

Church Life

There is no Santa Claus, Easter Bunny, Tooth Fairy, or pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. And there are no church forms, orders, rituals, sacraments, organization (or absence of any of these) which will guarantee the Lord's blessing and success of the gospel.

It has been nineteen hundred years since the pentecostal flames of the apostolic church flickered and died. The blame has been laid on this and that, and as many cures as flaws have been found and have been tried. From time to time it has pleased the Lord to send revival blessings, to raise up special messengers and mightily bless their labors, to favor movements in the Christian church with unusual success. But no specific pattern has ever been set forth that would positively identify that particular church order which would bring the church again to its primitive glory.

So long as the Lord's people are alive in the Spirit, are walking in the comfort and power of the Holy Ghost, witnessing the risen Christ; and so long as the gospel is being heard and the church is growing, no one would think of challenging the order and methods of the church. The presence of the Lord's blessing, they reason, is positive proof that we are doing it right. If it is successful, then it must be according to truth. But when things begin to drag, when people begin to dry up, sinners harden themselves and ignore the church, then the "doctors" begin to set forth their diagnosis of the illness and offer their prescriptions for cure. It is seldom considered that the practices, customs, rites, teachings and activities of the church in times of declension often were little different from those in time of growth.

An impressive array of teaching cures have been tried, and despite their failure to produce any appreciable change, are still being touted by their respective advocates.

Prophecy teaching takes a number of forms. Dispensationalists tell us that their teachings are the keys to open the scriptures so that they become fascinating to everyone. And by "rightly dividing" the word of truth, people become more sensitive to the Lord and His imminent coming, and will be more diligent and holy Christians. Split rapturists would have us believe that you can threaten the church with tribulation woes and frighten it into loving the Lord more fervently, and forsaking the world. Post millennialists would turn us to a more optimistic view of a decadent world and assure us that if we work in view of a world converted to obedience to God's law, that Christ will soon come and set up His kingdom. Church age (A) millennialists believe that if we could recover the proper concept of a presently reigning Christ, the church would be revived and awakened to her original glory. Other systems have their own reason for advancing their teachings. All these systems have had their day. Either by mass popular movements or a restricted movement in various areas. And they have failed to produce any noticeable change in the church.

Deeper life teachings have also had their day in court. We have been told that if people will just learn to reckon on their union with Christ, to rest in Jesus and let Him live His life through them, that they will become victorious flaming evangelists producing spiritual fruit by the bushels. About all it has produced are multitudes of fans for the deeper life message.

Now come the neopentecostals. The secret of the primitive church, they tell us, is the pentecostal power that they had. If we can manage to get the baptism of power that they had, we can once again do what they did. Yet about all the new pentecostals have been able to demonstrate is some sort of imitation of an unintelligible utterance, some "leg-lengthening," falling backwards, and a few dubious healings that always have to do with some internal disorder which cannot be visibly seen. Miracles, signs and wonders indeed were present in the early church. But the power which made it an unconquerable force was that which converted masses of people to Christ and changed the moral course of cities. Nothing anywhere remotely similar to that has appeared from Charismatic carping.

A somewhat more sane and refreshing turn in the teaching cures comes in a welcome awakening to the soteriology of the Reformation. Sovereign grace churches are springing up in abundance. Puritan reprints are making book publishers wealthy. A host of reformed and sovereign grace publications are regularly mailed out, and a goodly number of Calvinistic preachers are on radio. This has been increasing for about fifteen years at least. Yet the deadness seems to become yet deader. The idea that recovery of Biblical soteriology in systematic terms would bring us spiritual awakening ought to be at least checked by the knowledge that no such thing existed in the early church. Such elementary things as the deity and humanity of Christ, the eternal sonship of Christ, the Holy Trinity, the spiritual nature of the church . . . all these, though clear to us now, were not so clear to the primitive church. It goes without saying that they fared quite well without preaching the "five points." And we fare yet miserably, even though we preach them.

There is, however, another proposed cure which has always had fervent supporters. It has existed almost as long as there has been church declension. Its history, through various names and movements and denominations, parallels the history of Christianity itself.

