

SPIRITUAL VITALITY OR CHURCH ACTIVITY

Some strange things began to happen in the city of Jerusalem many years ago. A man by the name of Jesus, from the city of Nazareth, a providence in northern Palestine, had been crucified on a Roman cross. These were cruel times and human life was cheap. It was nothing strange to see men hanging on crosses in that day. This was the common method of execution, but it happens that this had been an uncommon execution, because the one put to death was indeed the Son of God. The most spectacular thing about this event was not the crucifixion, but the events that followed. This one who had been nailed to the cross by His enemies and deserted by his friends had been raised from the dead by His God. The full significance of this great event did not register in the minds and hearts of those involved until forty days after it happened. It was that he had ascended to the Father and was “seated at His right hand in the heavenlies, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but in the one to come. And He put all things in subjection under His feet and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:20-23). In the first preaching after this momentous event Peter said: “Let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified” God entered in their hearts that day and they were “pierced to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brethren, what shall we do?’” (Acts 2:36, 37). Peter’s answer matches the strangeness of that day when he tells for the first time in the history of the sin-held world what men must do to have the life promised and contemplated by the One who had been nailed to cross and raised by the power of the Almighty. He said: “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (2:38). This was a strange promise indeed to those who had only a few days before played a major part in the killing of the son of God. But stranger yet is what happened after they heard the word. We read further: “So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls, and they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and to prayer” and “day by day continuing with one mind in the temple and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people, and the Lord was adding to the church day by day those who were being saved” (ver. 41, 42, 46, 47).

This was true spiritual vitality. It was something vastly more profound than we are experiencing in our churches today. It had a non-material, non-psychological dimension to it. It yielded more than temporary joy and peace. These in the early church found something that bound them together in a common way of life comparable to nothing known in this century. They had been hit hard and deep. Their lives were changed. The world listened to them because they were able to see in them the irrefutable evidence of the truth which they proclaimed. And this evidence was seen in their lives because

they continued steadfastly in this new way of life. This was something more than Sunday morning church Activity. This was Christianity, in the words of J. B. Phillips, as “it was meant to be”. Something has happened during the course of time as we look from Pentecost to the twenty-first century. Mega-churches are bursting at the seams and church membership is the highest percentage-wise it has ever been. Churches, without denominational attachment, with modern sounding names, are being “planted” all over this nation. Yet there is a disturbing weakness in the religious picture today.

Elton Trueblood has a word for the churches that replaces spiritual activities with church activities. He says in his book *The Company of the Committed*: “In many contemporary Christian congregations the entire church operation points to a climax on Sunday morning, a conception which would have seemed very strange indeed to the early Christians. Often the major effort during the week is the promotion of “Sunday” with slick polished printed material plugging constantly for a bigger attendance. Sunday morning, then, when it finally comes, has something of the mood of a much-advertised athletic contest, for which the team has prepared and to which it has been pointed all week. Finally, at twelve o’clock on Sunday, the whistle blows, the climatic event is over for another week, and the spectators go home to relax.” Now perhaps such a description of the modern church shocks our sanctified imagination and causes us to cringe a little at such a description, which by our Pharisaical standards, borders a little on the sacrilegious. But let us open the windows of our mind and let the stale air out. Perchance it is springtime in heaven and the good news of Christ may yet penetrate our spiritual smog. This is not a description of the church as found in the book of Acts. It is a picture of ourselves. We need to be jolted out of our self-sufficiency and complacency. We need to take off our modern-church-growth-tainted spectacles and view with our own eyes the glories of the fellowship of the redeemed enjoyed by these original disciples of the Lord.

The modern church’s sincere efforts to evangelize the world and see the church grow has established a form of religion which is foreign to the teaching of Scripture on the purpose and conduct of the church. Gillis Harp, professor of History at Grove City College in an article in *Touchstone* magazine entitled *Mall Christianity* wrote: “There is no biblical warrant for turning Sunday worship into an evangelistic meeting. This transformation of the main Sunday service actually began in the early nineteenth century. It was evangelists like Charles Finney and his successors who turned church worship into a revival meeting. In some respects, ‘seeker sensitive’ advocates are simply extending the logic of this earlier innovation. The New Testament Church did not show confusion about either the nature of evangelism or its proper setting. It did not provide ‘excitements’ other than the excitement of the Good News. The church gathered on the first day of the week to hear the Word of God, for corporate prayer and the breaking of bread (Acts 2:42; 20:7). Significantly none of the evangelistic preaching in Acts occurs within the context of the church gathered for worship. To be sure, the early church was involved in aggressive evangelism, but it kept the gathering on Sunday for the edification of the covenant people.” His conclusions are borne out in I Corinthians 14:23, 24 where Paul shows it was unusual for an unbeliever or outsider to enter the place of worship. We need to read again the book of Acts without asking ourselves how our publishing

