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A Plea For Leadership

The importance of godly leadership among the people of God is written large on the pages of Holy Scripture.

Both Old and New Testaments affirm the deep concern of God that His people have leaders who will guide them in right paths. And the influence and effect of the leaders on the course and conduct of the people is most evident. Godly leadership has resulted in obedience to God on the part of the people; weak and wicked leaders have led into paths of disobedience and departure.

In the early days of their national history, God gave to Israel Moses and his successor Joshua. In Judges 2:7 we find the significant words:

And the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great works of the Lord, that He did for Israel.

But, in spite of the fact that God raised up various judges to call the nation back to Himself, when we come to the close of this book of Judges we find a leaderless people, and the record closes on the tragic note of 21:25:

In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes.

As a result we have a sad scene of national failure, religious apostasy, moral corruption, civil strife and individual lawlessness.

The six books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles record the history of Israel as a monarchy, first as a united

nation, then as the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah. During this period, God's ideal leader was David, whom He took from before the flock of his father Jesse at Bethlehem to lead the flock of God (II Samuel 7:8). But the majority of the kings, particularly in Israel, were wicked men and, as a result, the nation drifted further and further down the path of apostasy until, as we read in 11 Chronicles 36:16, "there was no remedy" and the nation was carried into captivity. The few bright spots in this dark picture are provided by the reigns of a small minority of good kings in Judah who sought to lead the people back to God.

There are those who would agree with all this, but who, nevertheless, feel that the unique character of the present church age presents a different situation in which human leadership is unnecessary and even incompatible with the Lordship of Christ and the liberty of the Holy Spirit. That this view is erroneous and neither practical nor scriptural is quite clear from a consideration of the apostolic era as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. At no other period in the Church's history has the Lordship of Christ and the liberty of the Holy Spirit been more acknowledged, and yet at the same time the leadership of elders was most prominent. Ten times in the book of Acts we find reference made to elders, and on six of these occasions the apostles and elders were acting in conjunction. It was the elders at Ephesus whom Paul called to meet him at Miletus (Acts 20), and these he addressed as "overseers" in verse twenty-eight, exhorting them to "feed the Church of God." The word "feed" in this verse is the verb form of "pastor," and is literally "shepherd." Thus, these elders

were, clearly, the ones responsible for the leadership in the assembly at Ephesus.

The teaching of the New Testament is that Spirit-made elders (Acts 20:28) are the guides or leaders of the local assembly of believers, and as such are to be obeyed (Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24). Such are not overlords (I Pet. 5:3), but are under-shepherds (v.4).

In I Chronicles 12:32 we read of men who came to David to Ziklag in the time of his rejection.

And of the children of Issachar) which were men that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do; the heads of them were two hundred; and all their brethren were at their commandment.

Here were men admirably suited to be patterns for elders in today's assemblies. They were knowledgeable men, who "had understanding of the times;" wise and practical men, "to know what Israel ought to do;" and leaders, for "all their brethren were at their commandment." Their knowledge and practical wisdom brought them recognition as leaders with their brethren, and gave weight to their words so that their advice was followed. So it should be with the spiritual guides in today's assemblies.

In considering the leadership of elders, let us think of three areas in which the elders must provide leadership. These areas are: 1) Truth, 2) Trends, 3) Trouble. There are PATHS OF TRUTH in which the Lord's people must be led. This calls for SPIRITUAL leadership. There are POPULAR TRENDS which could lead the saints astray. This creates a need for SENSIBLE leadership. There are PERILS AND PROBLEMS when TROUBLE comes into the assembly. This demands STRONG leadership.

I. SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP IN PATHS ACCORDING TO THE WORD OF GOD.

Surely all would agree that spiritual leadership in paths of Truth is the basic responsibility of the elder in the New Testament assembly. Whatever else he may or may not be, an elder must be a brother who is taught in the ways of God. He must know the Truth. He must be convinced it is the Truth. He must refuse to be swayed from the Truth.

We have already noted Paul's charge to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28 to "shepherd the church of God." One of the prime responsibilities of a shepherd would certainly be that of leading the flock in right paths. Writing to Titus, Paul describes a bishop (or elder) as one characterized by:

Holding fast the faithful Word, as he hath been taught, that he may by sound doctrine, both to exhort and to convince the gainsayer (1:9).

