

The Unconverted “Believer” (13): Only a Form of Godliness

Among Paul’s many epistles that we have in our New Testament, three of them were addressed to two young men in the pastoral ministry. Both Titus and Timothy served alongside the apostle until the time that they were prepared to direct a ministry apart and away from him. It was then that Paul wrote the epistles of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, instructing and preparing these men for the tasks before them. This is why they are referred to as “Paul’s Pastoral Letters.” Paul sent Titus to the island of Crete to do the work of an evangelist, planting churches and perhaps further organizing the churches that may have been already present (Tit. 1:5ff). Paul sent Timothy to pastor the church at Ephesus, a church that Paul had begun and that had existed for some time prior to Timothy’s arrival. Paul had not only instructed these men on how to minister the Word of God to the Lord’s people, but he also warned them of the challenges they would face in their ministry of the word. In 2 Timothy 3 we read of the problem of nominal Christianity that Timothy would encounter in his pastoral ministry in what the Scriptures call, “the last days.” Christians in name only were a significant problem in the church at Ephesus. Nominal Christianity has continued to be a significant ministerial problem in the churches of Jesus Christ through these past two thousand plus years. We will read all of 2 Timothy 3, but then we will give particular attention to verses 1 through 5.

But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: ²For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, ³unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, ⁴traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵*having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!* ⁶For of this sort are those who creep into households and make captives of gullible women loaded down with sins, led away by various lusts, ⁷always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. ⁸Now as Jannes and Jambres resisted Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, disapproved concerning the faith; ⁹but they will progress no further, for their folly will be manifest to all, as theirs also was.

¹⁰But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, ¹¹persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra—what persecutions I endured. And out of them all the Lord delivered me. ¹²Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. ¹³But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. ¹⁴But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, ¹⁵and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

¹⁶All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, ¹⁷that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:1-17)

In the early verses of this chapter (vs. 2-4), we read of a number of sins; it is a “sin list.”¹ There are at least five places in which sins are listed in the New Testament. These include 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:3-6; Revelation 22:12-16, and here in 2 Timothy 3:1ff. A few of these lists highlight the sins of the fallen, non-Christian world. But in this list of 2 Timothy 3:2-4, the Holy Spirit has identified the sins of ones who professed to be Christian. These are sins that characterize those who claim to be Christian, but by their practice of these sins, they prove themselves to be Christian in name only. And so,

¹ It has been calculated that the New Testament identifies 124 different sins that one might commit. A list of these are included at the end of these notes. I cannot verify the accuracy or completeness of this list.

let us consider the pastoral problem of nominal Christianity and how the Word of God would have pastors and churches address it.

I. Ministering to churches through “perilous times” in the “last days”

Paul warned Timothy that he would be ministering the Word of God in “the last days”, which would be characterized as “perilous times.” We hear and read much about “the last days.” Most people assume upon hearing the expression, “the last days”, that it refers to the time shortly before the second coming of Jesus Christ at the end of the age. And though this may be true in some places of the Scriptures, it is not true in every instance that this expression is found. The Bible presents this entire gospel age as “the last days.” They are the days that God had long promised to His people when He set up His kingdom and enthroned the Son of David, even His own Son, ruling over the nations of the world. Peter had declared the onset of these “last days” on the day of Pentecost when God fulfilled His promise of sending the Holy Spirit upon His people. Peter declared, “And it shall come to pass in *the last days*, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh” (Acts 2:17). The epistle of Hebrews referenced the “last days” clearly referring to this gospel age in which God had spoken through His Son Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1:1 and 2 read,

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, ²has in these *last days* spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds.

Peter used a similar expression in his first epistle. He wrote of “these last times”, which is synonymous with “the last days.” Here is 1 Peter 1:18ff:

... knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, ¹⁹but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. ²⁰He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in *these last times* for you ²¹who through Him believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

John Calvin (1509-1564) reasoned that “the last days” was a reference to this church age by simply pointing out that Timothy would be ministering in these “last days”. In verse 5 Paul instructed Timothy to “turn away” from those professing Christians who are living in these sins. Here are Calvin’s comments:

“From those turn away”. This exhortation sufficiently shows that Paul does not speak of a distant posterity, nor foretell what would happen many ages afterwards; but that, by pointing out present evils, he applies to his own age what he had said about “the last times;” *for how could Timothy “turn away” from those who were not to arise till many centuries afterwards?* So then, from the very beginning of the gospel, the Church must have begun to be affected by such corruptions.

