

INTEGRITY is published each month and seeks to encourage all believers in Christ to strive to be one, to be pure, and to be honest and sincere in word and in deed, among themselves and toward all men.

Integrity

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call of God came. And the results of this impelling call in the message of redemption brings thrill and ecstasy to our hearts even today. "But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women." (Acts 8:12) With the message of heaven received, there is always rejoicing. "So there was much joy in that city." (Acts 8:8)

If indeed any church is to be truly the body of Christ, it must evidence the presence of the living Lord Jesus; there must be keen awareness that the "word of the cross" is its essential message to the world, for by that message we have become the people of God's own possession, that we might show forth the marvels of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. (I Peter 2:9, 10)

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COMMITTED TO CONTINUE

Readers will recall that in the last issue of *Integrity*, our editor-in-chief, Hoy Ledbetter, stated that he was in the process of changing jobs, indicating some concern whether his new employment would permit the necessary time to continue with this vital ministry. We are grateful to God for recent developments which appear to have made it possible for our brother, Hoy, to continue living and ministering in this geographical area; and it likewise seems realistic to assume that he will shortly resume full responsibilities as *Integrity's* chief editor. We shall continue to depend upon the Lord's gracious leading of the Ledbetter family, and for the continued outreach of *Integrity's* ministry.

We believe that the present issue, focusing on several aspects of the church's nature, will be of particular interest to readers of our Restorationist heritage. Dr. Dan Danner struggles with the persistent concern among us about church models. After careful survey of Jesus' teachings and Christian origins, Acts and the search for a possible normative model, and Paul's ministry and emphases, he concludes that "Christianity emerges as a message of salvation..." and that "what remains normative and constant is the message of the cross."

Charles Gresham brings interesting sociological insights to bear on the nature of our Restoration churches and the institutional forms they have assumed subsequent to our origins. And Jim Warren raises the question so familiar in homiletical circles concerning the "ideal congregation."

We earnestly ask your continued prayers, encouragement, and financial support for our ministry through *Integrity*, and in a very personal way for Hoy and Lillian Ledbetter, as they strive to be true servants of Jesus the Servant.

Joseph F. Jones

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"Models of Early Christianity"*

DAN G. DANNER

It has puzzled scholars, historians and Bible readers for some time to raise the question, "What is Christianity?" Those of us who come from a Restorationist tradition have assumed that there is a monolithic first century Christianity which can be restored in modern times. I suspect that one of the problems our movement has experienced in this regard is the *nature* of the Christian religion revealed in the New Testament: not everyone perceives the same phenomena to restore, and consequently there is a plurality of forms of New Testament Christianity restored today, from one-cup and no-located-minister groups to instrumental music and premillennial groups.

I will not attempt to solve this problem, if, indeed, it is really a problem. But it might prove helpful to review the models of early Christian communities depicted in the New Testament.

Jesus and The Kingdom of God

If we were to begin with the time of Jesus we are amidst very delicate and complicated questions. For example, one might ask whether or not Our Lord understood his message of the Kingdom of God to represent a new religion (i.e. one totally divorced from Judaism). Since Jesus was not a "Christian" and

since his religion was Judaism, it should be clear that Christianity as a movement (not to say "religion" as yet) began after Jesus' death and resurrection. To be sure, the Kingdom of God, which was the focus of Jesus' preaching and ministry, was tied to his own person — his activity, his healings and his teaching — but primarily Jesus understood the Reign of God, the Jahweh who works in history, to be in the future. Ultimately, the Kingdom of God was accompanied by Jesus' death. His death would be the key to unlock the mysteries of God's new age.

There is, of course, Matthew's account of Jesus saying he would build his church (16.18). But, among other more serious questions, one might well ask whether or not Jesus used the word translated "church" (*ekklesia*) in the way it would come to be used in other New Testament writings, or whether it would have any resemblance to our understanding of the word today.

