

To What Should We Be Loyal

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What do you think of the person who says, "My parents were members of this denomination. I was born in it. And I'll die in it."

"Oh," you say, "I think he's wrong to talk like that:" "Yes, but why is he wrong?"

"I suppose because he assumes his denomination is right and will always be right."

"Well, then, to what denomination or group should he be loyal?"

"I guess he shouldn't be loyal to any denomination, because no denomination is perfect."

"One final question. If he shouldn't be loyal to any denomination or group of Christians, to what should he be loyal?"

"He ought to be loyal to the Lord and to the principles of His Word."

Yes, of course! That is the only correct answer. It is a mistake to develop an undying loyalty to any Christian fellowship, no matter how scriptural it may be at the time.

Even suppose that you reject the whole idea of denominations. Suppose you meet with Christians who refuse any sectarian name. Suppose, for instance, that they speak of themselves by the innocuous name of "the assemblies." They seek to adhere to the teaching of the Word. Shouldn't you throw in your lot with them permanently and be loyal to them alone?

If you do, you will find yourself in a difficult position.

You are committed to a group that will almost inevitably change over the years. This has been the history of almost every Christian fellowship. Liberal tendencies creep in. Zeal and freshness give way to formalism. A denominational hierarchy develops. Soon you can write Ichabod over the whole thing—the glory has departed.

Then again, if you are loyal to a group of assemblies, the question always arises, "With which particular ones do you agree?" There are wide differences among any group of local churches, just as there are wide differences among individuals. Some are open, some are exclusive. Some are conservative, some are liberal. Some have a pastor who presides over the congregation, others repudiate a one-man ministry. No two assemblies are exactly alike.

So there is a real problem. To which assemblies are we to be loyal? Are we to blindly subscribe to all the assemblies that might be listed in a semi-official address book? It seems obvious that we cannot consistently do this. We must judge each individual assembly by the Word of God, as far as our own personal affiliation is concerned.

Here is another problem. If my loyalty is to a particular group of local churches, what is to be my attitude toward other Christian groups that might in some ways be closer to the New Testament pattern than mine is? How do I evaluate them? Do I simply wave them off by saying, "They are not among 'our' assemblies." Do I accept or reject them by whether their activities are reported in one of "our" magazines?

Then there is the matter of individual Christian workers "outside our circle." How do we evaluate them? Do we ask, "Has he been commended by one of 'the assemblies?'" "Is he with us?" Or do we inquire if he is serving the Lord in accordance with the principles of the New Testament?

Certainly the easiest policy is to judge individuals or groups by whether or not they are "with us." This does not require spiritual exercise or discernment. But it is a false and dangerous basis of judgment. It supplants the Word of God as our final authority. It assumes a priori that "we" are correct in our position and that everyone else should conform to us. It leads to inconsistency, embarrassment and confusion.

Christians must be taught to test everything by the Scriptures. This is our only authority. The question is not, "How do we do it in 'our assemblies?'" but "What does the Bible teach about it?"

Our loyalty must be first, last and always to the Lord and to the principles of His Word. And we should never

blindly assume that any group of believers has a monopoly on the truth, is adhering to the New Testament in its entirety, or is immune from drift and departure.

Every generation must guard against the danger of slipping into denominational, sectarian ways of thinking. Down through the centuries, there have been great movements of the Holy Spirit in which certain truths have been recovered out of the rubble of tradition, formalism and ritualism. The first generation, that is, those living at the time of these movements have been intelligent concerning the scriptural principles involved. But then the second and third generations have tended to follow the system routinely because their parents were in it, and because they themselves were brought up in it. There has been a decline of true conviction and an increasing ignorance of the biblical basis of the pattern followed.

Thus the history of most spiritual movements has been aptly described in the word series: man ... movement ... machine . . . monument. At the outset there is a man, anointed in a special way by the Holy Spirit. As others are led into the truth, a movement develops. But by the second or third generation, people are following a system with sectarian, machine-like precision. Eventually nothing is left but a lifeless, denominational monument.

