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THE REFLECTOR

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PRAY FOR SPRING

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Recently a store down the highway from the church building displayed a sign saying "Pray for Spring." That was designed as a humorous reference to the extremely cold weather we were having, but it caused me to think seriously.

I fear we are not specific enough in our prayers. We have often heard jokes about praying for rain, but all joking aside, when the livelihood of people depends on rain for crops and livestock, is there anything wrong with praying for rain? Or if the severe winter brings shortage of food and fuel resulting in much suffering to the very young, poor, sick and elderly, shouldn't we pray for an early spring?

Jesus told his disciples of the coming destruction of Jerusalem in Matthew 24. He said when that calamity was seen approaching "let them which be in Judaea flee into the mountains," and "pray ye that your flight be not in winter, neither on the sabbath day." (verses 16 & 20) Flight in winter would bring suffering and their ability to flee would be impaired on the sabbath day because of Jewish laws.

Paul said to "Pray without ceasing." (I Thes. 5:17) We are not to pray for a specific thing and then sit back and wait to see if it is answered. We should pray as we go onward making the best of things as they are without taking time out to keep score on answered or supposedly unanswered prayers.

I have done a little study in the field of journalism and have read instructions to would-be writers. It is emphasized that a writer should not submit an article or story to a publisher and wait to see if it is accepted or rejected before writing and sending out another. If enough are sent out, some are sure to be accepted. I find that advice to be sound, and I believe the principle holds true in regard to prayers also. We should be persistent in our prayers if we expect them to be answered.

When Peter was put in prison by Herod prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him. (Acts 12:5) Paul thanked God and prayed for the Philippians (Phil. 1:4), and felt that through their prayers he would be enabled to carry on the work of preaching the gospel of Christ in spite of opposition. (Phil. 1:19) Paul asked the Romans to strive with him in prayers that he might be delivered from the unbelievers in Jerusalem and that he might be accepted of the saints. (Rom. 15:31,32) Epaphras labored fervently in prayers for the Colossians. (Col. 4:12) Paul exhorted Timothy that prayers be made for all men, for kings and those in authority in order that "we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty." (I Tim. 2:1, 2) Paul prayed for the saints at Colosse (Col. 1:3), and asked that they pray for him that a door of utterance to speak the mystery of Christ might be opened. (Col. 4:3).

Yes, there are many things we should pray for in regard to the spread of the gospel, the welfare of the church and individuals. There are some things we can pray for and also do something about, but there are other things such as wars, recession and depression which bring suffering and want about which we can only pray. Prayer is as necessary to the spiritual life of a Christian as food and drink is to the physical life. When we eat we do not look back the next day and consciously consider how the food we ate the day before gave us strength for another day. Neither should we consciously consider whether or not yesterday's prayers have been answered. We should look forward, not back, continuing in prayer, knowing that every good gift and every perfect gift is from above and cometh down from the father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. (Jas. 1:17)

Yes, if continued severe weather brings hardship and suffering; there would be nothing wrong with sincerely praying for the coming of spring.

The Shifting Of The Sheep

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FROM TIME TO TIME members of the church decide to change their place of worship from one congregation to another for various reasons. Here I list a few:

1. *Personal like and dislikes*: Perhaps someone has failed to extend to them common courtesy, or has offended them by some careless word or act. (We are all capable of this). But rather than meet the offender and talking it out like the Bible teaches (Mt. 18:15), they simply slip away and move their membership. Then they may childishly say, "I quit that congregation and not a soul contacted me." May I ask, "Why should they?" When a grown man or woman who claims to be a Christian decides to just walk away from a church and go to another one without saying one word, why should anyone contact them? I might retort, "You know, those people just walked away without saying a word." What do such persons want the church to do, beg them to stay?

2. *Church not friendly*: Do such persons mean to tell us that they were perfectly friendly, but nobody would respond? Really, now! When we say "the church (of which we are members) is not friendly," aren't we members of that church? And if so, aren't we talking about ourselves? Whose fault is it that "the church is not friendly enough?" Just as surely as we are part of the church, we are part of the problem! It is a fact that some persons' idea of friendliness is everyone's being nice to me! After almost 30 years of observation, I can say without fear of successful contradiction that most of the persons who complain about unfriendliness in the church are themselves partly the cause of it. They frequently are not very friendly to others. They are clannish; that is, they make a few friends and spend all their time at worship and in social activities with these. Their actions seem to say to others, "This is our party, our group, so please stay away." It is hard to be friendly to persons who seem to want to keep one at arm's length! Solomon said, "A man that maketh friends must show himself friendly..." (Pr. 18:24). Those who make such complaints should look in a mirror!

3. *Not enough social activity*: This is a common complaint in this pleasuremad society. Today, many want to be entertained, even in the church. It is a fact that it is good for brethren and sisters to be together socially, but let us settle one thing; this is an individual responsibility--it is not a church duty. That being the case, then social activities should be promoted by individuals.

But, as shown above, those who are able to do the most (have the most money and the most room in their homes) do the least. So, again, their idea of a church with a lot of social activity is everyone inviting them!

4. *Petty disagreements*: Some church members are self-willed, and want everything to go their way. They can't be satisfied in a congregation that does anything that disagrees with their personal preference, or their self-made creed. The slightest disagreement will send them looking for somewhere else to worship.

I do not believe the Bible stipulates where one should worship, as long as he worships correctly. We have no right to tell anyone in which loyal church he must have his membership, yet it should go without saying that if a person feels strongly enough about conditions in one congregation that he cannot conscientiously worship there, he cannot scripturally worship anywhere else until he at least tries to correct those with whom he disagrees.

