

The Church: A Radical Community

Letter to Diognetus (AD 125): “Although they live in Greek and barbarian cities alike, as each man’s lot has been cast, and follow the customs of the country in clothing and food and other matters of daily living, at the same time (Christians) give proof of the remarkable and admittedly extraordinary constitution of their own commonwealth. They live in their own countries, but only as aliens...they busy themselves on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, but in their own lives they go beyond what the laws require. They love all man, and by all men are persecuted...

Letter to Hadrian (AD 125): “The Christians know and trust their God...If any of them have bondwomen or children, they persuade them to become Christians for the love they have toward them; and when they become so, they call them “brother” without distinction. They love one another...If they see a stranger, they take him into their dwellings and rejoice over him as a real brother; for they do not call each other brother after the flesh, but after the Spirit of “God. If any among them is poor and needy, and they do not have food to spare, they fast two or three days that they may supply him with necessary food. But, the deeds which they do, they do not proclaim to the ears of the multitude, but they take care that no man shall perceive them. Thus they labor to become righteous. Truly, this is a new people and there is something divine in them.”

(Mark 3:32-35) "A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you." {33} "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked. {34} Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! {35} Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.""

When the first Christians were made part of the New Testament church, begun on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, they knew hardly anything of Jesus and nothing at all of the “church.” Yet, immediately, they were thrust into a fellowship of other believers – a radical, consuming community which supplanted every other loyalty.

What did the church look like? They “devoted themselves” to meeting with a relative strangers (Acts 2:42). They sold their possessions to support one another (Acts 4). They met daily with their new friends to worship and commune in each other’s homes (Acts 2:46). They even rejoiced together when suffering persecution and ridicule!

All this had a revolutionary impact on the families, businesses, and friendships of these first Christians. Old loyalties were exchanged for new ones. The church became almost overnight the primary “reference group” for its members.

In the New Testament, the **church** commanded the primary allegiance of disciples. No other group of people was allowed to take precedence over God’s people.

Even family ties were subordinated to the family of God. Families of origin were put at risk and even broken:
(Mark 10:29-30) "I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel {30} will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields--and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life."

This radical sense of community was true of the first century church. Is it true of the church today? Is it true that many other loyalties compete with our devotion to the body of Christ?

Old-school way of thinking:

John Donne, 1633, *Holy Sonnets*: “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less...Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

Modern way of thinking:

"I have no need of friendship, friendship causes pain; its laughter and its loving I disdain...If I never loved I never would have cried...I have my books and my poetry to protect me; I am shielded in my armor. Hiding in my room, safe within my womb, I touch no one and no one touches me. I am a rock, I am an island; and a rock feels no pain, and an island never cries." (Paul Simon, 1965, *I Am A Rock*).

All that mattered in 1st Century was being in Christ

(Gal. 3:26-29) "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, {27} for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. {28} There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. {29} If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

Leaders served and elders focused efforts on the good of others

(Mat 20:25) "Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them."

We have an opportunity in this place at this time to rediscover what a radical community the church of Jesus can be. Are we willing to place as much importance on being together and serving each other as the early church? Can we adopt a new ethic for living life in this community? Perhaps we need to realize that the church is God's means of saving us, and that we cannot make it alone!

Unity demanded at Corinth by Paul.

(1 Cor 1:10-16) "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. {11} My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. {12} What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas "; still another, "I follow Christ." {13} Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? {14} I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, {15} so no one can say that you were baptized into my name. {16} (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.)"

(1 Cor 3:1-3) "Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly--mere infants in Christ. {2} I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. {3} You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?"

Some evils of division

1. Division among believers is wrong because it is directly opposed to the prayer of Jesus.

2. Division among believers is wrong because it is contrary to the Scriptures.

3. Division among God's people is wrong because it results in a waste of time, means, and energy. Just imagine how powerful God's cause would be if all believers worked in harmony!

4. Division is wrong because it retards the salvation of lost souls. Several have told me that they are going to "try" every church until they find the right one. "Sinners are confused by the conflicting doctrines and practices of various religious groups. Each denomination is striving to uphold its particular doctrines rather than the New Testament.

To preserve its undenominational character the church must have:

1. No denominational name.
2. No denominational creed, recognizing no authority but Christ.
3. No denominational organization.
4. Uncorrupted worship, following the N.T. plan.

5. No denominational requirements for membership.

Unity an individual obligation to Christians

(Eph 4:3) "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

The Divine Standard of Unity

(Eph 4:4-6) "There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to one hope when you were called-- {5} one Lord, one faith, one baptism; {6} one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

How divisions can be avoided.

(2 Tim 2:14) "Keep reminding them of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen."

(2 Tim 2:23) "Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels."

