

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Revelation 2:8-11
“Postcard To A Church Under Pressure”

February 28, 2016
(3rd Sunday of Lent)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

IIB, REVELATION 2:8-11
"POSTCARD TO A CHURCH UNDER PRESSURE"

Problem = Persecution: Smyrna + Pergamum, 3:1 Chiasm
 Tension With Pagan Culture (2:13) & The Mother Faith: Synagogue (2:9)

100,000 +, Prosperous, Elegant Harbor City, 35 Miles N. of Ephesus, Modern Izmir

5/7

Address **1) v.8a Introductory "Angelic" Formula.** Large Jewish Community, Long Loyalty To Rome

Temple to Roma (195BC), 1st To Tiberias (26AD), Augustus, Library, Shrine To Homer

8a "And to the angel of the **church** in Smyrna write: Temples To Zeus/ Aphrodite/ Cybele, Stadium (20,000), Acts 19:10
 Author of *The Martyrdom Of Polycarp* from Smyrna, 155AD

Epithet **2) v.8b Characterization of the Lord from 1:17-18 (Sovereign Over History).**

Smyrna Call Itself *First In Asia!*

b 'The words of the First and the Last, Royal Edicts = *Thus saith...* //1:8, 18; Jesus Take Divine Title, Indirect Christology

c who **died** and came to **life**.' Why This Feature Of The Risen Jesus? Flashback, Smyrna Dead 600BC-290BC

Everything Hangs On Jesus' Bodily Resurrection, His Revealed Identity

Praise **3) vv.9-10a Unbounded Praise: "I Know"/ Satan (7:1 Chiasm).** True Jews? Who Gets Name?

Minority Denounced To Officials: *Religio Licita v. Superstitio*; Tacitus *Histories* 5.5

9a a 'I know your tribulation (lit. *pressure*) and your poverty
 (but you are rich) 1:9, 7:14 Guild System, Hard Circumstances

Family Fight, Grave Consequences: Who Are True Jews?

b b and the *blasphemy* of those who say they are Jews and are not, Slandered, 1 Thess. 2:14-16

"...a new and mischievous superstition," Suetonius *Life Of Nero* 16

c c but are a synagogue of Satan. 3:9 (Philadelphia), 20:7,12:12,18:2; Polycarp (156CE)

Never Generalize From This; A Post-Holocaust Reading Is Necessary

10a d Do not fear what you are about to suffer. 1:17, Ps. 46:1-3, Mt. 10:28

Adversary, Slanderer

b c' Behold, the **devil** is about to throw some of you into prison, Invisible Dimension

Cramped Squalor, Not Punishment But Detention Before Trial

c b' that you may be *tested*, Mk. 1:13, With An Eye To Victory, Not Failure, Through State/Synagogue

Religio Licita Withdrawn, *Not Us!* Gentiles As True Israel?

d a' and for ten days you will have tribulation. Mk. 8:34, Symbolic Number, Limited/Endurable

Gen. 24:55, Daniel 1:12, 14 As Model

***4) Chastisement Omitted!** //Philadelphia, Economically Marginalized, Severe Antagonism

No Widespread, Systematic, Early Persecution, Rather Sporadic And Local

***5) Call to Repentance and Warning Likewise Omitted.** No Criticism Or Complaint (2)

Victor 1 **7) v.10e Promised Reward After Death.** Smyrna Famed For Gladiators/ Games

Crown Which Is Eternal Life, James 1:2, 2 Tim. 4:8

e Be faithful unto **death**, Roman Policy (Pliny *Letters* 10.96.3-4) Fact Of Martyrdom, Then And Now

and I will give you the crown of **life**. 1:5, James 1:12, I Cor. 9:25

Death Has Two Forms: Physical, Ultimate

Hearing **6) v.11a Call to Hear What the Spirit Says.**

God Will Remedy Injustices! Stay Confident; Stay Faithful; Endure; Satan Defeated

11a He who has an ear,

let him hear what the Spirit says to the **churches**. Issue = Accommodation To Pagan, Imperial Culture

Issue = Accommodation To Pagan, Imperial Culture

7') vv.11b Promised Reward a Second Time.

