

On Movements

John Robinson, an Anglican clergyman of the Puritan party who became persuaded that he should separate from the established church near the beginning of the seventeenth century gives us some valuable insights to the limitations of denominations and movements: To the first small company of Puritan emigrants departing for Plymouth New England with elder William Brewster, he said, "I charge you before God and His blessed angels, that you follow me no further than you have seen me follow the Lord Jesus Christ. If God reveals anything to you by any other instrument of His, be as ready to receive it as you were to receive any truth by my ministry, for I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of His Holy Word. For my part, I cannot sufficiently bewail the condition of those reformed churches which are come to a period in religion, and will go at present, no further than the instruments of their reformation. The Lutherans cannot be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw; whatever part of His will our God has revealed to Calvin, they will rather die than embrace it; and the Calvinists, you see, stick fast where they were left by that great man of God, who yet saw not all things. This is a misery much to be lamented."

"John Robinson has aptly stated one of the most essential elements in the life of the church, namely the ability and freedom to progress, to develop in the understanding of the Scriptures. At the same time, he has just as aptly pointed out the root of sectarianism or denominationalism. Limitation to a particular aspect of Scriptural truth. In that a denomination propagates a facet of divine truth, its work may be good and useful, but its weakness lies in its limitation, because it neither sees the whole truth or is it willing to go on to apprehend it, so occupied is it with the blessedness of the amount of truth it does understand. It cannot be said that any Scriptural expression of the church apprehends the whole of truth. Such fulness of knowledge will be ours only in eternity. But the church, fully recognizing the limitations of its understanding, must be pressing forward with a divine urge to know more, unrestricted by bounds imposed by human understanding. That vital, spiritual growth is essential to church life." (John Kennedy, The Torch of the Testimony, Gospel Literature Service, Bombay).

What has been said above is largely true of both denominations and movements. But there are some basic differences in the two. Denominations usually have their origin in a powerfully gifted man with a message from God. Invariably he does emphasize some particular aspect of truth and neglects others. He also usually has a pretty big bone to pick with the sphere of Christendom from which he came. These characteristics are carried on into the churches which succeed him as his posterity. But if he is to leave a stable denomination that will survive, his message must be broad enough to sustain spiritual life and growth.

Movements, on the other hand, are somewhat broader in the ecclesiastical sense, but considerably more narrow in total teaching and practice. Movements also do not have one principal founder, but erupt on the scene in a number of varied places with as many diverse teachers. They cross denominational lines, spreading their influence across the whole of Christianity. They are precipitated by some lack, some neglect, some deficiency or vacuum which has been created by established churches who are unwilling to move out of the ruts they have wallowed out for themselves. Or they arise as an outraged cry against heresy and unbelief which has dragged the churches down into apostasy.

The total teaching and practice asserted by the movement is restricted to that particular sphere to which it addresses itself. For that reason, such movements can be a mixed blessing. They can be a great help to us if we will give heed to the truth to which it draws our attention, repent of our error and add its light and life to that which we are already walking in. But if we drop everything we already have, discard out of our treasure all things old, and grab only what is new, we will be greatly the loser. Consequently, movements always have great casualties along with great blessings.

We do not need to join movements. We need to give heed to any profitable teaching they may have for us. But such teachings alone are far too narrow to mount a balanced ministry.

Another danger of becoming too closely aligned with a particular movement is the debilitating effect of an inevitable negative bent. Movements often have prophetic tones. I do not mean they necessarily teach future events, but there is a part of them which is compelled to "cry out against false altars." They come to address a problem in the church. movement is the debilitating effect of an inevitable negative bent. Movements often have prophetic tones. I do not mean they necessarily teach future events, but there is a part of them which is compelled to "cry out against false altars." They come to address a problem in the church. This is good, and indeed it must be done. But our contentious flesh delights more in cutting someone or something down than it does in building up. If we are not careful we will find ourselves warring against our brothers in Christ for no other reason than the fact that they will not beat our drum. We become more interested in what we are against than what we are for, more obsessed with cutting down brethren and justifying ourselves than exalting Christ. This is especially true if we have suffered some rejection and persecution for the stands we take. We shall have need of much grace lest in reply to unjust provocation we find ourselves making an enemy of a brother in Christ.

B. B. Caldwell once said, "God begins with a man, uses that man. Then people start a movement which ultimately is no more than a monument." The late Rolfe Barnard declared, "Any time a man subscribes himself to a human system of theology, he is a dead man. He is no longer able to think, and he can no longer study the word of God with a free mind. He is boxed in his system and can go no further."

If a man has something to say, give him your ear. But do not give him exclusive hearing. If a movement supplies a spiritual lack in your life, receive it. But be assured, that movement is no substitute for Christ or the whole of the Christian church.