I refer to a persistent persuasion that all the ills of Christianity can be healed by the institution of proper "Church life." Church life is actually a form of what has been called from time to time "Churchanity," in that it blames everything on a departure from what is considered original New Testament church life, and promises to restore primitive life with primitive order. It deserves to be called Churchanity because it puts hope of Christian life, not in Christ, but in the church of Christ. In this it proposes the very thing against which it has always so violently reacted.

Church life teachings have always set themselves against the various forms of sacerdotalism. Sacerdotalism is the original "Churchanity." It espouses an order of human priests in distinction from the "laity." Along with this priestly order are a host of man-made sacraments, rituals and ordinances. Needless to say, the extreme claims of this system is power of salvation or damnation in the

organized church. The former is to be implemented by absolution and confirmation, and the latter by excommunication. The least of its claims say that God will bless or honour nothing outside its pales.

The seeds of sacerdotalism existed in the hearts of Judaistic Christians who never fully shook off the traditions of the priestly order of Jews. It had its first powerful advocate in Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch toward the end of the first and the beginning of the second century. Since that time the Christian church has never fully purged itself of sacramental leaven.

The primary evil of any form of sacerdotalism is the opportunity it offers for a person to trust the rite or the sacrament or the symbol rather than the Lord Jesus Christ. But it is not our purpose at this time to elaborate on and berate such evils. *Some* form, order and ritual will inevitably be in any church. And men who will not seek the Lord in truth will find some form in which to place their trust. What we wish to demonstrate is the vanities and delusions men get themselves into by militantly crusading *for* or *against* orders, forms and rituals.

The basic issues of Christianity have long been settled, and are generally agreed upon in some measure by all who may be properly called evangelical. The spiritual depravity and deadness of man: His need of regeneration. The humanity of deity of the Lord Jesus. His substitutionary death on our behalf. Salvation through faith in God. The final resurrection, and eternal judgment. None who do not hold to these can properly be called Christian. These and other basic truths can never be compromised.

Our problems come in the implementation of the ramifications of these truths. Do we approach God through one Mediator, Jesus Christ? Or do we need other intercessors to plead our cause? Does God regenerate men solely by the Holy Spirit, or is some baptismal water necessary? If so, how, and under what circumstances is it to be administered? And who is qualified to do it? If not, then why baptize at all? Do we partake of Christ by faith, or by eating the bread of holy communion? If so, who is qualified to serve it? If not, why eat it at all? We are to worship God in spirit and in truth. May we then worship Him anywhere, or must we have consecrated buildings, furniture, priests and vestments? May we pray and sing "as the Spirit moves," or must we act only according to a proscribed liturgy? May any man preach as the Lord enables and provides opportunity, or must he wait on orders from an heirarchy? Exactly where is the Lordship of Christ implemented? In the church or in the individual believer? If in the church, through its officers or through the whole congregation? And what is the extent of church authority over the life of the individual believer?

I want to say at the outset that there is nothing whatsoever foggy about these issues in the Scriptures. The Bible is crystal clear on every one of them. There is one mediator between man and God, the man Christ Jesus. We are born of the Spirit from above by the sovereign will and power of God. We partake of Christ by faith and commune with Him in Spirit, not in grape juice and crackers (or fermented wine, if you please). We do worship God in spirit and in truth, not *in* Jerusalem, Samaria, Cathedral or "Baptist Temple." We pray and sing in the Spirit, not necessarily as the order of service may dictate. The number of gospel preachers are equal to the number God calls, enables and sends; no more, no less. Christ rules as Lord in the hearts of individual believers, and the authority of the church is equal to sum total of all the authority of Christ in all its members. No church officer may usurp the authority of Christ over His redeemed.

The blessing of the Lord, however, does not depend upon strict orthodoxy either in systematic theology or in church order. A church may have neither, and yet be greatly instrumental in the conversion of souls. And on the other hand, a church may be flawless in its doctrine and strictly primitive in its church order, and be as bereft of the presence and power of God as a desert is of water. God "dwells in the high and holy place with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones" (Isaiah 57:15). The blessing of the Lord depends upon identification . . . vital union with the crucified, suffering, risen, reigning Christ, experimentally partaking of Him, believing Him, trusting Him, loving Him, walking with Him, obeying Him.