Complete Ruin Of Life, First Death (Body), Second Death (Self)

b He who conquers

To Conquer + To Resist Assimilation/ Receive Crown

Victor 2 shall not be hurt by the second **death**. Exclusion From God's Kingdom, 20:6, 14, 21:8, 11 (Hell/Annihilation?)

Not Condemned At The Last Judgment (20:14)

Jer. Targum (Dt. 33:6), "Let Reuben live in this age and not die the second death whereof the wicked die in the next world."

Targum on Jer. 51:39, 57, "...they shall die the second death and shall not live in the world to come."

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE GOSPEL BECOMES A COMMODITY AND PEOPLE CHURCH SHOPPERS?
HOW ARE RADICAL INDIVIDUALISM AND COVENANT IN TENSION WITH ONE ANOTHER?

POSTCARD TO A CHURCH UNDER PRESSURE

"He who conquers shall not be hurt by the second death."

The ultimate motivation for faithfulness.

REVELATION 2:11b

There is a remarkable document preserved from the second century.¹ It is the *Epistle to Diognetus* written by one *Mathetes*, which simply means *Disciple*. It's a pen name for a Christian leader who defends the faith and the church to an elite Roman audience as symbolized in Diognetus. It's a PR piece. In it the author describes a strange band of people who are *in but not of* the world, which is a paradox. He calls them *little-Christ*s, because that is what the word *Christianos* originally signified: *like Christ, like their Messiah, like Jesus*, the one whose stories they tell, the one they claim is alive as the world's rightful ruler or Lord.² This defense of the faith is not just a relic from the past but a manifesto for our day. And while the picture is idealized, since our flaws are absent, there is a message here. *Disciple* writes to Diognetus in Chapter 6 of the document:

"Christians are not differentiated from other people by country, language or customs... they do not live in cities of their own, or speak some strange dialect.... they live in both Greek and foreign cities, wherever chance has put them. They follow local customs in clothing, food, and the other aspects of life. But at the same time, they demonstrate to us the unusual form of their own citizenry.

They live in their own native lands, but as aliens.... Every foreign country is to them as their native country, and every native land as a foreign country. They marry and have children just like everyone else, *but they do not kill unwanted babies* (no infanticide since they value

¹ The earliest date is around AD 130. Some date it later, around AD 200.

² In Antioch, a Syrian city (Acts 11:26), the disciples were first called *Christianos*.

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life).³ They offer a shared table *but not a shared bed* (they spurn immorality). They are passing days on earth, *but are citizens of heaven* (*in* but not *of* the world), obey the appointed laws *and go beyond the laws in their own lives* (they build up social capital).

They love everyone, but are persecuted by all. They are put to death and gain life. They are poor and yet make many rich. They are dishonored and yet gain glory through dishonor. Their names are blackened and yet they are cleared. They are mocked and bless in return. They are treated outrageously and behave respectfully to others.

When they do good, they are punished as evildoers; when punished, they rejoice as if being given new life. They are attacked by Jews as aliens and are persecuted by Greeks; yet those who hate them cannot give any reason for their hostility."⁴

To be *in* but not *of* the world, that is the tightrope Christians walk, and we are forever falling off one side or the other.⁵ So heavenly minded we are no earthly good, or else so earthly minded and immersed in the cares of this world that we forget our first loyalty to the Triune God. But the goal is to hold the two together: *in the world* but not *of it*, living here with a new identity and a new mission

To live creatively in the tension, *in* but not *of*, that is the art of being a follower, a disciple, a modern apprentice of Jesus,⁶ and it requires constant study of Scripture, careful attention to the culture around us and its pressures, and a community of fellow subversives to walk with us in prayer and help us make adjustments along the way.⁷

³ The exposure of infants was common in the ancient world, particularly females.

⁴ "To Illustrate: Christians," *Leadership*, Summer 1997, 53.

⁵ "In but not of" is a slogan-type summary of the prayer of Jesus for his followers in John 17:14-16.

⁶ The idea of being an *apprentice* of Jesus has been revived in our day by Dallas Willard and his students (e.g. Richard Foster, John Ortberg, James Bryant Smith). See his article, "How Does A Disciple Live?" (www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=103). One of his quotes is "There is no problem in human life that apprenticeship to Jesus cannot solve."

