“Is Paris Burning?” is the name of a WWII movie where the Nazi Adolph Hitler has ordered his generals as they retreat from Paris to set it on fire. If Hitler can’t have Paris then no one else can either. And in the course of the movie the general in charge of Paris deftly ignores the order and preserves the city. It is too beautiful to be destroyed. But also just recently we were subjected to the terrible images of the burning of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. The roof was accidentally set ablaze by a construction project, and the ancient timbers in the roof caught fire, the central roof collapsed in the nave, and the large steeple, if you will, on which sat a large bronzed “cockerel” fell through the burning ceiling and onto the stonework of the cathedral below. The images of the destruction were horrible. Parisians gathered and wept in the streets as the roof collapsed and the full significance of the fire came to light. I found it interesting that nowhere was there sadness or even mention that a house of God where the Lord is worshipped collapsed. But reference was made to its historicity; the historic nature of the cathedral. Mention was made that it was a “cultural icon” of France. The man who found the blackened cockerel that once sat atop the steeple, mentioned that it was a symbol of France. But it was clear that no one had a sense that it was a house of God where the Lord God Almighty was to be worshipped. It was about architectural beauty; it was about history; it was about cultural icons. It was about France and not about God, let alone the Lord Jesus Christ. Tours occurred but not much worship. Did anyone else find that odd? And of course, it is because France today is a largely secular, god-less society whose culture long ago rejected the Lord. It is a cautionary tale, I think, for the United States of America as we celebrate our Independence Day. Will we go the way of secular godless France? Or will we go the way of Christ? It’s the question I pose today...

The cockerel –why would you put a rooster on top of Notre Dame Cathedral? What is its significance? Well, the man who located it thought it stood for France. Actually, it is the symbol of Peter’s three denials of the Lord Jesus Christ that we just read in the Gospel of John. The educated man who found the cockerel and who thought it was a symbol of France clearly did not know his scripture. Educated in some things; ignorant in others. The Hicks Chapel at Pittsburgh Seminary has a large brass rooster sitting atop its steeple. I asked Dr. Calian, seminary President, why they chose a cockerel? He said it is a sign of deep humility, a reminder of how easy it is when confronted by the world to deny Christ. Three denials. Jesus predicts that the brash Peter who boasts he will never deny His Master and friend Jesus, will indeed deny Jesus three times before the cock crows. Peter is confronted once: “Are you not also one of this man’s (Jesus’) disciples?” Peter responds: “I am not”. (John 18: 17) He is confronted a second time, “Are you not also one of his disciples?” and he responds, “I am not.” (v. 25) Finally a third time he is confronted, “Did I not see you in the garden with him?” and Peter again denies it. And “at once” “the cock crowed”. (v. 27) And Peter wept bitterly. Another rendering of this passage has Peter saying with great vehemence –“I do not know the man!” (Matthew 26: 74) And then the cockerel crows. And then Peter sheds bitter, bitter tears, remembering his confession of Jesus as “The Christ the Son of God”, remembering his boasting in the Garden that he would never deny Jesus, remembering Jesus’ prediction that Peter would deny Him three times and then the cock would crow.

So the cockerel is the Biblical symbol of the denial of Christ. I am not too certain that one would want to identify France too closely with that. What’s the meaning of the three denials, now having prophetic significance in relation to France?
First denial, is to make Christianity and Jesus Christ Himself into a mere footnote of history. These events happened a long time ago but they have no particular significance to today. Yes, Jesus lived and died and was buried and rose from the dead, but that all happened long, long ago. Its history and it has no significance to today. America was founded by Christians as a Christian experiment of a nation that saw itself as a new Israel. But increasingly, the significance of that is all in the past. A footnote. An obscure reference in a dusty history book. The FIRST DENIAL OF CHRIST...

Second denial, is to make the church, that which is the Body of Christ alive on the face of the earth, into merely a cultural icon. The church in the past, to be sure, influenced the society, but we are far more advanced and intelligent today than that. So the church is a symbol, to be sure, of something which occurred a long time ago, but it is an icon, a representation of something forgotten, not having any particular power to move us as moderns anymore. We are too sophisticated to believe. America was founded by people like William Penn who saw their faith as the seed of the nation and as the working out of the Peaceable Kingdom here on earth. The nation was to be the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God on earth. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. But Increasingly America is going the way of France. The church is a quaint notion of a dusty, forgotten past, turned into a cultural icon by its culture. The SECOND DENIAL OF CHRIST...

Third denial, is to make Jesus irrelevant to cut Him off from the church and from the cathedrals built in His honor. This is outright disbelief –“I do not believe in Him.” “I do not know Him.” Confronted by a secular world that increasingly wants the church to deny its faith, making that faith more and more costly to follow, questioning people and making Christians feel as if they are narrow-minded, or judgmental or bigoted because they believe in a God of love who sent His only begotten Son into the world to die for a world that would nail that Son on a cross. More and more every day each one of us will be asked to compromise what we believe. We will be asked in effect are you with the world or are you with Jesus? Do you follow the Jesus outlined in scripture or some made-up cardboard Christ put together according to the desires and whims of society? America is in danger of having a church that as the Bible warns, has “a form of godliness but denies its power”. (2 Timothy 3: 5) The church buildings are all still here but they are empty on the inside; they have been turned into just cultural icons; they have denied their Savior; ignored God’s Word; they are empty of His power. They are devoid of His presence. The world has pushed back because the world always pushes back on those who believe in Jesus. The question is whether we stand firm...or whether we deny. Invoking a curse and shouting with vehemence, “I do not know the man!!!!!” Or choosing to follow Jesus when it is increasingly difficult to do so...Do we know Him or not? The THIRD DENIAL OF CHRIST...

I end with hope. There were pictures while Notre Dame Cathedral was burning of an image of the Lord Jesus Christ arising out of the flames. It really was quite amazing to see this image of the resurrected Christ in the midst of the fire that was burning down His cathedral. I think it is a sign that even in the most secular of places, even in the midst of the denying of who He is and what He has come to bring, out of the ashes of a godless secularism that has no place for the Lord Jesus, out of the ashes the Lord will rise, out of every Good Friday His power in His resurrection arises in His church, and His people who are called by His name. Will America stand firm, will the church in America stand firm? Our time of communion holds within it this question: Will I deny my Lord and Savior Jesus? Or will I follow Him regardless of the cost? May the cockerel not crow at the end of the day for me, dear Lord; may I always claim You as my Savior and Lord no matter the day. Amen and Amen.

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IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!