

Survey of the Rediscovery of Reformed Truth

by Ian Murray

The speaker reflects on the 20 years that have passed since the renewed interest in the doctrines of grace, highlighting both the years of renewed hope and the years of renewed difficulty.

Duration: 1:01:24

Scripture: Psalm 24:1, Psalm 132:4-5, Matthew 6:33, Acts 2:17, Romans 14:17-18, Ephesians 3:20-21

Topics: "Unity In Prayer", "Evangelism And Dedication"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker begins by reading from the book of Nehemiah, specifically chapter four. The speaker then discusses the importance of unity and prayer among believers in times of confusion and challenges. They emphasize the need for Christians to have the same mind and heart in order to work and pray together effectively. The speaker also reflects on the past 20 years and highlights the spirit of dedication and sacrifice displayed by biblical figures like Nehemiah, Daniel, and David, as well as modern-day servants of God like William Carey. The sermon concludes with a quote from Archibald Alexander, emphasizing that genuine evangelism should flow from a love for Christ.

Transcript

Shall we first read the word of God in the book of Nehemiah and the fourth chapter. The book of Nehemiah and the fourth chapter. But it came to pass that when Sambalot heard that we builded the wall, he was wroth and took great indignation and mocked the Jews.

And he spake before his brethren and the army of Samaria and said, What do these feeble Jews? Will they fortify themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they make an end in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish which are burned? Now Tobiah the Ammonite was by him and he said, Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall. Hear, O our God, for we are despised. And turn their reproach upon their own head, and give them for a prey in the land of captivity.

And cover not their iniquity, and let not their sin be blotted out from before thee, for they have provoked thee to anger before the builders. So built we the wall, and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof, for the people had a mind to work. But it came to pass that when Sambalot and Tobiah and the Arabians and the Ammonites and the Ashtodites heard that the walls of Jerusalem were made up and that the breaches began to be stopped, then they were very rough and conspired all of them together to come and to fight against Jerusalem and to hinder it.

Nevertheless, we made our prayer unto our God and set a watch against them day and night because of them. And Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish, so that we are not able to build the wall. And our adversaries said, They shall not know, neither see, till we come in the midst among them and slay them and cause the work to cease.

And it came to pass that when the Jews which dwelt by them came, they said unto us ten times, From all places whence ye shall return unto us, they will be upon you. Therefore set I the lower places behind the wall, and on the higher places I even set the people after their families with their swords, their spears and their bows. And I looked and rose up and said unto the nobles and to the rulers and to the rest of the people, Be not ye afraid of them.

Remember the Lord which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your houses. And it came to pass when our enemies heard that it was known unto us and God had brought their counsel to naught, that we returned all of us to the wall, every one unto his work. And it came to pass from that time forth that the half of my servants wrought in the work and the other half of them held both the spears, the shields, the bows and the haberjohns and the rulers were behind all the house of Judah.

They which builded on the wall and they which bear burdens, with those that laid it, every one with one of his hands wrought in the work and with the other hand held a weapon. For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side and so builded. And he that sounded the trumpet was by me.

And I said unto the nobles and to the rulers and to the rest of the people, the work is great and large and we are separated upon the wall, one far from another. In what place therefore ye hear the sound of the trumpet, resort ye thither unto us, our God shall fight for us. So we laboured in the work and half of them held the spears from the rising of the morning till the stars appeared.

Likewise at the same time said I unto the people, let every one with his servant lodge within Jerusalem, that in the night there may be a guard to us and labour on the day. So neither I nor my brethren nor my servants nor the men of the guard which followed me, none of us put off our clothes, saving that every one put them off for washing. Amen.

May God bless to us the reading of his word. I did not read this passage in order to comment upon it, but as we prepared for these days together, this was a passage of scripture which recurred in my mind and at certain points, perhaps in what I shall try to say, I will make reference again to it. I do not have a formal address of any kind to give you, but simply a random collection of thoughts which I hope in some way may provide an introduction to our time together.