But the announcement that in these last days there would be “perilous times” would have been unexpected to the Jewish people. The reason is that it was thought that in the last days, after the establishment of the kingdom of God, there would be peace and security, an absence of trouble and hostility. Again, **John Calvin** wrote:

Under “the last days,” he includes the universal condition of the Christian Church. Nor does he compare his own age with ours (i.e. Calvin’s in the 16th c.), but, on the contrary, informs Timothy what will be the future condition of the kingdom of Christ; for many imagined some sort of condition that would be absolutely peaceful, and free from any annoyance. In short, he means that there will not be, even under the gospel, such a state of perfection, that all vices shall be banished, and virtues of every kind shall flourish; and that therefore the pastors of the Christian Church will have quite as much to do with wicked

and ungodly men as the prophets and godly priests had in ancient times. Hence it follows, that there is no time for idleness or for repose (i.e. resting).

Here we glean from Paul's instruction to Timothy a very important aspect of the gospel ministry. To identify and address nominal Christians in the church and to protect the true people of God from their ruinous influence. Ministers have the responsibility to warn and alert the people of God to the dangers that are before them. **John Owen** (1616-1683) wrote of this when he was addressing what he called "Perilous Times":

And so, justification of my present design, if God enable me unto it, I shall here premise, that it is the duty of the ministers of the gospel to foresee and take notice of the dangers which the churches are falling into. And the Lord help us, and all other ministers, to be awakened to this part of their duty! You know how God sets forth (Ezek. 33) in the parable of the watchman, to warn men of approaching dangers. And truly God hath given us this law:--If we warn the churches of their approaching dangers, we discharge our duty; if we do not, their blood will be required at our hands. The Spirit of God foresaw negligence apt to grow upon us in this matter; and therefore the Scripture only proposeth the duty on the one hand, and on the other requires the people's blood at the hands of the watchmen, if they perform not their duty... It is the duty of ministers of the gospel to give warning of impending dangers.²

Now it is important to note that the "perilous times" in this context are not a direct reference to the difficulties that Christians would face in the fallen world at large, although they certainly would live within a hostile and dangerous world. Indeed, there are many words of Scripture that warn of the dangers that God's people would encounter in a hostile world. But here Paul was warning of "perilous times" that Timothy would encounter *in the church*. Paul was writing of "perilous times" that would be encountered in the church of Jesus Christ. In this he was like Peter who wrote,

But there were also false prophets among the people, even as *there will be false teachers among you*, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. ²And *many will follow their destructive ways*, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. ³By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber. (2 Peter 2:1-3)

We might give a quick word of application for us. It is very clear to evangelical Christians everywhere that we are at the onset of very difficult times on the world scene. There is a sense of ominous apprehension due to the degradation of our culture and the disintegration and disappearance of much blessing that our Lord has bestowed upon our nation in the past.³ Difficult days are ahead for Christians in this fallen world, and we need to be informed and aware of how we may face the challenges before us. But I can imagine that the Apostle Paul or other Christian leaders of the first century could have said similar things about the political climate of their day.⁴ There was the loss of order and civility in the Roman Empire. The Caesars were eroding in character; they were less statesmen and more tyrannical, more despotic. There was increasing threat and danger of a hostile civil government against the Christian faith that would burst forth in organized and horrendous state persecution that would continue through several centuries. But with regard to Timothy and what he was facing, the great concern before him was the wellbeing of true Christians and the church of which they were members. There were dangers and threats among the within the church itself that Timothy would need to address and correct. And we would say that the same danger and concern is before the churches of Jesus Christ today. The perilous days continue in these last days of this kingdom age. There is a need to awaken and address churches to the reality that there are those among us who have but "a

² William H. Goold, ed. **The Works of John Owen**, vol. 9 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965, orig. 1850-53), pp. 320f.