The disciples of Jesus constituted an embryonic form of what would eventually emerge as the Christian church. Caught up in an apocalyptic mood of expectation and anticipation for the redemption of the fallen state of Israel, most of them seemed not to understand Jesus and his message of the Kingdom. It was only after the resurrection that they seemed to be given the clue to God's new age. Even then, however,

some still clung to religio-political models of reigning over nations sitting on either side of the throne of the exalted Son of Man and Messiah of Israel (Acts 1.6-7).

If Christianity is a "religion about Jesus" in the sense that it chronologically emerged in history after Jesus' death and resurrection, what was the model or form of the earliest "Christian" community? Reading Acts we learn that the disciples upon whom the Spirit of God came on Pentecost only weeks after the Passion believed the "Times of refreshing" were with them, that Jesus was the Messiah, that salvation in his name was offered the nation of Jahweh's own choosing and that the winds of heaven were reeling in a new time. They, of course, were not called "Christians," and had no idea they were involved in a "new religion." Rather, they understood their situation to be the fulfillment of apocalyptic hopes and dreams and the realization of the Word of God as revealed through his servants the prophets.

Still awaiting Christ's immediate coming, Acts tells us that they continued steadfast in the teachings of the apostles, in fellowship and prayer, and in daily breaking of bread. They were in and out of the temple, their religion was still thoroughly (but radically) Jewish and they understood God to have revealed himself in the last days through Jesus, as if he were the Father's only begotten son.

Acts and Normative Church Form

There were Jews from many parts of the Roman empire in this large throng of believers ("people of the 'Way'"), but one would assume a very large portion

were Palestinian Jews whose native language was Hebrew or Aramaic. Yet they, and the number in Jerusalem probably grew to many thousands in the short months following Pentecost, had all things in common with the family of Jews who were from outside the land of Palestine (Hellenistic Jews). Together, these men and women of Israel constituted the first Christian community. To them, Christianity was a *message* about what God had done in Jesus. Acts gives us no indication that there was a particular constitutional form which they believed to be normative.

Stephen represents a different model. Arguing upon the basis of the message of God's act in Jesus, that all these things were clearly unveiled now that were but shadows in the evening of Israel's prophetic heritage, Stephen, the Hellenistic Jew, questioned whether God needs and uses the temple to be served by his chosen nation. His arguments fell upon dull ears and uncircumcized hearts, for he became the victim of a heresy-hunt and died a martyr. Yet Stephen was a "Christian" too, although he was never called that name. His notion was that the God who works in history has acted once and for all in the man, Jesus of Nazareth, that his resurrection from the dead brings life and a new age for God's people, and that "old age" institutions such as the temple are no longer normative for the New Israel. In effect, Stephen said the New Israel is a new religion.

As a result of the persecution following Stephen's death, the believers had to scatter from Jerusalem. One might assume that apocalyptic feelings would subside in such a climate, or at least, that the second coming must await another *kairos* in history. Taking

what was basic in their new experience with them, these (predominantly, we would suppose) Hellenistic Jews brought the message of salvation back with them to their homes in the *Diaspora* where they began proclaiming it ever anew, except now, they understood the message was not just for Jews by blood or race, but Jews by faith as well. This proclamation of the Gospel was the occasion for the *Gentile mission*, and it is in this context that Acts says the believers were first called "Christians" (11.26).

The Hellenistic Christian communities were likely modeled on the pattern of the Jewish synagogue. Meeting in homes, they continued the apostolic practices of Old Testament scripture-reading, psalm-singing, prophecy and (as Corinthians indicates) tongue-speaking and other supermundane manifestations. The Lord's Supper was preceded by a common meal together and they seemingly concluded their gatherings with the prayer for the Lord's immediate coming (*maranatha*). They had been converted on the basis of the same message of salvation except it had been couched in language very different from salvation-history. Judging from Paul's sermons to Gentiles in Acts, we may conclude they were brought to a knowledge of the cross by having been shown the wonders of nature and the personification of what generally was known at that time as Wisdom (*logos*) in the person of Christ. The term "Christ" no longer was used as a messianic title but as the proper name of the God of creation, the very mirror or image of God himself (col. 1.15ff). God had become man.

