

# The Perils of Preachers and Churches

by Arthur Vess

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*The church's prosperity can lead to compromise and decay, causing it to lose its spiritual power and influence.*

**Topics:** "Church Purity", "Spiritual Leadership"

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## Description

Reverend J.T. Crane, in his prophetic sermon, warns about the perils that the church faces in the last days, not from external persecutions but from internal spiritual weaknesses like self-seeking, pride, and love of the world. He emphasizes the importance of maintaining purity, divine power, and zeal in the church, highlighting the dangers of compromising with worldly influences and seeking popularity over spiritual truth. The sermon also addresses the challenges faced by ministers in maintaining their calling with self-denial, sacrifice, and resistance to worldly temptations, urging them to prioritize spiritual responsibilities over personal comfort and worldly recognition.

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## Transcript

[Note -- The following is a condensed revision of a chapter in "Methodism and It's Methods," written by Rev. J. T. Crane, in 1875. Dr. Crane's many years of travel, study and intimate observations of current and past church history gave him a vision and insight into his own great Methodist church at that time. His prophetic fears have already been sadly fulfilled in his own great church, and are being repeated in the present day holiness movement, the last remains of true and early Methodism. May this great discussion of a great man in his generation be used of God to warn and awaken the fainting gleams of true Methodism among our own holiness ranks, whatever the organization or denominational constitution. Here is the message of Dr. Crane whose body lies in some cemetery while his great spirit lives on today!]

"This know also, that in the last days, perilous times shall come." II Timothy 3:1

The dangers of which Paul warns his son in the gospel are not those of the sword and flame of martyrdom. Great persecutions were indeed drawing nigh, and torture and death were drawing nigh to those of whom this world was not worthy. The days of burning and slaughter soon came. Ten times pagan Rome reached forth her iron hand and crushed the infant church; the blood of saints flowed like water; and yet, through three centuries of fiery trial, the church triumphed and grew in the face of the great persecutions; if not because of the great persecution.

Saints are made in the furnace of affliction. Great times of trials provide a chance to prove and demonstrate the supernatural! Many of the heathen who witnessed the joy with which the Christians died

for the Master's sake, turned from the scenes convinced that the religion of Jesus Christ was of God, and repented, believed in Jesus of Nazareth and in their own turn, laid down their lives for truth and righteousness. Perhaps the martyr methods would produce a revival in our day and age.

Paul's warning did not refer to this of suffering and martyrdom, but it did and does refer to the modern perils within the church produced by spiritual weakness, self-seeking, pride, ambition, the love of the world, "lovers of pleasure," among those who denied the power of godliness, while they are careful to maintain the "form without the power." In short, he warns the church against itself.

History shows that Paul sounded no false alarm. Three centuries of great persecution passed over the church, and left it pure, true and stronger than ever. Should we not say that the fierce persecution made and kept it pure and strong? Wallowing in the lap of the world is like wallowing in the lap of Delilah.

At the close of these three centuries of great persecution, Christianity proved its power over heathenism, and the Roman emperor turned to worship the church instead of the head of the church Jesus Christ. Christianity became the Roman religion, and decayed in the arms that once struck it with awful persecution. Persecution drives the church from the world, but friendship with the world smothers out its purity and power. Then the church rose to the highest pitch of worldly honor and prestige, but lost its divine nature and power, while every crafty schemer who covered royal favor pretended to embrace the Christian religion. Christianity at once became popular.

Christianity thrives under persecution, but dies under worldly popularity. Great, magnificent churches were erected, worship was made a splendid show; gold began to pour into the ecclesiastical coffers; and with the gold came the indolent and the mercenary, seeking places of honor and profit. The ministry attained prominence and public consideration. The church was organized more and more after the model of the world; bishops and archbishops and patriarchs arose, with palaces, revenue and power; with robes and miters and crosiers, and at last, a pope ascended his ecclesiastical throne, crowded out Jesus Christ, and claimed the homage and worship of a prostrate world, and a backslidden church. And thus, the early church which conquered the world in persecution, was conquered by the world in compromise and humiliated surrender.