The spiritual guides who were to be remembered by the Hebrew believers, according to Hebrews 13:7, were those who "have spoken unto You the Word of God". And the exhortation of Hebrews 12:13 would certainly apply to all leaders of the Lord's people:

Make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way, but rather let it be healed.

The New Testament teaching does not require that all elders be what we might term "platform teachers." Only some are such, as inferred in I Timothy 5:17 where we read:

Let the elders that rule well be counted nor, especially worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the Word and doctrine (or teaching).

But all elders should be “apt to teach” (I Timothy 3:2). Much teaching can be done in private (and should be), and there is a broad field for personal counseling. Furthermore, the elder should lead the saints in the paths of truth by the godly example of his personal and family life.

II. SENSIBLE LEADERSHIP IN REGARD TO POPULAR TRENDS.

Every age has its fads and fancies. Trends set in and are followed by the majority. Tragically, this is also true of professing Christians, many of whom might correctly be termed “weathervane Christians”—they swing around whichever way the prevailing wind is blowing. Like sheep they follow the crowd. Some popular trends are relatively harmless fads that will soon be gone and forgotten. Others indicate dangerous drifts that may create serious problems and pitfalls if allowed to go unchecked.

Each period has its trends in speech, in music, in dress, in actions, which may at first sight appear quite harmless, even amusing. Some Christians, particularly younger ones, feel that they must adopt the latest fashions in dress, speech, music and deportment, if they are to keep abreast of the times. These have not learned that the Christian marches to a heavenly drumbeat that the world cannot hear.

Here is where sensible leadership is invaluable. This is not an area where we have definite Scriptures to guide us. It is a grey area. Truth and error are black and

white, with no room for intermingling. But trends are in the grey area. Sensible leaders will determine the true nature of the trend and how best to deal with it. This will likely call for the united conferring of the oversight for, “in the multitude of counselors there is safety” (Proverbs 11: 14). It will be prayerfully decided just how much attention should be paid to the trend. Should it be allowed to wither on the vine, or should it be decisively incised by the sharp edge of the Word if Scriptural principles are involved? Sensible leaders will know where the line should be drawn between the personal liberty of the individual-which must not be infringed upon-and the public testimony of the assembly-which must not be damaged. In an age when time-honored standards of dress and decorum are increasingly being cast overboard, it behooves the assembly leaders to maintain standards of reverence befitting the presence of the Lord in our midst (Psalm 89:7). Slovenly attire, slang language, irreverent actions, and thinly-disguised rock and roll music should have no place on the platforms of New Testament assemblies. Here is where the elders among God’s people should heed Paul’s inspired words:

Be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conduct, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.

But there are truly dangerous trends in every age, and the most dangerous are in the area of doctrine. Certain actions are propagated by prominent persons; they become popular fads, and those with little spiritual discernment are carried away by them. Looking back over half a century, one recalls many such doctrinal trends which for a time carried many away from the paths of truth. Today, the most extensive one is the so

called charismatic movement or neo-pentecostalism. In regard to the modern tongues movement, too many even in assemblies are adopting an easy-going, fence-straddling attitude. "We don't propagate it, but we don't oppose it," is the Laodician stance of many. If it is Scriptural, then we should promote it. If it is unscriptural we should oppose it. Let us be hot or cold on the matter, not a nauseating lukewarm (Revelation 3:1516)!

Then there is the growing resurgence of ultra-Calvinism. This has always appealed to some who like to think of themselves as the intellectuals; but it has a withering effect on the souls of the saints, and stultifies an aggressive gospel testimony.

All of us are aware of the popular movements in today's society regarding the so-called rights of women-the Women's Liberation Movement, the Equal Opportunity Act, etc., etc. Some of it is silly, some is sickening, some is sacrilegious-but all is serious! Serious because it creates an atmosphere in which Christian women are tempted to step outside the sphere assigned to them by the Lord in His Word. This is not the place for the development of the Scriptural teaching on this subject, save to emphasize the need on the part of godly elders for sensible leadership in maintaining Church order as laid down in the New Testament. The invaluable service of Christian women in the assembly should certainly be utilized to the full, but always within the guidelines of Scripture. One hears of an increasing demand in some assemblies for public participation by the sisters, and there is a growing disregard for the God honoring head-covering of Christian women. When any of these modern trends become discernible in the local assembly it is the

responsibility of the elders to prayerfully reach a united decision as to the Scriptural course for the assembly to take. No allowance should be made for the public or private teaching of that which is contrary to the Word of God. If such a firm attitude is adopted it will save from sorrow and trouble in the assembly.

