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In response to His disciples' questions, "What shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" Jesus included this statement: "And there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers' places" (Matthew 24:3, 7).

The recent outbreak of the deadly Ebola virus has arrested the world's attention. Health workers and government officials are wondering and debating, "Just how devastating will this epidemic be? What should be done to stop its spread?" While Ebola is relatively a newly named virus (named in 1976 after an epidemic near the Ebola River in Africa), the world has long been plagued with epidemics.

In the Middle Ages, an estimated 60 to 75 million people died from the Bubonic Plague (Black Death). The influenza of 1918-1919 killed an estimated 50 to 100 million people out of a world population of 1.8 billion. Millions more have died from outbreaks of cholera, smallpox, and yellow fever. Some pestilences, such as the swine flu several years ago, are not as devastating as initially feared. Others, such as AIDS (an estimated 36 million have died since 1981), continue to plague the populace.

Physical diseases are a result of man's fall into sin. This result of the curse upon sin will continue its devastation until the end of time. While strides have been made in medical science and certain diseases have been conquered, there will never be a breakthrough that eliminates disease and pestilence.

In the face of pestilence, we trust God. We do not live with a nonchalant "It will not happen here" or "It will not affect us" attitude. But neither do God's people get caught up with the spirit of alarm and anxiety, for we trust God. Certainly, we follow the commonsense rules of hygiene, sanitation, and quarantine; then, having done what we know to do, we commit all to our heavenly Father.

Those who trust God possess a calm assurance of His sufficiency as they face whatever His providence brings into their experience. And while we do not fully understand the movings of the Almighty, we readily acknowledge God's sovereign hand in the desolations on earth (Psalm 46:8). While some pestilences, such as AIDS, are spread largely by sinful living, we know that physical affliction is not necessarily the result of personal sin (John 9:3).

In the face of pestilence, we offer hope to dying humanity. A caring hand

in a time of need kindles hope. When humans suffer, if God's people have the opportunity, they respond by doing good. This service is a direct response of our commitment to Christ, for "inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40).

Our offer of hope extends beyond the care we give. We point all men to eternal salvation in Jesus Christ. While humanity anguishes over widespread physical calamities and pestilences, it is sad indeed that the most severe of all pestilences, the pestilence of sin, is largely ignored or, worse yet, deliberately and actively spread. At his best, man's noblest efforts are but placing a bandage on the symptoms of sin. But Christ is the cure!

In these dark times, we should boldly proclaim and consistently live the Gospel of Christ, so that all men, whether they are living in health and abundance or suffering the ravages of pestilence, might have hope of eternal life in Him.

In the face of pestilence, we look up. Pestilences are a sign of the times. This does not mean that any one pestilence signals the return of our Lord. But every pestilence contributes to the fulfillment of Jesus words, "There shall be ... pestilences." The devastations on the earth should intensify our heavenward gaze—our Lord is coming soon!

JSM



Walking With God in a Fast-Paced World

That we live in a fast-paced world is self-evident. Our society is inclined toward fast food, same-day delivery, rapid response, one-hour photo, high-speed communication, instant on, quick connect, speed dial, EZ Pass—and the list speeds on. The world is on the run! In contrast, God's pace is usually a methodical walk. He always reaches each milepost right on time. God never needs to make an unexpected last-minute dash. Since the fast pace of our culture is diametrical to God's walking pace, how can we walk with God while relating to a fast-paced world?

We must be made suitable to walk with God.

"Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity" (Habakkuk 1:13). Before we can walk with God and draw nigh to Him, we must first of all "cleanse [our] hands, . . . and purify [our] hearts" (James

4:8). God's walk is holy; therefore, we can walk with Him only as we are made holy. "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). "For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light" (Ephesians 5:8).

We must slow down to God's pace and walk with Him.

Instead of imploring God to catch up to us, we ought to slow down to God's pace. Rather than pushing on ahead, we should walk with Him. Many people want to serve God in an advisory or lead position. We ought to let God be our Leader and Advisor. We must simply follow God and walk with Him, rather than imploring Him to bend to us and bless our agenda and our speed selection. Is it possible to walk and run at the same time? Can we walk with God while running with the world? The answer is a resounding no. We cannot possibly be in step with both God and the world. Let us "run not with them to the same excess of riot" (1 Peter 4:4). Let us choose to walk with God and be in step with Him. "He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked" (1 John 2:6). Our rate of speed says something about who we are following. Will we run after the illusive targets that the world is chasing—wealth, fame, and power? Or will we walk with God?

