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THE HOUSE OF GOD DESIRABLE.

PSALMS 84: 1, 2. *How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of Hosts! My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the Lord: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God.*

In the patriarchal ages, the pious had no particular place or consecrated edifice, where they offered up their worship to God, but wherever they happened to reside, there they erected altars, on which they offered sacrifices, agreeably to the original institution; and, sometimes, consecrated pillars, by anointing them with oil, to be memorials of some remarkable transaction. But in the time of Moses, while Israel remained near Mount Sinai, a command was given to build a tent or tabernacle for the worship of God, of the most precious materials. The quality and workmanship of these were specified with the utmost particularity. The form and dimensions of this sacred structure were also revealed, and it was positively directed that every part of it, even to the loops and pins, should be made in conformity to the pattern shown to Moses in the mount. Around the sacred tabernacle, a spacious court was enclosed, within which stood the altar of burnt-offerings, and the laver for the purification of the priests. While the Israelites sojourned in the wilderness, the tabernacle moved or remained with them, and the pillar of fire and cloud which rested on it, by night and day, was their constant guide. But when they had conquered the promised land, SHILOH became the permanent residence of the house of God. For several hundred years, even to the time of Samuel the prophet, the tribes were accustomed to assemble for the celebration of divine worship at this place. But in the time of David, the ark of the covenant, after its return from the

land of the Philistines, was brought to Jerusalem, where king David had erected for it a new tabernacle on a piece of ground, which, by divine direction he had purchased from Araunah the Jebusite, at the time of the destructive plague by which so many thousands of the people were cut off.

Here, on Mount Zion, was henceforth the sacred place where God met with his people. But the devout king of Israel was not contented, that now, when the nation was rich and powerful, God's worship should be celebrated in a moveable tent: he, therefore, by divine permission, resolved to erect a costly and splendid temple, adorned and furnished with the greatest possible magnificence. During the life of David, however, the tabernacle continued to be the place of worship; for, although God approved of his pious purpose to build him a house, yet he chose that the work should be executed not by him, but by his son and successor, Solomon.

While there was only one place where God recorded his name, and one house where he gave tokens of his presence, it was a precious privilege to enjoy the opportunity of frequent access to the courts and to the tabernacle where divine worship was daily and periodically celebrated; and where such rites were performed, and such objects exhibited, as were calculated to strengthen the faith and enkindle the devotion of the pious.

But it was especially desirable and pleasant to enter these courts, and join in the solemn worship of the sanctuary on those sacred festivals, which, by divine appointment, were periodically solemnized: at which times, the scene was rendered peculiarly impressive and interesting, by the number of appropriate and significant ceremonies which were exhibited; and by the eager multitudes of people who attended from every part of the holy land.

On these solemn occasions, it must have been a delightful spectacle to behold the thousands of Israel, of every age and condition, coming up to the house of the Lord, and presenting themselves before the God of Jacob, with their respective gifts and offerings. Who can tell, with what rapture the bosom of the devout worshipper swelled, when his eye caught the first glance of that holy and beautiful house which contained so many expressive and mysterious emblems of Jehovah's presence, and of Jehovah's grace! The worship of God in the tabernacle or temple was, doubtless, to the pious Israelite, a most solemn and affecting service. In it the ancient saints took exceeding great delight. Therefore, we find in the Psalm from which our text is taken, and many others, an expression of the most ardent desires to enjoy the privilege of joining with the people of God in the worship of the tabernacle; and the most pathetic lamentations, when by any circumstance, the psalmist was prevented from attending the public worship of God, celebrated in this sacred edifice. "As the hart panteth for the water-brooks so panteth my soul after thee, O God; my soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?" And the liveliest joy was expressed upon the pro-

pect of entering these sacred courts. "I was glad when they said unto me, let us go unto the house of the Lord. Our feet shall stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem. Jerusalem is builded as a city that is compact together. Whither the tribes go up, the tribes, unto the testimony of Israel, to give thanks unto the name of the Lord." And in our text; "How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts:" and in verse 10; "For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand. I had rather be a door-keeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness."

