

FOR YOU, YOUR CHILDREN, AND ALL WHO ARE FAR OFF

*Contending for the Faith in America:  
An Open Letter to  
North American Churches*

*From Rev. Fletcher Matandika*

*Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. (Jude 3-4)*


*To my dearly beloved North American Brothers and Sisters in Christ, greetings.*

*I thank God for this great privilege to write this letter to you. My hope and prayer is that the Lord will be pleased to use this letter to bless you and strengthen you as you contend for the faith once and for all delivered to the saints. To God alone be all the praise glory and honor through Jesus Christ forever and ever!  
Amen.*

I am writing to share a few things that I have been thinking about over time regarding the state of the church in North America and in the Western world, in light of the prevailing trends we are seeing as a result of the church's departure from the Scriptures, from historic Christianity and its pillars. This matter is and has been of great concern to me for a very long time.

While I was in Malawi and before I went to Westminster Seminary in California where I studied for my Master of Divinity degree, I had a lot of questions about the content and depth of American Christianity as I encountered and interacted with Christians and missionaries (short term and long term) from America. The biggest questions for me centered on the Christ-centeredness and the Word-centeredness of American Christianity. Much of what I saw and experienced seemed shallow, subjective, and sentimental. It seemed more worldly than godly. This troubled me very much—it left a sour if not a bitter taste in my mouth and was often nauseating. However, I did not know what to do about it as I did not understand the root of the problem and, at times, I was unsure if my sentiments were right or wrong—but something just felt off balance.

While in seminary, I continued to interact with many American evangelical Christians. Things began to get clearer as many of my doubts and suspicions were confirmed regarding the shallowness, softness, and “safeness” of American Christianity. Christianity



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in America is relatively “safe” with very few risks involved (if any at all). The scandal of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, the cross, and the cost of following Christ are not things many American believers like to talk about and celebrate. All this just seems so strange. While I expected to be able to speak the same language with my fellow Christian brothers and sisters in America (especially those in the Reformed Church), I felt as if we were speaking different languages and often speaking past each other.

As an African Christian, I have three main concerns when it comes to the American church and

American Christianity. First, I am concerned for the future of global Christianity. The impact that this shallow, subjective, and sentimental (Americanized) Christianity is having on the rest of the world is of great concern to me and many of my fellow African brothers and sisters in Christ. The kind of Christianity that is being exported to the rest of the world (particularly the developing world) from America is incredibly harmful. As a Malawian Christian, I am concerned about negative influences of the American Church in my home country at different levels, not the least of all theologically.

In God's good providence, the American church has been used of the Lord to bless the church of the Lord Jesus Christ around the world in many ways. You have sent more missionaries to the world than any other country around the globe. That is commendable and something for which I give praise to the Lord. However, it goes without saying that what the rest of the world needs is not an Americanized version of Christianity. Rather, the world (and America included) needs the pure and Christ-centered Christianity clearly taught in the Holy Scriptures. The kind of Christianity that embraces pain and suffering and addresses the fundamental human problem—namely, sin—through the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. The kind of Christianity taught and practiced in North America is in many respects contrary to the Word of God. It is soft and easy. It teaches no self-denial and refuses to take risks. It is more about seeking

personal comfort and security. If this kind of Christianity spreads and gets rooted among the nations, then I wonder what the future of the global Christian church will look like.

Second, I am concerned about the eternal impact of this kind of Christianity on individual souls. The kind of Christianity being frequently practiced across North America is, as Michael Horton has rightly described it, “Christless.”<sup>1</sup> If this is indeed the case (as

I believe it is based on my personal experience), then there is reason enough to be concerned about the eternal impact of this kind of Christianity not only on individual souls in the pews but especially on those who preach and propagate this kind of Christianity.

My third and greatest concern is the glory of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. The church of Jesus Christ must of necessity aim at and care about the glory of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ in everything she does. Christ must always be at the center of the church's worship, evangelism, and missions. The church must strive by the grace of God to open the

eyes of the blind by faithfully proclaiming and living by the gospel of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:1–6). I feel that many churches across North America are preaching a different kind of gospel, which the Lord through the apostle Paul condemns in Galatians 1:8–9. I plead with all who have been called to preach the gospel to follow the example of the apostle Paul and preach the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:26–27) and contend for the historic Christian faith (Jude 3).

My main goal in writing this letter is to highlight what I consider to be the central problem that I have observed and experienced in the North American Church, which is the lack of the faithful preaching of the Word of God. Article 29 of *The Belgic Confession of Faith* identifies this as the first mark of a true church. *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Q & A 89) clearly states, “The Spirit of God maketh the reading, *but especially the preaching of the word*, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation” (emphasis mine). The pure and unadulterated gospel of God’s grace is a nonnegotiable priority for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Sadly, something other than the pure gospel of God’s salvation for sinners has taken center stage in the pulpits of North America to the extent that some churches have become what the *Westminster Confession of Faith* rightly describes as “the synagogues of Satan” (WCF 25.5). In many church circles, people do not want to hear about their fallen state because of sin and their need for faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, leading to repentance unto salvation. These important truths are not always discussed, explained, or applied in the pulpits of America.

