

THE CHURCH JESUS DESIRES

By Richard Oostra

The New Testament Church that Jesus intended us to have was a vibrant body, mystical in character, and filled with divine power. Its leaders were men who were strong in the Lord (Acts 6:8; 11:24); having ministry abilities we so desperately need today (I Timothy 3; Titus 1).

That church was a fellowship over which Jesus had direct control, where miraculous events, like Peter walking out of jail or of the sick being healed, were not uncommon. Ironically, today in countries that do not have a commercial men-controlled church system like ours, we see these things are still happening.

Jesus promised us that as we gather directly under Him, theological differences will become minor because our focus will be on Him. Those who gather not under Him, however, He forewarned that they will become divided even on secondary issues (Matthew 12:30). Such divisions were not meant to be among the believers (I Corinthians 1:10). The Bible gives us a distinction of functions for service based on spiritual enablement (Romans 12:3-8), but not on hierarchy or rank.

This powerful, dynamic, New Testament Church made a global impact as a result of their structure not having been based by human design or intellect, but on knowing that God's ways are not men's ways (I Corinthians 1:27,28). The actions of this early church made a great impact, for they were known as people who were divinely led by the Lord and turned, as it were, the world upside down (Acts 17:6 KJ).

So that we may keep our focus as to what the church was meant to be and to follow in the apostle's doctrines and ways, the Lord gave us the book of Acts as a challenge to follow (Acts 2:42).

The Change

It was only 350 years into the existence of the Christian church that a major change came about. At that time, the Roman Emperor Constantine claimed to have seen in the midst of a battle the sign of the Cross in the sky and to have heard the words: "Under this sign will you conquer."

Having won that war, he now adopted the cause of the Christian church. Trying to help them, he institutionalized the once vibrant and mystical church into an organization based upon human design and insights.

Infiltration of the Faith

In heathen countries, many follow their leader's belief; as a result, the Christian church became quickly infiltrated with unconverted followers. Many of these took with them statues of their

previous gods and gave them Christian names. For example, the mother and child fertility statue now became a Christian symbol of Jesus and Mary and received a prominent place in the church.

Steps of Rebellion

Heathens worshiped in elaborate temples, and it was not long before they wanted to do the same for their new-found God. Together with the temple came a religious priesthood, authorized as Bishops to rule in the church. Soon these new leaders began manipulating the people.

Without any objection, Constantine declared himself the head potentate of his adopted church. Finally, through this declaration, the papal system was introduced into the Christian church. The headship that Jesus himself intended over His church was then replaced. God, however, will not share His glory with man, and so the church had lost His presence.

Further Deterioration

By now having instituted an earthly priesthood, not only was Christ's authority removed but also was the seeking for the ministry gifts of the Spirit (Ephesians 4: 11-13), which Jesus promised for the supernatural functioning of His Church.

Believers now began trusting their church for their spiritual well-being and this policy reduced the emphasis upon the need for personal conversion, spiritual growth, or mentoring to discipleship. As time passed, in order to remove all contrary views the Bible eventually was only permitted in Latin and became a forbidden book for the laity.

Church Legislation

In the Christian church, different views on the mode and value of baptism, the eating of meat, and the day of worship have always existed. The Apostle Paul, for example, wrote on issues like "It is better not to eat meat or drink wine if this will make my brother stumble" (Romans 14:21).

Nevertheless, the church would make up the minds of the people as to what was acceptable or not. For example, Sunday became the only approved day of worship; church support became compulsory, and clergy and laity became an accepted division. Baptism and other sacraments could be performed only by servants of the church and were declared as a must for salvation. Eating of meat was forbidden on Fridays; marriage was forbidden for the clergy, and speaking up against the church was a legal offence.

False Teachings

With the Bible being removed from the people, the church got away with these legalisms and many other false teachings. For over 1,000 years, this corrupt Christian church ruled with an iron fist, and Christianity went into what we now call "the Dark Ages."

Remnant groups of believers who had other thoughts were hunted down and burned alive or forced to move to other countries. Millions were murdered and the Christian church that had begun so well now had become an ugly monster.

A Partial Reformation

The reformation, being both political as well as spiritual, finally broke the power and dominance of the Empire and Church of Rome. Salvation was now proclaimed through faith instead of through the purchase of pardons. The Bible was translated into the language of the people, and tolerance of different biblical views and interpretations eventually became possible in some countries.

But like Lazarus being raised from the grave but still in his grave clothes, so the Protestant churches never fully clean came out of this corrupt Mother Church. Even today, many Protestant churches continue to follow many of their unbiblical practices.

- Many still practice a hierarchy of a clergy-laity system.
- They still enjoy elaborate churches and cathedrals.
- The headship and authority of Christ over the church is still questionable.
- Many still do not emphasize personal but rather a “church” salvation.
- Claiming exclusivity in biblical interpretation still leads to division.
- The ministries of the Spirit as well as biblical eldership are still being ignored.
- Many churches hanging on to traditions still neglect full adherence to Scripture.

Our Challenge

As an antidote toward the decay in the Western Church and as a means to revival, isn't it about time that in repentance we turn to the whole Word of God and to the instruction of our Lord as to what He intended His Church to be? If not, we will soon be swallowed up again into a global, end-time domineering church.

True believers, already in many countries and eventually globally, will be persecuted again. This persecution will force genuine believers to go underground; Christ's supernatural control over His people will then take place again. With that future in mind, why not strive to become a church by Christ's design now and upon a voluntary basis?

The Bible gives the invitation:

“Return to me, declares the Lord Almighty and I will return to you” (Zachariah 1:2).

Note: Richard Oostra is the author of the book *Church on the Rock(s)* available at www.RichardOostra.com