So the Gentiles were called away from their idolatrous ways to experience a *new way*, what Jesus had called the

Kingdom of God. Paul's notion of the new age was the new community under the headship of Christ, the New Adam. A new humanity was here, with a new spirit — the same Spirit which had filled the very person of Jesus. That Spirit now fills his spiritual body, the church, and we are all baptized into its fellowship to be members one of another.

Paul and House - Church Models

The portrait of Paul's congregations in the New Testament presents several house-church models. The Philippian church was very close to the Apostle, but he had had gigantic troubles at Corinth. False apostles were attempting to steer the young churches away from the original "good news" Paul had proclaimed, and he was adamant about their returning to the old paths. To Paul, Christianity was primarily a *message* whose outgrowth in community was clearly ethical and social. In ethics, the church adopted the teachings of its Lord (here, note the Synoptic Gospels and especially Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount) and wrestled to apply them to their new situation. In societal realms, the ethic of Jesus created a new humanity, where Jew and Greek, slave and free, men and women were one in Christ. Paul still tried to maintain societal norms where he deemed them expedient (particularly the place of the woman within the churches), but old ways had given way to a new creation.

When Paul attempted to report the Gentile mission to Jerusalem and the apostles, Luke gives us little hint that things went badly. But Paul's own letters give us another side to reflect on:

the Apostle would not compromise in making Christianity a mere sect or outgrowth of Judaism. Indeed, the God who had worked in the history of Israel is still working, primarily in the person of Jesus and now in his ongoing body, the church. But Christians need not be Jews before they became Christians. The new Israel was brought about by faith and not works of the law to merit God's acceptance. The "good news" is that we are all, no matter who we are, accepted by God's saving grace revealed on the cross in spite of our unacceptability. Our acceptance of each other is truly contingent therefore upon God's universal acceptance of us all.

And yet Paul fought the sticky battles of human ambiguity as he addressed his letters to churches and individuals to keep the faith. There are Christian ethics indeed, but all are summed up in the love commandment, to love our neighbor.

Christianity A Message of Salvation

Amidst this plethora of models and forms, Christianity emerges as a message of salvation. It is not just an individual phenomenon for it beholds an entirely new human race, a human race microscoped into a community of believers at Corinth, at Colossae, at Rome or wherever. What remains normative and constant is the message of the cross, a stumbling-block to some,

a message of folly to many.

It is this message of salvation which can and must be restored. Because of our hermeneutical differences we may see other things to restore as well. But they are problematic. The cross is not.

Our contemporary models of the church must stand against the New Testament models and be judged. Most, if not all, of them stand waiting. Some of my friends want the church to be a panacea for their troubles or a therapeutic society to meet their needs. They narcissistically shop for churches as they would for their favorite reclining chair or at the drugstore for medicine that cures what ails. Others want an intellectual citadel to rehearse the wisdom of the ages or titillate the mind with new-found insight. Many of us, already humbled and done-in by the guilt of bourgeois lifestyles, see the church as the aid to the poor and oppressed. I recently visited a church where I got the impression I was associated with a hard-sale business enterprise, the success of which was monitored by attendance at worship services, Bible classes and contributions.

Determining what Christianity *really* is is not easy. Determining what to restore is more difficult still. Above all, Christianity is a message about a man, a man who gave us the love of God in the form of a cross. That, to me, is good news.

Sociology and The Restoration Movement

CHARLES R. GRESHAM

In recent times there has been an attempt to view the Restoration movement from the perspective of Sociology. Some of these efforts have probably been helpful in showing the social thinking of different segments of the movement with the corresponding tensions developing because of this social thought. (e.g., the volumes by David E. Harrell, *The Social Sources of Division in the Disciples of Christ, 1865-1900*, privately published in 1973, *The Quest for a Christian Social Order*, Nashville, Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1966).