III. STRONG LEADERSHIP AMID THE PERILS AND PROBLEMS OF TROUBLE Trouble among the saints of God is always deplorable and is devilish in origin. Satan is a troublemaker, and he delights in disturbing the peace of the people of God.

For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints (I Cor. 14:33).

There are not wanting those who can be used by Satan as his tools in this sad business of troublemaking. The Church of the first century was plagued with this problem, so we need not be surprised to find it confronting the Church of today. We have already referred to Paul's warning to the Ephesian elders:

For I know this, that after my departing, shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after themselves (Acts 20:29-30).

The message to the Gentile churches from the apostles and elders at Jerusalem, as recorded in Acts 15, begins with the words:

Forasmuch as we have heard that certain which went out from us have troubled you... (v.24).

To the Galatians, Paul declared:

There be some that trouble you and would pervert the Gospel of Christ (1:7). and “he that troubleth you shall bear his judgment, whosoever he be” (5:10 ... “I would that they were cut off that trouble you” (v. 12).

So there is nothing new about trouble: Let us consider three of the major causes of trouble among the saints—deception, dissension, division.

TROUBLE THROUGH DECEPTION

It is not likely that the grievous wolves of whom Paul warned in Acts 20:29 came among the believers as wolves, but rather as wolves in sheep’s clothing, as our Lord had previously warned:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves (Matthew 7:15).

Peter, who had undoubtedly heard his Lord’s warning, wrote:

There were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you (II Peter 2:1).

His inspired description of these false teachers is quite striking. He describes them as those “who bring in stealthily destructive sects (Gr.). Their ways are termed destructive, and their words well-turned.” Could anything more accurately describe the false cults that are proliferating today? These cults, with their insidious teaching, must be exposed by the careful shepherds of the flock. The Apostle John adds his warnings:

Many false prophets have gone out into the world (I John 4:1).

And these he designates as deceivers (II John 7). Jude writes of men who “came in stealthily” (v.4). These warnings of deception surely emphasize the need for strong leadership on the part of elders with spiritual discernment, who will expose such deceivers.

TROUBLE THROUGH DISSENSION

In most local assemblies there is a small, but often vocal, minority of discontents. While the majority of the Christians are happily and heartily engaged in carrying on the testimony for the glory of God and the blessing of saved and unsaved, these dissatisfied complainers eagerly watch for something to criticize. Wherever there’s a problem, there you will find these critics, seeking to aggravate and enlarge the trouble. Usually these unhappy dissidents are afflicted with an overdose of chronic self-pity, and feel themselves to be completely overlooked and unappreciated. The poet wrote of such:

A little seed lay in the ground, and soon began to sprout,
“Now which of all the flowers around,” it mused, “will I come out?”

“The lily’s face is fair and proud, but just a trifle cold,
“The rose, I think, is rather loud, and then its fashion’s out.”

“The violet is all very well, but not a flower I’d choose,
Nor yet the Canterbury bell, I never cared for blues.”

“And so it criticized each flower, this supercilious seed,
Until it woke one summer hour AND FOUND ITSELF A WEED!”

But the tragedy is that these carnal discontents and chronic complainers can often secure a hearing and work untold harm, breeding serious trouble among the

saints. Such a situation demands strong leadership on the part of the elders to silence these troublemaking talkers.

TROUBLE THROUGH DIVISION

This is the most serious, and it is that to which dissension and discord will lead, unless nipped in the bud. Division among the people of God is a tragedy to be abhorred and avoided. It grieves the Lord, dishonors His Name, weakens His testimony, delights the devil, and gives the enemies of the Truth an opportunity to blaspheme. This is not the place for an extended discussion of the subject, but the writer has strong feelings on the matter of division. For fifty years he has refused to condone or fellowship with division, or with those who promote or participate in it. There is nothing indefinite in the Scripture teaching regarding division. Paul's sad and solemn prediction was:

Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them (Acts 20:30).

Who are the division-makers? "Men ... of your own selves."

How do they cause division? By "speaking perverse things."

What is their objective? "To draw away disciples after them"

There is no uncertainty nor ambiguity in the Scriptural instructions as to how to deal with division and those who cause it. The malady is dangerous, the remedy must be drastic. This is not the place for sentimentality or

partiality. The inspired apostolic injunction is clear and concise:

Now I beseech you brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned, and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple (Romans 16:17-18).