I have been to a number of churches where from the moment you walk in, you have no idea what’s going on. You go there expecting to worship and meet with the Living God, but you come out dejected and wondering if it was all worth it—sometimes feeling as if you had just participated in some evil practice (like pagan worship). The moment the preacher opens his mouth, I have often caught myself reaching for a “seatbelt,” not knowing where he was going to take me—many times not preaching from a text of Scripture but building the “sermon” around a movie clip, a newspaper article, or a story of his own making. It’s like riding on the dirty and bumpy roads in Malawi in a jeep that has neither shocks nor brakes. It’s very frightening and uncomfortable to say the least—and it’s pretty sickening. What’s worse though is hearing people’s remarks after hearing such a “sermon,” such as “Wasn’t that a great sermon?” and how “so and so” is a great preacher. The people sitting

in the pews are just gobbling up garbage and junk (which is pollution for the soul) as their level of biblical knowledge and doctrine is so low—almost nonexistent for many of them. They can teach their kids to sing songs such as “Jesus Loves Me This I Know,” but they have no clue what that really means. I have been brought to tears, mourning for the lost opportunity for so many who need to hear “Thus saith the Lord”—a prophetic word from the mouth of God through the preacher to sinners who are at odds with him because of their sin.

A few years ago, an older minister from a mainline denomination who had reached retirement age lamented as we talked. “Fletcher, I cannot preach about sin in my congregation. People get mad at me, and they would walk out of the church if I did that.” With great frustration and disillusionment, he continued, “I am serious! This is the reality in many congregations and in our denomination.” I felt distressed to hear this minister lament in that manner at the end of his many years of ministry. What a sad reality! I did not know how exactly to respond to him. I did with him the only thing that I could do. I asked him if we could pray together for his (now former) congregation, his denomination, and for America. As I reflect on this, I wonder how many more gospel ministers in North America will reach the end of their ministries in this manner. I pray there will be few.

Let me just take a moment and address all of my brothers who have been called to preach the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Dear brothers, *remember that you have been given the highest calling that any mortal man can receive from the Lord Jesus Christ*. In his divine providence, the Lord has graciously chosen and called you to declare the whole counsel of God for the salvation of sinners and sanctification of his flock entrusted to you. Heed the divine instruction handed down to Timothy and to us through the pen of the apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 4:2: “Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”

*Remember, dear brothers, that souls of sinful men and women are at stake!* If you do not preach the Word faithfully, you may fill your churches with thousands of seemingly “happy” and yet unsaved adherents who will soon stand before the seat of judgment—perhaps without knowing Christ as their mediator—and you yourself will have to give an account for their souls before the Lord on the Last Day (Ezek. 33:8–9). *Remember, dear brothers, that the gospel needs no improvement!* In fact, the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ cannot be improved upon. The Lord God has put his saving power in his gospel (Rom. 1:16–17). Any attempt to improve upon this gospel will only ruin it



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and further incite the wrath of God. The simple and yet life-changing gospel as handed down to us by the apostles in the words of Scripture (1 Cor. 15:3–4) is powerful to save even the worst of sinners.

I would be remiss to proceed in this letter without addressing you, my fellow brothers and sisters in the pews, especially because this letter is primarily directed to you and not necessarily the clergy, although I do pray and hope that they too will derive some benefit from reading it. But for you, I have these five things to say.

*First, sincerely long for the Word of God.* "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation" (1 Pet. 2:2). Seek to learn and be mastered by the Word of God. May God's Word be enough for you and sufficient to fill you up and guide you in all matters of faith and practice. Hunger and thirst for more of God's Word especially when you go to the house of worship. Make it central to everything that you do and desire as you go from day to day.

*Second, fight against the spirit of the age.* "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths" (2 Tim. 4:3–4). Paul's exhortation to Timothy written centuries ago still rings true today. It is sad that the entertainment culture has so penetrated the church in North America, so much so that the people in the pews expect to be entertained when they go to the house of worship, instead of confronted and comforted by the Holy Word of God in its totality.

*Third, seek to understand Christ's atoning work on the cross.*<sup>2</sup> Christ's atonement for sin on the cross is, in my view, the bedrock of our salvation and of the Christian faith. Any serious Christian should be amazed by and seek to better understand the grace of God given to us through the Lord Jesus Christ and his substitutionary death on the cross, where he stood condemned in our place and made us right with God (2 Cor. 5:21). I plead with you to make much of this truth when you go to

the house of worship and in all aspects of your life to the extent that others will be compelled and challenged to passionately embrace and behold Christ as "the Lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Anyone whose life has been gripped and impacted by the sobering and sweet truth of Christ's atonement for sin on the cross will do everything in his power (under God) to make sure that others get it and that they too are gripped and impacted by this good

news of God's salvation for sinners.

