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THE CHURCH'S CONDUCT IN THE END TIMES

1 Peter 4:7-11

by

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The Church's Conduct In The End Times 1 Peter 4:7-11

Every once in a while you read about a wacky religious group that has become so convinced that the Lord's coming is imminent that they have sold everything they owned and gone out to sit on a hilltop and await His coming. In 1988, thousands of pastors in America received in the mail a booklet by Edgar Whisenant, "88 Reasons Why the Rapture Could Be in 1988." It had a lot of interesting arguments, but, needless to say, they were not accurate. So, in 1989, I received another booklet explaining why his calculations were off by one year and why the Lord would come back in 1989. I didn't receive another booklet in 1990.

I'm sure that the author of those booklets is a sincere, Bible-believing man who means well. He admits in his 1989 booklet that he could be mistaken again in his specific calculations, since there are many complicated factors involved. And, his goal is worthy, namely, to wake up the sleeping church. He raises an important question: How should we, as the church, conduct ourselves in light of the fact that we are living in the end times? Peter answers that question in 1 Peter 4:7-11:

Because the end is near, the church should glorify God through prayer, love, and service.

These verses are sandwiched in a context dealing with the persecution Peter's readers were facing. In both the preceding and following sections, Peter brings in the certainty that Jesus Christ will return to judge all people (4:5, 17). In our text, he is telling the church how to relate to one another in light of the present suffering and the future judgment. Trials have a way of either driving a family closer together or further apart. Peter wants to make sure that the churches to which he wrote would draw together as the persecution intensified and as the coming day of the Lord draws nearer.

1. The end of all things is near (4:7a).

I don't know why, but most translations omit the connective particle that links verse 7 with verse 6. It should read, "Now [or, but] the end of all things is near." Peter has just mentioned how Christ is ready to judge the living and the dead (4:5). Some believers had died, which may have drawn ridicule from scoffers (4:6): "The Christians died just like everyone else! What difference does your Christianity make? Those 'holy Joes' who died just missed out on all the fun they could have had!" But Peter asserts, "Now the end of all things has come near."

Today many would scoff and say, "That's crazy! It's been almost 2,000 years and life goes on. How can anyone say that the end of all things has come near?" Peter answers that charge in 2 Peter 3:3-10. What such scoffers don't realize is that God's view of time and ours are significantly different. A thousand years with the Lord is as one day. Any extension of time that God gives before the certain, coming judgment is due to His patience and mercy: He does not wish for any to perish. But that judgment is delayed does not mean that judgment is not coming!

And, while the signs of the times look as if the return of Christ is very close, even if He does not return in our lifetimes, we are individually very near the end, aren't we? I'm 45, just 20 years from 65, the American retirement age! But I have no guarantee that I'll live to be 46. None of us is certain that we will be alive tomorrow. So we all need to live in light of the fact that the end of all things is near.

Does that mean that we make no plans for the future, that we sell everything and go sit on a hilltop? No, of course not! Although he is no theologian, newspaper columnist Sydney J. Harris was on target when he wrote, "The art of living successfully consists of being able to hold two opposite ideas in tension at the same time: first, to make long-term plans as if we were going to live forever; and second, to conduct ourselves daily as if we were going to die tomorrow" (*Reader's Digest* [5/82]). Because the end of all things is near, Peter shows how God's people should live:

2. The church should glorify God through prayer, love, and service (4:7b-11).

The commands in 4:7b-11 stem from the declaration in 4:7a: "The end of all things is at hand; *therefore*, ..." If Christ is ready

to judge the living and the dead (4:5), if it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God (4:17), then here is how we, as His people, should conduct ourselves. There are commands in three areas (prayer, love, and serving one another), but the overarching principle comes at the end of verse 11: "so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom is the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."

God's glory is a rather nebulous concept, so let me explain what it means and what it means to glorify Him. The Hebrew word ("kabod") translated "glory" has the nuance of weight or heaviness. It points to the riches or power of a person of importance, much as we may say, "He's a heavyweight" or "a man of substance." The Greek word ("doxa") comes from a word meaning "to seem or think," and has the nuance of reputation or honor. When applied to God, His glory is His inherent majesty and infinite worth. God's glory is intrinsic to His being. It is the manifestation of His perfect attributes, often expressed on earth by light brighter than the sun (Matt. 17:2; Acts 26:13; Rev. 1:16). In the Old Testament, God's glory was often seen as a bright cloud or a fire (Exod. 24:16-18; 40:34-35).

It is debatable, grammatically, whether "to whom" (1 Pet. 4:11) refers to God or to Jesus Christ, although it really doesn't matter (Rev. 1:6 clearly attributes glory and dominion to Jesus Christ). Hebrews 1:3 asserts, Jesus Christ "is the radiance of [God's] glory and the exact representation of His nature and upholds all things by the word of His power." Paul calls Christ "the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8). Jesus Himself claimed that the Father had given all judgment to the Son "in order that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father" (John 5:23). So, as believers, we are to glorify God through Jesus Christ, who has revealed the Father to us.

