

# The Congregation that Lasted 100 Years

(Written by Paul R. Blake)

- A. I am tired and stressed; I do not break down; I slowly grind to a halt like a tractor running out of gas. Do not mistake what I am about to say as a product of being tired and stressed out.
1. I also love all of you very dearly; it is because I love you that you are going to hear today what you need to hear, but may not find pleasant.
  2. In South America is the Camino de las Yungas death road from La Paz to Coroico. It is a single lane road nearly 1000 miles long and situated on a mountainside with a 2000 foot drop. In 2006, a bus driver ignored the warning about driving through water from a sudden rainstorm rushing across the road and drove the bus into it. The water had cut a channel in the road, and between the channel and the pressure of the water, the bus was pushed over the cliff and fell a quarter of a mile into the canyon. The driver was the only one who survived. He was prosecuted for the deaths of more than 100 persons.
  3. I am not going to face the Lord in Judgment to have Him ask me why I politely kept my mouth shut to spare your feelings
- B. What is the average lifespan of a local congregation? About three and a half generations, 65 years. Let me tell the story of the congregation that lasted for 100 years. We will consider it from the day they closed their doors forever.
1. Generation one: They began as a new work started by an older, established congregation of faithful Christians. In the early days, there were only a few dozen, but they were determined, hard workers dedicated to the goal of starting a faithful church in their own community. They met for several years in borrowed and rented halls until one day when they were able to buy a building and remodel it for worship services. They grew rapidly, tripling in size by the start of the second generation.
  2. Generation two: They experienced their greatest growth, strength, and stability. Their number rose to nearly 200 and they appointed several strong, devout elders. They were very busy in the work of the Lord and began to be well known to Christians everywhere. When brethren in nearby congregations began to succumb to the various errors of the day, this church stayed faithful to sound doctrine.
  3. Generation three: They maintain a strong stance and increase their influence, but the seeds of their decline have been sown. Generation two declares that generation three will not have to struggle like they did. They would give them all of the things they never had and not subject them to hard work and hard times. Generation three gets a taste of the spirit of the world and becomes more materialistic than spiritual minded. Making a good life in this world begins to rival preparing for the life that is to come. While they still practice sound doctrine, their service is diluted by pursuit of material things. They set the state for generation four to become, not materialistic, but worldly minded. They hire

preachers who add to their problems rather than help them return to their roots.

4. Generation four: They are somewhat worldly minded. They are sensitive to the attitudes and values of the world around them and attempt to blend the world's philosophy with the doctrine of Christ. Some of them are conflicted and struggle with being faithful. Others are loyal to the local church and the faith, but are so busy with so many things that they stay wrapped up in their own needs and not the needs of the church as a whole. They increase pressure on the elders to overlook the sins and unfaithfulness of family members. It is not long before the elders cease to practice local church discipline. They begin to treat Sunday night, Wednesday night, and Gospel meeting attendance as an option and not a command of the Lord.
  5. Generation five: Members begin to treat membership in the Lord's church as a denominational choice. Many of them only come on Sunday for the communion service. Sunday morning Bible class attendance drops dramatically. Gospel meetings are so poorly attended that the elders decide to no longer hold meetings. They eventually yield to member pressure to end Sunday evening worship services, and midweek Bible studies are held in the homes of the few members who are still interested. The attendance drops inexorably until they are no longer self-supporting. They hire preachers who are too inexperienced to know how to turn it around, or too old and tired to do the work. By attrition, the eldership dissolves as there is no one to take the place of those who passed away.
  6. Generation six: This generation was raised by generation five who did not instill them with the spirit of dedication to the Lord and the doctrine of Christ. Generation six one by one drifts off to community Bible churches, progressive institutional churches, or quits altogether. The few families that remain make the painful decision to drive a great distance to a faithful congregation and close the doors on a congregation that lasted 100 years. The building remains in the real estate market for five years until it is sold to a developer who tears it down and builds a housing development on the site. Generation seven knows nothing about the church of its ancestors because it is lost to history and memory.
- C. September 13 was the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my work as a preacher. I have worked with six congregations, am well acquainted with hundreds more, and know more than a thousand evangelists. I have seen this pattern repeated over and over again with very little variation and almost always the same outcome. What is the name of the church that lasted 100 years?
1. Tomlinson Run -- If we continue this current path, that will be the story of this congregation one day.
  2. This work started in 1947; where will it be in 2047? We change the condition of this church in 2047 today, not 31 years from today.
  3. What are we doing today?