To consolidate and perpetuate all this usurped power, and grandeur required audacity and craft on the part of the ministry, which was ever present. Falsehood after falsehood was invented, and put forth in the name of God, with awful curses added, consigning all to eternal perdition who refused to believe or obey them. The entire machinery of the church was directed to the enslavement of the minds and souls of men, till popery stood in all its might, a vast, stupendous imposture, founded on stupendous crime, flowing forth in filthy slime.

But the errors of Romanism, though they be many, have a common origin, and wear a common form in most of our modern churches and denominations, in varying degrees and destruction of spirituality. Their aim and effect are to increase the power of the church over the reason, the conscience, the purse and of the person; to nail the ears of men to the doorposts of the priest, and consign them to complete and perpetual bondage to men, rather than loyalty to God and truth. Do we see anything like this about us today?

A passing glance at "the commandments of men" will prove the statements just made above. They proclaimed the Bible as the word of God to increase its respect, but they declared that only the priest had the right and power to interpret and apply the truth. The Bread and wine [they claimed] became the actual

body and blood of Jesus, but only the priest could work the marvelous transition and offer it to the people. Matrimony, and all other sacred sacraments, could only be administered by the priest, or they were vain and blighting! Everything bound the people to the priests instead of to God. No room was left for the intelligence and conscience of the individual.

The climax in this ecclesiastical corruption was the claim of infallibility and indispensability by the pope, before whom all must bow and worship. Every feature of the papal scheme was a plot for the exaltation of the ministry, and enslavement of the people. Episcopal forms of church government drift farther and quicker away from God and truth than the extreme congregational forms. To further enslave and confuse the people, they spoke only in Latin which the listeners could not understand.

But the great glory of the early church, followed by the awful decay and corruption under the pope, is only one form of putting men in the place of God. Over and over through the centuries, great men have gone forth in the face of a corrupt church and a mocking world, to declare the whole council of God and His power to save men, but always in the face of great opposition and persecution, over which God gave them the victory in life and death. Great revivals and harvests of souls filled the land with great rejoicing in God.

Then their prosperity becomes a snare; the ministry is exalted to a high social position; honored, influential, liberally supported; then they lose their fervor and divine power and favor; then the zeal, burning love for souls and the self-negation and persecution which marked them at first, they lose and sit down to enjoy dignified ease, the fruits of their earlier toil and sacrifice; thus, the people sink into spiritual lethargy and repose, if not apathy, and the church's career of victory is ended. Listen, when numbers, wealth, and popularity come, purity, holiness, zeal and aggressive power decline.

It is not too soon [1875] for the Methodist church to look about her and inquire whether her perilous times are approaching. [Then the author shows how that the Methodist church increased from 15,000 in 1784 to 1,563,521, ninety years later.] But as the great Methodist church grew in numbers and popularity, she waned in spiritual power and influence. How long will it take us to understand the statement of Jesus Christ when He said, "My kingdom is not of this world." Federation with this world means separation from God.

The wealth of our Methodist people has grown and increased far more rapidly than our membership. Whether it be a matter of congratulation or of humiliation, the Methodist Episcopal church has grown to be a great and powerful body, commanding more and more of that kind of respect which the world pays to numbers, wealth and social influence. After the early church degenerated into the Roman Catholic machine, the pope once boasted that it was no longer necessary for her to say, "Silver and gold have I none." One replied, "Neither can she say, "Rise up and walk." Her supernatural, miraculous power was gone, because her contact with God had been severed. Let all modern churches take warning.

The peculiar warmth of our fellowship may have decreased as the forces of persecution from without had increased, to compel us to unite for self defense. The diminished attendance at class meetings has also tended to lessen it, by lessening our friendly, spiritual associations among our people. The future of the Methodist church, therefore seems to foreshadow enlarged numbers, increased ecclesiastical and personal wealth, a thoroughly organized, closely compacted body, which shall carry into the coming years something, at least, of the same energy, courage, and enthusiasm which has made its history bright with achievement.