⁷ On being a subversive Christian, see Brian Walsh, *Subversive Christianity: Imaging God In A Dangerous Time*, 2nd edition (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1992).

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It's precisely how Jesus lived in our world as God the Son immersed in Jewish flesh that was formed in the womb of his mother Mary, but drawing his life and his light, his power and wisdom and love from another source, from his Father above and the Spirit who was his indwelling companion.

It was life on two axes at once and in two simultaneous dimensions at once: *in* but not *of* the world. Jesus was salt in a tasteless world, light in a dark world, truth in a world of half-truths, simplicity personified, a healer of ordinary folk, and a teller of unforgettable stories, which is why we have four complementary biographies of the man as the first cluster of documents in the second part of the church's book, The New Testament. Looking just like the next man, but oh so different, and inviting his followers into his new reality, which was the rule of the transcendent Father and the invisible Spirit through the man standing right in front of you; in other words, *the kingdom of the Triune God* with Jesus the Son as its visible expression. He is the human doorway into the life of God, and he spent much of his time going from village to village dealing with people like us, and where he showed up, things happened! In Jesus we do face-to-face business with one true God.

We believers are free mix it up with all kinds of people in all kinds of places,⁸ but we must never forget who we are or whose we are or what is our purpose or how near God is. We live at ground level with all its concerns and opportunities, all its pains and pleasure, but we draw our life and identity from the one who reigns over us and to whom we belong, Jesus Christ. In John's Gospel, Jesus said of himself and us, "They are not *of the world*, even as I am not *of the world*."⁹ Our identity is from above; our life is here below. Jesus finds us, claims us, shares his life with us, puts his Spirit in us, rules over us, and sets us in the world as his reflective mirrors.

If a mirror is set at a forty-five degree angle, we reflect the light of God into the world, and we reflect the concerns of the world back to God in prayer and praise. At zero degrees it's just up and down; at ninety just the back and forth, but at forty-five degrees the exchange goes in both directions.¹⁰ We live in the world with resources from outside ourselves. *In it* because it's where we live, but not *of it* because we have been brought back into a relationship with the One who made it. We are not alone.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, especially vv.9-13.

⁹ John 17:7

¹⁰ The image is from N.T. Wright.

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Lately, meaning for at least the last fifty years- we Methodists have had a distinct preference for accommodating ourselves to the values and expectations of American culture in a mistaken attempt to be *relevant*, whatever that is. We have been *in and of* the world. We continually emphasize *how modern* we are, *how in touch* with contemporary culture, *how non-distinctive* and *nice*. And in the process of accommodation we've lost the balancing truth that the church is *different from the world*, that we are to offer a clear alternative to the increasingly post-Christian culture around us. We've forgotten we're an outpost of the kingdom of God behind enemy lines, working with and waiting for our Liberator to return. What John Drescher said a generation ago is even more true today:

"During the past decades the church experienced little criticism or conflict from the world, not because the world is more Christian, but because the world and the church are so much alike. We long to be loved so much we've lost the desire for a distinctively different life." Then his punch line, "*Most of us would rather be dead than different.*"¹¹

Let me say this gently but clearly. If you are not prepared to be different in what you do with your *money*, what you do with your *mind*, what you do with your *morals*, what you do with the *media and entertainments* of our culture, and what you do with the *management* of your time, then you're kidding yourself if you think having your name on a church roll means much at all. Mary Cummings says:

"When we refuse to consciously and deliberately choose specific behaviors, the powerful ocean of society that we live in is ready to wash us out to sea. There we can bob helplessly along with the crowd."¹²

If you lay still and passive in the steam of American culture, it will carry you away from God. We survive in this river by swimming *against* the powerful currents of the tides. *In it, but not of it*, to use our slogan. There may have been a time when the tide was coming in, when the American culture carried people towards the church; that is no longer true. The tide has turned, even for many who once claimed the name Christian. Let the media shape your mind, and you will not have the mind of Christ. Treat your time as your own. and you will fritter life away in endless trivialities. Follow the world's map, and you will end at the wrong destination.