house literature, or our favorite Christian author interprets it. As we read this short history of the church, we are struck with the one great fact modern Christianity has neglected: the fact that Jesus Christ was real to them. Real in every sense of the word. He was not someone their preachers talked about on Sunday morning. He was someone they all talked with each day. They did not go to church in order to prepare to meet Him, they had already met Him and walked with Him in the fellowship of one another and ate with Him in the fellowship of the breaking of bread and listened to Him in the fellowship of the Apostles doctrine. Religion was not a part of life, it was life. Christ was alive, but not just alive, He was present with them. Is it any wonder that fear came upon every soul of those who were beholding such things? The world does not fear that which is dead or asleep. One pigmy awake is stronger than a giant asleep. But here we see a wide-awake giant. We see people with a message and a mission. Their message was twofold, things seldom preached today: the resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:24; 2:31; 4:2, 33; 17:18, 32; 23:6,8; 24:15, 21; 25:19; 26:23), and the kingdom of God (Acts 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). Their mission was to make these things known to the world. Their mission was not to sing, contemporary or traditional, and say prayers. It was not to entertain young people or impress outsiders. Their mission was not to build buildings that would attract the world. When the church began it met in homes. There were no "church" buildings until the third century. This is not to say having a building is wrong, however, many times the church's emphasis and concern for the building overshadows the real purpose of the church, which, briefly stated, is to "show forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (I Pet. 2:9). Our compassionate interest in buildings has made the church a generation of beggars. The church many times makes a down payment on buildings, then struggles for 20 years to meet the mortgage payments. A. H. Newman in *A Manual of Church History* writes: "During the third century many 'churches' were erected, and considerable attention was given, in the wealthier communities, to architecture and to internal decoration. Churches assumed the magnificence of heathen temples. In imitating the pomp, Christians were sure to imitate the practices of heathenism chiefly because it was the fashion." In practical terms there is no comparison between the early church and the structure of the church today.

They had no time to take a stand on government issues, and the social gospel was unknown to them. Jesus had commissioned them to stand in a world full of chaos and confusion and witness of their hope in the resurrection and a better life to be found in the fellowship of Jesus Christ. The church should and must be involved in the great questions of morality that confronts each of us in this modern world, but this does not mean that the church is to minimize and neglect its one great mission of witnessing of the Christ, in order to influence a society that refuses to recognize any authority other than the authority of mammon. The answer to the ills of this nation does not lie in the legislative acts of Congress, nor in the legal acts of the Supreme Court, rather the answer to the ills of society is found in the application of the principles of the Acts of the Apostles. They fulfilled this mission by what the Greeks of their age termed "the foolishness of preaching." "They had a message to proclaim, and what a message it was! The message that in the name of Jesus Christ, God was granting the forgiveness of sins. Their message was Christ...the fact that He lives and reigns. The fact that He is real, and His message is true. This was first proclaimed by Peter and the Apostles on the day of Pentecost and since that memorable day it has changed the course of the whole world and led a church triumphant through the most terrible times imaginable to man. It is this message, given to and first proclaimed by these fishermen of Galilee, that is destined to fulfill the grand and glorious purpose of the great God of heaven. And there is no political, social or economic revolution that will keep

it from fulfilling this Divine intent. Sadly to say many times this is not the message we hear today. Oz Guinness makes this observation in *No God But God*: "The preacher, instead of looking out upon the world, looks out upon public opinion, trying to find out what the public would like to hear. Then he tries his best to duplicate that, and bring his finished product into the marketplace in which others are trying to do the same. The public, turning to our culture to find out about the world, discovers there is nothing but its own reflection. The unexamined world, meanwhile, drifts blindly into the future." The early church preaching is quite a contrast with this. They were guided by the Holy Spirit and proclaimed to the world the reality of spiritual things. They knew they were collaborating with the Holy Spirit. They never used their skills to perform mass psychotherapy. They told no death bed tales, no awesome stories to play upon man's conscience. They shed no self-righteous tears of pity and engaged in no evangelistic brainwashing and trumped-up emotional conversions as we see today. Their method was to present plainly, forcefully yet passionately the great message of the cross, the resurrection, and the living power of the Christ. They did this in the simplest manner possible: "They were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word." There was nothing more important to these early Christians than the proclamation of this great good news with which God had visited them.

The "Spiritual Vitality Church" had no Bible colleges or seminaries, no publishing houses, no missionary societies, no church growth programs, no church buildings, and no television stations. The one "mega-church" it had in Jerusalem was disbanded by persecution and scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Yet in a few short years the church had swept across the empire, confronted pagan cultures with the Lordship of Christ, demonstrated to the world a new and living way and made Roman emperors sit up and take notice. How did they do it? They certainly did not do it because they had no problems. In reading the New Testament you will see they encountered every kind of problem known to our modern world. Nor was it that they had no competition. When Christianity came to town, the religious marketplace was already over-crowded with everything from Judaism to Emperor worship with Zeus, Baal, Jupiter, Artemis and the like in between. It wasn't revivals or eloquent preachers that influenced pagan society but everyday Christians doing everyday evangelism. This type of evangelism wasn't an effort to make the pagan feel at home. Rather it was the fact of a way of life that made pagans feel they were missing something. They had something and showed to the world something that was real, the reality of Christ and the gospel; that is how they did it. This is what "the Vitality Church" was like. We should pray as an unknown believer preyed upon hearing the story of William Booth: "Do it again, Lord, do it again"!

David Wells in his book *God in The Wasteland* speaks eloquently of the modern church's pursuit of new activities. He states: "The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is not inadequate technique, insufficient organization, or antiquated music, and those who want to squander the church's resources. Bandaging these scratches will do nothing to stop the flow of blood that is spilling from these wounds. The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is that God is too inconsequently upon the church. His truth is too distant, His grace too ordinary, his truth too distant, His Christ too common." He continues, "It is one of the aspects of the contemporary church life that so many are attempting to heal the church by tinkering with its structure, its public face." So the church, not being satisfied with what is revealed, spends its time on church activities instead of spiritual activities. SELAH