But let us not deceive ourselves. There is ground for fear, as well as hope, and more fear than hope. New possibilities of sudden disaster or slow decay lie in our path. Prosperity may undermine our strength. Men are sometimes crushed by the caving in of gold mines, and perish by the weight of their own riches. Listen! When a church whose career has been in obscurity, poverty, and weakness; and whose every step upward has been made in the face of persecution and difficulties, has won its way to a place among the foremost Christian bodies of the land, it does not find it easy in the day of triumph to retain the self denial, the simplicity, the purity of doctrine and of life, the joyous loyalty to God and the right, which were the godly weapons by which the victory was originally gained.

The attitude of the Methodist church before the world is now very different to what it was a century ago; nor is it unreasonable for us to fear that in its new position, the church itself may undergo a change, both as an exponent of the religion of Christ, and as an instrument for the evangelization of the world. A very difficult problem is to be solved: How shall the stream widen without losing its depth? How shall we learn to use the new tools wisely, and not forget how to handle the old ones with which so much good has been done? How shall a church beginning with nothing but God and truth, gather in almighty host, and become strong in wealth, intelligence, and public favor; and at the same time, remain sound in faith, pure in life, spiritual, humble, self denying, having no confidence in the flesh?

Only the most faith and loyalty to God's word and the most firm, fearless resistance to all attempts, open or secret to lower the standard of moral conduct, or weaken the discipline of the church, either in the letter or the administration, can save it from decline and decay. Now is the time for us to lay aside all self-deception and self-flattery and exercise the keenest vigilance. A false alarm, though not pleasant, will do less injury than false confidence. When a church falls asleep in false security, all alarms are branded as false, and all alarm as wild criticism and fanaticism. Let us then be honest with ourselves and with God, and consider in what ways our prosperity of our church will affect unfavorably our spiritual life.

1. People less convinced of their spiritual need will more readily enter our fold or ranks. There was a time when Methodism, like their master in the days of humiliation, was "despised and rejected of men." The older churches pronounced our doctrines as heresy, our organization without authority, our ministers ignorant and our experience false, wild come-out-ism and fanaticism! The world declared our usages and practices unreasonable and burdensome and our morals fanatically severe. The older churches and the world unite their voices in a noisy chorus of condemnation, branding Methodism as a thing to be despised, abhorred and shunned.

Then it was indeed a thing of "a cross" to identify one's self with the Methodist. It dug a gulf wide and deep between the child of God and the children of the world, severing friendships, breaking up old associations, and compelling a reconstruction of social life. It severed at once and forever, the ties which bind one to another, the victims of vice, and the votaries of frivolous pleasures. It sometimes even drove sons and daughters from the parental roofs, and cut them off from their inheritance. A spiritual church shouts at church in spiritual power and glory. A backslidden church shouts outside at ball games, etc.

This state of things would naturally exert a powerful influence upon the rising society. In those days of censure, and persecution, the converts who cast their lot with the Methodist Episcopal church were thoroughly convinced that they were in earnest, ready to do or suffer all things, that they might throw off the burden of sin and find pardon and peace. They felt like Bunyan's Pilgrim when he put his fingers to his ears and fled from the city of destruction crying, "Life, life, eternal life."

This pungent conviction, this thorough earnestness, prompted a complete self-surrender and gave intensity to the entire experience, and solid strength to the whole Christian life. "Solid joys and lasting pleasures, none but Zion's children know." There was no motive for insincere profession; no place for compromise; no border land, where a man of feeble purpose or experience could pitch his tent and live in peace and friendship with his neighbors, both on the right and the left. He was content to "Come out from among them and be separate and touch not the unclean thing."

Thus the dishonor which rested upon the early Methodist church was like the cold bath which the Spartans ministered to their new-born infants; it secured general vigor among the people, because none but the vigorous, living souls had the power to survive it. [Does this sound like modern Methodism?]