We must take ample time to fellowship with God.

If we want to receive a fuller impact from our walk with God, we need to spend more time fellowshiping with Him. If we cannot calm down and slow down enough to sit down with God and His Word, we will soon find ourselves running with society and leaving God behind. His ways will become too slow for our accelerated agenda! A young person who chooses to spend the evening fellowshiping with God, rather than chatting on the phone, will develop a strong, godly character while also strengthening his relationship with his walking Companion. Are you learning to know God better as you walk with Him each day? If you are concerned only about quickly getting a spiritual bite to eat and then being on the run again, you will miss the blessing of fellowship with God.

We must walk close to God.

The two on the road to Emmaus allowed Jesus to get close to them and walk with them. "Jesus himself drew near, and went with them" (Luke 24:15). We ought to walk so close to God that we can truly say, "For in

him we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28). One who walks close to God will allow Him to touch areas of spiritual need in his life. Walking close to God involves receiving rebuke and instruction from Him, and heeding it by making the necessary changes. Walking close to God involves following His direction and will in every detail of our lives. When faced with a decision, our first concern should be to discover God's will. "See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is" (Ephesians 5:15-17). Walking close to God requires that we carefully guard our relationship against anything that would come between us and mar that close relationship.

We must expect that walking with God is not always easy.

Walking with God in a fast-paced world involves crucifying the flesh. Walking with God means keeping our earthly involvements throttled back so as to avoid the danger of running with the world. It means choosing to be satisfied with the basics while the world enjoys their luxuries. While society is free to put in overtime, earn better wages, and harvest better crops because of their aggressiveness in temporal pursuits, one who walks with God will take time for family worship, prayer meetings, and church work.

Walking with God is costly, but running with the world is far more costly. The rewards gained by walking with God eclipse the cost of doing so many times over. So take courage, fellow pilgrim, and keep walking with God to the end!

Brother James



The Value of Prayer and Fasting

God desires intimate fellowship with the believer. God communicates to us through the Bible, the Holy Spirit, and the church. God may also speak through nature and the various circumstances of life. We respond to God in prayer. God's injunction to the Christian is "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

Fasting is an additional spiritual exercise that is accompanied by fervent prayer. A Scriptural concept of fasting is abstinence from food to draw

near to God in fervent prayer. A fast may also include abstaining from other legitimate activities, such as sleeping or working, for a specified period of time.

What is the purpose of fasting?

We humble ourselves before the Lord by fasting (Psalm 35:13). Fasting weakens our bodies physically but strengthens our endurance and commitment (Psalm 109:24). Weakening the flesh will sharpen spiritual perception and help block earthly distractions. It should remove any carnal resistance, thereby conditioning us to hear God speak. God says, "My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). God can do more with human weakness committed to His way than what the arm of flesh can ever accomplish.

Our fasting should have specific spiritual goals. Fasting is not a ceremonial self-denial that excuses us from a life of self-denial. Instead, our fasting should be a spiritual exercise that complements a godly, disciplined lifestyle. God warns us that in the last days deceivers will command abstinence as a show of piety (1 Timothy 4:3-4). These individuals have a form of godliness, but they do not demonstrate the power of a godly life (2 Timothy 3:5).

Fasting involves us in spiritual warfare. In Daniel 10:3 the prophet Daniel, through his fasting, helped to fight a great battle to release the Jewish people from captivity. Jesus' disciples found themselves too weak spiritually to cast out an evil spirit. What was Jesus' answer to this dilemma? "This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting" (Matthew 17:21). God can use prayer and fasting to cast down strongholds in our lives and the lives of other people for whom we intercede. Jesus fasted during the time of His forty-day temptation in the wilderness and was victorious (Matthew 4:1-11).

How should we fast?

The nation of Israel developed a warped concept of fasting. Their times of fasting were attempts to leverage God's power to personal advantage. God despised these fasts and turned them into a curse. Fasting should heighten our awareness of others' needs and should be coupled with a life that sees the needy and provides for them (Isaiah 58).