¹¹ Albert M. Wells, *Inspiring Quotations* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1988), 47-48.

¹² Idem.

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Just this week the Barna organization, a Christian research firm, released a new study that's getting lots of press. It's titled, "Five Ways Christianity Is Increasingly Viewed As Extremist."¹³ Because of the violence of radical Islam— particularly its most virulent form in ISIS, there's an emerging idea out there that any form of serious religious commitment is socially dangerous, it really doesn't matter which it is. Barna writes, "The decades old trend that Christianity is irrelevant is increasingly giving way to the notion that Christianity is bad for society." In other words, look for the cultural pressures to increase.

Three of the research findings are worth reviewing. Adults and especially non-believers are concerned about religious extremism; nothing surprising here. San Bernardino and Paris have gotten our attention, and we wonder: Will it come to Greenwood? Secondly, and this was a surprise to me: nearly half of non-religious adults perceive Christianity to be extremist. Thirdly, that the range of what constitutes extremism is broad, from behaviors that are almost universally condemned to behaviors practiced by many. And as I went down the scale in four categories, I found that more and more of the behaviors *applied to me*, mainly because I define myself as a classic Christian who believes the Creeds, studies the Scriptures as authoritative, has a high view of Jesus, upholds biblical moral standards, speak and act on my faith in public, wear a funny collar as a public representative, fast weekly, and witness in some form to outsiders every day, including outside church walls. I've never thought of myself as a dangerous extremist, but now I am!

But here I want to change the geometry of the discussion. Extremism works off a scale from less to more and from left to right because that's how we read, and the further to the right the more extreme. But the way you define the extreme also influences where you define the *middle* or *the mainstream*, which is where most people want to be and why political candidates are so quick to define opponents as extremists. It's rhetorically and emotionally effective as a way to slander your opponent as dangerous weirdo, and not to be trusted.

I doubt I will ever say, "I am an extremist," but I am increasingly comfortable saying, "I am a radical," because radical— from the Latin *radix* for *root*, means not staying on the surface but going down to the foundations, down to the origins, down to the roots. You find the center in Jesus and then go deep in one place. It's not a left/right scale, but a shallow/deep one.

¹³ <https://barna.org/research/faith-christianity/research-release/five-ways-christianity-increasingly-viewed-extremist?>

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I want to be a Christian radical, a modern apprentice of Jesus, who- when you take time to think of it- was the greatest radical who ever lived, not in the shallow political sense but in the sense that in his living and in his dying he revealed just how deeply sin and evil and ignorance and fear and bad religion have effected us all and what the cure is. And the cure is to personally follow him back to into the embrace of the Living God, to the Father from whom he came as a perfect reflection at ground level. Jesus is the only point of access to the divine life vindicated by God in a bodily resurrection from the dead.¹⁴ Buddha was not raised; neither was Muhammed; only Jesus has been raised, and whom God vindicates and certifies is the one we are to follow. We are to be *in but not of* the world as currently constituted because a new world is already on the way, and of that new creation Jesus is the sneak preview.

So the cultural winds are now increasing against us, and we will have to find new strategies to define ourselves against unfair labels. We will also have to go on the offensive to reveal the new non-religion-religion of those who cast us as extremists. Secularism and non-belief and indifference are not non-religious but their own stealth religion with themselves at the center, and they deserve careful critique. They are not as neutral as they like to portray, and the one thing the most want is for us to stop making exclusive truth claims about Jesus and to keep our commitments out of the public square. Follow Jesus, but please keep it private: in your hearts, in your homes, in your churches, but not in the public square where the rest of us non-extremists have to live. Its going to be a difficult struggle, and we have much to learn. So now that we know the issue, as summed up in the phrase *in but not of the world*, let's take a brief look at a case study from the end of first century: the fledgling church in the great city of Smyrna.

TO THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA (2:8-11)¹⁵

¹⁴ For a defense of Jesus' bodily resurrection, see Phil Thrailkill, *Resurrection* (Fort Valley, GA: Bristol, 2014).