If you were to ask a sampling of Christians, "Why do you meet in church fellowship where you do?" how many do you think could give a clear, scriptural answer? Not many! There is widespread ignorance as to the truth of the New Testament church, and therefore a general lack of conviction on the subject. How can we have strong convictions about something we do not know or understand?

In a healthy New Testament assembly, those who are in fellowship know why they are there. They are not sermon-tasters or followers of men, but Christians who are well grounded in the truth of the gospel and of the Church. They are prepared to judge everything by the Word. They are not unalterably committed to any particular group of assemblies. If trends develop which are unbiblical and dishonoring to the Lord, they will seek the leading of the Holy Spirit to the company of those who do meet in obedience to the Bible.

Let us examine some of the great truths concerning the assembly which are found in the New Testament and to which we should be loyal.

UNITY OF THE BODY

One of the most obvious truths is the unity of the body of Christ. There is only one body, one church, one assembly (Eph. 4:4).

Because this is true, all believers are responsible to bear witness to it. As we gather together, we should give practical expression to it. Nothing that we do or say should deny it.

Many Christians see quite clearly that sects and denominations are a denial of the truth of the one body (I Cor. 1: 10-13; 3:3). Sects create the impression that Christ is divided, and thus misrepresent the truth of God's Word. Many of us see this quite clearly and refuse such names as Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist or Episcopalian.

But we do not always see that any name that separates us from other members of the body is divisive and unscriptural. Even if we take a biblical name like brethren, for example, the minute we qualify it or capitalize it, we transgress. It is as wrong for some believers to identify themselves as Plymouth Brethren, United Brethren, Christian Brethren, Evangelical Brethren, Open Brethren or Exclusive Brethren as it is for others to call themselves Presbyterians or Pentecostals.

Brethren with a capital B implies that there are some believers who are not brethren, or that some are brethren in a distinctive way. We hear people ask, "Is he in the Brethren?" or they report sadly, "He left the Brethren."

The truth is, of course, that if he's saved, he's in the brethren, and he can't leave the brethren since the believer is eternally secure.

It is certainly right that we should gather to the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ alone, but the minute we speak of ourselves as "Christians gathered to the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ alone," meaning that we do and others don't, we have become a sect.

To speak of any particular group of Christians exclusively as "the Lord's people" betrays a sectarian attitude. It puts us in the same class as those in Corinth who said, "I am of Christ"-meaning that they were of Christ to the exclusion of all others (I Cor. 1: 12).

Another way in which inconsistency appears is the habit of calling a particular gathering of Christians in a town

"the assembly" in that town. Or speaking of states and cities where there are "no assemblies." Actually this is not accurate language. The assembly in any given town is made up of all true believers there. Within that town there may be several gatherings of Christians. In addition there may be some true Christians who are not associated with a local fellowship for one reason or another; they may be under discipline, for instance. All go to make up the assembly in the town, though all may not meet together in one place.

Someone will say, "Well, how can I distinguish my assembly from the other evangelical churches in Hometown?" The answer is, "Instead of calling it 'the assembly' in Hometown, refer to it as the assembly that meets in the Bible Chapel at 5th and Pine." Then you have not denied the unity of the body.

We must never forget that we are Christians, believers, brethren, disciples and saints-and so are all who have been redeemed by the precious blood of Christ. To deny this by any form of sectarianism, denominationalism or exclusivism is to deny the truth of the Bible and to be guilty of carnality and pride.

ALL BELIEVERS ARE MEMBERS

A second great truth for which we should stand is that all true believers are members of the body of Christ and therefore members of one another (I Cor. 12:12-26). This being so, it is necessary for us to recognize all Christians as our brothers and sisters.

It is not always easy to do this. Men have erected fences. People are more loyal to their own denomination than they are to the body of Christ. They do not recognize the unity of the Spirit.