It is surely encouraging that so many of us have been able to come and I think that if we were asked individually the reason why we have come, I believe we would get a very considerable degree of agreement in the answers that would be given. I am sure we have not come because we thought we needed a break or a vacation. This is hardly the easiest time of year to get away from our regular duties in our churches and in other places.

We certainly have not come for that reason. And I don't believe that we have come simply to listen to speakers or to listen to addresses. I don't believe that that either is the main reason of our assembling however much we may look forward to these sessions.

I believe that the greatest influence that has brought so many of us together is that we have an opportunity for conferring together, for speaking together, for fellowship one with another. And in that respect I think we do resemble the men on the walls of Jerusalem in Nehemiah's day. The work is great and large as a scripture and we are separated far one from another.

God has called us to a work in which week by week and day by day we are in local situations, most of us. And we just see perhaps a few bricks being added to the wall where we are. Sometimes it may not even seem that anything is being added.

And I believe that there is in our hearts a constant concern for the wider cause of Christ. If we are His servants then though we serve Him in a particular situation it is the wider prosperity of His cause which is also very much on our minds and in our hearts. We want to know how the wall is being built in other areas and to hear encouraging news and to share things and perhaps to speak together of dangers and difficulties which we commonly confront.

And I do believe then that we assemble not simply for the hours that we will spend in these actual sessions, but for the days that we hope to have together for, as I say, spiritual conference for discussion in which every one of us has something that we need to contribute. You remember the verse in the book of Proverbs which says, as cold waters to a thirsty soul so is good news from a far country. And I think in the scale of Biblical geography a lot of us here have come from far countries.

We have come from wide distances and we each see only a part of the work of Christ. To use an illustration which Jonathan Edwards used in the 18th century he spoke about the work of God's providence being like several streams. And then he says there are times when God causes these streams to converge and to flow together.

And it surely must be our prayer in this day when there is so much confusion that those who have one mind and heart that they may work and pray together. And physically we cannot often do that. But if in such conferences as this and other conferences we can actually meet together and speak and think together surely there is great blessing under God's hand which we may expect in this exercise.

Well now, beginning my random thoughts. In the first place I wanted to say something on the 20 years that lie behind us. Just a few comments on some aspect of these years through which we have passed.

And what I want to say comes under two heads and the heads are these. That these have been years of renewed hope. And secondly, they have also been years of renewed difficulty.

Or perhaps I should say years in which difficulties have run parallel to the hope. Well let us speak in the first place of these years as years of renewed hope. I believe it is true to say that around 25 years ago something new developed in the church scene on both sides of the Atlantic.

That new thing was a renewal of commitment to the doctrines of grace. It was a renewed concern for doctrinal Christianity. It was a common awareness that began to spread amongst men that what is wrong with the church is not primarily that we do not evangelize enough, but that something was wrong in the church herself.

That we have lost the commitment to full historic Christianity. And with that there was a loss of the power of the Holy Spirit. We read in the book of Genesis in chapter 26 how Isaac digged again the wells which they dug in the days of Abraham, his father.

And how those wells had been filled up by the Philistines. And when as they began to clear those wells, they found at the bottom the same water that was drunk in the days of Abraham. And back there in the 1950s, independently of one another and in many different situations, there were men here in the States and in the British Isles who were going through that kind of experience of rediscovery, of finding underneath buried rubbish water that had been drunk in the days of the fathers.

And these then were the twin concerns. A recovery of doctrinal Christianity and a recovery also of the power of the Spirit of God in the life of the Church. I don't believe it is true to say that it was the charismatic movement in the 1960s which renewed emphasis on the Holy Spirit.

I believe that maybe in quite a way that in the 1950s there were those who had that concern. And I think that the date of this change can be placed with considerable accuracy. And I mention this just for your interest, maybe for the interest of younger men here who don't remember that.

In the year 1952, the late Arthur W. Pink died in Stornoway on the island of Lewis. He was the editor, as you know, of that monthly magazine Studies in the Scriptures. And right through his lifetime he began that magazine in 1922.

Right through those years he labored. He labored, in his own words, to help those who were thirsty and poor and needy seeking water and finding none. And that seemed to be the worldwide situation.