¹⁵ The second audience after Ephesus (2:1-7) is the church in Smyrna (2:8-11). Here chastisement and the call to repentance are omitted as unnecessary. To a church under increasing pressure, the issues of *death* and *life* are noted three times (vv.8b, 10b, 11b). That Jesus is *the first and the last* means he is before and after anything men can do to them. That he is the one *who died and came to life* means he has been where they may soon go and come out the victor. The section of praise (3. vv.9-10a) is a 7:1 concentric pattern where the outer frame (*tribulation, a//a'*) is echoed at the center (*to suffer, d*). It is through the false verbal attacks (*blasphemies*) of some Jews (likely to the Romans that these Christians are not true Jews and thus unworthy of legal protection) that the pressure

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Remember what has come before. John, the visionary prophet and pastor, is in exile on the island of Patmos. There he is granted a vision of the risen Jesus in all his glory and commanded to write letters to seven churches. Each is an analysis from the risen Jesus, a sort of divine cat-scan that reveals the truth about each church.

Smyrna, modern Izmir on the coast of Turkey, was a major seaport thirty-five miles north of Ephesus on the same postal route. From early times it was an ally of Rome and in AD 23 won a competition with eleven other cities and was granted by the Senate the privilege of building the first temple to the Emperor Tiberius. It was there that citizens burned incense and made the confession *Caesar is Lord* in a display of civic duty. It was a city zealous for the worship of the Emperor, and to *get along* you had to *go along* without raising any hard questions. But the Christian had an alternative confession about who deserved ultimate loyalty, *Jesus is Lord*.¹⁶

The worship of the state, whether in the form of the ancient Roman Emperor or of our own democratic form, is still idolatry. If you are of the opinion that government, whether more or less or of either party, can solve the problems that afflict the nation, you are already on the road to giving government the faith and hope that belongs only to God. The primary problems that afflict us are neither political nor economic; they are moral and spiritual and only then political and economic. Government, not even a relatively just government as our own, can replace God, and the state is never to be worshiped. And if you should ever face the choice between loyalty to the demands of the government and loyalty to Jesus Christ, you must choose Christ and be willing to pay whatever penalty the government imposes. It was that way in Smyrna at the end of the first century, and it is that way now. Many times you can be both a good citizen and a faithful Christian, but if a choice has to be made, choose Christ. That way, if you lose your life, you won't lose your soul as well.

Smyrna was a beautiful, sophisticated, polytheistic city. It boasted of being the *first of Asia in beauty and size*. But notice in the second half of verse 8 who Jesus

comes. Rhetoric that seems extreme to us this side of the Holocaust (*synagogue of Satan // the devil*) was not anti-Semitic in that day. They were being leveraged by the Evil One to cause pain to the church. To those who may die, the promise is *the crown of life* because they finished the race as victors. The *second death* that will envelop their foes cannot harm them.

¹⁶ Sean Kealy, *The Apocalypse of John* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1987), 85-88.

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said is first, "I am the first and the last!" It was economically prosperous and also the center for the worship of the female deity Cybele. Winding from her temple near the port up Smyrna's famous *Golden Street* were temples to Apollo the beautiful, Asclepius the healer, and Aphrodite the goddess of love. Where the street ended at the foothills of Mt. Pagos was the great temple to Zeus. It was the city of man's government, man's intelligence, man's art and architecture, man's religion, all in all a glorious place to live if you were a prosperous pagan, but not if you were a Christian. Go to Paris, go to Stockholm, go to New York or Atlanta, and there you will see and feel the throbbing life of a great city. But do not be mistaken by appearances. It is organized around fallen human beings and doomed to pass away.

There was in Smyrna a large Jewish community, protected by the Roman government as a legal religion with privileges, one being that Jewish did not have to worship the Emperor and do the rituals of patriotism. As the Book of Acts tells us, it was in the synagogues that the churches most often started with traveling missionaries like Paul preaching on the sabbath and leading persons to Christ, which would eventually lead to a split in the synagogue as differences became clear on whether the crucified Jesus was really the risen Messiah or not. For a while the Jewish Christians would be able to hide behind the protection afforded the Jewish community, but then-as the church became increasingly Gentile- that would no longer be possible. And, if they aren't Jews, then they have to worship the Emperor!

