

# Why Churches Fail

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This Sunday marks seven full years that I've been preaching the gospel in Joliet. It has been an eventful seven years. Some of the events I enjoyed; some I didn't. On this anniversary, it is typically my custom to review what has taken place in the past year and discuss what ought to happen moving forward. This year, I'm not going to do that, mainly because I believe that in his sermon a couple of months ago, Josh did a marvelous job of both of those two things.

However, I do want to focus on the church this morning regardless. Rather than being so concerned with our particular situation, I'm going to explore one of the most ominous Scriptural topics related to churches—the topic of church failure. All of us know that churches can fail in one way or another; many of us have had experience with it. Regardless of whether we have or not, though, we don't want it to happen here, and the best way to prevent that is by considering what the Scripture says on the subject. This morning, then, let's ask God's word why churches fail.

## Jesus on Failure

The first perspective on church failure that we're going to consider is the perspective of the Head of the church Himself, Jesus. In particular, we're going to study what He has to say in the early part of the book of Revelation to four churches in Asia that were in trouble. In these letters, Jesus reveals that churches fail by **LEAVING THEIR FIRST LOVE**. Read with me from Revelation 2:4-5. The rest of Jesus' words to the church in Ephesus are quite complimentary. They were noted for their good works, they rejected false teachers, and they persevered in their obedience to God. I daresay that if we lived in the first century and visited this congregation, we would come away impressed by what we saw. This is the kind of church of which we would want to be a part.

However, Jesus saw past the impressive exterior to a serious internal problem. The Ephesians were doing all the right things, but they weren't doing them for the right reason. They were serving God because they felt they should, not because they loved Him. This can be every bit as much a problem for churches today. We can get so busy with plans and programs and activities, with doing all the church stuff, that we forget that Christianity isn't about the church. It's about Christ. Once we forget Him, though, once we focus on the kingdom, not the King, we set the first foot on the road to denominationalism. After all, most of the denominations I'm familiar with do all kinds of good works. The problem is that they aren't the works that Jesus wants, and they aren't doing them for Him.

Second, Jesus tells us that churches fail because of **TOLERATION OF SIN**. This was the particular problem of the church in Pergamum, as revealed in Revelation 2:14-16. Like the Ephesians, the brethren in Pergamum had a lot going for them. In recent days, some of them had borne up under persecution to the point of literally dying for the name of Jesus. However, they allowed brethren who were engaged in all kinds of sin to continue in their number unchecked. Note that it doesn't seem that most of the Pergamene Christians were practicing immorality themselves. However, the mere fact that they turned a blind eye to the sin of their brethren led Jesus to call them to repent.

Two thousand years later, we too can face the same temptation. We too can be tempted to soft-pedal God's teaching on authority, or divorce and remarriage, or homosexuality, or any other controversial issue, simply for the sake of unity. That seems like a recipe for church success, doesn't it? After all, the fewer lines in the sand we draw, the more people will be willing to join us and continue with us. There's one problem, though. When we draw a line in the sand over a Biblical teaching, that's not our line. It's God's line, and we don't have the right to erase it for the sake of peace with the world. If we do, regardless of how many people our milquetoast "gospel" brings through the door, we will have failed as a church. It doesn't matter if we pack our building every Sunday, if Jesus isn't gathered in the midst.

Slightly later in Revelation, we see a different congregation indicted for **FALLING ASLEEP**. This is the church in Sardis, described in Revelation 3:2-3. This congregation still had the reputation of being alive. Today, people in the brotherhood would probably describe them as a "sound" church. They would still have their entry in that church directory. However, the appearance of life was nothing more than that. They either had to wake up or be destroyed.

If we had to summarize the problem of the church in Sardis in one word, that one word would probably be "complacency". This was a comfortable church, in which nobody did anything and nobody cared. Sadly, this same complacent pattern of behavior is evident in all too many churches of Christ. Sure, there will be people who show up on Sunday morning. Somebody is going to lead singing. Somebody is going to preach. The five acts of worship will be faithfully carried out. However, none of the members are willing to invest more of themselves than that. Woe to the weaker members in a congregation like this! Nobody's going to check up on them or encourage them. Woe to the visitor and the stranger! They're going to get ignored. Woe to the people of the community who have never heard the gospel! Certainly nobody from THAT congregation is going to tell them. And yet, the church will continue to meet, week after week, year after year, holding on to its entry in the brotherhood directory, but doing nothing to glorify God.