*Fourth, let me encourage you to learn to appreciate the gospel and its necessity for the salvation of sinners.* The gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is the world's only good news. It gives hope to the hopeless "sinners in the hands of an angry God," as Jonathan Edwards said in his most famous sermon. A sober understanding of the gravity and misery of sin will lead any serious-minded Christian to savour the sweet gospel of God's salvation. The pulpits as well as the pews must seek to make the gospel crystal clear and treasure it above all things. "Good" moral advice and self-help tips will do nothing to save dying souls and must be shunned at all costs.

*Fifth, keep your ministers accountable, especially by praying for them.* I think this point is self-explanatory, but I will say one thing here. Every gospel minister must be kept accountable in terms of how faithfully he exercises his duties and responsibilities, especially when it comes to the preaching of God's Holy Word. There are many ways to keep ministers accountable, but I will not delve into all that except to say pray for your ministers that by God's grace and the working of God's Holy Spirit they may be kept faithful and true to their calling. In my view, that is the best way to keep your ministers accountable before God and their congregations.

I would like to end this letter with a warning, an exhortation, and a promise from the Word of God. First, here is the warning: *Beware of the devil and his schemes.* There are many false prophets running around today trying to destroy the church of Jesus Christ through deception. Beware of them (Matt. 7:15–20). The devil is, of course, at the center of all this deception. He does not come clothed in wolf's clothing. He is too smart to do that. He comes clothed in sheep's clothing and so do his messengers, as the Bible tells us. He disguises himself as the "angel of light" as do his servants (2 Cor. 11:14–15). But he is prowling around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. The Bible calls us to resist him so that he may flee from us (1 Pet. 5:8ff). Paul Harvey's *If I Were*

*the Devil* illustrates this biblical truth.<sup>3</sup>

To my fellow gospel ministers, let us heed Paul's instruction: "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). Guard God's flock from ravenous wolves that may be among you.

Second, a pleading exhortation: *Stop playing as the church and start being the church that the Lord Jesus Christ bought with his precious blood.* Church is serious business and so is the worship of God. We do not have the luxury of worshipping the Lord God in the way of our own choosing. If we are going to worship God rightly and truly reflect his character, then we must worship him in accordance with his Word. "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). In addition to that, we must strive to "be holy even as he is holy" (1 Pet. 1:16). It's time to get real. The world is perishing. There is no time for playing church games. Souls of sinful men in the hands of an angry God are at stake. God's glory is at stake. Let's honor Christ, the Head of the church who shed his precious blood and died to purchase a people for his own, even the church to be his bride.

Third and finally, a promise for your encouragement: *Do not despair. Remember the faithful words of our Lord Jesus Christ, "I will build my church."* The situation might be pretty bad in your own denominations and/or congregations, but don't lose heart. There is hope in Jesus Christ. The battle is not lost! If you are a true believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, hold on to the faith. Keep fighting the good fight of faith. If you are a gospel minister, pray for the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit upon America and keep preaching the gospel faithfully. It's not a lost cause. Preach Christ, the Son of the Living God, and him crucified. Remember his own words, "On this rock, I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). Hold onto that promise and watch what he will do, and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will be found blameless.

Thank you very much for letting me share these concerns with you. May the Lord be pleased to pour out his Holy Spirit afresh upon America! May we experience a new reformation and a return to the true worship of the Triune and Living God through Jesus Christ!

Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

(Jude 24–25)

*Your brother in Christ,  
Rev. Fletcher Matandika  
Pastor, New Westminster Chapel  
New Westminster, British Columbia, Canada ■*

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**Rev. Fletcher Matandika** (B.A., Biblical Studies, African Bible College; M.Div., Westminster Seminary California) is founder and president of Joy to the World Ministries International ([www.jtwministries.org](http://www.jtwministries.org)) and founder of Ministry of Hope ([www.ministryofhope.org](http://www.ministryofhope.org)), a Christian ministry that cares for over 3,000 orphaned children. He was born and raised in Malawi, and his father, Rev. R. A. Matandika, is a minister in the Nkhoma Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP).

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<sup>1</sup>See Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008).

<sup>2</sup>For more on the atonement, I highly recommend James Denney's *Death of Christ*, which can be accessed at: [http://www.ccel.org/ccel/denney/christ\\_death.ii.i.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/denney/christ_death.ii.i.html).

<sup>3</sup>See <http://www.jesus-is-lord.com/ifiwere.htm>.