

Title The Vibrant, Active Brotherhood
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I've toyed with the thought, what would the committee do if we just sang for the rest of the evening? Singing can be active and vibrant without the brotherhood as well. I've been blessed just listening sometimes. Vibrant, active is a sure sign of life. If you find that in your brotherhood, you will find a group of believers cooperating together for a cause. Does that define me? Does that define you? Vibrant, active brotherhood.

Around 3,000 years ago, four men were banished from their city as lepers. Although the four were removed, the city was not much safer or better, because their city was besieged by a huge better army. The siege had been going on for so long, that the ones on the walls were on the verge of salvation. Due to their intense hunger, some of them had succumbed to cannibalism, eating their own for sustenance. With the people in the city walls, starving, you can imagine how much these four social outcasts were. Considering their options, they said, why sit here while we die? Even if we could get in the city, it wouldn't benefit us much as far as food goes. On the other hand, if we continue sitting here outside the city gates, that won't benefit us either. Why don't we go to the enemy camp? If they kill us, we're not much better. Maybe they'll be sympathetic, feed us, and let us live. As the sun set, four hungry lepers limped their way to the camps. To their surprise, they found the camp abandoned. As the four of them continued limping into the camp, there was no sign of human presence anywhere. These four lepers figured death was inevitable for them. Instead they found unattended camp suppers cooking their suppers: food, food, food, and plenty of it. They also found silver, gold, and raiment. After filling their stomachs, they carried out the valuables and carried it out and hid it. After several trips, they realized "we do not well." This day is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace. Should the four hungry men only enjoy themselves, fantasizing about their fabulous future, or should they share the good tidings? The very ones who have despised them, had cast them out to die. This evening, the dilemma of the skinny, bonny, hungry lepers is not much different than our own. We have feast on the Gospel. We have found the food that gives us abundant life and eternal life in the future. We have a joy unspeakable because we are well fed and taken care of. We used to be outcast, but this evening we have been pronounced joint heirs. We are offered a future beyond description, guaranteed by God. God has called us to flesh all of this out in the context of brotherhood.

Why aren't we vibrant and active? Is it because we have so soon forgotten where we once were, how desperate our situation was outside the city walls. Left to die, facing an inevitable death. As we evaluate our personal experience, our local church life. Do you see any correlation between one of the four lepers, those in the city walls eating their own sustenance. But if they bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one another. Brotherhood cannibalism. Walk in the spirit and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. Does our vibrancy exhibit the lust of the flesh, or is there evidence we are walking in the spirit. We have a promise that if we are walking in his spirit, we will not fulfill the lust of the flesh.

Wilbur asked last night, what is the biggest hindrance to fulfilling the call of God in our lives? My immediate response for Ben Stoltzfus is Ben himself. If Ben would just get out of the way, God could begin to show himself strong. Self hinders so much of what God wants to accomplish through us. Vibrant and active brotherhood.

When the spirit of God visited the churches in Revelation, he observed a condition in one of the congregations relevant to our topic this evening. Open to Revelation 3, beginning in 14. [*The church in Laodicea.*] Often one of the major problems within our brotherhoods is the fact that too many of us are neither hot nor cold. God clearly tells us he prefers us either hot or cold. This condition of being okay with something in between there is nauseating to our savior and the fact that we don't see it if we are in the middle is plainly to our detriment. Our condition in the eyes of God is wretched, miserable, poor, blind, innate. That's not a good commentary on a mediocre half-alive follower of Jesus Christ. I believe it's the half-alives among us who are the most damaging in brotherhood relationships. We're not on fire for God. On the other hand, we're not completely dead either. Just alive enough to be nauseating enough for the cause. God would prefer us hot or cold. It's difficult to fathom God really means what he says here: hot or cold.

If I understand correctly, God is telling us that lukewarm is that we do not appreciate what we were saved from. We used to be outside the gates facing death and condemnation. Now that we have all the food we could possibly want, all we can think about is self indulgence. God says I prefer you either cold or hot. Is God suggesting here that if we're not moving towards, that he prefers we wouldn't even pretend to be Christian? Is God really telling us, those who are cold, who make it clear that they want nothing to do with following Christianity, that they are preferable to him than those who are half alive, mediocre, middle of the road, run of the mill followers? Is God really saying, those who have never tasted good things are less miserable?