The final failing church in Revelation, the church of Laodicea, suffers from **PRIDE**. Consider the words of Jesus in Revelation 3:17-18. We will often criticize the Laodiceans for being lukewarm, but we rarely ask just what it was

that they were lukewarm about. Our Lord explains the real problem in these two verses. These were people who were so physically well off that they believed they were spiritually well off too. They didn't need financial help from anybody, so they concluded that they didn't need help from God either. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus praises the poor in spirit. The Laodiceans were the opposite. They were rich in spirit, and Jesus was revolted by their arrogance.

All of the problems we've looked at so far seem familiar to us today, but the Laodiceans' failure might be the most familiar of all. We live in a country that is ridiculously affluent. Even the poor among us would probably be considered wealthy in first-century terms. This prosperity whispers an insidious message in our ears. It tells us that we're just fine on our own, that we don't need to depend on God. Once we fall into that trap, once we start believing that God is an extra, we're going to start treating Him like an extra. Kids got soccer practice on Wednesday nights? We can miss church; no big deal. Bought a nice new car that's a little bit nicer than we can afford? We can cut back on our contribution to the Lord's work! That way, we won't have to give up anything that really matters to us.

The problem is that our faith in ourselves is founded only on illusion. Without the favor of God, none of us could so much as get out of bed in the morning. We are utterly dependent, as far from being independent as we could be. God is not an extra. He's not somebody who's nice to have on our side sometimes. We need Him the way we need oxygen, and if we don't seek Him first, He will surely abandon us to the disaster of our lukewarmness.

### **Paul on Church Failure**

In the second part of our study this morning, we're going to shift from the words of Jesus to those of one of His most prolific followers. We're going to examine what the apostle Paul says about why churches fail. First, Paul pinpoints **FAITHLESS LEADERS** as a potential source of problems. Look at his words in Acts 20:29-30. In context, this comes in the middle of Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders. How chilling it must have been for them to hear this from him! These were all men who had met the same qualifications for eldership that our elders do today. They are pillars of their congregation. And yet, Paul says that some of them are going to work to destroy what they've been building. I would imagine that many of the elders found that hard to believe, yet Paul's prophecy was certain to be fulfilled.

Even today, we don't like to think that our church leaders might lead our congregation away from the Lord. "Brother So-and-So has been a member here for 35 years and an elder for 10. We've been able to count on him for decades." "Brother Thus-and-Such has given his life to preach the gospel. Surely we can believe him." Now, brethren, I'm not arguing that we should treat our leaders like convicted felons. However, we do need to hold them to the same standard as everybody else. Whether they are teaching something or promoting something, we must always ask, "But what does the Bible say?" Any faithful leader will be happy to answer that question. Any faithless leader will be exposed by it. Nobody, no matter how wise, no matter how revered, can be exempt from the scrutiny of the word of God.

Faithless leaders, and false teachers generally, often find success because of **TICKLISH EARS** among the brethren. Paul warns about the danger of apostasy this creates in 2 Timothy 4:3-4. I'll be the first to acknowledge it—the word of God is a hard thing to face. It holds a mirror up to our souls, and quite often, we don't like the reflection that it reveals. There is great comfort in the promises of God, but there is great discomfort in comparing our lives to what the Scripture says that we ought to be. We should expect this. Following Jesus makes for a hard road.

However, a lot of people don't want hard. They want easy instead. They want a version of discipleship that's like those muscle-builder ads on the Internet, where all you have to do is take the right supplement, and you'll end up with biceps like a bull gorilla. They want to believe that they can be like Jesus with minimal effort, or, better still, with no effort at all. They want preachers who will lift them up and praise them and never, ever challenge them.

