentecost they were so joyful that their enemies could not explain them. They converted the pagans and both Jews and Gentiles by the thousands. And what they possessed long ago has been the priceless possession of countless hundreds of people from the denominational world and helped to establish many good and faithful congregations in the 1800's and 1900's. We can rekindle the flame again today if we will try.

But it is possible for us, with our nice church buildings, to lose that burning fire. From the mid 1900's to the end of the past century, many congregations lost it to a great extent, but now seems a large number of these churches are beginning to fan the fire and restore the burning blaze. However, so much more needs to be done. As we think about other congregations, we are not too depressed; we feel that something can be done about them. But too often they allow selfishness and pursuit of pleasure to put out their fire and quench their holy enthusiasm. And some of the older members are saying, "The church is not like it used to be. I can remember when ...," and then they describe the former days: baptisms, etc. These churches need to rekindle the fire.

What was wrong with the church at Ephesus? It was losing its "first love" (Revelation 2:4). It was failing to maintain the spiritual glow. Why was the church at Laodicea offensive to the Lord to the point of nausea? It was "lukewarm" (Revelation 3:15-16). Although rich and in need of nothing in a material way, they needed to rekindle and maintain their spiritual glow. They needed to repent; or else the candlestick would be removed. When a church loses its spiritual flame, it loses its usefulness to the Lord in spreading pure New Testament Christianity. A church that is lukewarm is not a church that is winning souls to Christ. They have lost interest in converting people to the Lord.

So, we need to note these three positive steps to rekindle the flame and to keep it glowing:

Keep Busy

Work is one of the supreme blessings of the church. We must work for others for the redeeming of their souls and helping make a better world. Don't quit working! Perhaps if we took a census of the city of Independence, Missouri, we would find several hundred men and women who had been active in the church at one time, but who have quit and lost interest altogether. They might say, "I was once active and busy then, but I have lost interest." Find them and rekindle in them the flame of fire.

Keep Our Faces Toward the Future

If we try to go forward in the Lord's work while looking back at the past, we are doomed to failure and disappointment (cf. Philippians 3:13). We cannot go back to the past; we must look forward. In every church there are these two classes: (1) Some have quit (2) Some are still working at all hours and under all circumstances. They realize they will never build a better church by looking back to splendid yesterdays. To face forward is the only way to maintain the spiritual glow of the flame for ourselves as individuals and to maintain it for our congregations. So, "keep on keeping on;" don't give up!

Finally, If We Are Going to Maintain the Flame, We must Keep in Touch with Our Lord and with His Word

A kerosene lamp goes out when its oil is exhausted. Even so, our flame goes out when we lose touch with Christ, who is the Light of the world. But if we can, by obedience to His Word, maintain that fellowship with Him, then nothing will put out our light.

So what is the secret? First, keep on working; second, keep your face to the future; and third, keep in touch with the Lord. Then, and only then, can we rekindle and maintain the spiritual glow.

Our nation within the past several years has gone down in morals, and this has affected the church:

- Abortion has become an acceptable means of population control.
- Thousands of babies are being murdered each year.
- Euthanasia seems not to be very far behind.
- Homosexuality has gained respectability.
- Sex outside of marriage has become common behavior, and teenage pregnancy has reached new highs.
- Addiction to pornography and gambling is almost epidemic.
- Alcoholism is a very serious health problem.

If we are going to get back to sound doctrinal preaching, we must preach on immorality and godly living.

When a person has a true Biblical understanding of the New Testament church and its undenominational nature, that person who wants to obey the teaching of the Bible will not want to join a denomination with its false doctrine and erroneous practices. We realize that schisms exist today in some congregations that were once united and growing a hundred years ago. But winds of false doctrine are leading some of the members toward denominationalism and away from the Bible. For example, some say baptism is not essential to salvation; in some places mechanical instruments of music in worship are accepted, and open fellowship with denominational churches is practiced.

The inspiration and authority of the Bible is being attacked. In the early 1800's the plea of New Testament Christianity was being preached and widely accepted, but division finally came. By the year 1906 a formal division was published in the US census: the Christian church and the churches of Christ. What has happened can happen again. As we reflect on the past and examine the present, we need to remember that the important thing is to always remain true to Biblical authority and to faithfully preach and teach the Word of God.

In the long ago, God asked Israel, "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3). Can we walk with God unless we agree with Him? Can religious people walk with Him while they make laws and change His teaching? (cf. Galatians 1:8-9; 2 John 9-11). Is we desire to follow the Lord's teaching, can we walk with religious people who do not follow His teaching? If we love God better than we do them, we will cling to God and to His Will. If division must come again, let it come along the lines of loyalty to God and His Word.

All we have to do and must to do is to stand true and firm to God and His Will, and leave the results with Him. Our only hope is to walk with God and be true to Him in all things. That desire needs to be rekindled today in all the congregations across the land, but by always "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). The church must remain pure in doctrine and teach against religious errors. It is the pure Word of God that saves – not the doctrines of men.

