

BREAKING THE BARRIERS OF SECTARIAN THOUGHT

By

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The faith has always been under attack from outside the church. But in the twentieth century the faith has come under the most strenuous attack from the INSIDE. This is, within each denominational organization have arisen grievous wolves, according to Paul's prediction in Acts 20, who have sought to destroy the flock, so that within the churches there are prominent leaders denying the faith, denying the Lordship of Christ and other basic truths of the gospel.

It is to the credit of many believers that they have retained so much of the faith in spite of the influence of their leaders and publishing houses. Every now and then a group of pastors may rise up and courageously challenge the hierarchy in an effort to force them back to a scriptural position, but this struggle usually ends with the dissenters being cast out to establish yet another denomination, with its own peculiar creed and traits, thus further dividing believers and forming the nucleus of another hierarchy which, in time, may be casting out its own dissenters.

Once a group of churches have been organized into a denomination with constitution, official literature and a statement of faith, a barrier to both fellowship and truth has already been erected.

Those who do not conform to denominational standards are looked upon with suspicion and are never fully accepted into the fellowship. In spite of affirming that believers of other denominations are recognized as brothers, the spirit of true fellowship is limited to those who hold the same traditions and practices and who act and worship according to the denomination's guidelines. Fellowship is circumscribed and limited by denominational definition.

The same thing applies to the truth. The basis of judgment in doctrine no longer rests upon sound biblical exegesis, but upon whether or not it fits the creed already accepted. If one should discover the meaning of some long neglected passage of scripture, he must measure it by the denominational bias, and if it doesn't fit, it must be discarded. If enough clamor is raised over it, the issue may be settled by vote, as though God and His revelation were subject to the majority rule of some self-created human organization.

The Restoration Movement. As an alternative to denominational error and division, various "movements" have been initiated, but they usually crystallize into monuments rather than movements. Early in the nineteenth century a group of Presbyterians and Baptists resolved to chuck their denominational creeds and policies and return to the simple faith preached by the apostles. They would "restore" the original message of the church, the original terms of salvation and the kind of ministry the church enjoyed in the times of the apostles.

This effort came to be called the "Restoration Movement" and succeeded to a certain degree in calling people back to the apostolic faith with a freedom and unity they had not known before. But eventually the movement settled down and crystallized around

the work of the original leaders, such as Campbell and Stone. Campbell is lauded for his discoveries in New Covenant theology and for his launching the movement to restore the principles and doctrines of the new Covenant church, but for anyone to discover anything today not already embraced by the restorers is tantamount to heresy.

The Reformation Movement. Under the leadership of such men as Martin Luther and John Calvin the church in the sixteenth century underwent a great reformation, during which many doctrines and traditions of the Roman Catholic church were challenged and denied in favor of newly discovered biblical truths. Out of this “reformation” movement arose the major denominations of our day. The various reforms crystallized around certain doctrines which became the distinguishing marks of new denominations, which are still with us.

Now there is a resurgence of “Reformed” churches, making a valiant effort to turn the church back to the 16th century, to the place where the reformers stood. Even though many of these churches are unaffiliated with any major denomination, they still use John Calvin — or later interpretations of Calvin, known as Calvinism — as the measuring stick of orthodox faith.

Freedom In Christ. By the grace of God some of us have found that neither denominational structure nor commitment to a “movement” is essential to the church Christ founded.

People who have grown up in the security and comfort of the structure of great denominational hierarchy have a natural tendency to lean on that structure and to depend upon it. At the same time they are shocked, hurt, and often intimidated by that very structure when it ceases to manifest the truth of the Gospel and bear the fruit of the holy spirit.

But we have found that one does not diminish his faith and his witness by stripping away the man-made armor. Rather he strengthens his faith and enlarges his witness.