That might make for easy listening, but it makes for an even easier road to apostasy, because the things that we least want to hear are the things that we most need to hear. A preacher who only tickles ears is like a gardener who never weeds. Soon, the weeds will take over the garden, and the sins and the false doctrines will take over the church.

On the other hand, church failure can be the result of **CONTENTION**. Paul describes the way this can go in Galatians 5:15. Contention is a fact of life in the outside world. People are always clawing and biting and scratching to get what they think should be theirs, whether they want power or recognition or something else entirely. The world suffers greatly because of contention, but as long as it's full of godless, self-centered people, contention is going to be the result. Contention becomes a problem in the church when people don't leave their worldly attitudes behind in the world. To people like this, the church becomes nothing more than another arena for self-advancement. If I get left off the duty roster, that's not an oversight. It's an insult. If my brother doesn't invite me over all the time and make a big deal out of me, he did that intentionally, and it's because he doesn't like me. If I don't get my way in the men's meeting, it's because everybody who disagrees with me is stupid, evil, or both. Now, don't get me wrong here, friends. Sometimes, sincere Christians do disagree with each other. However, when those disagreements arise, we must take particular care to keep our egos out of it. The Lord's work is too big to be about any of us, and when we make it about us, one of two things will happen. Either our contentious spirit causes the whole thing to collapse, or we create the church of us, not Him.

A popular source of church-killing contention is **SELF-MADE RELIGION**. Paul warns against this in Colossians 2:23. As we know, there are many areas of our spiritual lives where God prescribes what we must do. However, within the scope of His commandments, God gives us a great deal of liberty. He tells us that we are to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to Him, but He doesn't specify what hymns we are supposed to sing. These liberties give His church the flexibility it needs to adapt itself to any place and time, and they do the same for His people.

Too often, though, we feel the need to fill in those blank spaces with our own set of rules. For instance, several years ago, a friend of mine was waiting on the Lord's table one Sunday night, and after he finished serving the Lord's Supper, he picked up the collection plate, prayed briefly, and collected the contribution. After the service was over, a sister pulled him aside and read him the riot act because he had prayed before the contribution. She had gotten used to a Sunday-evening collection without a prayer first, and she demanded that it be that way.

This attitude is a church-killer for several reasons. First, when we bind what our Lord has not bound, we are claiming His position and usurping His authority. Second, when someone wants to know why we're insisting on this, and we provide them with a quotation from the book of Second Opinions, we inevitably stir up strife. Third, when we impose our rules on others, those rules often become a barrier that stands between them and God. Finally, the more time we spend on our own rules, the less time we have for the commandments of God. Like the Pharisees, we can get so caught up in our own standards for purity that we forget what serving the Lord is actually about. Each one of these things by itself would be a problem. Together, they add up to disaster for a local congregation.

### **Preventing Church Failure**

Any time a congregation of the Lord's people fails, whether it fails by disappearing or by apostasizing, at least one of the eight factors we've examined is going to be involved. More usually, the congregation is destroyed by a combination of them. Of course, we don't like the thought of our church failing, so let's look at what we can do to prevent it.

First, we must **BE ALERT**. Paul encourages the Ephesian elders to do precisely this in Acts 20:31. Alertness, though, isn't only for elders. It's for ordinary saints too. It is the responsibility of every Christian to pay attention to what's going on in his or her local congregation. We need to be alert for false teachers, whether from inside or outside the local body. We need to be alert for lukewarmness and inattention on the part of the members. Above all, we need to be alert for ourselves. Each one of us must continually ask whether we are doing all we can for the Lord. Are we shouldering our share of the burden? Are we doing what we can to help advance the Lord's cause in our community? Or, instead, are we showing up at services, sitting in the pew, and waiting for someone else to do something? We must be honest, friends, about the difference between where we are and where God wants us to be, and only as a congregation embraces this alertness, directed both outwardly and inwardly, can it hope to remain faithful and fruitful.

