

# LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

HARRY BOWERS, EDITOR

7844 GRIMSBY CIRCLE, HARRISBURG, N.C. 28075

SEPTEMBER 2007

## THE CHURCH, THEN AND NOW

Today we are hearing the battle cry “Back to the New Testament”. Is there any other kind of Christianity? If Christ ushered in the New Testament (New Covenant) then how could there be an “Old Testament Christianity” or any other kind for that matter? There are, however, denominations using the term “New Testament Christianity” and claiming to be a “New Testament Church”. If a church is truly a church it must by its very nature be “New Testament.”

Should we then make an effort to “restore” or emulate the church as revealed in the Scriptures? Peter Brown, the Rollins Professor of History at Princeton University, writes in his latest book: *The Rise of Western Christendom*: “I never cease to wonder at the confidence with which scholars, Christians and non-Christians alike, declare that they somehow know for certain that such and such a feature of the Christian Church is not a manifestation of ‘true’ Christianity, that it marked a decline from the more ‘pure’ state of belief. This seems to me to amount to importing into the lay discipline of history a version of the potent religious myth of the pristine purity of the Primitive Church. This myth began to be formed around the end of the fourth century. It has been wielded with great effect by reformers from the age of Augustine up to and beyond the Reformation. It has often been used for polemical purposes, to criticize many forms of Christianity through comparing them with an imagined, more perfect time. The early Christians, however, seem to have regarded their own church as far from perfect.” However there are countless Christians who have given their lives for insisting that the church return to the principles of the New Testament and give up the additions of man-made theories and opinions which have molded the shape of the church through the ages. In stark contrast to Brown’s quote is Davis W. Berocot’s statement in: *Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up*: “Christianity was originally a revolution that challenged the attitudes, lifestyle, and values of the ancient world. It was more than a mere set of doctrines, it was an entire way of life. And all the military, economic, and social forces of the Roman world could not stop it. But after 300 years, the revolution partially foundered. It ran aground because most professing Christians lost their obedient trust in God. They imagined they could improve Christianity through human means, by adopting the methods of the world. But they didn’t improve Christianity, they gutted it. Sex and money scandals, an exploding divorce rate, drug addicted youths, and an ever growing worldliness is rampant. Today’s church is fighting battles on all fronts. And we seem to be losing these battles to the relentlessly encroaching world. Perhaps the answers to our problems are not in the present, but in the past. Because there was a time when Christians were able to stand up to the world”. The writers of the New Testament spoke of the world as an alternative to God. Jesus himself was completely separated from the world. He was not of the world (John. 17:14; 18:36), refused to pray for it

(John 17:9), opposed its ruler (John 12:31; 14:30) and is now its judge (John 9:39; 16:7-11). If we are to fashion our churches after the church revealed in the Scripture the first thing we have to deal with is our attitude toward the world. The gospel that is being preached today is a gospel of being relevant and acceptable to the world’s way of thinking. The aim of most churches today is to become more relevant and acceptable to the world’s modern way of thinking. The watchword of the religious world has been “modernize”! The focus is upon the mission of the church based upon new and modern methods and managerial strength. As a result the church today lays little emphasis upon the past (after all what can we learn from the early church in the book of Acts?) and has dwelt upon the future and renewal. David Wells pretty well sums up the problem of the churches embrace of the world when he states in his book *God In The Wasteland*: “Today evangelicalism reverberates with worldliness. In first impressions, this worldliness does not appear ugly at all. Quite the opposite. It maintains a warm and friendly countenance, parading itself as successful entrepreneurship, organizational wizardry, and a package of slick public relations insights that are essential to the facilitation of evangelical business. Now there is nothing wrong with entrepreneurship or organizational wizardry or public relations or television images and glossy magazines per se. The problem lies in the current evangelical inability to see how these things carry within them values that are hostile to the Christian faith”. James says that “whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4). Where is this friendship taking us and where will it end? Author Regie McNeal in his book *The Present Future* states: “The current church culture in North America is on life support. It is living off the work, money and energy of previous generations from a previous world order. The plug will be pulled either when the money runs out (80 percent of money given to congregations come from people ages fifty-five and older) or when the remaining three-fourths of a generation who are institutionalist loyalists die off or both”. Rodney Stark, who is said to be the world’s most respected sociologist of religion is an agnostic and teaches at the University of Washington in Seattle, was interviewed by Mike Aquilina in *Our Sunday Visitor* who asked him: “You say that Christianity succeeded in the past because of its high moral standards. Today, however, many churches are lowering the bar to make religion more popular to the world. How would you analyze their efforts?”. His answer: “They’re death wishes. People value religion on the basis of cost and they don’t value the cheapest ones the most. Religions that ask nothing get nothing. You’ve got a choice: you can be a Church or a Country Club. If you’re going to be a church, you’d better offer religion on Sunday. If you’re not, you’d better offer a golf course, because you’re not going to get away with being a country club with no golf course”. These words coming from an agnostic makes more sense than many words coming from our pulpits today. Just how long are our artificial supports going to last?