³ This is not a denial or diminishment of the sins of our forefathers for which we should lament and be ashamed.

⁴ And they did so to a degree and toward the end of the first century this became the predominant concern.

form of godliness” even while they deny the power necessary to become godly in life. In short, there is a great need to address this problem of nominal Christianity within the churches of Jesus Christ.

That Paul was speaking of nominal Christians, that is, unconverted “believers”, is clear from his description of them in 2 Timothy 3:5. He wrote of them that they had a “*form of godliness but denying its power.*” **Matthew Henry** (1662-1714) wrote:

Timothy must not think it strange if there were in the church bad men; for the net of the gospel was to enclose both good fish and bad (Matt. 13:47f). Jesus Christ had foretold (Matt. 24) that there would come seducers, and therefore we must not be offended at it, nor think the worse of religion or the church for it. Even in gold ore there will be dross, and a great deal of chaff among the wheat when it lies on the floor...

Though gospel times were times of reformation in many respects, let him know that even in gospel times there would be perilous times; not so much on account of persecution from without as on account of corruptions within. These would be difficult times, wherein it would be difficult for a man to keep a good conscience. He does not say, “Perilous times shall come, for both Jews and Gentiles shall be combined to root out Christianity;” but “perilous times shall come, for such as have *the form of godliness* (v. 5) shall be corrupt and wicked, and do a great deal of damage to the church.” Two traitors within the garrison may do more hurt to it than two thousand besiegers without. Perilous times shall come, for men shall be wicked.

II. These nominal Christians had but “*a form of godliness.*”

These people have only “*a form of godliness.*” The word, “form”, conveys the idea of “shape”, “fashion”, or appearance.” It is used elsewhere in the Scriptures. Paul wrote to a church, “Abstain from every *form* of evil.” He meant by this, “Abstain from every appearance of evil” (cf. KJV). A similar use of the word is in the record of the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus at His baptism. “And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily *form* like a dove upon Him, and a voice came from heaven which said, ‘You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased’” (Luke 3:22). In other words, the Holy Spirit *appeared* like a dove descending from heaven and landing upon Jesus. And here in 2 Timothy 3:5 Paul was indicating that these people, though characterized by the sins listed in verses 2 through 4, had the “form”, or mere “appearance” that they were Christians. They claimed to be Christians. Most people thought that they were Christians. But they were not real Christians. It was Timothy’s responsibility to identify them and purify the church of their bad influence through their pernicious (harmful) presence.

Now again, some may question the need or value of addressing the subject of our present series that we have entitled, “*The Unconverted ‘Believer’*”. But we see from the apostle’s words to Timothy in preparing him to serve as the pastor of the church at Ephesus that one of his principle duties and primary challenges would be to address and awaken nominal Christians to true salvation even while protecting and preserving the church from their detrimental influence. **John Owen** (1616-1683) wrote, “There is a time when persons who claim the holy name and title of Christians are as bad, if not worse, in their lives, than the worst of pagans.”⁵ And of what makes time perilous for churches Owen wrote:

But where lies the peril of the times? Truly, I don’t think that all the world together can give so great a character of the world, of which they call the “Christian world,” at this day, as is given here by the apostle;--that is, they live in the open practice of all the horrible lusts, and yet continue a form of godliness; that is, continue a profession of the Christian religion.⁶

In other words, the times are perilous because of the great danger and prevalence of nominal Christians in the churches.

⁵ William H. Goold, ed. **The Works of John Owen**, vol. 16 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968, orig. 1850-53), p. 474.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 475.

It was Timothy's duty and calling to awaken people to true salvation, to rescue them from the state of damnation in which they stood, even while they thought themselves to have been "saved." Paul had written of this same matter in his first epistle to Timothy. After first exhorting Timothy to live godly while departing from sin in all of its forms, he instructed Timothy to make the effort to see that nominal Christians are genuinely converted. Paul wrote,

Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. ²³But avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife. ²⁴And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, ²⁵in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, ²⁶and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will.

