

The Old Hickory Bulletin

Old Hickory Church of Christ

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First Century Christianity

There is continuing need for a study of Christianity as it was in the first century. What Christianity was in the first century it needs to be in the twentieth century and in the twenty-first. The religion of Christ has been so long perverted that many have no true conception of genuine Christianity. Men are prone to use the wrong standards for judging the correctness of our faith and practice. As individuals we tend to measure our responsibilities as Christians, not by what the Bible teaches, but by the conduct of other church members. Congregations overlook the Bible as a standard for its activities and allow the practices of other congregations to be their guide. Unconsciously, many allow the denominations to set the standard for them and adopt sectarian patterns for their religious practices. In other instances the church is influenced by the pattern established by former generations. We are prone to accept the teachings and practices that have developed through the years without questioning their scriptural authority. We almost assume that our brethren have never erred and that we can safely adopt all that has been handed down to us. Nevertheless, a failure to follow the Bible as our only guide in matters of religious faith and practice will ultimately lead to apostasies! History gives abundant testimony to the truthfulness of this statement. The apostasy of the New Testament church did not arise overnight. Instead, it came gradually, over a period of centuries. The gradual departures introduced in one generation paved the way for

further departures in succeeding generations. This continued until the pattern of the New Testament church was lost and was replaced by the traditions and doctrines of men. The apostasy came because men failed to follow the Scriptures as their guide.

Today, the “Christian Church” (or “Disciples”) stands as a monument to the folly of substituting human judgment in the place of divine authority. While leaders in the “Restoration Movement” were united in their plea for a complete return to New Testament Christianity, the denominational world was put to flight. So long as these men were willing to abide by the slogan, “Where the Bible speaks, we speak; and where the Bible is silent, we are silent” (a principle which is taught in 1 Peter 4:11), the sectarian world was powerless to resist the onslaught of truth. It was when some of them abandoned this ground of safety that the devil gained an advantage. When some sought to “improve” on the Lord’s arrangement by introducing practices not authorized in the Scriptures, division resulted. These first departures were but introductions of the many that were to follow. The wide scale apostasy of the “Christian Church” in less than a century of time was so rapid as to be almost unbelievable. It could not have developed without a “beginning.” Its “beginning” was the substitution of human wisdom for Bible authority. Thereafter, men in this sect judged their teaching and practice in the light of what had been handed down to them rather than in the light of Bible teaching. And it is with deep concern that, during these recent years, we have observed the spectacle of many churches of Christ pursuing the same sad, inevitable course. When we adopt the wrong standard of measurement for Christianity we will “miss the mark” every time.

With people who want the truth the question is not “What are others doing?” nor “What do preachers think about this?” nor should it be “What do I want?” These are not questions to be raised by the honest truth-seeker. His question is: “What does the Bible teach?” In 2 Timothy 3:16,17 Paul teaches that the Scriptures are an all-sufficient guide. This being true, we need nothing more. Opinions expressed orally are as

useless as the written creeds of men. Each generation needs to reexamine its teaching and practice in the light of the Scriptures rather than accepting that which has been handed down by former generations. Likewise, in the light of Bible teaching it should examine the proposals of contemporaries.

If we would know what Christianity should be in the twentieth century, we must learn what it was in the first century. Let us first observe what it was:

Udenominational In Its Nature

This is evident from a number of considerations. First, the church of Christ is not a denomination. A denomination is a sect. It professes to be merely a “part” or a “section.” This does not describe the church of God. It is, itself, the whole of God’s people. All who are saved are added by the Lord to the church (Acts 2:41,47). Hence, the church contains all the saved. Furthermore, the Lord’s people in the first century believe the same, taught the same, practiced the same, and all wore the same name. There was nothing to distinguish them one from another. All were members of the “one body,” the church (Eph. 1:22,23; 4:4).