To glorify God means to show forth His excellencies to others, or, as I've often said, in street language, to glorify God is to make Him look good as He really is. If a photographer glorifies some natural wonder, he makes us revel in the inherent beauty of that scene. We see the photograph and gasp, "Look at the colors and grandeur of that mountain!" If a literary critic glorifies an author, he brings forth the subtle nuances of language and plot in a

way that makes us exclaim, "Wow! That author has a rare ability with words!"

When the photographer or critic does his work rightly, we don't extol the photographer or critic; we extol the object toward which they point. We say, "What a beautiful scene!" Or, "What a tremendous author or work of literature!" And when Christians properly glorify God, people should exclaim, "What a great being God is!" John Calvin rightly says, "We never truly glory in him unless we have utterly put off our own glory. ... whoever glories in himself, glories against God" (*Institutes* [3:13:2], [Westminster Press], ed. by John T. McNeill). As Peter makes it clear here, everything we have we received from God. Thus He alone is worthy of glory.

Peter mentions three means of conduct which will glorify God: prayer, love, and serving in line with the gifts God has bestowed on us.

A. The church should glorify God through prayer (4:7b).

Prayer glorifies God because it acknowledges our weakness and dependence upon Him. Not to pray is, in effect, to assert our own sufficiency and arrogance, in that we're acting on our own. So as we recognize the critical times in which we live, our own inadequacy, and God's total sufficiency, we should be driven to prayer. Peter mentions two somewhat synonymous qualities which will help us to be people of prayer:

First, "Be of *sound judgment*." Knowing that we are in the end times should not make us go off the deep end. Rather, we should keep our wits about us, or be sensible. The same word is used as a qualification for elders (NASB--"prudent," 1 Tim. 3:2; "sensible," Titus 1:8). It points to a man who is levelheaded, not impulsive, not swayed by fluctuating emotions.

Paul, like Peter here, uses this word in the context of spiritual gifts: "For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith" (Rom. 12:3). The danger is not that we will think too lowly of ourselves, but that we will think too highly of ourselves. Sound judgment concerning ourselves will

move us to prayer as we recognize our own sinfulness and weakness, but also, God's holiness and strength.

Second: "Be *sober*." (See 1:13; 5:8; Peter uses it 3 out of 6 NT uses). It is also a quality for elders (1 Tim. 3:2). It means, literally, "don't be drunk," but Peter intends more than not being intoxicated by liquor. He means that we should be alert and self-controlled. We should have the clarity of mind and resulting good judgment that mark a person who is not drunk in contrast to the one under the influence.

The opposite of the word is to be asleep (1 Thess. 5:6-8). Peter slept in the garden with Jesus when he should have been alert, sober, and in prayer. As a result he fell into temptation and sin. As we see our enemy prowling about as a roaring lion (1 Pet. 5:8), seeking to devour us, we should soberly perk up our spiritual eyes and ears and be in prayer, both for ourselves and for one another.

B. The church should glorify God through love (4:8-9).

"Above all" does not pit love against prayer, as if you can choose love and neglect prayer. Rather, Peter is calling our attention to the priority of love for fellow Christians as a central part of the Christian faith (Peter Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* (NICNT) [Eerdmans], p. 157). Jesus said that love for one another is His new commandment, the mark by which the world will know that we are His followers (John 13:34-35). Paul told the Corinthians that he could have all spiritual gifts and faith, but without love he would be nothing (1 Cor. 13:1-3). Loving our neighbor is second only to loving God (Matt. 22:37-39), and is a tangible evidence that we do love God (1 John 4:20).

Peter didn't doubt that his readers were practicing love, but he knew that under trials it's easy to start taking out our frustrations on those closest to us. So he writes, "Keep fervent in your love for one another." "Fervent" (lit., "to stretch" or "strain") was used of an athlete stretching and straining every muscle toward the end of the race. As we see the Lord's coming drawing near, we should exert ourselves to love one another.

This implies that love is not a warm, fuzzy feeling. Rather, it takes sustained, strenuous effort, such as athletes expend as they

near the finish line. The fact that love can be commanded shows that it is primarily an action, not an emotion, although often there will be an emotional element involved. But often biblical love is more sweat than sweet. It involves effort!

That's implicit in the phrase, "Love covers a multitude of sins." It's fairly easy to love people who don't sin against you. But biblical love extends even to those who wrong you. The phrase comes from Proverbs 10:12 (Hebrew text), which contrasts love with hatred, which stirs up strife. Peter seems to have in mind the fact that love is ready to forgive and careful to protect the offender from needless exposure. The one who loves doesn't keep a feud going by retaliating or holding a grudge. As Paul puts it, Love "always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (1 Cor. 13:7, NIV).

That love covers sin does *not* mean that love condones sin. Scripture is clear that love often confronts sin. Church discipline, which is sometimes necessary as an expression of love, exposes rather than covers sin. So how do we know whether to cover someone's sin or to confront it?