Other efforts have tried to fit the Movement into that over-worked sociological schematic of "movement, sect, church." (e.g. Oliver R. Whitley, *Trumpet Call of the Reformation*, St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1959). One gets the feeling that these works have been written to justify certain ecclesiastical trends taking place within one orbit of thought and action growing out of this movement.

We must admit, of course, that where there are people in relationship social forces are present. Therefore, social analysis is valuable *if* the analysts are cautious and careful; and *if they do not* allow their presuppositions to intrude, consciously or unconsciously, into their analysis.

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Order The Imperative of Social Life

One of the most perceptive of American sociologists is Peter L. Berger.* He is of particular relevance to those concerned with religious themes. One of Berger's emphases is that sociology, properly understood, is "conservative in its implications for the institutional order." Dr. Berger *believes firmly* that "sociology leads to the understanding that order is the primary imperative of social life." He maintains that "Society," *in its essences*, is the "imposition of order upon the flux of human experience." But this is not to be understood only as social controls — "The imposition of coercive power upon deviant individuals or groups" — it also relates generally to every social institution, no matter how non-repressive it may be. Language, which is the most basic social institution in any culture, illustrates this. Hence, says Berger, "social life abhors disorder as nature abhors a vacuum." (p.xv).

Along with this "imperative of order," Dr. Berger sees the "imperative of

* Peter L. Berger, *Facing Up to Modernity: Excursions in Society, Politics, and Religion*, (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

* I would like to dedicate this essay to the memory of my beloved father, G. Curtis Danner, about whose passing I learned in the process of writing it.

continuity,' which is rooted in the simple fact that people have children. Assuming any loving relationships between parents and children, parents will not only desire to explain the past to their children, relating the present to that past, but will also desire to project into the future (thus conserve) those good things that they have possessed in their own lives. As Berger says: "Children are our hostages to history . . . As a result there are limits not only to social disorder but to social discontinuity." (p.xvi).

One can immediately see the political implications of this conservative emphasis in sociology. Rather than being a handmaid of revolutionary disorder, sociology serves order. As Berger says, "except for rare and invariably brief periods, the forces of order are always stronger than the forces of disorder, and further, . . . there are fairly narrow limits to the toleration of disorder in any human society." (p.xv). He adds: "Indeed, revolutionary movements can be successful only if they succeed fairly rapidly in establishing new structures of order within which people can settle down with some semblance of social and psychic safety." (p.xv).

Implications for Religious Reform

The implications for religious movements are also obvious, but not only those revolutionary movements in religious thought and corresponding sociological structure.

Yet, there are structures and structures. Sociological structure, as seen by Berger and others, may not necessarily be equated with extensive bureaucratic structure such as most denominations exhibit. In fact, some of

these structures may be disruptive to order and continuity, since they pile unnecessary artificial structures upon the top of natural structures. Too much attention, effort, and expense are diverted to these artificial structures rather than the more natural structures (e.g. the local church).

Another implication that this analysis of the "conservative implications for the institutional order" presents is that leaders among those natural sociological structures (church, family, social unity, etc.) will take the "stance of a man who thinks daringly but acts prudently" (p. xvii). In other words, such responsible leadership will be motivated by "carefully thought through concern to avoid senseless pain and to protect the good things of ordinary life." (loc. cit.).

We see this in those beginning stages of the Nineteenth Century Reformation. Both the Campbells, father and son, thought daringly, but acted prudently. Paradoxical though it be, even when Alexander was the iconoclastic editor of *The Christian Baptist*, he was at the same time reluctant to break with the Baptists, avoiding open breach by relating to an Association of Churches (Mahoning) that was more amenable to his reform thinking. Campbell was quite shocked at the precipitate action among those Mahoning Association churches that brought an end to the traditional structure of Association. This "sociological conservatism" is clearly indicated in the *Millennial Harbinger* as his concern for church life and evangelistic action causes him to respond to and encourage Bible Unions, Sunday Schools, Evangelical Fellowships, Missionary and other Cooperative Societies.

