

Ask Anything

“Why Is The Church So Defeated?”

Selected Texts

Delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic via Livestream and to an under 50 gathering at Central Baptist Church on October 11, 2020

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Today we are continuing in our Ask Anything series. Here’s the next question that you asked and voted to be preached on: **(SHOW SLIDE 2) If Christians are empowered by the Holy Spirit and “more than conquerors”, then why is the Church so defeated?**
 - This is such an important question to wrestle with. You can hear the discouragement in it.
 - We say we believe in the power of the Holy Spirit. But where are the results? Why does the Spirit-empowered Church seem unable to stop our culture from moving further and further from Christian beliefs and values?
 - We say we believe the tomb is empty. So why aren’t thousands of Canadians embracing the risen Christ each day?
 - This is such an important question because discouragement can quickly turn to despair. And in despair we give up because things are hard. Or worse, in despair we may say, ***“Maybe this whole Christianity thing is just a sham.”***
- As we reflect on the Scriptures and our present time this morning I am praying that this message would save us from a defeatist mindset that leads to despair. I am praying we would cry out to God for better days but that we would also have hearts overflowing with thanksgiving at what He is doing in our day and in our time.
 - So, if Christians are empowered by the Holy Spirit and “more than conquerors”, then why is the Church so defeated?

WHO SAYS THE CHURCH IS BEING DEFEATED?

- Here is the first thing I think we need to say this morning: **(SHOW SLIDE 3) Who says the Church is being defeated?**
 - Oh, I can easily guess what is meant by the question and I will agree in part, but I think part of our discouragement comes from the fact that our vision is too narrow. Open your eyes. Look more broadly and it will change your view.
- On a global level, there is great reason for giving thanks. Oh yes, the western world is becoming less and less religious, but study after study says the rest of the world is becoming more religious, not less. Here is a key fact to learn.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 4) The centre of Christianity has shifted from Europe to the global South and East.¹** Here are so incredible statistics.

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/05/20/think-christianity-is-dying-no-christianity-is-shifting-dramatically/>

- **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** One hundred years ago 80% of the Christians lived in North America and Europe; today it is only 40%.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 6)** Today Latin America and Africa make up 1 billion Christians.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 7)** In Asia Christianity is growing at twice the rate of the population.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 8)** China (100 million?) and India (71 million?)² Due to persecution in China and major difficulties with census data in India, we simply do not know but there could be a lot more.
 - So much more could be added. This should encourage you. This is reason for thanksgiving.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 9)** But what about Canada? *MacLeans* magazine put out an article arguing that religion isn't declining nearly as fast as we think. In 1993 sociologist and pollster Reginald Bibby painted a dreary picture of where Canada's churches would be by our day. He projected a steady decline toward death. In 2015 Bibby said he was wrong. He says the major factor he missed in his predictions was immigration. New immigrants are bringing a vibrant Christian faith to Canada.
 - Here is another encouraging fact. An academic journal called *Review of Religious Research* revealed that it is the conservative churches that take the historic Christian faith seriously that are growing and not the liberal ones that have discarded belief in the Bible, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and biblical views on sexuality.³
- Oh yes, there are many things to be concerned about. We will get to that. But everywhere there is reason to lift up our hearts in thanksgiving today.
 - I see parents raising their kids to know Christ.
 - I see Christian doctors and nurses working out their faith in difficult ethical situations.
 - I see teenagers hungry to learn God's Word and dreaming how they can use their lives for Christ.
 - I see men fighting against pornography rather than going with the flow of culture.
 - I see women standing up for the rights of unborn children.
 - I see a new generation of young adults rising up that is deeply concerned about living out the values of Christ's kingdom in racial matters, caring for orphans, fighting sex trafficking, and building education in 3rd world nations.
- Have you fallen into a defeatist mindset? Remember Elijah. He fell into despair as his society abandoned God and worshipped Baal. His vision narrowed so he thought he was the only faithful one left. He fell into despair. But God encouraged him by broadening his vision. God said, **(SHOW SLIDE 10)** "I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him." (1 Kings 19:18)

² <https://www.lausanne.org/lgc-transfer/number-of-christians-in-china-and-india-2>

³ <https://www.turleytalks.com/blog-summary/study-finds-conservative-churches-growing-in-canada>

- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 11)** So the first response is, “**Who says the Church is defeated?**” Open your eyes to what God is doing in Canada and around the world and give thanks.