The essence of spiritual worship is the same under all dispensations; the same to the believing Israelite and the devout Christian. They had the same object of worship, for the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is the Christian's God. They exercised faith on the same Messiah; trusted in the same promises, and hoped for the same reward. The devotional exercises of the true worshippers under the old and the new dispensation were not different. Humble penitence, ardent thirsting after God, joy and confidence in his mercy and faithfulness, and fervent gratitude and praise, were common to both of them. Pious Jews and Christians, also, equally delighted in drawing near to God in his house. Here, under both dispensations, much was found to strengthen faith, to encourage hope, to elevate the affections, and to fill the troubled heart with consolation.

And the courts of the Lord are still sought after, and rejoiced in, by all the true Israel. The solemn pomp of ceremonies, it is true, no longer strikes our eyes; the mysterious veil has been rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the mysteries of the most holy place have been revealed; the mercy-seat is now accessible to all believers; and the spiritual SHECHINAH, OR GLORY OF GOD, is seen in the face of Jesus Christ. No longer is it requisite to pour out daily, the blood of lambs and bullocks, which is not efficacious for the removal of guilt; but it is ours, to present by faith the sprinkled blood of that Lamb, which "cleanseth from all sin."

If the worship of God, under the gospel, has less in it to strike the senses, and affect the imagination, it presents before the mind of the pious worshipper, the object of faith much more clearly and strongly. The method of reconciliation is no longer hidden under shadows and types; but the "new and living way" is rendered so manifest, that he that runs may read.

In the sequel of this discourse, I propose to explain what those considerations are, which have always rendered the HOUSE OF GOD so DESIRABLE TO THE PIOUS, both under the old and new covenants, or dispensations.

I. The COURTS of the Lord were highly prized by the pious of old, because, upon entering the sacred enclosure, they were permitted to behold the altar of burnt-offerings, on which, morning and evening, an unblemished lamb was offered unto God, and on which his blood was sprinkled. There is no want, which every true penitent feels to

be so urgent, as his need of pardon; and as it is an unchangeable principle, in the divine government, that "without the shedding of blood there is no remission," no object of contemplation can be more interesting to such, than an atoning sacrifice. And, although, the blood of these sacrificed animals possessed no efficacy to purge the conscience; yet, they served as types to represent, in a lively manner, the real and efficacious atonement which God was about to provide. And a believing Israelite was not only privileged to behold at a distance the blood flowing from the altar, but to be himself the offerer, the scene was still more impressive, and his faith had a more evident ground on which to rest. In this case, the humble penitent was permitted to come near to the altar, and with confession of his sins, to lay his hand on the head of the victim, before it was slaughtered: as much as to say, may my guilt be transferred to my surety, and may he bear the punishment due to my sins. Then when he beheld the devoted animal sinking under the deadly stroke, and his quivering limbs laid upon the altar to be consumed, and the priest in his sacred garments receiving the shed blood, and sprinkling it on every side of the altar, and pouring it out at its foot, could any other language have taught him more significantly and impressively, that his pardon could in no other way be secured, than by the shedding of blood, and by the infliction of the punishment due to him upon a substitute? Every soul, therefore, which was deeply conscious of guilt, and thirsted for pardon, would ardently desire to enter the courts of the Lord, where he might fix his believing eyes on the sacrifices which exhibited by anticipation, "THE LAMB OF GOD, which taketh away the sin of the world."

And what is it now which renders the house of God desirable and delightful to the pious Christian, but the doctrine of atonement which is there exhibited to his view, in the word and sacraments of the church? This is what causes him to long and faint for the courts of the Lord. Take away all idea of an atoning sacrifice for sin, and what is left that can much interest a soul oppressed with a sense of guilt and deserved punishment? Without the doctrine of an atoning sacrifice, the gospel would be no glad tidings; it would be but an empty sound. The church of God in that case would present no object of ardent desire to convinced sinners: the tabernacles of the Lord would be no longer amiable. The burdened soul would go away unrelieved; the thirsting soul unsatisfied. The sound of joy and thanksgiving would, in that case, be no longer heard in the courts of Zion. O Christian, what is it in the church of God which most enlivens and comforts your heart? Is it not "the Lamb slain"—"the blood of sprinkling"—"the cross"—THE REDEEMER, wounded for your transgressions, and bearing your sins in his own body on the tree? And what in the preaching of the gospel do you find most attractive and edifying? Is it not "Christ crucified?" Wherever, then, this precious doctrine is plainly and fully inculcated, thither will the sincere seeker of salvation resort. And as long as the world stands, the tabernacles

of the Lord will be amiable, when the people can find there a healing balm for a wounded conscience.