But this is too destructive to the ego of man. He must have something to strut about, something to achieve, some mark to make himself which will set him apart from all the others as the one who has attained. Therefore, as a man or a church or movement rebels against one form of Churchanity, it inevitably sets up another no better, if not worse, than the first. "The true church," someone has said, "is to be found in those groups that have separated themselves from the historic Church . . . at the moment of their separation." In a few short years they have fallen into the same hole from which they had pulled themselves.

But to ascribe "true church" to this minute existence is too narrow. And to confer an unqualified "true church" upon them is too generous. No group is without glaring flaws and unscriptural attitudes and practices. And we shall see that history bears record to God's blessing on both the highly organized historic churches, and alongside them, the various separatist movements in proportions which will hardly stamp the Lord's approval on one to the exclusion of the other.

The most pronounced split with sacerdotalism in Christian History, is marked by Martin Luther's rebellion against the Roman Church and the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Actually, sacerdotalism was not the prime mover in the matter, but the Pope's shameless peddling of sin (indulgences) in order to raise money for the Church. But once the break was made, Luther denounced the authority of the Pope, all priestly pretensions, the sacraments of the Mass and all other sacraments of the Roman order. But sadly enough, Luther soon reinstated a completely new order of priests and sacraments, little different from the first, and asserted a dogmatic authority in himself, second to no Pope.

The church in Switzerland under Ulrich Zwingli removed itself somewhat further from Rome's superstitions than did the Lutherans, but still tied civil government and the power of the sword to an all-powerful organized church. Zwingli's constant wrangle with Luther over details related to the Lord's Supper betray the fact that neither were free from sacramentalism.

The Reformation reached its theological and ecclesiastical peak in the work of John Calvin. Calvin's ecclesiology projected church government by elders and a Consistory made up of the elders and pastors who looked after church affairs. Yet the central authority of the church in civil government was not abandoned, and Christianity was qualified greatly by conformity to church pronouncements.

The last half of the sixteenth century and the first of the seventeenth saw England and Scotland's governments rocked by clashes between Protestantism and Catholicism. The English church finally settled on a Protestant course with excellent theology, but a practice closely aligned with Rome. Scotland settled in the Presbyterian camp.

For all this, these "Sardis" churches whose "works were not perfect before God," we must not write them off as failures and useless to Christianity. Within their confines are many names whose garments were not defiled. Besides Luther, Zwingli and Calvin, William Farel, John Knox, Protestant Bishops such as Ridley, Latimer, Coverdale, Cranmer, and countless others are stars which gave no little amount of light and to whom we owe no little debt.

Alongside these mainline Reformation Churches were the so-called "stepchildren" of the Reformation: the Anabaptists, the Independents, the Brethren, the Separatists, the Friends, the Waldenses, the Moravians, the Salvationists, and countless others.

Historians who admire the highly organized institutional Church are likely to record the movement of God among them and despise and belittle the separatists movements. Those who react strongly against the sacerdotalism of the high churches are likely to discount all that might have been done of any value in them and relate the true church solely to some specific branch of the separatists.

An objective view will reveal that God worked in His sovereign power in both. George Fox, founder of the Quaker movement, totally rejected every facet of organized Christianity of his day. He traveled about condemning the buildings of worship which he called "steeple houses," and taking to task the pretensions of Anglican priests with all their rituals, calling men back to worship God in Spirit and in truth. God mightily blessed his ministry and multitudes were converted to Christ. But on the other hand, consider the ministries of such Anglican preachers as Whitfield and Welsey.

George Whitfield and John Wesley were God's mighty instruments of revival in England and in America. Yet in all of their ministry they never considered themselves any other than priests of the Church of England. The Church hierarchy threw them out, but the people of the Lord in the church gladly received them. Add to their names the names of men who continued to pastor within the established Church and who were mightily used of God in the revival of the 18th Century. William Grimshaw, Daniel Rowlands, John Berridge, William Romaine, Henry Venn, James Harvey and Augustus Toplady are men whose ministries we would do well to study, and, in many cases, emulate. They knew well the corruption, unbelief and apostasy of the Church of England at that time. They also knew well the advantage of staying within its structure as long as they were permitted to do so. And they never let opposition from their Church hierarchy deter them from the faithfulness to Christ and the gospel ministry.