WHO CAN DENY THE SIGNS OF DEFEAT?

- With that being said, there is a second thing to say in response to our question. It is this: **(SHOW SLIDE 12) Who can deny there are signs of defeat in the western Church?**
 - I think that when Christians ask about the Church being defeated they often mean that the Church has been unable to stop our society from moving further and further away from Christian beliefs and values. There is no question that this is true. The morals of our society have changed. The speed of that moral change is astounding. We have not witnessed a small shift in morality. In just a few decades we have witnessed a complete revolution in morality; a revolution in how we view sexuality, homosexuality, abortion, the definition of marriage, divorce, and now gender. It is a moral revolution.
 - British thinker Theo Hobson defines **(SHOW SLIDE 13) what must happen for a moral revolution to take place.** There are three steps.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 14) First, that which was condemned must be celebrated.** So those things that used to be viewed as wrong must be celebrated.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 15) Second, that which was celebrated must be condemned.** The old ways of thinking and acting must be condemned. But then there is one big last thing that must take place for a moral revolution to take place.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 16) Third, those who will not celebrate must be condemned.”⁴**
- The Bible describes all of this in Romans 1. It says that when people turn away from their Creator and refuse to worship and give thanks to him, God gives them over to themselves. In other words, God’s wrath in Romans 1 is not lightning bolts from heaven but God giving a society over to do whatever their sinful hearts want to do.
 - And when this happens individuals and society decay from within. Romans 1 describes how people pursue the lust in their hearts. Paul says men and women pursue sexual relationships with their own sex. Society becomes “***filled with all manner of unrighteousness***” such as envy, boasting, strife, gossip, and lying. People are heartless, ruthless, and even commit murder. People are lovers of themselves (2 Tim 3:2).
 - Paul concludes Romans 1 by saying that the moral revolution is complete **(SHOW SLIDE 17) they not only do them [i.e. unrighteous acts] but give approval to those who practice them. (Rom 1:32)**
- So when Christians look at moral revolution that has taken place they conclude that the Church has been defeated. Why has the Church been unable to stop or even slow the moral revolution?

⁴ Theo Hobson, *God Created Humanism: The Christian Basis of Secular Values*.

- Is not one reason that many Christians, churches, and whole denominations have changed their views to accommodate culture?
 - How else can you explain why so many supposed Christian books, pastors, and denominations have abandoned all that Christians have believed for thousands of years. These books, pastors, and whole denominations now teach that there is no judgement or hell, that Jesus did not rise bodily from the dead, that the Bible is filled with errors, that God approves of same sex marriage, and that everyone will be saved in the end? This is defeat. The salt has lost its saltiness.
- Lest we become self-righteous, we need to also examine ourselves. Oh yes, there are signs of faithfulness, but I do not think that anyone of us would say our generation is the high-water mark of Christian prayer, obedience, and mission on the cause of Christ.
 - This ought to drive us to our knees in repentance and prayer.
 - So we've said two things so far: First, there are many reasons to give thanks for the church is not defeated. Second, there are many signs of defeat within the western Church.

WHAT EXPECTATIONS SHOULD WE HAVE?

- This leads us to ask an important question that will bring it all together. In the third place I want to ask, **(SHOW SLIDE 18) what expectations should we have?**
 - Expectations are everything. Should we expect that if Christians had just been more faithful in the past 50 years that our society would look radically different?
 - On a personal level, should you expect that once you are a Christian you will get the point where you experience near total victory over sin in your life?
 - Or, should we expect that Christians and churches will always struggle and often be defeated until the day Christ returns and brings complete victory?
 - What expectations should we have?
- Christians have often divided into two camps on this. James Stewart—who died in 1990 and is one of my favourite preachers—summarizes these two camps like this. The first camp says we should expect **(SHOW SLIDE 19) victory only beyond history**. That is, when Christ returns. The second camp disagrees and says we should expect **(SHOW SLIDE 20) victory within history**.⁵
 - Think this through with me because we need to have the right expectations.

