

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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TORCH AND COMPASS

by Gary North

For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little: For with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people. To whom he said, This is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing: yet they would not hear. But the word of the LORD was unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little; that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken (Isa. 28:10-13).

Are you sick and tired about being sick and tired? Well, you should be used to it by now. This is the normal state of affairs in the church today. It is the normal state of affairs in most periods of church history. It is not normative – because sin isn't – but it **is** normal.

Sinful people grow impatient. They are not satisfied with the slow process of biblical education: line upon line, precept upon precept. They are equally dissatisfied with the present rate of their institution's growth. They refuse to accept the fact that the way of God is progressive. Progress takes time. It takes a lot of time.

But then, in a relatively brief period of time, the church can make a major breakthrough. Like an army attacking a rival army's front, a section of the rival's defensive line collapses. The question then is this: Will the offensive commander concentrate his forces on the breach in the enemy's line? Second, will the rival commander have sufficient mobile reserves to throw into the breach? Will he commit his reserves in time?

The fact remains, however, that these historically rare major breakthroughs are always preceded by long periods of grinding frontal assaults. I think these periods last about 250 years, at least in Western history: the biblical ten generations. And the closer we get to the next breakthrough, the more tired and hopeless things seem, especially for those troops in the front line. "When will it all end?" Answer: "Later."

How Long, O Lord?

The angels in heaven, prior to the fall of Jerusalem, "cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" (Rev. 6:10). Now, if angels sound impatient with God's timetable, consider men. Consider us.

Each generation of Christians finds itself in the wilderness. But there is no pillar of fire or cloud of smoke to guide us. There is only the Bible. We are more like a group of lost men who are wandering in a Scottish bog at night-time. Our feet slosh through the water-logged soil. We hold up a torch, hoping to see three steps in front of us. But we have a compass: the Bible. We know we are headed in the right direction. So we keep on slogging.

There are those who say there is no pathway out of the bog. Some Christians think that there is no way out until Jesus comes personally, takes us by the hand, and leads us to firm ground (after a heavenly period of R&R). Others believe that Jesus will have to come back and dry up all the world's bogs by the blast of His fiery breath. No more bogs! So, both these groups tend to recommend standing pat. Worse: if the ground were not so wet, they would recommend sitting down. At best, they insist, we can expect to be found standing faithfully in the bog, eyes forward, confident that Jesus is personally against bogs and plans to get us out of this one, one way or another.

Judging from the history of the church for the last three centuries, Jesus is content with bogs. The bogs of life are good testing grounds. The church is bogged down, and God expects it to get out of its soggy predicament by the light of its torches and its faithfulness to the compass.

If the church marches forward long enough, it will get out of the bog. God's assignment to us is therefore three-fold: 1) don't stop marching forward; 2) don't ignore the compass; and 3) don't drop your torch. How long? For as long as it takes. Longer, surely, than copyright protection for Dave Hunt's *Whatever Happened to Heaven?*

There Is No Standing Still

The Christian who finds his feet cold, his ankles wet, and his legs tired can gain only limited solace from the fact that previous generations experienced much the same thing. If anything, they experienced the sensation of getting ever-more deeply mired in the bog. What had seemed like solid ground – natural law, widespread Christian moral attitudes, a legal structure governed by at least the basics of biblical law (capital punishment for murderers, for example), Bible reading in the public schools, literacy in the public schools, and abortionists only in "back alleys" – turned increasingly into bog.

There are millions of American Christians who believe that if we could just go backward a few miles, things would be satisfactory – not great, but satisfactory. Anyway, a lot better than muck spilling over the top of their boots. But the history of the church has been a long journey through varying degrees of bog. What we suspect is that a return to 1954 or 1948 would still leave us without confidence in the relatively more solid ground that we remember. We would still know what lay ahead. A growing minority of us now recognizes that the solid feel beneath our feet in 1954 was an illusion, that we could not hope to construct lasting foundations in that world. Earlier generations of Americans did not notice, or chose to ignore, the numerous signs of shaky foundations and even toppling buildings, a world grounded no more securely than Venice, Italy, is today. Astoundingly, most Christians remain committed to the older illusions: natural law, public schools, and the lawful-

ness of abortion in a pluralistic society.

But history does not move backward. Neither does it stand still. It does not allow anyone to stand still. Standing still when you are in the bog means only a soggy grave without a grave marker. The church moves forward or else it moves downward, as it did in North Africa a millennium and a half ago.

The War Against Torches

The individual Christian knows that his compass and torch must be held aloft for several decades and then transferred to someone who will continue moving forward. A soggy unmarked grave lies ahead for most of us. History swallows up most men without a trace. Only the resurrection can restore the public records of all men—records that most men who have made the journey so far would prefer to stay buried in the bog.

