

Missing Notes in the Modern Church

by Vance Havner

Vance Havner's sermon emphasizes the need for the modern church to recover the lost characteristics of intolerance towards false teachings, sin, and a sensational witness for Christ.

Scripture: Matthew 7:13, Acts 4:12, Galatians 2:20

Topics: "Church Discipline", "Intolerance"

Description

Vance Havner addresses the issues plaguing the modern church by contrasting it with the characteristics of the New Testament Church, which was marked by a healthy intolerance towards false teachings, sin, and a commitment to the exclusive truth of Jesus Christ. He emphasizes that the early church was not only intolerant but also repellent, creating a holy awe that kept casual joiners at bay while attracting genuine believers. Havner argues that the church today has lost its sensational nature, becoming complacent and failing to stir the community as the early church did. He calls for a return to the principles of the New Testament, where every believer is a missionary and the church stands firm in its convictions, leading to a revival that would create a sensation in the world. Ultimately, he urges the church to recover its power and holiness to regain respect and effectiveness in its mission.

Transcript

It is very fashionable nowadays to ask, "What is wrong with the Church?" It is no new subject. There has always been something or other wrong with the professing church, and there have always been speakers aplenty to discuss it. Unfortunately, their speaking usually relieves only the speaker and not the situation. One is reminded of the soap-box orator in London some years ago. He was lambasting the government with a vengeance. Somebody asked a policeman: "Why don't you do something with him?" "Oh, leave 'im alone," the bobby replied, "It relieves 'im and it don't 'urt us."

I venture to suggest three characteristics of the New Testament Church that are out of style today. There are other marks of the Early Church that are also out of style, but one cannot cover everything in one message. I think that if we seriously considered these lost characteristics and recovered them we would be a long way toward answering the question, "What is wrong with the Church?"

The New Testament Church was an intolerant church. At once we throw ourselves open to a broadside of protest. "Intolerant" is a scandalous word to use these days, for if there is anything that is in style among our "progressive" churches it is that word "tolerance." You would think that intolerance was the unpardonable sin. We are majoring as never in all church history on being broad-minded. That we have

become so broad we have become also pitifully shallow never seems to disturb us. We must "broaden or bust." Of course, some experts in tolerance can be amazingly intolerant of those who do not share their broad-mindedness, but that does not disturb them either.

There is, of course, a false, pharasaic intolerance that has no place in a true church. And one encounters it again and again among conservative Christians. It has brought about the remark that the modernists are arid and the fundamentalists are acrid, that the former lack clarity and the latter charity. It has nicknamed the fundamentalists "feudamentalists" and gotten them a reputation for spending so much time sniping at each other that they have little time left to go after the devil.

But there is a proper intolerance, and the New Testament Church had it. They were intolerant of any way of salvation except Jesus Christ. "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). That makes it straight and narrow, and it isn't what you are hearing in some localities these days. You are hearing that Jesus is the best way but that other ways are good and will lead to God just the same. Union meetings of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews create the impression that a general faith in God is enough without specific faith in Christ. Now, that cannot be true if no man comes to the Father but by Christ. The devils believe that there is one God and tremble: men believe it and do not even tremble, but expect to reach heaven by theism instead of by Calvary.

The New Testament Church was also intolerant of anything that threatened to compromise this Gospel of No Other Name. In Galatia men tried to mix in a little legalism, and in Colosse they were slipping in a bit of false mysticism -- and Paul would have none of it. He could have said nothing about it. I am sure that some of the false teachers must have accused him of seeing bugaboos and hobgoblins. He could have told Timothy to play ball with the apostates of his day, but, instead, he wrote, "From such turn away." He advised Titus to reject a heretic after the first and second admonition, which sounds uncomfortably intolerant. And even the gentle John forbade hospitality to those who abode not in the doctrine of Christ, asserting that "he that bids him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds." To be sure, we are not advised to bawl him out and throw stones after him until he is out of sight: but neither is there any encouragement for that fashionable modern fellowship with unbelievers.