The next conspicuous object in the court of the Lord's house, was the laver of purifying water. This was a lively figure of the "sanctification of the Spirit." Christ came both by water and by blood. So, when he hung on the cross, and was pierced to the heart with a spear, the disciple who bore witness saw a double stream, of blood and water, issue from his side. Here justification by his blood, and sanctification by his spirit, were emblematically represented. Every sincere believer earnestly desires to partake of both these rich benefits; and on account of both, the tabernacles of the Lord are amiable and his courts desirable. How delightful is it to those who abhor sin and loathe its pollution, to come to a fountain open for the washing away of sin and uncleanness? The doctrine of regeneration and sanctification by the sovereign and supernatural influences of the Holy Spirit, has ever been precious in the eyes of true christians. And as these blessings are usually bestowed through the instrumentality of the word and ordinance of the church, therefore, the house of the Lord is rendered exceedingly desirable. There, the word is like a purifying bath, and the influences of the Spirit descend as the gently distilling rain. "Let us draw near, then, with a true heart, in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water."

There is no more decisive evidence of being an Israelite indeed, than a habitual and ardent desire after universal holiness. The "new creature" breathes after complete redemption from the bondage of iniquity; "hungers and thirsts after righteousness," and never can be satisfied until he is filled. The name of *JESUS* is peculiarly precious to his people, because he saves them from their sins. The antinomian hypocrite desires exemption from punishment, and boasts of his liberty from the law, while sin has dominion over him, and while his pollution is not cleansed. But the truly regenerate knows that Christ came not to be the minister of sin; and that the end of his death was "to purchase a peculiar people," whom he would redeem from all iniquity, and render zealous of good works. God's house is to his people lovely, because it is a holy house. Holiness was, in the tabernacle, inscribed on every person who ministered, and on every utensil used. Every thing which came near to God must be purified; no unclean person or thing was, on any account, permitted to be brought into the sanctuary. And, now, by the grace administered, by means of the word and sacraments, the souls of believers undergo fresh purification from time to time. Here, as in a laver of pure water, they are washed again and again, from the filthiness contracted by too close a contact with the world: and knowing the value of this cleansing, the pious greatly delight in the courts of the Lord: and when prevented from the enjoyment of this privilege, their spirits long and faint, and their very flesh crieth out for the living God. "As the hunted hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My

soul thirsteth for God, for the living God, when shall I come and appear before God?"