There was so little preaching and so little preaching that was experimental and Calvinistic. And God's people who loved these truths were few and far between. And the subscription list to Studies in the Scriptures was never more than about 1,000 people in the whole world.

And when A. W. Pink died in 1952, he saw not a trace of what was to follow. Studies in the Scriptures ended in December of 1953 when Mrs. Pink brought it to a close. Well then, in 1955, many of you have heard of the Evangelical Library in London.

And every year the library has an annual meeting for discussion and prayer. And then an address is given by the president of the library, who is Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones. And in his address in 1955, he said this.

He said, I feel that we are witnessing a remarkable thing. And the remarkable thing to which he refers, he says, is a true revival of interest in the Puritans. And a number of young men are studying their literature constantly.

Well then in 1956, Dr. Lloyd-Jones was here in the United States. And when he came back to London, again to resume his ministry of course, but in the annual meeting of the library in 1956, a little booklet which they printed, and in his address in 1956, this is what he says. I spent some time in the United States and Canada recently.

And I can tell you something about the religious situation there. I found one thing there which is the most encouraging trend I have encountered for many a day. Among the leaders in evangelical work, and especially among the students, I found something which really did amaze me.

After meeting a number of young men who came forward to speak with me, and every single one talked to me about Puritan literature, and asked whether there was a possibility of getting Puritan books from this country. He says, this is true of an increasing number of them. They, like us, are turning to the Puritans and for the same reason.

Then he goes on to speak at more length about it. I have a feeling that we are going to witness a change. We are all getting tired of going round and round in circles, and are conscious of a need of deepening our understanding mentally and spiritually.

Many men in America told me that they had read John Owen and had begun to wonder whether they were Christians at all. Well, that was in 1956. That was two years, or at least a year and a half before the work of the Banner of Truth Trust began.

And I think that it is not a profitable thing to discuss where this new interest first began. Because I am sure that it began independently of men, and it began simultaneously in many places. To discuss where it first began would be like discussing which part of the beach got wet first when the tide comes in.

The tide was coming in simultaneously in different places. And it was God's work. And it was God's work in the sense that the means that were used had existed while they had been there all the time.

Puritan books, old books, they were there all the time. They were cheap. They were comparatively easily obtainable.

But there was no interest in them. There was no hunger for them. The difference was not the availability of the books in the first instance, but the beginning of a real hunger.

And that hunger came surely from God. And there is something else which perhaps should be noted about the beginning of this change. You know that both in the British Isles and in the United States, there were at that time, and there still are, denominations traditionally reformed and Calvinistic.

And these denominations in various degrees have borne their witness to the faith. But by and large, it wasn't from these denominations that this new interest began. It began amongst those who were converted in fundamentalist churches, converted, it may be, under Arminian preaching, converted out of liberal churches.

It began amongst men in a wide variety of backgrounds. And I say that not to draw any particular lesson from it, but simply as an observation. And I do think it helps to underline the fact that it wasn't organized.

It wasn't expected. It was something that happened. I can remember very clearly meeting an old Christian in the 1950s who had belonged all his life to a Calvinistic denomination.

And he really had a problem in understanding the excitement which men were showing in the doctrines of grace. They had been long familiar to him in his denomination, amongst his people. But here there was an awakening of concern amongst those who had no traditional contacts with these things.

And when the Banner of Truth Trust work itself began later in the late part of 1957, beginning of 1958, there were those in Christian literature work who said that it could not possibly succeed. And I don't know that we should be critical of that opinion because on the basis of all information that was a fairly sensible comment. There were no indications it would succeed apart from interest in these scattered groups.

So looking back, I think, over these years, we can surely say there have been years of renewed hope. And that this comment that I've made on the 1950s generally borne out even in conferences. I know that is true in Britain.

There are men still in the ministry who were ordained in the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, but generally in conferences it's not until you get about the 1950s that you start coming across men who are involved in this commitment to experimental Calvinism. Now, I say generally. There were, of course, a few older men who were of tremendous help and influence to younger men in the 1950s.

And we remember them with thankfulness to God. But by and large, there was a new generation who came into the ministry in the mid-1950s and soon after. And I'm sure that is borne out in the presence of many of us here today.