When David was about to go out to meet Goliath the professional warriors insisted he wear the armor of the king, the best armor available. But David found it to be a hindrance instead of a help and preferred to put his trust in God’s protection. When he faced the giant he was armed only with the power of God, and, to the amazement of his brethren, won the fight without all the paraphernalia they had felt was essential for such a gigantic task. Christ is not dependent upon human structure for the support and progress of His church. He is the head of the body, and from him, the head, is every joint supplied, not from any body of men, no matter how impressive may be their position or titles.

“For freedom did Christ set us free: stand fast therefore, and not be entangled again in a yoke of bondage” (Gal. 5:1). Paul was writing to counteract Judaism, which even in his day was making an impact upon the churches, seeking to keep the Christians “under control” and imposing on them their traditions. The church must always fight for freedom, for there are always those who would bring us under bondage. Such control might be attempted through the denominational hierarchy or through conventions, Bible Colleges or publishing houses. The result is virtually the same, to conform the Christian to a standard established by men, to prevent anyone from discovering some truth not sanctioned by the particular brotherhood, and to see that their errors are never exposed. Such bondage has put out the light of many a church, so that in order for one to bring the truth of the Gospel into focus he must cut through the matted layers of opinion and

tradition which have become sacred to the group, and have taken the place of God's revealed word.

Consider, therefore, the relief it is to be free from all human agencies and simply look to Christ and not to any person nor to any systematized theology or denomination. I do not look to Luther or Calvin or Alexander Campbell, nor to any modern teacher to absolve my fears and assure me of salvation and truth. I am indebted to them for what they have done and for the truth they have helped me to know, but I must hold their teaching to the touchstone of Scripture, just as with all the creeds and fellowships built around men.

The true Christian faith does not need to carry the label of "fundamental" nor "orthodox" nor "restoration" nor "reformation", nor any other such label as seems necessary when speaking "after the manner of men."

Christ is sufficient. Whatever He teaches is acceptable without first measuring it with any human classifications, such as whether or not it is Calvinism or Arminianism, Catholic or Protestant! When one wears only the label "Christian", the fear of wearing the wrong label disappears and he is free to believe all the Spirit teaches through the word. The love of Christ will hold us to his doctrine, and we have no fear of failing to measure up to the doctrines emphasized by men.

Through **The Witness** the ministry of the church where I preach reaches all the major denomination in this country plus people in 15 other nations. We have no denominational sanction, only the command of the Lord.

We present the sovereignty of God, but we do not follow Calvin.

We present the autonomy of the local church, but we are not disciples of Alexander Campbell.

We hold to baptism by immersion of believers, but we could not be labeled as Baptists.

I preach that immortality is conditional, but I would never wear the label of a Seventh Day Adventist.

Our church is under the guidance of elders, or presbyters, but we are not Presbyterians.

In short, we have no anchor at all in any of the theological systems as defined by men, but we do have an anchor, which is the Lord and the Word He has given. Every Christian is a priest of God, a servant of God who must give account of himself to His Master, and hence is under the responsibility to know where he stands with respect to God and His word. Like Peter, whose preaching offended the major denomination of the Jews, "We must obey God, and not men."

What about fellowship with other Christians? There is no limit! We fellowship with believers far and wide, who love the Lord and hate evil. We fellowship with them, but do not cut our lives to their pattern, nor hold ourselves to be the criteria of perfect faith. We have an example, a pattern, even Christ, who "submitted himself to Him who judges righteously," and to no other.

There are many others who think like this, but we do not seek to form any organization or peculiar brotherhood. The church of the Lord needs no such earthly bond, nor does it need any clearing house, such as a school, a convention or a publishing house to keep its doctrine pure and its fellowship intact. It is held together by the Lord Himself. "I am the vine," He said. "And you are the branches." He did not refer to denominations

as branches but to individuals; each disciple a branch attached to the vine. No matter how branches may be intertwined together to form a great denomination, if they are severed from the Vine they wither and die, and will be burned!

The church must always be restoring and reforming itself but not to the leadership of the 19th century (The Restoration Movement) nor to that of the 16th century (The Reformation Movement) but to that of the 1st century, Christ and the Apostles.

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