3. As the court contained objects of deep interest to the true penitent; so also did the tabernacle itself. On entering this sacred edifice the first thing which would engage the attention of the observer, was the golden candlestick, with its seven branches and lamps, constantly illumining the holy place. This was undoubtedly an emblem of the knowledge of divine truth. The natural light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is to behold the light of the sun: but blessed above expression, are they who have the light of divine truth continually beaming upon their souls. God is a sun unto those who are privileged to walk in the light. But as the natural sun is too bright for our eyes, with safety and comfort to gaze upon it, without the interposition of some medium, to mitigate his burning splendor, so the light of God's glory is too dazzling for the contemplation of human beings; they are overwhelmed and blinded by the exceeding brightness of his countenance. God is said, therefore, "to dwell in light which is inaccessible and full of glory, whom no man hath seen or can see." But in the church this glorious light is manifested in the face of Jesus Christ, who is the sun of righteousness; and here, without losing any thing of its clearness, its intolerable brightness is mitigated, and accommodated to the weakness of our vision. The divine perfections, by being exhibited in the person of the Mediator, and by being revealed to us through his human nature, are capable of being contemplated by the believing soul, as with open face. This view, however, is transforming; "for we are changed into the same image from glory to glory, as by the spirit of the Lord." The truth of God revealed in his word, and illustrated by the Holy Spirit, is the light of the soul. All those who know not the truth are in "darkness and walk in darkness, and know not whither they go;" but they who are taught of God are "children of the light and of the day." Christ is to them "the true light,"—"The sun of righteousness, with healing under his wings." And as in the natural world, the sun itself is the object rendered most brightly conspicuous by his own rays; so CHRIST is the object most distinctly revealed by the light of divine truth. That is a false light which does not exhibit Christ in his mediatorial work and offices. How pleasing to enter a room which is illumined by a clear but mild light, rendering distinctly visible all objects in the place: such a light radiated from the lamps of the golden candlestick, in the holy place. This light, like the holy fire, there is good reason to think, was never suffered to go out; for even in the day-time it was needed, as the tabernacle had no window for the reception of the light from without. Thus the lamp of divine truth, since it first began to dawn upon the world has never been extinct, and will go on to shine brighter and brighter, until the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of God, as the waters cover the sea. And as this light still shines in the house of God, the spiritual worshipper rejoices to go thither, that he may be enlightened with its life-giving rays. Therefore, he cries out, "How amiable are thy taber-

nacles, O Lord!" Here, in the church, are now seen the golden candlesticks, and one walking in the midst of them, who is no other than the Son of man. "One thing," said the royal psalmist, "have I desired of the Lord, and that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, that I may behold the beauty of the Lord, and inquire in his holy temple."

4. Another significant emblem in the holy place of the tabernacle, was the table of shew-bread: on which were placed twelve loaves of bread, in two rows, answering to the twelve tribes of Israel. These loaves were covered with frankincense, and were renewed every Sabbath morning; and those which were removed were eaten by the priests within the sacred inclosure.

As food is absolutely necessary to the subsistence of the body, according to the laws which regulate the animal economy; and as bread is the chief article of food, and therefore called, "the staff of life," it furnishes an expressive emblem of that grace and truth by which the soul is nourished in the spiritual life. When the body is in want, hunger impels us to seek for bread, and to go wherever it can be obtained. In vain do we endeavor to satisfy the cravings of hunger with any thing but food. The most precious metals and jewels will be spurned by one perishing with famine, unless they can be made available to procure nourishment. The soul needs nourishment as well as the body: the soul is famished while it has nothing better to feed on than the husks of this world. But a gracious God has made ample provision for our spiritual refreshment. He has prepared "a feast of fat things," and the invitation is gone out, "that all things are ready;" and that there is room and a welcome, for all who will come. This feast is exhibited in the courts of the Lord: it is presented to all believers, in the word and sacraments of the church. Here CHRIST, the true bread, that came down from heaven, may be eaten. The hungry soul may here feast on the hidden manna. Here, the body of Christ, broken for us on the cross, is meat indeed. Here, also, babes in Christ are fed with the pure milk of the word, and grow thereby. Under all dispensations, bread has been an emblem of that grace which nourishes the soul. In the wilderness God prepares a table for his people; and as there is no stint of spiritual provision, his language to them is, "Eat, O friends, drink, O beloved." On every holy Sabbath, the bread is renewed: the ministers of God, by the faithful preaching of his word, bring forth the precious food, and when the table of the Lord is spread, there is a rich feast for God's hungering people. His kind inviting language to them is, "O taste and see that God is good. Blessed is every one that trusteth in Him." Well, then, might the psalmist exclaim, when for a season separated from the house of God, "How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord! My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the Lord."

5. But in the holy place there was still another interesting object: it was the altar of incense. Every morning and evening sacred perfumes were here burnt, by a soul taken from the altar of burnt offer-

ings. The ascending smoke, the sweet savor, and the officiating priest, exhibited, in an impressive manner, the prayers of the saints, and the intercessions of our great High Priest. How pleasing the assurance, that the prayer of faith enters into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth! Our sincere petitions rise before him, like the savor of the precious incense from the golden altar. But our imperfect prayers can only be made acceptable through the kind and continual intercession of the High Priest of our profession. In allusion to this altar, the pious psalmist sings, "Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense, and the lifting up of my hands, as the evening sacrifice." There is a remarkable passage in the Revelation of John, which seems to have a relation to this subject. "And another angel came and stood before the altar, having a golden censer, and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints, upon the golden altar, which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense which came up with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God, out of the angel's hand."