But, not only were the Campbells

concerned with order — both church and social order — they also were concerned with continuity. Alexander Campbell had a high sense of history and its significance. The "consensus filelium" principle demonstrates this in terms of Biblical understanding. His use of the wisdom of the past in relation to many issues also corroborates this. The establishment of Bethany College — unique and radical as its Biblical foundation may have been at the time— shows convincingly that Campbell believed that "children are our hostages to history." Learning must be perpetuated so that God's purpose for man may be continued through the rising generations. Even the choice of the name of his major journal — *Millennial Harbinger* — stresses this continuity. "A new age will dawn," Campbell says, in effect, "and the 'daring thinking' and 'prudent action' espoused in this journal will be the harbinger of that new age."

Need for Continuing Reform

This is the spirit of a continuing Reformation. Every generation must be reforming itself in terms of God's original purpose designed to restore man to Himself. The acculturation process demands daring, sometimes ruthlessly daring, thinking. So often, in church life, expedients become more

significant than that which is clearly essential; forms may even become empty forms; institutionalization may produce a non-productive bureaucracy concerned only with perpetuating itself or serving the special interests of its leaderships, rather than in perpetuating the purposeful action of God. Daring, ruthless, thoughtful analysis must be made of these sociological situations.

But at the same time the true Reformer "acts prudently." By its very nature, reform occurs within that which needs reforming. Radical revolution would destroy the entities to be reformed, fragment, or even destroy the fellowship of the persons who need to see the necessity of such reform. Here is the "conservatism" of any true reformation. It is concerned with both order and continuity. Radicalism, on the other hand, whether in thought or action, tends toward disorder and discontinuity.

No religious movement is free from sociological analysis. Movements, orbits of influence, that involve people in structures are sociological phenomena. But, Christian movements, directed by the revelational reality perceived in the Word of God, are not mere sociological phenomena. These are orbits of God's action and need constant reformation in terms of God's revealed will for individual and group life.

Jesus, The Church, and Me

In view of the emphasis on congregational or group responsibility, there may seem to be no place for individuality within the Lord's church. Nothing could be further from the truth. We do need to be aware of our

duties toward and with each other, but we also need to appreciate the value of being ourselves. Let us encourage the freshness and vitality which our differences bring to our congregation. Jesus loves me — and US! — DAT

The Ideal Congregation

JIM WARREN

How does a church's leadership envision the ideal congregation? The question is highly pertinent, for how they perceive the ideal determines that for which they will consciously, or unconsciously, strive in their particular congregation. Desirable attributes of the ideal congregation are frequently spelled out in one or more of the following activities or achievements. Observe the list, and it could be extended indefinitely: specific attendance figures at the Sunday services, and mid-week Bible study; a weekly contribution of so many dollars (with frequent stress on whether it is being met); a building with a respectable seating capacity, along with classrooms and facilities for a specified number of students.

Continue this statistical listing with a definite number of baptisms each year (with job pressure on the preacher to produce or perish!), and a definite number of gospel meetings and youth rallies annually while attendance goals are established for all such activities (later to be published in the brotherhood journals under the caption, "New Records Set"); then include a busing ministry with so many students on a given number of buses, memorizing a certain number of Scriptures while enroute to the church building; add to these the goals of a personal work program with specific

numbers of classes taught, and the definite number of persons who attended; and the ideal congregation should have a definite number of missionaries supported in foreign fields, with several local ministers of various kinds - preaching, education, visitation, youth equipping! And yes, there should definitely be a benevolent program that distributes clothes and supplies meals for the needy, with accurate records kept on the number of clothing articles shared and the meals served.

If a church's goals are synonymous with this list then the prime measurement tool for the congregation is probably numbers and dollars. Many congregations that have such a philosophy will present to the church on an annual basis the budget for the year and growth statistics for the past and future years. The point that is inferred is that if the attendance, contribution, number of programs, etc. are on the increase, then the Lord's work is being accomplished.

