

An Improving Church

by W. Frank Walton

The Thyatira church of Christ had problems. They tolerated a false teacher and this self-styled prophetess had led others into error (Rev. 2:20-23). But the Lord gave the charge that the situation be corrected. All was not lost, nor had He completely written them off. He saw potential for change. His authoritative word is the means for correction, and He holds out the promised reward for faithfully overcoming (Rev. 2:23-28).

FINDING THE GOOD

Although they had sinful shortcomings, the Lord recognized and praised them for their improvement in other areas. "I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first" (Rev. 2:19 NASB). Instead of just dwelling on and blasting them for tolerating grievous error, He pointed out the problem and set forth a constructive solution. As a "good finder," He encouraged them that they were making progress. The problems didn't obscure the things they were doing right. They did have some love, faith, service and perseverance and positive growth was taking place. The Lord started with where they were and challenged them to strive for the ideal. "Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come. And he who overcomes, and he who keeps my deeds until the end" the Lord promises the elevated victory of reigning with Him and the gift of "the morning star" (Rev. 2:25-28). He holds forth the promise that they can do what it takes to be pleasing before heaven.

Many times we despair over problems, strife and spiritual shortcomings in the local church. Instead of getting involved, we get disillusioned and depressed and withdraw within ourselves. By dwelling on problems instead of solutions, idealism is soured and pessimism grows like creeping death. Even little signs of growth don't seem to be good enough.

A CONSTRUCTIVE PERSPECTIVE

The biggest room in the world is the room for our self-improvement in the Lord's service. No congregation, no Christian is so hopelessly in a rut, that if God's word is faithfully studied, taught and applied, that positive change cannot occur. It is "living and active" with the power to "build you up" (Heb. 4:12; Acts 20:32).

A constructive perspective helps us to find good in others, even if they're falling short in some areas. The story is told that the worst scoundrel in town died. The preacher wondered if he could say anything good about him. At the gravesite, he said, "You know, there was one good thing about this man- they say his brother was a worse scoundrel than he was." Spiritually, we can find some good in other Christians. God gave His Son while man was rebellious, sinful and "unlovable." With God, no one is hopeless. Paul could see good at Corinth, even in spite of all their problems and sins. No preacher today would

have liked to move to Corinth, but Paul could see they were doing some things right. "Now I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you" (1 Cor. 11:2). I don't think Paul was using sarcasm or irony here. To bring out the best in others and to challenge them to do better, they have to believe that they can improve. We build on what we're doing right.

We must see progress, however small, and nurture it. We ate to "consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds" (Heb. 10:24). To consider others is to pause and carefully think of how you can serve or encourage them. Instead of cutting brethren down, we need more Barnabases who will build others up (Acts 4:36; 1 Thess. 5:11). A thermometer simply reports what the current temperature is, whether it is too hot, too cold or just right. But a thermostat does something about it. If it is too cold or too hot, a thermostat works to change the temperature for the better. We need less thermometers and more thermostats in the church! "Through love serve one another" (Gal. 5:13). We can stimulate or motivate others by our sincere interest in them. "Love and good deeds" flourish in a positive spiritual climate. Good examples help others to want to do better. Faithful attendance, prayer for others, participation, hospitality, greeting brethren, visiting and forming closer brotherly relationships are constructive ways to "pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another" (Rom. 14:19).

In the congregation, we must see progress, however small, through the eyes of patience. Compliment someone for their faithful attendance. If someone makes a good comment in class, does a good job in song leading, prays a sincere, fervent prayer, teaches a good class, or does anything that shows faith and love in God's cause, tell them so! Many a Christian has been refreshed by a word of encouragement. Paul did so (Rom. 16:3-15). When we see that we're doing something right, we're motivated to be more involved in the Lord's church. We can make a difference.

IDEALISTIC FAITH IN THE LIFE-CHANGING WORLD

We're not where we could be, but thank the Lord we're not where we used to be. God gives us, not just a second chance, but a third, fourth or fifth chance. In fact, He gives us as many "chances" we need, if we're willing to repent and try again. His word was designed for sinful men, so that sincere and humble sinners might change their lives. In the parable of the four soils, Jesus guarantees that the man who truly hears, understands and welcomes the word into his heart, a tremendous change for the better will take place from the inside out (Mt. 13:23; Mk. 4:20). The living and abiding word has vast potential when planted in the depths of the human heart. "And the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, bear fruit with perseverance" (Lk. 8:15). We must keep idealism alive in the local church, that "the word of God ...performs its work in you who believe" (1 Thess. 2:13).

The Bible is practical. It gives a workable solution for any problem we might face, whether it might be lack of participation, brotherly love, and growth or dealing with strife, gossip and unfaithfulness. God's plan will work if we'll work God's plan. "But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does" (James 1:25). His word motivates and changes us to become all God designed us to be. The power of God alive in us is divine strength that blesses us to rise above the average and the ordinary. By making the connection between theory and practice, we can be transformed by the law of liberty so that we can be a active influence for good. We can rise above discouragement and cynicism to bring about scriptural growth in the local church. We can deal with problems in God's way, so that sin is corrected by brethren taking their minds off their prideful egos. If we will look together in glorifying Christ, we will fulfill our purpose on earth "that we might bear fruit for God" (Rom. 7:4). Then it might be said of us, as it was of the church in Thyatire, "that your deeds of late are greater than at first" (Rev. 2:19). When we do our best today, we will grow and do better tomorrow.