A false Christian may have "a form of godliness." He thinks and claims that he is a Christian. And many in the church also think that he is a true Christians. But he denies the power of God that accompanies those who are truly saved by the grace of God. His Christianity is largely a matter of externals--visible traits. He shows himself before others as though he were a Christian, but when he is apart from Christians, when he is alone or is with those like him, his true character comes to the surface. But his outward appearance or "form" seems to serve him, to mask the reality of his heart while in church. He is in reality as the scribes and the Pharisees, of whom Jesus declared,

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. ²⁶Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also.

²⁷"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. (Matt. 23:25-28)

He is not a true Christian, but a hypocrite, whose true spiritual state is dead still, and will remain so unless and until God does a miraculous work of saving race in his soul. Again, to cite **John Calvin** writing of false Christians, and here he was hitting on the corrupt Roman Catholic system from which the Protestants had separated themselves in the 16th century (it is quite to the point):

Even in the present day, although the lewdness of the Popish clergy is such that it stinks in the nostrils of the whole world, still, in spite of their wickedness, they do not cease to arrogate proudly to themselves all the rights and titles of saints. Accordingly, when Paul says that hypocrites, though they are chargeable with the grossest vices, nevertheless deceive under a mask of piety, this ought not to appear strange, when we have examples before our eyes. And, indeed, the world deserves to be deceived by those wicked scoundrels, when it either despises or cannot endure true holiness. Besides, Paul enumerates those vices which are not visible at first sight, and which are even the ordinary attendants of pretended holiness. Is there a hypocrite who is not proud, who is not a lover of himself, who is not a despiser of others, who is not fierce and cruel, who is not treacherous? But all these are concealed from the eyes of men. To spend time in explaining every word would be superfluous; for the words do not need exposition. Only let my readers observe that, *self-love*, which is put first, may be regarded as the source from which flow all the vices that follow afterwards. He who loveth himself claims a superiority in everything, despises all others, is cruel, indulges in covetousness, treachery, anger, rebellion against parents, neglect of what is good, and such like. As it was the design of Paul to brand false prophets with such marks, that they might be seen and known by all; it is our duty to open our eyes, that we may see those who are pointed out with the finger.

But of course ones like these are easily found in Protestant as well as Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, and Bible and Baptist and independent churches the world over.

III. These nominal Christians had but a form of godliness, “*but denying its power.*”

Our evangelical world is plagued with nominal Christians in churches because the churches fail to show forth the need of the power of God to convert sinners to Christ. Churches have often reduced the concept of salvation merely to the forgiveness of sins. They do not teach salvation from sin, but “salvation” in sins; this is a deficient and unbiblical view of salvation. Or the churches teach sinners that they have the ability to convert themselves. It is assumed and people are told that they may be “saved” by their free will; that is, by a decision on their part, in which there is no thought for the need for God’s power to make a saint of a sinner. It is thought and taught that any sinner has the capability to convert himself at any time so as to become a Christian. Fallen man desires, even insists, that he can be the determiner of his own destiny. Coming to Christ for salvation is assumed to be in the power of the creature, that he can come anytime he chooses for he has a free will and that God will stand by passively until a sinner desires and then decides by himself to be saved. He is urged to come forward, bow down, pray a prayer, and he is then assured that he is a Christian, that God has forgiven him of his sins and he has escaped the penalty of hell and he is now a citizen and an heir of heaven. He is told that all he needs is to have his sins forgiven, and it really does not need any divine power to do that, of he just believe the right things about who Jesus is and what he did on the cross for sinners. And then he is added to the church! But true salvation is, and must be, demonstrated in new life in Christ.

Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) wrote of the actual life of a person is the evidence of salvation, not the mere profession that he is a Christian. “A real change of life” is the proof that salvation has been received by the sinner. This is from his book, *The Soul Winner*:

Another proof of the conquest of a soul for Christ will be found in a *real change of life*. If the man does not live differently from what he did before, both at home and abroad, his repentance needs to be repented of; and his conversion is a fiction. Not only action and language, but spirit and temper must be changed. “But,” says someone, “grace is often grafted on a crab-stock.” I know it is; but what is the fruit of the grafting? The fruit will be like the graft, and not after the nature of the original stem. “But,” says another, “I have an awful temper, and all of a sudden it overcomes me. My anger is soon over, and I feel very penitent. Though I cannot control myself; I am quite sure I am a Christian.” Not so fast, my friend, or I may answer that I am quite as sure the other way. What is the use of your soon cooling if in two or three moments you scald all around you? If a man stabs me in a fury, it will not heal my wound to see him grieving over his madness. Hasty temper must be conquered, and the whole man must be renewed, or conversion will be questionable. We are not to hold up a modified holiness before our people, and say, “You will be all right if you reach that standard.” The Scripture says, “He that committeth sin is of the devil.”⁷ Abiding under the power of any known sin is a mark of our being the servants of sin, for “his servants ye are to whom ye obey.” Idle are the boasts of a man who harbours within himself the love of any transgression. He may feel what he likes, and believe what he likes, he is still in the gall of bitterness and the bonds of iniquity while a single sin rules his heart and life. True regeneration implants a hatred of all evil; and where one sin is delighted in, the evidence is fatal to a sound hope. A man need not take a dozen poisons to destroy his life, one is quite sufficient.

There must be a harmony between the life and the profession. A Christian professes to renounce sin and if he does not do so, his very name is an imposture. A drunken man came up to Rowland Hill, one day, and said, “I am one of your converts, Mr. Hill.” “I daresay you are,” replied that shrewd and

⁷ This is the KJV of 1 John 3:8, which is better translated by the ESV: “Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil.” The emphasis is on one who lives in sin, practices sin, not of one who commits sin, which everyone does, including every Christian.

sensible preacher; “but you are none of the Lord’s, or you would not be drunk.” To this practical test we must bring all our work.⁸

1) **Becoming a Christian is a spiritual resurrection**

The Word of God sets forth salvation as involving a far greater matter than “just believing.” It is likened unto a *spiritual resurrection* that the Son of God must perform or the sinner will remain dead in his trespasses and sins. Jesus said in **John 5:25-27**:

Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live. ²⁶For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, ²⁷and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man.

He was not speaking of our future physical resurrection here; He does so in the verse following these. But here He was speaking of the spiritual resurrection He performs when He converts a dead sinner into a living Christian.

Paul had written to the church at Ephesus on another occasion, in which he declared that he continuously prayed that the Lord would give them insight into what God had done in bringing them to salvation. Paul wrote:

Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, ¹⁶do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: ¹⁷that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, ¹⁸the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may *know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints,* ¹⁹and *what is the exceeding greatness of His power* toward us who believe, according to the working of *His mighty power* ²⁰which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come.

²²And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, ²³which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

^{2:2}And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, ²in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, ³among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.

⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), ⁶and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 1:15-2:7)

Paul had declared that the same power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead was operative when God had raised them from spiritual death unto spiritual life, causing them to become Christians by His power.

2) **Becoming a Christian is an act of God creating life**

⁸ Charles Spurgeon, **The Soulwinner** (Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 36f.

Paul declared to the Christians in the church at Corinth that their coming to salvation was the same kind of power God exerted when He first created the heavens and the earth and He created the sun to shine forth upon His new creation. He wrote,

Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart. ²But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. ³But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, ⁴whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them. ⁵For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake. ⁶For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor. 4:1-6)

Becoming a true Christian is the act of God performing a spiritual creation, bringing a soul from nothing into something—a living, shining, new creation.

3) Becoming a Christian is God causing one to experience a new (spiritual) birth into new life.

And then the Scriptures also describe becoming a true Christian as experiencing a *new birth*. Jesus Himself told a religious man, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). And Peter wrote of this new birth: "

Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, ²³having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever, ²⁴because

"All flesh is as grass,
And all the glory of man as the flower of the grass.
The grass withers,
And its flower falls away,
²⁵But the word of the LORD endures forever."

Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you. (1 Peter 1:22-25)

We are justified before God through faith alone, but salvation entails much more than believing alone. It only can occur when God's great power is put forward. We will not be as those who are "*denying the power*."

