**[Why the American Church Fell](http://hisexcellentword.blogspot.com/2016/12/why-american-church-fell.html)**

For about the past 7-8 years, I’ve been interested in behavioral economics.  This is a relatively new field of study that maintains that people, rather than being the perfectly rational robots of classical economic theory, are actually irrational decision-makers who will be irrational in predictable ways.  I don’t think it’s possible to be a preacher for very long without gaining a healthy respect for the power of the irrational, so this model has a lot of appeal for me.

One of the cognitive biases that behavioral economists cite is optimism bias about the future.  Basically, the way our brains are wired, we assume that things are going to turn out better than they actually will.  We resolutely look on the bright side and don’t focus on the problems that will wreck us if we ignore them.

A behavioral-economics book I read (I believe it was Daniel Kahneman’s *Thinking, Fast and Slow*) recommended the premortem as a tool for dealing with optimism bias.  We all know what a postmortem is.  After something fails, you sit and talk about the failure until you figure out why it happened so that you can make sure it doesn’t happen again.  A premortem, by contrast, is an attempt to predict the future.  You start with the assumption that whatever you’re working on has failed and then ask, “Why has it failed?”  On the basis of what you know now, you construct a narrative that will lead to that future failure.

Even though it’s a depressing exercise, the premortem is a useful one.  It forces us to confront the unpleasant truths we would rather ignore so that we can do something about them before it’s too late.  In this spirit, then, I would like to conduct a premortem for the American church.  As per the NASB section heading in 2 Kings 17 (one of the most telling postmortem chapters in the Bible), let’s call it “Why the American Church Fell”.  It hasn’t fallen yet, but if it does, here’s why I think it will.

**Ignorance of the Scripture**

Understanding of and love for the word of God is the lifeblood of any healthy church.  It all starts with the Bible.  Without a strong grasp of God’s will for our lives, we will run headlong into the lament of Hosea 4:6.  Conversely, the more time God’s people spend with the book, the more they will benefit, a benefit that appears in a hundred tiny ways, some predictable, some not.  I myself only began a program of daily Bible reading about three years ago, but my wife says that since I started, I’ve become a different person.

Sadly, it seems to me that most Christians are moving toward a diminished rather than a heightened devotion to the word.  The demands upon our time are many.  With the rise of the Internet, our jobs will insinuate themselves into every corner of our lives if we let them.  Parents spend hours every week shuttling their children between various must-participate activities.  We even have an unparalleled variety of things we can do with our leisure time.  Who of us hasn’t fallen down some online rabbit hole, only to emerge three hours later with absolutely no idea what we’ve been doing?

The result of all of these things, though, is to turn reading and study of the word into an assembly-only activity, and even to turn our assemblies themselves into a maybe, not a must.  Just as study of the word brings a hundred tiny benefits, so its neglect gives rise to a hundred tiny problems.  We can’t be sure how ignorance of the Scripture will bite us, but we can be certain that it will.  Unless Christians begin to adopt Deuteronomy 6:6-9 as a blueprint not for worship services, but for life, the whole church will inevitably suffer for it.

**Worldliness**

Like a bachelor, nature abhors a vacuum.  This is no less true in the spiritual realm than in the physical world.  Wherever there is a void, something will move to fill it.  When our neglect of the word leaves a spiritual void, the world will be quick to fill that void with its values.  Without realizing it, we will adopt and practice the ways of life of the people around us.

This problem is more subtle than we often give it credit for being.  Worldliness is not limited to gross debauchery.  The Christian college student who is led astray by their peers into the sordid world of sex and alcoholism has certainly become worldly.  However, it is no less worldly for a happily married, upwardly mobile Christian couple to take on the worldview of the happily married, upwardly mobile, yet godless people they associate with.

In fact, the latter situation is arguably worse than the former because its dangers are much less evident.  Anybody with a brain can see that you don’t want to end up drunk and passed out in the alley outside a nightclub.  But ending up like that nice couple we met at the PTA meeting?  Where’s the harm?

The harm, of course, is that the nice couple from the PTA meeting is living in the dominion of darkness, is following the elementary principles of the world, and will surely lose their souls unless someone leads them to Christ.  They are every bit as lost as the drunk in the gutter, and if we become like them, we will be lost too.  They have adopted our society’s materialistic outlook, and it is not godly.  They have emphasized their children’s intellectual development at the expense of their moral and spiritual development, and the results will not be godly.  They share in our society’s permissive attitude toward sexual sin, and the more time we spend with them, the more their thinking will permeate our own.  Unless we learn to see everyone in the world as spiritually dangerous, our naïveté toward the worldly people we overlook will allow them to corrupt us.

**Lack of Spiritual Leadership**

Leadership is one of the main themes of the Old Testament.  When God’s people had strong, spiritually committed leaders, they prospered.  When they had leaders who were either not strong, not spiritually committed (for instance, Jezebel was a strong leader, but she was spiritually committed to the wrong god), or both, the people faltered.  Over time, enough periods of bad leadership strung themselves together that the people were carried captive.

Today, the lack of spiritual leadership in the church is epidemic.  My brother and friend Steve Wolfgang likes to make a habit of asking Christians to estimate how many churches in the brotherhood have elders.  Generally, the answer is something like, “Between a quarter and a third”.  I’m not normally an Internet ranter, BUT THIS IS A MASSIVE, CHURCH-DESTROYING PROBLEM!!!  Not having elders is not God’s plan for the church.  Not, not, not.  Only a short time after first preaching the gospel in Pisidia, in Acts 14:23, Paul was able to return and appoint elders in every church.  Today, there are hundreds of churches that have existed for decades that can’t come up with two men who meet the qualifications and are willing to serve.  We have become desensitized to the disaster of an elder-less existence.

I think two of the root causes of this epidemic are the first two points.  Too many Christian men are worldly and Scripturally ignorant.  As a result, they do not provide strong spiritual leadership for their families and so display their incapacity for offering strong spiritual leadership to the church.  I see too many men my age making exactly the same mistakes that led men in the previous generation to be disqualified, and when the call goes out for leaders, they won’t be able to answer either.

This is a sure recipe for long-term failure.  A church can manage without elders, kind of, like a flock can manage without shepherds.  However, when sheep start straying, there’s no one to bring them back, and when wolves appear, there’s no one to fight them off.  Preachers are often called upon to fill the gap, but as a preacher in this position, I’m here to tell you that I’m a lousy substitute for the leaders God wants for His church!  Unless the American church gets its elder problem under control, we will have to rely on our brethren in Africa and Asia to carry the gospel forward because we won’t be able to do it.

I don’t think it’s too late, at least, not yet, but I do think the next couple generations will tell the tale.  Christians need to rededicate themselves to reading and following the word.  Young Christian men need to determine along with Joshua that, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”  If enough Christians do this, we will continue to shine as lights in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.  If we do not, we will not.

It’s really that simple.

Posted 2 days ago by [M. W. Bassford](http://www.blogger.com/profile/14826779298382097903)

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