There is no stronger inducement to bring the pious near to God than the assurance that He is the hearer of prayer. This, in fact, is our only accessible way of approaching our heavenly Father. No greater privilege, therefore, can be enjoyed by the believer, than prayer; and he is so sensible of this, that nothing in the world could induce him to forego this exercise, or to abandon a throne of grace. That house, therefore, which is emphatically called "the house of prayer," is amiable in his eyes. His soul longs to be present with the assemblies of praying people. He loves to mingle his desires, petitions, and praises with theirs. In these social and devotional exercises of the congregation of God's people, he finds unspeakable pleasure. "Blessed is the man whom thou choosdest, and causdest to approach unto thee, that he may dwell in thy courts: he shall be satisfied with the goodness of thy house; even of thy holy temple." "O thou that hearest prayer, unto thee shall all flesh come."

6. But the tabernacle of the Lord was not only amiable and interesting, on account of what was visible, but more so on account of those sacred objects which were concealed from the eyes of the people, and even of the common priests. Between the HOLY and the MOST HOLY place, was suspended a rich, impervious veil, which concealed from view the ark, and all the other mysterious emblems of the sacred place. Beyond this veil no one was ever permitted to pass, except the high priest; and he only on one day in the year—the great day of atonement; when with the blood of the sin offering, and a censer of incense, he went to make atonement for his own sins, and those of the people. The worshippers in the court and in the sanctuary well knew, however, what was contained in this most holy place. They well knew, that the divine glory visibly rested over the ark, and that there was the propitiatory, or mercy-seat, and the golden cherubim, with their expanded wings and emblematical faces. Their reverence and profound adoration would, therefore, be the more ex-

cited by the awful mystery which hung over this part of the tabernacle; and as they approached the house of God, they would be filled with holy exultation, and would be ready to exclaim, "How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord!" "I had rather be a door-keeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness."

The **INFERENCES** from the subject treated, are

1. The benefits and pleasures of public worship being thus great, we ought so highly to prize the house and ordinances of God, as never to be absent from his courts, unless providentially prevented from attendance. This subject brings a solemn admonition to many, who suffer a trifling obstacle to prevent them from appearing in the temple of God, when the regular period of public worship comes round. Professing Christians, who thus act, despise their own mercies. They loathe the children's bread, by which alone they can be nourished. They love darkness rather than light, or they would come to the place where the "true light" shineth. They are insensible of their own pollution, and the value and sweetness of moral purity, or they would frequent the fountain where their filthiness might be cleansed. They know not the malignity of the disease by which they are infected, and by which their life is threatened, or they would assiduously attend on the great Physician, and make use of the remedies which he prescribes. And as to the multitudes who are seldom or never seen in the house of God, it is, perhaps, useless to address an admonition to them, because they are not likely to peruse a discourse of this kind; but if, for a moment, I could gain their attention, I would say, deluded mortals! you know not what you are doing. You are pursuing happiness, and yet turn your backs upon the only true source of felicity. You neglect preparation for another world, and yet you stand upon its verge. Suffer one word of exhortation from a fellow-traveller to eternity, who seeks your salvation. Turn from the evil, reckless course, which you are pursuing. Turn unto God and live. Turn towards Zion—towards the temple of the most High, where safety and happiness only can be found. Turn seasonably—that is, *instantly*; lest, when his wrath is kindled, you perish forever, with the workers of iniquity. "Behold, now is the accepted time, behold, now is the day of salvation." "Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return unto the Lord and he will have mercy upon him, and to our God for he will abundantly pardon." And that you may receive safe directions into the way of life, go, I beseech you, to the house of God—frequent his courts—listen to his word, and obey his commands. And then you will also join in saying, "How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord!"