While it is true that the highly organized churches have always had an abundance of infidels, scoundrels and religious stuffed shirts, the separatists' movements have never been without their heretics, madmen and empire builders. Where the formalistic church stifled true worship with its forms and rituals, the informal come-outers erroneously supposed the abolition of such forms and rituals would automatically restore Christian life. The bondage and rules of no-order and no-rules became as stifling and as idolatrous as the former.

John Nelson Darby probably reacted against the organized church as far as anyone. He went so far as to take the position that the "church" as a whole was in a state of hopeless ruin, and that believers could only gather together as the Apostles did, fellowship around the Lord's table and teach the scriptures. He was one of the most influential teachers among the "Brethren." Yet Darby eventually adopted a system of teaching and practice so strict that he excommunicated whole assemblies in a stroke, and any other person who "broke bread with them" or any other assembly who refused to likewise disfellowship the offending group. This set off a series of bickerings, contentions, splits and disharmony which has not yet ceased. Thus a movement which had a prime priority of Christian Unity became the very opposite. And a man who rebelled against Catholic authoritarianism made a full circle to occupy that very position himself. He re-established what he left the organized church to get away from.

I would like now to turn our attention to some of the contemporary reactions against the traditional church which have hoped to restore Christian life by the way of a restructured church life.

An idea which will probably never leave us until the Lord comes is that of "house churches." When a group secedes, it needs a place to meet, and so naturally begins in a house owned by one of the group. It has much to recommend it. No expense for a special building with the attending bickering about architecture, maintenance, etc. It has good scriptural precedent. And it provides a close, warm, informal setting, ridding the group of all the hated formality and rituals. But nineteen hundred years of Christian history has failed to demonstrate that house churches are any more spiritual than those who meet in buildings constructed specifically for worship and teaching of the word. Gothic architecture and steeple will not make people spiritual. But neither will a three bedroom, two bath home, an abandoned store or a remodeled chicken house, for that matter. What some people call a love for simplicity may be nothing but a cover for their stinginess. They do not want the sacrificial cost of building a house of worship.

Another idea that persists is the thought that if we will give people the "liberty" to worship spontaneously they will do so. Such liberty is thought to be available when no particular order of the meeting is arranged. People come, sit and wait for the Spirit to move. Again, I say, it has been tried repeatedly and doubtlessly will continue. But it fails to produce the revival of spiritual life and the super-saints it promises. It more often degenerates into a boresome sitting and waiting, or, in the case of the more emotional and demonstrative people, wild fleshy and demonic disorder. It is essential that the saints be given opportunity of free expression. But it is foolish to abandon order and planned preaching and teaching in the absence of spontaneous worship. To take away one does not guarantee the infusion of the other. And to establish one need not exclude the other.

"Body ministry" is another church life illusion that has wide popular support today. The theory goes that every congregation is fully gifted with all sorts of ministries, and that if a person can just discover his gift and his ministry and begin to function in the body, then the church will be a powerful force. It never works, for the simple reason that all those gifts and ministries simply do not exist in every congregation. In fact, it is a rare congregation indeed which has over half a dozen persons highly gifted to minister *in the meetings*. The vast majority of Christians are gifted to exercise their ministries in the outside world in mundane matters which are rarely identified with what is called "church life."

Still another hope of church life advocates lies in the realm of church government. Taking their cue from the presbyterian order found in the New Testament, they stoutly assert that the blessing of the Lord cannot rest upon a church until it has a plurality of elders, all equal in authority. This well-intentioned movement is splitting churches and causing confusion far and wide. It has yet to demonstrate that it raised the spiritual life in any congregation one bit. A plurality of elders is indeed scriptural and desirable for a diversified ministry and a decentralization of dogmatic authority. But the fact of the matter is, most congregations simply do not have more than one able preacher . . . if they even have one. We must learn to accept what the Lord gives us and stop trying to create something that does not exist. If the Lord is blessing a church with only one pastor, who am I to step in and tear it down just so I can prove my point that they ought to have a half dozen? Foolishness!