But things have changed. "The offense of the cross has not ceased," but it is not what it once was. Membership in the Methodist church is no longer a discredit. As a result it requires less of self-negation; less of self-sacrifice to bear the name of Methodist. To enter the fold, therefore, does not require the pungent convictions, the force of conscience, which it once demanded. The conclusion seems inevitable that as the church becomes rich, powerful, and what the world calls respectable, men will be willing, or even eager, to enter it whose feeble religious experience and life would never have survived the Spartan bath of ridicule, contempt, and social separation of former days.

Success involves dangers which did not exist in the days of unpopularity. The church need not necessarily decline in spiritual power as it increases in numbers and wealth, but we must recognize and do all we can to prevent the peril and avert the evil. Unless recognized and resisted, evil will surely come. There will be action and reaction. The larger the proportion of the half-hearted, easy going members already in the church, the lower will be the conditions or standards of entrance and the less the religious obligations assumed in uniting with the church.

Falling bodies descend with a velocity which every moment increases, because the force which draws them downward gives them every moment a new impulse, and the farther, the faster, the church rushes downward and back to the world. History does not lack for examples of churches which began spiritual and scriptural in doctrine and discipline and pure in life, for a time, like the Heavenly city shines with the glory of God, but not guarding it against the insidious influences of prosperity, they ceased to be holy and true and began to decline, finally falling so low that they became a hissing and a by-word among skeptics and scoffers.

So is Methodism today and her remaining holiness ranks are rapidly drifting in the same direction, until it has become a great reproach to refuse to drift with them. The more our fervor grows for worldly recognition, the lower we place our standards for membership and Christian living. Our numbers may be rapidly increasing, but let us not be infected with the mania for numbers, regardless of their character or influence on us. We must not put numbers before the life and experience of those who join us. Now is the time when special care is needed in the guarding of the doors of the church and inoculating the doctrines and precepts of the gospel upon those already within, so that while the timid, and self-distrustful and the tempted may receive a cordial welcome, yet men of tainted reputations and unworthy lives may have no place among us. If forsake of numbers and the financial strength which numbers bring, we sacrifice the purity, the spiritual beauty and moral power of the church. We sell the Master over again for "pieces of silver."

2. The growing prosperity will tend more and more to effect the true character of the ministry.

During many years of history, the call to the ministry was a fearful thing to hear. To enter the traveling ministry required much of which in itself, is not only morally right, but valuable and naturally to be desired. It involved a surrender of other plans for life, in themselves, right and worthy, a yielding up of cherished purposes, a fading out of bright hopes; in short, a mental and moral process akin to that which comes to other men on their death-beds. He who obeyed the call divine, left his native place and home, to become a life-long wanderer. While other young men whom he knew were winning their way to prosperity and comfort, he must be content to expect, at the best, a bare support, so long as he was able to toil in arduous work, while fancy painted in the dim distance an old age of poverty and want. The thought of marriage came to him as well as to others, but it came clouded with doubt; the fear that a family would prove an impediment in his ministry, and the certainty that it would be a poor home, scanty in its comforts, and very lonely to those who should live and wait there, while he was on his long journeys around the circuit.

[The circuits were long and involved the travel through wilderness and over swollen rivers, in darkness of night, among wild animals and Indians. The preacher nor his family was ever sure that he would return home again well, or even alive. What about our modern preachers who court comfort and sell the truth for office and prestige? God help us!]

Nor did the praise of men supply the place of substantial reward. The world frowned and jeered, pronouncing him sometimes a fanatic, sometimes a hypocrite, sometimes a fool. The clergy of other denominations too often treated him with pretended pity and real contempt, vinegar mixed with gall, as one who ran when God had not sent, and who babbled of things he knew not. This they did, partly because they believed the charges which they uttered and partly to keep their flocks from straying away, and their personal interests from being damaged. Whatever the motive of their wicked warnings, many believed it, and thought to insult a Methodist was to do the service of God. "The time will come when they will turn you out of the synagogue, and he that killeth you think that he doeth God's service," do or doeth God a favor. Oh, if we had preachers like that today, we would not have to complain that revivals have passed!

