



The Reflector

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The Church in Crisis

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I have a sermon titled “Crises in the Jerusalem Church” that I preach from time to time. It is based on notes that I took on a sermon I heard brother Clinton Hamilton preach many years ago. It points to several crises faced by the first congregation of Christians ever. The purpose of that sermon is threefold: 1) to show that even the Lord’s church under the personal guidance of the apostles had problems and 2) churches of Christ in every generation have had problems to solve and overcome and 3) that by studying how Jerusalem weathered its crises we can learn to deal with the crises as they come to churches today.

A study of church history, from its beginning until the present will reveal that the Lord’s church has never flourished for any extended length of time without facing a serious crisis. The results of each major crisis has been that a large segment of brethren (individuals and congregations) have gone into apostasy. At times apostasy has been so widespread that the New Testament church has all but disappeared from the radar screen of recorded history for many years. Before the death of the first generation of Christians, “the mystery of lawlessness” (2 Thess. 2:7) was already at work that led to the great apostasy following the death of the Apostles that ultimately evolved into Catholicism. For the most part the church of recorded history from about the middle of the second century until the “Reformation” was that of the apostate church. That does not necessarily mean that there were no local churches after the New Testament order in existence during that period. In fact, I have read over the years of some evidence that seem to indicate that there may have been some isolated instances of such congregations existing. I tend to believe that that may have been the case, but they would not have been noted by secular and ecclesiastical historians.

Whether or not that is the case there have been many

successful efforts to “restore” New Testament Christianity around the world from the time of the “Reformation” to the present time. It is not necessary to established historical succession back to the first century for the New Testament church to exist today. As long as we have the “seed of the kingdom,” the word of God, we can teach and practice it anywhere in the world and produce Christians and churches belonging to and following Christ at any given time and place in the world. We are assured that the word will not pass away (Matt. 24:35; 1 Pet. 1:23-25) and that the kingdom shall never be destroyed (Dan. 2:44).

The “Restoration Movement” in the U.S. that began early in the nineteenth century (although early seeds of it date back into the eighteenth century) produced a widespread return to the New Testament order. The “back to Bible” message spread rapidly throughout the nation. Evangelistic fervor was high. Many believers were baptized for the remission of their sins and local churches were started without any denominational affiliation. The sense of brotherhood with those of like precious faith was deep and genuine. There was again an identifiable remnant of God’s people at work. The ancient gospel message rang loud and clear from the pulpits of local churches meeting in school houses, under brush arbors, in private homes and in modest buildings they had bought or built.

But, by the middle of the century the church was in crisis again. There was a sizable segment of the brotherhood that had come to believe that the great work of evangelizing the world would not be accomplished without brethren’s combining their efforts and resources into some kind of working arrangement larger than a local church. Various co-operative arrangements began to be formed around the country into which individual Christians and local churches pooled their moneys. This movement ultimately evolved into a nationwide

organization known as the American Christian Missionary Society in 1849. From the beginning there were brethren who opposed these arrangements and societies insisting that the local church was the only scriptural functioning organization to do the work of the church. The controversy occupied much of the attention of brethren for the rest of the nineteenth century. Sermons were preached, papers were published, and debates conducted about the issue. During that period the issue over mechanical instrumental music in worship was thrown into the mix. As had been the case in the great apostasy that followed the death of the Apostles, a vast majority of the church went with the innovators – leaving a remnant adhering to the ancient order. The American Religious census of 1906 recognized the “churches of Christ” and the “Disciples of Christ” (Christian Church) as separate movements. After that, for the most part members of churches of Christ looked upon the Christian Church as another Protestant denomination.

For the most part the churches that did not go with the society/instrumental music movement were not as affluent as those who did. Thus in the early days of the twentieth century very few of the churches were able to support full-time preachers to work with them. The majority of the preachers made their living at farming or some trade during the week preaching on Sundays and in gospel meetings barely being supported enough to meet their expenses. Yet, hundreds were baptized and the churches grew in leaps and bounds during the first half of the century. It was rare for a gospel meeting to close without several being baptized into Christ. By the end of WWII the “remnant” had grown and prospered. Most churches in cities and towns had full-time preachers and many country congregations had preaching every Sunday. The cause of New Testament Christianity was on the march. There were some controversies during this period that ultimately proved to be no more than a small speed bump in the road. Then came the 50's and 60's and another major crisis. It revolved around efforts once again to activate the church universal in the form of “sponsoring church” and various institutions designed to do the work of the church. As in past crises the “issues” were discussed in papers, pulpits and debates until ultimately the lines were drawn between conservative/non-institutional and the liberal/institutional churches. As in the past, the majority of the brethren went with the innovators and have become more and more liberal in doctrine and practice with time.