The New Testament Church was intolerant of sin in its midst. When serious trouble first showed up in Ananias and Sapphira it was dealt with in sudden and certain terms. When immorality cropped out in Corinth Paul delivered the offender to the devil for the destruction of his flesh. It was in line with our Lord's teaching on discipline in the eighteenth chapter of Matthew. To be sure, it was to be done in love and tenderness, and the brother overtaken in a fault was to be restored by the spiritual ones, and Paul was quick to recommend the restoration of the Corinthian brother. But, still, sin was not to be glossed over and excused as we condone it today in our churches until liars, gamblers, drunkards, and divorcees fill prominent places in Sunday schools and on boards and have never as much as heard that we must be clean who bear the vessels of the Lord. We have let the camel get his foot in the door and then his head, until now the whole camel is inside and along with him other animals far more unsavory. Peter added even hogs and dogs to our spiritual zoology, and the lambs today are so mixed with every other species that what was once a sheepfold has become a zoo. Our Lord warned us that the shepherd who did not stand his ground when the wolves appeared was only a hireling. We are bidden to feed His sheep but not to feed wolves. I grant you that it is often a complicated problem and can be handled only on one's knees. But we are paying an awful price today for our sweet tolerance of sin within the Church. If the church of the Acts had overlooked iniquity and by-passed evil and smilingly looked the other way while the devil

sneaked into every phase of her life as we have done today, Christianity would have died in infancy.

The New Testament Church had a healthy, holy intolerance. It got somewhere because it started out on a narrow road and stuck to it. It might easily have taken up a dozen wide boulevards and ended in destruction. We face the peril of the wide gate and the broad way today, and it tantalizes us all the more because "many enter through it." We were told a long time ago that "few there be" who take the S. and N., the Straight and Narrow. We Americans especially are gregarious; we like to run with the crowd. We had rather be called almost anything on earth than narrow; yet our Lord chose the adjective, and faithfulness to Him will prove that it still fits today.

I am sure that there were those who called the Early Church "exclusive," and predicted that it would never get anywhere until it became inclusive. "Exclusive" is another word that is anathema today and has been shoved into the limbo of the outmoded, along with "intolerant" and "narrow." But the New Testament Church was the most exclusive fellowship on earth. It was not just a society of people with good intentions. It was not a club for improving the old Adam. It was a fellowship of people who believed in Jesus Christ as the one and only Saviour. It seemed not to have a chance in the face of the great Roman world. It could easily have let down the bars and taken in all sorts of religiously minded folk, but it stuck to "Jesus Only." A river may look very lovely spread out all over a marsh, but to generate power it must narrow itself. We have endeavored to spread out the river today. We have sacrificed depth for width and instead of a power dam we have a stagnant swamp.

In the second place, the New Testament Church was not only intolerant, narrow, exclusive. IT WAS A REPELLENT CHURCH. Instead of attracting everybody, it repelled. In the fourth chapter of Acts the church was really going places for God. It was a great hour but dangerous. Could the church stand success? There is a turn in the story with the fifth chapter. It begins "But . . ." Ananias and Sapphira appear, trouble has arisen in the midst. There were plenty of liars in Jerusalem but these were in the church! But by the grace of God the church rose to the occasion and cleaned house. Ananias and Sapphira were carried out dead and the church rolled on. We read, "And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things. And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people; and they were all with one accord on Solomon's porch." Here is the church in the full bloom of her power: a Spirit-filled church, a wonder-working (not a wondering!) church; a church that stirred up the devil.

Then we read that there were three reactions:

Even though people admired them a lot, outsiders were wary about joining them. On the other hand, those who put their trust in the Master were added right and left, men and women both.

People didn't join this church carelessly. They were afraid to. There was a holy awe that kept Tom, Dick, and Harry at a distance. People didn't rush into this fellowship just because it was the nice thing to do. It meant something to unite with this crowd. There was a holy repulsion, and I know of nothing that the church needs more today. It is the last thing we think we need. We are always trying to attract. Our programs, prizes, picnics, and pulpit pyrotechnics are aimed at drawing the people in. Here was a church that made people stand back! We have catered to the world, we have let the world slap the church on the back in coarse familiarity. Here was a church that prospered by repelling!