Our Authority in Religion

Every thinking person realizes that authority plays a very significant role in the life of all of us. We must have adequate authorization for everything we do. The vital place which authority plays in every phase of our lives is seen no matter in which direction we may look.

Before we drive a car we must have the authority of a license. Before we write a check we must have the authority which comes from having made a previous deposit in a bank. Even to get married, we must have a license from the County court clerk.

We can't even attend a football game until we are authorized to do so through the purchase of a ticket. Authority comes from many sources and is of many kinds, but there is little we can do in life without proper authority.

Is it not reasonable to think this principle would also be in place in regard to religious conduct? Christianity is essentially a personal relationship with God, found in Christ, and based upon a person's surrender of obedience.

Late in the earthly ministry of Jesus the chief priest and the elders came to him and asked: *(Matthew 21:23) "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?"*

Jesus answered their question in a variety of ways:

1. The fulfillment of the many prophecies concerning His life
2. The miracles which He performed
3. The superior quality of His teaching
4. The perfection of His life
5. His resurrection from the dead was the absolute proof!

The question asked by the religious leaders of Jesus day needs to be asked/answered often in our day! I suggest that it must rest in one of three possible sources:

In the church.

This is the Roman Catholic view of authority. Although the Bible is considered, it is to be officially interpreted by the hierarchy of the church. The traditions of the church have significance, but the final authority rests in the supreme official of the church, the Pope.

When speaking *ex cathedra*, his pronouncements are binding upon Roman Catholics throughout the world. While there are other religious bodies who hold a similar position, the Catholic example is the clearest and most familiar to people.

The problem? The Catholic church was not in existence for some 325 years after the establishment of the church we have seen which began in Acts 2. And the first century Christians definitely felt as if they were under an authority which both required and demanded a high standard in their individual lives – to the extent that literally hundreds were willing to die for that cause.

Martin Luther's statement rings even today (when he stood in defense of his life before the Diet of Worms): "If his imperial Majesty desires a plain answer, I will give it to him, and if it is this: It is impossible for me to recant unless I am proved to be in the wrong by the testimony of Scripture or by evident reasoning; I cannot trust either the decisions of Councils, or of Popes, for it is plain that they have not only erred but have contradicted each other."

Reasoning power of men

This view holds that authority is internal, resting within the person himself. It is the authority of one's own conscience, one's inner feelings, one's own reason.

It is a subjective process, not objective.

There was a time when Saul of Tarsus believed in this internal kind of authority, at least, in part. When standing before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, he said: (Acts 23:1) *"Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, "My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day.""*

(Acts 26:9-10) "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. {10} And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them."

He was referring to the very earnest, sincere feelings which led him to be the leading persecutor of Christians. In spite of his honesty of purpose and intensity of zeal, he was wrong, and he spent the rest of his life trying to undo the wrongs which he had honestly but mistakenly done.

Conscience is a creature of education – it can be defiled by the wrong kind of training.

- *I just know I am right with the Lord. I just feel it in my heart*
- *I know what the Bible says...I just feel that I am saved.*

In following their own feelings, men such as Joseph Smith and women such as Ellen G. White and Mary Baker Eddy have claimed special revelations from God. And religious groups are organized around these "revelations."

God is not the author of confusion.

Jeremiah 10:23: "I know, O LORD, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps."

The Bible, the inspired word of God

The only dependable authority in religious matters is the Word of God. And isn't it obvious that God, the creator but also the object of our worship, should be the one to determine what He wants done in our worship and service to Him?

(Matt. 11:27) "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

(John 1:17) "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

(John 5:26-27) "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. {27} And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man."

(John 17:7-8) "Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. {8} For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me."

(Hebrews 1:1-2) "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, {2} but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe."

Christ's authority was executed through His apostles

(Matt. 16:17-19) "Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. {18} And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. {19} I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.""

(Matt. 19:27-28) "Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" {28} Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

(Mat 28:18-20) "Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. {19} Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, {20} and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.""

(2 Cor 5:18-20) "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: {19} that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. {20} We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."

- Let's have a "thus saith the Lord" reply when talking with people about the worship and work of the church
- Let's call Bible things by Bible names
- Let's speak where the scriptures speak, and be silent where the scriptures are silent
- Direct command (clear commands from scripture)
- Approved apostolic examples (teachings and lives of the apostles)
- Necessary inference (when 1st century Christians were ordered or encouraged to do certain things, we can necessarily infer that the principle applies to us as well)
- Where two positions are under consideration, it's wise to choose the safest and surest of the two (don't use a more difficult verse to explain away one that is much clearer)

Our relationship to God through Christ is the most important things in the world. We ought to be absolutely certain about everything that we believe and practice!

(Gal 1:8-9) "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! {9} As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!"