I know your works, God says, and what I see is nauseating. Choose one or the other. Being okay with something half way between is not a good place to be. Jesus is giving us a choice, what sort of brother we will be in the brotherhood. The only reasonable choice as we look at the Word of God is that we become hot, alive, active, vibrant for the cause. As I understand life and what it expects, we happen to be in the driver's seat to become the hot people. God and His word is wanting us there, and he's going to give us the resources to go there. God tells us what resources we'll need if we find ourselves numbered in those in between.

The half-dead, half-alive, three passions listed here will be obvious. Revelation 3:18-19.

Passion #1: Buy gold tried in the fire

God says go and buy this book. Salvation can't be bought with money; grace on unmerited favor comes to us as a gift from God. This passage says we're to go and buy gold tried in the fire. In 1 Peter 4:7, the trial of your faith being much more precious than gold—I'm not sure what this gold is that we're counseled to go and buy. In Peter, it has something to do with our faith. Buying gold has the implication that it is going to be costly to get this. I don't know for sure what this church in Laodicea was in desperate need of, but I believe they needed some stirring up. Maybe they even needed persecution. I don't know if that's the condition of your brotherhood or not. I prefer to think Pequea is not in the condition where they need stirring up and persecution, but if she is, if that is the condition of our brotherhood, and God does send persecution or stirring up, you and I, if that occurs, we at that point will choose how we respond to it. It's important. Maybe it will serve us well now how we're going to respond if God does see it best. He says it in verse 19, as many as I love, I rebuke and chasten! Most don't ask God to send that to us, do we? If our spiritual condition is such as causes God to vomit, he probably will send persecution. It's evidence of his love.

Most of us find ourselves living in a culture where feelings trump right thinking. I don't suggest we should urge ourselves where we are past feeling. Unless we are thinking right, the problem won't go right. How are we going to respond if God does send us chastisement and rebuke? How do you respond if that occurs in context of your brotherhood? Way too often we reply by getting angry. We respond by suggesting, "I don't deserve this sort of brother!" In fact, we might be there. We might deserve what God has given us. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Too often, we base action on feeling rather than what God has says. Our feelings tell us, if I have to live with this brotherhood, I'm out of here. I wonder how often we miss what God has wanted to teach us. Be zealous therefore and repent. Brotherhood offers blessing and protection for the believer. In fact, this protection and blessing, we often fail to think about.

Just this past weekend, I was reminded of the blessing of brotherhood. In our community there was a 60 year old man that died in prison. His last name was Stoltzfus. His father had been a bishop of the local Mennonite church. In his youth, he had identified himself with a brotherhood, the pagans. The reason he spent forty years in prison was because he had been accused of murder. Throughout those years, he maintained he was not responsible for it. It is possible he was right and the jury was wrong. As someone said, he didn't receive that sentence because he sang too loud in church. He was not a suspect because of living godly. The brotherhood of the believers offers blessing and protection. We forget it so often.

[Excerpt:] "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the sinners..."

Passion #2: Buy white raiment that ye may be clothed

We cloth ourselves with it. Maybe you have difficulty with the suggestion that it might include that which we wear, clothing. Go buy white raiment! The implication is that it will be costly to buy! It will be holy, it will be a separate people unto God. Let me say this: I believe God desired this brotherhood in Laodicea to really look like something. I believe he wanted them to look like they were serious about the cause. As the world observed them, looked at them, there was to be no doubt in anyone minds who these people were: little Christs.

Passion #3: Anoint thine eyes

Because you're blind, so that you can perceive the direction you are heading. Do your brotherhoods need that in 2010? Do you need to know the direction you're heading? Absolutely! Have enough vision that you'll be able to see where your decisions [*will take the church*] in four generations, Tim told us today. We're so short-sighted sometimes. Have enough vision for at least four generations. Are these decisions your brotherhood is making, are they going to result in wretchedness in the lives of our posterity, or are they going to give us a blessing. What are we willing to pay to experience the sort of brotherhood that keeps us from heading down that road? I'm convinced it's going to cost us. I'm convinced it's going to cost us something that our flesh is not going to like.

1 John 3:14 "We have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren." This verse in 1 John, the content, is not what you will find promoted in nominal Christianity. Mostly what you will hear from them is that God loves you and all you need to do is accept that love, and happy day! Go get the food and enjoy it! Get as many valuables as you can possibly carry away and stash it away for your own good. The four lepers realized, "We do not well! This day is a day of glad tidings."