So, what were the signs of hope? Well, one was this new hunger for the truth. And I'm sure that there's nothing that we find more encouraging in Edinburgh. We don't see people so often, but we get a good deal of mail.

And so often, we get the assurance that there is real hunger for the truth across the whole earth. I had a letter last Friday from an evangelist in India who lives in a town near the banks of the river Ganges. I have written to him several times.

We know each other to some extent. And last Friday, I had a very moving letter from him. Their whole town has been flooded and hundreds of homes utterly destroyed.

He has said that he had spent much time with friends in rescuing people from these great floods of which I'm sure you have seen and read here in the States as we have in Britain. And he said recently, they had as many as 25 crowded into their homes, staying there because their own homes had been destroyed. Well, he was writing for help.

But the help that he wanted was not money, was not food, was not clothing. He wanted more books. He wanted more of Spurgeon.

This is what he wanted. It was a beautiful letter. I wish that I had brought it with me.

That kind of letter reminds you that God by His Spirit does create spiritual hunger. And then another particular blessing in these years of renewed hope has been the bond that has been forged across the Atlantic. The Leicester Conference which began in 1962 was really a transatlantic effort to some degree.

Two of the men involved from this side of the Atlantic were Marcellus Kick, although he wasn't able to come in the end, and then Professor John Murray, although John Murray, of course, was a Britisher, he really was long stationed here in the States. But it was a little while after that that the bonds between the States and Britain became much closer. I mean between men who fought and worked together.

And these bonds have been a great blessing and source of encouragement. Now let me hurry on to say something about the difficulties. If these have been years of hope, they've also been years, surely, of difficulty.

And I think perhaps if we were to ask the men here who began their ministries in those days, if we were to ask each other, what, looking back, was our main weakness at the time? Well, we had many weaknesses, but I think it could be, perhaps, that our main weakness was that we underestimated the difficulties. The difficulties were greater than we thought. We didn't give sufficient weight to that word which Paul spoke to the disciples at Iconium and Lystra and Antioch when he exhorted them to continue in the faith saying that we must, through much tribulation, enter the kingdom of God.

Now these difficulties have been of many kinds. The difficulties in the situations in which we have lived. The difficulties of inheriting situations where the spiritual climate and tradition was so different to the one of which we read.

You know, men were reading Spurgeon and Whitefield and the Puritans, and then they compared the present time with what they saw there and it seemed to be a different world. And, to some extent, it was a different spiritual world. The superficiality, the disinterest in doctrine, the utter lack of biblical church discipline.

Men were coming into pastorates and literally what Judah says there in Nehemiah 4 was true. There is very much rubbish. The situations that were inherited were situations of great difficulty.

And then there was much to learn about the difficulty inherent in human nature itself. I'm sure we could all speak at some length on this point. How fickle, for example, people are.

How fickle people are when Paul and Barnabas preached at Lystra and when that cripple was raised. The people marveled. They said in the speech of Lyconia that the gods are come down to us in the likeness of men.

They were ready to do their worship to Paul and Barnabas. But then you remember just a few hours or was it days later that certain Jews came down from Antioch and we read that they persuaded the people. They persuaded the people and having stoned Paul, drew him out of the city supposing he had been dead.

Well, my friends, that spirit in human nature is not changed. Martin Luther said that when the German New Testament was first published, the excitement was so tremendous that people would almost give anything to have a copy. But he says within ten years, what a change of spirit.

People are very fickle and human nature at its best is weak. And surely we had a great deal to learn on that score. But then, of course, chiefly, difficulties in ourselves.

Difficulties in ourselves. Is it not true that the besetting sin of young ministers is pride? And although we knew such texts as Paul's words when he says we are not sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves, to think anything as of ourselves, but our sufficiency is of God. I say although we knew those texts, my brethren, it's another thing to live them and to learn them.

And although I'm sure we were unconscious of it, there must have been a good deal of feeling that if only we were active enough and vigorous enough and earnest enough, then surely there would be quick and speedy success. Just as Melancthon at the beginning of the Reformation believed that if they pressed ahead with all that they were doing, the whole land would be reformed in a short space of time. And then you remember he came to say that he learned that old Adam was too strong for young Melancthon.