It is time the church began asking some hard questions relative to their claim to be a “New Testament” church or for that matter their following the example of the early church. Do we really want to return to the principles of the New Testament? Is the Word of God really our guide or do we just mouth platitudes about it being the only basis of our faith and practice? Or more importantly could we actually put into practice the teaching of the Scripture relative to the church? Oz Guinness in his book *No God But God* asks: “Is the church primarily guided and shaped by its own character and calling, or by considerations and circumstances alien to itself? Or, to put the question differently, is the church a social reality truly shaped by the Word and Spirit of God?”

If we ever entertained the idea of following the precepts and examples set forth in Scripture concerning the church it would mean a radical change in the church culture that could be compared to the difference in what Christ taught and advocated to the existing religious system of the Jews in his day. His teachings were radical. His actions unheard of. His ministry rejected by the religious system. But note: this religious system, held on to so tightly and defended so strenuously by the religious leaders, was brought to an abrupt end in seventy AD while the rejected teachings of Christ brought about a world revolution which continues to this day and will continue until he returns. Anyone advocating even a partial attempt to bring the church today into the practices revealed in the New Testament would be castigated as a religious fanatic and a radical trouble maker. In fact if the church today returned to the pattern taught in the New Testament it would destroy most of the religious system today which is thought of as “the Lord’s work”. Perhaps if we returned to the simple pattern of the early church, and divorced ourselves from the world (a divorce that would have God’s unequivocal blessings and is long overdue) we would have to forego the raising of money for a new sanctuary to seat thousands on Sunday morning, or the plans for a family life center and recreational facility to attract and compete with what the world is offering our young people. Perhaps preachers would once again become preachers and forget about being administrators. Preachers would once again emphasize simple holiness, genuine love and cross-bearing. Gone would be the light, bouncy, simple, engaging, uplifting and fun spirituality in a cocktail party atmosphere where pleasantries are served up in twenty minute pep talks and all unpleasantness, such as sin and Christian responsibility is never mentioned. “But that would give credence to non-Christians who say they don’t go to church because it is boring”. Why should the church uncritically accept the diagnosis of fallen men and women? Understanding how the unchurched are thinking is important; letting them set the church’s agenda is dangerous. The prevailing attitude today is that the church must gain the respect and acceptance of the world in order to grow or to be heard and accepted. The aim many times is to make the transition from life in the world to life in the church as painless and invisible as possible. Some churches are careful not to make outsiders find anything alien or intimidating in their services. They even remove the pulpits and alter the sanctuary and discard anything that looks “traditional”, especially the so called “worship service”.

The modern church’s sincere efforts to evangelize the world and see the church grow have 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 for 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 faithful and for God’s covenant people to praise the covenant God”. 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.

Another obstacle in returning to the life and practice of the early church would be found in the fact that there are only two reasons for the giving of money given in the New Testament: (1) for caring for the poor and needy (I Cor. 16:1-3; II Cor. 9:1-13; I Tim. 5:9-16; Gal 2:10)., and (2) for the preaching of the gospel ( I Cor. 9:6-14; I Timothy 5:17-18; Phil. 4:15-18). Eberhard Arnold in *The Early Christians*, a source book of the original writings of the church Fathers (who lived a generation or so after the Apostles) wrote concerning the church’s ministry to the poor: “The affairs of the poor were the affairs of the church; it supported bereft women and children, the sick, the destitute (Justin). To help others, the Christians took the hardest privations upon themselves and never limited their work of love (Didascalia). Even Emperor Julian had to admit that ‘the godless Galileans feed our poor in addition to their own’ (Julian). Even in the smallest community, the overseer had to be a friend of the poor (Tertulian). Pagans and Jews burned their sacrifices to honor God; Christians used them to feed the poor.” Discussions about whether there are “deserving vs. undeserving” poor, whether people will take advantage of generous hospitality, and whether it is too risky to respond to strangers will not excuse the church from this ministry.

“Worship services” as we know them today were unknown to the early church. They met in homes and rented facilities. The New Testament speaks often of “the church in your house”. The majority of offerings in the church today are used to pay preachers to preach to Christians and to construct and maintain our buildings. If we returned to the early church the preachers would evangelize the lost and money for buildings would feed the poor. This is not to say buildings are wrong, it questions if they are really the “Lord’s Work”.