- a. We have ended the practice of midsummer VBS meetings
- b. We have about 20 members who wait until after Bible class to come on Sunday morning.
- c. We have a 20 to 30% drop in attendance Sunday and Wednesday nights
- 4. Last week it was brought to a head with the worst congregational attendance in a Gospel meeting in 17 years
- D. Congregations in decline everywhere are ending the practice of having meetings, they are ending Sunday night services, they are making Wednesday night Bible study optional gatherings in various members homes, and they are ceasing to practice local church discipline. This inevitably results in a decline in Sunday morning attendance and an overall reduction in spiritual mindedness. Members start falling away, going to progressively institutional churches, or community Bible churches.
  - 1. Maintain this current trend here, and your parents and grandparents will weep of the knowledge that they will not see you in heaven. When you stand at the side of your faithful parents' casket in your current state, you can do so with the knowledge that you will never see them again.
  - 2. In this congregation, we have an older sister who is at every service. She goes to nursing home to visit and help take care of residents. She is generous with her time and resources. She is an active encourager and a dedicated Bible student. And she comes to me from time to time in tears wishing that there was more she could do and sometimes fearful that she might be overlooking some good work.
  - 3. In this congregation, we have persons who wanted me help them to figure out how many services they had to attend in order to keep membership. Do we honestly believe that God sees no difference between the two, and that He will admit both of them into heaven?
- E. We are not playing church; this is not a pour honey all over everyone, I'm okay, you're ok community Bible church. This is the Lord's church! We will continue to preach and to stand for what is right no matter how many leave.
  - 1. One can get upset and go to a neighboring, less faithful congregation, or an institutional church, or a denomination, and they will not be happier religiously; they'll simply be one step closer to being lost and yet another step further from God.
  - 2. We experienced appalling attendance at the recent gospel meeting
  - 3. We are seeing disheartening endorsements on the social media of the immodest (borderline nudity) and of persons disciplined for rebellion against the doctrine of Christ.
  - 4. We may differ on a number of things, but this is doctrine. I am not going to change the message because the attitudes of some have become worldly, materialistic, and immoral.
  - 5. Do not let my treatment of you with kindness, love and patience be mistaken for acceptance of worldly behavior. And even if I were to approve and accept this kind of behavior, God does not approve!

- F. Think about it; where are the churches in the Ohio Valley that stopped practicing discipline and cut back on services and Bible studies? How long do you believe people will survive as Christians giving into weakness in congregations that cater to weakness?
1. For those members who are still strong and faithful, but wearied and discouraged by the trend of family and friends to drift away from dedicated service to God: I know I am asking a lot, but we need to present a united front against the inroads that Satan has already made here at TR. You are going to need to risk your relationship with falling family members in order to save them.
  2. In these matters in our relationship as a preacher and a local congregation, we are not compatible. This current condition will change. Some may become angry and leave; I pray that instead they will become humble before God and repent and grow,
  3. If as a congregation, TR persists in this current trend, it will be a sign to me that I have reached the limit of my effectiveness here as an evangelist. Make the right choice.
  4. I have done my best. You know this. A significant number are not doing their best; in fact, they are doing less than mediocre. You know it, I know it, but most importantly, God knows it.
  5. We do not want to be the local church that lasted for 100 years.

G. 2Cor. 7:1-4, 9-12

Invitation:

French general and statesman, Charles de Gaulle, became the father of a baby girl Anne, who was born in 1928 severely afflicted with Down's syndrome. She needed constant care and attention, as she couldn't feed or dress herself and was unable to speak understandably. Madame de Gaulle took care of her during the day while her husband served the country, but at night when Charles came home, He took care of Anne. De Gaulle appeared to everyone as distant, cold and hard. But to Anne, he was the man who spent hours with her every evening, talking to her and playing simple games with her. At bedtime, he would sit at her bedside and hold her hand until she fell asleep. In 1948, she contracted a lung ailment and died. After her body was placed in the family vault, de Gaulle turned to his wife and said, "Now at last, our child is like all other children at rest with the Lord."

This illustrates the love of God for us. We are so flawed and damaged, helpless to free ourselves from the state of sin, hopeless without God's gentle, tender care.

***Psalm 94:14-19; Rom. 5:6-9***