Second, we must **HOLD FAST THE WORD**. Read with me from Titus 1:9. As we implied earlier, the word is not a comfortable thing to hold. It has two edges, and it is every bit as likely to cut us as it is to cut somebody else. However, if the word isn't cutting us and piercing us, it isn't reaching our hearts, and if it isn't reaching our hearts, we aren't becoming more like Jesus. That's a challenging process, and many Christians limit their exposure to the word precisely so they can avoid it. Sure, they know their proof texts and candy-stick passages, but usually, those are about how somebody else has to change, not how they have to change. Instead, of immersing themselves in the word, they immerse themselves in the warm, comfortable bath of church tradition, with its emphasis on the checklist requirements of the assembly instead of on a sacrificial life of discipleship. Over and over and over again, our question must be, "What does the Scripture say?" We need to ask this question not only in the context of the sermon and the Bible class, but in our own private study. We must hear what the Scripture says about authority and the use of church funds, but we must also hear what it says about what manner of people we ought to be, in holy conduct and godliness. If a congregation of the Lord's people loves the word and embraces the word, especially when it hurts, they will continue to flourish.

Third, we must **HOPE ON GRACE**. Peter expresses this idea in 1 Peter 1:3. Hope is universally important to the human race. Everybody has some hope that they structure their lives around. Some hope that they will find satisfaction from wealth and material things. Others place their hope in their families. Still others hope that the pleasures of this life will bring them contentment and peace. As Christians, though, our hope must be this and only this: that on the last day, Jesus will come, that He will look upon us with favor, and that He will grant us the blessing of eternal life. I suppose that every Christian will say that he has this hope, but the truth is revealed by the way we live. We will lay up treasures in heaven first and on earth second. We will abandon other commitments for the opportunity to assemble with the saints, rather than abandoning the assembly for the sake of other commitments. We will choose to be mistreated, as God's people have always been, rather than enjoying the passing pleasures of sin. In short, we will rely so fully on our hope that if indeed there is no resurrection, we will be of all men the most to be pitied. Let's be honest about this, friends. If Jesus is not the Son of God, are our lives a pathetic waste? Or, instead, are we serving so many other masters that if Jesus were subtracted from the equation, we wouldn't miss Him too much? Is Christ our hobby, or is He the center and guiding star of our existence? If the latter is true in our churches, they will never fail.

Next, we must **NOT GROW WEARY**. Paul makes this point in Galatians 6:9. Culturally speaking, persevering and not growing weary is NOT one of our favorite things to do. We like to wait to watch our favorite TV shows until we can DVR them, so that we don't have to sit through all the tedious commercials. When it comes to spiritual things, that instant-gratification mentality often doesn't translate well. As the saying goes, "Lord, I want patience, and I want it now!" Sadly for us, that isn't the way that it works. If we want to attain any spiritual goal, we are going to have to invest effort, and we are going to have to stick to it. We might have to extend a hundred invitations before we find one person who is willing to visit services with us. We might have to drag ourselves to Wednesday night services 50 times in a row before it finally becomes habitual. We might have to become experts at saying no before we can carve out a daily space of quiet time with God. In any area of spiritual growth, the price of success is high. However, the cost of failure is a lot higher. Only a church with people who are willing to hang in there and keep going will prosper over the long run.

Finally, we must **SERVE FROM LOVE**. Look at the famous statement of Jesus in John 14:15. Note first of all that it does NOT logically follow from this that if we keep A commandment, we must love God. Instead, Jesus is speaking from a much broader perspective. He's telling us that unless selfless devotion to Him drives our obedience, we will fail as disciples. Christianity is not about the church. It's about God. We shouldn't be doing the things we do as Christians because "those are the rules". We should be doing them because we love Jesus, we are overwhelmed by gratitude for His salvation, and in the face of all that He's done for us, surrendering our lives to Him is the least we can do. If we don't feel this life-transforming love for Jesus, there's only one cure. We have to go back to the book and get to know Him there. I guarantee you, friends, that if we put in that study time in the gospels, we will find it impossible not to love Him. If we don't, why are we surprised when we don't love a stranger? Our love for Jesus is, as Paul notes, the perfect bond of unity. It will keep us together with one another and with Him, no matter what.