Jesus rebuked the hypocrisy evident in the Pharisees' fasting. Their fasting was done with the pretense of a great burden, a sad face, and abstinence from bodily care. But Jesus said, "When thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face" (Matthew 6:17). When fasting, we should care for our

bodies just as we do on any other day. Our fasting should be done secretly, with anticipation of spiritual victory.

When should we fast?

The Bible has numerous examples from which we can learn. God commanded Israel to afflict their souls in a national fast on the Day of Atonement. This fast expressed repentance and sorrow for sin (Leviticus 23:27-32).

Fasts also occurred when there was a notable death (1 Samuel 31:13), war (2 Chronicles 20:3), or pestilence (Joel 1:13). Esther called for a three-day fast when Haman planned the destruction of the Jewish people (Esther 4:16). Ezra proclaimed a fast to petition God's protection for the Jews returning from Babylon to Jerusalem (Ezra 8:21). The New Testament church sought God's direction through fasting when they ordained leaders (Acts 14:23) and began mission work (Acts 13:2-3).

The prophetess Anna was rewarded for her devotion in fasting and prayer for redemption, by being granted the opportunity to see the infant Messiah (Luke 2:36-38). Cornelius fasted and prayed in his desire for a fuller relationship with God. God answered him by sending Peter (Acts 10). Saul fasted while he waited for the revelation of God's will after he responded to God's call on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). Later, when he was known as the apostle Paul, regular prayer and fasting gave him spiritual strength to lead the church (2 Corinthians 6:5; 11:7).

Jesus said fasting would be fitting for His disciples during His absence until He comes again for His bride, the church. The discipline of fasting will help the church remain sober and pure in preparation for marriage to Christ at His second coming.

We should avail ourselves of fasting and prayer when we are struggling to have victory over a besetting temptation. Fasting is beneficial when facing a major decision such as seeking a life companion or contemplating a move to another locality. At the time of ordination or the call to mission work, during the crisis of a death, or in face of grave danger, seeking God through prayer and fasting is appropriate. "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (James 5:16).

A neglect of prayer and fasting reflects a lack of spiritual burden. This would correspond to the lukewarm condition of the church at Laodicea. They claimed to have need of nothing, and were insensitive to their spiritual lack (Revelation 3:14-17). Have the luxury and convenience of affluence lulled us to sleep spiritually and dulled our senses to the needs of our

souls? Exercising our spiritual muscles in prayer and fasting can wake us up. God calls us to shake off this materialistic stupor and spiritual drowsiness with fasting and prayer. This will develop a burden for our own spiritual needs and an interest in the welfare of the souls around us.

Brother Ernest



Church Life That Reproduces Itself

The church is a living organism. Each of the three New Testament figures of the church emphasizes this characteristic of the church. The church is portrayed as a living body and a cherished bride. The church is also portrayed as a building or temple made up of "lively [living] stones" (1 Peter 2:5). As these living stones are "fitly framed together," this temple grows (Ephesians 2:21).

The life of the church is derived from Jesus Christ, who is the Head of the body, the chief Cornerstone of the building, and the heavenly Bridegroom, preparing a bride for His coming!

The members of this living organism are those who are a part of the "called out ones" (the literal meaning of the Greek word *ekklesia*, which is frequently translated church in the New Testament). These members are redeemed by the blood of Jesus. They have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit and share a fellowship of mutual love. They are united in obedience to the work and will of God as taught in the Holy Scriptures, and they are subject to one another in the fear of God.

What are we hoping to reproduce—a Mennonite church? an Anabaptist church? The Anabaptists of the 1500s were determined to establish a New Testament church. To reproduce this kind of New Testament church life is a work of God in the lives of people. It requires a new birth and a new life in Jesus Christ.

What are the characteristics of church life that reproduces itself?

Jesus Christ is and must always remain the central figure of church life. His promise stands: "I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). Church life reproduces itself only as others believe on Him and are united as one in Him (John 17:20, 21).

The church is a place of spiritual nourishment. As we worship with God's people and receive the eternal verities of truth, we are spiritually fed. "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they

shall be filled" (Matthew 5:6). The Lord's sheep are satisfied in the church; they do not suffer want (Psalm 23).