But, in spite of the dire predictions of the more liberal brethren, the conservative/non-institutional brethren not only survived but grew and prospered across the nation. Hence, New Testament Christianity is still alive and well in this country and in many places around the world.

Now in these early years of the twentieth first century, I believe that the church is once again in a crisis of major proportions. While I am optimistic and confident that the church in the long term will weather the storm and a remnant will once again persevere. However, in the short term I am far from optimistic. I believe we have some rough waters ahead in the immediate future that will try the faith of us all. This time the crisis is not as focused on one or two well-defined issues, but is caused by several seemingly unrelated matters that threaten the very fiber of the church. Some of these matters have been around for years, but not nearly to the degree that they are now and because they were mostly confined to a few relatively isolated cases – but each has grown in the number of influential advocates and practitioners of each position. All these issues combined constitute a major crisis for the church that in my judgment could easily fuel the need for another “restoration movement” in many areas of the country.

1. The quality of preaching emanating from our pulpits. Much of the preaching in our pulpits is like cotton candy – a lot of fluff and very little nourishment. Too many gospel meetings are filled with sermons(?) that are mostly anecdotal sprinkled lightly with scripture to give them a mild religious flavor. Very little real Bible teaching finds its way into the modern presentation/performance (I refuse to call such a sermon) of some of the more popular and used preachers among us. This is not just the subjective opinion of an old tired preacher, I have heard the same concerns expressed by faithful gospel preachers of all ages in recent months. There are still a goodly number of preachers who take the Bible in hand and “preach the word.” but I fear that their tribe is decreasing rather than increasing. Churches fed on this kind of preaching can only grow weaker in the “knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” The situation is not likely to improve as long as “the people love to have it so.” (Cf. Jer. 5:31). Until brethren in the pew rise up and say “enough already” to the leadership that continues to invite such shallowness into the pulpits, things will not likely improve.

2. Corporate style leadership managing churches. One

of the great needs among the churches is that of qualifying and appointing faithful men to the eldership. I can name sizeable churches that have operated for years without an eldership. This ought not to be. Having said that, there is a grave problem among many of those churches that do have elderships. The elders and the congregations they serve view their position and work to be much like corporate boards in the business world. This is especially true of the larger and more affluent churches in urban areas and this mentally is fast spreading to smaller churches in more suburban and rural areas. Often they are chosen and appointed not because they have proven themselves capable of “ruling their houses (families) well,” and of “convicting the gainsayer,” but because they have proven themselves to be successful in the corporate world. They approach their work as corporate managers rather than shepherds of the flock of God. Their prime concern is to see that the church has show-case facilities and programs that will attract the most “customers” or “clients” possible from the community and to ensure that a budget is maintained that will pay for those facilities, their upkeep and future expansions. They often will look for a preacher whom they believe will facilitate that objective. He must be charismatic with the charisma to be a great P. R. man for the corporation, excuse me, I mean church. When a personnel problem arises the best solution is the one that will minimize the loss of “customer base” and revenue rather than what the scriptures demand of shepherds who truly care for each sheep in the flock of God over which they are supposed to be overseers. As long as these conditions exist churches will continue to be spiritually malnourished and ripe for every wind of doctrine that comes along. Things will not get better until churches come to realize what real elders are like and that their work is that of tending God’s sheep and going before them setting examples for them to follow and not bosses nor lords demanding their subjects to blindly follow their lead.

Also, as part of the corporate mentality, elders are more concerned with running a well oiled corporate machine than they are with watching for the souls of those over which they have been made overseers. They are good at drawing up corporate plans that organize and departmentalize a maze of activities that really belong to the Christian’s work as an individual. All of this gives the appearance on paper that this church is really on the ball and has every base covered. As a result many congregations are top heavy with organiza-

tion leaving little room for individual initiative. Christians come to feel that in order to do the Lord’s work that they need to be assigned a place on the organizational chart. A Methodist friend once told me that his church was so organizationally minded that if two of their preachers were to fall out of an airplane they would have to organize a landing committee before they could hit the ground. Brethren seem to forget that the bulk of the Lord’s work is to be done by individual Christians as they go about their daily lives. Again, this condition will not get much better as long as “the people love to have it so.”