You will observe that all this followed on the heels of the death of Ananias and Sapphira. If the church took a stand today on sins within; if we thundered out, as Peter did here, against lying to the Holy Spirit, it

would make the world stand at a respectful distance, and the fear of God would fall on a generation that laughs at the church. What was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira? They pretended to make a full consecration which was not real. And are not our churches filled with men and women who sing, "I surrender all," when they have not surrendered anything? The church is cluttered with people who should never have joined. She already has too many of the kind she has. We need a holy repulsion. You don't have to be different to be a church-member now. There is little about the average church to make men stand back in reverence. In other days we at least had church discipline. I can recall the old Saturday church meetings, when Ananias and Sapphira were dealt with. Some mistakes were made but there was a healthy regard for the sanctity of the church. When the church takes a stand, it repels careless "joiners."

But someone asks, "What would people think if we took such a stand?" Let us see what happened here: "But the people magnified them." The church had favor with all the people (Acts 2:47). The church that stands in the power of the Spirit wins the respect of the people. We have driven them away in trying to attract them. We have lost favor in trying to win favor. The world is sick and disgusted with the church making a clown of itself, trying to talk the slang of this age, running third-rate amusement parlors, playing bingo and putting on rummage sales. The church, it has been said, is not running a show-boat but a life-boat, and we make ourselves ridiculous in trying to compete with the world. The preacher and church that stand for God and righteousness will be magnified.

When judgment fell on Ananias and Sapphira the world sat up and took notice. Today we coddle and excuse our sins, call weakness what God calls wickedness. We shelter sin in the Church, and when a preacher would cry out against it he is advised, "Don't be too hard, nobody is perfect," and is given a dressing-down from the text, "Judge not that you be not judged." We have let down the bars until anybody can get into a church and nobody ever gets out. If we raised the New Testament standard it would stop the rush of superficial disciples and win respect where now there is ridicule.

"But nobody would ever join!" do we hear? Let us see what happened here: "And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women." While outsiders dared not join, the Lord added more and more to Himself. The church that repels as this church repelled will attract as this church attracted. It will be the attraction of the Holy Spirit, and He will draw out those who really believe. All that is necessary is just to be New Testament Christians and a New Testament Church, and we will both repel and attract. It is a law of nature. The rose has its thorns, it both repels and attracts. Everywhere you look in the world of nature, you observe this double law at work. It is a law of the spiritual world too.

What is this repulsion? There is a false repulsion. Often we drive people away by our indifference, criticism, lack of love and zeal. We ought to be ashamed of it, confess that we are ugly and unattractive Christians, repent of our bigotry, coldness and hardness, and let the Lord make us winsome with the loveliness of Christ.

But there is a repulsion that goes with being a Christian. Here is a fine Christian girl, beautiful and charming in face, in mind, in spirit. When she comes into a gathering she is attractive. But there is something about her which makes it out of the question to use profanity in her presence, something which makes the rudely familiar keep at a distance. She doesn't have to say, "I will allow no foul language, no improper advances." People just don't curse and otherwise misbehave in the presence of such people. She repels while she attracts.

There ought to be that about every Christian when he walks into a gathering, that makes the unholy and profane subdued and respectful. There ought to be that about a church that would make the world never dream of rudely rushing into its fellowship. And Jesus Himself both attracts and repels. He is the Great Divider. He has attracted more people and driven more people away than any other character in all time. Once, when He had preached a crowd away, He asked the disciples: "Will you also go away?" All through His ministry men were being drawn and repelled. The young ruler was first drawn; then when the terms of discipleship were made known, he was repelled.

God help us, as Christians and churches, to recover the power of God among us until a holy awe shall rest upon us. God help us to deal with sin until men shall be afraid to lie to the Holy Spirit. When we do, outsiders will not dare to join us; the people will magnify us; believers will be added to the Lord.

There is a third characteristic of the New Testament that is quite out of style: IT WAS A SENSATIONAL CHURCH. There was something happening every minute. On the day of Pentecost the multitude gathered "amazed, confounded and perplexed." And from that day on, Jerusalem was kept in a turmoil on account of this new power let loose in the world which jails could not lock up nor swords kill nor death destroy. And wherever they went, these Christians stirred up the elements. Paul exceedingly troubled Philippi and created no small stir in Ephesus and won the name of a world upsetter. That a mere handful of plain witnesses, talking about One who was supposed to be dead and buried, should tackle the great Roman world in a head-on collision and come off winners is the most sensational thing in history.