No wonder that when the first whisper of the dreaded duty came, many a young man wept and prayed that the burden might not be laid upon him, and yielded only when the "woe is me if I preach not the gospel of Christ." The weight of the ministerial burden of those early days is attested, not only by the recorded experiences of preachers, the months of mental agony which they endured before they consented, but by the sad and significant fact, that during the first fifty years of our history, one held of those who entered upon the work, located, after having traveled an average of about seven years. The average Methodist preacher of those days died at the age of forty years. But what are we doing with the fruits of their sacrifice today? Their lives and influence far outweighed the many years of the average minister of today who lives in luxury and ease, and preaches to please, rather than to bless and help his congregation.

The woe which Paul dreaded still remains for those who realize the serious responsibilities involved. There are still calls for the ministry, voices that fall upon the ear, which are as truly from God as any that ever sent prophets and apostles on their holy errands, but they are not feared as they once were. When the ministry becomes a famous profession, rather than a sacred calling, God is grieved and souls lost. Though the call to the ministry does not face the serious trials of earlier days, yet the Lord of the harvest demands the same deep searchings of the heart, the same serious weighings of the eternal interests involved the same intense solicitude to settle the principle on the right principle, honestly, wisely, in the fear of God and the light of eternity.

And there may still be cases where those who are truly called are reluctant to obey, and yield only when they dare no longer to delay. When God calls a man, he lets him feel the weight of the responsibility, lest he enter the work lightly, and later fails because of the great responsibility. When God called the Apostle Paul he said, "I will show him what great things he must suffer for me." Later Paul himself testified, "In every town and city bonds and afflictions await me." The battle with the devil who controls this wicked old world is no easy task, when we enter it in earnest and without compromise, with men or devils. The time is on us when those who seriously enter the ministry, determined to be true to God in the face of every foe, may feel more of the seriousness of the call, as did the early apostles and Methodist preachers.

The woe still remains, but conditions of the times have changed the call to another point of moral danger, more serious in eternity than that which faced our early ministers. The woe was once for those who failed to obey the call; it is now for those who do not wait for the divine call, or obey the divine instructions after they are called. The terror once stood before those who dared to obey in the face of every foe; but it is now the woe for those who are ready to prophesy for friend or foe, provided their wages of mammon are duly paid. It is far better to suffer want and reproach now, than to suffer loss "when the chief Shepherd shall appear to award the crown of glory that fadeth not away," to all his under-shepherds.

It is fortunate that our modern ministers do not have to suffer the privations and persecutions which they once suffered, if they do not sell out for comfort and worldly pleasure and ease. It is never fair nor just for wealthy and prosperous laymen to allow their faithful ministers to suffer for their support, and the "servant is worthy of his hire," but both need to beware lest they both sell out for the meat that perisheth, rather than "laying up treasures in Heaven." The support and respect of the community should be held by the minister, but he must not allow such to destroy his piety, nor rob his people of the truth.

Is it safe then to assume, that in the future history of our churches, the ministerial office will be found to possess attractions not only for those who are called of God, as was Aaron; but also for the ambitious and self-seeking, and that it will tend to draw into the ministry some whose convictions are not strong, and whose motives for entering the ministry are not worthy of the sacred responsibilities of the call. How may the door be guarded so that none but those who are divinely called and commissioned may enter? This has been the problem and defeat of every spiritual church which becomes strong and great in the eyes of men.

But the peril does not lag about the door only. Many who enter the ministry "with an eye single to the glory of God," and with a burning love for souls, may almost unconsciously fall from the higher to the lower motives, unworthy of the true minister. Popularity gained by honest effort and sincere motives may lead the minister away from his higher calling to seek the praise and honor of men. "Verily I say unto you, they have their reward." The preacher and his family may fall to lower plains of the masses, instead of lifting others up to the higher plains of holy and unselfish living. It is easier for many to pull a few down, than it is for a few to lift many up, unless they maintain that power from on high, which makes men conquerors on every field of endeavor. It is the legitimate things of life which become attractive and dangerous. It seems to be the universal opinion of men that every man, except the preacher, ought to have the necessities and even the luxuries of life; when in fact, the layman has no more right to the good things of this life than the minister; but both must beware lest they sell out eternity for time, Heaven for earth, and Heaven for hell.