The Church Business

The objective of a business in our capitalistic society is to make a profit. Consequently the bottom line profit number and related statistics are that about which business owners are most concerned. However, is the church of our Lord like a business and is the

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prime objective of church leaderships to make the numbers increase?

It would appear that a number of churches place heavy emphasis on statistics in evaluating their progress of carrying out the Lord's work. But aside from the incidents surrounding Pentecost, the New Testament is relatively silent on growth statistics.

Is it wrong then for a church to keep track of statistics? Certainly not, but the emphasis placed on these statistics must be closely scrutinized. Unlike a business, there are a number of other factors aside from statistics that must be evaluated in order to judge if a church is successful; and it is to some of these biblical criteria that we now turn our attention.

Mission of the Church

According to the great commission found in Matthew 28:18-20 the purpose of the church is portrayed as making disciples of all nations. Can you guess the two words omitted after reading the following passage?

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."

The two words 'to observe' are not only left out here but almost forgotten by many churches. To observe means to actually do the things that Christ taught, to learn and apply God's word to our daily life and be involved in the growth of becoming like Jesus Christ.

A number of congregations are geared up to teach the word in a variety of forms, but are not equipped to know

if their members are applying the teaching to their lives. Churches are filled with members who are educated far beyond their obedience. They know all the things they are supposed to do, but find little help in actually appropriating the teaching to their daily Christian experience. Because they are hearers only and not doers, they miss the joy that James talks about in James 1:22-25 and live frustrated and depressed lives.

Batch Mentality and Programs

Some church leaders have allowed our mass production society to deceive them into thinking that one can make disciples on a mass production basis. Can one preach to the masses, place the converts in a new converts' class, graduate them to service in some sort of program or teaching assignment, feed them solely from the pulpit and classroom, fellowship them once a month at a pot luck dinner, and expect to fill the churches with mature disciples? Where in that process does one learn if the individual is actually applying the Word to his personal life, and how is the spiritual progress evaluated?

Actually, programs can be a choking influence on the growth of a disciple. Because the leadership wants the programs to be successful, as measured by attendance and dollars, many Christians are thrust into program activities regardless whether it will meet their needs or not. Perhaps the most spiritual thing a person can do instead of going to visit others is to stay home and have an intimate visit with his wife. Perhaps he has neglected his children all week and will continue to do so because of a compelling admonition to

be involved in some church program or religious meeting.

There is nothing inherently wrong with programs unless they assume such a sacred level that they are more important than the individuals that are in them. Jesus sharply accentuated this theme with the Pharisees when he told them that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath (Mark 2:27).

One drawback to programs is the enormous amounts of time church leaders devote to developing, overseeing, budgeting, and planning for such structured activities. A question that comes to mind is whether the Lord intended the elders of a congregation to be the board of directors for religious programs and church finances? What about such functions as shepherding and pastoral care?

Another aspect of programs is that they can deceive Christian leaders by substituting activity for true spiritual growth. "God must be pleased by all our programs, look at how many people were taught the Word of God," is the cry of the leadership. But when asked the gut level question of whose life was changed, the answers may be slow to come. Church leaderships must be able to point to more than the number of responses when evaluating programs. Responses mean babies are born, but who will raise them?

There is no substitute for individual shepherding by one who is spiritual for gaining help in applying the word. All of us are unique, at a different stage of spiritual growth, and have individual needs and problems. Paul's goal was to warn every man and teach every man in all wisdom, that he might present every man mature in Christ (Col. 1:26). This requires studying 'every man' in order to determine and meet his spiritual

needs (Heb. 10:24). Anyone can put on a spiritual mask and look spiritual at religious services or church programs; but what about the spiritual quality of his or her life? Is he or she a good spouse, a good parent, a good employee, a good student? Does he need help in overcoming a sin, does she have personal time with the Lord, or can you see glimpses of Jesus Christ living in their lives? According to Romans 12:1 part of our spiritual worship is what we do with our lives, not so much what we do at a building.