The point to be made here is the various prescriptions for church life pretend to produce the very thing original sacerdotalism promised: Access to Christ and worship and the blessing of the Lord on the ministry. It is simply another order imposed by men that is a substitute for Christ Himself. If I, as a separatist, cannot understand how a high-churchman can see Christ beyond the rites and sacraments of his church, have I a right to declare that he indeed does not know Christ? Paul did not disfellowship Jewish Christians who yet practiced ritualistic law, nor did he shirk from accommodating himself to them without compromising the gospel of Jesus Christ. Nor should the high-churchman rail against the separatist who has found a place where his heart can rest in Christ in a non-formal non-ritual movement. He does not belong to the church; he belongs to Christ. Who is he that judges another man's servant? Here are some wise words from a man associated with one of the separatists groups to a conference of like-minded brethren: "Have we ever acknowledged the incalculable debt of gratitude which we owe to the great historic churches? I think of the Church of Rome, scarlet in her sins, supreme in her saints, and strong in the way that she has stood like a rock in early and medieval history. A score of times she has saved the framework of the Christian society in days of assault by the heathen and by heretics. I recall what we owe to our beloved national Church in this land, for having kept faith alive for centuries in the towns and villages of England. I thank God for our brethren in the Salvation Army who have reminded us to consider the poor; and for our friends, the Friends, who have poured out their lives, their wealth, and their sympathies in the service of wretched refugees in scores of darkened lands. Should a man not lay his had upon his mouth before he criticizes his brethren?"

If we think these remarks may be too generous to the Roman Catholic Church, we must remember that it has not always been what it is now and in years past. Since we have observed that high church sacerdotalism was first fervently advocated by Ignatius of Antioch, it would be only fair to take a glimpse at the glowing love of God in Christ that martyred saint exhibited. Said he, "It is glorious to go down in the world, in order to go up into God." He begs of the Romans: "Leave me to the beasts, that I may by them be made partaker of God. I am a grain of the wheat of God, and I would be ground by the teeth of wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of God. Rather fawn upon the beasts, that they may be to me a grave, and leave nothing of my body, that, when I sleep, I may not be burdensome to any one. Then will I truly be a disciple of Christ, when the world can no longer even see my body." Who among us who abhor high church formality can demonstrate a Christian spirit superior to that?

The sovereign God has a place to use all churches and movements within true Christianity. And He has a place for each of His people to serve. If we have found a place where we can serve comfortably, if we have been suited with the Lord's well-fitted yoke, well. Let us not try to put it upon everyone's neck. What we can serve well under will not do for the next fellow.

What, then, is the secret of primitive church life? It is primitive Christian life. Any effort to produce life by revision of church order and structure ought to be abandoned immediately. Our commission is to preach Christ and Him crucified, not churches and them reorganized.

A word to preachers in view of the foregoing: If you find yourself in a church which has a poor gospel foundation, which has received heretical teachings, which is ignorant in the faith and has erroneous views of God, man, Christ, Salvation, then by all means you must expose the lie and proclaim the truth. This ought to be done in all patience and charity, entreating and reasoning from the Holy Scriptures. If, then, the church splits, you will have done no harm to the ministry. It will have split over something worth standing for.

If you find yourself in a church which is alive in the Lord, yet has form, order or ritual too high or too low for your taste, which does not fit in exactly to what you are accustomed to, then it does not follow that you should force the issue to change the structure of the church. If it is independent, don't try to herd it into some larger denominational structure. If it is part of a denominational structure, you will not have betrayed the Lord if you leave it in the same framework where God is blessing its labors. I have never seen a church improved by getting out or getting in a denomination. I have seen some crippled by changing their status.

You might quite well know some things about church order and structure which others do not. Your system might well indeed be nearer to the New Testament pattern than the practice of the church in which you serve. But you are not obliged to make everyone understand what you know. "Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth" (1 Corinthians 8:1). We are prone to remember that only until *we* get some knowledge. Then we try to force issues upon people who are unprepared for them.

Let us receive the counsel of the Lord from Matthew 9:17: "Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the *bottles perish*: but they put new wine into new bottles, and *both* are preserved." Too often we have failed to notice that the Lord is as interested in preserving the old bottle as He is the new wine. Rather than blowing up old churches over issues of church order and losing both the church and our new wine, it might be best to find a new bottle into which to pour our new wine.