

A Sincere Appeal

(Regarding The Pattern Of The Gatherings Of The Church)

By W. Carl Ketcherside



When Ezekiel was carried away captive into Babylon, the city of Jerusalem was not yet destroyed. One day the prophet was sitting in his foreign house with some of the elders of Judah, when he saw a dazzling vision. A man appeared who took him by a lock of his hair, and the Spirit lifted him up between heaven and earth, and was forced to look upon the idolatrous practices carried out in secret and also openly on the very porch of the temple (Ezek. 8). The city was almost wholly filled with worshippers of pagan deities.

As the prophet contemplated the wretched scene, he saw seven men approaching from the direction of the upper gate. Six of these held drawn swords, the seventh had a writing case at his side. They marched solemnly into the temple precincts and stood beside the bronze altar. A voice called out instructions to the man with the writing case. "Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark upon the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it." The other six were then ordered to pass through the city behind the first, and to slay outright, without pity, all who were not marked in their foreheads. They were told positively to "touch no one upon whom is the mark." And they were likewise told to "begin at my sanctuary."

We believe that idolatry, worldliness and apostasy characterize much of the religious world in these days. The leaders are like the false prophets in the time of Ezekiel. "They have spoken falsehood and divined a lie, they say, 'Says the Lord', when the Lord has not sent them, and yet they expect him to fulfill their word. Have you not seen a delusive vision, and uttered a lying divination, whenever you have said 'Says the Lord', although I have not spoken?" (Ezek. 13.6,7) Yet there must be in this Babylon of religion, a remnant of honest and humble hearts who sigh and groan over the abominations committed in the name of worship. Surely the invisible mark on the forehead has been made by the one whose finger wrote on the temple walls of Belshazzar. "The Lord knoweth them that are his." The judgment of God will be upon this idolatrous generation. That judgment will begin in his sanctuary.

The sectarian spirit of today can never achieve the ideal of God. It can never

answer the prayer for unity of Him “whom having not seen we love.” Division, schism and strife are perpetuated by the clergy. The common people sigh for unity. They do not want to hate their fellowmen, but they are taught prejudice, animosity and fear by leaders who segregate them with human creeds as barriers to prevent them from thinking for themselves. The early Christians belonged to no sect. They had no other creed but Christ. They were not fractured into diverse groups, each with a top echelon of clergyman who exploited them for gain and manipulated them for political prestige. They were all a kingdom of priests unto God, and they recognized no high priest but the Son of God, now coronated King of kings.

Greed for money is at the bottom of much of our sad plight. Men make a profession of dispensing the water of life which God has freely given. They then inaugurate a special caste to minister in this profession and demand support from the rest of God’s children. Others see an opportunity to make gain and seize power by instituting organizations to produce and train the professional clergymen. Theological seminaries operating as specialized colleges are begun and again a tax is levied against the true clergy of God to produce a special clergy which will steal the very privileges of those who pay tribute to this earthly handmaiden to produce them. Eventually the simplicity of God’s original plan of priesthood becomes so obscure, that those who plead for a return to the old paths are derided, maligned and laughed to scorn.

Occasionally, men who love the cause of Christ and sigh for its purity rise up and sound the call to return to Jerusalem. The hearts of men are stirred for a brief time, and the weary marchers take up their burdens and face again toward the walls of Zion. But the love of popularity, the lust for preeminence, the desire for gain soon crush out the noble ambition, and once again a clever priestcraft under innocent titles takes over and the work bogs down in a morass of innovations.

If this generation is to see any rapid strides toward restoration of the New Testament order it must begin with the elimination of the whole clergy idea, under whatsoever name or system that idea is perpetuated. Labeling poison by a harmless name does not change its nature, but makes it the more dangerous. There must be a purging from our very thinking of a clergy system which is repugnant to God.

But how shall we rid ourselves of the burden of an unscriptural clergy system? That the task will be difficult let no one doubt. The first step must be a firm resolution to examine the sacred Scriptures by each child of God for himself. Everyone who loves God must not only seek to derive spiritual food for his own growth, but he must have then a compelling urge to share his learning with his brethren for their good. Restoration must always be preceded by reformation of life, thinking, attitude and heart. Let the glorious liberty which is ours in Christ Jesus be again understood and cherished. Let anything which will steal that liberty and bring us again into bondage be so obnoxious to us that we will not countenance even the faintest hint of it.

Men must reassert their right to “buy wine and milk without money and without price.” (Isa. 55.1) They must resent with every moral fiber the idea of professionals “cashing in on the gospel” and selling back to them that which God gave equally to all mankind. They must be possessed of such an overpowering love for undying souls that they will all carry the glad tidings to loved ones, friends and neighbors. They must be willing to share in the edifying of the congregation both privately and “when the whole congregation is come together in one place.”

It is not a question with real saints whether a thing will work or not. The only thing they question is whether or not it is God’s will. If it is they must make it work. God’s plan will work if we will work God’s plan.

Many preachers are unwilling victims of a modern condition which they secretly detest and even openly question. They realize that the position which they occupy as “The Minister” in a local congregation is without scriptural warrant. Such men must through prayer and meditation strengthen their hearts and steel their convictions until they develop the courage to break away from tradition and cease to cater to that which will enslave the church. This will require a tremendous faith, because of the adverse criticism, and the tug of so many considerations which may be sacrificed — money, power and prestige!

The wives of such gospel preachers will need to be saintly women. The feminine heart seeks security. There is a lure in a nice home made ready to the hands, in a regular check of ample proportions, in the social glory attending a profession. To turn one’s back upon all such appeals and face the future is an acid test of fidelity to God. Yet in every age there have not been wanting faithful women who have encouraged their men to “stand fast in the Lord.”