Church Growth

In some instances church growth may remain constant from a numerical standpoint, while the Holy Spirit may be radically transforming the lives of the members. This is spiritual growth, changed lives. The Spirit may, in fact, want to stop the numerical growth until the true spiritual maturity of the members is developed so they can take on new members and contribute to their spiritual growth. Paul did not rejoice in numbers but in the news of changed lives. He praised God for the news of their love for one another, their growing faith, and changed lives. (Ro. 1:8-9, Col. 1:3-4, & II Thess. 1:2-3). Such growth cannot always take place in a congregation if it is only geared to soul winning instead of soul rearing.

Paul told Timothy to take what he had given him and commit it to faithful men who would be able to teach others also (II Tim. 2:2). If a church is really involved in making disciples then those who are spiritual leaders are trying to reproduce themselves in others (I Cor. 11:2). Such a process is slow and demands great amounts of time and energy. But can you imagine the

amount of true spiritual growth in a congregation where spiritual leader 'A' felt the responsibility and had the commitment to bring brother 'B' to full spiritual maturity in all areas of his life? What would happen if all the spiritual leaders had the same commitment?

Individual Growth

A congregation of Christians cannot grow if its individual members are not growing, and individuals cannot grow apart from personally knowing the Lord. Each disciple must have a consistent time in the word where he asks God to search his heart and try his thoughts and show him what he wants him to apply to his life (Ps. 139:23, 24). When a spiritual leader encourages another in such an activity and allows him to share what he has learned and applied, he cooperates with the Holy Spirit who actually brings about the spiritual growth in an individual (Phil. 2:13). It is in this individual time spent with the Lord that the Holy Spirit will highlight portions of scripture that are

essential for that particular individual at that given time of his life. The spiritual leader's responsibility is to constantly expose himself, and encourage others to expose themselves, to the truths of scripture and follow the Spirit's leading by obeying what he has taught.

Summary

Church growth is far more than increasing statistics, it involves changing lives. Those who are spiritual leaders have the responsibility to see that those who are taught are also applying what they have learned to their lives. This can only be accomplished by close intimate contact with the flock.

In order to evaluate if a disciple is maturing one must be mature in the Lord himself. Each individual's goal is to ultimately take on the complete character of Jesus Christ; however, in the process of growing all of us need to be able to see other brothers that are headed in that direction and are farther along than ourselves.

The Message and The Church

JOSEPH F. JONES

In his discerning article on models of the early church, Dan Danner concludes that what was normative about the early Christianity and the church was a message, a message of the cross and salvation. Employing this conclusion as a launching base for the more limited reflections of this article, it seemed appropriate to explore more fully something of the relationship between message and church.

Good News of the Kingdom

The Gospel accounts of Jesus' life and teachings point toward the conclusion that the essence of His message was the Kingdom of God. After John's arrest Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:14)

It was good news to an expectant people that the long awaited Rule or Reign of God was near. The sovereign Reign of God was arriving with the powerful and persuasive preaching of Jesus, and the evidences of this affirmation were everywhere to be seen. With divine insight and powerful displays evidencing God's presence and working, Jesus' message of the kingdom was becoming a present reality. Here was God's Messiah in whom that sovereign rule was embodied, bringing glad tidings to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, liberty to the oppressed. And when criticized by the Pharisees for this message and ministry, the Lord answered, "But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you." (Luke 11:21)

Not until after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus did the kingdom message take on its full meaning with the heralding of Jesus as Lord and Christ. (Acts 2:36) Now the consummate message of the kingdom was that God the sovereign one had broken into history in a unique way never before witnessed, and that His Rule was to be seen and experienced in Jesus the risen Lord. That Jesus himself envisioned this message is amply demonstrated in the four gospels. Hence the anticipation of the church by Jesus as that community of His disciples who had yielded to the ruling of God in their lives through none other than the risen Christ himself.