Today we Christians are living, for the most part, on the momentum with which the New Testament Church started and on fresh waves of momentum started since through others who were sensational in their day. Savonarola and Luther and Knox and Wesley and Whitefield and Moody let nobody go to sleep in their vicinity. But of late anything out of the ordinary, anything likely to disturb the saints at ease in Zion, is frowned upon by a stiff and starched formalism "faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null" (Tennyson). In reaction to that there has sprung up in the churches today an extreme sensationalism as bad as the thing it tries to correct. Wild free-lances, weird prophetic firebrands, erratic evangelists would try to remedy freezing in formalism by frying in emotionalism. So the battle rages, and the saints are so busy calling each other names that Satan gets scant attention.

But the counterfeit proves the genuine and the fact of a spurious sensationalism should not blind us to the truth. Someone has said that sensational preaching is the kind some preachers don't like because they can't do it. Be that as it may, we have dried up being "revolutionary," we need to become revolutionary. There is no reason why any band of Spirit-filled Christians should not arouse and excite and stir any community. If they didn't, something would be wrong. It is argued that the world is so much more Christian than it was in the New Testament days that we cannot expect such reactions today. The argument is beside the point. The days are darker instead of brighter and the contrast should be all the more pronounced. As for being Christian, our civilization has become infected with a mild rash of Christianity that has almost immunized it against the real thing. A real revival would be such a contrast with this weak Sunday-morning Laodiceanism that it would be a sensation indeed.

We glory these days in our churches being precise. Every "i" is dotted, every "t" is crossed. We are Disciples of the Great Happy Medium. Now, because there are extremes, our Lord would not have us be middle-of-the-roaders. He said He would spew us out of His mouth, not for being too hot, but for being lukewarm. He would rather have us on the wrong side of the fence than on the fence. Yet today the churches are on the fence. We do not commit ourselves boldly to anything. We are so cautious that half of

what we say cancels the other half and we end up by having said nothing. We are salt without savor, there is no tang, no flavor, no relish about us, nothing to smack the lips over. Our services are dry and flat and tasteless, and when we try to pep them up with a little glorified "spizzereenctum" the result is embarrassing. We need a New Testament sensationalism -- not an emotional spree but the earth-shaking stir of a movement of the Holy Spirit. To have that, we need only to be New Testament Christians, then things will begin to happen. The most sensational thing I can imagine would be an outbreak of New Testament Christianity. It would create a sensation among the churches, for it would be a revival, an awaking out of sleep. Some churches have slept so long that the awakening would be as remarkable as Rip Van Winkle's. It would certainly create a sensation in this world, for the world has become so accustomed to our being comfortably hidden away in brick buildings on street corners that if a revival drove us out as at Pentecost to declare in the marketplaces the wonderful works of God, the general public would gather amazed, confounded, perplexed.

I am not advocating mere noise and uproar, but the Acts of the Apostles is an exciting book. And most of the denominations that now repose in such quiet dignity had a rather stirring start. The Baptists have subsided until one would hardly think that they were once considered heretical nuisances, so greatly did they disturb the peace. Surely the Methodists have a name for setting the woods on fire in days gone by. And even the Presbyterians, long synonymous with dignity, were once agitators second to none. Some of our denominationalists who fear that a holy stir in the house of God would be out of keeping with their tradition need to learn that it would be entirely in keeping -- they would merely be returning to what they started with! If any of our modern denominations had started with no more zeal than they now have, they wouldn't be living today to tell the tale!

Intolerant, unpopular, sensational, such was the New Testament Church. And so will we be if we dare to follow in that train. What kind of people were these New Testament Christians? They believed in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. They did not live on a memory; they believed in One who had died, had risen and was coming again. They were filled with the Spirit. They were living a supernatural life in this present world. They were all witnesses. To them a missionary was not somebody to visit the church now and then to talk about Africa or China. Every Christian was a missionary.

Let us try that today, and something will happen. Personal faith in a risen, coming Christ. The infilling of the Spirit, our duty and privilege, as we yield all, receive, trust, and obey. The daily practice of Galatians 2:20, living by the faith of the Son of God. Every Christian a missionary. Let a few in any church start living that, and the impact will shake the community. For that is the way it started.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/vance-havner/missing-notes-in-the-modern-church/>

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