VICTORY BEYOND HISTORY

- Let's think through the first view which is that there is victory only beyond history.
 - Many Bible passages back this up. Jesus declared that **(SHOW SLIDE 21) "this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." (Matthew 24:14)**
 - So Jesus promised that the gospel would be proclaimed to the very ends of the earth but he did not promise that all nations would respond and be saved.

⁵ James Stewart, *Thine is the Kingdom*, 55-74.

- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 22)** Jesus also told the parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13. Tares are weeds that look like wheat and entangle themselves with the roots of the wheat. In his parable, the wheat represents Jesus' people and the tares the people of this world.
 - And Jesus does not say that the wheat will eventually take over so there are no more weeds. No, he says the field of this world will be a mix of wheat and tares until the very end of the age when he returns.
- Then there are the verses that say it is normal for the world to hate Christians, to persecute and even kill them.
 - Other passages like Galatians 5 say it is normal for Christians to struggle against their own sin.
- Finally, there is all the Bible's teaching on the devil, on evil powers, and on one called the anti-Christ. All of these are said to be waging war against the Church and keeping people captive in their sins.
 - In Greek mythology the Hydra was a multi-headed dragon. If you cut off one head then two heads grow back. We know something of this. For all our efforts for Christ, it seems sin in our society just keeps multiplying its heads.
 - This first view is so helpful because it is realistic. It saves us from despair because it says we should never expect some sort of utopia in this world. We must wait for the second coming of Christ when he will usher in the complete victory of God.

VICTORY WITHIN HISTORY

- The second view is victory in history.
 - This view emphasizes the power of the Holy Spirit. It points out that wherever the gospel goes it changes the world. Jesus told the parable of the mustard seed, which starts small and grows to be the biggest plant in the garden.
 - The apostle Paul writes of **(SHOW SLIDE 23) "the gospel, ⁶ which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing."** (Col 1:5-6).
 - Even Israel's historic rejection of Jesus is not final. Once the mission to the Gentiles is fulfilled, Romans 11:26 says **(SHOW SLIDE 24) "all Israel will be saved" (Rom 11:26)**. I understand this to mean that God has many chosen within Israel and a day is coming when many Jewish people will embrace Jesus as their Messiah.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 25)** This view emphasizes that the Spirit of God has been poured out, that Christ is with us on mission for him and we should expect big results. One version of this called Post-Millennialism says the Bible teaches that the gospel will spread and spread and eventually the nations of this world will bow the knee to Jesus.
 - So, this view is very optimistic about the future for it declares that even though it is dark now God's great power will subdue the nations to Christ.

THE UNRESOLVED PARADOX

- So, which is it? Should we lower our expectations and only expect victory beyond history when Christ returns? Or, should we raise our expectations and expect to see the triumph of Jesus within history?
 - It seems to me that both answers are right. As I read the Bible it seems that **(SHOW SLIDE 26) we should expect struggle and apparent defeat until the victorious return of Christ at the end of history, but we should also expect to see great victories for Christ within history.**
- What will save you from despair is the first view. You should expect to find following Jesus difficult. Galatians 5 says you should expect to constantly be fighting against sinful desires. You should expect to see the world turning away from Jesus and heaping scorn on those who follow him.
 - Truly our great hope is in the second coming of Christ when he will bring his people into complete victory.
- Yet, in my view, the western Church needs to hear the second part just as much. We should expect to see great victories for Christ within history. We need to hear this because everywhere I see Christians, particularly conservative ones, giving into a defeatist mentality. They say, ***“Everything has collapsed. We’ve lost the moral revolution. The Church is dying”*** and so they retreat behind their church walls to do Bible studies until the second coming takes place.
 - What has happened to us? Have we forgotten that Christ has risen from the dead and the Spirit has been poured out? Do you not believe that the same Spirit who saved 3000 people through one sermon on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 and 2000 people a few days later can do that again in our day?
 - Do you think the powers of evil or the devil himself are any match for the risen and reigning Christ?
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 27)** You say, ***“But I see so little of this. We see one person here and there becoming Christians, but we don’t see that in our day and time.”*** I agree but faith means never giving up no matter how dark it is. In fact, all through history God has often broken through when it is was darkest.
 - Israel was enslaved for 400 years until, in His time, God miraculously delivered them.
 - God promised to send His Messiah to save us. Thousands of years passed. Then in the fullness of time God sent forth His Son.
 - The disciples were praying in the upper room. The Spirit suddenly fell and the young church exploded out from Jerusalem.
 - In 1400 and 1500’s the Church had grown very corrupt. God raised up one man, Martin Luther, and within a generation Europe was turned upside down.
- Let me tell you of the spiritual condition of America and England, in the early 18th century. One author named J.C. Ryle writes,
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 28) “The state of this country in a religious and moral point of view was so painfully unsatisfactory that it is difficult to convey any adequate idea of it. England seemed barren of all that is really good. How such a state of things can have arisen in a land of free Bibles . . . is almost beyond comprehension. Christianity seemed to lie as one dead. . . . There was**