IV. Dealing with nominal Christians who fail or refuse to repent of sin and be converted.

How was Timothy to deal with these false professors of Christ, when they were discovered and if they refused to repent of their sin? Paul instructed Timothy on how to deal with them that had but a form of godliness but who deny its power: "*And from such people turn away!*"

What does this mean, "From such people turn away?" Timothy as the pastor of this church was to turn himself and his church away from accepting and treating these nominal Christians as true Christians. In other words, Timothy was to work toward the church membership to be comprised of true Christians. Only those may be admitted to the church family that have been regenerated by the grace of God, those who manifest new life in Jesus Christ. **John Gill** (1697-1771) explained the meaning of these words, "And from

such turn away” in these words: “have no fellowship with them, depart from their communion, withdraw from them, and come out from among them.”⁹

Now this is not instruction for churches to forbid the church attendance of anyone. We do not do that unless they are disruptive to the worship of God. We welcome and desire all would come under the hearing of the Word of God. And clearly unbelievers would be in attendance of worship services of the early churches (cf. 1 Cor. 14:24). But we are not to declare people to be Christians and welcome them formally into the church family unless and until they give evidence of new life in Christ.

How else can a church of Jesus Christ experience and enjoy true fellowship with the Lord and with one another unless the church is comprised of true believers only? Paul reasoned this way in 2 Corinthians 6:14ff:

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? ¹⁵And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? ¹⁶And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said:

“I will dwell in them
And walk among *them*.
I will be their God,
And they shall be My people.”

¹⁷Therefore

“Come out from among them
And be separate, says the Lord.
Do not touch what is unclean,
And I will receive you.”

¹⁸“I will be a Father to you,
And you shall be My sons and daughters,
Says the LORD Almighty.” (2 Cor. 6:14-18)

This instruction that Paul gave to Timothy, “*And from such people turn away!*”, strongly supports the historical understanding and commitment of Reformed Baptist churches to maintain a regenerate church membership. This is not the concern or consistent effort of paedobaptist churches, whose view of membership is extended to any and all “who profess the true faith¹⁰, but whose lives are not examined for the evidence of new life in Christ.

It is important for us to know and understand that for Timothy to “turn away” from these nominal Christians was not giving up on them or an act of cruelty toward them. The very action that Timothy was to take respecting them could possibly result in their salvation. By Timothy making it very clear to these ones that they had no part or place among the people of God, God might awaken them to their real spiritual condition and the Lord might move them to seek true salvation. But on the other hand, if Timothy failed to take action, then they might continue to presume that they had salvation, or continue to believe that salvation

⁹ John Gill, Commentary on the Whole Bible, on 2 Timothy 3 at <https://www.truthaccordingtoscripture.com/commentaries/geb/2-timothy-3.php>

¹⁰ Here is the statement of The Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647 to which most reformed paedobaptist (Presbyterian) churches espouse, stating who may be admitted to membership in the local church. It is Article 25, paragraph 2: “The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation as before under the law), *consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion;*(b) *and of their children:* (c) and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, (d) the house and family of God, (e) out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.” Take note: a simple profession only is required for membership, not the evidence of new life in Christ. Moreover, membership is extended to children, if their parents profess to be Christian. This is a prescription for a local church characterized by nominal Christianity. “Professors” are assumed to be true Christians.

was of very little importance and of little difficulty to obtain. These people might continue in their self-delusion that they are “saved.” By setting them apart, declaring to them that they are strangers to the saving grace of God, Timothy was doing the best thing that could be done for their spiritual well-being, for the eternal benefit of their souls.

But this action of Timothy would also be what was best for the church itself to which the apostle was sending him to pastor. Paul gave the same nature of instruction to the church at Corinth. He wrote,

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father’s wife! ²And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. ³For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed. ⁴In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁵deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. (1 Cor. 5:1-5)

The apostle declared that this action of the gathered church was necessary and important and might result in this man coming to see the reality and gravity of his sin, leading him to repentance. The church thought that it had been loving toward this man in not condemning him even for this scandalous sin. They were actually being very unloving toward him on enabling him to continue in his sin while thinking that he had salvation.