God really does love us just the way we are, but it's also true that because he loves us, he does not want us to stay that way. His goal is for us to be conformed to Jesus Christ. "Let this mind/thinking be in you which was also in Christ Jesus." Don't allow feelings to trump your thinking.

There are three methods God uses in bringing us to the realization we need to change.

- 1) The mirror of his Word
- 2) The presence and influence of his Holy Spirit living within us
- 3) The brotherhood

All three of these need to have their proper significance in the lives of Jesus. I don't plan to say a lot about the first two, except, I don't think we should emphasize one at the expense of the other, especially with the Holy Spirit and brotherhood. There really is the possibility to overemphasize the brotherhood at the expense of serious Bible study. We will ultimately compromise the truth of the Scripture to accommodate rational issues. We will never truly solve relational issues by bypassing the truth of the Scriptures. God's Word and the illumination of His Spirit will give us the answers we need in brotherhood.

Sometimes we sort of pride ourselves by suggesting we are people of the book. Most of us last evening raised our Bible and said "This is THE book." Yet, sometimes we should admit we are a people of many books. We're more eager to hear what commentators had to say about what God had to say without looking at what God had to say. There can be an overemphasis on the spirit, where they say the Spirit told me this or that which is contrary to the Scriptures. Any spirit that violates what has been said is clearly not the same spirit which wrote the Scriptures to begin with. He cannot lie, he has promised to lead us into all truth. The spirit has not guided us differently than what he has already written. The grace of God operates in a similar way. Have you ever heard, "I'm so thankful for God's grace taking care of my wrong actions and sins." But God's grace has appeared to us for much more than that. Titus 2:11-12. The same grace that brought salvation is also the same grace that wants to do a work in our lives. John 3:14.

God is really giving us a thermometer, to value where we are in relation to him. I don't know if this is a practice in your home congregation, but at Pequea every six months we have preparatory services. Recently, I thought, this comes around just a little often, every six months we get together and take inventory of our relationship with each other. But you know, if we notice the seriousness of loving the brethren, it may put a little different light on our tradition.

Beachy believers need to affirm the certainty between faith in Christ and commitment to brotherhood. We can't have one without the other. The Bible says, we love the brotherhood or we abide in death. Death, that's serious. It's really serious. It's a seriousness that can't be ignored. Sometimes, maybe a lot of times. Sometimes we think God gave us some difficult people to love. The probability of that being true, most of us have a few in our brotherhoods that, well, if our feelings would trump right thinking, we would say, "Oh no we're not!" I don't think we should spend much time trying to figure out why they happen to be in our brotherhoods. We should encourage each other about why God says they're going to be there. 1 Cor. 12 "Now has God set every member in the body as it has pleased him." I've never seen anyone do themselves a favor by arguing with God.

I remember hearing one pastor that he feels sorry for those unhappy with where they have set them, because it pleases God. What we need to do is choose the life. "He that loveth not his brother abideth in death." How much are we willing to pay, sacrifice, to say 'I love the brethren.' Not feelings, but a decision. Whatever it takes, whatever it costs us. We need to begin up that path. Whatever it is we have to sacrifice, it won't be too much. The other alternative is not an option. 'Abideth in death.'

I've read about football fans who actually paint themselves purple to match the color of their teams. These same human beings will shave the name of their teams into their hair cuts. I also understand they wear some silly rubber masks and tattoo the team logo on their shoulders, and some insist that their honeymoon is shortened all in name of loyalty to their team. An 87 year old man was a devoted fan of a Southern California team. He had gone to 750 consecutive football games. He had not missed a Trojan game in 69 years. Once, when he was having an emergency surgery and was still in this hospital, he tells the nurse he needs to go for a walk. He ended up at the stadium. Someone asked him, why do you make all these sacrifices to identify with the Trojans? His answer, but that's all just part of being a fan.

Brothers and sisters, have we honestly answered the same question in relation to a team more important than any USC football attempt? How many of us have actually said, that's just part of loving the brethren. That's just part of my commitment to a team that one day is going to experience the marriage supper of the lamb.

In conclusion, regardless of how we view the condition of the brotherhood back home, for most of us, we think she is less vibrant and active than what we think she could be. Even if that's true, even though she has some spots and wrinkles and has lost the last ten consecutive games, she is the organism and locality where she says, 'I will build my church.' If you want to be a part, you must love the brethren. The ultimate future of the church is glorious above imagination. That reality should do something for us that were once boney, gaunt, hungry, desperate members. May God bless you.