We conclude our study with a clarion call for strong leadership in dealing with division. This is no place for weaklings nor men-pleasers. Nip division in the bud, before it blossoms, and produces its bitter fruits. Expose and condemn it as soon as it raises its ugly head; and if it develops then, brethren, “quit you like men, be strong” and carry out the divine commandment to mark the division-makers, avoid them, turn from them and refuse to fellowship with them.

**MAY GOD GIVE US STRONG, SPIRITUAL, SENSIBLE
LEADERS IN THESE CLOSING DAYS!**

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Discipleship and its Dangers in the Last Days

One of the best axioms in teaching can be expressed in this way, "Define your terms, then stick to your definitions."

In considering the subject DISCIPLESHIP AND ITS DANGERS IN THE LAST DAYS, we must first define the term "discipleship". What do we mean by discipleship? Here we are faced with a problem inasmuch as the term is not employed in any of the epistles of the New Testament. The 272 instances in which the word occurs are to be found in the Gospels and Acts- 240 in the former, 32 in the latter.

Examining these references we are impressed with the fact that discipleship in a peculiar sense was connected with Christ's earthly life, when it had a two-fold significance. First, there was the literal, physical following of Christ to learn from His personal teaching. That is the reason for His demanding that those who would follow Him as disciples must forsake all.

"So, likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be My disciple." Luke 14:33 If they were to actually follow Him in His itinerant ministry, then they must leave home, loved ones, possessions and occupations.

But there was a deeper spiritual following of Him in heart's affection and loyalty. Judas could be called a disciple in the outward sense. but certainly was not in the inward. This would seem to be the explanation of an otherwise difficult passage in John 6:60-66.

In verse 60 some of Christ's disciples murmur at His teaching. In verse 64 they are charged with unbelief. In verse 66 many of them permanently forsake Him. These were, undoubtedly, the outward followers who did not possess the inward reality.

When Christ died, arose and ascended to the Father's right hand, the personal aspect of His ministry ended. Now we learn through the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Christ said to the Twelve, "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when He, the Spirit of Truth, is come He will guide you into all truth, for He shall not speak of Himself, but whatsoever He shall hear that shall He speak and He will show you things to come. John 16:12-13 There is no literal, physical following of Christ now, it is a spiritual exercise. Consequently we are under no obligation to leave home, loved ones, occupation and possessions to become His disciple. These are to be recognized as belonging to Him, and held in trust for Him, to be used as He directs for the furtherance of His interests. The hardworking Christian wife and mother can be as true a disciple in the kitchen as the missionary worker in a foreign field. The important question is, Is each where God would have them?

I believe the hymn writer caught the true meaning of discipleship, as it applies today, when he wrote, Naught that I have mine own I'll call, I'll hold it for the Giver, My heart, my strength, my life, my all Are His and His forever.

These facts would seem to throw us back on the popular use of the term "discipleship". Consulting the American Collegc Dictionary, it is interesting to note that the

meaning assigned to the word “discipleship” is I. One of the twelve personal followers of Jesus Christ.

2. Any follower of Christ.

3. An adherent of the doctrines of another; a follower.

Combining this current use of the term with what we have learned from Scripture can we not correctly define discipleship as the dedicated spiritual following of a risen, enthroned Christ?

Now let us consider the second part of the subject,
DANGERS TO DISCIPLESHIP IN THE LAST DAYS.

While the present time, (which many of us believe to be the last days of the church age,) undoubtedly possesses significant features which increase the danger to the child of God, yet, basically, our dangers are the same as those which beset the first century disciples. Therefore, I am going to ask you to turn in your Bibles and read a passage in Luke’s Gospel, chp. 9, verses 57 through 62, “And it came to pass that, as they went in the way, a certain man said unto Him, Lord, I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest.

And Jesus said unto Him, foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head.

And He said unto another, Follow Me. But he said, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. Jesus said unto him, Let the dead bury their dead. but go thou and preach the kingdom of God.

And another also said, Lord, I will follow Thee, but let me first go bid them farewell which are at home at my house.

And Jesus said unto him, No man having put his hand to the plough. and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

It is certainly not my intention to consider these verses in detail. I only want to point out three dangers that beset those who would have become Christ's disciples in the first century, and to suggest that these dangers are still with us today.

The first volunteer (in v. 57) was discouraged, apparently, by the uncertainty of the future, the lack of any tangible security.

"Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head." said our Lord, and you can almost hear the man mutter, "No security there", and he disappears from sight. It may be no exaggeration to say that we, today, are living in the most "security-conscious" age of all time. Americans insist on job security, social security, old-age security, and every other security except eternal security. Does this not, then, present a very real danger to all-out discipleship, THE DESIRE FOR SECURITY?

As pointed out previously, discipleship does not necessarily involve a Romish vow of poverty, the giving up of all material possessions, the rejection of home and married life. This is a false view of Christianity. BUT discipleship is a costly thing. and following Christ will entail loss here. To follow fully we must be willing to find our security in the faithfulness of the One we follow.

In the second would-be disciple we have a conscript, not a volunteer. To him Christ said, "Follow Me." Does this not remind us that there are two sides to the coin of discipleship? On the one hand it should be a free and

voluntary expression on our part of a genuine desire to follow Christ; on the other, we really have no choice in the matter. Christ's command is "Follow Me", and the reality of our faith will be demonstrated by the resoluteness of our following. But this man of the first century immediately encounters a danger to discipleship which remains with us today. He exhibits a DEFECTIVE SENSE OF PRIORITIES. His first mistake is seen in his words. "me first". "Suffer me first to go and bury my father." That was a poor start to discipleship, in which "me" must be last not first! John expressed it correctly when he said, "He must increase, but I must decrease." John 3:30 "Less, less of self each day, And more, my God, of Thee, O keep me in Thy way, However rough it be."

The second mistake of our friend was in putting social responsibilities above the spiritual. To bury his father certainly seemed like a definite responsibility. But there were others to do this, who could not preach the Gospel. Hence our Lord's words to him, "Let the dead bury their dead, but go thou and preach the kingdom of God." v. 60 The social responsibility was great, the spiritual was greater. This is a matter which requires great wisdom and most careful consideration in these days when the emphasis on social responsibilities is being stressed, not only in liberal, but evangelical circles. Certainly we have social responsibilities since we live in a society with other men, and to completely neglect these will undoubtedly be detrimental to our testimony, both individual and collective. As usual, some are going to both extremes. There are those who disavow all social responsibility-they will not vote, will not serve in the armed forces, will not contribute to any philanthropic

funds, will not attend P.T.A. meetings, etc. Let us say these are the religious far-right conservatives.

Then there are the religious left-wingers who advocate going all the way. Their slogan is,, “If you want to win them you’ve got to join them.” They advocate looking like, talking like, and acting like the unsaved under the plea of winning them to Christ. This is contrary to Scripture, to logic and to experience. One wonders if such views are not often a mere subterfuge for the indulgence of fleshly desires, and a pretense for escaping the persecution and ostracism that inevitably accompanies discipleship to a rejected Christ.

Where shall we draw the line between the social and the spiritual? Did not our Lord Himself provide the answer? “Let the dead bury their dead but go thou and preach the kingdom of God.”

There are responsibilities in the social area which the unsaved-the spiritually dead-can discharge as well as the Christian can. Let them do so, while the believer expends his time and energy and means on the furtherance of the Gospel.

Just a few closing thoughts on the third volunteer for discipleship. He, too, offered to follow Christ, but there were reservations. Again the fatal “me first” intrudes.

“I will follow Thee, but let me first go bid them farewell which are at home at my house.” v. 61.

“I will follow Thee, BUT.” Here is the clue to this man’s difficulty-indecision. Willing-BUT, other things are attracting and distracting. The danger indicated here is DELAY THROUGH INDECISION. But this will not satisfy Christ. His reply indicates that He demands of His

disciples an undivided interest in and attention to the work at hand.

“And Jesus said unto him, No man having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.” v.62 No plowman can cut a clean, straight furrow if he allows his attention to be diverted elsewhere. This underlines a great need today-servants of Christ who will forget about everything and everyone else’, including themselves, and render undivided interest and dedication to the task given (hem by the Lord. Too many are occupied with providing for themselves and their dependents; allowing themselves to be diverted by the opinions, desires and actions of others; and dissipating their energies on activities of secondary importance. Many -years ago, as a young man, I heard an old servant of Christ (I’ve forgotten who it was) say that he would rather drive in one tenpenny nail than a dozen tacks. I’ve never been able to shake off the influence of those simple words. That is my definition of dedicated discipleship-doing with undivided interest the task God has assigned to me.