The Message is Christ

The message of the early church was that God had come to earth in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and that this Jesus though killed by wicked men, had by the power of God been raised from the dead, and was now Savior and Lord. "But we preach Christ crucified," wrote the apostle Paul, "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

(I Cor. 1:23,24) Although such a message of a crucified and risen Jesus offended the Jewish mind and was a sheer folly to the Greeks, it nevertheless was God's plan for "our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption." (I Cor. 1:30)

This proclamation of good news in Christ assured men of God's unconditional love providing them the right to become His children. (John 1:12) "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us that we should be called children of God," writes the apostle John. (I John 3:1) It was undeserved grace lavishly shared in Christ that could take disrupted and defaced lives and make them alive with new meaning and direction. (Eph. 2:6-10) That which sin had so miserably marred could be refashioned into a new creation. (II Cor. 5:17) Hopeless and helpless persons now were promised freedom from despair and anxiety, and assured of sufficient grace with which they could both live bravely and die victoriously. (II Cor. 12:8-10) What was indeed normative in early Christianity and the apostolic church was "the word of the cross" embodying redemptive grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The church exists through and because of the message of God in Christ Jesus.

The Message and the Call

In this message of redemptive love is the call of God to lost men. It began with John and Jesus who demanded that men "repent and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:14) Throughout the writings of the apostle Paul we hear the calling of God in the good news, for it is "God's aim to rescue men from the hopeless situation in which they find themselves, and to liberate them from the chains in which they have involved themselves." (Barclay, *The Mind of Paul*, p. 49) It was God the gracious one

who took the initiative to call men to himself; and it was a call to holiness and peace. (I Thess. 4:7) God was calling sinners into a state of salvation, and into the indescribable fellowship of Christ. Paul assured the Corinthians that they were "called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." (I Cor. 1:2) And to the same congregation of believers he wrote with equal assurance that "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." (I Cor. 1:0) How clear in the mind of Paul that the church is truly the called of God, called by the message of reconciliation, to be saints of God, sharing in the fellowship of Christ and the Holy Spirit. So the church then is Biblically to be perceived as the ecclesia of God, the called People of God, who have heard and responded to His call.

Called by the message of God in the person of Christ, and existing by virtue of that very message, the church is to live under and be judged by it. The church indeed lives by the word (Christ), for He is the church's life and light. Since God is love, pure and unselfish agape, then the church must be a loving community of saints. If we are looking for norms by which to measure the church of God, then we must expect the church to be a fellowship of loving individuals, characterized by that same kind of unconditional love which we see in Jesus' sacrificial life and death. Indeed, this is one of the few clearly identifiable marks of the church, for Jesus made such love between brethren imperative, declaring that by this would all men know that we are His disciples, if we love one another. (John 13:34,35) Such love can accept imperfect people while not condoning sinful behavior; it can welcome or receive others in their differences without forcing a superficial FEBRUARY-MARCH, 1980

conformity to an arbitrary standard of Christian fellowship. (Rom. 15:7)

Not only is the church called to live and love by the word of Christ, but it is constantly under the discerning judgment of that message as well. That message of God is living and active, capable of "discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." (Heb. 4:12,13) So the Christian community is brought into being through that message of redemption and reconciliation; it is characterized by holiness in life, and evidences its relationship to Christ the Lord by loving all persons - even the unlovable.

The Message and Evangelism

The implication for evangelism by the church is now clear: the message of redemption and reconciliation which brought the church into being now becomes the message which the church heralds to the world. The New Testament documents are vibrant with the good news that God in Christ has become incarnate, bringing us light, life and immortality. (I Tim. 6:14-16) Upon arriving in Corinth for his initial visit and evangelistic thrust, Paul was quite certain concerning his message: it was "the word of the cross." In this saving message he personally gloried because of what it had done for him, and he would declare it, not with "eloquent wisdom" or charming speech, but "in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." (I Thess. 1:5)

Luke summarizes with remarkable clarity what it meant to evangelize with the message of salvation. He speaks of "preaching the word" and then equates it with proclaiming the Christ. (Acts 8:4, 5) It was "the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" through whose name (being) the