Well, that's true of all of us. Old Adam is too strong for young whoever. And we had difficulties in our situations, difficulties in human nature, but I say chiefly, surely, difficulties in ourselves, in our own lack and spiritual poverty.

Now, these difficulties have been very real. I know there are many men here who could speak to that point. Churches have been sometimes divided.

Friends have been lost. Sometimes men's health has literally been broken. All kinds of difficulties.

And yet, surely, we are conscious, brethren, that these difficulties also are of God. They have been good for us. You know, Arthur Pink, when he was dying, to quote him again, I think it was one of the last things he said to his wife, or it was among them.

She was standing beside him and the tears were on her cheeks and he could see that. And he said, my dear, he has done all things well. And then he enlarged on the word, all things, not just some things.

Now, I don't know how much you know about the life of the Pinks. So good to see with us Mr. Lowell Green and others too, I believe, who had contact with Mr. Pink many years ago. They had a very difficult life, humanly speaking.

But this was his testimony. He has done all things well. And that, surely, is something which is true for us.

These difficulties, they are designed to humble us. And is there anything that's more needed with historic Calvinism, is there anything that's more needed with it than a tender, broken-hearted spirit? Is there not something abhorrent about a Calvinism which is hard and self-conscious and censorious? That is something which does immense harm. And God, in His goodness, has brought us these 20 years, so many of us, so many difficulties.

And these difficulties are good for us. John Bunyan says that the soil in the Valley of Humiliation was the most fruitful soil in all those parts. It brought forth fruit, he said, by handfuls.

Then you remember the song of the shepherd boy, He that is down need fear no fall. Now men don't learn that from books. Don't learn it from Banner of Truth books or any books.

God has to teach it to us. The difficulties then. And I think also these difficulties have been of value in God's providence in sifting men.

There's no doubt at all that in the early 1960s, in our country, in Britain, there were those who had come to believe that Calvinism was the key to filling your church. They read a little of Spurgeon. They heard a little about Whitfield's preaching.

They came to the conclusion that this was what was needed to revive the church, to change the church. Perhaps they were very zealous. But many of these men fell by the way.

And they fell by the way because God has called us to preach and to love the truth, not because it's successful, but because it is truth, because it is His Word, and because we have to be faithful to it if no one else is standing to it. And difficulties are good for the church in sifting out men who are not really holding the truth out of love to Christ alone. Now moving on, just some general lessons.

The times through which we have been, there have been times of renewed hope, times of real and deep difficulty, and now some lessons, just three. I try to think in my own experience of matters which were lessons for me and that is what I'm giving to you now. In the first place, I believe that God has been teaching us the lesson that if we are to have His blessing, we are not to be followers of movements or of men.

Call no man, said Jesus, master, that is leader. Don't call any man your leader, neither be ye called master, for one is your master, even Christ, and all ye are brethren. Now, it sounds simple to say that, but

again, I don't think it's an easy lesson to learn, and I'm afraid a number of people are still not learning it.

We sometimes get letters reading like this. These people, I'm sure, want to encourage us, but they write and say, we believe everything that the banner of truth prints. Well, that's disturbing, and also it's very foolish, of course, because on some subjects we print quite opposite views.

I'm sure all you ministerial brethren know that. It's good that we do. Anybody who says we believe everything the banner of truth says, well, they haven't read very much of the banner of truth.

If you want to read Independent Church Government, you can read John Owen. If you want to read Presbyterian, you can read Bannerman, you can read Spurgeon, and so on. No, the banner of truth, trust, whatever it is, is not intended to be that.

We have to judge everything from Scripture, and we are accountable to God for the way we respond to Scripture. And it's difficult, isn't it? Especially in our younger years when we are so tremendously helped by the Puritans or by Spurgeon or by whoever. It's very difficult, not unconsciously, to make them in some way our authorities.

And God forbids that we should. And God equally forbids that we should make any living man our authorities. And again, it's easy to fall into that.