Second, a denomination is not the church of Christ. The church is referred to in the New Testament in two senses: (1) Universally, with reference to all the saved, all the church, everywhere. Jesus spoke of it in this sense in Matthew 16:18. (2) The church is referred to in its congregational or local sense speaking of the church in a given locality. Paul used it in this sense in 1 Corinthians 1:2. But, what is a denomination? It has been defined as “a religious organization smaller than the whole church and larger than the local church.” One Methodist Church is not the Methodist denomination. It is made up of local Methodist churches tied into the General Conference. Likewise the Baptist denomination is composed of all such churches of like faith and order having affiliation with the Association. Thus a denomination is larger than the local church and smaller than the whole church; and since the New Testament presents the church only in the whole sense or the

local sense, and a denomination is not the church in either sense, it necessarily follows that a denomination is not the church in any sense. The church is a divine organization founded by Christ. Denominations are human organizations founded by men.

Next, let us note that the gospel does not create denominations. The gospel is God's power to save (Rom. 1:16). It is the mission of the church to preach the gospel (Mark 16:15; 2 Tim. 2:2; 1 Tim. 3:15). The gospel was preached in the first century and thousands obeyed it. But while thousands obeyed the gospel then, such obedience did not make a Roman Catholic, Mormon, Methodist, Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist, Episcopalian, Lutheran, or Presbyterian of a single one of them! It follows that if obedience to the gospel in the first century did not make denominationalists then it will not do so now. When the gospel is preached today as it was preached then and people obey it today just as they did then, it will make of people now what it did then: Christians. Only when something other than the gospel of Christ is preached and obeyed do men become denominationalists. Baptist doctrine must be preached and obeyed to make Baptists. Methodists are made by the preaching of Methodist doctrine and obedience thereto. The same is true for all denominations. But the gospel of Christ will not make a Baptist, Methodist, or any other denominationalist. It did not do it in the first century! It will not do it in the twentieth century! The gospel does not create denominations.

Furthermore, the gospel requirements in the first century were undenominational. The same conditions of salvation required of the Gentile were required of the Jew. Rich and poor, strong and weak, were called upon to do the same things in order to have the remission of sins. Alien sinners in the first century were taught to believe, to repent of sins, and to be baptized for the remission of sins (Matt. 28:19, 20; Luke 24:46, 47; Mark 16:15, 16; Acts 2:38). None was exempt from these conditions. All were required to meet all of these conditions. No exceptions were made.

Finally, the results of gospel obedience were undenominational. This has already been noted. Let us notice further, however, that all penitent believers who were baptized obtained salvation (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38), entered Christ (Gal. 3:26,27), and became members of the body of Christ, the church (1 Cor. 12:13 Acts 2:41, 47). Since the Lord has “but one body” (1 Cor. 12:20; Eph. 4:4), which is the church, they were all members of the same church. Being “in Christ” they were “new creatures” (2 Cor. 5:17) and hence they had all been “born again” (John 3:3-7). Gospel obedience obtained the same results for all.

These facts show conclusively that Christianity in the first century was undenominational. This being true, it follows that genuine Christianity in the twentieth century and every century, must be undenominational. Let us put forth every effort to keep it undenominational. To this end may God bless us.

- Paul C. Keller

First-Century Christianity Really?

We often talk about restoring primitive, New Testament Christianity. We are usually referring to the abandonment of denominationalism and the restoration of first-century patterns of mission, work, worship, organization, and message of the Lord’s church. This is a needed and noble effort. -”We speak where the Bible speaks and we are silent where the Bible is silent” should be a practice rather than just a motto. Congregations which make and actually try to keep this plea are often called sound or loyal, others being referred to by such terms as liberal; digressive or institutional. But there is more to first-century Christianity than a few outward forms, although these are important and without them all else would be vain.