But the trouble is not all with other people. Even in our own hearts, there is often the desire to be distinctive, to think of ourselves as having a cover on church truth or some other truth. We often find it difficult to befriend those who do not see exactly as we do. Instead of rejoicing when others are led into a certain measure of divine truth, we are apt to magnify the ways in which they are still different from us. And too frequently we quarrel most bitterly with those whose church order is strikingly similar to our own.

How then can we give practical expression to the truth that all genuine believers are members of the body of Christ?

First of all, we should love them because they belong to Christ (I John 4:11). The fact that they may differ with us in various areas of doctrine or practice should not prevent our loving them.

We should pray for them (I Sam. 12:23). This is a debt we owe to all men, especially those who are of the household of faith.

Third, we should seek to share with them the precious truths which God has shown us from the Word (II Tim. 2:2).

This does not mean that we should adopt a deliberate policy of sheep-stealing, that is, moving into other evangelical groups with the specific purpose of leading people out to "our own fellowship." Nowhere in the Bible are we called to this divisive ministry. Rather, in our individual contact with others and as led by the Holy Spirit, we should minister Christ to them as the gathering Center of His people. We should "teach everyone we can, all that we know about Him, so that, if possible, we may bring every man up to his full maturity in Christ" (Col. 1:28, Phillips).

Not only should we love other believers, and pray for them, and seek to edify them, but we should also learn from them (I Cor. 12:21). It is a mistake to think that we have all the truth and that we cannot benefit spiritually from those outside "our own fellowship." Every member has something to contribute to the rest of the body. Any man-made barriers that hinder believers from helping other believers are contrary to the will of God.

Also we should refrain from criticism, jealousy, gossiping, backbiting or judging (Luke 6:37). Each believer is a steward of the Lord. We are distinctly forbidden to judge others before the time, that is, before the Lord comes (I Cor. 4:5). Paul asks, "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? To his own Master he standeth or falleth" (Rom. 14:4). And when Peter became concerned about John's service for the Lord, Jesus said, "What is that to thee? Follow thou me" (John 21:22).

We should rejoice whenever Christ is preached, whether or not we agree with the methods and motives. Paul wrote to the Philippians: "Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife; and some also of good will; the one preach Christ of contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds; but the other of love, knowing that I am set for the defense of the gospel. What then? Notwithstanding, every way, whether in

pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice' (Phil. 1: 15-18).

The fact that we thus recognize all true believers as members of the body does NOT mean that we will adopt their policies and practices. We are responsible to obey the Word of God as He has revealed it to us. We can love people without loving the system in which they are found and without becoming a part of it. As far as our own pathway is concerned, we must be uncompromisingly obedient to the Bible. As far as other believers are concerned, we should be patient and tolerant.

CHRIST, THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH

A third important truth for which we must stand is that Christ is the Head of the Church (Eph. 5:23; Col. 1: 18). This means that we must look to Him for direction and guidance in the affairs of the local assembly.

We all realize that the truth of Christ's headship is denied when a pope, for instance, claims to be head of the church on earth. But we must guard against the more subtle error of thinking that any of us has any right to manage the affairs of the assembly. It is so easy to give lip service to the Headship of Christ, and yet to maneuver, lobby and connive in a carnal way in order to get one's own way. Instead of waiting upon Him in fasting and prayer, we apply successful business methods and the wisdom of this world. All this is a practical denial of the Headship of Christ. If Christ is Head, then everything must be done under His guidance and control.

THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

Then there is a fourth truth-the truth that all true believers are priests. In I Peter 2:5-9, we learn that we are holy priests and royal priests.

As holy priests we offer up spiritual sacrifices to God by Jesus Christ (v. 5). These sacrifices include:

- the sacrifice of our bodies (Rom. 12:1, 2).
- the sacrifice of our praise (Heb. 13:15).
- the sacrifice of our possessions (Heb. 13:16).

As royal priests we show forth the excellencies of Him Who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light (I Peter 2:9). This means that every believer is expected to witness for Christ, both by life and by the spoken word.