Rekindle The Same Message

The Gospel message is the same now as it was in the first century. It will continue to be the same message until the Lord returns at the end of time. The Gospel was completely given by inspired men in the first century. And it continues to be all-sufficient for man's spiritual needs. It "thoroughly" furnishes us "unto all good works" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The Holy Spirit guided the apostles into "all truth" (John 16:13). Jude exhorted the early Christians to "earnestly contend for the faith which was once ["for all," ASV] delivered unto the saints" (vs. 3). Let us therefore never be ashamed of the glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Sad Days

Some of the saddest days in the history of the Lord's church in our nation took place a little more than a century ago. Brethren who once worked together could no longer work together. Sadness filled the hearts of those who had to choose between remaining true to God's Word or division. The restoration plea to "do Bible things in Bible ways and call Bible things by Bible names" had called many sincere people out of sectarianism and denominationalism, but now the focus on the part of some was to unite with the popular religions of the day. Some brethren could not conscientiously worship in churches that introduced mechanical instruments in the worship, or that denied the essentiality of baptism for the remission of sins, or the churches that supported them in so doing.

Brethren who held firmly to the principles of New Testament Christianity felt forced to leave and establish congregations that remained true to the Bible. Although they had helped generously in the past in building and paying for those church buildings and colleges, they left, shedding many tears, and started all over again. Those who refused to embrace the changes of the liberal movement in America were only one-sixth the size of those who followed the digressives. But after a few decades the little group remaining true to the Bible soon doubled in size and continued to grow rapidly while the liberal movement grew very little and soon even began to lose members.

Now today, after the Lord's church has grown so rapidly during the past seventy-five of hundred years, there are a few who are advocating a change in our teaching and fellowship so as to approve false doctrine. But this we cannot do.

The pious, unimmersed people are still outside the spiritual body of Christ, the Lord's church (Acts 2:47; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:27). The addition of instruments into worship is going beyond the word of God (Ephesians 5:18-19; Colossians 3:16-17; 2 John 9-11). Mechanical instrumental music was never a part of Christianity for several hundred years after the Lord's church was established.

Also, the use of women in a public way in the general worship assembly in the church is contrary to Biblical teaching (1 Timothy 2:8-14; 1 Corinthians 14:34).

Make no mistake about it; these are "salvation issues." As always we must obey the Lord (Hebrews 5:9; Matthew 7:21-27). We cannot ignore or disobey the will of God and still remain

pleasing to Him. Just as Jesus said, “And why call ye me, Lord, Lord and do not the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46).

Sadly, many of our youth are being led astray by teachers and youth leaders to demand changes in the teaching and in the worship assembly of the church. But, we must hold to God’s unchanging word, rekindle the zeal of faithful teaching, and practice once again true New Testament Christianity.

We love our “progressive” brethren, but already some of our congregations and colleges have been swept away from the faith, and we cannot and will not follow them into error and lawlessness. Loving others does not mean that we will encourage them into a false sense of security, that their humanly devised worship or baptism is acceptable to God. Loving others means telling them what the Bible teaches and what they need to do to please God. It is not “judgmentalism” to ask people to be faithful to God’s truth. We are supposed to do this. There is only one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God and Father (Ephesians 4:4-6). Let us therefore get busy immediately, “rekindle the fire,” and save as many churches as possible from this liberal movement. God will bless us in the effort.

The basic principles of the New Testament church must always be taught and obeyed. To continue to grow we must have a commitment to the Bible as the inspired and infallible Word of God. This is how the church grew in the first century (Acts 19:20; cf. 21:20), how it was growing a hundred years ago, and how it will continue to grow today. The Bible is God’s perfect revelation. The lessons from the past are clear. God’s work flourishes when Christians submit to the teaching and practice of the Holy Scriptures. This attitude achieved remarkable success in the past, even through the first half of the twentieth century, and it will do the same today.

We cannot successfully combat error by fellowshipping it and going along with it. It has often been said, and truly: “Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” We cannot allow history to repeat itself today. If we reject the Bible as the only source of authority, further religious division will occur, and history will have repeated itself because we failed to learn from the mistakes of the past. Religious unity can be achieved only by following Biblical teaching. We must continue to emphasize that the Bible is the only and sure guide to heaven. May God help congregations and good, faithful preachers to turn the tide of apostasy that is threatening the church today.

Rekindle the flame. Preach the word! A congregation is a church of Christ as far as, and only as far as, it possesses the qualities and characteristics of the church defined in the Scriptures. A church that fits the Lord’s definition of His church is a church of Christ at any time and in any place that it is found. It is not what you say or I say or what someone else says that counts; it is what God’s Word says. It is the final authority. May God help us to do His will!

Among many religionists today we often hear the kinds of phrases:

- “Join the church of your choice.”
- “One church is as good as another.”

- “It doesn’t matter what church you are a member of because we all worship the same God.”

What people need to know is what the Bible teaches. That is the important thing, and it must always be kept as the most important thing of all.