Are We Preaching Something New?

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A plea for primitive Christianity

> *Ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk therein. Jer. 6:16*

THERE is a Christian movement in the world today which departs radically from generally accepted and traditional methods of procedure. This movement increased rapidly in the last century and has thousands of followers today. Twelve hundred missionaries are pursuing its methods in almost every country in the world, and report their success among all classes of people.

The question is continually asked, "Is this a new religion —a new form of worship?" People feel that they have a right to be suspicious of the introduction of that which is new into the Church of God. The Church has been in existence for nineteen hundred years, and its charter is plainly indicated in the New Testament.

It should be borne in mind however, that a thing is not necessarily new because we have not heard of it. We may be ignorant of it through defective teaching. We read recently of a people living on a lonely island in the South Atlantic. They are visited once in a couple of years by a steamer from South Africa, and know little of what is happening beyond the great sea around them. They know nothing of our modern inventions and conveniences, and would regard as novel and new that which we have been enjoying for a long time. So it may be here. What we may regard as new and without a

parallel in modern ecclesiastical life may be an "old path," a return to the simplicity and practice of first century Christianity.

The Church of God has been scattered and torn. Many false teachers have arisen teaching perverse things. Human inventions have displaced divine plans and principles. Sects and parties and forms of worship have multiplied until one wonders, as he gazes around him, if it is known that God has a pattern at all. We see at once that God is not the author of such confusion. We trust that we shall be able to show that this Christian movement is a return to primitive simplicity. We propose to go over some of the things surely believed among us, and to see if we are introducing something new at this late hour in the Church's history.

(1) Is the Message of Salvation which we preach something new?

> "*For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.*" *Eph. 2:8-9.*

We need not linger long here. We believe and teach the complete ruin and depravity of the human race. Rom. 3:9-20; 5:12. We believe and proclaim the complete atonement of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Rom. 3:24-25; Heb. 9:12-14, 26; 10:12. Our offer, as ambassadors of Christ, of the blessing of eternal life as a free gift of God, is based upon the Holy Scriptures. Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:8-9. We rejoice in declaring the complete safety of all who trust Christ. They have eternal life and can never perish. John 10:28-29. Being justified, they shall be glorified. Rom. 8:29-30. This message is not new; it is apostolic and fundamental.

(2) Is the Practice of Believers' Baptism by Immersion Something New?

> "*And they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him.*" *Acts 8:38.*

Here again we are on safe ground. The primitive method was undoubtedly by immersion. Acts 8:38-39; Rom. 6:4. The Ethiopian eunuch went down into the water with Philip to be baptized. It is spoken of as a burial, a putting out of sight. Note why Aenon was chosen by John the Baptist to be the place where he baptized the people. John 3:23.

We quote here a number of authorities, men who may not be considered as having a bias in favor of immersion since many are Church of England expositors, and practice infant sprinkling.

Canon H. P. Liddon, Church of England, writes in "Explanatory Analysis of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans:" "The baptism of adults by immersion is present to the Apostle's mind. The descent into the water and the rising from it, were the two striking features of the rite."

Dr. R. T. Knowling, Professor of New Testament Exegesis, Kings' College, London, in "The Expositor's Greek Testament," writes on Acts 8:38: "The context indicates that the baptism was by immersion, and there can be no doubt that this was the custom in the early Church."

Dr. A. Plummer, Church of England, Master of University College, Durham: "The rite is nowhere described in detail; but the element was always water, and the mode of using it was commonly immersion."

Bishop Handley Moule, "Outlines of Christian Doctrine:" "Scripture indicates a usage of immersion in the apostolic missions very plainly." The same expositor says again, "In the New Testament we have not indeed any mention of infant baptism—few certain notices of it are to be found before the third century." Outlines, p. 256, line 7.

Principal John Cunningham in the "Croall Lectures:" "Infant baptism is never heard of during the first hundred and fifty years of the Church's history . . . Infant baptism came slowly into use." Many more authorities could be quoted, but these are enough to show that we are not introducing something new when we preach and practice the baptism of believers by immersion. Is the reader a believer? Has he been baptized as a Christian?

(3) Is our Regular Observance of the Lord's Supper Something New?