2. This subject also reproves those, who, for the sake of earthly gain, emigrate from a region where they enjoyed the privileges of God's house, and go, with their families, far into the wilderness, where

there are no churches, no Sabbaths observed, no sound of the gospel, except from some chance itinerant. Here their children grow up without the beneficial training of the church, and without the salutary and powerful influence of religious society. They grow up nearly as wild as the savages whose places they occupy. There are thousands of families who have thus sacrificed spiritual for the sake of earthly blessings: who have preferred fat lands and rich crops, to the pleasures and benefits of the church of God. They may have obtained for their children a worldly inheritance, while they have put them entirely out of the way of securing for themselves an inheritance among the saints in light. Solemn will be the account which such persons must give for turning their backs upon the house of God, and removing their children, consecrated to God, perhaps, in holy baptism, from the church into which they were initiated, and from all the means of grace. God may, in some instances, have over-ruled it for good, by planting germs of gospel churches in the bosom of the wilderness; but this does not lessen the guilt of those who deserted the ordinances of God, without any reason to expect that any spiritual good would ensue.

I am not opposed to emigration. In this land it is the order of Providence to fill up the unoccupied parts of the earth; but I would have christian people to emigrate with the ark and the priesthood in their midst. Let them first provide for the instruction and spiritual edification of their families, and then let them go forth wherever Providence may direct them. Let them only be careful to follow the leadings of the pillar of fire and cloud, and pitch their tents wherever God may direct.

3. But finally, I feel my heart moving me to say a word to such as are still, unhappily, far from the tabernacle of God, whether thus separated from the ordinances of public worship by their own fault or not. In such painful circumstances, I know, there are found many of God's dear children; but when the Sabbath comes, no church-bell announces the approach of the hour of preaching. No temple of God rears its top towards the skies; yea, no humble tabernacle of the felled trees of the forest opens its doors to receive them. They are doomed to silent Sabbaths. They cannot but reflect with a mournful pleasure on the privileges and enjoyments of former days.

Dear brethren; I sincerely compassionate your condition, and would suggest a few words of counsel suited to your present destitute circumstances. If you have any pious neighbors, or any who have any sense of the importance of religion near you, however small their number, invite them to meet with you for the social worship of God, and for the reading of his holy word. "Where two or three," says Christ, "are met together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Be not backward to take a part in these social exercises. Though you may be weak in the gift of prayer, the mere effort will be acceptable in the sight of God; and he often wonderfully strengthens the weak, and aids those who go forward in the performance of

duty, in humble dependence on his help. Be not discouraged, although many obstacles should oppose your attempt. Persevere, and God may cause "a little one to become a thousand." From such a beginning, a flourishing church may take its rise. In these social meetings, on the Sabbath, make it a point to catechise the children, and give them good advice. And as a substitute for preaching, let a discourse or religious tract be read by one of your number. A sermon out of Boston, Burder, Davies, Walker, Scott, Newton, or Witherspoon, will often be found exceedingly refreshing, and will be likely to have a very salutary effect on your children. I have known such social meetings to be eminently blessed, in the absence of the public ordinances, in preserving the spirit of piety from becoming extinct.

But I would earnestly beseech you to spare no pains to get the gospel preached among you, by a faithful minister. Go to the nearest presbytery, when met, and supplicate with importunity for aid. Take no denial; but hang upon the skirts of the servants of God, until they consent to visit you. This advice will also apply to many vacant churches. These are often so far removed from settled ministers, that they are seldom supplied with preaching; and often the elders neglect to gather the people together at the house of God. This is a fault to be censured. It is the duty of every ruling elder, in the want of a pastor, to do his best in giving the people instruction. He must not preach, but he may exhort the people to the performance of duty. He may instruct the ignorant by familiar conversation; and he may and ought to catechise the children, in the use of the excellent catechisms of our church. And it is his bounden duty to read an edifying sermon to the destitute flock. There is in my neighborhood a little society of Quakers, who have no speaker among them these several years; and yet they never fail to go to their meeting, where they sit in silence, unless some *public friend* comes along. Will not these punctual Quakers rise up in judgment against many of our vacant congregations?