The all-too-common practice of just walking away from a church then making comments about it that cast aspersions and ugly reflections upon it, is just not in keeping with the teaching of the New Testament. We should either face the accused, or make no comment about them to others.

Churches sometimes feel flattered when they receive such members. They think it is an indication of congregational virtue that members are flocking to us, but let this be understood: Those who will simply walk away from one church over something petty and childish, will walk away from any church for the same reasons. Changing churches doesn't change character!

I have known some brethren of the dispositions described in this article who have moved through every church in an entire area. I lived in one area where some members came to us from another church. I was told that they left this church several years ago over some petty little disagreement and had been through every church in town. Thus they were now starting over! As sad as it is, such persons never lend strength to a church. To a large degree, they are mere spectators, rather than active participants. They spend most of their energy looking for flaws in the performance of others. They are looking for a PERFECT church--perfect by their own definition of course. But let this be understood; should they ever find such a church they should not become a part of it, because they would ruin it!

I have not yet found a perfect church. All churches have weaknesses, but no sincere Christian can strengthen such weaknesses by simply walking away. Such is always a sad occasion. It reveals one's own weakness. Let us never rejoice at the SHIFTING OF THE SHEEP, or when a drifter drifts, or a shifter shifts.

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SAM'S PREDICAMENT

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Sam (short for Samaritan) came upon a fellow in distress. Sam's first impulse was to go ahead and help the man. But, then it hit him like a bolt of lightning, he was about to act alone, by himself, on his own. That would never do! Poor Sam almost forgot that he is now living in the modern age of organization. He almost forgot that (1) this was Tuesday and *Aid-Night* was not until Friday; (2) this type of work might belong to another committee; and (3) he was not real sure "we" had a program organized yet to cover this situation.

Oh, well, he would bring the incident up in the next business meeting of the church (a month from next Sunday) to see if some kind of program could not be instituted to cover such problems in the future, if one was not already in existence. Sam would be glad to serve on the committee and dutifully do his assignments (like a good Christian should)--but to act on his own seemed a little presumptuous to him after having been conditioned to think in organized terms. It just seemed to him that such personal (?) work should be organized and systematized.

As trends in government, business, and society have pointed toward more rigid organization, it has affected religious thought. A Lutheran preacher told me a while back that if two Lutheran preachers were to fall out of an airplane that they would have to form a *Landing committee* between them before they could hit the ground. Now, brother, that's organization!

In the New Testament, organization was kept to a minimum. To be sure, congregations were organized with elders and deacons (Phil. 1:1). Congregational activities are organized activities. This we do not deny. However, the weight of emphasis was upon individual action, under Christ, doing the Lord's will toward God and man.

Super-organization has affected the Lord's church. We must scrutinize, organize, deputize, and institutionalize (Th-that's all folks, that shot our vocabulary) before we can do the Lord's work. Emphasis has gradually and subtly shifted from individual initiative and action to organized (congregational) emphasis. Rather than motivating brethren to do good out of personal loyalty to Christ as Lord, whenever and wherever they see opportunity--I fear that we are more motivating folks by forming them into committees or "*bringing them into a program*". This concept lends to the notion that in order to act properly that one must act "as a part of a committee" or "within the program", or at least, with the permission of the appropriate "chairman". Personal initiative gives way to carrying out "assignments".

Too often, "*WE are not doing anything*" means "*We have no organized program*". "What are the brethren at Fultondale doing to teach the lost, help the needy, or visit the sick?" translates "What groups or programs do you have going on a set schedule doing these things". Brother Brown's talking to several of his fellow-employees about the gospel doesn't count--it was not supervised by the organization as a part of the program. The fact that sister Black carried food and sat with a sick neighbor means little--it was not her "assignment". Brother Blue's call to a "wayward brother" yesterday is overlooked--after all *who told him* to get involved?

I have often thought that preachers (or elders) should be given the title: "Congregational Programmers". Success is measured by how well one can program the church for work. He is just not with it unless he can get the church into some sort of regimented "visitation program", or "personal work program", etc. One may be ever-so-successful in motivating brethren to individually do their duty to Christ through preaching the Christ and him crucified--but unless he can get the church "programmed" he is just not with it in this age of super-organization. The pity of it all--**MANY PREACHERS THINK THIS IS WHAT "LOCAL WORK" IS ALL ABOUT.** They lament that the church is "dead" unless and until they can pigeon hole every member into some kind of *organized* program.

Certainly, there is a place for organized work. The assembly itself is organized (or should be). Organized edification (such as classes, etc.), benevolence, and evangelism are a necessary part of congregational (group) activity. No individual member has a right to act *alone* planning work *for the group*; nor does he have the right to speak or act on behalf of the group *without the consent of the congregation*. But, often activities properly belonging to the individual and his daily life as a Christian are organized for him by the church, regimented by the leadership and assigned and controlled by those "in charge" of the program. This is not right.

It is a wonder that Paul did not give the qualification of a widow in need as follows: "If she have served on the Young-People's-Activity-Planning-Committee, if she have worked in "our" hospitality program, if she have attended every saints' feet-washing night, if she have served well on our benevolence committee.." (See 1 Tim. 5:10). Pshaw! Brethren, how in the name of reason can we label activities as *individual* obligations and then have the church to become involved in the planning even the details of their execution for the individual?

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I wonder if we may not lose sight of the real beneficiary of our good works--the individual doing them. Super-organization might be efficient (?) in getting the jobs done--but at the expense of personal growth. If it were just a matter of "getting the job done", then many methods would do, including "by proxy". Let's not

forget that a Christian's service is designed to help in two directions--benefiting both the served and server. We must not forget the strength and growth that comes to the individual when he initiates service under Christ. Let's be careful not to set up programs that weakens the motive to act individually.

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