Torches do not stay lit by themselves. By God's grace, however, there is peat in the bog, that decomposed legacy that still burns, though not too brightly. The bog contains an energy source. But we have to keep the torches burning to make good use of the stuff. If the user should stumble, he may drop his torch into the bog. If it goes out, it must be lit by another man's torch.

Stumbling is inevitable. Some men recover; others never do. Some men accept the offer of a renewed flame from their fellow travellers; others don't, and end their days in darkness, either sunk in muck or wandering blindly in circles.

The best service that a man can render to others is to find those with extinguished torches, and then offer them a light. The flame from one torch can be transferred to a dozen or a hundred others. Every man is given a rudimentary compass in life—the **work** of the law on the heart (Rom. 2:14-15)—and some are given a high quality compass (God's Bible-revealed law), but not every man is given sufficient light to read his compass clearly. This light is the historical legacy of the church: creeds, theologies, capital of all kinds, kingdom vision, programs, and personal and institutional reputations. These flickering points of light can go out.

The problem is, **men despise the gift of light**. It makes them visibly dependent on that all-too-specific compass. It reminds them of their assignment: to keep moving forward, as defined by the compass. They therefore resent the very presence of light. "In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not" (John 1:4-5). And so, there is a war against torches. That war is escalating.

The Problem of Torch Transfers

The fifth point of the covenant is succession: inheritance, continuity, and covenant renewal. The torch must be passed to the next generation. This must be personal, yet it must also be institutional. It is not merely one on one; it is one on one within the framework of a team effort.

As men grow older, they recognize that they cannot carry their torches aloft indefinitely. They must begin to make plans for an orderly transfer, one which does not result in a dropped torch. Few do this successfully.

Only one institution is empowered to continue this transfer process over many generations: the church. Other institutions can imitate the church in this regard, but the church provides the only reliable model. When its members become noted for sharp, precise, successful transfers, so do

other organizations. Likewise, when churches lose this skill, so do other institutions, although there will always be numerous rivals that claim the old ability: cults, political organizations, military organizations, fraternal societies, giant corporations, and schools of higher learning. And, indeed, some of them do make far more successful torch transfers, but only by adopting the familiar two-handed transfer; both participants must drop their compasses in order to execute this complex maneuver.

Consider the key transfer points in a man's life or in institutional transitions. The pastor of a successful large church has to decide: Who will succeed me? And the answer is: Not the man I personally pick. (The same is true of national leaders; even Lenin failed. He feared Stalin's influence, but Stalin inherited anyway.) The more prominent the leader, the less likely that his immediate successor will survive the institutional test. The leader has created too many expectations among his followers; also, his presence has contained the divisive personalities within the organization. When he retires or dies, the torch sputters and often goes out.

There is only one way for a leader to make the transfer with any chance of success: by choosing several subordinates, dividing up the assignments, and using his torch to light the others. This is why a mega-church is inevitably doomed, as surely as Spurgeon's was a century ago. The mega-church pastor who does not divide his congregation into multiple congregations, making his church a cornerstone, will leave behind a tombstone disguised as a church. The mega-church pastor who is not willing to become a functional bishop over the pastors of several congregations will become little more than a corporation president whose successor will see "share prices" collapse.

Abraham made the transition successfully, but he remarried and moved far away from Isaac (Gen. 25). Isaac made the transition successfully because his wife and younger son tricked him. Moses made the transition successfully, but God would not allow him to enter the land. Elijah made the transition successfully, but he had to; he was scheduled for a heavenly chariot ride. Jesus made the transition successfully, but He had to be translated bodily to heaven. These men were noted for uniquely successful exits. Not many men are.

Some men refuse to transfer the torch in their lifetimes. "I'll ride my bicycle until I fall off," said one such libertarian leader, but he fell off mentally and physically five years before he died, and he refused to let go of the handlebars. His organization became a one-man retirement home with 26 full-time nurses. It has still not fully recovered, despite the efforts of more than one successor.

Conclusion

Few men see their work survive intact after they have departed from command. The main question is this: Does their vision of the kingdom remain? Kingdom tactics and even strategies must change over time, but the compass remains. The vision should, too. The key is to avoid dropping either the compass or the torch.

Only those men who make the transfer voluntarily well before they die, content to march quietly behind the one who inherits, can die as each man should, seeing his torch move forward into the distance. The timing of this transfer is crucial; so is the selection of the successor. Most important is the successor's sure grip on his compass. Without this, the torch's light is wasted.