In Smyrna is it likely that the leaders of the synagogue informed the officials that the Christians were not part of them, which led to exclusion and pressure. To the Jews the Christians were interloping heretics trying to mooch off their good name and protected status; to the Romans they were just one more odd new religious sect to be kept in line. To label them a *synagogue of Satan* in this case is true because they cooperated with the governing powers who were the instruments of persecution.¹⁷ But that offers no basis for applying that extreme label to other synagogues, then or now. There is no room for anti-Semitism in the Christian faith. Judaism is our mother. And besides, the title *synagogue of Satan* could just as easily be applied to churches in Germany that cooperated with Hitler or to churches in the South that cooperated with the system of slavery and put economics before Christian conscience. Wherever a religious body cooperates with government authorities to deprive other religious groups of basic liberties and freedoms, there the power of the devil is at work. Any religious group that is a cultural majority needs to very careful in its use

¹⁷ Reconstruction of the situation at Smyrna based on Robert Mulholland, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 97ff.

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of power. Inquisitions, pogroms and witch hunts result. So the first word of a Christian to a Jew is not “let me tell you about Jesus” but “let me listen to the story of your family and apologize for what we Christians have done over the years. We have misrepresented the one we call Savior. We forgot he was Jewish.”

This background helps us make sense of the extreme languages of verses 9 through 10. As a minority community losing legal protection, the church is coming under intense pressure (tribulation), being excluded by both the government and the Jewish community from economic participation (poverty), and about to be jailed and even martyred. The good news is that Christ knows about their situation in detail; the bad news is that he is not going to rescue them *from it* but preserve them *through it*. At the core of his message is a word which any of us would have trouble receiving, verse 10a: "Do not fear what you are about to suffer." For the Christian, pain does not have to mean fear. It will not last forever.

In 1895, Andrew Murray was in England suffering from a terribly painful back. One morning, while eating breakfast in his room, his hostess told him of a woman downstairs who was in great trouble and wanted to know if he had any advice. He handed her a paper he had been writing on and said, "Giver her this advice I'm writing down for myself. It may be that she will find it helpful." This is what was written:

"In time of trouble say, 'First, he brought me here. It is by his will that I am in this difficult place; in that I will rest.' Next, 'He will keep me here in his love, and give me grace in this trial to behave as his child.' Then say, 'he will make the trial a blessing, teaching me lessons he intends me to learn, and working in me the grace he means to bestow.' And lastly, say, 'In his good time he can bring me out again. How and when, he knows.' Therefore say, (1) 'I am here by God's appointment, (2) in his keeping, (3) under his training, and (4) for his time.'"¹⁸

You may have suffering. The church at Smyrna surely did. Andrew Murray, out of his own pain, gives us a way forward without fear, "Therefore say, 'I am here by God's appointment, in his keeping, under his training, and for his time.'" Jesus called the believers in Smyrna to trust him in the midst of chaos.

What is remarkable is that– in contrast to the church at Ephesus that had lost

¹⁸ Michael Green, editor, *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 388.

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it's first love— the risen Lord has nothing to say against this church. It is a pure church, and made so by persecution. How different from our idea of what success means. Most of us pastors have been trained to believe success means more bricks, more bucks, more bodies. We are professionals at envy. It's how we keep score in the ministry, and Jesus is not happy with it.

Imagine being pastor of the church at Smyrna. Every day you and your people are getting creamed. And then comes the word that the one opinion that matters says you're a great, faithful church. There are churches like this, but I suspect that they are not in America but in places like North Korea and Iran and China and India where persecution has purified them.

To his followers in Smyrna Christ gives three promises. The tribulation is not endless but only for *ten days*, an indeterminate idiom for *a short while*. Those who are killed are promised the crown that is life; martyrdom will usher them into the presence of Jesus, and they will be protected from *the second death*. At the end of the age when all stand for judgment, they will be safe. Safe with Christ, sharing his life forever. That is the reward for not caving to pressure and selling out the Lordship of Jesus, the implication being that those who persecuted them will not only undergo the first death, which is physical, but also the second death, which is the spiritual death of eternal separation from God. All of us die once, but some die twice, and it's the second one you want to miss! In the first your soul is separated from your body, and in the second you are forever separated from God, and the imagery of fire is to get your attention. It's not something you want to experience.