> "*They continued steadfastly in breaking of bread.*" *Acts 2:42.*
> "*Upon the first day of the week the disciples came together to break bread.*" *Acts 20:7.*
> "*The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?*" *I Cor. 10:16.*

On the night in which He was betrayed, our Lord Jesus Christ brought to an end the fifteen hundred year old Passover Feast, and instituted the new feast which is variously called the Lord's Supper, the Breaking of Bread, and the Communion. Christ, the True Passover, was about to be offered, (1 Cor. 5:7) and that feast

properly came to an end that night. The new feast was to commemorate the death of our Lord, and was enjoined upon the disciples by Him. Acts 2:42 shows us how they sought to carry out the command. The same command was given directly to Paul (I Cor. 11:23) by the Lord Himself, and he exhorted the churches to observe it. Thus we have the desire of our Lord to be remembered, the example of the first members of His Church in the regular observance of the feast, and the special revelation given to Paul concerning it.

Acts 20:7 shows the Apostle coming back to scenes of former labors, and remaining with the saints over Lord's Day to Break Bread. Again the regular observance is clearly hinted. They were "continuing steadfastly" in it. With this agree the mentions by later writers of the practice of the Early Church. In a report to the Emperor Trajan by Pliny the Younger, reference is made to the purity of the Christian doctrines and their practice of meeting on a stated day "before light, to eat in common a harmless meal." The Didache, or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles speaks thus in Chapter 14, "And on the Day of the Lord come together and break bread, and give thanks."

Thus our gathering together on the first day of the week to observe the Lord's Supper is according to the command of our Lord and the example of the early disciples. Its frequent observance does not make it common; it is the divinely appointed means of drawing out afresh the hearts of His own to the Lord Himself.

(4) Is our Gathering without a Denominational Name something new?

> "*Now I beseech you, brethren, by the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you.*" *1 Cor. 1:10.*

It is pertinent to ask here "In whose name did the early Christians gather at the beginning? What were the Churches called? What names did Paul give to these churches when he addressed his various letters to them?" A glance at each of these communications will show that he addressed them as Churches of God or Churches of Christ. There were the churches of Asia or of Galatia with respect to their location, or the Churches of the Gentiles or of the Thessalonians with regard to their membership. He does not write to the "Presbyterian Church" although he believed in elders and committed the ministry to them as we shall see. He does not write to the "Baptist Church" although he believed in immersion for those who professed faith in Christ. We need not say that there is no mention of a "Lutheran Church." Martin Luther was not born until 1483. We do not call ourselves by the name of that honored servant of Christ, nor did he wish it. He said,

"[A passage here could not be read in the scan.] Luther? My doctrine is not mine. I have not been crucified for any one. St. Paul (1 Cor. Ch. 1:13; Ch. 3:4-5), would not that any should call themselves of Paul nor of Peter, but of Christ. How then does it benefit me, a miserable bag of dust and ashes, to give my name to the children of Christ? Cease, my dear friends, to cling to these party names and distinctions; away with them all; and let us

call ourselves only Christians after Him from whom our doctrine comes." Life of Luther, by Michelet, p. 262.

The Church obviously had no such names at the beginning. If we do not call ourselves by any of these names, nor by any of the dozens of others which divide the Church of God, it is because we are seeking primitive Christianity and the names given to the Body of Christ. The early disciples gathered in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ and were content to be called after Him. Endless sects and divisions have arisen in failing to recognize this simple fact. There is one body, and we are endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit when we own no sectarian names. Ephesians 4:3-4.

Therefore when we come together with no denominational distinction, desiring only to be known as Christians or as a Church or Assembly of Christ, we are not preaching and practicing something new, but seeking a return to apostolic principle and example.

(5) Is Our Rejection of a One-Man Ministry Something New?

> "*Paul . . . called the elders of the Church and . . . said unto them, . . . 'Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the Church of God . . .'." Acts 20:17, 28.*
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> "*The elders which are among you, I exhort . . . feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind . . ." 1 Peter 5:1-4.*

When we speak of a "one-man ministry," we refer to the common practice of having a "pastor" or "minister," to

whom alone is committed the responsibility of preaching to the people. He is usually "called" after being "tried out" and found suitable. Having been hired, he takes over the task of the ministry of the Church, and is practically the sole mouthpiece of the church as long as he remains with them.