But then the apostle explained why this action was also necessary and beneficial for the local church itself. Here is verses 6ff:

⁶Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? ⁷Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. ⁸Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Paul then instructed the church to practice this “turning away” from all nominal Christians, that is, they were not to extend church membership, extend Christian fellowship, to professing Christians who are characterized by unrepentant, egregious sin. Here he referenced an earlier letter that he had written. This letter was not inspired by God and so it is not included in our New Testament. Paul indicated that they had misunderstood the instruction that he had previously written to them. Here is 1 Corinthians 5:9-13:

I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. ¹⁰Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹***But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person.***

¹²For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? ¹³But those who are outside God judges. Therefore “put away from yourselves the evil person.”

Here Paul was setting forth the will of God for this church to exercise church discipline. It was to remove any and all nominal Christians from its fellowship (official membership). This must be done for the purpose to awaken these excluded people that they are not living as true Christians and that they must repent of their sin before the Lord. But also it must be done in order to maintain the clarity and purity of the Christian testimony of that local church.

But it is a sad reality that many evangelical churches have such a low standard or bar for prospective church members, that the salvation which the Word of God sets forth is not required for full inclusion in membership and fellowship of a local church. There is often such a drive to “grow” a church numerically that just about anyone who claims he is a ‘believer’ is accepted into membership and no desire or effort is

made to assess the validity of his profession and consider the evidence of new life in Christ.¹¹ He is assumed to be a Christian simply because he claims to be one.

Our own church had gone through a period of its history in the mid-20th century in which the congregation had become comprised largely of nominal Christians. At least this is what I have been able to determine from the testimony of those in this church before me. When this church called Pastor Duerr to be its pastor in the mid 1980's there were apparently very few members of this church that gave evidence of biblical Christianity in their faith and practice. Pastor Duerr's ministry was one of evangelizing the members of this church. And by the time he retired, in about 1996 many here could testify that the Lord had brought them to true life in Christ. But when we arrived in 1998, there were still over 300 names on the church membership role and there were quite a number of nominal Christians present, from what we were able to determine. But the Lord used the teaching and proclamation of the Word of God to separate the wheat from the chaff. Those who had no true life in Christ determined that they wanted no part of me or this church in the direction that we were moving. And from that day we have sought to baptize only those who show forth evidence of new life in Christ in their souls and propose only them for church membership. As a result our church over the years has moved toward a body in which true spiritual and biblical life and fellowship may be experienced and enjoyed by us. Now our church membership is approximately the same number as our church attendance. But what is most important is that there is a common life that we share, the same Lord that we love, the same Scriptures that we value and desire to learn, to which we all long to be conformed. This is the kind of church that the Lord would have us be and remain. We want to grow larger, but not at the expense or compromise of soundness, strength, and stability. We do not desire to be as the church at Sardis of which the Lord Jesus said "You have (but) a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy" (Rev. 3:4). We desire to be, say, as the church at Smyrna, in which Jesus said:

"These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: ⁹I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.'" (Rev. 2:8-10)

May our Lord grant our church great mercy and grace as we face the future in which we may encounter perilous times in both the world and the church. May He enable us by His presence and power among us and within us to remain faithful and true to Him before a world that desperately needs to believe and submit to Him as the only Lord and Savior. Amen.

But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God,
you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. (Rom 6:22)

¹¹ Some churches do not even maintain a membership role, which renders inclusion and exclusion from a church according to the Scriptures a practical impossibility.

