

NEEDED: RADICAL REFORMATION

By

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A number of Christian scholars and writer have said that the reformation is not over, and that “the church must always be reforming.” There are signs all around today that a radical reformation is needed and, in fact, has already started, as indicated by numerous books, articles, and various Christian publications.

One area in which radical change needs to occur is the clergy-laity system, which places the burden of leadership and instruction upon a professional “outsider.” The professional minister usually controls what is said, so that the “layman,” however intelligent, gifted and spiritual, is hardly ever heard. I spent over forty years in this professional ministry, and I’m well acquainted with how the system works. Those who charge the professional clergy with orchestrating the church, from choosing its leaders to controlling the services, are on target. That’s what he is trained to do.

In the words of Artie Carnes, “many churches have become huge spiritual nurseries where hired attendants spend most of their waking hours meeting the selfish desires of spiritual infants who refuse to grow up, thus ignoring the lost who really need the attention... We teach them that spiritual maturity is based on the level of involvement in programs and practices that Jesus never established and the New Testament does not embrace” (The Christian Contender 6/1996).

We have a generation addicted to entertainment and anesthetized by music. They want a church that makes them feel at home in the same atmosphere they found in the world. Rather than run the risk of losing “generation X”, churches are in a popularity contest to see who can market the product that will attract them. The preacher is expected to be the main attraction and star of the show. This leaves little time or place for any participation of the members, except as an audience.

This is not to say that there is no place for preachers. I have spent most of my life preaching, and have served a number of churches as their “minister,” but now, after nearly 9 years of observing the church from the “pew” I am more than ever aware of an important element that is missing in the churches. That element is the fellowship and inter-personal ministry of all the members of the body, another area in need of drastic change.

The New Testament reveals the early church to have had a program completely different from what we usually see today.

Paul writes, “So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and severally members one of another” (Rom. 12:5). He goes on to mention activities of the different members: prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhorting, giving, ruling (Greek = leading), and showing mercy. Note that “ministry”, which simply means service or serving, was not assigned to any professional class, but was for the “members”. The same can be said of prophecy (or preaching), teaching, and exhorting.

Again he writes, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts unto God” (Col. 3:16). This verse has been the chief

debating ground over instrumental music, but generally overlooked is the fact that Paul is telling the saints that we are to teach and admonish one another, rather than to leave this to the preacher or professional staff.

To the “brethren” at Rome Paul wrote that they were able to “admonish one another” (Rom. 15:14). To the Galatians he wrote, “Brethren, even if a man be overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to yourself, lest you also be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:1, 2). These instructions are not written to the elders, nor to “the minister”, but to the “brethren,” meaning all the saints. Contrast that with our practice today. In such cases the first thing that is usually done is to inform the preacher, assuming that it is his job to confront the erring party and deal with the problem. While there might be no hesitation in talking about the matter among ourselves, rarely would one accept the responsibility to go to the brother or sister and, in a spirit of gentle love, try to help them recover from their sinful position.

The “minister” is hired for the purpose of building up the body of Christ, in spite of the Bible’s instructions for *all* the saints to minister to one another and build up each other (Eph. 4:12). We have so organized the church and professionalized the leaders that there is hardly any place for the “body life” as described in the Bible, where “the whole body grows and guilds itself up in love” (Eph. 4:16). In the words of Leroy Garrett:

“We have a professional in the pulpit, ‘the pulpit minister’ we now call him, who often commands a salary far beyond those of comparable education and background, who satisfies more than he edifies. He is part of the System that is more concerned for getting a crowd and meeting the budget than in reaching out to the poor and oppressed of the world. We spend most of our great wealth on ourselves and in building our own denomination. All this give us form, but does it give us power?

“Yes, our people not only become bored but disillusioned when they are cut off from ‘the resources of power’ (Eph. 1:19) that God intends for them in his ekklesia. The message they get is that they are not supposed to think for themselves or entertain a new idea or suggest a new way of doing things...Our churches are made up of spectators, who, unlike their Lord, come to be ministered to, not to minister. All this means stagnation. No power!” (*Restoration Review*, Oct. 1988).

Garrett suggests that to overcome this weakness in the body the elders must quit functioning as corporate executives and become shepherds of the flock as Scripture teaches. The congregation must learn to minister to the body and the hired preachers must cease being pastors in the churches and go out into the world as evangelists.

This would require an entirely new concept of “church” and “ministry”, a *radical reformation*, and it cannot happen as long as the clergy is seen as the key to a church’s “success” and “growth,” nor as long as the Sunday assembly is composed chiefly of performers and audience, and professionals are hired to do our jobs. Of late there has been intense concern over replacing the traditional worship service with a “contemporary praise service.” We need to sacrifice both the traditional program and this new fad in order to get to the kind of one-another ministry which is described in the New Testament.

This would require an atmosphere of humble willingness to be as ready to listen to the person of low estate as to listen to the erudite man of degrees, ready to give attention to the poor widow as well as to the rich executive. Needed is a climate of trust and loving acceptance, where we might be candid, honest and open with one another so

that all Christians can participate in exhorting and admonishing as well as receiving such exhortation and admonishment from each other. In such a setting all can pursue the truth without intimidation or fear of being criticized or dis-fellowshipped. These are basic marks of the church described in the New Testament, but almost totally absent in the modern church. Such body-life requires extreme patience, brotherly kindness, love and long-suffering on the part of all, but aren't these the qualities developed by those in whom dwells God's holy spirit?

Would we feel comfortable in such a church? That's asking if we would feel comfortable doing the very things Jesus intends for us to do in the assembly! Such a question is a strong indication that we need some drastic changes in the way we "do church."

The one-another, interpersonal, ministry makes each member dependent upon Christ, the Head of the church, rather than upon the staff or hierarch, and focuses attention upon Him rather than upon the organization.

The question is: are we preachers going to continue the traditions according to the world's wisdom, or will we be willing to give up our titles and position at center stage and become servants, "each counting the other better than himself" (Phil. 2:3), that Christ may be exalted, and His body, the church, built up?

If there is to be radical reformation of the church, to get closer to the original intent as outlined in Scriptures, it must begin here.

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