I'm sure in all our experiences there are particular men who have greatly helped us. And the easiest thing for us is to assume that what these men teach us is always right and we must follow them. And I say God would not have us to do that.

And one of the signs of spiritual ill health of the 20th century has been this tendency to organize around men and around movements. And it's not God honoring, and it's something, my friends, that we should flee from. Who is Paul and who is Apollos is the Scripture, but ministers by whom he believed even as God gave the increase.

Be not, says the Apostle to the Corinthians, be not the servants of men. Ye are bought with a price. We belong to Christ and to Him alone.

Let us continue to say that and to believe it and to act on it. And let us beware of anything that would give the impression of anything else. Now, another lesson that we have learned is the need to distinguish between matters fundamental and matters secondary.

Now, again, that seems a simple thing. But I don't know how you have found it, but personally I've found this very difficult to learn. Distinguishing between basic fundamental things and secondary issues.

And I think many of us have found it difficult for this reason. You've heard the popular slogan that all we need is the simple gospel. And when it comes to matters of theology or church polity or discipline, people say these are not things about which we should concern ourselves.

These are not things we should debate about. All that we need, all that we've time for is the simple gospel. We've all heard that.

And it's right that when we hear it, we should be indignant about it. Because it's God dishonoring. Every grain of truth is precious.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God that the man of God might be truly furnished unto all good works. And it's for that reason, I say, that it's a difficult thing for us to adjust to this lesson. That there are things fundamental, there are things secondary.

Because we are reacting to that kind of attitude which has dismissed as being almost indifferent a great many things which are spoken of in the Word of God. And in response to that wrong attitude, we have sought to say that our one hope depends upon being faithful to the Word of God. It is by honoring the Scripture that God the Holy Spirit will work in the Church.

That's what, is it not, we have sought to say. We have sought to say that no part of the Word of God can be safely ignored. That's right.

But that does have its own dangers. And these dangers have often appeared in history. Let me give you one or two illustrations.

Think of the Great Reformation. When the reformers began with those doctrines of man's sin, God's sovereign grace, justification by faith. There was that great movement of evangelism and reawakening in Europe.

And then there came discussion on church order. The Puritans said against Anglicans and Episcopal men, they said that God has not ruled that the church should be led by bishops, but by a parity of men. And the Puritans, as you well know, began to suffer and to stand for those and other truths.

But then other men came who were later called separatists, and they said these Puritans haven't seen enough. That there is more that has to be done. And so the separatists began to organize themselves apart.

And then the separatists among themselves began to divide on other issues. And some followed Brown and some followed Ainsworth, and you can think of the various men. And what happened? What happened was this, that come 60, 70 years after the Reformation, the focus was no longer on the fundamental truths of the Gospel of Grace, but the focus of attention was on these other issues that were now dividing men who were equally reformed.

And that has happened many times. It happened to some extent with the great Robert Haldane. You know his commentary on the Epistles of the Romans.

In the 1790s in Scotland, in the beginning of the last century, there was this spontaneous awakening that Robert Haldane and his brother James and others were involved in. And they began to evangelize and to preach simple, Calvinistic, fervent, evangelistic message. But then they also were conscious of this truth that we have to be faithful to the whole Word of God.

And new discussions began on the order of the Church, the New Testament pattern, the relation of elders to pastors, baptism, church, all these things. And what happened? Well, something, I believe it's true to say, was lost. Something was lost.

The direction, the focus was not what it was at the beginning. You can see what I'm trying to say. I'm trying to say that not all things in Scripture have the same priority of importance.

And that we must not allow our attention to become focused on secondary things. And that's what Satan is constantly seeking to get us to do. Just as in the Church of Rome, that question of meats and drinks that Paul discusses in chapters 13 and 14 of Romans, that was an important question.

Paul just doesn't dismiss the question. He deals with it. But then he goes on to say, For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.

In other words, brethren, don't for a moment, he says to the Christians of Rome, imagine that this thing that you're talking about is the big thing in the kingdom of God. Not at all. For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but it is this.

We always need to say that to ourselves. It's amazing how men can get excited and divided on all sorts of issues. And brethren, I need hardly remind you that there are endless issues for men to divide over.

