

LEARNING FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Jesus instructed his disciples to obey everything He had taught them, so it is fair to assume that the practices of the apostles had within themselves Christ's design for the Christian church.

In I Corinthians 11:2, the Apostle Paul urges us to continue in the traditions and teachings passed on to us in his writings. The Bible gives us many commandments of things we, as believers, were meant to do unto each other; however, with the institution of professional clergy, "ministering unto each other" began to cease. Over time, believers in a large number stopped being involved in ministry.

Institutionalization

The early church meetings were interactive meetings. For example, in Ephesians 5:19, we read, "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs...." In the instituted church ministry became a one-man show. Preaching has become a monologue instead of the dialog style the apostles used. Informality became formality, and as a result, spontaneous participation and the ministries Christ had for the church has become all but lost.

Again, let us see what the apostle had to say: "...when you come together everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All these must be done for the strengthening of the church" (I Corinthians 14:26).

When was this spontaneity lost? Could it be that it all happened when, instead being an organism ruled by His Spirit, the church became an organization ruled by men?

Did you know that when the church became institutionalized, church services even became compulsory? Statues and incense became holy objects. The administration of the sacraments were controlled by and only permitted to be done by the clergy. Informality had ceased. The Old Testament priesthood was reinstated. Scriptures were not meant for the common people, and all the biblical interpretation was the exclusive right of the church, allowing little room for other thoughts.

Reformation Incompleteness

Then came the Reformation, which brought for a short time less deceit, better theology, and the Bible into the hands and language of the people, but the works of God (various ministries of the Spirit) stayed with the clergy, and the ministry of all believers remained ignored. The Old Testament priesthood system continued even in the protestant churches. In countries where the church was State approved, clergy became as domineering as the previous church had been.

In the same manner in which God wanted Israel to be a nation He could control through His spiritually anointed judges or prophets, He intended to control the church to be a body governed by spiritually equipped people under His direct control. In much the same way that Israel wanted to choose a king in order to be like other nations, so did this earthly church now formed their own system of training leaders instead of those who were send and equipped by God. Indeed, God's own people had forgotten what He had said to Samuel when Israel demanded a king: "...it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king" (*I Samuel 8:7*).

The New Continued the Old

Even when Jesus came to earth, His own people cried out against Him: "We will not have this man rule over us." Because of that reaction to His Son, God took away their privilege of

being His chosen people and formed a New Testament church. Though God never restored the Old Testament temple and the priesthood system, our churches today have retained those practices. A major intent in forming the N.T. church was for every believer to participate in ministry. In that way, we would “minister unto each other,” and such service would not be done by one man who had been hired as the minister—a system Jesus warned us against as well. (John 10:12)

Multiple Ministries

The portion of Scripture, “If a man’s gift is prophesying let him use it...if it is serving let him serve, if it is teaching let him teach, if it is encouraging let him encourage...” (Romans 12:6-8), speaks of various gifts throughout the church body; therefore, what right has any man that he should be the only one to minister in the church?

As explained by Paul to the church of Colossae, Jesus is looking for body life and body participation: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Colossians 3:16).

Decay Within

Believers, as well as leaders, should realize that not allowing the gifts and ministries of God to function throughout the total body will cause spiritual decay in the church. Lack of ministry involvement will stop spiritual growth because believers will no longer be participants but spectators as they go to church. When questions are no longer permitted in the church, learning will cease, for it is by questioning, sharing and discussing we learn. Because individual thinking has been discouraged and conformity has taken over, false doctrines or ideas will easily enter in. Because believers are no longer encouraged to search and return to the Scriptures or to recognize God’s voice which means that the mind of Christ will no longer be revealed. Because of a limited love for each other or for a lack of walking in the Spirit, spiritual coldness will prevail.

A Biblical Church

A New Testament form of gathering under Christ’s control will bring back New Testament results. It will build up believers, equip them for service, help them to live out the Christian life, increase prayer and care for each other, strengthen the unity of the body, and prevent a falling away we see today.

A biblical church is not an organization but an explosive organism, directed by the Spirit of God and only functions when all parts are functioning. God’s church was meant to be a house where each piece of material is connected and all minister in harmony.

Human control will only make a man-made church that is easy to fall. Such control causes a continual division, and biblical truth, when presented, is often shallow. Scripture can easily be inappropriately used when it lacks proper interpretation. In these situations God’s gifts for ministry will no longer be present.

Where do we find a spiritual church in function? In countries where Christian persecution exists; where they have no buildings or denominational labels; where all believers participate; where all lean on God’s Spirit for protection, guidance, and teaching. Yes, this is a New Testament way of gathering, a gathering still available to us today which we will explore in another article.

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