A consistent church life will reproduce itself. This consistency will be evident between doctrine and practice. It will be obvious between the practice of the older members and the practice of the younger members. Inconsistency in these areas is evidence that church life is not reproducing itself. Sound concepts of our responsibility to the rising generation are essential to the propagation of the faith. Children must be raised "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." They must be protected from evil influences. In a church that reproduces itself, the home, school, and church will unite in a cohesive indoctrination effort.

A church life that reproduces itself will maintain Scriptural lines of responsibility and authority. God is a God of order, and the church is an organized body. It is her responsibility to make appointments and ordain leadership for the spiritual well-being of the body. One of the lessons of history is a warning against giving too much responsibility too soon to men who have not developed sound doctrine and sound thinking (1 Timothy 3:6).

Brother Daniel



"Come Out of Her, My People" (Part 1)

Ecumenical Religion

The Weaver family was traveling to midweek prayer meeting.

"Father, did you see that our Gospel sign message was changed last evening?"

"No, Susan, I failed to notice. What does it say this time?"

"I was a bit surprised," Susan answered Father. "It says, 'Sin separates from God.' That doesn't have a very inviting tone. Shouldn't the messages be more warm and friendly?"

"Do you like that sign better?" Thirteen year-old Roy pointed to the announcement blazing from the sign beside the local independent church. Join us for Fun, Food, and Fellowship. All Welcome!"

Father smiled as he pondered Susan's question. Her sincerity demanded a careful answer.

Ecumenical religion can be defined as an effort to promote unity and cooperation between multiple denominations and varying religions. Just as some clothing is made so that "one size fits all," so ecumenism promotes an elastic "one-size-fits-all" Christianity.

Ecumenical ideas focus on the things everyone can agree on. The grand theme is love—a love that holds no ill will for my neighbor. This even feels quite Biblical. Grace is another charming emphasis. But ecumenical grace does not merely forgive. It also demands toleration. "I'll make room for your beliefs, and you make room for mine." Promoters of ecumenical religion readily sing, "Bind us together in love."

Ecumenical promoters prefer terminology that is general and abstract. They do not want to step on each other's toes. Consider faith. We all need to have faith, grow in faith, and be loyal to our faith. We must also pray in faith. But without practical expression, this is merely faith in faith.

Prayer becomes common ground for an easy unity. Ecumenists gather for prayer breakfasts. Prayer becomes a comfortable umbrella for social gatherings and sports events. But sadly, disobedience to the Bible is comfortable here also.

Influential organizations are lurking behind this amiable front. The World Council of Churches and the International Sunday School Union have been typical motivators of the ecumenical agenda. They infiltrate colleges and Bible seminaries. Modern pastors are thoroughly infected with a tolerant, social gospel suited to itching ears.

Sunday school outlines and study guides containing unsound doctrine have been produced by such organizations for decades. How grateful we must be for the vision to produce distinctive Mennonite Sunday school curriculum! Many of us have no recollection of Sunday school classes tainted with Calvinism, pietism, and a general disregard for the King James Version.

Our generation must also be alert against these deceptive voices. We must give heed to faithful preaching of the whole Scripture. We must welcome practical preaching that addresses the particular issues of today. We must willingly identify with a separated, peculiar people.

Our use of Bible study helps must always be subject to scrutiny. Loyalty to the cautions of the brotherhood will help us use study resources wisely. The more contemporary the writer, the more likely his writings are poisoned with deception. We should not be so attached to study Bibles that we carry them with us to church.

A popular religious author promotes this idea: "In the wider ecumenism of the Spirit being opened for us today, we need to humbly accept the learnings of particular Eastern religions." Ecumenism has moved further than ever, endeavoring to find common ground among all religions.

Closer to us, the differences in practice between conservative and liberal Mennonites are made to appear insignificant by focusing on historic roots and common goals, or by using terms such as "Anabaptist" and "Kingdom Purposes." The erosion of clear lines of fellowship allows groups to unite in missions, relief work, and mutual aid. But it also hastens apostasy.

Ecumenism intimidates Biblical convictions and separation from the world. God calls us to "come out of her, my people" so that we may be a part of the glorious bride whom Christ will present to Himself without spot or wrinkle. May we ever be faithful to the one who is the "author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him" (Hebrews 5:9).

Brother Christopher