1. The early Christians were a lot like Jesus, who had “not where to lay his head” (Lk. 9:58). Jesus did not own a home; He had to borrow a donkey to ride into Jerusalem; in fact, the only things we can assume He actually owned were the garments which were parted and gambled for at His crucifixion. And most of His followers were known for their relative poverty also (1 Cor. 1:26, 2 Cor. 8:2). Yet today, we see many brethren more concerned with a nice house, a new car, modern conveniences, the latest clothing, etc., rather than the work of the church. Keeping up with the Jones has led a lot of so-called Christians to become merely church-goers; or even worse, nothing more than church-members (name on the roll). Of course, there is nothing wrong with having money, comforts, and a reasonable good life; but aren't some of us overdoing it? We have a tendency to attach too much emphasis to material possessions nowadays (Mk. 10:23-25; 1 Tim. 6:6-10, 17). Worldliness is sapping the life out of the church.

2. First-century disciples “rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name” (Acts 5:41). These simple, humble, but dedicated and convicted people were willing to risk and, if necessary, lose security, property, limb, and even life for Christ's sake. And yet we think we are “suffering above and beyond the call of duty” if our religion might cause the loss of some “friends,” the approval of our family, or the esteem of the social leaders in our area. As a result, several have become “ashamed of the gospel of Christ” (Rom. 1:16) in deed, even though they may not admit or even recognize it, as evidenced by their non-committal attitude. It is sometimes called “chameleon religion.” Many children of God (and sometimes even whole churches) have fallen into what might be called “Laodicean lethargy” because they are more concerned about building an image for themselves in the community than doing God's will.

3. New Testament children of God, as well as those of earlier periods in our own nation, could always be identified because they lived “soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world” (Tit. 2:12). Although they did not strive to be “odd-balls” or non-conformists just for the sake of

being eccentric, they were different even as Peter indicated in 1 Pet. 2:9-12. However, modern times have ushered in the “neo-Christian,” more tolerant and “open-minded” about sin than before. So now, Christians dress (or undress), curse, drink, smoke, fill their minds with smut, and divorce, etc., just like the world around them to the extent that it is next to impossible to tell who is the Christian and who is not by the way they live. Brethren, these things ought not so to be!

4. Followers of Christ in ancient times were known for their liberality in terms of giving. They were generous, benevolent, charitable. They even sold lands and other possessions in order to have the money, when it was needed, to give so the church could carry on its work (Acts 4:32-37). And they gave in other ways too – helping the needy, visiting the sick, etc. (Gal. 6:10, Jas. 1:27). One problem today is that elders do not have enough faith and foresight. Instead of planning a work (within reason, of course) and asking each member to give for it, thus providing a goal to be reached, they let things drift along on the basis of what they already have or have always done, taking care of only the bare essentials (i.e., paying the preacher and the bills) because “we don’t have enough money for anything else”; and then complain because the brethren don’t give more! How many of us have ever sold, given up, or gone without something so that we could give more? Sacrifice – we do not even know the meaning of the word in our prosperous and affluent society.

5. Primitive brethren also engaged in extensive “personal evangelism.” We are told that “daily, in the temple and at home, they ceased not to preach and to teach Jesus as Christ” (Acts 5:42). Even as persecution arose, “They that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word” (Acts 8:4). They did not leave this work to full-time preachers or a select few who were “trained” for it. Every Christian was an “evangelist” in one sense or another. And so far as we know, this is the only method by which the gospel was spread and the church increased in those days. How long has it been since you talked to someone about his soul? In spite of all the television shows, radio programs, newspaper articles, magazine advertisements, and bulletins we may use, the Lord’s

church will never grow until every individual Christian fills himself so full of joy and God's word that he will be driven to share the good news with others.

This is not to say that these qualities do not exist anymore today, that the church is failing. There are many devoted Christians; I know some of them. God's people in this generation have great possibilities. But these trends seem to be developing among us as they have in every previous era and I mention them only to warn us to be on guard. Unless each one of us has the kind of attitude displayed by the people of God of the first-century as revealed in the New Testament, we cannot be the kind of influence He wants us to be in this life, and we simply will not get to heaven.

- Wayne S. Walker

THIS WEEK'S LESSONS: Sunday morning: *"Points of Emphasis for Our Young People!"* (text: Eph. 6:4); Sunday evening: *Bi-monthly Singing!*