Reading about such churches as Smyrna and about persecuted Christians in our day has the effect of sobering comfortable Methodists up a bit to the reality that the culture and the government and even the church are not always friends of Christ, and that we have better keep watch on all three.

If you are among the older faithful who were born during the Depression or just afterwards, and if you came through hard times with this faith at the center of life, and if you then lived out your faith in family life and in the church and in civic engagement and played by the rules, then along the way you may have developed a sense that "people like me who share my values are pretty much running things, so I can feel at home here in my little corner of the world." For a while you were right, but things are changing rapidly, and soon you may not recognize the world as you've known it. You are now an extremist, a dangerous person making unsubstantiated claims that are no longer mainstream, so please go to the sidelines and keep quiet.

CONCLUSION

In his new book *Against the Flow*— and I love the title— Oxford mathematics professor and defender of the faith Dr. John Lennox notes that when God calls us to do something difficult he gives us strength when we need it, not before. He then tells of his encounter with a Russian who spent years in Siberian for the crime of teaching his children the Bible:

“He described to me that he had seen things no man should ever have to see. I listened, thinking how little I really knew about life, and wondering how I would have fared under his circumstances. As if he had read my thoughts, he suddenly said: ‘You couldn't cope with that, could you?’ Embarrassed, I stumbled out something like: ‘No, I am sure you are right. He then grinned and said: ‘Nor could I! I was a man who fainted at the sight of his own blood, let alone that of others. But what I discovered in the camp was this: God does not help us to face theoretical situations but real ones. I couldn't imagine how one could cope in the Gulag. But once there I found that God met me, exactly as Jesus promised his disciples when preparing them for persecution.’”

Lennox adds, "We can be confident, then, that the Lord will give us a sufficient amount of grace to handle whatever comes our way, whenever it comes our way— and not necessarily a moment before!"¹⁹

It's time to be an informed, savvy, tough-minded and tender-hearted Christian. Are we up to it? How will we thrive as many of the old social supports fall away and pressures increase. We will soon find out. It's time, I think, to be a radical. One who is *in, but not of* the world. The people who go deep with Jesus Christ.

¹⁹ John C. Lennox, *Against the Flow: The Inspiration of Daniel in an Age of Relativism* (Oxford, England: Monarch, 2015), 147

The Barna Group (Feb. 23, 2016)

“Five Ways
Increasingly Viewed

Christianity Is
as Extremist”

**WHAT MAKES SOMEONE
A RELIGIOUS EXTREMIST?**

**CATEGORY 1 EXTREMISM
Widely Considered to be Extreme**

80%-plus of US adults believe this is
“very” or “somewhat” extreme

- Use religion to justify violence
- Refuse standard medical care for their children
- Refuse to serve someone because the customer’s lifestyle conflicts with their beliefs

**CATEGORY 2 EXTREMISM
Usually Considered to be Extreme**

50% to 79% think this is “very” or “somewhat” extreme

- Demonstrate outside an organization they consider immoral
- Preach a religious message in a public place
- Attempt to convert others to their faith
- Teaching their children that sexual relationships between people of the same sex are morally wrong
- Distribute religious material door-to-door
- Pray out loud in public for a stranger
- Believe that sexual relationships between people of the same sex are morally wrong
- Protest government policies that conflict with their religion

**CATEGORY 3 EXTREMISM
Often Considered to be Extreme**

20% to 49% say this is “very” or “somewhat” extreme

- Pray in a special language, often called speaking in tongues
- Quit a good-paying job to pursue mission work in another country
- Wear special clothes or a head coverings for religious observance
- Adhere to special dietary restrictions for religious reasons
- Fast or refrain from food for a period of time
- Wait until marriage to have sex

**CATEGORY 4 EXTREMISM
Sometimes Considered to be Extreme**

6% to 19% indicate this is “very” or “somewhat” extreme

- Read the Koran (or Qu’ran) silently in a public place
- Regularly donate money to a religious community (tithing)
- Abstain from alcohol or tobacco for religious reasons
- Read the Bible silently in a public place
- Attend church, synagogue, or temple on a weekly basis
- Volunteer to help people in need