I don't know of an easy formula to answer that question. Study how Jesus dealt with the disciples and how God deals with His people and seek to do likewise. But here are four guidelines:

First, it's helpful to distinguish between immaturity and defiance. Is this person a rebellious Christian who knows better or just an immature one? Paul wrote that we are to "admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, and help [literally, 'hold on to'] the weak (1 Thess. 5:14). The unruly ("out of step") are defiant and their defiance, like those out of step in a company of marching soldiers, will affect others. Their sin needs confrontation, not covering. But others are discouraged or weak, and they need encouragement or just being held on to so they don't go under. Cover their sin.

A second guideline: Cover whatever offenses you can, but if an offense bothers you to the extent that it hinders your relationship, you need to confront it. Many offenses are too trivial to confront; absorb these. But if it is creating a barrier to a relationship, then it needs to get cleared up. Consider a way to do it that will bring healing, not a deeper rift.

Third: Do I have an adequate relationship to confront the offense? If not, I need to cover it for a while and work on deepening the relationship so that I will be heard when I do confront. People are more inclined to accept correction if they know that I genuinely care for them.

A fourth guideline: Is this a minor flaw that just grates on me, or is it a character defect or sin that hinders this person's growth in Christ? Again, love's motive and goal is to glorify God. If a person has a blind spot or sin that is hindering God's glory in his life or that may result in his falling into worse sin, it needs to be confronted, not covered. I may or may not be the one to do it, but I shouldn't dodge confronting it just because confrontation is unpleasant.

We are commanded to *love* people in the church that we may not *like*. Peter knew that we aren't inclined to like everyone. That's why, in mentioning the specific duty of love to be hospitable (4:9), he adds, "without complaint." We can be outwardly hospitable while under our breath we're saying, "I wish they would leave!" But we're supposed to do it joyfully, as unto the Lord Himself (Matt. 25:35-40).

Hospitality is also a quality required of elders (1 Tim. 3:2). In Peter's day, there weren't many clean, safe motels which "left the light on for you." Traveling evangelists and other Christians often needed a place to stay. So the church was exhorted to open their homes not just to friends, but even to Christians whom they didn't know ("hospitable" lit. = "a lover of strangers"). Our love should be shown in cheerful hospitality.

C. The church should glorify God through service (4:10-11).

Peter divides all spiritual gifts into two broad categories: Speaking gifts and serving gifts. Speaking gifts are usually more visible: preaching, teaching, exhortation (counseling), and (if valid for today) prophecy. Serving gifts are usually more behind the scenes: good deeds, helping, showing mercy, giving, and administration.

There are few areas where there is more confusion and disagreement among Bible teachers than the specifics concerning spiritual gifts. But the New Testament is clear that every believer

has at least one gift (note “each one” in Rom. 12:3; 1 Cor. 12:7; Eph. 4:7; 1 Pet. 4:10). That means that each of us is a steward or manager of the resources God has given to us to use for His glory. The fact that God’s grace as seen in His gifts is “manifold” shows that we are all uniquely equipped by God for distinctive functions. No gift is insignificant.

A local church will be healthy only to the extent that every member conscientiously exercises his or her gifts as stewards before God. The one who speaks must speak, as it were, the utterances of God. This doesn’t mean that he is speaking under divine inspiration; rather, it calls attention to the seriousness of communicating God’s Word. When you preach, you don’t toss out human opinions that are up for grabs, but rather you bring people face to face with God’s authoritative truth.

Those who serve must do so by the strength which God supplies, which points to the need for conscious dependence on God, no matter how mundane the task. The word “supplies” originally was used of a wealthy person who supplied the funds for a chorus or dance, much like a modern philanthropist who supports the arts. God is an abundant source of strength for all that He commands us to do. If Christians were serving in the strength which God supplies, I doubt that we would be hearing so much about “burnout.”

Remember: Our motive in service, as in prayer and love, must be God’s glory. Some get involved in serving the Lord in order to meet their own needs for love or recognition. Invariably they get hurt at some point when their efforts go unnoticed or unrewarded. Many others serve with good motives, but not the best. They want to help people with their problems or see people get saved or see the church grow in numbers. Great! But they, too, eventually will be disappointed. The glory of God is the only motive that will enable us to persevere in serving Him without burning out.

Conclusion

The end is near; therefore, the church should glorify God through prayer, love, and service. When I once lived in Chicago, I got a job as a bellman at the Drake Hotel, an older, but first class hotel overlooking Lake Michigan. I later learned that in 1959, the

Queen of England visited Chicago. Elaborate preparations were made for her visit. The waterfront was readied for docking her yacht. Litter baskets were painted. A red carpet was rolled out. Many hotels were alerted. But when they contacted the Drake, the manager explained, "We are making no plans for the Queen; our rooms are always ready for royalty." What an advertisement for the Drake!

Peter is saying, "The King is coming soon. Don't go sit on a hilltop to wait. Rather, ask yourself: Are you living so that others will see how great God truly is? Are you depending on Him in prayer? What about your love for other Christians? How about your management of the gifts God has entrusted to you? Your life should always be ready for royalty. Don't let His coming catch you unprepared!"

Discussion Questions

1. Are Christians generally too caught up with Christ's coming or not enough?
2. How can we properly "cover" sin without condoning it?
3. How important is it to know your spiritual gift?
4. Agree/disagree: If Christians were serving in God's strength and for His glory, they would not "burn out."

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