There's a group in a part of Africa which I won't name just now. That's the trouble with these tapes. We can't just speak to each other in conference, but tapes travel around and sometimes they can limit the amount that men can say.

Tapes aren't an unmixed blessing. Well, however, that's an aside. There's a group in a part of Africa amongst whom God is surely working.

But one of the last letters I had from them was to say that there was great tension amongst them on the question of music. The Christian's attitude to music. And it seemed to me some real danger that this work, which had begun so hopefully, would even split on this issue.

Now, you can think of other issues. Prophecy. Are we postmillennial or amillennial or premillennial? Do we hold services on Christmas Day, on Easter Day? What do we think of the church calendar? These and innumerable other questions we can debate.

And I don't say we shouldn't debate them. But what I do say is that there's a constant danger that other things will move into the center of our attention. And this is what the devil works for.

And we always need to remember that we're going to die and leave this world understanding still, or I should put it the other way around, we're going to leave this world not understanding a great deal that is in the Word of God. That's another temptation, especially when we're younger in the ministry. To imagine that every issue that crosses our path, we have to sort it out.

Well, Paul says, for we see through a glass darkly but then face to face. Now we know in part. We need to underline that.

We know in part. And it's because we know in part that we should take such care that on the secondary issues we are not divided. If men are one on the great needs of the hour, then, my brethren, what a tragedy it would be to be divided on lesser things.

He that winneth souls is wise, says the Scripture. Is that what is getting our chief attention? They that turn many to righteousness shall shine as the stars forever and ever. That's what we need to be looking to.

That's the main thing. And I do believe that this is a lesson that repeatedly has been brought back to our attention. When the Leicester Conference first began, the first conference was on preaching needed today.

And then we had two conferences on matters of church, order, church unity, church confessions. And these conferences became progressively more difficult. And in fact, we stopped the conference altogether after the second of those conferences.

We made little headway. There did not seem to be any movement forward in it. And then in 1967 the conference was started again by the same people, but with a deeper emphasis on the things about which we were sure.

The things about which we were united. And it was at that point that God forged these closer links across the Atlantic. Some of the brethren here, who you know, were over.

And God blessed us with this spirit of unity, so that we knew that our first need was to be spiritual people, and that we needed churches that were spiritual churches under spirit filled preaching. That's a great need. Well, I'm almost done.

I had a third lesson which I'll mention briefly. The lesson that we have to seek, to learn of maintaining our vision and our spiritual ambition. To maintain our vision.

Our vision for ourselves as Christians. I'm sure many of us would say that when we were young Christians and in our early days in the ministry, we gave a good deal of time to self-examination. We sought the Lord earnestly.

We vowed to serve Him. We sought to love Him. We spent much time alone.

And what a danger there is as we become more busy and more active, that we become in a sense self-forgetful. Now, of course, there's a sense in which we ought to be self-forgetful. But there's another sense in which we need always to be examining ourselves to see that we are pressing on.

That we are not losing out. It's so easy, especially perhaps in those middle years, to lose one's edge. To get tired of offending people.

You know, however nice we are, people are offended by the truth. And with experience in the ministry, you come to recognize the things which offend people. And it's very easy to develop a sort of spirit in which you become tired of offending people.

We all like to have friends. And there are many temptations that come to men simply to become a little more lax, a little more indefinite, a little more ready to let things go which we wouldn't have let go in earlier years. I read a letter of Calvin a little while ago and I wished I could find it and I couldn't.

But Calvin was writing to a brother pastor on this point. On the very point of the difficulty of continuing. Of maintaining one's position.

Of not coming to the end of one's life and saying with regret we might have been different then. We might have done so much more. Now I haven't put that very well because I believe if we continue to the end of our days as lively Christians we will say that.

You know one of the greatest evangelists Scotland ever had. A man called Hector Macphail in the 18th century. When he was dying, his wife could see he was in some kind of distress and she asked him, was he in pain? No, he said.

He wasn't in pain. Well, she said was there a cloud over his assurance? No, he said he was as sure of being in heaven as he was then lying upon his bed. But oh, he said this troubles me.