Turning to the New Testament Scriptures bearing upon the subject, we find such an idea foreign to their teaching and to apostolic practice. In the passage at the head of this division of our subject we see Paul on his way to Jerusalem, calling for the elders of the Church at Ephesus to come down to Miletus so that he might bid them farewell and instruct and warn them. To these elders (v. 17) he committed the overseership, and the work of feeding the flock of God (v. 28). Paul did not send for the pastor or the clergyman and thus exhort him, but for the elders, to whom was committed this ministry. With this agrees our second Scripture in 1 Peter 5:1-4, where elders are again exhorted to feed the flock of God. It is noteworthy that Paul blames no single "pastor" for the evils permitted in the Church of Corinth, but addresses himself to the church as a whole and to those in responsibility there. None of his epistles are addressed to "the minister of the Church at . . . " Why? Because no such thought is in the mind of the Apostle or of the Spirit of God as a single person relegating to himself the function of pastor, evangelist, and teacher. Pastors and teachers are in the plural in each church, and these gifts were quite irrespective of their occupation in secular life.

The Epistles seem rather to contemplate a number of pastors, or evangelists, or teachers in each assembly of Christians, who minister according to the ability that

God gives. These do so, "not for base gain, but readily; not lording it over their possessions, but being models for the flock." N. T. Their own hands may minister to their own necessity, as Paul's did to his. Acts 20:33-34. When we therefore reject what we have termed a "one-man ministry" we have the teaching of both Paul and Peter as revealed by the Holy Spirit, and the practice of the churches as known to these first apostles.

(6) Is Our Recognition of the Liberty of any God-gifted Member in the Church to Minister, Something New?

> "*Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. If any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace. For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted.*" *I Cor. 14:29-31.*

This follows the truth indicated in the previous section. There was liberty in the apostolic church for two or three to minister, one by one, as the Spirit of God enabled them. These were gifted members, and these gifts came from Christ the Head of the Church. As emphasized before, these gifts were given and used irrespective of a man's secular business. Aquila was a tent maker, but was also a real teacher of the Scriptures. Luke was a physician, but could preach the Gospel by the side of Paul, as at Philippi.

The one-man ministry dwarfs the gifts in the Church: they remain undeveloped and atrophied. The hired preacher must earn his salary, or be replaced when he fails to deliver the desired message. The divine plan is rather for leaders to encourage and develop gifts in the local church, so that it can maintain its own ministry,

whether in the Gospel or in teaching the saints. These churches when properly functioning, are not burdened with the expense of maintaining the hired preacher. Scripture certainly teaches that God-sent ministers be maintained, when they have need of it, but this is far from what we have been considering here.

If therefore, we seek to maintain this liberty of ministry in our gatherings, and to refuse anything that would hinder such an exercise of gifts, we are attempting to get back to the primitive pattern laid down in the early days of Christianity. We have seen hundreds of such gatherings, where more than a dozen men in each can exercise their gifts of pastor, evangelist, or teacher, and do so to the glory of God and to the eternal blessing of souls.

(7) Is Our Method of Financing God's Work Something New?

> "*Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings (collections) when I come.*" *1 Cor. 16:2.*
> "*Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give.*" *2 Cor. 9:7.*

We look in vain in the Scriptures written to the churches for such methods as we find in use today for financing the work of the Lord—suppers, bazaars, rummage sales, cook-book sales, or tag-days. The early Church received no money from those "without"—from the world. They believed that the Lord's work should and could be maintained by the Lord's people. We also look in vain in these writings for tithing as a system or principle of Christian giving. The point we wish to emphasize is that

it was not enjoined upon the churches. One man might indeed "purpose in his heart" to give this portion, another more, but tithing is not taught as the proportion of giving, or as the method of financing the work of God. Tithing is often foisted upon the congregation by the salaried preacher, anxious to meet the current expenses of the organization, and without regard to the particular circumstances of the individual.

The divine principles are laid down in the Scriptures indicated at the head of this section—"as he purposeth in his heart" and "as the Lord hath prospered him." The human "purposing" should be according to the divine "prospering." Where hearts are true to God, responding to His love, it will be found that their cheerful giving will not fall below the demands of Jewish law. The privileges of grace are higher than the legal demands of Moses. The Lord's people should not be brought into bondage in their giving to Him. These principles we seek to maintain in our assemblies. This is not something new. Again we say it is apostolic and fundamental.

An Appeal

Are we preaching something new? If not, will you as a believer acknowledge these seven things to be divine, and seek to obey them? Gatherings of Christians carrying out these truths, will of necessity be small and unpopular, but they are Scriptural. Gather with them. If you are in a company where unscriptural things are allowed, purge out the evil. If you cannot do so, purge yourself from it. This is the way of blessing; this is the way of approval in a day to come.

"Ask for the old paths, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls." Jer. 6:16.