All must be made to realize that the task of bringing the Gospel to the world belongs to every saint. The realization of that fact overturned paganism in the first few centuries after Christ. It is the only thing which can do it again. “It is an interesting, but not a surprising fact, that the circumstances of the first planting of Christianity in places which later were among its most powerful seats, including Rome and Carthage, are not known. Visitors to Jerusalem at the great festivals, mechanics who changed their abode from place to place, and commercial travelers, might carry to their homes the faith which they had elsewhere received and form the nucleus of Christian communities. The gospel doctrine was transported from place to place, as seeds blown from the trees and warred abroad.” (The Beginning of Christianity, Fisher).

The first truly literary assailant of Christianity was Celsus, who about the beginning of the second century taunted God’s congregation with the fact that “woolworkers, cobblers, leather-dressers, the most illiterate and vulgar of mankind, were zealous preachers of the gospel.”

One historian declares: “If men were often, in the first instance, won without

the word, they were won to the word, and to Him who gave it. And the word was nigh unto them. It dropped from the lips of those whose lives adorned it, and it is a most notable circumstance that, though there was a regular ministry from the beginning, there is scarcely anything said in the history of the second and third centuries of Christians who could, in any distinctive sense, be called missionaries. The trader on his journey, the soldier in the camp, the slave in the house, the philosopher among his disciples, as well as the friend among friends and the mother among her children; these all did their part in diffusing the knowledge of the truth which they felt to be of God, and to which, they were assured, God would give the victory." (The Early Church, by David Duff, M.A., D.D., LL.D.)

In the primitive church the saints met to edify one another and scattered to preach. The bench of the cobbler, the plow handles of the farmer, the desk of the tax collector; these were the only pulpits known. The Christians took the good news to the world; they did not build houses and tell the world to come. The kingdom was spread like leaven works in the dough. Just as the yeast affects one particle of the mixture and it then permeates every other particle with which it comes in contact, so Christianity filled the hearts of men, and from them spread to other hearts as they came in contact in the pursuit of daily tasks. The slave girl whispered the story of freedom into the ear of her haughty mistress as she combed her tresses and applied the unguent; the bazaar keeper talked to the prospective purchasers as they examined his wares; the banker heard about the lowly Nazarene at the public bath; the clerk in his counting house; the farmer at the local inn. The Ethiopian treasurer learned of Christ as he rode along in his chariot; the jailer in his dungeon keep; Lydia out on the river bank. Everywhere men were persuaded by those who said, "We have found him of whom the prophets have spoken."

Those who were Christians did not speak of "entering the ministry." They were already in it. Everyone entered the ministry at conversion. To be in Christ was to be in the ministry. No one went away to study for "the ministry." Each one began where he was and announced the Messiah who had come. People did not send for a preacher. They just began preaching. All who had been inducted into the kingdom could tell what Christ had done for them. Every Christian was a minister, everyone was a priest. The congregation was a priesthood — a royal priesthood composed of all believers.

Each week these priests gathered about a table. They ate of the bread and drank of the cup in memory of the Lord's death. As they were assembled they prayed. Their prayers were spontaneous. They did not pray because they were "on the program" or because they were "assigned to do it." They talked to God as a son speaks with his father. They bore their mutual burdens to the throne of grace to find help in time of need. They rejoiced in thanksgiving in the presence of God. They spoke to each other to build up, stir up and cheer up. Their talks were not formal or stilted sermons. A number of brethren participated, speaking one by one, that all might be edified and all might be comforted.

The pattern of the gatherings of the early church was designed by God to meet the needs of the church in all ages. It requires no alteration, needs no amendment, and demands no improvement. The church of today can only be healthy if it follows this prototype. **To produce it we must alter our views concerning the word "member"**. We employ it today to designate one who has united with a specific congregation, or who has his name on the roster of the local church. **We talk about "a member of the church" in the same sense that we refer to a member of the country club, a lodge or a farm bureau. The word is never so employed in the New Testament.** There it always refers to one who sustains a vital, living connection with the spiritual body of our Lord, and who is thus in direct relation to Him as the head. And just as one does not confer about the problem of finding something for his physical hands, ears or feet to do, so we should not have to discuss putting the members of Christ to work.

When a child is born, we never once question how many of his physical members will be, or should be, employed in the growth of his body. We train him in the use of his members as he grows toward maturity, but if someone were to advance the idea that a majority of the members should be bound and not permitted to function lest they embarrass the rest of the members, such a person would be laughed out of court. It is only in the spiritual body that we devise schemes whereby the majority of the members can shift their responsibility to one hired to do the work. **Such a system not only degrades God's spiritual institution, making of it a helpless, dependent and servile thing, but worst of all, it appropriates the privileges and abrogates the rights of those who are truly priests of God.**

The call to a brighter and better day goes forth to all who are of a broken and contrite spirit. The way to liberty in Christ Jesus is the way of the cross. Men who plead for a complete restoration of the New Testament church must endure persecution and misrepresentation. An organization in its corruption never did, and never will, admit it. Its only feeling will be anger, not repentance. There is no hope of reforming a decadent movement as a body. The only hope is that men will arise who see the need to call forth those whose trust is stayed in God and once more start a move toward Jerusalem's broken down walls.

Our plea is to everyone who has a good and honest heart. Only on such fertile soil will the seed of the kingdom produce a bountiful yield. Regardless of religious affiliation in the past, or parental instruction, ecclesiastical tradition, or priestly doctrine, let us throw off the yoke which neither we nor our fathers were able to bear. Let us recapture the fountain of life so that its waters can once more flow free and freely, and restore to this earth the congregation as it was given by Him who is our great high priest at the right hand of God. Remember that "you also as living stones are built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God by Jesus Christ." May God bless the royal priesthood of all believers is our very humble and sincere prayer.

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