darkness in high places and darkness in low places – darkness in the court, the camp, the Parliament, and the bar – darkness in the country, and darkness in the town, darkness among the rich and darkness among poor.”⁶

- The Archbishop in those days summed it up by saying, **(SHOW SLIDE 29)** “An open and professed disregard for religion is the distinguishing character of the age.”⁷

- But then God raised up men like John Wesley, George Whitfield, and Jonathan Edwards. Suddenly sermons they had even preached before with little effect started to come with great power.
 - George Whitfield preached in the fields to massive crowds. One man writes that **(SHOW SLIDE 30)** “The gospel so proclaimed was listened to and greedily received by hundreds who never dream of going to a place of worship. Thousands came to Christ.”⁸
- Jonathan Edwards reported the same thing in America: **(SHOW SLIDE 31)** “Everywhere the reign of formality seemed broken and tears streamed down the faces of thousands under the preaching of the gospel.”⁹
 - By May 1740 it was reported, **(SHOW SLIDE 32)** “There was never such a general awakening and concern of the things of God known in America before. . . The gospel in this day may be likened to a fire set to well dried fuel: it no sooner touches but a flame arises”¹⁰
- Or jump ahead to the nation of Wales in 1904. Listen to this description.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 33)** “The nation had drifted far from God. The spiritual conditions were low indeed. Church attendance was poor, and sin abounded on every side. Suddenly like an unexpected tornado, the Spirit of God swept over the land. The churches were crowded, so that multitudes were unable to get in. Meetings lasted from ten in the morning until twelve at night. Three definite services were held each day...nothing had ever come over Wales with such far reaching results. Sinners were converted; drunkards, thieves and gamblers saved. . . . Confessions of awful sins were heard on every side. Old debts paid. In five weeks twenty thousand people joined the churches.”¹¹
 - Canada has never experienced anything like this. Oh Lord, do this in our day and in our country! But you may say, “*Things have become so dark here.*”
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 34)** The famous climber Hilaire Belloc was once climbing in the Pyrenees mountains in Spain. Suddenly a terrific storm burst upon them. His friends all thought they were going to die. They said, “*This feels like the end of the world.*” “*Not so,*” replied Belloc, who had climbed these mountains many times before, “*this is how dawn comes in the Pyrenees.*”

⁶ JC Ryle, *Christian Leaders of the 18th Century*, 13-14.

⁷ Ibid. 15.

⁸ Ibid. 39.

⁹ Ibid. 117.

¹⁰ Ibid. 117, 120.

¹¹ Dr. Stephen Olford, *Heart Cry for Revival*, 76-77.

- There are many reasons to think the Church is being defeated. There are many reasons to think the darkness of night has come. There are many reasons to think this is the end of western civilization and the western Church.
 - But where is our faith? Who knows but that Christ will not return for another 1000 years and he has great plans for Canada. Who knows but that this present darkness is how dawn will come to our nation? I do not know what will happen but one thing I know: we need less talk about how bad things are and more prayer, repentance, and action.
- Let us call on God to act in our church, in our city, and in our nation.
 - Let us not fall into despair for the risen Lord has commanded us to make disciples and said, ***“Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”*** (Mt 28:20).
 - Let us not allow the darkness to overtake our hearts for the risen Christ has said, ***“I will build my Church and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it.”*** (Mt 16:18).