As holy priests we go into the sanctuary to worship. As royal priests we go out- into the world to testify.

The idea that worship and service are the functions of a special group known as priests or clergymen is foreign to the New Testament. All believers are priests and should be free to exercise their priestly functions.

NO ONE-MAN MINISTRY

There are some local churches that repudiate the clerical system, refusing to have what might be called a one-man ministry. And yet if you were to ask many of the Christians in those churches for a scriptural defense of their position, they would be hard put to give an answer. Why is it wrong to have a one-man ministry in the local assembly?

The first reason is because it is not found in the New Testament. The assemblies in apostolic times consisted of saints, bishops and deacons (Phil. 1:1). The bishops, or elders, are always spoken of in the plural. Not one elder over a church, but several elders in each church. Bible historians agree that the clerical system arose in the second century; it was not found in the churches of the New Testament.

Secondly, the clerical system generally ignores the purpose for which the gifts of evangelist, pastor and teacher were given to the church. The function of these gifts is to build up the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12). In other words, Christian service is not the function of any one class but the responsibility of all believers. It is only as each one fulfills his function that the body will develop and mature. The function of the gifts listed in Eph. 4:11 is to build up the saints to the point where they are mature, functioning members of the body. Thus, these particular gifts are temporary aids, not permanent fixtures.

When one man is responsible for all the teaching and preaching in a local church, there is always the danger that people will gather to him, not to the Lord. If a man is especially gifted, people are drawn to his preaching. They attend because he is there. If he leaves for any reason, then they are apt to follow him, or if this is not possible, they often drift elsewhere, looking for another gifted man.

Christ should be the gathering Center of His people (Matt. 18:20). We should be drawn by His presence, not by a

man. When believers see this and act upon it, the local assembly need not be shaken by the departure of any man. An assembly where Christians gather to Christ has strength, stability and solidarity.

And, of course, there are potential dangers when all or most of the teaching in a local church is done by one man. People tend to accept his word as authoritative. If they are not studying the Scriptures for themselves, they are not in a good position to discern error.

In addition, no one man is able to provide the diversity of ministry that is possible when the Holy Spirit has liberty to speak through several men. We must be concerned not only with ministry that is doctrinally accurate, but also with ministry that provides a balanced diet for the people of God. The scriptural injunction is, "Let the prophets speak two or three and let the others judge" (I Cor. 14:29).

A one-man ministry too often stifles the development of gift in a local church. There is not the same opportunity for others to participate. Some ministers insist on confining most of the work to themselves; they resent anyone else's intruding into their office. But even where this is not the case even where ministers would like to see others participating-the very nature of the clerical system discourages the so-called layman from developing his God-given gifts.

When one man is salaried by the local congregation as preacher, there is often a subtle temptation to water down the message. It should not be so, but the fact is that by controlling a minister's salary, the congregation often cuts itself off from receiving the full counsel of God.

Now we recognize that there are many great men of God in the clerical system who preach the gospel faithfully, teach the Word, and seek to shepherd the sheep of Christ. And God is using them.

We also recognize that there are many "one-man ministers" who do not have the clerical spirit. They have a sincere desire to help the saints in every possible way, to lead by example, and not to lord it over God's heritage.

And we also realize that it is possible for someone who is not a clergyman to have the clerical spirit. In III John 9-11, for example, we read of Diotrephes who acted as a tyrant in a local assembly.

But the fact remains that the clerical system is basically wrong and unscriptural. The world will never be evangelized in the way that God intended, and the church will never be built up according to the divine plan as long as the distinction between clergy and laity is maintained.

THE PRESIDENCY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Another vital truth which each local assembly is obligated to maintain and practice is the presidency of the Holy Spirit (John 14:16, 26). This means that the Holy Spirit is the Representative of Christ in the church on earth. He is the One Who should be allowed to lead the people of God in prayer, praise and worship. He should have liberty to speak through servants of His own choosing according to the spiritual needs of God's people.