3. Redefining of marriage and liberalization of divorce. There has always been some differences of views on marriage and divorce among brethren. Until recent years these differences were very limited in their impact upon local churches because only a few brethren could be found that held views differing from the overwhelming majority of brethren. Even those who held those views differing from most brethren did not openly push their viewpoints because there were so few divorces in local congregations. But that has changed since divorce has become more socially acceptable and preachers and churches have had to deal with a huge increase in the number of divorces among members and prospective members of local churches. All of this has given more urgency to studying the subject and making application to situations as they exist today. As a result many Christians, especially preachers, are giving more time to the study of all aspects of the subject and coming to very conflicting conclusions about the institution of marriage itself and how a marriage can be scripturally dissolved.

Some of these conclusions that are being openly espoused will, if widely adopted, destroy the institution of marriage as we have known it and as it is revealed in the scriptures. They will also open the door for adulterous marriages within congregations. These conclusions are not matters of individual conscience and personal practice, but matters that strike at the very foundation of the oldest God-ordained institution and they force local churches to decide whether or not they will fellowship adulterous relationships.

Among these erroneous conclusions is the concept that marriage is just a private agreement between a man and women to be husband and wife before God and it is fast catching on with brethren. Meeting the requirements of civil law and cultural norms is just a mere formality that really has nothing to do with the validity of a marriage. Likewise

divorce is just a mental act before God and that civil divorce proceedings have nothing to do with a real divorce. Then there is the conclusion that there are multiple scriptural reasons for divorcing a spouse that is gaining popularity in spite of the fact that Jesus said that “But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery...” (Matt. 5:32 NKJV).

If these conclusions are not challenged and checked they will throw the marriage institution into chaos adversely affecting the church and society as a whole. God’s marriage law is universal in scope and is for all of human society as a whole and not just a law for Christians. We would like to hope that those who have recently arrived at these dangerous positions and are advising brethren based on their conclusion will rethink their positions and consider the logical consequences and return to the position that most brethren have held for years. That being that marriage was ordained in the beginning for the good of the human race and is entered into by a covenant between the parties that is publicly ratified and recognized in a manner dictated by the society in which the parties live and that dissolving a marriage is also a legal or societal act based on the customs of the society in which one lives. That does not mean every marriage or divorce authorized by a given society meets God’s approval. God’s law tells us who it is that has a right to enter into a marriage covenant to be ratified by society and who has a right to petition society for divorce from a marriage (Matt. 5:32; 19:3-9). If the situation continues as it is now and the number of advocates of these new positions continue to grow, I fear how it will direly affect unity among brethren. Those who believe that such doctrines will result in adultery will not be able to stand idly by and let such teaching have free course. This is a real crisis.

4. The creation and proliferation of unnecessary issues. There has never been a shortage of things for brethren to argue over. Most of the time such discussions are of little consequence and are localized, never rising to the level of a “brotherhood issue.” Many issues are of the nature that brethren can agree to disagree because their application is personal rather than congregational, nor do they cause a breach of morality or undermine the foundation of one’s faith. Such issues have been around for years causing a minimal of strife among brethren. Most brethren agree that such differences are not worth dividing over.

So, it is not like we don’t have enough issues to keep our argumentative skills honed, it seems that in recent years there are those who are bent on creating new controversies to throw into the mix to keep the polemic pot boiling. Among these are the “tradition busters” who dream up new and novel approaches to the church’s worship and work. It is not that they, through serious study, have found that the “traditional” approaches need changing because they are unscriptural, but that we need change for changes sake. They push their proposed changes upon brethren knowing full well that they will be met with resistance from those who happen to believe that approaches already in place are scriptural and have proven to be expedient over the years. Even those who are clamoring for change admit that the old approaches were not necessarily wrong but in their judgment their new approaches are better. But are they enough better to warrant the strife that their introduction causes?

Then there are those projects that are launched that depend on the approval and support of a goodly number of brethren to succeed. But, alas, a significant number of brethren view the existence and promotion of the said project to be at best questionable and at worst unscriptural and a dire threat to the purity of the church. Thus the fat is in the fire and a new major issue develops. We need to ask if all of this is necessary? The best defense that the promoters of these projects are able to make is that they are “authorized liberties.” Then the question must be raised is: Is clinging to an admittedly “authorized liberty” worth the brotherhood strife its introduction has caused?

Then, on the other hand, there are some brethren who see apostasy lurking behind every bush. Their unwarranted and ill advised objections also create new unnecessary issues. We all need to be careful that our oppositions are well thought out and scripturally based and not just a product of our living in the “objective case and kickative mood.”

There is hardly anything that is worth disturbing the harmony and good will among brethren. We are going to need unity to go forward in this new century. Nor can we afford to allow trends away from ancient order go unchecked for the sake of peace. So, we believe that the church is truly in a crisis that is going to require careful study of the Scriptures and sound judgment on the part of all to weather the storm and once again preserve a remnant bent on walking in the “old paths.”