Official List of Sins In the New Testament

From <https://truediscipleship.com/official-list-sins-new-testament/>

1. Abusers of self: self polluters, having unnatural lusts
2. Adultery (note: only for those who have been married)
3. Anger
4. Backbiters: those who speak evil of those who are absent
5. Banqueting: a drinking party
6. Becoming a stumbling block to a weak brother through our liberty: taking liberty to do things without thinking of the effect on a weaker brother's conscience.
7. Being angry with one's brother: expressing unkind thought or action toward others
8. Bitterness
9. Blasphemy
10. Boasting
11. Brawling
12. Brother going to law against brother: no definition given, so I'll wing it. Bringing legal action against another. If someone has a better definition, please let me know.
13. Burying our talents: not making wise use of what God gave us
14. Calling one's brother a fool: Ridiculing another
15. Chambering: unmarried people living and sleeping together
16. Clamor: loud, continued noises
17. Complaining
18. Contentious: quarrelsome
19. Corrupt communications: unprofitable or impure language
20. Covenant breakers: lightly breaking a solemn or legal pact.
21. Covetousness
22. Craftiness: cunningness
23. Debate
24. Deceit
25. Defiling the body
26. Defraud
27. Denying Christ
28. Desiring the praise of Men: doing things to gain praise.
29. Despiteful
30. Dishonesty
31. Disobedience to parents
32. Divisions: forming splits or schisms in groups
33. Divorce
34. Double tongued: making insincere statements
35. Drunkenness
36. Eating the bread, or drinking the Lord's cup unworthily: taking communion while living in sin
37. Effeminate: unmanly or womanish man.
38. Emulations: Ambition to excel
39. Envy
40. Evil concupiscence: longing or desire for forbidden things.
41. Evil Eye: having selfish motives
42. Evil thoughts: worthless, injurious, or depraved thoughts
43. Extortion
44. Fathers provoking children to wrath: Frustrating children through harsh treatment and/or failure to communicate.
45. Fearful: discouraged, anxious, faithless
46. Filthiness
47. Filthy Lucre: receiving personal gain through unrighteousness.
48. Finding faults with others while having a greater fault our self
49. Foolishness
50. Foolish talking: silliness.
51. Giving false witness
52. Fornication
53. Giving offense: causing another to fall spiritually by our example.
54. Greediness
55. Guile: deceit
56. Haters of God
57. Hatred

58. Having evil treasures in the heart: (The definition doesn't make any more sense).
59. Having pleasure in them that do things worthy of death: enjoying the company of sinners.
60. Hearing the sayings of Christ, but not following them
61. Heresies: religious opinion different from established Scripture.
62. High-mindedness: arrogant
63. Hypocrisy
64. Idle words: words of no value.
65. Idolatry: loving someone or something more than God.
66. Implacable: refusing to be appeased
67. Inordinate affection: passion, lust.
68. Inventors of evil things: those who contrive evil ways to satisfy their carnal lusts.
69. Jesting: talking to make others laugh.
70. Judging
71. Knowing to do good, but doing it not
72. Lasciviousness: lustful, wanton, exciting lust.
73. Laying up treasures on earth: pursuing material success at the expense of spiritual things.
74. Living in pleasure: fond of luxury and sensual pleasure/gratification.
75. Lovers of self
76. Loving another person more than Jesus
77. Lusting after a woman
78. Lying
79. Maliciousness
80. Malignity: being harmful or dangerous, bad character.
81. A man prophesying or praying with his head covered.
82. Mockery
83. Murder
84. Murmuring: grumbling, secretly complaining
85. Presumptuous
86. Pride: self-esteem.
87. Puffed Up: overestimating of one's ability or knowledge.
88. Purloining
89. Railing: slander
90. Reveling: overindulgence at feasts, merry-making.
91. Rioting
92. Seditious: stirring up opposition against authority.
93. Self-will: arrogant
94. Speaking against the Holy Spirit
95. Sorcery: practicing magic with aid from evil spirits.
96. Speaking evil of dignities: speaking ill of those to be honored.
97. Stealing
98. Stiff-necked and uncircumcised in hearts and ears: obstinate
99. Strife: quarreling, seeking superiority
100. Striker: ready to fight
101. Swearing: to take oath (as in court).
102. Teaching for doctrine the commandments of men: neglecting God's commandments by manmade interpretation or commandments.
103. Traitors
104. Trusting in riches
105. Not entering by the door into the sheepfold: seeking salvation through means other than the blood of Christ.
106. Unbelief: lack of faith.
107. Uncleaness
108. Unforgiving heart
109. Unmerciful
110. Unrighteousness: moral wrongfulness.
111. Unthankfulness
112. Vain jangling: babbling.
113. Variance: strife
114. Voluntary humility: false humility.
115. Wantonness: lustful, morally unrestrained.
116. Whisperers: secretly spreading false or slanderous information.
117. Whoremongers: one who associates with whores, a male prostitute.
118. Witchcraft
119. Wickedness: evil practices, crime.
120. Without normal affection: hardhearted.
121. Without understanding: unwise
122. Wrath
123. Woman cutting her hair
124. Woman prophesying or praying with her head uncovered