How, how will I look him in the face when I think how little I have done for him? That was an old saint. A man who had served his Lord as few did. So, I must take back those words.

When we come to the end of our days, we will realize we've done so very little. But at the same time, brethren, it's a sad thing to realize that we aren't what we once were. And it's that need continually to reassess, to press forward in the work of Christ as Christians ourselves.

I read this little piece from Archibald Alexander and I must read it to you. He says, In vain do we seek to awaken our churches to zeal in evangelism as a separate thing. To be genuine, it must flow from love to Christ.

It is when a sense of personal communion with the Son of God is highest that we shall be most fit for missionary work, either ourselves or to stir up others. And then he gives this good quotation from John Wesley. Find preachers of David Braynard's spirit, said John Wesley, and nothing can stand before them.

But without this spirit, what can be done with silver and gold? So, Wesley, it doesn't matter how much affluence we've got, what we need is Braynard's spirit. And Archibald Alexander says, Let this love to Jesus Christ be the ruling passion and it will communicate the thrill of evangelical zeal to every member in our congregation like an electric chain. A church of such ministers, of such members, would be an apostolic, a heavenly church.

So I say, brethren, the need to maintain true spiritual ambition, not simply to settle down in our routine. To press toward the mark of the prize of our high calling. And lastly, under this same head, not to lose our vision for the church of God.

Isn't this the greatest thing of all? This is what I tried to say at the beginning. Isn't it a common concern for the church of God which brings us together? And when we read the Old Testament, how rebuked we are by the spirit of Nehemiah and Daniel and David. David says, I will not give sleep to mine eyelids, nor slumber to mine eyes until I find a place for the mighty God of Jacob.

Until the ark was brought back and so on. And that is the spirit of God's servants who have advanced his kingdom. Of William Carey.

Those men who saw what the church should be. Of what the church will become. Because God has promised it.

The God of the whole earth shall he be called. These were the texts that men like Carey looked to. God is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think.

And unto him, says the apostle then, unto him be glory in the church throughout all ages, world without end. Now my friends, I find this a great temptation to lose one's vision of the possibility of a great awakening. We haven't seen it yet.

We have read of it. We have heard of it. But to believe that just as God in 1740 and in 1857 and in countless other years came with power and grace so to awaken the church that the truth of the gospel went through the land.

God is able to do that work in our day. And how easy it is for us just to fall into a routine of preparing our sermons, of keeping our churches going, of seeing a little encouragement. But my friends, that would be sinful to stop there.

In the day in which we live, we need a great and mighty movement of the Spirit of God. And we are warranted to pray for it. He will give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him.

We sang that beautiful hymn of Dwight's, Timothy Dwight's. I noticed it was written in the year 1800. I love thy kingdom, Lord, the house of thine abode, the church our blessed Redeemer saved with His own precious blood.

And that third verse, for her my tears shall fall, for her my prayers ascend, to her my cares and toils be given, till toils and cares shall end. You know, about two years after Dwight wrote those words, there was a great revival in the place where he ministered, at Yale, in New Haven. The whole college, the whole body of students were visibly affected by the power of the Gospel.

But God gives men these prayers before He gives the blessing. Prayer is the shadow that precedes the blessing. And the prayer that we need to pray is the prayer that God would pour out His Spirit.

These, brethren, then, are a few introductory thoughts. Perhaps we can speak together of these things in our discussions. Let us pray that God will help us in our days together.

Shall we pray? O Lord, our God, we do seek to thank Thee for enabling us to meet together. We thank Thee for journeying mercies. We thank Thee for the refreshment that it is to see one another, to come consciously, to gather into Thy presence.

We pray for Thy Holy Spirit to be with us and upon us. O Lord, teach us that we do indeed know nothing yet as we ought to know. Bless those who will speak to us.

Grant them the anointing of the Spirit. Give to us all the spirit of prayer that we may be waiting upon Thee. Bless our fellowship together and grant that as a result of these days we may be better fitted to be Thy servants and to be Thy people.

O Lord, hear our cry and pardon our sins as we ask it in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

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