In I Cor. 14:26, we have a picture of a meeting of the early church in which there was this freedom of the Spirit. "How is it then, brethren? When ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying."

When the Spirit is thus free to lead, there will be spontaneity in teaching, preaching, worship and intercession.

Most of us realize that the ministry of the Holy Spirit has been greatly quenched by the introduction of ritual and liturgy. The use of printed prayers, of stereotyped messages for certain days of the "church calendar," of a prescribed order of service that must be followed without deviation-these things fetter the Holy Spirit in the meetings of the local church.

But we must guard against more subtle ways of quenching Him. For instance, we must guard against manmade rules in our worship meetings. In some places, there is an unwritten law that there must be no ministry before the breaking of bread. Or that the meeting must not go beyond a certain time. Or that in worshipping we must not dwell on our own sins or unworthiness. Or that we must sit or stand when praying or singing. All such rules quench the spirit of spontaneous worship and lead to formalism.

We often make a man an offender for a word. Perhaps a young believer will express thanks to God for dying for him. Must he be rebuked for this? We all know that God, the Father did not die. And doubtless the young believer knows it too. But in the self-consciousness of taking part publicly, he is apt to express himself poorly.

Should he be made ashamed of his first, faltering act of public worship? Is it not better to hear his sincere though faulty adoration than not to hear it at all?

Generally speaking we believe that the Holy Spirit will guide the worship of His people along a certain theme. But suppose a brother gives out a hymn that seems to be quite unrelated to this theme. Must he be embarrassed for this? Is it not better to sing the hymn and pray that as he matures sufficiently to discern the theme in the meeting, he will do so without losing any of his warmth and affection for the Lord?

Which reminds us of a certain preacher who was asked, "What would you do if some brother gave out a hymn that was obviously not in the Spirit?" He replied, "I'd sing it in the Spirit."

As we seek to give the Holy Spirit His proper place in the assembly, let us beware of rules that quench Him and that kill spontaneity and unaffected worship.

EACH ASSEMBLY INDEPENDENTLY RESPONSIBLE TO CHRIST

There is another principle in the Word of God that should guide us in connection with the assembly, namely that each assembly is independent and responsible only to Christ. There is no such thing in the New Testament as a denomination, a federation of churches, or a circle of fellowship. There is no headquarters on earth, exercising authority of any kind over local assemblies.

The headquarters of the church is where the Head is -in heaven.

Every local church should carefully avoid anything that might lead to centralized control on earth.

This centralization is the evil that has hastened the spread of modernism. The liberals have seized control of the denominational headquarters and of the seminaries. They knew that if they could control the headquarters, then eventually they could control all the churches.

The formation of a central group often comes from government pressure or from a desire to obtain certain benefits from the government. But then centralization makes it easy for totalitarian governments to suppress the church. If they capture a few denominational leaders, they can control the activities of the entire denomination.

God's will is that each assembly should be an independent unit, responsible directly to the Lord Jesus. This hinders the spread of error, and enables the church to go underground more easily in times of persecution.

THE ROLE OF THE GIFTS IN THE CHURCH

We have already touched briefly on the role of gifts in the Church. Actually every believer has some gift, some special function in the body of Christ. In addition there are the special service gifts of evangelist, pastor and teacher (Eph. 4: 11). The latter gifts were given to help all the saints find their gift and to exercise it. They were given to build up the saints for the work of the ministry, and thus for the building up of the body of Christ. From this it is clear that:

The work of the ministry is not for a special class of Christians but for all the people of God.

The work of the special gifts of Ephesians 4 is to build up Christians to the point where they can carry on by themselves, then to move on. In other words, the saints should not become perpetually dependent on such gifts. On the contrary these gifts should work themselves out of a job in the shortest possible time, then move on to new areas of opportunity. Just as parents begin right away to teach children to take care of themselves, so should these gifts teach the babes in Christ.