Why accuse the pastor if he becomes worldly minded and mercenary like the members, so long as they justify themselves in these things? But neither is justified but condemned. The command to bring all the tithes into the storehouse and prove me therewith, that I shall open the windows of Heaven and pour you

out a blessing that there shall not be room enough to receive it," refers to the spiritual blessings poured out through the ministry of the world, and the members supporting their pastor.

If those who affirm that they are called to the ministry refuse to enter the field until they are assured that the church will maintain them in a position which the world calls elegant, there is reason to fear that they have not rightly obeyed the call which they claim to have received. In the palmiest days of the true church of God, there will still be a place for toil and sacrifice of many things one might humanly hold dear, especially the good will and appreciation of the parishioners which all of us hold more dear than money.

We are still called on to "go forth and sow in tears that we may reap in joy." As Christ gave himself a ransom for men, while He owned the universe, as the apostles counted not their lives dear unto themselves, so that they might finish their course with joy," and the "ministry which they had received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God, so to the very end, the cause must advance by sacrifice and suffering. In poverty and shame, in tears and hunger, thirst, and weariness, their friends few and feeble, and their enemies many and strong, the first preachers of the gospel took their lives into their own hands, declared the whole council of the gospel, whether others wanted any or all the truth. When duty calls, no successor of the apostles will shrink from the following in their footsteps.

As strange and shocking as it may seem, few preachers of the gospel face more heartaches and greater danger of compromise and selling their own souls and those who hear them, than those who minister to rich and popular congregations, who dare their ministers to condemn and expose their sins and cry out against their luxury and ease. They worship the gods of gold and silver and will not tolerate interference. Their preacher must be a traitor to the "man of sorrows" or be abused and cast out with Him. It is the moral and spiritual battles that try men's souls, especially that of the minister who dares to represent God in the face of great odds. One who is popular with such luxurious people cannot be right with God. He who seeks a life of pleasure and ease must not enter the ministry unless he chooses to sell his soul and those who hear his words.

If we look at the entire history of the Christian church, and contrast the ages of progress with those of stagnation and decay, we find that self-denial and self-sacrifice in the ministry characterize the times of progress, while worldliness and self-seeking mark the days of weakness and failure. Hear it: When the church affairs are conducted on the principle that the ministry exists for the sake of the church and the world, there is victory. When it is assumed that the church exists for the sake of the ministry, there is defeat. When walls are built about the churches and conferences to protect and care for the ministers, selfishness rides out over love for others. "The Son of man came not to be ministered to, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" --others. Ministers must follow His example if souls are to be saved.

If those who have entered the ministry begin to heed the whispers of the world and self, and to struggle for the world and self, they are losing the spirit of God. "The good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep."

We knew of a strong church in a certain conference which was open for a new pastor, and thirteen other pastors felt especially called of God to that pastorate? "Thirteen" was certainly an "unlucky number" there. He is like a hireling who is busy calculating the weight of the fleece and anxiously inquiring in regards to the state of the market, the size and kind of parsonage, etc.

However, there is none so criminal as the congregation which possess all the wealth and advantages of the community and yet, allows their pastor and his family to suffer want. "If we love not our brother whom

we now see, how can we love God whom we have not seen?" "We are to bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ." The church should provide for the home of the pastor, so that he may give his time and strength to the souls of his people. If he ministers to them spiritual things, they should take care of his material needs.

Neither the pastor nor the church should live for self, nor sell out their soul for the praise and support of the other. In these closing days of time, let us all live for God and others. Let us put God first, then others next. Those who live for self, live for only one, while those who live for others live for many. Then let us all love God with all our soul, mind and strength and then love our neighbors as ourselves, and all will turn out right, here and in Heaven. Eternal life is far more important than a few short years on earth.

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