Now this raises a question: "How long should such a gift remain in a local assembly?" There is only one possible answer to the question-as long as it takes to mature the saints to serve. Paul only stayed in Thessalonica "for three sabbath days" (Acts 17:2), yet left behind an indigenous assembly-self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating. As far as the record is concerned, the longest that he stayed in any one place was the three years that he spent in Ephesus (Acts 20:31). It is not exactly a question of how long a man stays in one place, but rather what his purpose is. What is he trying to do? Is he trying to equip the saints to carry on by themselves?

In this regard, these gifts must guard against the natural tendency to nestle, to think of themselves as having a lifetime appointment in any one place. (This is as true of foreign missionaries as of workers in the homeland.) They must keep themselves mobile. And they must also guard against another subtle danger, that is the feeling that the saints couldn't get along without them. When they are absent, the attendance drops; this makes them

think that they must not leave. They are afraid that the whole assembly would go to pieces. It caters to pride to think that we are indispensable. And sometimes it wounds our pride to think that we are no longer needed in a particular place. Actually we should rejoice when that time arrives.

While speaking of gifts, there is something else that should be mentioned. In the New Testament, these gifts were charismatic, not professional. By this we mean that these gifts were men who were sovereignly endowed by the Holy Spirit without regard to training or occupation. For instance, the Spirit would reach down and equip a fisherman to be an evangelist. Or He might take a shepherd to teach His Word. Or He might fit a carpenter to exercise a pastoral ministry among the saints.

There is no suggestion in the New Testament that professional training can make a man a gift to the church. The idea that only men who have had formal schooling in the Word are qualified to minister is disgusting. Training can be helpful to a believer in getting a grasp of the Scriptures, but no amount of training can make a man an evangelist, a teacher or a pastor. And there is always the danger of professionalism. If the Scriptures are approached from a philosophical basis, then training can be a very deadening and dangerous thing.

THE LOCAL CHURCH

When is a local church a true New Testament Church? When most of the members are true believers? Even if only a minority are true believers? Wherever Christians are gathered in the Lord's Name? What qualifies a group to be considered a local assembly?

Actually the New Testament does not lay down hard and fast rules as to what an assembly is. It does state that where two or three are gathered in Christ's Name, He is in the midst (Matt. 18:20). And the Scriptures assume that those who compose the assembly are Christians, although it is also recognized that unbelievers are sometimes taken into the number unawares (Acts 20:29, 30). Also the New Testament seems to assume the presence of elders and deacons in the normal assembly (Phil. 1:1). But beyond that there is no final way for us to say that certain Christian groups are New Testament churches and that others are not. We can be grateful that we are not the judges in these cases.

If a group professes to be a Christian assembly, then it should manifest the truth of the church universal. It should be a miniature, a replica of the body of Christ. It should present a living portrayal of the church of the living God.

Now the situation among local churches in the world today is this. Some local assemblies depict the universal church very badly. Some do it more accurately. None does it perfectly. What you have is a wide range of churches with all different degrees of likeness to the universal church.

Some churches obviously have no right to be thought of as Christian assemblies. I am thinking of those liberal churches, for instance, that deny all the fundamental doctrines of the faith.

But then we have a wide variety of other churches that do acknowledge Jesus Christ as only Lord and Savior. Some are more evangelical than others. Who can say where the line is that divides those that are N. T. churches from those that are not? We have to leave them with the Lord. Our responsibility is to build according to the pattern, that is, to give a true likeness of the church in our own local assembly.

Certainly no assembly has any reason for pride. If we could see ourselves as the Lord sees us, we would probably shrivel up and die. Spiritual pride is itself a denial of the truth that we are seeking to uphold.

CONCLUSION

To what should we be loyal? Once again we emphasize that we should be loyal to the Scriptures, not to any church system or circle of fellowship. In a day of drift, we must constantly test everything by the Bible and act accordingly.

And there will be a price to pay. It costs something to follow New Testament principles. There will be reproach from the world and opposition from other Christians. But our responsibility is clear. We must obey God and leave the consequences with Him.